



THE BIBLE TOP

What do the five most searched, highlighted and shared Bible verses really mean? Are they sometimes misunderstood? These five famous Bible verses may not mean what many people think they mean, but like all of God's Word, what they truly tell us is so much more!

THE BIBLE TOP 5 • John 3:10–21 • Tim McConnell • August 2, 2020

We are looking at famous verses. Most popular, and maybe most popularly misunderstood. **The Bible Top 5**, five of the most searched, most quoted, most shared, most clicked, probably most tattooed verses in the Bible. What are people looking for in the Bible? What are they searching for? The most popular verses are also most popularly misunderstood, and sometimes the misunderstanding makes them popular. But the actual meaning is so much better. Today we look at John 3:16. Is there any more popular verse than this one? I think it's the first verse I ever tried to memorize. If you were asked the most popular verse in the Bible, I bet you'd pick this one. It summarizes the Gospel in one sentence. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Love. Love is God's motivation. Love sends Jesus into the world. Love saves us from death. Love. Does this mean love wins for all? Does this mean God loves the world so much, no one will ever wind up separated from God?

John 3:16 can be misunderstood. In 2011, a popular young pastor named Rob Bell published a book called *Love Wins*. Followers of Rob Bell were surprised that he, having spent his life building a church on the necessity of knowing Christ for salvation, was ready to say in that book that in the end love will win for all. In other words, there is no hell or eternal damnation, eternal separation from God. As Bell put it, "Would a loving God send people to eternal torment forever?" I understand the impulse. I can sympathize with the desire to rescue God from a potentially reputation-damaging position. But this is John 3:16 misunderstood. The true meaning is so much better than the misunderstanding.

Love wins. That's true. But love is victorious in Jesus Christ. That's where the win is, that's where the victory is, and that victory can be yours if you are willing to be in Jesus Christ by faith; or it can remain for you a distant, irrelevant fact as you remain outside of God's eternal grace, in your heart saying "no" to God and all God has done for you through Jesus Christ, preferring your rebellion, preferring your self-determined life, preferring to be your own God rather than accept Jesus as your Savior and Lord.

I don't know everything about how eternal separation from God looks, but I know what is in the Bible. Hell is real, whatever it is. I tend to agree with the likes of C. S. Lewis and Tim Keller that there is not a person in hell who didn't choose to be there, who didn't choose to separate themselves from God—the gates of hell are closed, as Lewis said, from the inside. Where is your heart this morning? Are the gates closed against God? That may become an eternal state. Open the gates now.

This is what Jesus explained to Nicodemus that night in John 3. Quick aside, if you have not taken time to download and watch the Bible series called *The Chosen*, let me just recommend it. Quick product placement here. I'm not getting any kickbacks, unfortunately. But I cried at every episode, and the episode where Nicodemus comes to talk to Jesus is . . . wow. Worth your time. Okay, back to regularly scheduled programming. John 3. Nicodemus has snuck out at night to talk to Jesus. Why? He's a religious leader, part of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council of Leaders that has been tracking Jesus as an unwelcome disturbance. He can't be seen hanging out with Jesus, but he has seen enough of Jesus to be curious. Jesus will meet you wherever and whenever you call the meeting.

Jesus has been explaining to Nicodemus that he must be born again in the Spirit of God, born again spiritually. It's not a new idea. The prophets talked about it. But Nicodemus can't get it. "'You are Israel's teacher,' said Jesus, 'and do you not understand these things? Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?'" (John 3:10–12). Jesus wants Nicodemus to understand. He wants him to see. He wants you and me to understand, to really see, heavenly things. How it works, how it is with God. "No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man" (John 3:13). You don't ascend into the heavenly places by philosophical research, discovery or personal growth. No one has. No one does. The one, the only one, who can tell you what's up, is Jesus, the Son of God, who came

down. We know God by revelation, not personal discovery. Will you let God show you who He is, or will you go to God with a list of demands of what He must be to please you?

Next, Jesus points Nicodemus right back into history and Moses. "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him" (John 3:14–15). That's a strange thing to say, but back in Numbers 21, there's a story. The people cursed God; and to curse God is to be cursed by God. Turn from the Author of Life and experience the pain of death. In their curse, they were beset by venomous snakes, biting and poisoning them. God told Moses to make a snake out of bronze and set it on a pole. God provided a way of salvation, a cure. All who look to it will live. Jesus says, look, that's just like me. The curse is already in you. The poison is already running through your bloodstream. I will be lifted up when I die on the cross. Look to me, believe in me, and you will live. Look away, and you are already dead.

Now comes John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." God gave His son like Moses put a snake on a pole? Yes. God so loved the world that He sent His Son into it to die? Yes. This is the mission of Jesus. This is the reason for the whole thing, from incarnation and a baby born of a virgin on Christmas Day to Good Friday and a horrible cross, to Easter morning and an empty grave with heavens open to all who would follow, this is it. Jesus didn't just come, Jesus was sent. Jesus didn't just teach, Jesus became a sacrifice to create a cure. Jesus didn't just express love, Jesus gave His whole life as a sacrifice for our sin to win salvation for us when we deserved eternal death. God gave His one and only Son, Jesus, so that anyone who calls on His name, believes in Him, puts their faith in Him, that they shall not perish—to move them out of death—but have eternal life. That's it. That's the core of the mission of Jesus. That's the core of the Gospel. That's the core of Christianity.

Jesus helps Nicodemus understand it a little more. "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him" (John 3:17). God isn't an angry, lightning

bolt-throwing hothead up there on Mt. Zion tossing down wrath. He could have done that. He could have sent His Son into the world to zap it all! But God sent Jesus to save the world, not condemn it. Have you heard of "cancel culture"? Cancel culture writes you off. One comment trending the wrong direction and you are condemned, forever, no mercy, no restitution, no second chance. God isn't like that. He sent His Son to save. But here's the part we don't like. "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil" (John 3:18–19). There is a sickness in the world that leads to death. We don't like to talk about it, but it's there. Jesus is the cure.

How can a loving God send people to hell? Doesn't John 3:16 mean love wins for all? God's love is an escape, a cure, a way out of the way of death and a way into the way of life. We don't like that part about the way of death we are already stuck in, but when we are honest with ourselves we know it's true. There is a sickness in the world. We say we want a God who is all-loving, all-accepting, but anyone who loves another sometimes feels anger, wrath even. If you love someone, you get angry if you see them getting attacked, or ruined or destroyed. You are angry at that thing, even if that thing is themselves. We have a problem in us, a sickness that leads to death. God is angry at that. Becky Pippert wrote some years ago, "God's wrath is not a cranky explosion, but his settled opposition to the cancer which is eating out the insides of the human race he loves." God's wrath, His settled opposition to the cancer eating away His children, it does not change. You and I, we need to decide, do we want to be part of the love or part of the wrath. Do we want to be part of the healing or part of the cancer? Hell. Well, hell is resolving to remain outside and participate in the selfish, self-destructive cancer. That's eternal separation from God. That decision does not mean God's love is deficient. God's love is not deficient. That's what Jesus told Nicodemus. The darkness is set in. Choose darkness if you'd like. But you can choose light. God is love.

I relate it to what we are experiencing right now

with COVID-19. I'd like you more if you told me this virus was not a big deal and I could go back to my normal life. But is that love? Love is telling the truth. If God lied to you about the seriousness of sin and kept you happily ignorant of the precariousness of your situation—that your soul may wind up eternally separated from life in God—if God did that, it might feel good for a moment, but is that love? No. Love names the sickness. Then love does what it can to bring the cure. Love sends a Son, Jesus, into the world. God's Son died. God's Son gave His whole life for yours. Jesus went down into Hell, He went down into death, and darkness, and separation from God—the anguish of a sinner's selfish fate. The Father felt it too. They shared in death as a way to make life possible for me and you. Isn't that love? God doesn't automatically apply His plan of salvation to every soul. Maybe some people don't want to be with God. God allows that, you see. God allows you to say no to His love. This too is love. I don't force myself on you. I don't demand your love and overpower you and force you to love me. I wait, I watch, I offer, I stand at the door—you either open or keep it closed, forever.

Today is a day to open the door. I'm going to lead us in a prayer to Jesus. Revelation 3:20 says, "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me" (Revelation 3:20). Just like Jesus said to Nicodemus, turn and open the doors of your heart to the Son of God to come into the world to save, Jesus says in Revelation, and says to every person in every age, "Here I am. I'm at the door. I won't kick it in. But if you want to know life, if you want the forgiveness and righteousness and peace and joy I have here with me, if you want me, God, in your life, you ... open the door." I'm going to lead us in prayer. You can pray along with me if you'd like, and welcome Jesus into your life, maybe for the very first time: "Lord Jesus Christ, I hear you standing at the door, I open my heart to you, come into my life I pray, forgive me my sins, guide me out of darkness, show me your light, thank you for giving your life on the cross, now I give you mine. In Jesus' name. Amen."

STUDY GUIDE

THE BIBLE TOP 5 • "Love Wins for All"

John 3:10–21

UP: UP: Connect with God through Spending Time in His Word

Slowly, we are learning how to walk in a new atmosphere.

Grace is the word. Grace. John opens his gospel saying, "For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace." Of all the peoples of the world, the children of God must walk in the grace of God if we are to reflect this core attribute of God. This summer the word is grace. In exactly the pace at which the Lord is leading you through Covid-19, may his grace abound to you.

Begin your study in prayer. Read and reflect on John 3:10-21.

- 1) According to John 3:16, why does God give His only son?
- 2) How is a person saved according to John 3:16?
- 3) According to verse 18, in what state does a person stand by not believing in Jesus?

OUT: Connect With the World Around Us (Join God in His Mission)

4) Each week during our current sermon series we are highlighting a misunderstanding of a well-known passage of Scripture. The misunderstanding this week is that some have taken John 3:16 to mean that everyone is saved regardless of their faith in Jesus and that there is no condemnation, no eternal separation from God. Scripture offers no solid ground for this misunderstanding. Host a conversation on how the doctrine of hell, eternal separation from God, impacts how we live each and every day of our lives, especially regarding reaching our friends, neighbors and colleagues for Christ. Together, lay your hearts out to the Lord on this subject and ask God to guide you in understanding His heart.

IN: Connect with Each Other

Pastor Tim quotes Becky Pippert: "God's wrath is not a cranky explosion, but his settled opposition to the cancer which is eating out the insides of the human race he loves." Host a conversation on the wrath of God within this biblical context. How ought you feel about the holy Creator hosting eternal, righteous anger against all ungodliness? How ought the knowledge that God rescues out of genuine love change how you live each and every day?

Pressing into the level of vulnerability that your group has built to date, close your time in prayer. Celebrating that God saves you out of love, confess and rejoice together. Invite the Spirit to minister to your hearts. Ask God to give you the spiritual eyes to see how He desires to use you to be His witness in the coming days. Groups of 3 – 5 are ideal for this intimate, crucial time together.