
Y O U N G A D U L T S W E E K O F P R A Y E R : D A Y F O U R

FOR GOD
so **LOVED**
the **WORLD...**

If you have been around a church for a while, it is something that you might have heard many times. It is a personalized “version” of John 3:16. Sometimes used as part of an appeal to accept Jesus as “your personal Saviour,” it goes something like this: “For God so loved [insert your name here] that He gave His one and only Son, so that if [insert your name here] believes in Him, [insert your name here] shall not perish but have eternal life.”

For all the wonderful complexity we find in the Bible’s story of God, the heart of the gospel can be summarized in a single sentence that even a child can memorize and begin to understand. And this personalized version of this well-known Bible verse is a valuable way of emphasizing the personal love of God for each of us and the choice each of us has to make to accept God’s gift offered through Jesus. As such, this adaptation of the well-loved verse portrays an awe-inspiring and life-changing truth.

Perhaps it is also a world-changing truth. In acknowledging our sinfulness and lostness, we take a significant step in acknowledging the primary problem in our world—ourselves—our selfishness and reluctance to accept that we are part of the problem. In retelling a conversation with a friend about the need for confession in growing a relationship with God, writer Don Miller suggests, “Perhaps you can see [confession] as an act of social justice. The entire world is falling apart because nobody will admit they are wrong. But by asking God to forgive you, you are willing to own your own [rubbish]” (Blue Like Jazz, page 53). As John 3:16 emphasizes, both sin and salvation are realities we need to take personally—and seriously.

But we also must remember that this personalized version of John 3:16 is not what the verse says; if read in only this way, we can be tempted to a shallow embrace of salvation and risk missing so much more that is involved with a deeper reading of this Bible verse.

That old argument

Too often salvation—as we often talk about it—seems to be all about getting me into heaven one day. It’s surprising to think that even our theological discussions might be self-centered. If we are driven by “value for money” and “what’s in it for me?”—unless we exercise great care—such attitudes can flow into even our most devout reflections. In this sense, too often it seems we are looking for salvation at the cheapest price possible.

Undeniably, we are saved only by the grace of God: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no-one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8, 9). But Paul continues in the next verse and recognizes another aspect of this relationship: “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (verse 10).

James expands on this facet of salvation: “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? . . . In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” (James 2:14, 17).

In the big and eternal picture of salvation, we are saved by what Jesus has done for us and we take hold of that by faith. But in the practical aspect of living life today, that salvation should trigger a life lived in partnership with God as a member of the present kingdom of God. The call of God repeated throughout the Bible is to a life of faith and a life of faithfulness. It is not so much about gaining salvation as it is about living and serving joyfully in the light of salvation.

When we begin to appreciate the wonder and mystery of the unfailing love of God, we respond with faith and gratitude and we seek His goodness in our lives and for those around us. We live with as much faith and as many good “works” as we can muster, realizing these are themselves gifts from God and that neither of them adds anything to our salvation or to God’s abundant provision.

Read it again

John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world . . .”—and the original Greek word for “world” is kosmos, meaning “the world as a created, organized entity” (Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary, Vol 5, page 929). That “John 3:16 is about me” is an important starting point; that the plan of salvation so neatly summarized in this verse has implications for everyone and the whole of creation is something we need to spend more time exploring.

Of course, this is not about mounting an argument for universalism—that everyone will be “saved” regardless of their choices for or against God and His plan. Instead, the focus is on God’s love that reaches out to all and His purpose of working through those who choose to cooperate with Him to redeem and ultimately recreate the whole creation. It is a broader understanding of salvation, stepping away from the temptation to self-centeredness that sometimes mars the understanding of

salvation that can arise from individualistic ways of thinking.

Yes, salvation is about me and my saving relationship with God—but it is not merely about me. Theologian N. T. Wright puts it like this: “Justification is not just about ‘how I get my sins forgiven.’ It is about how God creates, in the Messiah Jesus and in the power of the Spirit, a single family, celebrating their once-for-all forgiveness and their assured ‘no condemnation’ in Christ, through whom his purpose can now be extended into the wider world” (Justification: God’s plan and Paul’s vision, page 248).

We can, perhaps, readily accept that God loves people other than just ourselves. He loves those we love and we can rejoice in that. He also loves those people we reach out to in our communities, and our realization of His love for everyone should be a motivation for reaching out to let them know of His far-reaching love. But He also loves those we are afraid of, those we don’t know how to

show and share God’s love to. God loves people—all people, everywhere, all the time. God’s favor is not limited to our favor.

Creation is one way we see this demonstrated. The Bible consistently points to the world around us as evidence of God’s goodness. Paul urges that all people have an opportunity to encounter God through His creation: “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse” (Romans 1:20). Jesus also referred to the natural world and the created order as evidence of God’s love and a means by which all people are recipients of His grace: “He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45). As well as all the goodness of the natural world, life itself is a gift from God and, regardless of the individual’s response or attitude to God, every person is a recipient of that grace.

Renewing relationships

But even this reading does not do justice to the breadth of John 3:16's "for God so loved the world . . ." The second half of this verse places the focus of God's plan of salvation as a way of offering eternal life to "whoever believes in him" (John 3:16b). The real danger of "perishing" results from the relationship with God being broken by the first human sin. We can only ever personally come to God as fallen human beings. When we accept this gift of salvation, our relationship with God is restored. In response to how much God has loved us, the gift He gave us in His Son and the promise we have of eternal life, we are made new and we grow toward all the right relationships God created us to enjoy, including our relationships with others and the world beyond ourselves.

Obviously, human beings have a special place in salvation and Creation, and more attention is given to human creation in Genesis 1 and 2 than to the rest of the story. But the first "definition" of what it means to be human includes being created in the image of God and situated in relationship to the rest of creation (see Genesis 1:26). Creation is important to who we are as human beings in relation to God and, while humans are the central part of Creation,

it is clear God also has a special concern for the rest of the created world.

When Adam and Eve chose to disobey God, all of creation was affected. The reality of sin changed the relationships between God and humanity, between humanity and nature and, it seems, between God and all His creation (see Genesis 3). God is still the Creator, and He still orders and sustains all of life. But perhaps in similar ways to the change in the relationship between God and His people, God's relationship to Creation is rendered less direct and more difficult.

Not that there are not still glimpses of God in the created world. As noted above, God still speaks and works in and through the natural world. And somehow, the creation and the creatures themselves have voices that offer praise to God and echo the relationship for which they were created: "Praise the Lord from the earth, you great sea creatures and all ocean depths, lightning and hail, snow and clouds, stormy winds that do his bidding, you mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars, wild animals and all cattle, small creatures and flying birds. . . . Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted; his splendor is above the earth and the heavens" (Psalm 148:7-13).

But even in this ordered praise the tones are muted, the celebration is incomplete, and the brokenness is evident. The praise is mingled with groans (see Romans 8:22). Life is punctuated by death. Creation is beset by decay—and somehow yearns for re-creation: "For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will

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be liberated from its bondage to decay" (Romans 8:19-21).

In a sense, the dislocation of creation because of human sin was most visibly demonstrated at the Crucifixion. C. S. Lewis described the Resurrection as the "great miracle" that introduced an entirely different kind of possibility into the world, but the death of the world's Creator within the confines and limitations of that world must be no less a magnitude of "anti-miracle." It is little wonder that nature turned away and violently revolted at this darkest moment in human history (see Matthew 27:45-51). But even in this darkest of moments, the Creator was working to recreate—even the Creator's death opened the way for re-creation. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son . . ."

Agents of re-creation

When we are invited into a new life in relationship with God because of what

Jesus has done for us by His death, we are also called back to our relationship with God that originally saw human beings established as "stewards"—as caretakers and gardeners—of His creation. God's ultimate plan is for the world to be restored to its original goodness. Death will be defeated (see 1 Corinthians 15:26) and the impacts of sin and death will be removed (see Revelation 21:1-5). As such, we are called not only to accept His offer of salvation, but to live for and share that salvation in our world today in anticipation of the complete re-creation promised by God. We are saved by grace as a gift of God and recreated as "God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10). When we are saved, we are also called to the roles He created us to live out in our world.

This has significant implications for how we understand our response to God's salvation and our relationship to the world in which we have been

created and recreated: "We are not saved from the world of creation, but saved for the world of creation (Romans 8:18-26). Humans were made to take care of God's wonderful world, and it is not too strong to say that the reason God saves humans is not simply that he loves them for themselves but that he loves them for what they truly are—his pro-creators, his stewards, his vice-regents over creation" (N. T. Wright, Justification, page 234). The whole world should benefit from the renewed relationships between God and His people.

Because God so loved us, we are called to love what He loves. Because "God so loved the world"—"as a created, organized entity"—so must we. Because we have accepted God's gift of salvation, we seek that same salvation and re-creation for our fellow human beings and ultimately look forward to the re-creation of the whole created world. And in a specific and special way, we are now God's agents for serving, preserving, helping, and healing in our world.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. How would you explain salvation to a non-Christian friend?**
- 2. How important is God's grace in our relationship with Him?**
- 3. What are some of the ways in which God's grace extends even to those who might not believe in Him?**
- 4. What does it mean to be a "steward" of creation? How does our care for creation affect other people?**

