



# the core

the **central truths** of the faith

## Discussion Guide

### God loves you: John 3.14-17

#### Getting Started: 10 minutes

- o How do you know when someone truly loves you? What kind of response does real love elicit from you?
- o Optional: What from the sermon, if anything, encouraged, challenged, or really made you think?

**Setting the Stage:** *“Jesus loves me! this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” Simple and profound words that some of us learned to sing as a child. Yet, do we really believe them? Does God really love us? I suppose it depends on what your definition of love is, but looking at many of us, that definition probably isn’t all that great. On our best days we act as if God’s love is available but distant. On our worst. . . His love is conditional and must be earned. For many of us, God’s love seems too good to be true. God’s anger, wrath, justice, and punishment we get. God’s love is harder to wrap our minds around. But what if it is true? What if God really does love us? What would it do to us? What might it free us from and for? What if God really does love?*

**Diving Into the Text: 60 minutes** (The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)

- Read John 3.14-17. (*Leader Note:* You may wish to use the context and background notes to set the scene.)
- In what ways did God demonstrate love? (*Leader Note:* Seek to draw out as many as possible.)
- Imagine you are hearing this passage for the first time. What is most surprising to you? Can you elaborate?
- Do you think it is easy or difficult for people to view God as loving? Can you explain?
- Have you ever seen anyone who lived as if God loved them? What was their life like?
- Think about your life. What might demonstrate that you believe God loves you? What might demonstrate an element of doubt in God’s love?
- Which is more prevalent in you, a belief or doubt in God’s love? Can you elaborate?
- What would it take for you to come to a place where you believed and lived in God’s love? What steps might you be willing to take to move to this place?

#### Wrapping Up: 20 minutes

- o Prayer requests
- o Group prayer time
- o House-keeping matters (assignments for the next meeting)

## Group Notes

### *God loves you: John 3.14-17*

#### **Context and Background**

**A conversation at night:** The statement of God's love for the world comes within the context of a clandestine meeting between Jesus and Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. In John's Gospel, Jesus has cleared the Temple courts and threatened to destroy the Temple and raise it in three days (John 2.13-24). Such actions would certainly have angered the religious authorities. Therefore, it is no surprise to find that in the next scene, a member from the Jewish ruling council is meeting with Jesus. The meeting is at night. Thus, the meeting is secret in a time that most meetings were done in public places during the day. More than likely, Nicodemus is investigating Jesus on his own rather than as a representative of the ruling council and does not want his actions to be publically known. Jesus' actions would have drawn ire, not intrigue, from the religious leaders. However, Nicodemus seems to be different. He approaches Jesus stating that he can see the power and presence of God in Jesus' ministry. What Nicodemus is most likely saying is that he resonates with what Jesus is doing, including the cleansing of the Temple. Jesus jumps to the heart of the matter. What Nicodemus is truly interested in is not the cleansing of the Temple—the signs Nicodemus refers to—but the message of the Kingdom of God. Jesus states that to be part of the Kingdom of God, one must be born "from above" ("again" in most English translations). To be born "from above" indicates an action that must be taken by God, something Jesus refers to as born of the Spirit (John 3.8). Nicodemus struggles to understand Jesus' words and a dialogue ensues. In this dialogue, Jesus states that eternal living is being made available to people through himself. The dialogue probably ends in verse 15 and John's own comments begin in verse 16. While Jesus' comments explain the "what" of Jesus' ministry and the life being offered, John's own comments explain the "how" and "why." Taken together, John's and Jesus' comments form a clear and concise explanation of the gospel message, a message of God's movement to rescue the world.

**Eternal life:** The outcome of orienting one's life around Jesus (trust) is described as one coming to possess eternal life. What is eternal life? In our modern context, we often understand the term "eternal" to refer to a state of timelessness. Thus, eternal life is simply to live forever. However, Jesus' audience used the term "eternal" in a much different way. The term in the language of the NT refers to something that comes from an age and place other than the present. That is, it is a different sort of life. Thus, "eternal life" actually refers to quality and not quantity. To speak of "eternal life" is actually to offer life that is different from the life one presently possesses. Further, this life is something that one can possess in the present as seen in the present-tense grammatical structure of John 3.15. Therefore, it is probably best to translate the term as "eternal living" or to paraphrase it as "the present possession of a different sort of life."

#### **The Text**

**A rescue mission. . . (John 3.14-15):** As Jesus concludes his conversation with Nicodemus, he seeks to explain what God is doing. He uses a story from the Exodus journey to make his point. While the people of Israel were moving through the wilderness, they began to grumble and turn against God. The result of this grumbling and turning against God was pain, suffering, and death due to venomous snakes. Basically, turning against God led to destruction. However, God instructed Moses to make a bronze serpent and raise it up on a pole as a means of saving the people, restoring their life. All who looked upon the snake lived (Num. 21.4-9). Jesus states that this story explains what God is presently doing. He begins with the lifting up of himself, a reference to the cross. In so doing, he assumes the first part of the story. People have turned against God and the result is pain, suffering, and death. People are in need of rescue. However, this time those in need of rescue are the entire world and not just the Jewish people. As before, God moves to rescue. Once again, He does so by raising up a symbol, this time His son on a cross. Those that turn to the son (have faith) find that their life is restored in the present. They are given eternal living (see *Eternal Life*).

**A rescue mission motivated by love (John 3.16-17):** The conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus probably ends with verse 15. However, John chooses to elaborate on the conversation by providing further explanation. God is moving to bring rescue because of love for the world. To state that God loves the world would be shocking. First, it would be shocking for a Jew to hear that God loved others beyond themselves. Second, the idea of a god having love would have been foreign to someone in the first century. Gods were often viewed as angry and not loving. However, God the Father is portrayed as loving and this love is demonstrated by action, the giving of His only son. Here we find a reference not just to the incarnation but to the cross. God gave his son for both. In this giving, God made a way for people to have a new type of life, one that was not gripped by destruction. This type of action of God motivated by love was foreign to all ancient religions. Gods simply did not act magnanimously on behalf of people. They wished to be appeased and often had to be goaded into action for they cared little for people. John claims that this action was different. It is motivated by love. Further, it has no anger in it at all. The coming of Jesus was not anger based for he did not come to judge. People had already brought judgment upon themselves by turning away from God (John 3.18). Rather, Jesus came to rescue the world from itself, to offer a life that was different and new.

**Application:** God is good and loving. He is not angry. He does not wear a frown. He does not have to be appeased. He is not out to "get us." He does not keep score. He doesn't need to do any of these things. We do them enough to ourselves as we turn away from Him. In turning away we bring pain, suffering, and death into our lives. We are our own worst enemy. Why do we need another one? No. God loves us and seeks to rescue us, to rescue us from ourselves. He has sent His only son to us, not to remind us of our sin but to save us from it. He is the remedy and rescue for a world gone mad. He is good and loving, and lovingly offers us life of a different sort.