

003 How God is Saving the World According to Jesus

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Hello, and welcome to the Walk Humble podcast. I'm your host, Brandon Cox. And this is an ongoing conversation about life, faith and relationships among people who don't claim to have life all figured out. We **walk**, implying we want to grow, make forward progress, and be healthy, holy, and happy. But we walk **humble**, meaning we get to drop the pretense, take off the mask, and realize we have nothing to prove.

Maybe someday I'll have fancy intro music and I'll interview experts and celebrities. But for now, it's just me sharing inspiration passionately about topics I've been wrestling with my entire life.

Today, I want to tackle a tiny subject - nothing major, nothing heavy. I just want to talk about **how God is saving the world, according to Jesus**.

Before I get into that, I want to consider the question of whether or not the world even *needs* saving to begin with. And my own quick answer is Yes! But let me give you a bit of background.

At at our wedding, my wife and I back in 1997, when we got married, one of the songs we had played during our wedding was Louis Armstrong's famous rendition of *What a Wonderful World*. And that song would later become kind of problematic for me because I began to form a theology and began to learn more and more about my own worldview. And I started to think thoughts like this...

The world is bad and evil, and everyone living in it is bad and evil. And so is it really a beautiful world? Is it really wonderful? Or...

The world is temporary and disposable, it's all going to burn up someday, and wasn't made to last forever. So should we really care that much about it? Or...

The world is the plan that God scrapped when he created Heaven. God made this world and we messed it all up. And so he rolls the dough back together and begins again, and makes heaven as this escape, so to speak, from all its broken here.

I also would think, *don't get too attached to this world. Focus on the next one. Don't love things here, don't, don't hold them too closely, too precious.*

And there may be some elements of truth in those ways of thinking. But there's also a lot about those thoughts that that are not necessarily healthy thoughts, if that makes sense. Problematic is that millions of people believe those things a lot of people believe the world is, is bad, and we may as well abandon it. And it's just temporary. And it's just all sin and muck. And we just need to wait for God to kind of burn it up and start over. And it'll all happen instantly. And those of us who get our theology right, will enjoy a fixed version of it called heaven. And those people who don't get their theology, right might just miss out.

So that's all problematic for me. Because I think Louis Armstrong was actually right to say, this is a wonderful world, a beautiful world. Even the Bible in Genesis one says that after God created each part of the world, he looked at what he created, and he said, It's good. You know, I don't think that was completely wrecked by what happened next in the Garden of Eden story, okay.

I believe that you have goodness *in you*, by virtue of your origin story, a good God made you good. He made a world that's good.

Now, we can also at the same time acknowledge that while the world is wonderful, in lots of ways, while it's beautiful, in many ways, it's also a world riddled with problems, and that the responsibility for most of the world's problems lies at the feet of human beings. It's my problem I've created. It's our problems that we've created, even though we're all beautiful, and we're all valuable. And there's inherent goodness in us by virtue of our origin story. Truthfully, we're all a bit selfish, too. And we keep proving that over and over.

So somehow, we got to hold those two things in tension. That the world is great and wonderful and beautiful. And the world is also a place filled with problems and pain and suffering and hurt and it's okay to believe both of those things at the same time and to get up in the morning and see a beautiful sunrise and go man, what an awesome world. And to flip on the news and see that another war is going on and go man, what a what a horrible place. What a difficult place.

You can't look around without acknowledging we keep hurting and killing each other. We keep grabbing at power and hanging onto our privilege, however we can. We tend to ignore all the warning signs that were messing up the planet's physical condition. We're depressed, we're disconnected, we're unhealthy. And all of that's just the tip of the iceberg.

Therefore, I look up, I look around, and I think to myself, if there's a God who created everything, and he's out there watching us, I want his help. If there's a God who spun this world on its axis into existence, if There's a God that started all this and made me and made you and made everything around us. I want his intervention. I want him to get involved.

And personally, as a Christian, I believe God has involved himself in the messes we've made of this planet. And the way he did that, while it's difficult to understand, while I've spent my whole life trying to figure it out, and still don't have it all, you know, nicely ironed out, I believe God did that by coming to earth in the form of His Son, Jesus Christ.

Now bear with me, you may not believe that you may not understand that. And that's okay. Keep listening. I just want to lay this out before you and I just want to say I believe God is real and that God has a plan.

When I was seven or eight years old or so, growing up in Southern Baptist Sunday school classroom, I remember creating Vacation Bible School art, with the most famous verse in the entire Bible. I still remember what it what it looked like it was a piece of wood, we had painted white, and then we'd written on it, these words, or at least some version of these words, a different translation, maybe.

But this is what we wrote, *"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but have eternal life."* You may have heard it a little bit differently, but that's the gist of it. That's, that's the New Revised Standard Version. Okay. And this verse is perhaps the most well known verse in, in all of Christianity. It's known by a lot of people don't don't consider themselves Christians anymore, or perhaps never word. It's so familiar. It's sort of the defining verse for Christianity.

The problem is, I also think it's one of the most misunderstood verses one of the most misunderstood passages in the Bible. Even by me. I think all of us who come to it 2000 years after it was written, have some struggles and some problems trying to figure it out and unwind it all. So I wanted to take a look at this today. Because when I talk about how God is saving the world, according to Jesus, this is the passage I want to go to because this is the passage where Jesus is having a conversation about God's saving the world and how he's going to do it. Okay.

I want to read the whole passage to you. It's 18 verses so bear with me. But just listen to the story, as it unfolds in the in the third chapter of the Gospel of John. This is what the Bible says,

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews, he came to Jesus by night, and he said to him, Rabbi, we know that you're a teacher who's come from God, for no one can do these things that you do apart from the presence of God. Jesus answered, and verily, truly, I tell, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above. Nicodemus said to Him, How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can we enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born? Jesus answered, very, Truly I tell you, nobody can do that. No one can enter the kingdom of God, without being born of water, and spirit. What is born of flesh is flesh. What is born of spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, you must be born from above, the wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is what everybody is born of the Spirit. Nicodemus said to Him, How can these things be? Jesus answered him, and this is a little bit of a jab if you'll if you'll hear Jesus in it. He says, Are you a teacher of Israel? And yet you do not understand these things? He's kind of highlighting for Nicodemus, the problem of you don't get it, do you? Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we've seen, yet you do not receive our testimony. If I've told you about earthly things, and you do not believe how can you believe I tell you about heavenly things. No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up and that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life. And then here

comes the verse, For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him. Those who believe in Him are not condemned, but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they do not believe they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

(John 3:1-18 NRSV)

All right, so there's a lot there, right? This passage that tells us about a moment in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, when He is conversing with a well-known, highly respected religious leader among the Jews named Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a law keeper. He was one of those guys that would have memorized what we would call the first five Books, the Bible, he, you know, sort of walked according to the letter of the law. He was highly religious participated in all the ceremonies and rituals he was looked to as a leader among his people in his time.

And he comes to Jesus and they have a conversation about the world and its condition. And one of the themes that sort of comes out is Nicodemus seems to be looking at the world as a place that is very physical, and very real, and very ethical and not necessarily a world that has a spiritual supernatural dimension to it. Okay, Jesus gets into the spiritual, he gets into the supernatural. And he gives in this passage, these, these two big pieces of information that Christians have built a whole lot of teaching on, that we've wrestled with for a couple 1000 years now.

First, he tells Nicodemus, nobody can see the kingdom of God without being born again or born from above. And then secondly, he gives him this plan of salvation, so to speak, For God so loved the world, he gave his only Son, everybody who believes in Him may not perish but have everlasting life. So you got this piece of information about being born again. And you've got this piece of information about whoever believes in Jesus is not condemned, but may have eternal life. And those are the two big chunks of information that we wrestle with.

Now, so far, seems pretty straightforward. And most people reading this passage of Scripture, feel pretty assured by the end of it, that it has confirmed what they believe already about life and faith and God and eternity. The problem is, the more familiar we become with any part of Scripture, or any religious teaching for that matter, the more familiar we become with it, the harder it is for us to see it with fresh eyes, and new meaning gets obscured. And by new meaning, I mean, the way it speaks to us are what it teaches us gets obscured sometimes, because we're so familiar with it, we, we stop looking for anything fresh about it. And we just rely on what we already know. In fact, it's a little scary to question any of that.

Problem is, I think that we make a lot of assumptions about this passage, and I want to give you some assumptions we make. I wrote down 10 of them, I'll go through them real quick, but just 10 things that we assume about this passage of Scripture that may or may not be true, I'm not saying these are wrong assumptions. I'm not saying they're right assumptions. I'm just saying these are assumptions that most of us who've walked in Christianity for a while we bring to this passage that may or may not serve us well in trying to understand what Jesus was trying to get across.

Assumption #1: Here's the assumption number one, it's a little one. Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, to avoid the embarrassment of being associated with Jesus. He came by night, sounds sneaky, he didn't come in the day, he came in the dark. The problem is, the Bible doesn't tell us why. So we don't get to assume that there's some dubious motive or he's being sneaky or doesn't want to be seen.

The Bible doesn't really echo any of that just says he came by night could have been that he was really, really busy. But he came to Jesus by night. Now, John, as an author uses night and day light and dark, he uses them a lot to kind of symbolize good and evil and, and God versus that which is against God, and, and so that's there. But it doesn't really give us nicotine as his motive.

Assumption #2: So that's one assumption, here's another one, we assume sometimes that being born again, refers to the experience of conversion. That what, what maybe you are high if someone else experienced as a kid, or growing up, or maybe more recently, as adults, that this moment where we we felt something in our heart, and we expressed our belief, and we were we were saved, or we were changed, or we were baptized, or confirmed, or there's some kind of experience some religious moment of conversion, and that that's what it means to be born again. And without doing that, without this conversion experience, we can't see the kingdom of heaven. We can't see the kingdom of God.

Now, the problem is, Jesus was using the terminology about being born again *before* he died on the cross, before there was a resurrection, and before there was a church. And so think he was necessarily talking about Christian conversion, the way that we think of conversion today, and saying, that's what I mean when I say born again. I think there's more to it than that.

Assumption #3: Here's the third assumption. We assume that when Jesus says a person cannot see the kingdom of God cannot enter the kingdom of heaven, that what he's talking about is a person can't go to heaven when they die. Problem is that's actually a bigger leap than we realize.

To see the kingdom is to perceive to understand, have our eyes open to the kingdom of God, and **the kingdom of God is not heaven**. Does it include heaven? Oh, that's another topic. It's another podcast. And, you know, Heaven may extend itself or excuse me, the kingdom of God might extend itself into heaven into eternity in the life beyond the grave and all of that. But that's not necessarily what Jesus was getting at here. He's not talking about going away to heaven, when we die.

Assumption #4: Here's the fourth one. And this is for my religious friends. Okay. I didn't necessarily grow up believing this. But many people believe that when Jesus says, You got to be born of water and spirit, that he's talking about **baptism**, and the Holy Spirit. Again, we're getting more specific than Jesus was. Nobody had really been baptized into the church. When Jesus says this to Nicodemus, the Jewish people at the time did baptize was part of their historical traditions. And obviously, the church has baptized millions of people since then. But I don't think Jesus had baptism in mind when he said, You got to be born of water.

And when he said, You gotta be born of the Spirit. You know, is he talking about the Holy Spirit? It's quite possible, probably even. But I don't want to assume that that's that we're limiting him correctly to

only talking about this, this particular kind of spiritual birth, okay. What I do think he's getting at is what he's been getting at with Nicodemus all along Nicodemus, you're thinking about everything from a natural, earthly, limited human perspective. And there is a spiritual supernatural perspective to be seen. You got to be born not only of water, not only of that, which is natural, that there needs to be a supernatural side of how you come to understand things. Okay.

Assumption #5: Assumption number five, Jesus was telling us in John 3:16, just *how much* God loves us, how much does God love us this much. And we, we, we hold our arms out as far as we can, to the left and to the right, and we say, so much so that he stretched his arms out this far and was nailed to a cross. That's how much God loves you. Here's the problem. This verse is not about *how much* God loves you. It's not about the amount of His love or the the size of his love or the extent of his love. It's actually about *how he loves*. It's about God's love language, if you will. And it isn't gifts or time or touch or any of those things necessarily, as much as it is that God loved us by giving us his son.

So how did he love us? He loved us by giving us his son. We'll come back to that.

Assumption #6: Okay, assumption number six. When Jesus says, God "gave His only son," he was, of course talking about the *cross* on which Jesus died, that God gave His Son who died. Again, we're adding something in that isn't there in the text. It's not there in the Scripture. And even when he talks about this imagery of Jesus being lifted up, like Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, what we picture is a cross. I'm just referring to the death of Jesus.

But John elsewhere in his book talks not only about Jesus's lifting up as referring to the cross, but also to his resurrection and his ascension and his enthronement as king. It's, it's all of the grand finale of Jesus's life. So when the Bible says he gave his only begotten Son, it's not just talking about the cross, the death of Jesus is more to it than that. He actually gave us His Son.

You know, my mom used to joke about, she would run into somebody that she knew in the grocery store, and they would say, Oh, you're Ronnie's wife, or, Oh, you're Brandon's mom. Or she she worked for a lawyer named Joe Bill, say you're Joe Bills's secretary. In other words, she got defined by one of her roles in life. And sometimes I think we do that to Jesus.

We define Jesus as the Savior who died on the cross. But Jesus was more than that. And this is not just saying that God gave us His Son for the role of dying on the cross it saying he gave us His Son, Jesus period, that Jesus *Himself* is the gift. He's the gift.

Assumption #7: We assume that the phrase "whoever believes in Him" is referring to our embracing of a particular theological thought. It's a particular meaning of the atoning death of Christ that, that whoever believes in Him means whoever believes that he died for our sins, and that he rose again. And that's what whosoever believes in Him, must mean, but again, we're adding things in that are not there. Jesus just says, whoever believes *in Him*, whoever believes in Jesus, in Him in His person in his teaching in his message in his ministry, whoever believes in Him in who he is, okay?

Assumption #8: Assumption number eight, to perish means to go to hell, forever. The problem is, the word perish just means *die*, to cease, to no longer be alive, to push up daisies, to be six feet under. That's what it is to perish it is. So to say that Jesus is talking about shall not perish means shall not go to hell forever. Man that's adding a lot that's not there into the text.

Assumption #9: Assumption number nine, to have everlasting life, that means to go to heaven upon our death, right? It's to die and then go to heaven forever. Again, the problem is that the word eternal in Scripture has two shades of meaning. It's, it's both quality and quantity. So yeah, it's about the afterlife. But it's about this afterlife that begins in the present life. It's about the here and the now it's about a kind of life that we get to possess starting today. Not something that starts upon our death. Okay.

Assumption #10: Here's assumption number 10. This is maybe the most controversial that I've said so far. But assumption number 10 is this. Those who do not trust in Jesus are condemned already, everybody's guilty of sin, deserving of God's wrath, and bound for hell without Jesus. And if you don't believe in Jesus, if you don't place your faith in what he did on the cross, then you will go to hell forever, and you'll burn there and suffer for all of eternity.

This is probably the biggest chunk of stuff that we're adding into the text that simply isn't there. It's just not there. See, the problem is that being *condemned* for us might mean going to hell when you die. But for Jesus being condemned means something else. He's looking at a world, at a cosmos, that is condemned. It's condemned. Okay, so here's, here's the deal. Let me let me kind of share with you why I'm sharing all these assumptions.

I grew up in conservative evangelical tradition, and we would talk a lot about the "plan of salvation." Step one, God made everything. Step two, we've all sinned and blown it, and we're no longer perfect. Step three, we need to see what Jesus did for us on the cross. Step four, I need to believe in him and put my trust in Him. And He saves me as a result of my belief, okay, so that's his plan of salvation.

And when we read John 3:16, or any of the verses surrounding it, we're really reading the plan of salvation, according to Jesus. And we're right in that we're reading about Jesus's plan of salvation. We're wrong, though, to think, to assume and to put into the texts that we're reading about our modern evangelical understanding of the plan of salvation, in Jesus's words.

So what's the real point of John three? What does it mean to say that God is saving the world through Jesus? If it's not so much, that we're all bound for hell and Jesus lets us go to heaven if we believe in him personally... If it's not just about my individual conversion to Christianity, to save my neck after death... If it's not about that, what is it? What's, what's the point here?

Well, here's my sentence that I wrote down, kind of summarize what I think the author John is telling us the story for what Jesus is trying to get across is this.

Everything about life on Earth, and in heaven, both now and forever, looks different when you finally come to understand how God loved the world, in all of its brokenness, and how he decided to save it

through the life, death, resurrection and Ministry of His Son, Jesus Christ.

Let me read that again more slowly.

Everything about life on Earth, and in heaven, which earth and heaven are a unified whole, both now and forever present and eternity looks different. When you finally come to understand what when your eyes are open, when you're finally born again, everything looks different when you finally understand how God loved the world, in all of its brokenness, in all of its need of saving, and he decided to save it, to save the world, through the life, death, resurrection and Ministry of His Son, Jesus Christ.

And let me make one other big clarification. And this matters more than you might realize. In John 3:16, when God says, "For God so loved the world," he uses the word *cosmos*, the universe. We as western, modern, most of us listening this probably American, maybe European, at least English speaking, origin, people tend to read this. And what we assume again, is that the *world* should be personalized. We even say it this way, that means God so loved **you**, you could put **your name** in there. For God so loved Brandon, For God so loved Ginny, or Mark, or Bob, or Heather or.

And that's what we do with most of the New Testament scriptures. We individualize and personalize way more than the author's probably intended us to.

But what the Bible says here is that God saw and loved the world, the cosmos, the universe, all of creation, he made and loves all of creation, he sees that it's broken, he is saving it from its brokenness. He's saving it from its brokenness. So this is how I've come to summarize this entire passage, I wrote six lines, okay, these are in the podcast notes if you want to grab them.

**God who made the world,
and who loves the world he made,
including everything, and everyone in it,
is saving the world he made and loves,
by sending His Son Jesus Christ,
rather than leaving the world to die.**

That's it. That's the message to me of Christianity. That's the message of John. That's the message of the church for 2000 years. That's the message of Jesus. That's the message of the Gospels. That's it, God who made the world and who loves the world, he made the whole thing, including everything and everyone in it, he is saving the world, the cosmos, everything that he made and loves, he's saving it all, by sending His Son Jesus Christ, and Jesus is doing the saving.

And he did all that rather than leaving the world to die. Rather than leaving the world in its condemned state, rather than leaving the world in its perishing state, rather than leaving us to death, God brought us to life.

Now, let me just say at the end of all this, you might see all this differently than I do. That's okay, there's room for you, there's room for your perspective, in this conversation, there always has been. And there always should be.

Some of you may be bothered by a lot of what I've said, because you come to this from a traditional Christian evangelical perspective. And I totally get that because I did too. And you believe that what Jesus is getting at is that there's a way for individuals to be saved from hell and go to heaven. And that that's by placing their faith in what Jesus did on the cross.

But most of that statement is not in the text. It's just not found in there. Okay. But nonetheless, that might be your perspective. And I'm not here to try to wreck that perspective, not trying to convince you to give up on all of that I'm not doing that, right. That's not my point. My point is simply to say that the message of Christianity is that God is saving the world that he loves. He's saving the world. God loves how through Jesus Christ, okay.

Others of you may be listening, and you believe the world is simply a product of nature, and that we're on our own, that there's no God out there, that there's never going to be a God out there. Nobody's going to come save us. Nobody's going to step in. And so it's up to us to save ourselves. That would be that either atheistic or agnostic or humanistic perspective, or there's a variety of terms, but you might fall into one of those categories or some other category that I that I haven't really picked on.

But here's what, here's what I want to share. Okay, I'm a Christian, I follow Jesus. And I want you to know why. It's *not* because I want to save my neck for eternity. It's *not* because I don't want to go to hell someday. It's *not* because I want to go to heaven instead of hell. Here's why I'm a Christian. Okay. This is why. **I believe there is a God who's saving the world through Jesus, because He has saved me.**

And I'm not referring to that moment as a kid when I got saved. I'm not talking about my baptism. I'm not talking about my conversion. I'm not talking about me becoming a crew Question. That's not what I'm talking about. I'm being more practical and being more pragmatic.

What I'm telling you is that there are moments and seasons in my life, where I have tried to ignore God and push him out and do life my own way, and it has not gone well. It has led to brokenness, it's led to condemnation has led to forms of perishing that maybe weren't completely physical. But that's where my life was, when I have ignored God and pushed him out of my life. But when I have believed in Jesus, when I have believed in his message and his teachings, as challenging as they may be, when I've received all of that, and I've put my trust in him as one who is capable of saving everything, as one who's capable of teaching us a different way, as one who is capable of making the sacrifice that none of us can make, when it comes to that, when I believe in that, and trust in that, and my worldview is framed around that, and I adopt that as my core philosophy in life. I am healthy, and happy, and holy. And I live on this sort of even track and there's peace, and there's love and I become what I'm supposed to become and I grow and I mature. And so I keep following Jesus because of that.

I'm not a Christian, because I can scientifically prove to you that God made the world. I'm not a Christian, because I can give you documented cases of miracles that have been performed that that wouldn't convince me, I don't know that it would convince you. I'm not a Christian, because I was taught about heaven and hell, and I want to stay out of hell and go to heaven. I'm not a Christian because I'm afraid of dying or what lies beyond it in eternity.

I'm a Christian because I can see how Jesus saves. Because I see how Jesus has saved. is saving me. Okay? And I can tell you, I am too broken to do life on my own.

Now, if you can master life, on your own, more power to you. I just don't know anybody that's done it. You know, I've never met someone that's figured it out. That's why it's why I started *Walk Humble*. Because we want to walk and grow and make progress. But we get to do it humbly. Because none of us have it all together, we don't have the answers. We've all messed it up. Okay.

Now, for me, coming to that place of faith, that place of believing that God still loves me and you and everybody else, that place of believing that the creator of the world still wants to save the world. Coming through the process of seeing and understanding how Jesus has saved, how he saves, how he is saving has been a powerful experience.

I would even say, **it's been like being born all over again.**

That's it. That's the episode. I'm so thankful you listen to all the way through. I'm happy to take feedback and questions at WalkHumble.com or you can email me at brandon@walkhumble.com.

I'm very happy and thankful if you'd share this episode with somebody else you think might need to hear it. And if you believe in this work and appreciate what I have to say you want to support this podcast and other writing, just go to [walk www.humble.com/support](http://www.humble.com/support). You can drop a small one time gift and contribute in some way. You become a monthly supporter, or you can just keep listening. I'm just glad you're here. And I hope that you either have been or can be will be an experience that preciousness of being born again and seeing Jesus who saves God who loves the world, and Jesus who saves on his behalf.

That's the message. Hope you have an awesome rest of the day.