

For God So Loved the World!

George Bennard was struggling with personal problems that were causing him a great deal of trouble and anguish. In his suffering, his mind returned again and again to Christ's anguish on the cross. This, he thought, was the heart of the gospel! The cross he pictured was not ornate, or pretty, or gold or silver. It was "a rough, splintery thing, stained with gore." "I saw the Christ of the Cross," he said later, "as if I were seeing John 3:16 leave the printed page, take form and act out the meaning of redemption." And so, in a room in Albion, Michigan, Bennard sat down and wrote a tune. But he struggled with the lyrics. In fact, he could only come up with one line. He struggled for weeks to set words to the melody he had written. Then Bennard, a Methodist evangelist, was scheduled to preach a series of messages in New York. He found himself focusing on the cross. The theme of the cross grew increasingly more urgent to him. He struggled once more with the words to his hymn. This time the lines came. He later told a friend, "I sat down and immediately was able to rewrite the stanzas of the song without so much as one word failing to fall into place. I called in my wife, took out my guitar, and sang the completed song to her. She was thrilled!" On June 7, 1913, George Bennard introduced the new hymn in a revival meeting he was conducting in Pokagon, Michigan. The words went like this: "On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross, the emblem of suffering and shame; and I love that old cross where the dearest and best for a world of lost sinners was slain. So, I'll cherish the old rugged cross, till my trophies at last I lay down; I will cling to the old rugged cross and exchange it someday for a crown." The Old Rugged Cross became one of the most popular hymns of the 20th century. What impressed me, however, was how Bennard described his feelings as he struggled to bring his feelings to the printed page: "I saw the Christ of the Cross as if I were seeing John 3:16 leave the printed page, take form and act out the meaning of redemption."

John 3:16 has had that effect on many people. Martin Luther called John 3:16, "the Gospel in Miniature." If all you had of the New Testament was this one verse, it would be enough to save your soul. "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." How do you describe a love that is unearned, undeserved, given freely and generously and sacrificially for the sake of everyone, whether they can ever return that love or not? That's God's love. God had a million reasons to condemn the world. But He didn't. God saved the world by giving the absolute greatest gift He could give, Himself! And God made us a promise that whoever believes! Yes, whoever believes in God's Son, Jesus Christ, will not perish but have eternal life. Have you accepted that promise in your own life? My dear friends, I pray that you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior so that you will not perish but have everlasting Life in the presence of Jesu who gave His life for you!