I’M SURE MANY OF YOU REMEMBER ROLLEN STEWART. YOU PROBABLY DON’T REMEMBER HIM BY THAT NAME, THOUGH.

ROLLEN STEWART WAS COMMONLY REFERRED TO AS “SUPERFAN.”

HE WAS THE GUY WITH THE BIG RAINBOW WIG WHO WAS SEEN AT VIRTUALLY EVERY MAJOR SPORTING & ENTERTAINMENT EVENT OF THE 1980’S.

ROLLEN CAME ON HARD TIMES – REALLY HARD TIMES – FROM WHICH HE NEVER RECOVERED.

MOST OF THOSE HARD TIMES WERE SELF-INFLICTED.

I HAD OCCASION TO MEET SUPERFAN.

IT WAS IN LONDON AT THE WEDDING OF PRINCE CHARLES & LADY DIANA.

EMMA SUE & I WERE THERE THAT DAY & I SPOTTED SUPERFAN & WALKED OVER TO TALK TO HIM.

I ASKED HIM HOW HE ALWAYS MANAGED TO BE SEEN ON TELEVISION.

HE SAID, “FOLLOW ME – I JUST LOOK FOR THE CAMERAS.”

SO I DID – AND MANAGED TO BE STANDING NEXT TO “SUPERFAN” BEHIND THE “TODAY” SHOW SET DIRECTLY IN FRONT OF BUCKINGHAM PALACE.

ASIDE FROM THAT RAINBOW WIG, THERE WAS SOMETHING ELSE DISTINCTIVE ABOUT ROLLEN STEWART.
HE WAS ALWAYS HOLDING A SIGN OR WEARING A T-SHIRT WITH “JOHN 3:16” EMBLAZONED ACROSS IT.

TODAY’S PASSAGE INCLUDES THAT VERSE – A VERSE THAT IS KNOWN TO EVERYONE, WHETHER THEY LEARNED IT IN CHURCH OR SIMPLY WATCHED A LOT OF SPORTING EVENTS WHERE SUPERFAN SHOWED UP.

IT’S A VERSE THAT MARTIN LUTHER CALLED “THE GOSPEL IN A NUTSHELL.”

ONE OF OUR ADULT SUNDAY SCHOOL CLASSES JUST COMPLETED A STUDY OF “CHRISTIANITY & WORLD RELIGIONS.”

AFTER LOOKING AT THE WORLD’S MAJOR RELIGIONS & MAKING A COMPARISON TO WHAT CHRISTIANS BELIEVE, THE FINAL SESSION WAS DEVOTED TO CHRISTIANITY AS A WORLD RELIGION.

THE LEADER USED JUST ONE VERSE TO TALK ABOUT CHRISTIANITY – JOHN 3:16.

YOU NOT ONLY KNOW THE VERSE BUT YOU PROBABLY KNOW THE CONTEXT IN WHICH IT IS FOUND.

A HIGHLY-RESPECTED PHARISEE NAMED NICODEMUS COMES TO JESUS, “BY NIGHT” JOHN SAYS.

THERE IS, OF COURSE, THE DUAL MEANING OF “NIGHT” FOR JOHN.

NICODEMUS CAME TO HIM IN LITERAL DARKNESS TO AVOID BEING SEEN BY FELLOW JEWISH LEADERS.

AND HE ALSO CAME IN THE DARKNESS OF HIS SOUL.

HE CAME WITH QUESTIONS FOR JESUS.

HE CAME IN SEARCH OF SOMETHING MORE FOR HIS LIFE.

JESUS TELLS HIM ABOUT “BEING BORN FROM ABOVE.”
HE TELLS HIM THAT BELIEF IN HIM IS THE WAY TO ETERNAL LIFE.

AS JESUS FINISHES WHAT HE HAS TO SAY TO NICodemus, JOHN REFLECTS ON THE IMPLICATIONS OF JESUS’ WORDS & HE BEGINS HIS REFLECTION WITH THIS VERSE --- THE MOST WELL-KNOWN VERSE IN ALL OF SCRIPTURE.

JOHN ARTHUR GOSSIP, IN HIS COMMENTARY ON JOHN, SAYS ABOUT THIS VERSE –

“IN THE WHOLE WORD OF GOD THERE MUST BE FEW IF ANY SCRIPTURES WHICH HAVE APPEALED SO IRRESISTIBLY TO SO MANY AS THIS VERSE.

DEEP CALLS TO DEEP IN IT; IN EVERY PHRASE, VISTAS THAT HAVE NO END AT ALL, BUT MELT INTO THE FAR REACHES OF ETERNITY, KEEP OPENING UP BEFORE ONE’S EYES & MIND.”

IF THAT ISN’T DAUNTING ENOUGH, HE GOES ON TO SAY (AND THIS IS TERRIBLY FRIGHTENING TO THE PREACHER) – ANY ATTEMPTED COMMENTARY IS SUPREMELY AN AUDACITY AND AN IMPERTINENCE, TO BE ESSAYED AT ALL ONLY WITH REVERENCE AND HUMILITY.”

THAT IS A FRIGHTENING WARNING!

IT’S A WARNING THAT REMINDS ME OF A STORY ABOUT A MAN WHO BROKE INTO A WOMAN’S HOUSE ONE NIGHT TO ROB HER.

WHEN THE WOMAN SAW THE THIEF IN HER HOUSE SHE PICKED UP HER BIBLE AND SAID, “ACTS 2:38!”

WHEN SHE DID, THE ROBBER TOOK OFF RUNNING OUT OF THE HOUSE.

WHEN THE POLICE CAUGHT UP WITH HIM, THEY ASKED HIM WHY HE TOOK OFF RUNNING SO FAST.
THE THIEF SAID TO THE POLICE, “WELL YOU WOULD TOO, IF YOU HEARD A WOMAN TELL YOU THAT SHE HAD AN AXE AND TWO 38’S!”

MISGUIDED AS HE WAS, THE MAN WAS ACKNOWLEDGING THE POWER OF GOD’S WORD.

THERE IS PERHAPS NO VERSE MORE POWERFUL THAN THIS ONE. HERE IS THE CONSUMMATE PROCLAMATION OF GOD’S LOVE. IT’S PROBABLY ONE OF THE FIRST VERSES YOU LEARNED AS A CHILD.

IT’S ONE OF THE FIRST VERSES OUR CHILDREN LEARN IN THE BIBLE MEMORY CONTEST.


WHEN I WAS VERY YOUNG I REMEMBER HEARING ABOUT “THE LOVE OF GOD.”

I DIDN’T FIRST HEAR ABOUT IT IN THE WAY THAT I KNOW IT NOW, THOUGH.

I REMEMBER HOW I COULD TELL THE LEVELS OF MY FATHER’S DISPLEASURE WHEN I WAS SMALL.

WHEN HE WAS JUST A LITTLE BIT UPSET HE WOULD SAY, QUITE LOUDLY, “OH, FOR THE LOVE OF PETE!”

NOW, WE DIDN’T KNOW ANYONE NAMED PETE & I COULD NEVER UNDERSTAND WHO IT WAS MY DAD WAS TALKING ABOUT!

BUT WHEN HE WAS REALLY UPSET, IT WOULDN’T BE PETE HE’D REFER TO & HIS VOICE WOULDN’T JUST BE SLIGHTLY RAISED.

HE WOULD ANGRILY SHOUT, “OH, FOR THE LOVE OF GOD!”

UNFORTUNATELY, THAT MAY HAVE BEEN MY FIRST INTRODUCTION TO “THE LOVE OF GOD” AND I DIDN’T UNDERSTAND WHAT WAS MEANT BY IT.
IT WASN’T EVEN A COMPLETE SENTENCE.  
IT WAS JUST THIS ANGRY EXPLOSION THAT WAS TOSSED OUT, 
NOT AIMED AT ANYONE IN PARTICULAR & WITH NO FURTHER 
COMMENT ABOUT ITS MEANING. 
IT DIDN’T MAKE SENSE. 

IN THIS WONDERFUL VERSE IN JOHN, THE LOVE OF GOD DOES 
MAKE SENSE. 
IT’S A LOVE THAT ISN’T CONFINED. 
IT ISN’T CONFINED TO A PARTICULAR NATION AS THOSE OF THE 
OLD TESTAMENT HAD ALWAYS BELIEVED. 
IT ISN’T CONFINED TO THE SO-CALLED “GOOD” PEOPLE – THOSE 
WHO SUBSCRIBE TO A PARTICULAR SET OF MORAL & ETHICAL 
STANDARDS. 
IT ISN’T EVEN CONFINED TO ONLY THOSE WHO LOVE GOD. 
IT’S LOVE FOR THE WORLD. 
THE UNLOVABLE & THE UNLOVELY… 
THE LONELY WHO HAVE NO ONE ELSE TO 
LOVE THEM… 
THE PERSON WHO LOVES GOD & THE PERSON WHO REJECTS 
GOD. 
ALL ARE INCLUDED IN THIS VAST, ALL- ENCOMPASSING LOVE. 
1,600 YEARS AGO, AUGUSTINE SAID WHAT HAS BEEN SAID IN A 
THOUSAND DIFFERENT WAYS SINCE – “GOD LOVES EACH ONE OF US AS 
IF THERE WAS ONLY ONE OF US TO LOVE.” 
WHEN WE SHARE HOLY COMMUNION, YOU ALWAYS HEAR – IN 
THE WORDS OF INSTITUTION – THE WORDS OF JESUS – “THIS IS MY 
BODY, BROKEN FOR YOU….THIS IS MY BLOOD SHED FOR YOU.”
WHEN WE SHARE IT AT OUR 8:00 SERVICE BY INTINCTION, I LIKE TO PERSONALIZE IT – “THE BODY OF CHRIST, BROKEN FOR YOU...BOB, JUNE, BILL, JANE.”

AT THE 10:30 SERVICE, WE EAT THE BREAD INDIVIDUALLY, SIGNIFYING OUR UNIQUENESS & WE SHARE THE CUP TOGETHER, INDICATING OUR UNITY.

THE “YOU” IN EACH THOSE PHRASES – THE BODY BROKEN FOR YOU & THE BLOOD SHED FOR YOU IS BOTH SINGULAR & PLURAL. CHRIST DIED FOR YOU & CHRIST DIED FOR ALL.

THERE IS SUCH BEAUTY & SIMPLICITY TO THIS BELOVED VERSE. WE SOMETIMES WANT TO MAKE THINGS MORE COMPLICATED THAN THEY ARE.

THERE’S NO Need TO DO THAT HERE. MAYBE THAT’S WHY THIS VERSE IS SO MEANINGFUL TO US. IT’S STRAIGHTFORWARD.

IT’S ABOUT GOD’S LOVE AND IT’S ABOUT ETERNAL LIFE.

IT’S ABOUT BEING, AS JESUS SAYS TO NICODEMUS, “BORN FROM ABOVE.”

BUT WHAT DOES THAT REALLY MEAN?

WELL, IT DOESN’T MEAN TURNING OVER A NEW LEAF. IT’S NOT LIKE GOING BACK ON A DIET FOR THE UMPEENTH TIME.

IT’S NOT ABOUT A SET OF NEW RESOLUTIONS.

IT’S NOT SAYING TO YOURSELF, “WELL, I’VE GOT TO WORK ON MY MORALS.”

JUST LOOK AT THE INDIVIDUAL JESUS IS ENCOUNTERING HERE.
YOU COULDN’T FIND ANYONE MORE “MORAL” THAN NICODEMUS!

IF ANYONE “DESERVED” ETERNAL LIFE, IT WOULD APPEAR THAT NICODEMUS HAD ALL THE RIGHT QUALIFICATIONS. HE SEEMS WORTHY OF ETERNAL LIFE. BUT THIS VERSE TELLS US THAT SALVATION ISN’T ABOUT HUMAN EFFORT OR MERIT.

NOR CAN POSITION SAVE YOU. NICODEMUS HELD A DISTINGUISHED RELIGIOUS POSITION & THAT DIDN’T DO IT.

BEING A CHURCH MEMBER DOESN’T SAVE YOU.
BEING A GOOD PARENT DOESN’T SAVE YOU.
NO – ETERNAL LIFE ISN’T ABOUT POSITION.
NEITHER IS IT ABOUT POPULARITY OR PRESTIGE OR PEITY. NICODEMUS EXCELLED IN ALL OF THESE & YET THAT’S NOT WHAT WOULD SAVE HIM.

BEING BORN FROM ABOVE ISN’T ABOUT HUMAN EFFORTS. IT’S ABOUT THE POWERFUL LOVE OF GOD THAT TRANSFORMS US & IMPLANTS THE HOLY SPIRIT INTO OUR HEARTS & CHANGES US. IT’S AS SIMPLE AS THAT!
THAT’S WHAT THIS VERSE IS ABOUT.
BUT FOR FAR TOO MANY, IT’S JUST TOO SIMPLE TO ACCEPT.
I READ A STORY ABOUT AN INSTANT CAKE MIX THAT WAS A BIG FLOP A NUMBER OF YEARS AGO.
THE INSTRUCTIONS SAID ALL YOU HAD TO DO WAS ADD WATER & BAKE.
THE COMPANY COULDN’T UNDERSTAND WHY IT DIDN’T SELL – UNTIL THEIR RESEARCH DISCOVERED THAT THE PUBLIC FELT UNEASY ABOUT A CAKE MIX THAT REQUIRED ONLY WATER. APPARENTLY, PEOPLE THOUGHT IT WAS TOO EASY! SO THE COMPANY ALTERED THE FORMULA & CHANGED THE DIRECTIONS TO ADD AN EGG IN ADDITION TO THE WATER. THE IDEA WORKED & SALES INCREASED DRAMATICALLY!

IS THAT THE WAY YOU RESPOND TO A VERSE SUCH AS THIS?

IT’S TOO EASY?

UNLIKE THE CAKE MIX MANUFACTURER, GOD HASN’T CHANGED HIS “FORMULA” TO MAKE SALVATION MORE MARKETABLE.

IT’S STILL THE SAME.

“FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD…”

HAVING SAID ALL THAT, I THINK WE NEED TO BE CAREFUL WITH THIS VERSE.

WHAT I’M ABOUT TO SAY MAY SEEM TO COMPLETELY CONTRADICT EVERYTHING I’VE JUST SAID.

THERE IS A CONTEXT HERE THAT GOES BEYOND JUST THE ENCOUNTER WITH NICODEMUS.

THERE’S THAT SEEMINGLY STRANGE VERSE THAT BEGAN THIS PASSAGE – A VERSE ABOUT MOSES & SNAKES & A POLE IN THE WILDERNESS.

THAT’S FOR ANOTHER TIME & ANOTHER SERMON, BUT THERE’S ALSO THE VERSE WHICH FOLLOWS THE ONE WE KNOW SO WELL.

I’M AFRAID THAT SOME PEOPLE HAVE A TENDENCY TO TAKE THAT BELOVED & FAMILIAR VERSE – JOHN 3:16 – AND TURN IT INTO BAD NEWS RATHER THAN GOOD NEWS.
I’m afraid – if truth be told – there are those who would call this their favorite verse because it reminds them that they’re “saved” but others aren’t.

Rather than being seen as the assurance of God’s love, it’s used as a call of judgment.

Instead of it being a statement of God’s love for the world, it’s used as a threat to those unwilling to accept that love.

It’s not offered as an invitation to help spread God’s love, but rather a summons to exclude those we think aren’t deserving of that love.

Here, again, is where context matters.

To me, you can’t truly understand the breadth & the beauty of John 3:16 without including the verse which immediately follows.

You have to read on in the passage to see the magnificent expanse of God’s gracious love for all humanity.

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

Read on:

“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.”
YOU KNOW, AT SOME TIME - I DON’T KNOW WHEN - I COMPLETED THAT SENTENCE THAT I OFTEN HEARD SHOUTED BY MY FATHER.

I COMPLETED IT WITH THE WORDS “HAS SAVED ME” AND I CHANGED THE TONE OF VOICE IN WHICH IT WAS SAID.

IT WENT FROM “OH, FOR THE LOVE OF GOD…!” TO “OH, FOR THE LOVE OF GOD…HAS SAVED ME!”

IT’S NOT JUST JOHN 3:16 THAT TELLS ME OF THAT LOVE.

WHEN I READ ON – WHEN I INCLUDE VERSE 17 – I KNOW THAT JESUS DIDN’T COME INTO THE WORLD TO CONDEMN THE WORLD, BUT THAT THE WORLD – THE WORLD & EVERYONE IN IT – MIGHT BE SAVED THROUGH HIM.

PERHAPS IT’S VERSE 17 OF JOHN’S THIRD CHAPTER THAT WE SHOULD ALL MEMORIZE.

PERHAPS IT’S THAT VERSE THAT SHOULD BE FOUND ON PLAQUES & BUMPER STICKERS.

PERHAPS IF SUPERFAN ROLLEN STEWART HAD BEEN ABLE TO “READ ON” IN JOHN’S GOSPEL, THOSE HARD TIMES HE BROUGHT UPON HIMSELF MIGHT HAVE BEEN DIFFERENT.

“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.” AMEN.

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