

FOR GOD SO LOVED . . . WELL, WAIT A MINUTE

I've often heard people quote John 3:16 ¹ and say something like: "Just believe in Jesus Christ and you'll be saved." I am now convinced that this is nonsense. If salvation depends solely on belief, then John must have been pulling our leg when he said, "God is love." ² It seems to me that only a hard-hearted, mean-spirited deity would allow people to perish when saving them would be so easy! After all, if belief is what Jesus wants, why doesn't He simply go on television and do a few miracles so that everyone would believe? Or better yet, why doesn't He fly around the world (without an airplane or a helicopter, of course) demonstrating His existence and His power to the whole world? Must we believe that God cares so little for people that He makes salvation much more difficult than it has to be? Or could it be that our interpretation of John 3:16 is wrong? Let's look at what some other Scriptures say.

If salvation requires nothing more than belief, what are we to do with James 2:19: "You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder." If belief brings salvation, wouldn't the demons' belief save them? James says no. Or what about Romans 1:17: "But the righteous man shall live by faith." Why does Paul bring faith into this, if mere belief is sufficient? Look at what Jesus says in Matthew 10:22: " 'You will be hated by all because of My name, but it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved.' " Then He further muddies the waters by asserting that the greatest commandment is to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." ³ If belief is all it takes, why does Jesus talk about endurance and love as though they were critical?

The secret to making sense of these verses is to look at the original Greek. The English words "believe" and "faith" are both translated from the Greek word, *pisteuô*, which generally means far more than mere belief that something is true. One commentary notes that *pisteuô* has many meanings, including: "to adhere to, cleave to, to trust to, have faith in, to rely on, to depend on." ⁴ Another says that *pisteuô* involves "trust or personal commitment, to the extent of handing over

¹ John 3:16: " 'For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life.' " (All Biblical quotations are from the *New American Standard* translation.)

² 1 John 4:8, 4:16

³ Mark 12:30; see also Matthew 22:37-38

⁴ The Lockman Foundation – Amplified Bible, found at <http://www.gospelcom.net/lockman/amplified/>.

one's self to another person.”⁵ Every time you read in the New Testament that we should “believe” or have “faith” in God or in Christ, the word is *pisteuô*, or its root word, *pistis*.⁶ In this context, the meaning of *pisteuô* (trusting God, relying on Him, and making a strong personal commitment to Him) seems very similar to what Jesus said when He spoke of loving God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

The word “belief” is simply inadequate to convey what God wants from us. He seeks far more than our mere intellectual agreement that Christ is alive or that the Bible is true; He wants us to live as if we believe those things. Simply stated, God asks us to surrender ourselves to Him. Surrender usually begins with belief and trust, and quickly evolves into love and obedience.

But wouldn't God get all of that by clearly demonstrating His existence and power? In other words, if Jesus performed miracles on television or flew down from Heaven, wouldn't everyone immediately surrender their lives to Him? Sadly, I believe the answer is no.

The fact is, God has played the intimidation card, and it did not result in surrender or love or trust—only fear. In Exodus 19:16, God appears to the people of Israel in the form of thunder, lightning, a thick cloud, and a sound like a very loud trumpet. Their reaction is typical: they trembled with fear. The Israelites were in fact so afraid that they begged Moses not to let God speak to them again.⁷ But surely the Israelites responded with love and trust—or at least obedience! No. Within a short time, they built and worshiped a statue of a calf,⁸ in flagrant disregard for God's commandments against worshiping idols.⁹ The Old Testament shows God constantly reaching out to His people through miracles and prophets, only to see them turn away from Him time after time.

In the Bible, fear is the consistent reaction of people when confronted with the

⁵ *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, ed. by Charles F. Pfeiffer and Everett F. Harrison (Moody Press, Chicago, 1962), p. 1185.

⁶ The perceptive reader may be wondering about the word translated “believe” in James 2:19, quoted above. Yes, it is also *pisteuô*. Yet, in context, “believe” seems an appropriate translation, since James says the demons “*pisteuô*” a fact—that “God is one.” Faith is more than merely believing facts.

⁷ See Exodus 20:18-19: “All the people perceived the thunder and the lightning flashes and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled and stood at a distance. Then they said to Moses, ‘Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, or we will die.’”

⁸ See Exodus 32:1-8.

⁹ See Exodus 20:3-5.

power and majesty of God. Adam felt this fear.¹⁰ So did Moses,¹¹ Isaiah,¹² and Jesus' disciples.¹³ Even some of Jesus' miracles provoked fear, such as walking on water,¹⁴ calming the sea,¹⁵ and casting out demons.¹⁶

Leaving the Bible aside for a moment, don't people react with fear when they are confronted with a powerful earthquake, a hurricane, or some other natural disaster? How much greater is the power of God than those! One of the most powerful forces within our experience is that of the Sun, which has an average surface temperature of 10,000 degrees Fahrenheit, bathing us with heat and light from 93 million miles away.¹⁷ Yet the power of the Sun must be insignificant compared to the power of God, who created it along with the rest of the universe.

God could easily terrify us with His power if He wanted to. And if God merely wanted our belief, I am convinced He would do exactly that. Fear and belief can co-exist quite nicely. I have no trouble believing in the tornado that is about to destroy

¹⁰ See Genesis 3:9-10: "Then the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, 'Where are you?' He said, 'I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself.' "

¹¹ Exodus 3:5-6: "Then He said, 'Do not come near here; remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.' He said also, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' Then Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God."

¹² See Isaiah 6:5: "Then I said,

'Woe is me, for I am ruined!

Because I am a man of unclean lips,

And I live among a people of unclean lips;

For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.' "

¹³ Matthew 17:5-6: "While he was still speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and behold, a voice out of the cloud said, 'This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!' When the disciples heard this, they fell face down to the ground and were terrified."

¹⁴ Matthew 14:26-27: "When the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid.' "

¹⁵ Mark 4:39-41: "And He got up and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, 'Hush, be still.' And the wind died down and it became perfectly calm. And He said to them, 'Why are you afraid? Do you still have no faith?' They became very much afraid and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?' "

¹⁶ Mark 5:15: "They came to Jesus and observed the man who had been demon-possessed sitting down, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the 'legion'; and they became frightened."

¹⁷ *Planets, A Smithsonian Guide*, by Thomas R. Watters (Macmillan Publishing Company, 15 Columbus Circle, New York, NY 10023, 1995).

my home and perhaps take my life. But my belief is useful to God only if it also causes me to surrender my life to Him. As we have seen, the greatest commandment is to love God with our whole being. We were created by God to be in relationship with Him—to love Him and to be loved by Him. A majestic display of awesome power would terrify us, but it would not produce love. When we are afraid, we run, we hide, we draw back. Fear elicits anxiety and worry, not love.

Now I will concede that we humans are quite capable of loving someone of whom we are afraid.¹⁸ For example, a child may love a parent who is verbally or physically abusive to her. But I believe two truths are self-evident in such circumstances:

1. Love exists despite fear, not because of it. A wife may love her abusive husband because he sometimes is, or once was, caring and attentive to her needs. But her fear of his abuse does not enhance her feelings of love for him. Also,

2. Where love and fear do co-exist, love almost invariably develops first. A woman is unlikely to fall in love with a man who is abusive to her on the first date, because they will never have a second date. She will flee out of fear before love has a chance to develop.

In short, fear is an obstacle to the loving relationship God wants to have with us. If we are terrified of Him, we may temporarily submit to His power, but we will not surrender our lives to Him. So an open and obvious demonstration of God's tremendous power simply undermines His own interests. For this reason, God must restrain His power, at least for the time being. He must be gentle with us. "For God so loved the world" that He came in a way that would not terrify us: as the man, Jesus. God's purpose was not to make us simply "believe" in His existence, but to demonstrate His great love for us, so that we would respond in love, and commit our lives to Him. Surrender, not belief, is what John 3:16 is really all about.

¹⁸ However, I will not concede that trust can co-exist with fear. How can we trust someone to have our best interests at heart if we are afraid that person may hurt us, either physically or emotionally?