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April 18, 2024

Misunderstanding John 3:16

John 3:16 *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.*¹

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1 Introduction

The verse John 3:16 in scripture is probably the most well-known verse among Christians. Placards can often be seen at sporting events and large gatherings with “John 3:16” written on them in the hope of evangelizing unbelievers. Yet John 3:16 is among the most misunderstood verses in christendom today. Let’s examine what this verse really means and see if it is appropriate for evangelizing.

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2 Understanding John 3:16

The primary problem with John 3:16 is that it is not properly translated from the original Greek language and below we will explore some translation issues. Please see David Pawson's informative book *Is John 3:16 the Gospel?* [5] for more detailed information.

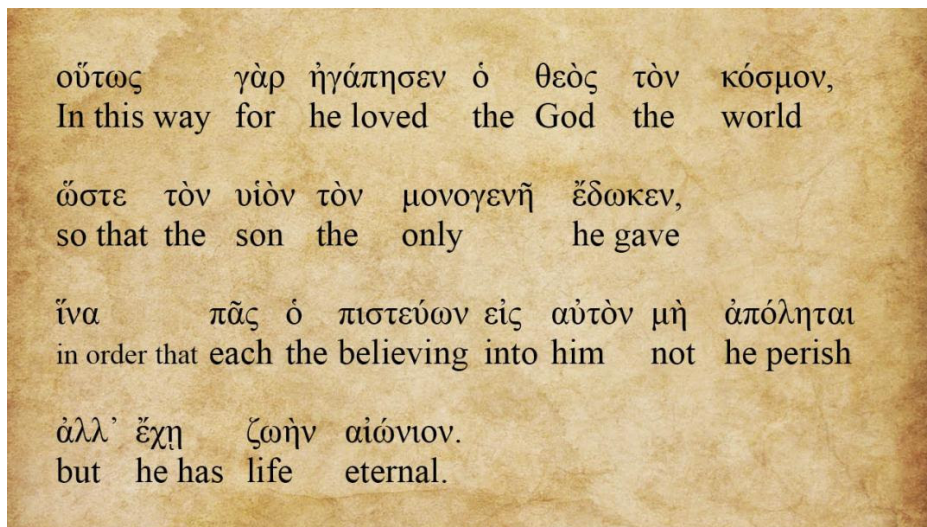


Figure 1: John 3:16 Literally

2.1 Context

One downside since chapter and verse numbers were added to the Bible is that we easily lift verses or passages out of their context. As you study a verse or passage in your Bible, be sure to familiarize yourself with the surrounding verses, so you know the context of the section you are studying.

In translating the first part of John 3:16 as ‘For God so loved the world’ makes people think it is saying how much God loves or loved the world (picture Jesus with his arms stretched out wide), however that is not what the original Greek text says.

A great many things God did in the Old Testament were prophetic in that they have a corresponding event in the New Testament. In order, to understand John 3:16, we have to consider an event reported by Moses in the Book of Numbers chapter 21:

Numbers 21:4–9 They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!”

Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us.” So Moses prayed for the people.

The LORD said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.” So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.

Next, in our quest to understand John 3:16 we must look at the two previous verses, 14 and 15.

John 3:14–15 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

Recall that in the first part of John chapter 3, a Pharisee named *Nicodemus* came to Jesus at night and they are having a conversation. In verses 14–15 Jesus has told Nicodemus of the parallel between an Old Testament event recorded in the Book of Numbers and Jesus’ own forthcoming crucifixion. This marvelous account would eventually align with the gospel, that if people would look to Jesus, i.e., believe in Him, they would not die (spiritually).

In verse 16, the apostle John begins a narrative (see [section 3](#) below) on what Jesus had just said.

Starting with the Greek adverb *houtōs* (οὕτως), which means “in this manner/thus/in the same way/likewise”, John is expounding on the parallel that Jesus drew between the bronze snake and his crucifixion.

The conjunction ‘For’ (Greek “gar” or γάρ) links this verse with the previous verse, telling us v16 is connected to vv14–15. Therefore the first part of John 3:16 doesn’t tell us how much God loved the world, but rather that God provided a solution to our sins in a similar way to the Old Testament account of the snakes—that is by looking to Jesus for our salvation.

Note that John’s use of the “world” *kosmon* (κοσμον) means all people, not just the elect. However John is not espousing *Universalism* (that all people will be saved), because he limits or puts a condition on it that only “those who believe” will be saved. Moreover, the world in the Bible usually has a negative meaning, it is referring to the human race in our fallen, sinful, rebellious state.

It is possible that John meant both: 1) how much God loved the world and 2) the way God showed his love by sacrificing his Son. This would be in keeping with John’s style of using double entendres.

2.2 Begotten?

Note that the KJV (King James Version), the NKJV (New King James Version), and the NWT (New World Translation)² use the word *begotten*. This is an incorrect translation, as the Greek word *monogenēs* (μονογενής) usually means “unique” or “one and only”. The word *begotten* implies Jesus had a beginning, which is not the case, as Jesus is eternal and without a beginning just as the Father and Holy Spirit are eternal. See my teaching entitled [Choosing a Bible](#) for better translations that people should be using.

² Used by the Jehovah’s Witnesses

2.3 Verb Tenses

Another translation issue deals with verb tenses. In some ways the Greek language used to write the New Testament is more precise than our English language.

With the phrase “God so loved. . .”, it is important to fully understand the word translated “loved”. In the Greek, it is the word “agape” (αγαπε), which is the highest form of love, and it means *active love*.³ In this instance within John 3:16, the verb is in the aorist tense, which means it happened in the past, one time only; it does not say God loves the world or continues to love the world. Rather, God loved (past tense) the world, by a single act of mercy and grace—God provided a means of restoration and salvation through what became the atoning death, burial, and resurrection of his son Jesus, i.e., the Gospel or Good News.

People sometimes ask “Why is it okay for God to love the world but we are forbidden to?”, as commanded in 1 John 2:15:

1 John 2:15 *Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them.*

The answer is rather simple—we easily become polluted by the world and enslaved to the world, while God is beyond such things. God created the world (and the whole universe for that matter) but he does not and cannot succumb to his creation (see [James 1:13](#)).

God’s plan for salvation was not some last minute solution, for before the world was created, God’s plan for our salvation had already been worked out—that Jesus would be sacrificed for our sins:

Ephesians 1:4–5 *For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will. . .*

2 Timothy 1:9 *He has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time. . .*

Titus 1:1–2 *Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ to further the faith of God’s elect and their knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness—in the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time. . .*

1 Peter 1:20 *He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake.*

Another verb that is not properly translated, is “whoever believes in him”. In the Greek, the verb tense for ‘believes’ is in the present continuous tense, meaning to go on believing in him, or to continue believing in him.

Likewise the verb ‘have’ is also in the present continuous tense. Thus the translation should be something to the effect that “whoever goes on believing will continue to have eternal life”, i.e., our eternal life is conditional by our continued faith.

³ Contrary to a popular belief, agape does not mean “unconditional love”.

Now there is a popular though false Christian doctrine called *Once Saved, Always Saved*, which says once a person believes and is regenerate, they cannot lose their faith and they will certainly be saved. However, there are some 80 passages in the New Testament that warn us not to lose our salvation by losing our faith. Our salvation is depended upon our continuing to believe in Jesus Christ. See my teaching entitled *Once Saved Always Saved?*.

2.4 The True Meaning

The late pastor David Pawson provided in one of his sermons on John 3:16 a wonderful paraphrase of what John 3:16 actually says:

Paraphrase:

John 3:16 *“Indeed, in just the same way, God the father acted in love on another occasion, this time for the whole rebellious human race, by sacrificing his only natural son, so that all who go on trusting and obeying Him, might never be ruined beyond recovery, but go on having everlasting and abundant life.”*

[?, pg. 36]

If you add this paraphrase after John 3:14–15 you’ll see that it makes sense.

Gundry & Howell [3, Page 39] provide this translation of verses 14–17:

Translation:

John 3:14–17 *And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, in this way the Son of man must be lifted up in order that everyone believing might have in him life eternal, and so God gave the only Son in order that everyone believing in him might not perish; rather, might have life eternal, for God did not send the Son into the world in order that he might judge the world; rather, in order that the world might be saved through him.*

3 Who Said It?

If you have a red-letter bible, with Jesus’ words printed in red, chances are that vv16–21 are printed in red. However, many theologians believe Jesus concluded his words to Nicodemus at the end of verse 15, where there should be a closing quotation mark; then verses 16–21 should be printed in black.

Verses 16–21 are not Jesus speaking, but rather the apostle John resumes with his own words. Theologians give several reasons for this view: [1, pp. 205–206], [4, pg. 202], [5, pp. 54–55]

1. Verses 16–21 contain unnecessary repetition of previous verses, which was uncharacteristic of Jesus.
2. The word ‘For’ is a typical way of starting an explanation or commentary as well as tying verse 16 to verse 15.
3. No personal pronouns are used in v16–21 to address the person whom Jesus would be speaking to.

4. Jesus always refers to Himself as the “Son of Man”, while here we have “only begotten Son of God”, something only John would write.
5. Vv14–15 speak of the cross being in the future, yet v16 speaks of the cross in the past.
6. Jesus never spoke about the love of God to unbelievers; had he said v16 to Nicodemus, this would have been an exception.⁴
7. Verses 17–18 refer to Jesus as “him”. If Jesus were speaking, he might have said ‘me/I’.

4 Why Not Fix It?

Someone may well ask, “Why don’t the Bible translators and publishers make a more accurate translation?” That’s certainly a good question, and after looking into the matter, I found there are multiple reasons:

Tradition You see, people like John 3:16 the way it is, and do not want to see it changed. . . not a good position for Christians to take, as we should always seek truth. I recall years ago being on a website of a store that sold bibles online. They had a feature that allowed several bible translations of John 3:16 to be displayed side-by-side; yet all of them had nearly identical incorrect translations.

Bias Translators sometimes (often?) impart their own religious beliefs rather than translating in a purely objective matter. For example, a Calvinist might translate in a way that supports Calvinism.⁵ We must be careful not to put doctrine before scripture; rather our doctrines must come from exegeting scripture objectively.

Wishful Thinking By not faithfully translating scripture, appealing heresies such as *Once Saved Always Saved* and *Easy Believism*^v can be supported and sustained.

Deception It may be that the enemy, i.e. the devil and his demons, always wanting to deceive us and blind us to the truth corrupts scripture when he can.

Perhaps if enough people write to bible publishers and translation committees, these errors could be addressed in the future.

5 Application

The Gospels of Mark and Luke are written for unbelievers (and only Mark calls his a Gospel). The Gospels of Matthew and John are written for people who already believe, who have repented, been baptized in water and with the Holy

⁴ See my teaching entitled *The Love of God* to better understand this doctrine.

⁵ See my teachings entitled *Calvinism and Arminianism* and *How to Become a Christian* for more information.

Spirit.⁶ John’s Gospel also expects his readers to have some basic understanding of Christian doctrines. Therefore, John’s gospel is not evangelistic and should not be given to unbelievers. Pawson says “It is the worst Gospel to give to unbelievers.” [5, pg. 58]

John’s Gospel was written to encourage believers to “go on believing”, as both verbs in the following verse is written in the present continuous tense:

John 20:31 *But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*

John’s Gospel tells us who Jesus was, rather than what he said and did as in the three synoptic Gospels. Neither Jesus nor the apostles ever preached John 3:16. In fact, without the proper translation, John 3:16 contributes to the heresy called *easy beliefism*. To say that just believing in Jesus makes a person a Christian is wrong, and as we know, even the devil and his demons believe in Jesus (*James 2:19*).

John 3:16 is not the complete lesson about how to become a Christian, as it leaves out the essential need for repentance (*Mark 1:15, Luke 24:47, Acts 3:19, Acts 26:20, and Hebrews 6:1*), the two steps of baptism—water and Holy Spirit (*John 3:5, Book of Acts*), and forgiveness (*Matthew 6:14–15*). See my teaching entitled *How to Become a Christian* for more information. We are to show people the love of God but we are not to preach it to them. [5, pg. 73]. See my teaching entitled *The Four Gospels*.

John 3:16 doesn’t say that God is going to save everybody. It says God provided a means for people to be saved. God loved the world enough to send his son.

God didn’t send multiple saviors: Mohamed, Buddha, etc.

For a much deeper teaching, listen to David Pawson’s teaching series [7].

6 Prayer

“Heavenly Father, thank you for your scripture to help us better know you and your will. Thank you for the gift of your Son Jesus, through whose sacrifice and resurrection we have eternal life. Please fill us with your Holy Spirit to give us light and understanding of your words. We pray in Jesus’ name that translators and publishers will strive to give us more accurate translations, and not be influenced by tradition or to please people. May you be glorified by the accurate understanding of your words. Amen.”

A References & Further Reading

- [1] Carson, D.A.; *The Pillar New Testament Commentary—The Gospel According to John*; Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; 1991.

⁶ The words “repent“ and ”repentance“ do not occur in John’s Gospel.

- [2] Hendriksen, William; *New Testament Commentary—John*; Baker Book House; 1953 (July 2002 printing).
- [3] Gundry, Robert Horton & Howell, Russell W.; *The sense and syntax of John 3:14-17 with special reference to the use of hutōs . . . hōste*; *Novum Testamentum* Year: 1999, Volume: 41, Issue: 1, Pages: 24-39; Brill; 1999.
- [4] Michaels, J. Ramsey; *The New International Commentary on the New Testament—The Gospel of John*; Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; 2010.
- [5] Pawson, David; *Is John 3:16 the Gospel?*; True Potential Publishers; 2007.
- [6] Pawson, David; *Explaining three texts often taken out of context*; Anchor Recordings Ltd.; 2016.
- [7] Pawson, David; *Is John 3:16 the Gospel*; Sermon; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gG5m68Zm1o0>.

B Scripture References

Numbers

21:4–9; 2

Matthew

6:14–15; 7

Mark

1:15; 7

Luke

24:47; 7

John

3:5; 7

3:14–15; 3

3:14–17; 5

3:16; 1,5

20:31; 7

Acts

3:19; 7

26:20; 7

Ephesians

1:4–5; 4

2 Timothy

1:9; 4

Titus

1:1–2; 4

Hebrews

6:1; 7

James

1:13; 4

2:19; 7

1 Peter

1:20; 4

1 John

2:15; 4