

A Study of John 3:16

The "Golden Text" of Scripture

Along with the 23rd Psalm, John 3:16 must be among the most beloved and well-known verses in the entire Bible.

(John 3:16 NNAS) "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life."

(John 3:16 NKJV) "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."

(John 3:16 NIV) "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."

Because of the great truths taught in this one verse, some call John 3:16 the golden text of Scripture. However, though often quoted John 3:16 is perhaps among the most misunderstood and misrepresented texts of the Word of God. Many people — many sincere people have little idea what this verse actually teaches.

It begins with the word FOR: "FOR God so loved the world..." The word for (Gk. gar) is a conjunction which is used to explain a forgoing statement. John has just alluded to an historical situation that occurred in the days of Moses: (John 3:14) "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up." The event that Jesus referred to is found in Numbers 21:4-9

Then they set out from Mount Hor by the way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the people became impatient because of the journey. {5} The people spoke against God and Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this miserable food." {6} The LORD sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. {7} So the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned, because we have spoken against the LORD and you; intercede with the LORD, that He may remove the serpents from us." And Moses interceded for the people. {8} Then the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a standard; and it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he will live." {9} And Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on the standard; and it came about, that if a serpent bit any man, when he looked to the bronze serpent, he lived.

Israel had been delivered from Egypt by the mighty hand of God! But they had already become impatient with their journey to the Promised Land and began to complain against the Lord and His servant Moses: "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this miserable food." The people had become ungrateful to the Lord for His loving kindness. For their punishment He sent fiery serpents among them. Those who were bitten died — end of story. But the people came to their senses. After witnessing the Lord's punishment they cried out for deliverance: "We have sinned." In mercy God instructed Moses to fashion a serpent out of brass, and set it upon a standard. Any person who "looked" upon the serpent would live. (It must be observed that the desired cure was not to be realized through faith alone; rather, in addition to having faith in the Lord, the Israelite who sought healing was required to obediently look upon the image. Those who believed and looked were saved, those who disbelieved died.)

Jesus said this incident of the serpent was a type (a symbol or picture) of his death. Note the use of the connective, even so, in verse 14: As Moses lifted up the serpent ... even so must the Son of Man be lifted up." The expression "lifted up" was a favorite of Jesus when talking about his death (cf. John 8:28; 12:28, 32, 34).

Jesus would be lifted up "so that whoever believes will (may) in Him have eternal life." This rendering — the rendering of the NASB — is to be preferred to the rendering of the NIV, KJV and the NKJV. In these translations "in him" is linked with belief — "everyone who believes in him." However, the commentators F.F. Bruce and Leon Morris agree that the preferred translation is found in the NASB. According to Bruce: "The phrase 'in him' in verse 15 is probably to be taken with 'may have eternal life' rather than with 'believes'. The Greek is en autō, whereas eis auton is regularly used when reference is made to believing 'in him' (as in verse 16)" (THE GOSPELS & EPISTLES OF JOHN, 89; cf., Morris, THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN, 226).

In constructing the sentence in this manner we see Jesus promising eternal life not to "whoever believes" but to all believers who are "in Him," that is, in Christ. This rendering is in perfect agreement with the statement in John 1:12.

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name,

One cannot be a child of God unless he first believes. However believing alone does not make a child of God, but it does give one the right — the power to become a child of God. Furthermore, having faith in Jesus alone does not give one eternal life. The believer who may have eternal life is the believer who is in Christ. The Son of Man must "be lifted up so that whoever believes will (may) in Him have eternal life." It is the believer who is in Christ who has eternal life.

Eternal life is "in Christ" — "In Him was life" (John 1:4a). In his second letter to Timothy Paul wrote: "For this reason I endure all things for the sake of those who are chosen, so that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus and with it eternal glory" (2 Tim. 2:10). Those believers who are "in Christ" have eternal life. And the manner in which they enter Christ is by baptism in water — this is the culminating act of the conversion process.

(Gal 3:26-27) For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

(Rom. 6:3-4) Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

With these introductory remarks before us, let us look more closely at our passage, John 3:16.

• GOD SO LOVED

The term "God" is the designation of the divine nature, and so can be employed of either the Father (Eph. 1:3); of Jesus, the Son (John 1:1); or of the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:3-4). In this verse, obviously "God" is used of the Father, who gave his Son.

How wonderfully the love of God is here portrayed. Unlike the gods devised by men — gods vicious and cruel or cold and indifferent the true God — the God of the Bible — is a God of love who demands the same from those He loves.

(1 John 4:8-11) The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love. {9} By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. {10} In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. {11} Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

The word love and loved are from the Greek words *agape* and *agapao*. The Greek lexicons inform us that this love is not an emotional love, but one of genuine interest — of determined dedication. It is the love which acts out of concern for others. W. E. Vine observed that *agapao*, as used of God:

“expresses the deep and constant love and interest of a perfect Being towards entirely unworthy objects ...” (Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words, III, p. 21).

It is in response to this love that men love God back. As John also says in 1 John: “We love, because he first loved us” (vs. 19).

The intensity of God’s love is underscored in John 3:16 by the use of the adverb “so” (*houtos*) a term marking the degree of intensity. “God SO loved” And who was the beneficiary of this intense love.

- God so loved THE WORLD

The Greek word for world is *kosmos*. In a literal sense, the term denotes the orderly universe created by the intelligent God (Acts 17:24), or, in a more limited sense, the earth (Mk. 16:15). Frequently, though, “world” stands for all people of the earth — this is a figure of speech known as metonymy. The container (the world) is put for the contents (the people). The world stands for all who inhabit it. The passage therefore emphasizes the universal love of God.

It is fitting that these words were spoken to a representative of the narrowest and strictest sect in ancient Judaism; who taught that God’s love was the special province of Israel. In their wildest imaginations they could never imagine God loving all mankind. In this respect they were like some today who do not believe that God loves every inhabitant of this globe. For according to them all who are loved by God shall be saved! But since it is evident that some will be lost, God must not love everyone! But to them we must repeat to these people the word of Jesus, “For God so love THE WORLD.”

- God so loved the world THAT HE GAVE

Giving is characteristic of God. He has given us life (Acts 17:25), and his gifts of providence are daily evident (Acts 14:17). He is the source of all good gifts (Jas. 1:17), and the greatest was the gift of his Son. Seven centuries before the birth of Jesus, Isaiah announced: “...a child is born...a son is given...” (9:6). God did not give His Son because he needed a reason to love the world. It was because he loved the world that he gave his son. And God gave His son not only for the sins of those whom He would save, but for all mankind.

(1 John 2:2) and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.

In Matt 20:28 Jesus affirmed that he came “to give his life a ransom for many.” But “many” is an expression meaning “all;” this is brought out by Paul who said that Jesus “gave Himself as a ransom for all” (1 Timothy 2:6; cf., Rom. 5:12, 15).

Yes, God’s grace appeared “bringing salvation to all men” (Tit. 2:11). Jesus is the Lamb of God who “takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29; 1 John 2:2). God is not willing that any should perish (2 Pet. 3:9). However, He will not compel anyone to receive His gift; and not all will. In the prolog of John’s gospel it is written: (John 1:11) “He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him.” God desires the salvation of all men! Yet, only those obedient to His Son shall be saved (Heb 5:8-9).

But some say that if one must obey Jesus to receive the gift of salvation then it would no longer be a gift. But this is certainly not the Biblical position. In the days of ancient Israel, for example, the Lord informed Joshua...

(Joshua 6:2) ...“See, I have given Jericho into your hand, with its king and the valiant warriors.”

Jericho was God’s gift to Israel. But in spite of this fact God gave Israel specific instructions for the taking of the city. An inspired writer later comments: “By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they were compassed about seven days” (Heb.11:30). Similarly, those who would receive Christ, as God’s gracious gift, must submit to the conditions required by the Lord and his apostles

(Matthew 7:21) “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter.”

God loves the whole world and wants all to be saved, but he will force no one to yield to his plan!

- **God so loved the world that He gave HIS ONLY BEGOTTEN SON...**

The expression “only begotten” is from the Greek word *monogenes*, found nine times in the New Testament (five of these of Christ — John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 John. 4:9). The term derives from two roots, *monos* (only, alone) and *genos* (race, stock).

Contrary to Jehovah’s Witnesses and to many other sectarians Jesus did not exist in eternity as the son of God. In eternity he existed with God as God the Word (John 1:1). He became God’s son in the incarnation —when the Word, who was God, became flesh.

(Luke 1:35) And the angel answered and said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy offspring shall be called the Son of God.

Jesus is the *monogenes* of God. According to Danker, when used of Jesus *monogenes* denotes that he is “unique in kind” (F.W. Danker, et al., *Greek-English Lexicon*, University of Chicago, 2000, p. 658). It is used “to mark out Jesus uniquely above all earthly and heavenly beings” (*Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Colin Brown, ed., Zondervan, II, p. 725). There may be other sons of God (cf., Job 1:6; 38:7; Gal. 3:26), but none are like Jesus. He is unique in kind —being both God and man.

- God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son THAT WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM

Again, the term “whosoever” (literally, “everyone”) reveals the universality of God’s saving plan. The gospel is addressed to the whole creation: (Mark 16:15) “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.” And, as the final great invitation of the Bible has it: (Revelation 22:17) “And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost.”

The word “believeth” is a present tense participle, literally, therefore, “the keeping on believing ones.” But exactly what is the biblical “belief” of which God approves?

Some have defined the term as simply an acceptance of the historical facts regarding Christ, along with a willingness to trust him as Savior. This is the view of those who advocate the doctrine of salvation by “faith alone.” But the truth is, there is more to faith than a mental disposition.

The verb “believe” in the Greek New Testament is *pisteuo*. In addition to the acknowledgment of the historical data, and a trusting disposition Liddel & Scott (in their Greek Lexicon) say *pisteuo* means “to comply,” (p. 1273); and, as they further point out, it is the opposite of *apisteo*, which means “to disobey...refuse to comply” (p. 175).

In *Biblico-Theological Lexicon of the New Testament* by Cremer, it is noted that “faith” (*pistis*) both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament “is a bearing towards God and His revelation which recognizes and confides in Him and in it, which not only acknowledges and holds to His word as true, but practically applies and appropriates it” (T. & T. Clark, 1962, p. 482; emp. KM). W. E. Vine declared that faith involves “a personal surrender” to Christ (*Expository Dictionary*, II, p. 71).

Another lexicographer — J.H. Thayer — noted that belief is “used especially of the faith by which a man embraces Jesus, i.e. a conviction, full of joyful trust, that Jesus is the Messiah — the divinely appointed author of eternal salvation in the kingdom of God, conjoined with obedience to Christ” (*Greek-English Lexicon*, T. & T. Clark, 1958, p. 511; emp. added).

Saving faith cannot be divorced from obedience as the following evidence from the the word of God clearly reveals.

- a. Belief and disobedience are set in vivid contrast in the Bible

(John 3:36) “He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.”

(John 3:36 NKJV) “He who believes (*pisteuw*) in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe (*apeithew*) the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.”

(Hebrews 3:18-19) And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient? {19} So we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief.

(Hebrews 3:18-19 NKJV) And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who did not obey? (*apeitheo*) {19} So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief (*apistia*).

(Hebrews 4:3, 6) For we who have believed enter that rest, just as He has said, "AS I SWORE IN MY WRATH, THEY SHALL NOT ENTER MY REST," although His works were finished from the foundation of the world. ... {6} Therefore, since it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly had good news preached to them failed to enter because of disobedience

(Hebrews 4:3, 6 NKJV) For we who have believed (pisteuw)do enter that rest, as He has said: "So I swore in My wrath, 'They shall not enter My rest,' " although the works were finished from the foundation of the world. {6} Since therefore it remains that some must enter it, and those to whom it was first preached did not enter because of disobedience (apeitheia)

(1 Peter 2:7-8) This precious value, then, is for you who believe; but for those who disbelieve, "THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED, THIS BECAME THE VERY CORNER stone," {8} and, "A STONE OF STUMBLING AND A ROCK OF OFFENSE"; for they stumble because they are disobedient to the word, and to this doom they were also appointed.

(1 Peter 2:7-8 NKJV) Therefore, to you who believe (pisteuw), He is precious; but to those who are disobedient (apistew), "The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone," {8} and "A stone of stumbling And a rock of offense." They stumble, being disobedient (apeithew)to the word, to which they also were appointed.

- b. While John 3:16 promises eternal life to him who believes, Hebrews 5:9 attributes eternal salvation to such as who obey, thus demonstrating that the two are not mutually exclusive, rather, saving faith includes obedience!
- c. The New Testament often uses "faith" as a figure of speech whereby the part is made to stand for the whole to denote the sum total of gospel obedience (a synecdoche).

For instance, Paul wrote: (Romans 5:1) "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God." That this means more than mere mental faith is proved by Paul's own conversion. He believed in Jesus' Lordship while yet on the road to Damascus (Acts 22:10), but he enjoyed no peace for three days subsequent thereto; until he was baptized in water in obedience to the Lord's command (Acts 22:16; 9:18,19).

Other components in the plan of salvation sometimes figuratively represent the entire process. Repentance is said to result in life (Acts 11:18), but certainly not repentance alone! And baptism saves (1 Pet. 3:21), but not baptism by itself.

Biblical faith that saves, is therefore much more than mental assent that Jesus is the Messiah. Instead it is a firm belief in this truth which then obeys or submits to the other requirements as set forth by the Lord (repentance, immersion in water and faithfulness unto death). A faith that saves is a faith that lovingly does the works of God.

(Galatians 5:6) For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love.

The notion that salvation is effected by "faith alone" is strictly a human doctrine.

- God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him **SHALL (SHOULD) NOT PERISH**

Contrary to the assertions of some religious materialists, the Scriptures do not teach that the wicked will ultimately cease to exist. The Greek word, here rendered "perish," is *apollumi*, a very strong term meaning "to destroy utterly."

That *apollumi* does not suggest annihilation is clear in that this word is employed to describe the miserable condition of the prodigal son, when separated from his loving father. In that state the son was "lost" (Luke. 15:24) — in a condition of utter ruin, but he had not ceased to exist.

As Vine pointed out: "the idea is not extinction but ruin, loss, not of being, but of well-being" (Expository Dictionary, I, p. 302). Prof. Thayer declared, with extreme clarity, that *apollumi* suggests "to be delivered up to eternal misery" (Greek-English Lexicon, p. 4). This will take place on that final day when Jesus himself will separate the sheep (his sheep) from the goats (Matthew 25:46; cf., 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9)

- God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him shall (should) not perish **BUT HAVE ETERNAL LIFE**

Eternal life is here promised to those who pursue the life of obedient trust. But exactly what is eternal life?

Most assuredly it is not mere eternal existence, for the wicked will exist eternally. Eternal life is the exact opposite of everlasting death. The final abode of evil persons is called "the second death" (Rev. 2:11; 20:6, 14). Since "death" always connotes the idea of separation, in some form or another (cf. Eph. 2:1), the final death is obviously eternal separation from God (cf. Mt. 7:23; 25:41; 2 Thes. 1:9).

Conversely, eternal life is everlasting communion with God, along with all the wonders that involves. It is a state of glory (Rom. 2:10; 2 Cor. 4:17), rest (Heb. 4:11), and happiness (Mt. 25:21).

Conclusion

John 3:16 is truly a marvelous text. But it is deeper and much richer than many have supposed. May we be wise enough to study its truths in the light of the Bible as a whole. It contains history, responsibility, warning, and promise.