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John 3:16

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Freed  
From  
Tradition

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## John 3:16 Freed From Tradition

Sometimes the passages we know best we know least. That is, when we hear a passage repeated in a particular context over and over and over again, we tend to lose sight of its real meaning in its original setting. This is surely the case with John 3:16, for it is one of the most commonly cited passages in evangelical preaching. And yet, how often is it actually subjected to *exegesis*? Hardly ever. Its meaning is *assumed* rather than *confirmed*. I would like to offer a brief exegesis of the passage and a confirming cross-reference to a parallel passage in John's first epistle.

### Exegesis

We are uncertain just where in this passage the words of the Lord Jesus end, and John's begin. Opinions differ. But as John did not believe it necessary to indicate any break, we do not need to be concerned about it. In either case the words flow naturally from the discussion Jesus begins with Nicodemus concerning what it means to be born again, or from above. But as every text without a context is merely a pretext, note the preceding verses:

<sup>14</sup>"As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; <sup>15</sup>so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.

Jesus harkens back to the incident in the wilderness (Numbers 21:5ff) where the Lord provided a means of healing to the people of Israel. It goes without saying that the serpent was 1) not something the people would have chosen (given that their affliction was being brought on through serpents); 2) only a means of deliverance for a limited population (i.e., the Jews, not for any outside that community); and 3) was limited in its efficaciousness to those who a) were bitten, b) knew it and recognized it, and c) in faith looked upon the means God had provided for healing. This historical event in the history of Israel (one that would be well known to Nicodemus) is made the type that points, if only as a shadow, to the greater fulfillment in Jesus Christ. The Son of Man was lifted up (on the cross) as God's means of redemption. Faith is expressed by looking in obedience on the God-given means of salvation.

The phrase "whoever believes" in verse 15 is *hina pas ho pisteuwn*, which is directly parallel to the same phrase in verse 16 [in fact, the parallel of the first part of the phrase led, in later manuscripts, and in fact in the Majority Text type, to the harmonization of verse 15 with 16, resulting in the expansion of the original. The NASB, however, reflects the more accurate textual reading, "so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life" or "so that whoever believes in Him will have eternal life."]. The English term "whoever" is meant to communicate "all without distinction in a particular group," specifically, "those who believe." *Pas* means "all" and *ho pisteuwn* is "the one(s) believing," hence, "every one believing," leading to "whoever believes." It should be remembered that there is no specific word for "whoever" in the Greek text: this comes from the joining of "all" with "the one believing," i.e., "every one believing." The point is that *all* the ones believing have eternal life. There is no such thing as a believing person who will not receive the promised benefit, hence, "whosoever." This is a common form in John's writings. For example, in his first epistle he uses it often. Just a few examples:

If you know that He is righteous, you know that *everyone also who practices* (Greek: *pas ho poiwn*) righteousness is born of Him. (1 John 2:29)

One could translate the above phrase as "whoever" or "whosoever practices righteousness." Likewise,

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves (Greek: *pas ho agapwn*) is born of God and knows God. (1 John 4:7)

Likewise one could use "whoever" here as in "whoever loves is born of God," etc. And a final relevant example,

Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and whoever loves the Father loves the *child* born of Him. (1 John 5:1)

Here, because the phrase *begins* the sentence, it is normally rendered by “whoever,” since “everyone” does not “flow” as well. So this passage could be rendered “Everyone who is believing.” In each case we see the point being made: the construction *pas + articular present nominative singular participle* means “all the ones, in particular, doing the action of the participle, i.e., whoever is doing the action of the participle.” What we can determine without question is that the phrase does not in any way introduce some kind of denial of particularity to the action. That is, the action of the participle defines the group that is acting. The “whoever” does not expand the horizon of the action beyond the limitation of the classification introduced by the participle. This will become important in examining the next section of verses.

<sup>16</sup> "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. <sup>17</sup> "For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. <sup>18</sup> "He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

Verse 16 begins with the assertion that God’s love is the basis of His redemptive work in Jesus Christ. God’s love for the world comes to expression in the sending of His unique Son into the world, and in the provision of eternal life *for a specific and limited group*. The same delineation and particularity that is found in the last phrase of v. 15 is repeated here.

For a discussion of the meaning of *only-begotten Son*, or much better, *unique Son*, see *The Forgotten Trinity*, pp. 201-203.

The text’s meaning is transparent, though again, the challenge is hearing the text outside of pre-existing traditions. “So” is best understood as “in this manner” or “to this extent” rather than the common “sooooo much.” His love is shown, illustrated, or revealed in His giving of His Son. The Incarnation is an act of grace, but that Incarnation is never seen separately from the purpose of Christ in coming into the world, specifically, providing redemption through faith in Him. Hence, the love of God is demonstrated in the giving of Christ so as to bring about the eternal life of believers.

### **The Meaning and Extent of *kosmos***

The great controversy that rages around the term “world” is wholly unnecessary. The wide range of uses of *kosmos* (world) in the Johannine corpus is well known. John 3:16 does not define the extent of *kosmos*. However, a few things are certain: it is not the “world” that Jesus says He does *not* pray for in John 17:9, a “world” that is differentiated from those the Father has given Him: “I ask on their behalf; I do not ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom You have given Me; for they are Yours.” It is not the “world” that is arrayed as an enemy against God’s will and truth, either, as seen in 1 John 2:15: “Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” Obviously, the “world” we are not to love in 1 John 2:15 is not the world God showed His love toward by sending His unique Son. The most that can be said by means of exegesis (rather than by insertion via tradition) is that the world is shown love through the giving of the Son so that a specific, particular people receive eternal life through faith in Him. Since we know that not all are saved by faith in Christ, it is utterly unwarranted to read into *kosmos* some universal view of humanity: how is God’s love shown for one who experiences eternal punishment by the provision of salvation for someone else? Surely, then, this is a general use of *kosmos*, with more specific uses of the term coming in the following verses. That is, the common meaning of world that would have suggested itself to the original readers (Jew and Gentile), and this is born out by the parallel passage in 1 John 4, as we will see below.

### Whoever Believes

See comments above regarding the meaning of *pas ho pisteuwn*. There is no phrase or term here that indicates a universal ability to believe as is so often assumed by those reading this passage. The present tense of the participle should be emphasized, however. John's use of the present tense "believe" is very significant, especially in light of his use of the aorist to refer to false believers. The ones who receive eternal life are not those who believe once, but those who have an on-going faith. This is his common usage in the key soteriological passages (John 3, 6, 10). When one examines Christ's teaching concerning who it is that truly believes in this fashion we discover that it is those who are given to Him by the Father (John 6:37-39) who come to Him and who believe in Him in saving fashion.

Verse 18 continues the point by insisting that the one believing in Christ is not condemned/judged (Greek: *krinetai*). However, the one not believing has been judged already because he has not believed in the name of Christ (both "has been judged" and "has not believed" are perfect tense, indicating a completed action that is not awaiting a future fulfillment). Just as Paul teaches that the wrath of God is continually being revealed against children of wrath, John tells us that the wrath of God abides upon those who do not obey the Son (John 3:36).

### Salvation, Not Judgment

Verse 17 expands upon the reason why God sent the Son into the world. The primary purpose was not for condemnation. Given the fact that Jesus speaks often of His role as judge and His coming as something that brings judgment (John 3:19, 5:22, and 9:39), it would be best to render the term "condemnation" in this context. English usage and tradition again conspire to rob the due force of the adversative *hina* clause: that is, many see "but that the world might be saved" as some kind of weak affirmation, when in fact the idea is, "God did not send the Son for purpose X, but instead, to fulfill purpose Y." The *hina* clause expresses God's purpose in the sending of the Son. It does *not* contain some kind of sense that "God did this which *might* result in that, *if* this happens..." While the subjunctive can be used in conditional sentences, it is also used in purpose/result clauses *without* the insertion of the idea of doubt or hesitant affirmation. The word "might" then is not to be read "might as in maybe, hopefully, only if other things happen" but "might" as in "I turned on the printer so that I might use it to print out this letter." Purpose, not lack of certainty.

Of course, this immediately raises another theological question, however. Will God save the world through Christ? If one has inserted the concept of "universal individualism" into "world" in verse 16, and then insists (against John's regular usage) that the same meaning be carried throughout a passage, such would raise real problems. However, there is no need to do this. When we see the world as the entirety of the *kinds* of men (Jew and Gentile, or as John expresses it in Revelation 5:9, every "tribe, tongue, people and nation" = world) the passage makes perfect sense. God's love is demonstrated toward Jew and Gentile in providing a single means of salvation for both (Paul's main point in Romans 3-4), so too it is that He will accomplish that purpose in the sending of the Son. He will save "the world," that is, Jews and Gentiles.

### A Parallel Passage

1 John 4:7-10 <sup>7</sup> Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup> The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love. <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> 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.

This passage provides us with a tremendous commentary, from John himself, on the passage we have just examined from his Gospel. The repetition of key phrases in the same contexts show us how closely related the two passages are. Both passages speak of God's love; both speak of God's sending of His Son and how this is a manifestation of God's love; both speak of life and the forgiveness of sin, often using the very same words John used to record John 3:16ff. So how did the Apostle John understand those words? Here we are given that insight.

The context of this passage is love among believers. Love comes from God, and it is natural for the one who has been born of God to love. The redeemed person loves because God is love, and those who know God seek to be like Him. Those who do not walk in love are betraying any claim they may make to know Him. This brings us to the key verses, 9-10.

The fact that verse nine is meant to be a restatement of John 3:16 can be seen by placing them in parallel to one another:

John 3:16 For God so loved the world  
1 John 4:9 By this the love of God was manifested in us

John 3:16 that He gave His only begotten Son  
1 John 4:9 that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world

John 3:16 that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life  
1 John 4:9 so that we might live through Him

Once we see the clear connection, and recognize the background of John's words, we can use 1 John 4:9 to shed light upon some of the key issues regarding the proper interpretation of John 3:16ff. For example, we concluded above that "world" meant the world of humanity, i.e., Jew and Gentile taken in *kind* and not in universal particularity (each and every person). This is confirmed by John's rephrasing here, "By this the love of God was manifested to us." The "us" in this immediate context is identified in verse 7, "Beloved, let us love one another," i.e., the Christian fellowship, which is made up of Jews and Gentiles. Further, the issue of the intention of God in sending the Son is further illuminated by noting the teaching of 1 John as well. That is, John 3:17 says it was the Father's intention to save the world through Christ. This we know Christ accomplished (Revelation 5:9-10) by saving men from every tribe, tongue, people and nation (this comprising the same group seen in John 6:37 who are given by the Father to the Son). 1 John 4:10 summarizes the entire work of God by saying that God's love is shown in His sending Christ as the propitiation for our sins. This is paralleled here with verse 9, "God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him." This helps to explain the oft-cited words of 1 John 2:2. The "whole world" of 1 John 2:2 would carry the same meaning we have already seen: the whole world of Jew and Gentile. The thrust of 1 John 2:2 is that there are more who will experience the benefit of Christ's propitiatory death than just the current Christian communion. The message continues to move out into the world, and as it does so, God draws His elect unto Himself, those that He joined to Jesus Christ so that His death is their death, His resurrection their resurrection. But in none of these passages do we find any reference to a work of Christ that is *non-specific* and *universal with reference to individuals*, let alone one that is not perfectly accomplished. God's manifestation of His love does not fail.