

Understanding John 3:16 in its context, John 3:11-21, 3:31-36

By Daniel Gray

The context goes back to John 1 and even to Genesis 3. The general context that requires most of our attention is John 3:1-21. If you want to shorten it a bit the immediate context for understanding John 3:16 is John 3:11-21 but that leaves out the important John 3:31-36, Yet the true context of these verse must include the fallen nature of Humanity from Genesis 3 because that is the cause of our need of salvation in the first place.

Jesus has told Nicodemus in verse 3 that a person must “born again.” Nicodemus acts like to be born again is incomprehensible, but Jesus does not buy it because the Jews had a baptism for those who converted to Judaism. The proselyte was then considered reborn as a new person. They were considered Jewish without gentile relatives. Nicodemus was playing dumb and Jesus called him on it in verse 10.

Verse 11 is interesting because of the plurals used. Jesus says “I say to you”, this is in the singular. Then it switches to the plural, “we speak”, “we know”, “we testify”, “we have seen”, “our testimony” and “you do not accept”. Commentators readily admit the lack of agreement among scholars as to the purpose of the plurals and offer a variety of possibilities, (see J. H. Bernard). The first person plurals are best explained by Lenski¹ who suggest they include John the Baptist. John the Baptist is the only other person who is said to have “testified” of Christ (John 1:7, 15-18, 19-23, 32, ,34 36) in public so far in the Book of John. Also, the Book of John returns to John the Baptist immediately after Jesus’s conversation with Nicodemus. The second person plural “you all” refers to Nikodemus, the Jewish teachers, legal experts, and leaders who frequently opposed Jesus.

Verse 12 speaks to the unbelief of Nicodemus evidenced by his playing dumb. Since Nicodemus refused to understand something so similar to proselyte baptism which he was so familiar with. He would not be able to believe the things of heaven. The point of verse 13 is to say that only Jesus can speak of Heavenly things.

Verse 14 and 15 are a single sentence in the Greek. It refers us back to the Numbers 21:5-9. This is a well-known narrative to the Israelites as it is part of the well-studied Torah. The Israelites had spoken against God and Moses. Then God sent “fiery serpents” to bite the people. Many people died from these bits. When the people repented, God told Moses to “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.” Numbers 21:8. This event, as Jesus shows here, prefigures His being lifted up at His Crucifixion. Ones’ repentance and looking to (trusting in) Christ brings salvation. Events that pre-figure something about Christ’s ministry are referred to as “messianic types” by theologians and serve as a kind of prophecy. Jesus tells Nikodemus that He must “be lifted up” also. Just as Moses made a serpent to protect the people from serpents, Jesus became sin on the cross as he bore our sinfulness on the cross to accomplish our salvation when we repent and look to (Believe in) him for forgiveness.

It is often said that “lifted up” only refers to death on a cross. I have wondered, if that is the true, how could the disciples be so dense as to not understand the plain teaching of Christ’s predations of his death and resurrection.

¹ Lenski, R. C. H. (1961). The interpretation of St. John’s gospel (p. 246). Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House.

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The word for “lifted up” (ὑψωθῆναι) has two possible meanings and may not always refer to being crucified or even to capital punishment but rather “to exalt.” I hope to do an article on the word “lifted up” soon. It should be an interesting topic to explore. For the time being we will continue to assume that in this verse “to be lifted up” means to be crucified.

The reason the Son of Man must “be lifted up so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.” This belief in Jesus is John’s whole purpose in writing (John 20:30–31) The purpose of our belief is that we will have eternal life in Christ.

To believe in Jesus is not to say, “I think there really was a man named Jesus many years ago” or even “Jesus really did many miracles.” This “believe” means much more than that. It is the conviction that He is able to forgive us of our sins and save us from the consequences of those sins. We cannot believe in Jesus while denying our sorry sinful state, for “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23), because we will not turn to him unless we realize our need of forgiveness.

Some people say the Bible does not say you have to “accept Jesus” or “ask for forgiveness of your sins.” Jesus once seen the faith of a man and his friends. And faith is similar to belief. So, He said to him, “Your sins are forgiven you.” (Luke 5:20) The sacrificial system of the Law of Moses in the Old Testament required people to take a sacrifice to the priest as a sin offering for atonement of unintentional sin. (Leviticus 4) This is “asking” for forgiveness through the priest. If Jesus is to be our substitute sacrifice, we must accept Him and His sacrifice of His life on the cross for our sins. If a person is not willing to accept this the substitutionary work of Christ, the Mosaic sacrifices and keeping the whole law without stumbling (see James 2:10) would be the only possible option, if it were possible. All that is entailed in “accepting Jesus” or “asking for forgiveness” is encompassed in the “belief” used in this passage.

We gain “eternal life” when we believe in Christ in this way. Here again, there is more than initially meets the eye. “Eternal life” is not the same as “everlasting life.” Even though there are at least three English translations that have “everlasting life” in verse 15 and at least fourteen English translations that have “everlasting life” in verse 16, it is not the same as “life eternal.” John uses the same two words in both verses so it should be translated the same in each verse.

John uses the phrase “eternal life” to say “life”, but this life is not referring to natural life or even a natural life extended forever. John’s use of “life” includes a quality not possessed in natural life. This is why “everlasting life” does not work here. For John “life” is used to refer to life in the Age to Come when we will have bodies of a different nature. Life in the Age to Come has a quality not found in natural life even if it is extended forever. This eternal life “is the life by which God Himself lives, and which the Son of God possesses from the Father”² (John 5:26, 6:57). Matthew 19:16-17 is a good example where life (ζωή) represents eternal life as Jesus changes the young mans “eternal life” to “life.”

¹⁶ “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.

² Brown, R. E. (2008). The Gospel according to John (I–XII): Introduction, translation, and notes (Vol. 29, p. 507). New Haven; London: Yale University Press.

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John 3:16 provides the support for the proposition presented in John 3:14-15.³ In the Greek, the sentence begins with a regular combination in Greek⁴ “Οὕτως ... ὥστε.” It usually means “So that.” However, there is disagreement as to its usage in John 3:16. The traditional way is to understand it as the “Degree” of God’s love. How much God loved, “so much.” Gundry and Howell⁵ claim it speaks to the “manner” in which God loved. How God loved, “in this way.” Many have followed them in this understanding as indicated by the significant modern Bible translations that understand it as manner. (NET, CSB, GWT, HCSB, LEB) But, in a footnote Köstenberger⁶ says:

This reading is novel, but it is hard to see how ὥστε could introduce a main clause and be rendered “and so.” Also, these authors maintain that 3:16 is parallel to 3:14 (καθώς ... οὕτως, “just as ... so”), but the traditional rendering provides a much better parallelism (“so much ... so”) than the newly proposed one (“in this way ... and so”).

It is interesting to note that Lenski⁷ who preceded Gundry and Howell by over thirty years sees manner while holding on to degree:

The word οὕτως, “thus,” denotes manner and degree, “in this way” and “to such an astounding degree” did God love the world.

I hold to the position of degree. How great a love God had for the world.

For” ties what follows with what preceded. Just as God provided a salvation to those bitten by serpents and looked at the bronze serpent so they would live, God’s love is so great that he provided a salvation to those who believe in Christ.

Loved: This is great love of God is “a kind of love that expresses personal will and affection rather than emotions or feelings.”⁸ It is the highest kind of love. It is commonly thought of as the love a parent has for their children. It is the same kind of love we are commanded to have for our enemies.

The love that God has for us in this high degree is “a kind of love that expresses personal will and affection rather than emotions or feelings.”⁹ It is the highest kind of love and is commonly thought of as the kind of love a parent has for their children. It is the same kind of love we are commanded to have for

³ Runge, S. E. (2010). *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament: A Practical Introduction for Teaching and Exegesis* (p. 278). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

⁴ McHugh, J. F. (2009). *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on John 1–4*. (G. N. Stanton & G. I. Davies, Eds.) (p. 239). London; New York: T&T Clark.

⁵ Harris, W. H. (1999). Review of *The Sense and Syntax of John 3:14–17 with Special Reference to the Use of Οὕτως ... ὥστε in John 3:16* by Robert H. Gundry and Russell W. Howell. *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 156, 359.

⁶ Köstenberger, A. J. (2004). *John*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

⁷ Lenski, R. C. H. (1961). *The interpretation of St. John’s gospel* (p. 259). Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House.

⁸ Nettelhorst, R. P. (2014). *Love*. D. Mangum, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, & R. Hurst (Eds.), *Lexham Theological Wordbook*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

⁹ Nettelhorst, R. P. (2014). *Love*. D. Mangum, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, & R. Hurst (Eds.), *Lexham Theological Wordbook*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

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our enemies.¹⁰ The object of God's love is not the earth. The use of the word "World" here is a figure of speech where "The World is put for its inhabitance."¹¹ God's motivation is His love for everyone.

The word "that" "is a conjugation used to introduce a clause expressing consequence, result, or effect."¹² It introduces the result of God's love toward us. Using the word "that" as a conjugation is Old English¹³ and carries the idea of "so that."¹⁴ In John 3:16 ὥστε (that) introduces a resultant clause. The result of God loving everyone follows. John uses the indicative form of ὥστε (that) "to indicate the actual realization of the consequence."¹⁵ The indicative form is only used twice in the new testament (John 3:16, Galatians 2:13). According to Zerwick,¹⁶ based on the fact that these two occurrences of the ὥστε in the indicative "are in such contrast to the usual practice of using the infinitive with ὥστε", "we have the right to suppose that by using the indicative mood the writer wishes to insist on the actual fact of the incarnation."¹⁷ We understand ὥστε (that) introduces the result of God's love for the world as an actually realized fact.

The introduced result is the following action, "He gave His only Begotten Son." McHugh¹⁸ provides an interesting insight:

The clause probably alludes to Gen 22:12, 16, as does Rom 8:32, but there are subtle differences between John and Paul. While Paul stays closer to the LXX, with οὐκ ἐφείσατο [not spare], John stays closer to the Hebrew, but in place of the Hebrew, did not withhold (יָשַׁן ḥśk), he writes, more positively, gave. Again, Paul in Rom 8:32 uses παρέδωκεν of God handing his Son over to his redeeming passion; in John, παραδίδοναι is (with one exception, 19:30) used only (pejoratively) of men handing over Jesus to his fate (Judas, 6:64 etc., nine times; the High Priests, 18:30, 35). John's choice of ἔδωκεν in preference to παρέδωκεν is therefore significant, intimating that God was not handing over his Son to suffering, but rather giving him as a gift to the world

Genesis 22 is the narrative of Abraham with Isaac as a sacrifice. The event has elements in common with the Crucifixion. The father willing to sacrifice his son on a mountain and the son carrying the wood just

¹⁰ Lenski, R. C. H. (1961). *The interpretation of St. John's gospel* (p. 259). Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House.

¹¹ Bullinger, E. W. (1898). *Figures of speech used in the Bible* (p. 576). London; New York: Eyre & Spottiswoode; E. & J. B. Young & Co.

¹² Merriam-Webster, I. (2003). *Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary*. (Eleventh ed.). Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc.

¹³ Merriam-Webster, I. (2003). *Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary*. (Eleventh ed.). Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc.

¹⁴ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 1107). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹⁵ Zerwick, M. (1963). *Biblical Greek illustrated by examples* (English ed., adapted from the fourth Latin ed., Vol. 114, pp. 121–122). Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ McHugh, J. F. (2009). *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on John 1–4*. (G. N. Stanton & G. I. Davies, Eds.) (p. 239). London; New York: T&T Clark.

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like Christ carried the cross. It is a messianic type that prefigures the crucifixion of Christ. It is no surprise that Genesis 22 would find its way into the redemption story.

God gave his only begotten son. Many of the modern translations are translating μονογενῆ as “one and only Son,” “only Son”, “only and unique Son” or something similar that avoids the word “begotten.” “only begotten” does not accurately convey the meaning of μονογενῆ but neither does any of the others currently being used in English translation. It should probably be more like “only natural Son.” I do not fully understand this yet, but I have a friend who has done a scholarly study on it. I anticipate something being published on it soon and hope to update this article once that is available.

If a person just reads the crucifixion accounts out of the context of the gospels. They could get the impression that the Romans took Jesus and crucified Him while leaving Him no choice. But God gave Jesus to the world. John’s choice of the word ἔδωκεν (gave) is significant of the willingness of God to gift Him to the world for the purpose of providing for our salvation.¹⁹

Sometimes an atheist will misrepresent the gospel saying, “So god came to earth to die for the sins that he himself designed us to commit and save us from the punishment he gives us. So, what’s the big deal?” This statement denies the doctrine of the trinity and that Christ is a separate person from the Father. Jesus indicates He is separate from the Father (Matthew 11:27, 24:36, 28:19, Luke 10:22). John 5:20 speaks of the “affectionate, continuous and habitual”²⁰ loving relationship between the Father and the Son. “Jesus himself uses παρὰ θεοῦ (16:27; 17:8), emphasizing the enduring relationship rather than the (humanly envisaged) temporary ‘distancing’.”²¹ Jesus truly was and is the son of the Father. It is not as though God gave nothing, for he gave dearly because of His great love for us.

The second “that” in John 3:16 is translated from the word “ὅτι” and indicates the purpose or objective of God’s action is going to be given to us. God’s purpose in giving Christ to the world is that “whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” The Greek word translated whoever (πᾶς) refers to the distributive whole. Which places the focus on all the individuals of the world rather than the collective whole.

To believe is more than accepting something as real or true. It is the conviction as to the ability of something.²² Here it the conviction that Christ can and does save as the phrase here is “believes in Him”.

The word “perish” speaks to destruction especially to “eternal death,”²³ as in hell. The double negative to “not perish” means to “live eternally”. The use of double negatives is explained in the article [“Not Ashamed Proud.”](#) This “not perish” meaning to “live eternally” is followed by “but have eternal life” which creates an emphasis by repetition “‘shall live eternally,’ yet have eternal life.” Note that the word translated “but” (ἀλλὰ) after a negative can mean “on the contrary, but, yet, or rather.”²⁴ This does not

¹⁹ McHugh, J. F. (2009). A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on John 1–4. (G. N. Stanton & G. I. Davies, Eds.) (p. 239). London; New York: T&T Clark.

²⁰ Trail, R. (2013). An Exegetical Summary of John 1–9 (p. 228). Dallas, TX: SIL International.

²¹ McHugh, J. F. (2009). A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on John 1–4. (G. N. Stanton & G. I. Davies, Eds.) (p. 223). London; New York: T&T Clark.

²² Merriam-Webster, I. (2003). Merriam-Webster’s collegiate dictionary. (Eleventh ed.). Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc.

²³ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature (3rd ed., p. 116). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

²⁴ *ibid.* p. 44

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diminish the fact that it says, “not perish” which indicates perishing is the default for those who do not believe in the Son. But it brings out the figures of speech that put an emphasis on “eternal life.”

Eternal (αἰώνιος), for God is a time period without beginning or end. For us mortals who had a beginning, it is “a period of unending duration, without end.”²⁵ John’s writings use the phrase “eternal life” twenty-three times compared to nine times in the other gospels and nine times in all of Paul’s writings.²⁶ Not only does John have an inclination for the phrase “eternal life,” but for John the words “eternal” and “life” do not retain their separate meanings but the phrase “eternal life” is the transcendent life God gives to believers in Christ.

To have eternal life is to possess it. It does not mean it is something you will receive sometime in the future. It means that as a “believer” having confidence in the work Christ accomplished on the cross, you have eternal life now. It begins in this life. It is a transcendent life that comes from God.

To summarize the meaning of John 3:16, God loved people so much that He willingly gave His only natural Son in order that everyone who has confidence in Christ’s ability to save has **eternal life**.

John 3:17 tells us first what Christ was not sent to do and then we are told the objective of Christ’s earthly mission. “For God did not send.” Here “send” is “to dispatch someone for the achievement of some objective”²⁷ which is not revealed at this point yet. “Not send” is contrasted to the “gave” of verse 16. “The Son into the world”, world here is the earth contrasted to heaven, it is the place Christ is sent to. Most modern translations have “His” Son rather than “the” Son. This is because “The article often takes the place of an unemphatic possessive pronoun when there is no doubt as to the possessor”²⁸ and it becomes the translator’s choice to retain the article or to translate it as a possessive pronoun.

Verse 17 continues, “To judge the world.” Judge (κρίνω) is to judge on the basis of the law as in a court. In this case, everyone is guilty of breaking God’s law, so the idea conveyed here is that of judgement leading to condemnation or punishment of the law breakers, which parallels the “perish” in verse 16 above. But that is not why Christ came for it is negated. Christ was sent into the world, but not for the purpose of judging. His objective in coming into the world was “that the world might be saved through Him.” This second use of the word “world” is the same Greek word as the first one in this verse but has a different meaning than “earth.” It is using a figure of speech placing the world for the inhabitation of the world as in verse 16. It refers to all of humanity.

“But that the world might be saved through Him.” “Saved” (σῶζω) means to save from death, illness, or judgement. “That the world might be saved” becomes emphasized when the negation of the former “to judge the world” forms a repetition of the thought “to be saved.” To be saved from eternal death is to

²⁵ *ibid.* p. 33

²⁶ These numbers disregard word order and are based on a search of the lemmas.

²⁷ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 120). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

²⁸ Smyth, H. W. (1920). *A Greek Grammar for Colleges* (p. 287). New York; Cincinnati; Chicago; Boston; Atlanta: American Book Company.

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be given the eternal life of verse 16. “Through Him” indicates God is the agent of salvation but He uses a mediator; Therefore, salvation is through Christ.

John 3:17 can be understood in this way “For God did not send His son into the world to judge (condemn) people, but that **the people might be saved** through Him.”

John 3:18 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.

Why are unbelievers judged already? By the end of Genesis 3:6, every human being had sinned. The human nature had fallen from the innocence and landed in sin. Human nature became a sinful nature. Every human that came after Adam and Eve were born into this sinful nature. All humans have sinned. The Old Testament law revealed this sinful nature and its burden on us. Everyone is guilty of sin. (Romans 3:23, 6:23, 1 John 1:8) While in this fallen state we are already judged and condemned. The gift of God’s salvation through His Son is the only redemption available. (John 14:6) John 3:18 says the non-believer is judged already.

A person remains in that fallen condition unless they believe in Jesus. It requires action on one’s part to avoid the default outcome of eternal death. The only acceptable action to change from the default outcome is to “believe” in the Son and gain eternal life. That is to believe in Christ. Those who believe in Him will not be judged. Jesus said (John 14:6),

“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life.

One may wonder what the difference is, why those who believe are not judged while unbelievers are judged. It is because the work Christ accomplished on the cross removes our sin such that in the eyes of God it as though we have never sinned by giving us “the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ.”²⁹ This is called justification and is explained in Romans 3:21–26. Believing in the name of Jesus, God’s only son, is the only way to pass for “eternal death” into “eternal life.” For those who do not believe are still on the path of destruction and still under judgement.

Verse 19 goes on to explain this judgement further. First it recalls the references to Christ as “the Light” in John 1:4-9. He is the “Light” that has come into the world. Yet people’s deeds are evil and so they desire the darkness of evil rather than the light of Christ. The analogy of good and evil as light and darkness has been around a long time because it is such a good analogy.

Verse 20 supports this by describing those who do evil. It describes the condition of our human nature in its fallen state.

In “does evil,” the word “does” indicates action that bring about the result³⁰ of “evil.” People engaged in evil deeds necessarily fear exposure in the light. Because of their love of doing evil things, they come to hate the light and will not come to Christ who is the light.

²⁹ Romans 3:22

³⁰ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature (3rd ed., p. 860). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

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Verse 21 presents the case of those who “practices the truth.” Here the word “practices” means to “carry out an obligation of a moral or social nature.”³¹ It is not referent to an intellectual truth.³² In this context it is to live in accordance to God’s desire. They do not fear the Light, but are happy for their deeds to be made visible (Manifested) for all to see. “Wrought” (ἐργάζομαι) means to accomplish something that involves effort, a work. Their desire is that their work be recognized as being done in God by His grace and power.

John 3:31-36 Since Christ is from heaven, He is above those from the earth and testifies that God is true. He speaks the words of God and God has given Him all authority. John 3:36 concisely sums up what we have covered in John 3:11-21. Everyone who believes (puts their confidence in Christ) in the Son has what John calls “eternal life.” But those who disobey/disbelieve³³ the Son will not see life but rather the wrath of God is on Him.

³¹ *ibid.* p. 840

³² Plummer, A. (1896). *The Gospel according to S. John* (p. 107). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³³ Young, R. A. (1994). *Intermediate New Testament Greek: a linguistic and exegetical approach* (p. 44). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman.