

When a theologian meets Jesus
An Exegesis of John Chapter 3 Verses 1-21

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Introduction

It has been said that the three things to remember when evaluating scripture are context, context and context. Coming to the faith through the teachings of a local church, a more accurate grasp of theology has been something this writer has recently come to realize the value and need for. What this writer has been exposed to is what some may consider a form of easy believism via the Roman's Road type of presentation. After all, as it is often quoted, John 3:16 says:

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." -KJV

Great emphasis is given to "whosoever" such that it has become the goal to reach as many people as possible with this presentation of the gospel in the hopes they receive it of their own free will and have eternal life. The one, two, three repeat after me approach. It is not the purpose of this paper to judge the interpretations or motivations of this form of evangelism. Maybe that will be a future paper.

This writer's personal studies have evolved his position starting from a place of believing personal free will makes salvation an individual's choice to what he considers a more biblical position that it is God's will that enables salvation as described in the chain of redemption (Romans 8:29-30). The purpose of this paper is for this writer's edification through a deep dive into John 3:16 in the context of John chapter 3 verses 1-21 for a more proper biblical understanding of this passage of scripture. It has been made available in hopes others will find it beneficial.

Introduction to the Book of John

The book of John was written by the Apostle John, son of Zebedee, known as the disciple who loved Jesus. The theme of the book is that Jesus is the Messiah or Savior, the divine incarnation of God, come down from above to share the message of God's love. The book is intended for the Jews and Gentiles alike, written with the intention that believers of all stripes, are to have not just a saving knowledge of the faith, but to also grow in a well informed faith.

Exegesis

The following exegesis will begin in chapter 3 verse 1 with Jesus' dialog with Nicodemus.

1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.

A man of some authority and well educated in Jewish theology, laws and customs, Nicodemus was a member of the Jewish governing body called the Sanhedrin. Assuming he was a member of the Great Sanhedrin, he was one of around 70 who participated in what we would consider a supreme court or perhaps a senate capacity today. They would have met in the Temple in Jerusalem and likely would have convened daily. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus would have held to Jewish law and tradition, and likely would have seen himself as having a higher level of holiness compared to other

citizens. The New Testament generally regards Pharisees as being Jesus' chief rival although they were likely less hostile to him than the Sadducees due to having more agreement with certain doctrines. The passage continues:

2 This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.”

Nicodemus came "by night." Given his duties, it could have been a time of convenience for him. It could also be that he did not want to be seen meeting with Jesus by his contemporaries, as Jesus was not someone favorably looked upon by most of the Jewish religious leadership. Coming at night would also have given him more uninterrupted time with Jesus since Jesus' crowds would have likely dissipated at nightfall as well. The phrase could also be a symbolic allusion that he is in spiritual darkness and is seeking spiritual light, which given how the conversation proceeds, may in fact be the case.

When Nicodemus addresses Jesus as "Rabbi" (ῥαββί, which means teacher), Nicodemus is starting the conversation with an expression of respect. This would seem to indicate Nicodemus must have viewed Jesus as an authentic teacher of God's word even though he did not have formal rabbinical training. "Signs" (σημεῖον, sign or act that points to spiritual reality) refers to miracles Jesus had performed, which Nicodemus may have interpreted as God authenticating Jesus as one of His. He clearly disagrees with many pharisees who believed the miracles were the work of the devil, as testified in Matthew 12:22-32. Clearly whether in support of Jesus or not, there was agreement in the religious community His miracles were not mere illusion. Moving on:

3 Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

4 Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”

5 Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

Jesus, apparently not concerned with continuing the exchange of pleasantries, jumps right to the point in verses 3-6 expressing the need for spiritual rebirth before one can see the kingdom of God. This point will be repeated during this discourse as the Jewish way of driving home a point is with repetition. Being born again, this rebirth, or regeneration is something that must happen or one will not enter the kingdom of God!

No one is born a Christian. To be a Christian, one must be reborn spiritually. This concept appears to confuse Nicodemus as at this time in history, Jews had come to believe that as God's chosen people, by virtue of being born of the right people, with the right ancestry, the right law and the right observances, they would someday see the Kingdom of God. But here is Jesus saying, no, you must be born again.

Nicodemus may be asking a rhetorical question with his response speaking of a physical birth but

again, he has been introduced to a concept totally foreign to him. Jesus again responds and remember, anytime Jesus says "Truly, truly" (ἀμὴν ἀμὴν which is literally Amen! Amen!), what follows is very important! Jesus again states for a second time the essential truth that one must be born again, but this time he expands the thought to include the details of water and spirit.

Jesus mentions water, which of course is not concerning physical birth but rather to baptism, a common ritual of purification at the time. It is not that physical baptism saves, but that it is an outward sign, accompanying a public profession of faith and confession of the need for repentance from sin. It is one's first act executed by faith. This is certainly not something conducted in secret under the cover of darkness. But Jesus speaks of water AND spirit for a spiritual birth. Both are required. Nicodemus may have thought of Ezekiel 36:25-27:

"I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness-es, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules."

Just as water can cleanse the physical body, the cleansing of the water of the word (see Ephesians 5:26) can cleanse the soul that has been quickened by the spirit. For as flesh can give birth to flesh, but only the Spirit can perform the rebirth or regeneration of the spirit. A baptism without faith is meaningless and one does not come to faith without first being born by the Spirit.

Jesus next gives Nicodemus a curious parable which almost seems out of place.

7 Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'
8 The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

"You must be born again", "You" is plural, probably including the other members of the Sanhedrin, but the implication here is toward all humanity as everyone MUST be born again. After restating this essential of the faith again for the third time, Jesus then gives a parable about the wind and its behavior. Interestingly, the same word translated wind (πνεῦμα) can also be translated spirit and he explains how it moves as it pleases and while we can detect its presence, we don't know where it came from or where it is going. What he is teaching is that likewise, the Holy Spirit is sovereign and that He will do as He pleases with regards to whom he touches and when he touches. This is a very important concept to remember as the exegesis goes forward for only those that receive the Spirit will exercise faith and receive eternal life.

9 Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"
10 Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?"

Nicodemus is being rebuked as Jesus asks how he can be in his position and not understand! Nicodemus just did not understand how the relationship between God and his people works. It was

never about what the people do, it was always about what God does. He should have understood these things having studied the Jewish scriptures like Deuteronomy 30:6, "And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live." and Ezekiel 36:26, "And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh." yet Nicodemus, as educated as he was, did not seem to understand these things.

11 Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony.
12 If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?

"We" refers to Jesus and his disciples. Although Jesus speaks with absolutely certainty from first hand knowledge of what is a certain truth and not an imagination, the term "we" is used because Jesus has taught these things to his disciples. The language is similar to what Nicodemus said in verse 2, when he refers to "we know....". When saying "you do not receive our testimony," Jesus is referring to the religious leaders not just Nicodemus, who have heard and refused to accept His testimony. He continues his criticism of religious leadership explaining that upon being told earthly things, referring to the working of the Holy Spirit in one's new birth, that if they don't understand this, how can they understand even deeper heavenly things.

13 No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

Referring to himself to further explain his authority, Jesus can speak of the heavenly, not as a man who has ascended to heaven and returned, but as one who first abode in Heaven in the very presence of God the Father, and has descended to impart spiritual knowledge.

14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,
15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

Jesus, knowing his own destiny, speaks of his future death and resurrection, but relates it in terms Nicodemus can understand by way of comparison made to the bronze serpent in the wilderness of Numbers 21:9, "So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live." With reference to Isaiah 52:13, "Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted." But now, instead of a believer, by faith, looking to the serpent for physical life, they will by faith look to Jesus to gain eternal life.

Again, God is providing the way for those that believe. As discussed above, those that believe are those the Spirit has touched (John 6:63a), and the Spirit touches (regenerates) those that God the Father has called (John 6:44a) and Jesus' sacrifice provides redemption to those believers having placed their faith in Jesus who were called and regenerated. In other words, eternal life is not earned by a Christian as a result of a decision to believe, they believe as a result of being ordained to do so. And now, to what is probably the most recognized and perhaps the most misinterpreted verse in the New Testament, John 3:16.

Οὕτως γὰρ ἠγάπησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν κόσμον ὥστε τὸν υἱὸν τὸν μονογενῆ
ἔδωκεν, ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν μὴ ἀπόληται ἀλλὰ ἔχῃ ζωὴν
αἰώνιον.

This writer is not well versed in Greek, but considering various sources listed in the references, the verse literally reads something like: "Thus for loved God the world, so that the Son the one and only he gave, in order that all who believe in him not destroy but have life eternal." It is generally rendered something the following:

16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that
whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. -ESV

Or as:

16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son,
that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have
everlasting life. - KJV

A lot of discussions arise as to the meaning of this verse. For example, is it saying that God loved everyone and has offered up his Son to everyone as propitiation for their sin, also known as universal salvation? Does it mean that salvation is open to everyone if they accept it? Or does it mean something different?

The gospel is truly represented in this one verse, but remember it is still connected to verse 15 via "For" and contextually connected to the rest of the passage being discussed. Let's take a closer look at verse fifteen before continuing.

ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων ἐν αὐτῷ ἔχῃ ζωὴν αἰώνιον.

The literal translation is, "In order that all who believe in him have life eternal." So in verse 14, the Son of Man (a term Jesus often calls himself) is to be lifted up, and continuing with verse 15, in order that all who believe will have eternal life. Some translations like the KJV include the phrase "should not perish" as in "should not perish, but have eternal life", but this is not in the Greek. It was added to better harmonize with verse 16. But to add the phrase "should not perish" infers that this is happening at some future point in time but this should be read as a present reality that faith is proof that believers are saved to eternal life while the unfaithful are not, there is no maybe this will happen sometime. It is a done deal for believers.

If verse 15 is the what (and/or perhaps who), that through believing in Christ, one can have eternal life, verse 16 answers the why. That is, that God loved the world enough that he gave his only son, Jesus, as a sacrifice for it's redemption, as propitiation or payment for sin. When today's reader encounters the word world, to think of it as all encompassing is not unexpected. This writer submits rather, that it is referring to all creation in that God loves his elect wherever they are in the world. But many imply the text is speaking to all humanity but when the translation sounds this way, the biblical text may not always be making that case.

For example, in Matthew 5:28 it says, "But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Does this mean that every man has committed adultery in their heart? Well, he probably has but this is not what the text is saying. It is saying every man who looks at a woman with lustful intent has committed adultery with her in his heart. There is a qualification to be met, "everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent...", and it is those that have committed adultery in their heart, not every man.

Verse John 3:16 is the same way. God's love of the world, is for those believing ones, those that believe with faith in Jesus who will have eternal life. When contemplating this verse, many focus on the whoever/whosoever, but one can see above that literal translations do not have whoever/whosoever in them. This is because it is not there.

While the modern reader will see whosoever and interpret it to mean a random free choice by random individuals, that is not what John wrote nor what the KJV translators were intending. The term whosoever to the translators was used to designate a particular group, so in this case whosoever are those who believe. The focus for this verse should always be on belief. In fact the rendering of the phrase would be better if it read something like "every believing one" instead of "whosoever believeth". Clearly there is no implication of universal salvation in this verse, either. And just as Nicodemus learned above, it is not by virtue of being born of the right people, with the right ancestry, the right law or the right observances that one receives salvation. It is not of the individual at all, but of God! Thus, it is not a matter of people exercising freewill to come to God, it is a matter God coming to them.

The good news is that redemption, rather than being solely for Israel, as Nicodemus apparently believed, is available to everyone, but it is limited to those that believe, and belief comes to those who God has called (or his elect) and for which the Spirit has regenerated. Those who are called, regenerated and redeemed as believers can faithfully believe, they will have eternal life through God's only son rather than perish in eternal judgment with unbelievers.

Jesus continues:

17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world,
but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Jesus reiterates his purpose, which is his work of redemption, not condemnation, to be made available to those who come to him.

18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not
believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the
name of the only Son of God.

Those who do not have a settled belief and trust in Christ have neither a positive or neutral stand before God, for they are already condemned for their sin. People do not earn hell, they are going their by default if they do not in faith trust in Jesus. No other path gets one to Heaven, only Christ.

19 And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and
people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works

were evil.

20 For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.

21 But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.”

Jesus concludes the discussion explaining to Nicodemus that judgment has taken place, that He is the light that has come into the world but people have loved the darkness rather than the light. Man's default fallen nature, prefers darkness and this is reflected in their evil works. They will not come to the light of their own doing. They don't just avoid the light, they actively work against it in fear of judgment should their works become known, just as they have actively rejected Jesus. But those that have come to the light, as the result of the divine work of regeneration, have works that testify to that work of God.

Conclusion

The paper has provided an in-depth exegesis of John 3:16 in the context of John chapter 3 and verses 1-21, including other references as needed but kept minimal for the purpose of a concentrated study. It has provided a more proper biblical understanding of this passage of scripture with particular emphasis on the meaning of John 3:16. It has discussed the language of the text and the implications of Jesus' teaching for believers and non-believers alike.

References:

The following sources were used although I didn't formally site references in the document.

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