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## JOHN THREE SIXTEEN

"GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD" is probably the best known verse in the Bible. So often has it been expounded and so fully discussed that there seems little likelihood of discovering still deeper delights should we delve in the original, or consult a more exact and consistent rendering. We hope to show, however, that this gem is far more brilliant in its original form than in our idolized English version. Even those who use it most miss much of its message. This was forcibly brought to my attention by a series of questions concerning it, in which the inquirer asked, "*God*—does this refer to the Father? *So*—what is the meaning of this adverb? *World*—does this refer to the world geographically or to men and women in the world? *Gave*—what does the word mean? *Begotten*—does this refer to being begotten of Mary, or always and eternally begotten? *Whosoever*—to whom does that refer? *Believeth*—does this mean any ordinary belief of the mind? *On*—I have always wondered what *on* means . . . Is *on* used in a sense as of a foundation?"

Although the apostle John was a minister of the Circumcision, and his writings are, in their application, for them alone, nevertheless they belong to the "all Scripture" which is beneficial for us also. Paul's evangel of conciliation contains grace far beyond the range of this verse, yet there is enough here to more than fill our cup of wondering joy. Here we have the climax of Israel's ministry, as it will be carried out in the coming day of Jehovah. Hitherto Israel had been self-centered. They

wanted blessing for themselves, although they were chosen to be channels of blessing to others. John's ministry is characterized by this. He sets forth the blessing of the whole world *through* the holy nation, when they are blessed, while Paul sets forth the portion for the nations while Israel is still stubborn.

#### GOD—NOT THE FATHER

One of the eyesores of modern evangelical teaching is confusion in regard to the Deity. This exposes itself at times in such questions as "Is it God the *Father*?" In such a dilemma, a modern evangelist would almost be compelled to answer "Yes". But this leads to even more confusion, if we substitute, and say, "The *Father* so loved the world." This suggests that the love is that of a parent, and that God is related to the *world* as a father to his child, sometimes called the "universal fatherhood" of God. This logical deduction no evangelical preacher will acknowledge. Is it not much better to *avoid* the character of *Father* here? The unbelieving world is related to God as *Creator*. The title "God" denotes the "Subjector" in the original tongues. So we should perhaps answer by saying that it is *not* in His character as *Father* that God's love is displayed here, but rather as *Subjector*. The unbeliever is not related to God as Father, hence the love here spoken of is not paternal.

John three sixteen is clear in its testimony against the trinitarian heresy. If we include in the title "God" the theological "God the Son", then we transform it into an inextricable and insoluble maze. How can "God the Son" generate Himself? Or, perhaps we should say, How can He perform a part of this, so that He is the only begotten Son of two Others, as well as Himself? The question, Was it God the Father? is the cry of one who is perplexed, not by John three sixteen, but by orthodox theology. It ought to open our eyes to the

darkness of orthodox doctrine, and, by its clear-cut inferential testimony, confirm the great truth that there is one God, Who alone could give His Son, not one of three, who give one of themselves.

SO—MANNER, NOT MEASURE

Often, in my early days, did I revel in the word *so*, and in my preaching, I expatiated on the magnificent *extent* of God's love to the world. But one day I thought I would look it up in my Greek concordance. I am ashamed to say that for a while I was disappointed to find that it was *not* "so", in the sense of quantity or size. But it was not long before I began to see that the *quality* of God's love is here displayed by the *way* in which it expresses itself to His creatures, and this is far more precious than its *abundance*. It is the *manner* of God's love which is here revealed, not alone its *measure*. This Greek word is usually rendered *thus*, not *so*. Its true force is seen in the preceding verse, "as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, *thus* must the Son of Mankind be lifted up". In other places the Authorized Version translators have it *on this wise* (Mat. 1:18), *after this manner* (Mat. 6:9), *likewise* (Mat. 17:12), *in like manner* (Mark 13:29). *Thus* is a closer rendering, as in its next occurrence. Our Lord "sat *thus* on the well" (John 4:6). "*Thus* God loves the world . . ." The word "so" really calls attention to the manner rather than the measure, yet, in this connection it has become blurred, and is always taken as an adverb of size, hence it should be replaced by a clearer expression.

Paul expands this thought more fully in the fifth chapter of Romans: "God is recommending this love of His to us, seeing that, *while we are still sinners*, Christ died for our sakes" (Rom. 5:8). John puts it thus: "*We are loving God, seeing that He first loves us*" (1 John 4:19). Even the greatness of His love for His

own depends upon this contrast for its revelation. As Paul puts it: "God, being rich in mercy, because of His vast love with which He loves us (we also being dead to the offenses and the lusts) . . ." (Eph. 2:4). In essence, it is its *graciousness* which characterizes God's love. The unworthiness, yea, the utterly despicable character of its object tells us of its grace, for it is a very unlovely world which God loves. On the other hand, the vast value of His gift to this undeserving world, nothing less than the Son of His love, unveils the preciousness of His affection.

What the world needs is to be impressed with the *way*, rather than the *quantity* of God's love. This can be done by stressing the fact that He gives His most precious possession to a world which deserves His indignation and destruction. Only the knowledge of *such* a love has power to break through the resistance of hard hearts. Only by giving His best to those who deserve His worst has God been able to reveal to us the unutterable graciousness of His feelings toward the creatures of His hand and heart. I sympathize with all who still cling to the familiar "so". It was a hard and a long pull before I could leave it. It took time for me to become used to "thus". But it is well worth the cost. 'It is the *manner* of His love to which He calls our attention.

#### LOVES—NOT LOVED

This is further impressed upon our hearts by the fact that, in the original, the verb is *loves*, not *loved*. God's love to the world is not a matter of past history, but a present and a future fact. It is indeed true that He loved and gave, but it is infinitely more true that He loves and gives. These are timeless verities, not mere past manifestations. In Paul's passage in Romans, which parallels, or rather expands and exalts these great truths to accord with the present grace (Rom. 5:1-11), justification is through the blood of Christ, yet there is also

salvation *in the life* of the Son of God. In the preceding verse we have the death of *Christ*, the *Son of Mankind* exalted as the serpent in the wilderness, but John 3:16 goes on further than this, for here, as in Romans, God gives *His Son*, and this includes His life as well as His death, His future glory as well as His past humiliation, His coming for us in the future as well as His advent in the past. God *loves* (not loved) the world.

#### WHAT IS MEANT BY THE WORLD?

Many are perplexed by the word *world* in the Bible because it sometimes seems to mean one thing and sometimes another. As a matter of fact the word in the original means *system* or *arrangement*, and it includes all organized creation demanded by the context in each case. This relieves our minds of the absurdity of making *world* mean all the men and women *in* the world, for that which is *in* a thing can hardly *be* that thing. English has no good equivalent for the Greek *kosmos*, which is broader in its significance, and refers, not directly to the individuals, but to the whole social system of which men form a part. God, the great Arbiter, has created all in the Son of His Love (Col. 1:16), and it were strange, indeed, if His heart did not crave a response from that part of this marvelous system which can return it. But, as His power alone has imparted power to His creatures, so His love alone is able to awake a response in them.

Before coming to John 3:16 we are told what sort of world this is. In the first chapter we read, "In the world He was, and the world came into being through Him, and the world knew Him not" (John 1:10). It was an ignorant world. It was a dark world (Mat. 5:14). The men who make it, love darkness rather than light, for their acts are wicked (John 3:19). In Paul's epistles salvation is individual and particular. In our infirmity, while we are still sinners, Christ died for our sakes. Being enemies, we were conciliated through the death of

His Son (Rom. 5:8-10). But John's evangel is not so individual. Christ was a "Servant of the Circumcision, for the sake of the truth of God, to confirm the patriarchal promises" (Rom. 15:8). The outlook is national and world wide. It has in view the promised day of salvation, the millennium, when the world, the whole system, will be the subject of God's salvation. Hence God loves the world, and the world is to be regenerated by the salvation of those in it who believe. To Nicodemus our Lord said, "*ye*" (not *you*), that is, all in Israel, "must be born anew".

#### THE GIFT OF GOD

Who shall define the meaning of a gift? But is not this very passage itself an exalted exposition of its truest significance? It is the chief activity and expression of love. Hate robs. Love gives. Nearly all who have ever labored under the desire to express their affection have had to resort to this means of making it known. The great difficulty is to secure appreciation. I remember once wondering how I could get beyond the ordinary, humdrum, routine gifts, so I gave some of my own heart's blood by using it in place of ink in writing to the object of my affection. A gift of such a character is more effective than imposing presents. God is too rich to expect much response from mere material donations. But when He gives that which is near and dear to Him then our hard hearts are affected.

#### THE ONLY BEGOTTEN

Among westerners the firstborn of a family has little precedence over the rest. But in the Orient the firstborn son takes a place of privilege far above his brothers. When there is only one, he almost monopolizes his father's heart, for a man's present standing and future hopes for his family are all bound up in his heir. To the eastern mind there can be no more precious posses-

sion than an only son. He is the supreme joy of his father and the pride of his mother's heart. He is more to them than all else besides. To give such a one is to give all, for nothing else can be compared to him in his father's estimation. Christ is God's only *begotten* Son in the literal sense, in the flesh. In spirit, He becomes the Firstborn among many brethren, but no other man was without a human father except Adam, and he was not begotten, but created. This unique glory belongs only to our Lord.

We must learn to distinguish a *son* from a mere offspring. Especially in Hebrew it has a wide usage, and includes rank and dignity as well as relationship. But it especially denotes likeness. God gave the One Who was most like Him to be our Saviour. How far we have been led astray into the misty mysteries of medieval theology may be seen by the form in which the question is put. What is "always and eternally begotten"? How thankful we should be that no such nonsense can be found in God's Word! In theology a contradiction in terms seems to be taken as the hall mark of the divine. The same statement, in other spheres, would be an unquestionable symptom of a deranged intellect. There is no such thing as "eternally begotten", for begotten is a beginning, and eternal is without a beginning.

#### WHOSOEVER BELIEVETH

What a perplexing time we used to have trying to stretch out the word *whosoever* over every member of the human race! But, alas! it would *not* stay down over unbelievers. It is not "whosoever", without limitations, but everyone *who believes*. Herein John 3:16 differs from the glorious evangel of the conciliation, which Paul later revealed for us gentiles. In John we have God's love for the world. In Paul we have this love displayed by God's attitude toward unbelievers as well as its effect on believers. Our Lord spoke before His sacrifice.

Paul writes after His cross. John seeks Israel's salvation. Paul realizes Israel's repudiation. The world is now conciliated, so far as God is concerned, and our message to the unbeliever is to *receive* this conciliation. When our Lord was here on earth, the unbeliever was judged (John 3:18). The indignation of God remained on the stubborn (John 3:36). But not so now. God beseeches all to be conciliated to Him because He is conciliated to them. He is *not* now reckoning their offenses to them (2 Cor. 5:18-21).

What a joy and satisfaction it was to get the vexed "whosoever" question settled by Paul! We were continually tripping over our own feet by preaching that Christ died *instead* of "the world", and "whosoever", and trying to widen this so as not to miss anyone, and then we insisted that, if they did not believe, then—though Christ had died as their "substitute", and God could not justly punish them as well as Him—if they did not believe they would suffer eternal torment.

"Payment God will not twice demand,  
First at my bleeding Surety's hand,  
And then again at mine."

What a change when we discovered that we had been mixing and distorting and adulterating God's plain declarations! Then the evangel for today, with its two distinct phases, conciliation on God's side to the whole world whether they believe or not, and reconciliation when they believe and receive the conciliation into their own hearts, enabled us to refrain from making God appear unjust. "Whosoever" in John's evangel is limited to those who believe.

"Does this mean any ordinary belief of the mind?" This was another earnest problem of the past. In this very gospel we read of those who believed into His name, beholding the signs which He did. Yet He did not entrust Himself to them, because He knew all . . . (John 2:23-25). This put quite a damper on our "whosoever



believeth". We tried to classify the various varieties of faith. It was very evident that there was something lacking with the faith of most "Christians". One did not need much knowledge of mankind to distrust their profession. Here again Paul came to our rescue. No, a belief with the *mind* is not genuine. "With the *heart* it is believed for righteousness" (Rom. 10:10). A superficial assent is worthless. Only a faith which flows from the very core of our being is of any use. It is useless to *say* that we believe. If it is a living faith it will bear fruit, and by this we will recognize if it is genuine, and convince others of its reality.

## NOT ON, BUT INTO

The "kind" of faith necessary for salvation has disturbed the mind of many an anxious sinner. But God's Word knows no species in faith. The difference lies in its vitality and its depth. It must be with the *heart*, that is, from the inmost center of our being. All else is sham and hypocrisy. The character of faith is also most graphically expressed in the original by the accompanying preposition. Our stammering English allows us to believe *on* or *in*. But the more truthful tongue of inspiration prefers to believe *into*. Faith is a moving force. When we believe we do not stand *on*, or even *in*, but we are *transferred from without to within*. Out of the world and *into* God's Son. Not only is He the foundation beneath our feet, but He is above us and all around us. The true force of *into* is seen in the very next verse. As God dispatched His Son *into* the world so faith moves from out of Him into Him.

How much richer would be our life and experience if we should imitate God as beloved children, even in His ways of speaking! He seldom refers to the great change wrought by faith as a motionless position. Never is it faith *in* Him until after "the great transaction's done". Seldom, in John's gospel, do we read of believing *on*.

Yet nearly forty times, in nearly every chapter, we read of believing *into*. In the third chapter alone it occurs four times (16, 18, 18, 36). These precious distinctions were lost early, as may be seen in John 3:15, where the three most venerable manuscripts each have it differently. Alexandrinus has it *on*, Vaticanus has it *in*, and Sinaiticus has it believe *into*. But here there is the danger that it was adapted to the next verse. But in John 3:16 there is no question. It is those who are carried by the vital power of *faith into* the only begotten Son of God who shall not be perishing but may be having eonian life.

Yet there is motion into His name which, nevertheless, is not to be trusted. The difference seems to spring from the motive power. The perception of physical signs may not beget vital faith. It is a conviction concerning matters which are *not* observed. It comes by hearing the divine declarations. Its foundation today must always be, "It is written." How much of the faith in the millennium is false is seen only at its close, when an innumerable multitude, who have known the powers of that marvelous eon, will follow Satan when he is loosed from his prison. And in our day, how little genuine belief is there in the great religious bodies with their millions of nominal believers! A colporteur in the eastern part of Europe was assured by a man who bought a Bible: "It is true that I am a Christian, but I have never had this book in my hands before." God alone can read the heart. We must look for outward signs. There is no better evidence than to toil and suffer for God's Word.

#### EONIAN, NOT EVERLASTING, LIFE

Do we not too often forget that John 3:16 was attuned to the heart and the understanding of a learned Jewish rabbi? Have we not tried to trim it down to fit the ignorant, irreligious sinner? What was the subject of the discourse? Was it not that which occupied the

attention of all who pondered the Hebrew Scriptures, how to enter the kingdom of God? Before Nicodemus could say anything about it, our Lord anticipated the thought of his heart, and told him that, apart from being begotten anew, he could not perceive the kingdom of God (John 3:3). Let us not forget this when we come to the sixteenth verse. Here our Lord is opening up the way into this kingdom. Only in this light can we understand what is really meant by "shall not perish". Should we not take these words *as Nicodemus must have received them?* Is it honest to "apply" them to sinners and circumstances utterly foreign to their original intent? It is this wresting of a few words from their context which causes the confusion and the questioning of sincere seekers after truth in these days of dire apostasy.

Let us seek to put ourselves in the position of Nicodemus. He is looking and longing for another "world" or system, in the coming eon: the kingdom of God. To live in that day is his great desire. How can he attain it? What works must he perform? To begin with, our Lord seems to shut the door of access in his face. No man can do anything in order to be born anew. Having barred the way of works, our Lord opens the gate of faith, based on God's love gift. This is the path into the kingdom of God on earth, not the portal into His presence for the nations today. In brief, the kingdom foretold by the prophets will be the portion of all who *believe*. Only those who have died *in faith* (Heb. 11) will find entrance there. And only the faithful will be preserved through the terrific judgments which precede it. These "should not be perishing but may be having eonian life". Unbelievers, like those stubborn in the wilderness, will not enter the promised land. *John 3:16 is millennial in its context and its scope.*

The Hebrew rabbis spoke of "the life of the age", or eon, the time of Messiah's reign and of Israel's exaltation among the nations. This is the so-called "everlast-

ing" life of this verse. The Hebrew root "olam", which this represents, signifies *obscure*, and is usually rendered *hide* as a verb. To the prophets the future was still obscure to a large extent, hence the time of blessing which was dimly seen ahead was so called. But, with added revelations, the future became clearer, and, in the Greek Scriptures, this obscure term is displaced by a more definite one, *eon*. The eons emerge out of the mist and take a definite number and sequence. It turns out that, in the Scriptures, time is divided just the same as is space. As in the tabernacle, the outside, the camp, the court, and the holy places constitute five distinct divisions, so there are five eons or ages. Two are past. The present, in which Christ was crucified, corresponds to the court and the brazen altar. The next two, the eons of the eons, correspond to the holies of the holies, the two rooms in the tabernacle building.

The life of the eons, or eonian life, is life for the two concluding eons, the scene of the reign of Christ and His saints. This corresponds exactly with the facts, as gathered from other passages. The unbeliever is not made alive in the former resurrection, when the kingdom is set up. He is roused from judgment at the great white throne, and goes into the second death. Thus, he shall be perishing, and has no part in the kingdom of God. The believer in Israel, however, is made alive soon after the advent of Messiah, and he lives and reigns with Christ, not only during the thousand years, but also in the succeeding eon, the day of God. He receives "eonian life", according to John 3:16.

Revelation has been gradual. The early prophets saw but one coming of Christ. Later, details were added, and His advent in humiliation was separated from his appearance in glory. So also it is with John 3:16, and all the prophecies of our Lord and His twelve apostles. He could not reveal to them all that was in store for mankind in the future, for they were concerned only with

the blessing which should come through the elect nation. That is why the truth for today was not made known to them, for our blessing comes to us, not through Israel's mediation, but in spite of their failure. The truth for today was a secret, revealed only through the apostle Paul after Israel was set aside. Until this had come to pass it is foolish to look for truth which is based upon it.

For the same reason the final state, the ultimate consummation, was never made known through the apostles of the Circumcision. Theirs is an intermediate process, by which God will reveal Himself to the denizens of earth, by means of one favored nation. Only through Paul has God made known what lies beyond the "olams", the eons. This is entirely out of the range of John 3:16, and is in contrast with it. Paul reveals it in Romans five, First Corinthians fifteen and Colossians one. Then not only believers, but *all* will receive life. Then it will not be *eonian* life, but actually endless life, for death will be abolished and no longer operate. This is confirmed by the fact that the words "perish" and "have", in the original, do not speak of a fact, indefinite in its reach, but of a process, which is terminable. The perishing and the having are future and during the period of the kingdom. But, when all rule is abolished, and the "everlasting" reign of the Son terminates with His abdication, then the perishing ceases, and gives place to reconciliation, beyond the kingdom era.

#### TRUTHS AND PROCESSES

Every now and then I am sent passages of Scripture which seem to be absolutely contradictory, and this is acknowledged by men who have tried their best to solve them. Time and again the solution has been simple, for one spoke of a fact, the other of a temporary process. A glance at the Hebrew or Greek makes all plain. But our English versions are lamentably lame in this regard. The Hebrew has two forms for its verb, but who would

ever dream of it if he was dependent on an English translation? The Greek also clearly distinguishes three great groups of verb forms, the indefinite, the incomplete or durative, and the perfect. It is of the utmost importance that we know of any action whether it is a fact without limitations, as *God loves*, or a temporary process, limited to the indicated time, as "*should not be perishing*".

How many who read "*should not perish*", get the impression of a process going on during the eons? None! Even when correctly rendered "*should not be perishing*" only a few will grasp the significance of the change in grammar before it is pointed out to them. *This ignorance of the force of these two verb forms, and the failure to carry it over into English translations, is a most potent stronghold of error.* John three sixteen, in its popular form, contains two glaring and ungodly errors of this kind. God's love and giving are relegated to the past, although they are timeless. The perishing is made timeless although it is definitely assigned to a limited period in the future.

I am well aware that this is not based on traditional Greek grammar. But why should I confine myself to stereotyped, ossified ideas about Greek, when constant contact with the living oracles has taught me vital facts which all the scholarship in the world cannot disprove? Let a real student examine *all* of the occurrences of the verbs in the sacred text, and classify them as to actual form (not traditional grammar), and then examine the classes, and he will see that the so-called "incomplete" (there is not even a good name for it!) always speaks of an action as going on, and always limited to the scope of the context. Permanent, abiding facts are put in the indefinite.

The errors which are fostered by the inability of translators to carry over these great distinctions are so vital and disastrous that I have made up my mind that,

in future, every Concordant version will make the matter clear. It is true that the version at present does maintain this distinction, as a rule. In fact, that is the chief objection to it! But we have yielded to English idiom in some cases. In future, except with an accompanying sub-linear, these must be noted, so that the distinction will be clear to the most ignorant. Then "shall not see life", and "abides" (John 3:36) will no longer deny other portions of God's revelation. Such errors as these would not be so fatal if it were not for our human failing—to believe what is false and obscure, and to reject what is right and plainly revealed. When we "choose", our selection is sin.

It is true that even the misuse of this text has been accompanied with untold blessing, for God is a skillful Workman. If the power of His Word were dependent upon the intelligence of His servants and their choice of the proper tool for each operation, what would be accomplished? It is only another proof that this is an era of grace, when His slaves are allowed to use His Word with so little spiritual discernment without being called to account, or being set aside. Millions of copies of John's gospel have been printed and distributed in our days because of the popular impression that it is especially adapted to the needs of sinners today. We can only applaud the sincere motives and great sacrifices which have made this possible. They will find a sure reward.

But how much more would it please God if we should spread the epistle of Romans, and the truths which it contains! The first five chapters of this epistle with a few extracts from Corinthians and Galatians definitely deal with the nations while Israel is set aside, and reveal the truth which is for unbelievers in this time of unparalleled grace. These deal with the individual sinner, not the world as a whole. They reveal God's justice, as well as His love. They bring faith righteousness to the nations, after Israel had refused the pardon of sins.

They set forth God's *present* gracious attitude of conciliation for all mankind, the true heart of the evangel for today, which has been forgotten and ignored in our lawless desire to rob Israel of John 3:16 and other texts.

The "appropriation" of this text has made us poorer, not richer. If we leave it where it is, it speaks no whit less loudly of God's love. Connected with Nicodemus, and those who enter the kingdom to be set up on this earth, it shines with a brighter brilliancy than ever before. "Applied" to sinners among the nations, contrary to its context, it cannot itself be clearly understood, and it eclipses the brighter light and far greater grace which is ours in Christ Jesus. What a day that will be when our eyes will be opened to understand the Scriptures! How much that we have taught will ascend in smoke! Yet how thankful we will be that He knows our motives and judges our hearts and not our heads! Most of us read as much into the Bible as we read out of it. The less we read into it the more we will read out. All who really wish to understand John 3:16 must orient themselves in Romans, and view it from their proper standpoint. It is stolen goods which we by no means need, for we have even richer and rarer expressions of God's love in His letters addressed to us and not to Israel. A. E. K.

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