

A quick exegesis of John 3:16

Outos: (adverb)	- In this way, thusly ...
Gar: (conjunction)	- For ...
Egapesen: (verb, 3 rd person, aorist, active, indicative, singular)	- loved ...
Ho: (article, nominative, singular, masculine)	- <i>not translated</i>
Theos: (noun, nominative, singular, masculine)	- God ...
Ton: (article, accusative, singular, masculine)	- the ...
Kosmon: (noun, accusative, singular, masculine)	- world ...
Oste: (conjunction)	- so as ...
Ton: (article, accusative, singular, masculine)	- the ...
Uion: (noun, accusative, singular, masculine)	- Son ...
Ton: (article, accusative, singular, masculine)	- the ...
Monogene: (adjective, accusative, singular, masculine)	- only begotten ...
Edoken: (verb, 3 rd person, aorist, active, indicative, singular)	- He gave ...
Hina: (conjunction)	- that
Pas: (adjective, nominative, singular, masculine)	- every, all
Ho: (pronoun, nominative, singular, masculine)	- one
Pisteuon: (verb, present, active, participle, nom, sing, masculine)	- believing
Eis: (preposition)	- in
Auton: (pronoun, accusative, singular, masculine)	- Him
Me: (adverb)	- may
Apoletai: (negated verb, 3 rd , aorist, middle, subjunctive, singular)	- not perish
All: (conjunction)	- but
Exe: (verb, 3 rd , present, active, subjunctive, singular)	- may have
Zoen: (noun, accusative, singular, feminine)	- life
Aionion: (adjective, accusative, singular, feminine)	- eternal

Context:

v. 1-2: Nicodemus was a member of the "minority party" of the Sanhedrin (Jewish ruling counsel) in that he was a Pharisee. He approached Christ by cover of night, for fear of being ostracized by his peers. Pride may also have been a factor. He was supposed to 'know it all' as the master of Israel (v. 10). To admit that he did not 'know it all' was an admission he did not wish to make publicly. Common sense told Nicodemus that Jesus was no kook. God was with Him (not against Him) as evidenced by His miracles.

Very important - Nicodemus was a Jew. He had a thoroughly Jewish worldview. He was speaking for the Jews, and was thinking in very Jewish terms as he came to Jesus in this encounter

v. 3: He never got the question off to Jesus. Jesus declares, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born from above." First remember; this is a very Jewish truth: the Messianic Millennial Kingdom will only be seen by those who are transferred out of the kingdom of darkness, and into the kingdom of the Son of His love). And this will only happen by a supernatural, spiritual birth. Notice the order. Men must first be born from above and given spiritual life. Then they are able to see and believe. And all who are given spiritual life, do come to believe as evidenced in John 6.

- John 6:37: All that the Father gives to Me shall come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out.

- John 6:44: No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise Him up on the last day.

This verse (3:3) clearly teaches the doctrine of Total Depravity (spiritual deadness). It also teaches the doctrine of Regeneration (spiritual birth).

- v. 4: Nic asks the logical question: How can an old person be born again (physically?)
- v. 5: Jesus' tells him that entrance into the kingdom will require both a physical birth, and a spiritual birth.
- v. 6: Mom's and Dad's (as a second cause) give physical life. But God gives spiritual life by agency of His Holy Spirit.
- v. 7: This shouldn't surprise you Nic (you should know Deuteronomy 30:1-6, Ezekiel 36 and Jeremiah 31 by heart).
- v. 8: The Spirit is sovereign in this ... He blows where He WISHES (He has free will!)
- v. 9-10: Nic is still having trouble with this idea.
- v. 11-13: This is Jesus confronting Nic with the dominating question of the Gospels: Who do you say that I am, and from where do I come?

From here down, I lean heavily on (even citing verbatim) lengthy sections of an open letter from James White to Dave Hunt found at <http://aomin.org/DHOpenLetter.html> .

v. 14: 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.

v. 15: 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.

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. ¹⁷“For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. 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.

v. 16: 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. (James White)

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.” In other words, not “How much did God love the world?” But instead “How did God love the world?” 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. 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*

Remember, Jesus was addressing a Jew, steeped in the Jewish idea that salvation was only for those in the nation (the physical sons of Abraham, through Isaac, and Jacob). When Jesus says, “in this way, God loved the world” the emphasis should be on the word “world.”

“For this is the way that God set His love upon the world, Nicodemus (not just upon the Jews, but also among the Gentiles). I know that is hard for you to grasp Nicodemus, with your Jewish preconceptions. But He loved not just the believing ones among you Jews, but also the believing ones among the Gentiles!”

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. 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 ⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸ 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.

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.

Hope this helps ...

Final Rendering of John 3:16-17 (as understood by Aaron King):

For this is the way that God set His love upon not only the Jews, but also the Gentiles ... He gave His unique Son that all believing ones would be saved. For God did not send His Son to the Jews and Gentiles to condemn the Jews and the Gentiles (they were already condemned by their sin), but that the believing Jews and Gentiles, through Him, would be saved.