

Salvation by Grace Alone



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As Jesus said, "Freely you have received ...so freely give!"



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About the front cover

The photo on the front cover shows a fawn being rescued. This is a picture of salvation by grace. Grace is unearned favor from God, and we do not earn salvation in any way whatsoever. It is all of God's doing **for** us!

That fawn was saved because someone loved it enough to save it from drowning. Salvation of itself was just not possible. It may very well have fought its savior, mistakenly thinking it was being attacked by a stronger force. Or it may have felt that it did not need to be saved, or (if it was able to think like a human) might be too proud to give in to being saved. But the savior did his job of carrying the fawn to safety simply because there was a need to do so.

This is the love of God ... a savior who saves, does it all himself (because he alone can), requires nothing in return or as a means of earning, and never fails to accomplish what he sets out to (and wants) to do. This is "salvation by grace alone".

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What Is “The Good News” (Gospel)?

The “good news” (gospel) is commonly misunderstood. It is not an *offer* made by God, providing a way for humanity to save itself by believing. Instead, it is an *announcement* of who Jesus is and the salvation of all humanity through his resurrection. Instead, it is a salvation completely by God’s grace (unearned favor toward humanity), so that people can hear this good news, believe what they hear, then turn *from* their sin, and turn *to* God who has already saved them.

What is the Good News? Some say it is an *offer* from God based on what Jesus did on the cross, that if we believe in Jesus we will be saved from eternal punishment in hell. But is this true? Where does this come from? Does it come from the Bible, or from church tradition? Well, it seems like the best place to start is by looking at *all* of the New Testament passages that say what the gospel (Good News) is.



The Good News (gospel) is mentioned many times in the New Testament. But usually it is mentioned by way of *reference*, not by way of *definition*. That is, it *refers* to the Good News many more times than it *tells* what it is. But there are a number of passages that clearly define what the Good News (gospel) is. The first occurrence is in Mark chapter one in the opening words. They are:

This is the Good News about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.

Three things can be noticed in this verse: (1) The Good News is about Jesus, (2) Jesus is the “Messiah”, the promised savior, and (3) Jesus is the “Son of God” -- God who became human. And these same items occur repeatedly in other passages that identify the Good News (gospel).

Another excellent identification of the Good News from the New Testament is how Paul opens his letter to believers in Rome:

1 This letter is from Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, chosen by God to be an apostle and sent out to preach his Good News. **2** God promised this Good News long ago through his prophets in the holy Scriptures. **3** The Good News is about his Son. In his earthly life he was born into King David’s family line, **4** and he was shown to be the Son of God when he was raised from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit. He is Jesus Christ our Lord.

This is one of the most complete definitions of what the Good News is. Paul has a lot to say about it. First, the Good News is *about Jesus* (verse 3) and that Jesus is the *Son of God* (verse 4). Notice that these two items are also present in Mark's claim of what the Good News is. But here Paul adds more information. The Good News was something *promised* a long time ago in the Old Testament writings (verse 2), and that Jesus is a *descendent of King David* (verse 3). But one other feature of the Good News is important. When Paul says (in verse 4) that Jesus is the *Son of God*, he also says that his *resurrection* from the dead is proof of this Sonship. This will come up repeatedly in Acts when Paul preaches the Good News.

A third major passage that clearly identifies the Good News is found in Paul's second letter to Timothy (a young, up and coming pastor), in chapter 2:

Always remember that Jesus Christ, a descendant of King David, was raised from the dead. This is the Good News I preach.

Again, some of the features found in previous passages are found here also. Paul says to Timothy that the Good News he preaches is *about Jesus*, that Jesus is a *descendent of David*, and that Jesus *raised from the dead*.

When Paul wrote his letter to believers in Galatia, he started it out by warning them not to accept any *other* Good News message.

Let God's curse fall on anyone, including us or even an angel from heaven, who *proclaims* a different Good News than the one we announced to you. I say again what we have said before: If anyone *proclaims* any other Good News than the one you *accepted* from us, let that person be cursed.

And what was this original Good News that was *proclaimed* to them and that they *accepted*? The best evidence is in Luke's account commonly known as "The Acts of the Apostles." In it, Dr. Luke chronicles the travels and events of Paul's three missionary journeys throughout the Eastern Mediterranean region. This included all of his sermons that he preached. Anyone who would take the time to carefully read through this book of "Acts" and mark all of Paul's sermons (as I once did) would find a number of themes that Paul repeats in his preaching of the Good News (Gospel). Here is a list of what I found, with the number of occurrences in parentheses (no number assigned indicates a single occurrence):

- About Jesus (9)
- Things God has done
- The resurrection of Jesus (9)
- Repent and turn to God (10)
- Be baptized (2)
- Save yourself
- Jesus is the Messiah (8)
- The Messiah had to suffer (2)
- Resurrection of believers
- The name of Jesus (4)
- The kingdom of God (7)
- The Word of God/Lord (7)

- Son of God
- Peace through Jesus
- Lord of all
- The message of salvation (4)
- Forgiveness
- The grace of God (5)
- Believe
- The way of God/Lord
- Faith (2)
- All God wants us to know
- Judge/Judgment (3)

Several observations are helpful in defining Paul’s Good News message. First, the topics that had the highest occurrences were (in order):

- Repent and turn to God (10)
- About Jesus (9)
- The resurrection of Jesus (9)
- Jesus is the Messiah (8)
- The kingdom of God (7)
- The Word of God/Lord (7)
- The grace of God (5)

Notice that three familiar items are at the top: *about Jesus*, the *resurrection* of Jesus, and Jesus as the *Messiah*. These are familiar because they are the same topics seen in the three main passages (previously presented) that identified what the Good News is. This clearly demonstrates that Paul’s Good News message is an *announcement* of who Jesus is (The Messiah) and what he has *done* (raised from the dead).

But also at the top of this list is “Repent and turn to God.” This is because this is logically what people are invited to do after they have heard the Good News of what Jesus has already done for them. Notice that there is no hint of earning or merit in this invitation. It seems to be more a message of, “Now that you have heard what Jesus has already done – raised from the dead – you are free to turn away from your sin that destroys you, and turn to God who loves you and will keep you safely away from sin and its harm!”

Further support of this is the fact that the lowest topics in Paul’s preaching were: judgement, *baptism*, *faith*, and even *forgiveness*. There is never any mention of Gehenna or eternal punishment in Paul’s sermons proclaiming the Good News! Why is there never any warning for lack of belief, if indeed eternal punishment is the consequence of unbelief? This is a very powerful and telling observation. When it comes to *faith* in the book of Acts, however, most people will think of the story of the *Philippian Jailor*, and how he asked Paul, “What must I do to be saved”. But how Paul answered him is, perhaps, even more memorable: “Believe in Jesus and you will be saved.” It is very tempting to turn this into a “*formula* for salvation by faith”, rather than salvation by grace alone based on the finished work of Jesus on the cross on the behalf of all humanity (which it must be). A couple of factors put this story into correct perspective and prevent it from being heralded as “the way to get saved” as so many Christians do in reference to this passage.

1. As shown above, the “Good News” is not essentially about believing or anything else that any human does. Instead, it is clearly about *who* Jesus was (messiah, Son of God) and *what* He did in His resurrection. (See a section below in this booklet titled What Jesus Did, and for Whom for a complete presentation of all that the New Testament teaches about this.)
2. The context of the *Philippian Jailor* story in Acts is that in an earthquake the jail doors flew open, enabling all the prisoners to escape. Thus, the jailor was about to kill himself knowing what the penalty would be from the Roman government if they did escape. But Paul stopped him and assured him that no one was going to escape. The jailor, in his fear, cried out to Paul asking what he must do to be “saved”. But *saved* from what? The word *saved* in the Greek does not mean “to escape going to hell.” It simply means “to be delivered.” What was the jailor in need of being delivered from (in the context of this story)? Not the wrath of God, but the wrath of Rome. Paul was exhorting him to believe in Jesus to deliver him from this situation of crisis.
3. Paul, for sure, also told him the Good News about who Jesus was and what he had done, before and after this event, just as he told everyone he met throughout his journeys, as recorded all the way through the book of Acts. But his exhortation to “believe in Jesus” was not Paul’s message of the gospel (Good News) or how people are saved from sin that leads to death. Such salvation, Paul always makes clear, is *by grace alone, through faith in Jesus who is “Savior of the World”!*

So, it seems reasonable to conclude that the Good News in the New Testament is an *announcement* about Jesus, who he is, and what he has done for humanity in his death and resurrection, as “the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (according to John in his gospel account). The Good News does not seem to be an *offer* graciously made by God to provide a way for people to save themselves from eternal punishment in hell, by exercising faith. In fact, the word “gospel” (“evangel” in Greek) means “to announce.” It comes from a description of those who came in from the battle field and proclaimed that the victory had already been won. It had nothing to do with anyone believing it (or not), nor was it an “offer” to activate the victory by believing. It was simply a *declaration* of good news.

But not only is the Good News an *announcement*, it is also very much about *grace*! Grace is the very reason why the Good News is an announcement of something fully accomplished rather than an offer, allowing people to complete their salvation by exercising faith. Grace is “unmerited favor.” This means that there is *nothing* we can do (not even believe!) to earn salvation, add to it, or complete it in any way. Salvation is a free gift from God for all humanity, by his grace alone, through the *finished* work of Jesus on the cross. It is that simple!

Grace is tied in with the Good News (gospel) and with salvation thoroughly throughout the New Testament. Paul described it simply like this: “The Good News of the grace of God.” And this says it all ... the Good News is about the grace of God (not the faith of man!). Faith is very important and without it we miss out on a full and wonderful relationship with God. But there is no merit or earning, whatsoever, in faith. Faith is only our humble and correct response to God, realizing what He has *already* done for us through the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus. (See the following section titled *The Role of Faith in Salvation* for more details).

Here are just a few key verses about *grace* from the New Testament writings:

But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God. Acts 20:24

When he arrived and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced and began to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord; Acts 11:23

If by the transgression of Adam many died, much more did the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abound to many. Romans 5:15

In the ages to come He will show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. Ephesians 2:7

The Good News has come to you, just as in all the world also it is constantly bearing fruit and increasing, even as it has been doing in you also since the day you heard of it and understood the grace of God in truth. Colossians 1:6

But we do see Him who was made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone. Hebrews 2:9

For the grace of God has been revealed, bringing salvation to all people. Titus 2:3

As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. 1 Peter 4:10

To see how the grace of God works in the salvation of humanity, from start to finish (eternity past to eternity future), see the section later in this booklet titled *The Plan*. It summarizes all major aspects of theology in plain English:

- The God of the Plan (God)
- People and Their Need (Sin)
- God’s Rescue of People (Salvation)
- How People Respond (Faith)
- God’s Completion of His Plan (Judgment)

The Role of Faith in Salvation

Most Christians believe that their “act of faith” ultimately saves them. For them, Jesus and his death on the cross was only *potential* and through faith a person becomes saved. This is “salvation by faith”. But actually, salvation is “*by grace, through faith.*” Faith earns us nothing with God and we are saved by grace alone through the finished atonement of Jesus on the cross.

Recently, I shared with a pastor friend my view of salvation of all humanity through the finished atonement of Jesus on the cross as a free gift from God, by His grace alone, and not a result of anything we do – including our faith! His response was simply, “But doesn’t there need to be a response?” My answer was also very simple ... No! There is *no requirement* whatsoever for salvation from sin that results in death. This was taken care of *completely and finally* by Jesus when he hung his head to die and utter his final words, “It is finished!” There is not only nothing we *need* to add to what he has done for us, there is nothing we even *can* do to improve on (or contribute to) what he has *already* done for all of us by grace alone.

However, this does not mean that there is not a proper and correct response on our part to all that has been done for us. And this response is to *believe* the Good News that we have been told about the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus. When we believe, we also receive, accept, turn *from* sin that destroys us, and turn *to* God who loves us unconditionally. There is no earning or merit whatsoever on our part, but there sure as heck is much to gain! When we believe and choose to live in the “new person” that we all are now in Jesus, our lives change, we feel “born again”, and we enter into fellowship with God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And, all three together came, as a human being in Jesus, to join us in our misery, die *for* us, *with* us, and even *as* us. This is the Good News!

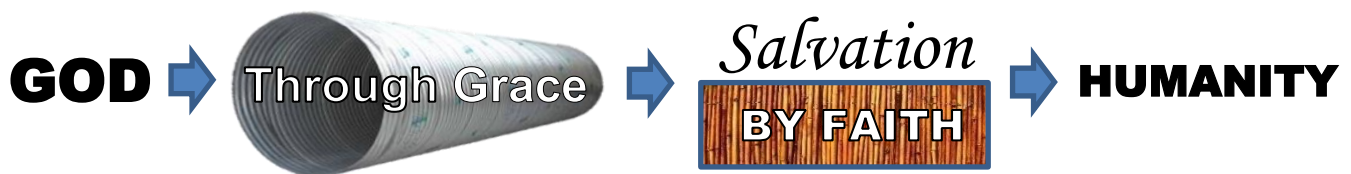
When reading the New Testament, it is easy for people to come to a conclusion that their act of faith (believing) is what saves them from going to hell forever. This is a very common belief and, perhaps, the most common among Christians. With verses like “Believe in your heart that God raised Jesus from the dead, and you will be saved”, and “believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved” – it is no wonder that such conclusions about the role of faith in salvation are held.



But is this not really “salvation by faith” rather than “salvation by grace” as Paul so clearly states in chapter two of Ephesians? Who or what saves us? When all is said and done, who does the saving work and who, therefore, gets credit for salvation? Remember, Paul

also, in many places, cautioned us that “no one can boast” about their salvation! He did not say no one *should* boast, but that no one *can* boast. There is no basis whatsoever for us to boast about being saved. God alone gets credit, because He alone saves! It is a free gift, by his grace (unearned favor toward humanity), though the finished work of atoning for sin by Jesus on the cross.

Salvation is not “*by faith through grace.*” Instead it is “*by grace through faith!*” What is the difference? Salvation “*by faith, through grace*” means that the basis of salvation is our own act of believing (it is *by faith*). Faith then becomes the deciding factor in our salvation. This turns the *moment we believe* also into the *moment we are saved* (no longer destined for eternal punishment in hell). And, this makes faith something that *we do* that makes the difference (rather than God). Additionally, this faith-based salvation is made available *through grace*. In other words, God *offers* all humanity salvation, as an act of his grace. But it is only an offer. This is why it is *through grace*.



In the above illustration, salvation is **by** faith (as the ultimate determining basis), and is **through** God’s Grace (made possible and available).

On the other hand, very much in contrast, Paul says “salvation *by grace, through faith!*”! What does this mean? Well, it is quite opposite from “salvation by faith” described above. In chapter 2 of Paul’s letter to believers in Ephesus, he formulated salvations as “*by grace, through faith*”. For Paul, the basis (“*by*”) of salvation is grace, not faith. It is totally God’s doing for us, apart from ourselves or anything we do – including faith! However, this salvation that God does for us comes *through* faith. This mean that we receive it, realize it, accept it, acknowledge it, and experience it *through* our faith. But there is no earning of salvation on our part whatsoever when we believe.



In the above illustration, salvation is **by** God’s Grace (as the ultimate determining basis), and is received, accepted, and experienced **through** faith.

So, if we are not saved by our faith (and are saved only by grace, through the atoning work of Jesus) ... then what is the role of faith in our lives? Faith is a wonderful and important activity that we engage ourselves in. When we believe, everything changes in our life. We hear the Good News announced that Jesus *already* saved us from our sin, and took all of our sin on himself on the cross. We then respond by believing (faith), we become “born again” (experience a new life in fellowship with God), and we begin to “walk in the Spirit” so that we will no longer desire to do what is destructive in our life (sin). That is a lot of accomplishment in our faith, but still there is no aspect of earning anything with God in believing.

None of our believing and experiencing fellowship with God in any way earns the slightest amount of favor with him! This is because salvation from sin (which results in death) is *completely* the work of God for us by His grace alone. It is His doing and we neither contribute to it in any way, nor can we take any credit whatsoever for such a wonderful salvation. Clearly, we are said to be “justified” by our faith. But what does this mean? It does not mean “saved by faith”! We are saved by grace alone. All of the New Testament makes this abundantly clear. The word “justify” means “to make right.” We are indeed made right with God when we believe. In other words, we come into a right relationship with God when we believe. And this is a wonderful thing. But there is no merit or earning in this act of faith on our part whatsoever. We merely *respond* to the Good News about what God has *already* done for us. And, more importantly, God’s disposition toward us does not change when we believe. He loves us, has always loved us, and always will love us (more than we could ever know). And this love never changes because God never changes! So, *our disposition* toward God does indeed change -- when we believe. Our mind is renewed, just as Paul says in Romans 12. But, *God's disposition* toward us does not change when we believe.

Once we understand that faith is a “non-meritorious work” on our part, that it is no more than a proper and reasonable response to the Good News, and that salvation is by God’s grace alone ... we can then rest in him and rest in the finished work he did on the cross (not in what we did by believing). We realize that He alone makes us eternally secure with him, right along with all humanity that he saved by taking away the sin (not sins) of the world through his birth, death and resurrection. It is no more complicated than this. And the result is that we can fully (and only) trust the God who loves His world and saves it by His grace alone.

The role of our faith really comes down to how we understand *grace*. If grace really is “unmerited favor” toward us on the part of God, then there is nothing whatsoever that we can do to earn salvation or even contribute to it, improve on it, or “activate” it in any way. It is a complete and finished work by God (through Jesus), as a free gift of his grace for all humanity, simply because He loves us so much and wants the very best for us. But, on the other hand, if grace is merely a *kind offer* by God, providing (through Jesus) a way for us to save ourselves (ultimately) by exercising our faith, then there is much for us to do

(believe), and in fact, much that we *must* do! So how we view grace is everything. This second view of grace (as only an *offer* on the part of God) comes from the Roman Catholic Church, over the past 1500 years of church tradition, based on the heavy influence of Augustine.

In a large two-volume work opposing all forms of universalism, titled *The Devil's Redemption* (see the description of this book in the *Book Resources* section near the end of this booklet), the chapter of Grace presents very clearly the Roman Catholic view of grace. It is primarily the view that grace is the act of God giving each person the *opportunity* to freely choose or reject Him (and therefore salvation). But this RC view also holds that if God were to *force* salvation in any way, even automatically saving all humanity without allowing this free choice, then such salvation would no longer be *grace*. When I first read this chapter, it was a real “head-scratcher” since it is clear in the Bible that grace is the act of God freely saving on an unearned, non-meritorious basis. But this other (RC) view of grace seems to be what 1500 years of church tradition produces, especially when it becomes the monstrous institution of brutality and fear that it was in the middle ages! Unfortunately, many Protestants and Evangelicals today follow and hold this *offer view* of grace. However, most Calvinistic and Reformed churches hold to a *meritless view* of grace (as did Luther before modern-day Lutheranism). But all of these groups do so believing also that God has not, and will not, save all humanity by such grace. Instead they believe that God will only save an elected part of humanity and that such choosing of some and not others is an act of grace. But a careful study of what grace is from a full historic perspective, all the way back to the New Testament, is a very worthwhile study and a real eye-opener. Not all things “modern” are necessarily accurate and Biblical.

Recently I watched the movie “God Is Not Dead”. It is an Evangelical-promoted movie. (And, there is nothing wrong with this since every other ideological group promotes their movies that portray their ideals and beliefs.) But in this movie a college student challenges his professor (who is an atheist) on the existence of God. The movie is a little “rigged” in that it lead the viewer into a favorable view of the popular Evangelical position of “salvation by faith”. But this is OK too! What movie does not promote something and lead its viewers down some intended path? I always told my kids (when they were living at home) to look for the lesson and purpose in every movie. I emphasized that none of them are *pure entertainment*. Some lessons found in movies are very good moral reinforcement. But other lessons are more subtle and questionable. I wanted them to be aware of this and to watch for it. I told them that it is hard to be fooled when you know what it is that is coming at you ... and why!

This “God Is Not Dead” movie ended with the professor lying in the street, having just been hit by a car. He is surrounded by all the main figures in the movie (the student, the student’s pastor, and some bystanders). As this atheist professor is dying, but still conscious, he is hammered (even begged) by the pastor and the evangelical student to “believe in Jesus before it is too late!” They added to their pressure by letting him know

that God had kept him alive and conscious as one last chance to save himself from going to hell forever. Now if this message is indeed true, they certainly have done the right thing in warning him. And, I am not in any way against people doing this, if they sincerely believe that the act of faith is what ultimately saves each person. In fact, I would say that they *must* say this to everyone not just a dying man on a road! But I do not see people who believe in salvation by faith warning people ... certainly not often or with any real urgency or passion. It is seldom preached on or warned about (clearly and passionately) at funerals of unbelievers by Evangelicals. It makes me wonder if they *really* believe it!

But I also found this final scene in the movie to be a curious and desperate scene where God in all His mighty power, love, mercy, and grace was nowhere to be found (except in the background having already done all He could to save). God really did not factor in at this point for this dying atheist, because God had already done all He could by *providing a way* for this dying man to be saved ... but only if he believes. In other words, the salvation of this man (his eternal destiny of either heaven or hell) all comes down to his decision, and his alone. Clearly, in this “salvation by faith” view, God nor Jesus are the ultimate deciding factor. They only made salvation *possible* by providing an atonement that did not actually save anyone – though it did *potentially* save everyone. This is a perfect picture of *Salvation by Faith* (as opposed to *Salvation by Grace*) discussed above. God, the pastor, the evangelical student, any onlooking angels, and all bystanders --- all of these can only hope and try to convince this poor dying soul to believe in what Jesus did potentially for him, knowing that ultimately his eternal destiny lies solely in his final decision!

Again, if salvation really is just God *providing* a way for people to get saved by believing, then this scene is indeed an accurate presentation and it should motivate all people who hold this view to do all they can to get this desperate message out to all people, and get as many people saved as they can convince to believe. And, I fully commend them for such sincere effort! But if salvation is what God has *accomplished* fully and finally in the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus, then it is not a desperate situation at all. Instead, it is a victory over sin and death for all humanity, and something to be announced to poor struggling souls (like this dying atheist), encouraging them to believe in the Good News they are hearing about what God, who so loves them, has *already* done for them! Such salvation is something they can never do for themselves by faith or deed. These are indeed two very different Gospels (Good News messages), and two very different roles of faith in salvation.

I will finish this chapter with a song I heard and sang a few weeks ago at the Evangelical church I attend (and have done so for the past 40 years). We sing many such songs (hymns) and when I sing them, I really mean them – more than I ever have in my long church-going life of nearly 70 years. Here is the hymn (with my probing and honest questions):

Jesus paid it all

(All? Do we really mean *all* when we sing?
Did he actually pay it *all* for us, or just *some*, or maybe just all *potentially*?)

All to him I owe

(Again, all? Do we owe him for a *complete and final* work of salvation – all –
or do we just owe him for *providing a way* to save ourselves by believing?)

Sin had left a crimson stain

He washed it white as snow

(Did he really, actually, wash away my crimson stain caused by sin and self-destruction?
Or did he only *potentially* wash it away, or *act like* he did on the cross,
waiting for me to believe before he actually does any washing?)

I love this hymn and so many others (Amazing Grace, Wonderful Grace of Jesus, The Old Rugged Cross, etc.) and I sing them like I mean them ... because I do, fully! I hope you do too. Read all hymn words carefully!

The Meaning of John 3:16

This is the most famous (and in some ways perhaps the most misunderstood) passage in the Bible. For sure, it presents the Good News about God's love and sending His only Son into the world to save it. But do we read it completely correctly? Or do we "read *into* it" based on what we have been told for so long, repeatedly, about it?

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Introduction

There is no more famous verse in the Bible than John 3:16. And, perhaps, rightly so! In it is the most compact presentation of the "Good News". It tells of God's incredible love for the world that He created, what He did to prove His love by giving His only Son, and what a wonderful result of eternal life that comes about as a result. Here is that verse:



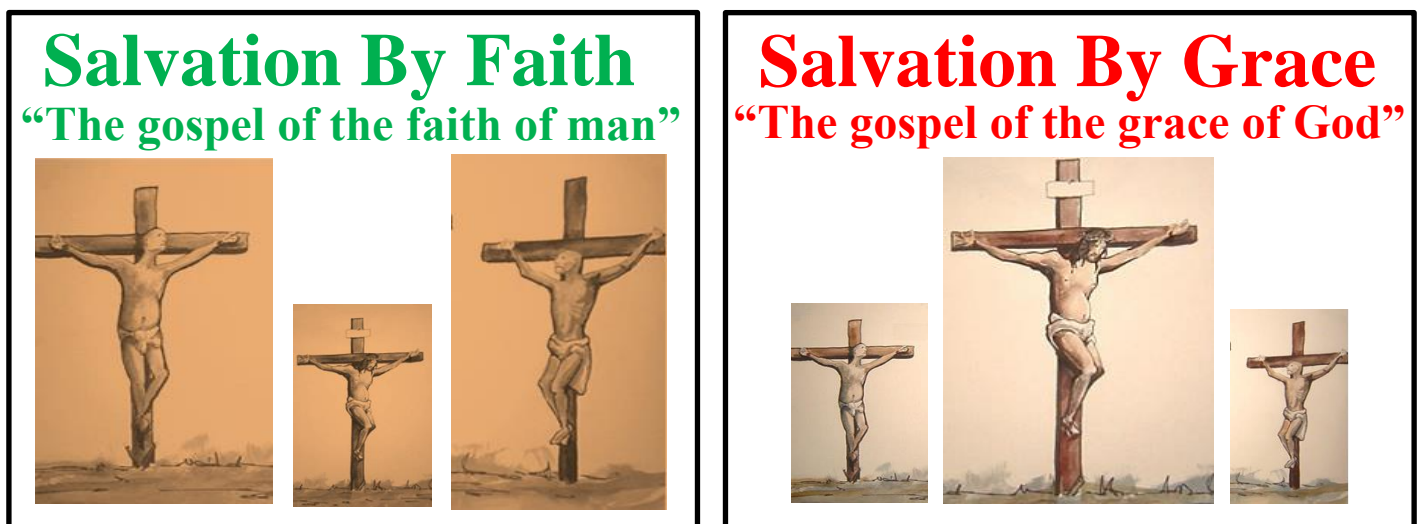
For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

But, there are at least two ways of understanding this verse. One focuses on God, the other on man (humans). The man-focused understanding typically interprets John 3:16 this way: *God loved people so much that He sent His Son to die on the cross and offer everyone a chance to believe, causing them to go to heaven instead of hell when they die.* This view sees God as providing an *opportunity* for anyone to be saved, if they accept it by believing. Here, salvation is determined (ultimately) by the action of each person (by their belief),

and not by God who only made salvation possible by giving His Son. This is a reasonable understanding of this verse and it is held by many Christians today and in the past. People who have been told this interpretation of John 3:16 tend to believe it without question because they have heard it so many times. But in this interpretation, salvation is ultimately determined by the belief of each person and not by the death of Jesus on the cross (though his death made such “saving faith” possible).

The other view of John 3:16, the God-focused understanding, interprets the verse this way: *God loved people so much that He sent His Son to die on the cross and save all humanity so that they can believe, not be destroyed by sin, and live eternally with God.* This view sees God as *actually* saving people and letting them know so they can hear about it, believe, not be destroyed by sin in this life, and live forever with God. Here, salvation is determined (ultimately) by God through the death of Jesus on the cross, and each person who believes escapes destruction in this life. This, too, is a reasonable understanding of this verse and it is also held by many Christians today and in the past. People who have not been told this their whole lives (and have only heard the other view) will tend to reject it, even though it is God alone, by His grace, who does all the saving and gets all the credit for doing so.

On the front cover of a book I am working on titled *The Two Competing Views of the Gospel within Christianity*, I display this contrast:



The contrast could not be more dramatic. On the left (Salvation by Faith), the two thieves (humans) are the focus. What each thief does determines whether or not (ultimately) he will end up in heaven or hell. Jesus only provides an *opportunity* for each thief to believe (and be saved) or not. Thus, the two thieves loom up over Jesus who is incidentally in the middle because it is what each of the thieves do that really matters! But on the right (Salvation by Grace), Jesus looms over the two thieves because it is what he does that determines (ultimately) the salvation of these two thieves (or any other human being).

This is because salvation is by grace alone (not by faith), and humans cannot add to, improve, or even “activate” what God has already done (and what God alone can do) to save. (For more detailed information on salvation by *Faith vs. Grace*, see the previous section titled *The Role of Faith in Salvation*).

So, a good question to ask is: Have we, in the modern-day church, understood this verse correctly? Have we *left out* anything, *added* anything to it, or *misunderstood* it in any way? Perhaps we have, or maybe not. But make no mistake, it is very easy to do any of these three things. And it is done quite often by all of us when we become well-intentioned, but sometime overly-indoctrinated Christians. Our goal should always be to read this verse (and every verse) accurately and not just the way we want to, or the way we have been taught. This does not mean that when we read verses the way we want (and in the way we have been taught) that we are reading them incorrectly! We all read many verses (perhaps most verses) correctly – or *correctly enough* -- in order to obtain the essential meaning.

Both of the above views of John 3:16 are reasonable, respectable, and can legitimately be concluded from reading this verse in *isolation*. But there are a number of things we can do to ensure that we are reading any verse correctly and not adding, subtracting, or changing the meaning intended by the original writer. And this is our goal, isn't it? Do we really want to read anything incorrectly and misunderstand the meaning, no matter how such a particular understanding appeals to us? I hope not.

Three safeguards for obtaining a correct understanding of any verse will be presented below. These will help us understand John 3:16 (or any verse) correctly. The first principle is to *not add or subtract* anything from the verse. Both of these errors (adding and subtracting) are deadly. The second principle is to *understand the meanings* of the words used. The third principle is to *look at the context* of the verses surrounding any verse you want to understand.

1. Do Not Add or Subtract

In my first year at Dallas Theological Seminary, I had Howard Hendricks for my Hermeneutics (Bible Interpretation) class. Hendricks (as most people who have heard him speak can attest) is a master communicator. If you think hearing him on audio, or even seeing him on video is dynamic ... sitting in front of him, just a few feet away in a classroom was overwhelming! There were many times at the end of a lecture that I could not move from my seat for a minute or two -- even though I needed to get to my next class. What he had to say, and how he said it, pierced my mind and my heart. It was often stunning.

For example, on the first day of class, his very first words were: “*If you guys believed just one-tenth of what you claim to believe, you would be frothing at the mouth to tell people about it and not sitting here in this classroom!*” Wait a minute! (I thought to myself). I quit my job, uprooted my family, came all the way from California to Dallas, and paid my exorbitant tuition ... just to listen to you insult me? Then I thought about what he said (a very dangerous thing to do when listening to Howard Hendricks), and realized ... he was right! Why was I here? Did I really believe as much as I claimed? What are my real motive for being here? You see, Hendricks knew why all us young guys were there and that our motives were a mixture of both noble and selfish. After all, he too was a young zealous guy, many years before. But he also knew we needed to be hit smack in the face with reality and get humbled down to our socks, before we could ever really learn anything. He did us all a great (but painful) service that day in September, 1982.

But there was yet another amazing experience in Howard Hendricks’ class (and there were many) that relates very much to this first safeguard of *Do Not Add or Subtract*. One of our early assignments was to look at just *one* verse and make fifty (yes 50!) observations about it! I went home, worked on it, and came up with about 35 observations after exhausting all my mental energy on that one verse. But how, I wondered, could I ever find another 15 observations? So, I got creative (rather sheepishly inside) wanting to complete the assignment and get full credit. I began listing things that were *not* in the verse. I came up with things like: “Nothing mentioned about peanut butter and jelly sandwiches!” Somehow, I came up with my needed fifty observations and went to class the next day, hoping I would not be called upon to account for my rather lame excuse for *fifty observations*. But in class I was rather surprised. I was not way-off in my reach for unusual kinds of observations. It turned out that my idea of *noticing what is not there* was one of Howard’s main points! Man, was I proud of myself even though I did not know what I was doing. Hendricks told us that day, that we need to first observe (and never ignore) what *is there* in a verse. But he added that it is equally important to observe what *is not there*, and to resist the temptation to add something to make the verse say what we want or expect. Accuracy and “staying true to the text” were his keys. I never forgot this lesson and it has served me well for the past 35 years of careful study.

What is in John 3:16

So, what *is there* that we can observe for sure in John 3:16? Here is a list:

1. God loves His world.
2. He gave His Son.
3. It was His only Son.
4. His Son was given as proof of his love.
5. He gave him to benefit those who believe.
6. Everyone is invited to believe.
7. Believers will not perish.

8. Believers will have eternal life.

This is a very good list. It should never be forgotten or forsaken! You can count on these things being true about God and the Good News, concerning the free (unearned) gift of His Son who took away the sin of the world. Never let anyone – Calvinist, Catholic, Universalist, or Arminian – ever take any of these precious truths away or diminish them in any way!

What is *not* in John 3:16

But, being true to the Howard Hendricks' principle of "seeing all that *is* there, without reading-in what is *not* there", here is a list of what *is not there* in John 3:16:

1. God's love does not depend on man's belief.
2. The fate of unbelievers is not revealed.
3. Perish is not defined as "eternal punishment."
4. Belief is not required to avoid being punished.
5. There is no earning or merit associated with believing.

All of these are important to recognize because they are the kinds of things that are typically read-into John 3:16. And this is very easy to do if we have been taught to do so over and over all our lives (as so many have been taught to do). But hearing something repeatedly, even when it makes perfectly good sense, does not make it necessarily true (though it may *feel* true). However, hearing things repeatedly and feeling good about them does not render them false either! And this is the very point I am making – truth is not determined by familiarity or feelings ... but by context, meaning of words, and by not modifying the verse in any way by adding or subtracting from it. And looking carefully at the above list of what is *not* in John 3:16 – if any of these things are added they diminish God's grace in salvation and place the work and determination of salvation on each person in their act of believing! This is important.

Take another look at the two ways of reading John 3:16, as presented in the introduction above:

1. The Man-focused view: *God loved people so much that He sent His Son to die on the cross and offer everyone a chance to believe, causing them to go to heaven instead of hell when they die.*
2. The God-focused view: *God loved people so much that He sent His Son to die on the cross and save all humanity, so that they can believe, not be destroyed by sin, and live eternally with God.*

It is my hope that the difference is clear, and more importantly the *significance* of the difference. One view (Man-centered) is salvation “*by faith through grace*”. The other is God-centered and is salvation “*by grace through faith*”. Paul clearly preached the second view, not the first. (For more detail on the difference between these two, see the section above titled *The Role of Faith in Salvation*.)

2. Understand Word Meanings

The second safeguard for obtaining a correct understanding of any verse is to make sure we understand the meanings of key words. And this must be done in the original language in which the passage was written. In the case of the Gospel of John, the original language in which John wrote his gospel account was Greek (along with all of the New Testament writings). Translators do their best (or, at least we hope they do) to find the best English word (or words) to communicate the meaning of a Greek word being translated. Sometimes they get it wrong, or just something less than perfect. Translation is not an easy of exacting task. So it is always best to go look at what the original word means, not just in the New Testament writings themselves but also what they mean in other writings (in the Greek language) during that same era and culture. I depend on Kittel’s ten-volume set titled *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* to help me understand the meanings of key words. (See the description of Kittel’s work in the section below titled *Book Sources*).

The Meaning of “Perish”

The word “perish” does *not* mean “go to hell forever”. Yet, this is exactly what most Christians believe when they read John 3:16. Why? Partly due to the fact that we have been taught (falsely) by 1500 years of Roman Catholic Church tradition to view every severe word in the New Testament as a reference to eternal punishment. Judgment, condemnation, destroy, and others are also treated this way. But in reality, none of these words imply or require “eternal punishment” at all. They are just severe words that are used to convey God’s severe actions as *corrective judgment* upon the world He so loves and desires to rescue from sin and destruction.

The word perish simply means “to destroy”. It does not mean to utterly destroy (annihilate) or to continually destroy (eternal punishment). And why would we expect this from God even if it did? Does he not desire for all people to be saved? Isn’t this at the very heart of who we know God to be – to rescue, redeem, heal and save those He loves who are lost? Is not the desire to save and bring the best for all His creation overwhelmingly in the Bible? Do not almost all of the Old Testament Prophecy books start out with God’s severe warning, but then ends up in hope of a savior who saves because he wants to?

The Meaning of “Eternal”

The word translated as “eternal” in John 3:16 is the word for “age”, or “indefinite period of time” in the Greek language. It is the word *aionios* (from which we get our English word aeon) and it is *not* the Greek word for “eternal”. However, there is a different word used in the New Testament writings and elsewhere in Greek literature that *does* mean “eternal.” It is *aidios*, and it is not used here in John 3:16. But it is used elsewhere in the New Testament (twice) and was known to the various writers. Only Paul and Jude used this word (once each), and all other writers and speakers (including Jesus) avoided using it. And why? Why would they (including Jesus) avoid using a word that clearly means “eternal”, and instead exclusively use a word that means *age* or *period of time*? Was the Holy Spirit preventing them, or did they have some rational hesitation and caution in using the word “eternal?”

Based on my education in the sciences (engineering), I became convinced that the whole idea of “eternal” is a false one (or an *unsure* one, at best). We really have no idea of what “forever” or “infinity” really means, yet we so confidently speak of God inflicting *never-ending torment* as punishment on those who oppose Him! We don’t even have a clear idea of what time is, or how it works. Time has been found to be experienced at different rates by different observers. A person (or even a clock) traveling at a high velocity (near the speed of light) will experience a different rate of change than and other persons (or clocks) that are at rest in comparison. This has actually been measured in very small differences. But in theory (and there is no reason to doubt the probability of this), travel at the speed of light would result in no passage of time at all! Wow, what does this do to our idea of “eternal”? And what happens when we use zero as a denominator in a simple fraction? Undefined! Infinity! Eternity! Yet we do not know what this means and we flag a computer to be in error if such a fraction is attempted! How then is it possible, that we are so quick to accuse God of “eternal punishment” when we do not really understand what “eternity” means? How do we draw such dogmatic conclusions about Him when it is a concept so obviously avoided by Jesus and almost all other New Testament writers? My sense is that we need to be very careful before we *tag* God with the worst possible thing we can imagine anyone ever doing to anyone (never-ending torment!) – unless, of course, we have clear and convincing proof (from the Bible, or elsewhere) supporting this. But we do not seem to have such evidence ... at least, I have not seen it – not clear and convincing – just a bunch of isolated and stretched “proof texts!”

In John 3:16, the adjective form of *aion* (age) is used (*aionios*). Adjectives are nouns used to modify (say something about) other words. In John 3:16 *aionios* is used to say something about “life”. Since the word *aionios* literally means “indefinite time-period”, John is saying “indefinite time-period life”! But since most translators logically believe that the life we receive from God through the death of Jesus never ends, they translate

aidios as “eternal.” But just how accurate is this? Does it mislead the reader and cause him or her to draw a theological conclusion that is not literally in the text of the verse (at least not in the Greek language in which it was originally written)? Some translators, (like Young’s Literal Translation), while exercising great care and respect for the Bible, translates this phrase as “age-during life”. This is a much more accurate and honest (and respectful of the Bible) translation. But it does not fit the preconceived theological narrative that has been for centuries imposed on John 3:16 (and elsewhere) by Roman Catholic Church tradition, and so it is not used. This is a tragedy and leads people to believe something different than John was communicating.

When “eternal life” is falsely used in close proximity to “perish” (a word looked at previously) readers falsely assume that perishing (like life) must also be eternal. What a horrible thing to tag the loving God of the universe with, based on such poor evidence! Can you think of anything worse than to accuse God of tormenting unbelievers forever, as pure retribution, with no corrective or restoring purpose whatsoever? And this is exactly what is concluded by most Christians today, thinking (and being told) that this is some kind of absolute truth about God. Shameful! (For more detailed information on the meaning of the words “age” and “eternal” in the New Testament, see the book *Terms for Eternity: Aiônios and Aïdios in Classical and Christian Texts* by Ilaria Ramelli in the *Book Sources* section near the end of this booklet. This is a very scholarly work. For a layman’s level of the use of these words, see *The Greek Word Aion-aionios* by J. W. (John Wesley) Hanson in the same *Book Sources* section.)

3. Look at the Context

The third safeguard for obtaining a correct understanding of any verse is looking at the context of the passage under consideration. Ignoring context (surrounding passages) is one of the greatest causes of error when people read the Bible and try to understand it. And, it is quite amazing to see how quickly and easily people ignore this important principle as they allow bias, prejudice, ego, and influential upbringing to shove context considerations right out of the picture in order to maintain all existing beliefs! This does not mean, however that any pre-existing beliefs are wrong! In fact, for many people, most of their existing beliefs are full of great and wonderful truths that define their faith. We get ourselves into trouble in discovering the intended meaning of a writer only when such ungrounded beliefs take precedent over context, correct word meanings, resting the temptation to add or subtract ideas, and seeking a good common-sense reading using our rational mind that God has given us.

The Context of John Chapter 3

Any time we read anything -- *context* is essential! Nothing is written in a vacuum. So, we must look at all that is written *before* and *after* to understand the writer's true intention. If, for example, you received a "Dear John" (or Dear Jane) letter, you could (and may even want to) pick out certain favorable phrases in the letter to make it say what you want. But in doing so you would miss the true intent of the writer ... that you have been dumped! Though it might be your preference to "fool yourself" in this matter, doing so will certainly not render the truth of the letter to you. The same is true of all passages in the New Testament. We may very well be satisfied reading them as we want to (or, perhaps, as we've been taught), but if we want to know the intent and true meaning of the writer, we must look at the *context* of his or her own words.

In the case of John 3:16 there is plenty of helpful information that comes *before* and *after* this one well-known verse. John starts chapter 3 discussing what it means to be "born again". Then he builds a basis for John 3:16 by relating an event from ancient Israel of "lifting up a bronze snake on a pole" to bring healing (a symbol of modern medicine to this day!) Then after John 3:16, John discusses condemnation and judgement! Wow, all of this might actually be important context to consider in order to understand the meaning of John 3:16, even if it results in a different understanding than what we expected!

What it Means to be "Born Again" (verses 1-13)

John begins chapter 3 by explaining what it means to be "born again".

There was a man named Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leader who was a Pharisee. After dark one evening, he came to speak with Jesus. "Rabbi," he said, "we all know that God has sent you to teach us. Your miraculous signs are evidence that God is with you." Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God." "What do you mean?" exclaimed Nicodemus. "How can an old man go back into his mother's womb and be born again?" Jesus replied, "I assure you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life. So don't be surprised when I say, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it wants. Just as you can hear the wind but can't tell where it comes from or where it is going, so you can't explain how people are born of the Spirit." "How are these things possible?" Nicodemus asked. Jesus replied, "You are a respected Jewish teacher, and yet you don't understand these things? I assure you, we tell you what we know and have seen, and yet you won't believe our testimony. But if you don't believe me when I tell you about earthly things, how can you possibly believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ever gone to heaven and returned. But the Son of Man has come down from heaven.

Staying true to the *Howard Hendricks' principle* of "observing what *is* there, and not making it say what is *not* there", some good and honest observations are in order.

1. A person must be "born again" to see the kingdom of God.
2. Nicodemus mistakenly assumed Jesus was referring to physical birth.

3. Jesus says he is talking about spiritual birth, not physical
4. The Holy Spirit causes spiritual birth.
5. Being “born again” is as mysterious and unexplainable as the wind blowing.
6. If *earthly things* are not understood, *heavenly things* will not be either.
7. No one has gone into heaven and returned.
8. The son of man has come down from heaven.

The main take-away from the above list is that being “born again” is not something we do! It does not depend on our works or even our faith. It depends completely on God, through the Holy Spirit who brings about spiritual birth in us! Peter put it this way in his first letter:

All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is by his great mercy that we have been born again, because God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. (1Peter 1:3).

Peter bases being “born again” on both God’s mercy and the resurrection of Jesus. Then later in his letter he says that being born again is based on the “living word of God” (which is *Jesus*, according to the beginning of both John’s gospel account and his first letter).

For you have been born again, but not to a life that will quickly end. Your new life will last forever because it comes from the eternal, living word of God. (1Peter 1:23).

So, before John gets to 3:16, he begins his chapter by revealing that being “born again” is not based on anything we do or believe, but instead on God through the unpredictable work of the Holy Spirit. This is clearly a God-centered view of salvation.

The Bronze Snake on a Pole (verses 14-15)

But John continues quoting Jesus and relates an event in ancient Israel about lifting up a bronze snake on a pole to bring healing. This is briefly recorded in the Old Testament book of Numbers. Here is that passage beginning in verse 4:

Then the people of Israel set out from Mount Hor, taking the road to the Red Sea to go around the land of Edom. But the people grew impatient with the long journey, and they began to speak against God and Moses. “Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die here in the wilderness?” they complained. “There is nothing to eat here and nothing to drink. And we hate this horrible manna!” So the Lord sent poisonous snakes among the people, and many were bitten and died. Then the people came to Moses and cried out, “We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take away the snakes.” So, Moses prayed for the people. Then the Lord told him, “Make a replica of a poisonous snake and attach it to a pole. All who are bitten will live if they simply look at it!” So Moses made a snake out of bronze and attached it to a pole. Then anyone who was bitten by a snake could look at the bronze snake and be healed!

Several things must be understood about this ancient event in order to understand how John 3:15 introduces John 3:16. First, God sent snakes to afflict the Israelites who were complaining about their miserable conditions. Their complaining is humanly understandable, and I would probably have complained right along with them. But complaining is not usually the best way to respond. It solves nothing and puts us in a paralyzing, self-centered mindset. And so, God in his love, acting in the best interest of stubborn people (who, more often than not, require severe corrective judgment in order to move on to a place where a solution can be understood and implemented), sent snakes to afflict them and get their attention. As always, God did not afflict them in retaliation, revenge, or in pure retribution with no corrective and healing purpose whatsoever. And, it seemed to have worked. The Israelites repented, admitted their error, and asked for help from God. And so, as always, God provided a solution to heal them by having Moses lift up a bronze snake on a pole for all to look at, believe in God provision (represented by the bronze snake), and be healed by Him. (And this *snake on a pole* is a symbol of modern medicine to this day!)

But why did God have Moses lift-up a replica of the very thing that was judgment on them for their complaining, sinning, and unbelief? Because God's judgment, even in the form of snakes that bring deathly bites, is always *corrective* judgment! How could it not be? Can the God of the universe, who loves his whole world that He created in His very own likeness, do anything less? They needed to look at what God provided in judgment and corrective healing, and then believe in Him turning away from their self-centered focus, anger, and unbelief. This is how healing starts, but it is not the *act of believing* that heals ... God does! It is the object of belief – God himself – that heals, not what they do. But looking at the lifted-up snake was required to receive the healing. Those who did not believe, died ... perished.

And so, Jesus in verses 14 and 15 says the following (in preparation for verse 16):

And as Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life.

The parallel could not be clearer with the use of “as ... so ...” to relate the two verses. Just as Moses did what he did with the snake on the pole, so God did with Jesus on the cross. Both were lifted-up; both were instruments of loving, corrective, healing judgment by God; and both were looked upon in belief to receive healing!

God So Loved His World (verse 16)

Now, John 3:16 can be seen in the light of all that came before it. (In the next section it will be seen in light of all that comes after it!) Here is John 3:16, again:

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.

So, in light of (1) what *is there* and what is *not there* in John 3:16, (2) the *meanings* of the words perish and eternal, and (3) the *context* of what come before this verse (“born again” and the bronze snake), our options in how to interpret John 3:16 begin to narrow. But this is good! This means that interpretation is being taken out of the hands of our background, self-interests, habitual thinking, ego, and feelings. Instead, the interpretation is placed into the very capable and objective hands of considering context, understanding words, and the discipline of letting a verse say all that it does ... but no more! But there are still two more important things to consider: (1) What comes *after* John 3:16, and (2) what is the *context* of the whole New Testament writings, in which this verse is found.

Judgment and Condemnation (verses 17-21)

When it comes to *context*, John 3:17 is also of great help. It is interesting that the traditional Christian Church has selected John 3:16 to be the great summary of the Good News, and not John 3:17 (which is just as important if not more so) or John 3:16 and 3:17 together (which make a more complete presentation! And why not? Perhaps getting *too much context* will ruin the already accepted narrative! If the generally accepted interpretation of John 3:16 is that the Good News is no more than a kind and gracious offer on the part of God, to give people a way (by believing in Jesus) to alleviate themselves from going to hell forever – how does all this context, word meanings and restraint in reading this verse help? It may not. In fact, it may very well go against the intended meaning of the writer (John) and leave us with a Good News that is not as good, powerful, or successful as it really is. Maybe the Good News is a lot more than just a kind and gracious offer. Maybe the true Good News what God has *already* done, fully, to save all of humanity through Jesus, who joined the human race as its “new Adam”, and as a new and better representative. Maybe the true Good News is something to be announced to all the world so all people, everywhere, can hear and believe and not be destroyed by sin!

John continues in verses 17-21 to discuss judgment and condemnation. And this is exactly what is missing in verse 16 that most people (by traditional influence) read-into it. Here are verses 17-21:.

God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him. “There is no judgment against anyone who believes in him. But anyone who does not believe in him has already been judged for not believing in God’s one and only Son. And the judgment is based on this fact: God’s light came into the world, but people loved the darkness more than the light, for their actions were evil. All who do evil hate the light and refuse to go near it for fear their sins will be exposed. But those who do what is right come to the light so others can see that they are doing what God wants.”

John 3:17 goes on after John 3:16 and clearly states that Jesus' purpose in coming to this world was to *save* it and not to *judge* it! Well, did he succeed? Or did he come just to *try* to save the world? Did he come and die only to render all people *savable*, waiting for each person to save his or her self by believing? Is this really how salvation works? Many Christians believe this! Or, did Jesus come to *actually and fully* save the world that he so loves, and not fail (even in the slightest degree) to accomplish his mission? (See the section in this booklet titled *What Jesus Did and for Whom* for all the passages in the New Testament on the atoning work of Jesus).

But John goes on and writes that there is no judgment against anyone who believes in Jesus, but that anyone who does *not* believe has already been judged! Perhaps this is the condemning judgement so many seek in John 3:16, even though they must read such judgment into that verse in order to find it there! But how could John so quickly forget what he just wrote in the previous verse that God did not send Jesus into the world to judge it? Ah... context to the rescue! John is clearly not talking about "condemning judgment" against those who do not believe. Instead, he is talking about correctly assessing the condition of humanity – an "assessing judgment". Look at what John writes immediately after saying that all who do not believe are already judged:

And the judgment is based on this fact: God's light came into the world, but people loved the darkness more than the light, for their actions were evil.

Wow, John explains what he means by "judgment"! Man oh man, ya gotta love context when it comes to getting the intended meaning of the writer (unless, of course the *intended* meaning is not desired more some *preferred* meaning). God's judgment is an assessment that "people love darkness more than light." And, of course, darkness and light are figurative here, meaning "truth" (light) and a lack of it (darkness). For the meaning of *light* and *darkness*, see the introduction of both John's gospel and his first letter.

A Perspective on John the Baptist (verses 22-36)

John closes out chapter 3 (verses 22-36) with a perspective on John the Baptist (who was a different John).

Then Jesus and his disciples left Jerusalem and went into the Judean countryside. Jesus spent some time with them there, baptizing people. At this time John the Baptist was baptizing at Aenon, near Salim, because there was plenty of water there; and people kept coming to him for baptism. (This was before John was thrown into prison.) A debate broke out between John's disciples and a certain Jew[i] over ceremonial cleansing. So John's disciples came to him and said, "Rabbi, the man you met on the other side of the Jordan River, the one you identified as the Messiah, is also baptizing people. And everybody is going to him instead of coming to us." John replied, "No one can receive anything unless God gives it from heaven. You yourselves know how plainly I told you, 'I am not the Messiah. I am only here to prepare the way for him.' It is the bridegroom who marries the bride, and the bridegroom's friend is simply glad to stand with him and hear his vows. Therefore, I am filled with joy at his success. He must become

greater and greater, and I must become less and less. “He has come from above and is greater than anyone else. We are of the earth, and we speak of earthly things, but he has come from heaven and is greater than anyone else. He testifies about what he has seen and heard, but how few believe what he tells them! Anyone who accepts his testimony can affirm that God is true. For he is sent by God. He speaks God’s words, for God gives him the Spirit without limit. The Father loves his Son and has put everything into his hands. And anyone who believes in God’s Son has eternal life. Anyone who doesn’t obey the Son will never experience eternal life but remains under God’s angry judgment.”

Verse 36 needs special explanation. Read it carefully:

And anyone who believes in God’s Son has eternal life. Anyone who doesn’t obey the Son will never experience eternal life but remains under God’s angry judgment.”

First, what can we observe in verse 36 (what is *there*)? (1) Those who *believe* have eternal life. (2) Those who do *not obey* do not experience eternal life. (3) Those who do *not obey* remain under God’s angry judgment. (4) The contrast/comparison is not between believers and unbelievers, but between those who *believe* and those who do *not obey*!

But also, what is *not there*? (1.) The word translated as “eternal” is actually the word “age” (indefinite time period) in the original Greek text, so it is unlikely to mean “eternal” and more likely refers to the “age to come”. (See the explanation above of the meaning of the word “eternal” in Greek). (2.) It does not say that unbelievers fail to experience eternal life, but instead those who *disobey*! (3.) The consequence for disobeying is not eternal punishment but God’s angry judgment. From all of this it is very hard to conclude that unbelievers go to hell forever. We must read something into the text to conclude this. In other words, there is not clear and convincing evidence here (or anywhere in chapter 3) that God will send unbelievers to hell forever.

The Context of the Whole Bible

Reading the Bible (or any other book) in light of its own context – in other words, looking at all that comes *before* and *after* any passage – forces us to narrow down our scope of interpretation (what we think it means) to a much closer understanding of what the writer intended to communicate. And this is our ultimate goal, isn’t it? If not, then we are just using the passage for our own selfish agenda.

And, the context of any passage goes far beyond just the verse that precede and follow it (though this is indeed the most important context). The whole book in which a passage is found is also context – just a greater one. Just as John 3:16 must be read in the full context of chapter three, so also chapter three must be read in the full context of the whole Gospel of John. But even further, the John’s Gospel must be read in the full context of all the other books that John wrote (like his three letters and his Revelation of Jesus). And there is one more important context to consider, and that is how John’s writings fit into the full context

of all the New Testament writings (assuming they have a connection with each other in content and purpose).

It is this full context of the New Testament writings (and even the whole Bible) that need to be looked at as a final safeguard in attempting to understand what John intended when he penned John 3:16. And, what is the most striking thing we see in the full context of the whole Bible when it comes to understanding John 3:16? Is it not that “God is Love” and that He is “rich in Mercy”, forgiving, patient, kind, holy and just (in the true sense of these words), and not desiring that anyone perish? Isn’t it true that the character and moral excellence of God throughout all of the Bible is not in doubt? Does not all of the Old Testament accounts of God’s dealings with Israel demonstrate His grace, forgiveness, never-ending cycles of taking them back after sinning, and never giving up on them in the book of Judges and elsewhere? Are not all of the prophetic books clear and consistent presentations of God’s anger concerning Israel’s sin, but also always ending in hope that they will be redeemed by a Messiah-Savior who would someday come? With all of this overwhelming evidence of the greatness of God and his love for humanity, how can we conclude in John 3:16 (that focuses on how much God loves His world and sent His Son to save it), that He would ever *eternally torment* anyone within the humanity that he so dearly loves and came to save?

Conclusions

In order to understand the meaning of John 3:16 we must disciple ourselves to do several things. First, we must look honestly at this verse and let it say all that it does ... but no more than that. But we must also understand the meanings of key words as they exist in their original language and setting (in this case, Greek). And, finally, we must read John 3:16 in its own chapter, book, and overall context of the whole New Testament writings and the Bible. All of these things are safeguards and keys if we really want to understand the intent of the writer (in this case, John). To ignore this and just accept what we have been taught (just because we have been taught it) will not deliver the truth to us. But, if we engage these wonderful safeguards, seek the correct meaning of the text at all cost, and find that what we have always been taught is true – we are even more confident of what we believe. But ... if in this process, we find our long-held conclusions to be wrong, and as a result we change what we believe – then we are so much better off, even though we had to go through the painful process of changing! No one likes to change, but what we gain from doing so (when we discover we were wrong) is well worth the struggle to get there.

In the case of John 3:16, to be able to see the love of God and His salvation of the world through Jesus as something that is a free gift of His grace, unearned by any of us

whatsoever is beyond mere words. The peace, joy, and confident trust in a God who cannot (and does not) fail, is overwhelming and wonderful. If true, such knowledge will for sure forever change anyone's life. It sure did change mine!

Take one more look at the two ways of reading John 3:16, as presented in the introduction above:

1. The Man-focused view: *God loved people so much that He sent His Son to die on the cross and offer everyone a chance to believe, causing them to go to heaven instead of hell when they die.*
2. The God-focused view: *God loved people so much that He sent His Son to die on the cross and save all humanity so that they can believe, not be destroyed by sin, and live eternally with God.*

It is my hope that the difference is clear, and more importantly the *significance* of the difference. One view (man-centered) is “salvation *by* faith *through* grace”. The other is God-centered and is “salvation *by* grace *through* faith”. Paul clearly preached the second view, not the first. Remember, John 3:16 is famous for good reason. It is, perhaps, the best presentation of the Good News message! But keep the good news “good”, and keep it squarely based on the *infinite grace of God* and not the *finite faith of man*.

Finally, in the picture below, John 3:16 is like a house that contains the unconditional love of God, through Jesus who He sent to save the world. The people on the left side are pushing a flimsy bamboo foundation of the *Faith of Man* under the house, while also pushing out the solid brick foundation of the *Grace of God*. And this seems to be what has happened to John 3:16 (and the “Gospel of Grace”) over the past 1500 years -- after the dominating influence of Augustine and Roman Catholic Church tradition.



Holy Justice!

Most Christians believe that the Holiness and Justice of God require him to send the majority of humanity into never-ending torment and agony as punishment for unbelief and/or unrepented sin. But is this true? Or, does holiness and justice mean something quite different (and much better) than the common understanding of these words?

Introduction

The strangest thing happens whenever I tell Christians that Jesus has *already* saved the world: rejection, recoil, pride, fear, anger, scoffing, pity and more. You would think I had just told them that God was some kind of monster that does the worst possible thing that could ever be done to anyone! Oh, wait, that is what many Christians believe -- that God will send a majority of humanity to never ending agony and suffering as a result of their unbelief and unrepented sin! Yet When they hear the greatest “good news” they could ever hear possibly hear -- that God has saved his world (everyone) through Jesus dying on the cross to take away sin -- they immediately reject it as if something completely contrary to the love, grace, mercy and moral excellence of God had been uttered!

Why? Why do Christians usually respond this way, instinctively? Why do they not say, “Wow, that is great news! I don't believe it, but I sure would like to look into this and see if it is true.” Instead there is immediate rejection, often accompanied by anger, fear, scoffing, insecurity, and a desire to flee! Why is there not, instead, a desire to “examine everything carefully” as Paul so clearly exhorted us to do? Why is there not an instinctive desire to be noble, like the Bereans in the book of Acts, who looked into what they were taught to make sure it was true? Why instead do they feel threatened and prefer to assume what they believe is automatically true and cannot be wrong?

What do they possibly gain by doing this? Does rejecting assuming and fleeing increase their confidence in what they believe? Or is it a purely emotional reaction based in fear, anger, and prejudice? What do they possibly have to lose by looking into something and possibly finding out they are wrong, need to change, and will no longer be wrong! Or, perhaps they will find out, with even greater certainty, just how *right* they are? How can they possibly lose by doing what Paul exhorts us all to do when presented with new information -- especially if it is clearly positive information and presents God as a totally good and loving Creator who never fails in what He sets out to do (save the world!)? Yet, sadly, this is not the instinctive response of most Christians.

The first reason I usually hear as to why Christians reject the idea of God saving everyone is that he is “holy and just”, and that He must punish sin. Well, he is for sure holy and just, but it is possible that most Christians have some wrong thinking and misunderstandings about what holiness and justice really mean?

The Holiness of God

The holiness of God is indeed very important. Many Christians correctly quote Isaiah who wrote, “Holy, holy, holy, is our Lord God almighty.” And indeed he is! Repeating it three times makes it all the more significant. But what does “holy” mean? It does *not* mean “spooky” (as many people think), rendering God to be the equivalent of the image in The Wizard of Oz where Dorothy and her friends are shaking in fear as smoke and fire arise from an angry face that projects a stern and loud voice intended to scare and subdue. Sadly, this is



exactly the view of God that many Christians have, but it is not what “holy” means.



The word holy simply means “to set apart”, or to make something special and altogether different from other things. And this is what God is. He is holy in that he is totally set apart from evil, wrongdoing, injustice and anything else that would render God less than the perfect being of highest moral excellence! God cannot lie, He

cannot deceive or even tempt someone to do evil. He is good and always good, all the time, and has *only* a good purpose in all that he does.

A few years ago I visited a church in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where they opened and closed their service with, “God is good all the time; All the time God is good.” They are very wise to remind themselves of this every week. The goodness of God is of extreme importance because if he is not good all the time, in everything he does, then he is not *wholly* “set apart” from all evil and wrongdoing either. God’s goodness and holiness *requires* him to save, redeem, restore, reconcile and heal all people who he created to be very much like Himself. How could he not? He made the world and all people in it, but He also made us able to fall into sin by granting us the wonderful (but very dangerous) gift of free choice. God is responsible for who we are, what we are, and what happens to us -- especially when we have so great a need as desperately lost creatures so loved by our Creator! God is not free to “save, or not save”! He *must* save, simply because he is a *savior*. Saviors save -- that’s what they do! They do not stand back and watch a desperately drowning person perish and then blame it on them for not knowing how to swim, especially if they're drowning as a result of the savior allowing them to be there drowning.

The Justice of God

Not only is God *holy*, but he is also *just*. But what does it mean to be “just”? Is it possible that we have misunderstood God’s “justice”, just as we also misunderstood His holiness? Most people think of justice is “getting back at someone” when they have wrong us. And to some degree this is a form of justice because it is an attempt to make things right. This kind of justice is about the best we can do as humans to bring about justice. But does this ever really make things right, which is what justice really means? No, it does not. It just makes us feel better and it is better than doing nothing. True, justice God’s kind of justice, is making things completely and permanently right.

If someone committed a horrible crime against you or one of your love ones, what would *ultimately* justice be? What would you want done that would satisfy you the most (in the sense of *ultimate* justice)? Would it be to lock him up and throw away the key? Would it be to take his life since he took the life of one of my loved ones? That would be better than nothing and it would give you *some* sense of justice. But in the end things are still not made right. But what if this horrible person who committed this horrible crime became fully repentant and was sorry to the point of tears and love for you and your family? What if he became a close and trusted friend that would do anything for you the rest of his life? Wouldn’t this be *ultimate* justice if you could somehow bring it about?

Would this not also be ultimate justice on God’s part? Would we not expect God also to bring this kind of ultimate justice -- the kind that actually makes things right and does not just keep things wrong as pure revenge and retribution? Would not full and complete restoration of all sinners back with God be the ultimate justice and the ultimate making things right? Of course! How could it ever be anything less? How is it that Christians (of all people) have come to believe that tormenting people in hell forever in never-ending agony could ever achieve true, complete and ultimate justice? How could doing this ever make things right? The truth is that it never can! Things just stay wrong.

Conclusion

Many Christians immediately and forcefully reject the idea that Jesus has already saved the world through his birth, death and resurrection. It certainly is not a ridiculous idea, nor is it something inconsistent with the high moral character of God. Salvation of all humanity is not beyond God’s ability as One who repeatedly presents himself as a savior, redeemer, restorer, reconciler and healer. Is it impossible for God to save everyone? Is it not clear in the Bible that he “desires everyone to be saved” and “does not want anyone to perish”? Is there anything in God that prevents him from saving everyone? Is he fully able to do so? Is this something too difficult for him? And when we add the fact that we cannot save ourselves to the previous facts that God *wants* to save us and is *able* to save ... how is it possible for all people to not be saved? What would be the reason? Let me restate this

important idea: If God *wants* everyone to be saved, is fully *able* to save everyone, and he is the *only one who can* save anyone ... then how is it possible that all humanity is not saved? What would be the reason? He *wants* to, He is *able* to do so, and only he can. So why would we not expect God to save everyone? Is this so unreasonable an idea that we must automatically reject it, simply because we have been told to do so all our lives? His *holiness* and *justice* certainly do not prevent this!

For a complete exposition of what Justice means, see the section later in this booklet titled *George MacDonald's View of Justice*.

George MacDonald's View of Justice

George MacDonald was CS Lewis' mentor. In this "unspoken sermon" he correctly identifies *justice* as "making things right." But he goes on and logically concludes that God's justice must be *ultimate* justice, and that ultimate justice must be God making things ultimately right.

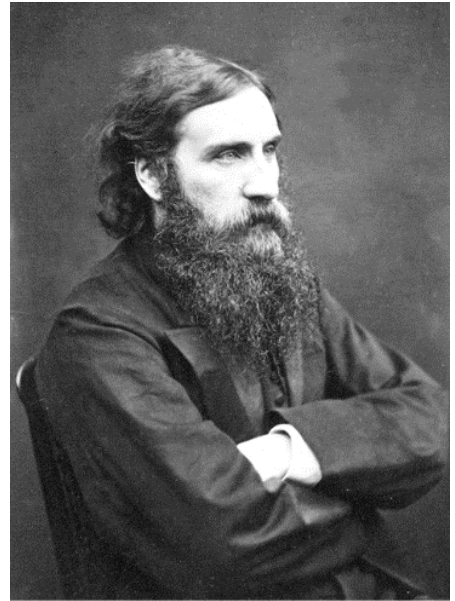
George MacDonald had an impressive list of people he influenced. Wikipedia has this to say about George MacDonald:

George MacDonald (10 December 1824 – 18 September 1905) was a Scottish author, poet and Christian minister. He was a pioneering figure in the field of fantasy literature and the mentor of fellow writer Lewis Carroll. His writings have been cited as a major literary influence by many notable authors, including W. H. Auden, C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Walter de la Mare, E. Nesbit, and Madeleine L'Engle.

C. S. Lewis wrote that he regarded MacDonald as his "master": "Picking up a copy of Phantastes one day at a train-station bookstall, I began to read. A few hours later", said Lewis, "I knew that I had crossed a great frontier." G. K. Chesterton cited The Princess and the Goblin as a book that had "made a difference to my whole existence." Elizabeth Yates wrote of Sir Gibbie, "It moved me the way books did when, as a child, the great gates of literature began to open and first encounters with noble thoughts and utterances were unspeakably thrilling."

Even Mark Twain, who initially disliked MacDonald, became friends with him, and there is some evidence that Twain was influenced by him. The Christian author Oswald Chambers wrote in his "Christian Disciplines" that "it is a striking indication of the trend and shallowness of the modern reading public that George MacDonald's books have been so neglected."

In addition to his fairy tales, MacDonald wrote several works on Christian apologetics.



George MacDonald

MacDonald has an impressive list of lifetime publications (which demonstrates why he was so influential on CS Lewis who was also a writer):

Fantasy

- Phantastes: A Fairie Romance for Men and Women (1858)
- "Cross Purposes" (1862)
- The Portent: A Story of the Inner Vision of the Highlanders, Commonly Called "The Second Sight" (1864)
- Dealings with the Fairies (1867), containing "The Golden Key", "The Light Princess", "The Shadows", and other short stories
- At the Back of the North Wind (1871)
- Works of Fancy and Imagination (1871), including Within and Without, "Cross Purposes", "The Light Princess", "The Golden Key"
- The Princess and the Goblin (1872)

- The Wise Woman: A Parable (1875) (Published also as "The Lost Princess: A Double Story"; or as "A Double Story".)
- The Gifts of the Child Christ and Other Tales (1882; republished as Stephen Archer and Other Tales)
- The Day Boy and the Night Girl (1882)
- The Princess and Curdie (1883), a sequel to The Princess and the Goblin
- Lilith: A Romance (1895)

Fiction

- David Elginbrod (1863; republished in edited form as The Tutor's First Love), originally published in three volumes

- Adela Cathcart (1864); contains many fantasy stories told by the characters within the larger story, including "The Light Princess", "The Shadows", etc.
- Alec Forbes of Howglen (1865; edited by Michael Phillips and republished as *The Maiden's Bequest*;
- Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood (1867)
- Guild Court: A London Story (1868; republished in edited form as *The Prodigal Apprentice*)
- Robert Falconer (1868; republished in edited form as *The Musician's Quest*)
- The Seaboard Parish (1869), a sequel to *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood*
- Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood (republished in edited form as *The Boyhood of Ranald Bannerman*) (1871)
- Wilfrid Cumbermede (1871)
- The Vicar's Daughter (1871), a sequel to *Annals of a Quiet Neighborhood and The Seaboard Parish*
- The History of Gutta Percha Willie, the Working Genius (1873; republished in edited form as *The Genius of Willie MacMichael*),
- Malcolm (1875)
- St. George and St. Michael (1876; edited by Dan Hamilton and republished as *The Last Castle*)
- Thomas Wingfold, Curate (1876; republished in edited form as *The Curate's Awakening*)
- The Marquis of Lossie (1877; republished in edited form as *The Marquis' Secret*), the second book of *Malcolm*
- Sir Gibbie (1879): *Sir Gibbie*, Volume 1. London: Hurst and Blackett. 1879. With simultaneous publication of Vol. 2 and Vol. 3, each of ca. 300 pages.
- Paul Faber, Surgeon (1879; republished in edited form as *The Lady's Confession*), sequel to *Thomas Wingfold, Curate*
- Mary Marston (1881; republished in edited form as *A Daughter's Devotion and The Shopkeeper's Daughter*)
- Warlock o' Glenwarlock (1881; republished in edited form as *Castle Warlock and The Laird's Inheritance*)
- Weighed and Wanting (1882; republished in edited form as *A Gentlewoman's Choice*)
- Donal Grant (1883; republished in edited form as *The Shepherd's Castle*), a sequel to *Sir Gibbie*
- What's Mine's Mine (1886; republished in edited form as *The Highlander's Last Song*)
- Home Again: A Tale (1887; republished in edited form as *The Poet's Homecoming*)
- The Elect Lady (1888; republished in edited form as *The Landlady's Master*)
- A Rough Shaking (1891; republished in edited form as *The Wanderings of Clare Skymer*)
- There and Back (1891; republished in edited form as *The Baron's Apprenticeship*).

- The Flight of the Shadow (1891)
- Heather and Snow (1893; republished in edited form as *The Peasant Girl's Dream*)
- Salted with Fire (1896; republished in edited form as *The Minister's Restoration*)
- Far Above Rubies (1898)

Poetry

- Twelve of the Spiritual Songs of Novalis (1851), privately printed translation of the poetry of Novalis
- Within and Without: A Dramatic Poem (1855)
- Poems. Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, & Roberts. 1857. Retrieved 15 March 2017.
- "A Hidden Life" and Other Poems (1864)
- "The Disciple" and Other Poems (1867)
- Exotics: A Translation of the Spiritual Songs of Novalis, the Hymn-book of Luther, and Other Poems (1876)
- Dramatic and Miscellaneous Poems (1876)
- Diary of an Old Soul (1880)
- A Book of Strife, in the Form of the Diary of an Old Soul (1880), privately printed
- The Threefold Cord: Poems by Three Friends (1883), privately printed.
- Poems. New York: E. P. Dutton. 1887. Retrieved 3-15-2017.
- The Poetical Works of George MacDonald, 2 Vols (1893)
- Scotch Songs and Ballads (1893)
- Rampolli: Growths from a Long-planted Root (1897)

Nonfiction

- Unspoken Sermons (1867)
- England's Antiphon (1868, 1874)
- The Miracles of Our Lord (1870)
- Cheerful Words from the Writing of George MacDonald (1880), compiled by E. E. Brown
- Orts: Chiefly Papers on the Imagination, and on Shakespeare (1882)
- "Preface" (1884) to *Letters from Hell* (1866) by Valdemar Adolph Thisted
- The Tragedie of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark: A Study With the Text of the Folio of 1623 (1885)
- Unspoken Sermons, Second Series (1885)
- Unspoken Sermons, Third Series (1889)
- A Cabinet of Gems, Cut and Polished by Sir Philip Sidney; Now, for the More Radiance, Presented Without Their Setting by George MacDonald (1891)
- The Hope of the Gospel (1892)
- A Dish of Orts (1893)
- Beautiful Thoughts from George MacDonald (1894), compiled by Elizabeth Dougall

One of his publications was “Unspoken Sermons” (under *Non-fiction* above), and one of his sermons was titled “Justice.” In this written sermon, MacDonald spells out (in no uncertain terms) what *justice* is ... and more importantly, what *ultimate justice* is, especially in light of God eventually bringing about such ultimate justice. I have provided only the first part of his sermon which I hope you will find interesting and helpful. I have underlined key thoughts and added some section titles in **bold** to help break up the sermon into readable sections. These section titles are *not* part of MacDonald’s sermon! You can download the complete sermon at the following link: (http://www.amazon.com/Unspoken-Sermons-I-II/dp/1612035272/ref=sr_1_6?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1420842799&sr=1-6&keywords=george+macdonald+books)

Justice

(From George MacDonald's "Unspoken Sermons", with key passages underlined)

And to you, O Lord, belongs unfailing love; for you give to everyone according to what he has done. -- Ps 62:12

Introduction

Some translations say "kindness" and others "goodness", but I don't think there's any dispute as to the underlying meaning of the phrase which in this translation, is "unfailing love". Most Christians, however, following what they've heard and been taught, would see in this verse something different to what they're used to seeing. In order for the psalm to fit with what they understand, the verse would need to be changed to say "And to you, O Lord, belongs justice; for you give to everyone according to what he has done. In and of itself, this passage is quite remarkable. But at present, I won't clarify exactly why I've chosen this text for the sermon that follows. It goes without saying that I don't intend to use it as a basis for logical persuasion.

Let's try to see clearly what we mean when we use the word *justice*, and whether what we mean is true – especially in relation to God. Let's come closer to knowing what we should understand by justice - that is, God's justice - for God's justice is the living and active justice, and it's this justice of God which makes it possible for us to have the idea of justice in our hearts and minds. Because God is just, we too have the capability to know what justice is. It's because God is just that we have the idea of justice so deeply rooted within us.

What do we normally mean by *justice*? Don't we mean the carrying out of the law, the application of the penalty assigned to a crime? And when we think of a just judge, we mean a person who administers the law without any prejudice, without any favor for or against someone. And where the person is guilty, a just judge will punish the person to the extent the law allows, but certainly no more. Yet even here, justice may not have been done. It may be that the law itself is an unjust law, or perhaps that the judge makes a mistake. Probably more likely, the outworking of the law may be tainted by those who have the power to do so, for their own gain. Yet even if the law is good, and carried out properly, it's still not a "given" that justice is done.

Example of a stolen watch

Suppose my watch has been stolen from my pocket. I find the thief and drag him before the magistrate. He is proven guilty of the theft and sentenced to a just imprisonment. Does it follow that I must then go home satisfied with this result? Has justice been done to me? Certainly, the thief may have had justice done to him, but where is my watch? It's gone, and I remain a man wronged. Who has wronged me? The thief. Who can make the wrong right? The thief, and only the thief. Nobody except the man that did the wrong can make the wrong right. God may be able to move the man to right the wrong, but God himself cannot right the wrong without the man.

Suppose my watch is found and restored to me. Is the debt settled between me and the thief? By all means I may forgive him, but is the wrong removed? In no way! But suppose the thief repents. Let's say he's not able to return the watch, but he comes to me and tells me he's sorry he stole it. He begs me to accept for now the little he can bring as a beginning of making it up to me. How then should I regard things between us? Wouldn't I feel that he'd gone a long way to make it up to me, and that he'd actually done more to right the wrong than if he had simply returned the watch? And when the thief confessed to me, submitted himself to me and restored to me what he could, wouldn't I feel an appeal to the character of God within me, and that after all, we were brothers? Wouldn't this in fact be a sufficient atonement from one man to another? If he offered to take whatever suffering or further punishment I chose to lay on him, would I feel it necessary, so that justice was done, to inflict some particular suffering on him as righteousness demanded? He would still owe me my watch, but wouldn't I be liable to want to forget about it? The one who commits the crime can make up for it, and only that person.

One thing should be very clear: the punishment of the wrongdoer does not make atonement for the wrong done. How could the punishment of the man make it up to me for the stealing of my watch? The wrong done would still exist. I am not saying the man should not be punished; far from it. I'm only saying that the punishment does not make anything up to the man wronged. Suppose the thief, with the watch in his pocket, were to inflict the most severe self-harm: would that lessen my sense that I had been wronged? Would it make anything right between us? Would it in any way atone? Would it give him a right to keep the watch? Punishment may indeed do some good to the thief, but while punishment is important, it is completely different to justice. Something else which should be clear is that even if it were impossible for the actual watch to be returned to me, the repentance of the thief takes away the offence, where no amount of suffering can. As for me, I would feel that there was nothing more between us. I would even feel that what he had given to me – a repentant brother – was infinitely more valuable than the returning of the watch he had taken from me. True: he owed me himself as well as the watch; but giving me the greater thing of himself in repentance contains even more than the return of a watch.

If you say to me: "You might forgive him, but the man has still sinned against God!", then I say to you that mercy must not be a part of God's character, and that a man is able to be more merciful than his maker! At least that's what your logic says. You're really saying that a man may do something which would be too merciful for God to do! If that's the case, then mercy is not an attribute of God, because it might be too much. Mercy must not be infinite and therefore cannot possibly be of God. "Mercy can be different from, and even opposite to justice." Never – if you mean what I mean by justice. If there is such a thing against justice, it cannot be called mercy, because it's cruelty. *And to you, O Lord, belongs mercy; for you give to everyone according to what he has done.* There is absolutely no conflict between mercy and justice. Those who say that justice means the punishing of sin, and mercy means the not punishing of sin, and then say that both justice and mercy are of God, would force a division in the very idea of God. And this leads me to the question: What is meant by divine justice, God's justice?

What is divine (God's) justice?

Human justice may well be a poor distortion of justice, more like a shadow of justice; but the justice of God must of course be perfect. We cannot outwit or outsmart justice, but are we fair to justice in our own idea of what it is? If you were to ask any ordinary church-goer what was meant by the justice of God, wouldn't 95% of them answer that it means his punishing of sin? But think for a moment what kind of justice it would show if the justice of a man was that he punished every wrong. A Roman emperor or a Turkish prince might do that, and indeed be the most unjust of both men and judges. Ahab might be just when sitting on his kingly throne, and yet the murderer of Naboth in his own home.

In God, are we to pretend that there is a difference in what he does and in who he is? God is one, and a theology which speaks of God as if he had different functions and different actions is surely the most foolish of theologies. It puts a division in the very nature of God himself. As an example, it portrays God as having to do that as a judge which he would never do as a father! Think of it: the love of the father makes him desire to be unjust as a judge!

How foolish the mind that explains God before obeying him! How foolish the mind that tries to logically compartmentalize God, instead of crying out, "Lord, what do you want me to do?" God is no judge, but if he were, he would be a judge only because he was a father. God's rights as a father cover every right that anyone might suppose him to have. And even though the following phrase is not perfect, but will have to do, this then is the justice of God: that he gives every man, woman, child, animal, and everything else that has breath, fair play. He gives to everyone according to what he has done.

And there lies his perfect mercy, for nothing else could be merciful to the person, and nothing but mercy could be fair to him. God does nothing to which any man would not say "That is fair" – assuming, of course, that the man was just, and had the thing put fairly and fully before him so he understood it plainly.

I repeat: who would say that a man was a just man because he insisted on punishing every single offender? A scoundrel might do that. Yet the justice of God, apparently, is his punishment of sin! No! A just man is one who

cares for, and always tries to give fair play to everyone in everything. When we speak of the justice of God, let's make sure we do indeed mean justice! Punishment of the guilty may be connected with justice, but it is not the justice of God one iota more than it is the justice of man. "But no-one has any doubt that God gives fair play."

That may be true – but it doesn't count for much, if you claim that God does something which is not in itself fair. "If God does something, you can be sure it is, by definition, fair." Without doubt; or he wouldn't be God – except of course to demons. But you say he does this thing, and is just in doing it; I say he does not do that same thing, and is just in not doing it. You say that he does so, because the Bible says it; I say that if the Bible did say it, then the Bible would lie. But the Bible does not say so. The Lord of life rebukes men for not judging correctly. To say on the authority of the Bible that God does a thing that no honorable man would do is to lie against God. To say that it's therefore right, is to lie against the very spirit of God. To continue with a lie for God's sake is in reality to be against God, not for him. God cannot be lied for. He is the truth. The truth alone is on his side. And even if his child could not see the rightness of something, God would infinitely rather have the child claim that God could not do that thing, than to have him believe that he did do it. If the man were convinced that God did it, the thing he should say would be "Then there must be something about it which I don't know, and which if I did know, would cause me to see the thing differently."

Believing something evil

But where something evil is invented to explain and account for something good, and someone who loves God is called on to believe the invention or else be shunned, then he should not mind being shunned, for he is shunned into the company of Jesus. Where the only reason to believe that God does something is that others have believed and taught it, then the man who listens to such men instead of his own conscience of God is not a true man. If some authority tells me to believe something about God which I do not and could not believe about a fellow man, then I ignore that authority. If some explanation of God means that I need to believe something about God which I would reject as false and unfair in a man, then I don't accept that explanation. If you say, "It might be right for God to do something which would not be right for man to do", then I answer: Yes, it might, because the relation between the maker and his creatures is very different from the relation between one creature and another. And so God has to do things to and for his creation which require of him what no man would have the right to do to his fellow-man. Nevertheless, God cannot do anything which is not both just and merciful. More is required of God, by his own act of creation, than can be required of men. More justice and righteousness, and indeed higher justice and righteousness, are required of God by himself, the Truth – greater nobleness, more penetrating sympathy, and nothing that an honest man would not say was right. If it's something man cannot understand, then man can't comment on whether it's right or wrong.

He can't even know for sure that God does it, when he can't even understand the it. What the man calls it might well be just the smallest part of a complex action. His part in it should be silence. If it's said by anybody that God does something, and that thing seems to me to be unjust, then either I don't really know what that thing is, or else God does not do it at all. Either the thing can't mean what it seems to mean, or else it's not true. If, for example, it was said that God visits the sins of the fathers on the children, then a man who thinks that visits upon means punishes, and that the children means the innocent children should say: "Either I do not understand the statement, or else it's not true, whoever says it." God may well do what to a man does not seem right, but it should seem not right to the man because God works on far higher and different principles; principles which are too right for a selfish, unfair or unloving man to understand. But in no way at all should we ever accept some low understanding of justice in a man, and then argue from that that God is just in doing exactly the same.

Why must God punish sin?

To summarize: most people's understanding of the justice of God is that his justice is his punishing of sin. And so in the hope of providing a bigger idea of the justice of God than simply punishment, I now ask: "Why is God bound to punish sin?" "How could he be a just God and not punish sin?" Mercy is a good and right thing and if it weren't for

sin, there would be no mercy. We are implored to forgive and to be merciful; to be as our Father in heaven. Two rights cannot possibly be opposed to each other. If God punishes sin, then it must be merciful to punish sin. If God forgives sin, then it must be just to forgive sin. We are required to forgive, and the reason given is that our father forgives. This means that it must be right to forgive. Every attribute of God must be as infinite as himself. It's impossible for God to sometimes be merciful but not always merciful. He can't be just, but not always just. Mercy is of God, and needs no theological wrangling to justify it. "So you're saying that it's wrong to punish sin, and therefore God does not punish sin?" Not at all. God does punish sin, but there is no conflict between punishment and forgiveness. The one might well be essential to the possibility of the other. Why, I repeat, does God punish sin?

That's the real question I'm asking. "Because sin, as sin, deserves punishment." If that were true, how could God tell us to forgive it? "What about this: He punishes first, and then he forgives?" That won't do. If it's true that sin demands punishment, and the righteous punishment is given, then it must be true that as a result of the punishment the man is free. Why then should he be forgiven? "He needs forgiveness because no amount of punishment will make up for what he has done." At present, I avoid the logical consequence of this reply. Then why not forgive him straight away if the punishment is not enough? Even more, can that which is not adequate – punishment – be therefore required? You might answer that God should be pleased to take what little he can get, and that answer brings me to the major problem in the whole idea.

Punishment in no way compensates for sin. Sometimes foolish people will say "When I have sinned, I have suffered." True enough, but so what? What good is there in that? Even if you had put the suffering on yourself, what did that do to make up for the wrong done? It might be good for you that you were made better because of your suffering, but how has the suffering made amends for the wrong? The whole idea is false. Punishment, when it's deserved, is not an antidote to sin. It's no use trying to balance sin with punishment. The punishment won't move the scale even a hair's breadth. Against sin, suffering weighs nothing. It's not of the same kind, nor under the same laws, any more than are the immaterial and the material. We say a man deserves punishment. However, when we forgive and do not punish him, we do not always feel that we have done wrong. Neither do we feel that any amends have been made for his wrongdoing when we do punish him. If in fact punishment were a counterbalance to sin, then God would be bound to punish for the sake of the punishment. But he cannot be so bound, because he forgives. This means that the punishment God gives is not given for its own sake, as an end in itself, but rather for some other reason, as a means to some other outcome. It is not given for justice; otherwise, how could God show mercy, since that would involve injustice?

God must destroy sin

The important thing is that God is not bound to punish sin, but he is bound to destroy sin. If he were not the maker, he might not be bound to destroy sin – I don't know. But since he has created creatures who sin, and therefore sin has, through the creating act of God, come into the world, God is, in his own rightness, bound to destroy sin. "But that must mean he is to show no mercy." You are mistaken. God does destroy sin; he is always destroying sin. I trust that God is destroying sin in me. He is always saving the sinner from his sins, and that is destroying sin. But punishment of the sinner in return for sin, the law of a tooth for a tooth, is not in the heart of God, nor in his hand. If the object of the divine wrath is the sinner and the sin, then there can indeed be no mercy. In that case, sin will certainly come to an end with the destruction of the sinner along with sin. But by this, no atonement – no making amends for wrongdoing – would take place. Nothing would be done to make up for the wrong God has allowed to come into existence by creating man. There must be an atonement, a making amends, a bringing together, an atonement which, I stress, cannot be made except by the man who has sinned.

I repeat: Punishment is not what God requires. God requires the absolute destruction of sin. How is the world better, how is the sinner better, how is God better, how is truth better, if the sinner suffers, and even continues suffering through all eternity? Would there somehow be less sin in the universe? Would there be any making amends for sin? Would it show God right in doing something which he knew would bring sin into the world, and right in making creatures who he knew would sin? What putting-things-right would result from the sinner's suffering? If justice

demands it, if suffering is the counterbalance for sin, then the sinner must suffer and God is bound to make sure the sinner suffers and is not pardoned. This would mean that the making of man was a tyrannical act, a creative cruelty.

But even if the sinner deserves to suffer, no amount of suffering can in any way make amends for his sin. To suffer throughout all eternity could not make up for one unjust word. Does that imply, then, that for one unjust word I deserve to suffer through all eternity? The unjust word is an eternally evil thing, and nothing but God in my heart can cleanse me from the evil that spoke it. But does it logically follow that I was so perfectly aware of the evil I did, that eternal punishment for it would be just? Sorrow and confession and humbling oneself will make up for the evil word; suffering will not. For abstract evil, nothing can be done. It is eternally evil. But I may be saved from it by learning to loathe it, to hate it, to flee from it with an eternal avoidance. The only vengeance worth having on sin is to make the sinner himself its executioner.

Forgiveness *and* punishment

Sin and punishment are not in conflict within man, any more than forgiveness and punishment are in conflict within God. They can perfectly co-exist. The one naturally follows from the other. Punishment is born from sin, because evil exists only by the life of good, and has no life of its own, since it is in reality death. Sin and suffering are not natural opposites. The opposite of evil is good, not suffering. The opposite of sin is not suffering, but righteousness. The path across the gulf that divides right from wrong is not the fire of suffering, but repentance. If my friend has wronged me, will it console me to see him punished? Will that be a making amends of what is due to him? Will his agony be healing to my deep wound? Would I even be fit for any friendship, if that were possible even with regards to my enemy? But wouldn't the shadow of repentant grief, the light of reviving love in his being, heal the wound at once, no matter how deep?

You can download the complete sermon at the following link: (http://www.amazon.com/Unspoken-Sermons-I-III/dp/1612035272/ref=sr_1_6?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1420842799&sr=1-6&keywords=george+macdonald+books)

“The Plan”

(The central theme of the Bible: The Redemption of Humanity)

This is a summary of the plan God had from eternity past to save the whole world as an act of his grace (unmerited favor toward humanity) through the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Introduction

We are not alone in the universe. There is indeed a God who created it and all of us. God loves his creation and wants only the very best for us. In fact, this “bringing about the best” is his plan, and he will carry it out with unfailing success.



The God of the Plan

God is good, and only good, all the time, forever. And everything he does has a good purpose. If you could ever meet God (and you will someday) you would find him to be the most wonderful, enjoyable, engaging, supportive, caring, and helpful person you could ever imagine. He is *loving* beyond measure, so *kind* it would bring you to tears, *patient* without end, *good* with no room to be better, *merciful* with eyes that stare with compassion, *gracious* to the point of eliminating all obligation, *holy* and pure without falling short of perfection for even a moment, and he is so *just* that everything will be made right in the end.



People and Their Need

When God created us, he made us in his own image so that we are nothing less than limited versions of himself. This makes us extraordinarily valuable to him and therefore we are beings he will never forsake, annihilate, or torment. He loves us so much he created us with the wonderful gift of freedom that enables us to accomplish either great or terrible things. God created us knowing that we would exercise our freedom foolishly and bring destruction and misery upon ourselves. But he also created us knowing that he would redeem us from

our self-inflicted misery, and would make us forever perfect like himself through a process we now know as “life.” This was his plan for us that always existed in his heart and mind.

God’s Rescue of People

After failing miserably in the exercise of our freedom, God himself came into the world he created as a fellow human being. He allowed himself to be born in a horse-feeding tray and lived a life as a humble carpenter named Jesus. But his purpose in becoming a fellow human being was to fully join us in our suffering and misery, and to die *with* us. But he also died *for* us, and even died *as* us, taking the penalty of sin (death) on himself. He came into this world so that all the trouble that happens to us, also happens to him. But in doing so, what happens to him also happens to us! So when he conquered death by raising from the dead, he brought a new and everlasting life to everyone. This is the wonderful gift that he gave to humanity that he so loves -- a free gift that is unearned by us in any manner of behavior or belief. He saved us, all of us, simply because he loves us!

How People Respond

The message of this “good news” of salvation of all humanity by grace alone, is announced to the world so that all people may hear and believe what has *already* been done for them. When we hear the message and believe it, we are accepting, acknowledging, and receiving what God has *already* fully done for us. We do not believe in order to get saved, we are saved in order that we might believe! Believing in Jesus does not save us ... Jesus himself saves us, and then we believe as a result! Those who do not believe (whether unaware or unwilling) are just as saved by the work of God alone in Jesus on their behalf -- as saved as any believer. The only difference is that unbelievers do not realize or acknowledge that they are saved, and therefore they do not fully benefit from it and experience it. But they, along with all who believe, will be fully reconciled to God in eternity as a result of his wonderful plan to save all humanity who he created and loves.

God’s Completion of His Plan

God loved us and created us, even knowing we would abuse our freedom, and had a plan to save us and transform us into perfect beings like himself. Therefore, it is inevitable that everyone will eventually be fully reconciled to God. However, there are a number of severe steps that God takes to accomplish this good purpose in us. First, he *judges* all people. But this judgement is a good thing because in it God accurately assesses our condition. Judgement reveals the truth of our failure and our need for correction. As a result of this accurate and true judgment, God pronounces *condemnation* of the sin in us that is destroying

us. Because God loves us, he hates sin because of what it does to us. Judgment is God's way of saying that something needs to be done about our sin. Condemnation is God's way of saying that he has done something about it by taking it away. Salvation of the world by Jesus is his solution in judgement and condemnation.

When we sin, it does *not* make God want to punish us by inflicting pain on us. Instead, our sin makes God want to save us from its punishing pain that inflicts us! It is sin that God hates, not us. Sin is the enemy ... not God! We do not need to be saved from what God will do to us because of our sin, we need to be saved from what sin will do to us because of God who loves us and saves us.

Love is by far the strongest force in the universe, and God *IS* love. His love will win because God will win in defeating sin completely and finally. He will, in eternity, reconcile all things to himself. Someday every knee will bow in thanks before God when his unfailing love wins, when sin and death are forever conquered, all things are made right (ultimate justice), and all things are recreated as they were intended, perfectly, according to Gods great plan.

The Plan summarizes all major aspects of theology in plain English:

- The God of the Plan (God)
- People and Their Need (Sin)
- God's Rescue of People (Salvation)
- How People Respond (Faith)
- God's Completion of His Plan (Judgment)

