

Is John 3:16 Christian?

Introduction

Probably the most well-known verse in the Bible is John 3.16. It reads,

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.

The first principles of interpretation are 1) to examine a passage in its context and 2) to recognize that a verse may have several applications but only one interpretation. With these principles in mind, the goal of this study is to examine John 3.16. It is widely published as a statement of the way of salvation. But is it?

Jesus' Earthly Ministry: National Repentance

The Lord Jesus Christ took on flesh and was born of Mary. As a Jew, he ministered to the nation of Israel. Paul wrote of His ministry:

For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers (Romans 15.8).

Jesus was a "servant of the circumcision," the Jews. His role was "to confirm the promises to the fathers." These promises were the covenants God had given the nation: the Abrahamic, Land, Mosaic, Sabbatic, Davidic, and New. Through covenants, best understood as promises, God told Israel what He would do for them. He promised He would bless them, give them a land, make them a nation of priests, give them an eternal king and kingdom, and write His laws on their hearts. Lastly, they would become a light and blessing to Gentiles. This was known

as the prophetic or kingdom program. All these blessings depended upon Israel accepting her Messiah—the source of all blessing. None of the blessings could come apart from Him.

When Jesus began His public ministry, his herald, John the Baptist, announced Him to the nation in anticipation of the long-awaited kingdom. Matthew 3.1-3 reads:

¹ Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, ² “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” ³ For this is the one referred to by Isaiah the prophet when he said, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make ready the way of the Lord, Make His paths straight!’”

National repentance was the required condition for God to establish His kingdom (Matthew 4.17). The nation, however, refused to repent. Instead, they crucified their Messiah. As horrific and tragic as this was, hope remained. He had risen from the dead. Encouraged by this hope, Peter addressed his people:

³⁶ Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified.” ³⁷ Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brethren, what shall we do?” ³⁸ Peter said to them, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself” (Acts 2.36-39).

Notice Peter addressed the whole nation (v. 36). He continued the message of repentance and water baptism John and Jesus had

preached (v. 38). Even though Israel had crucified her Messiah, if the nation repented, the prophetic plan would be fulfilled (cf. Acts 2.14-21, 3.17-21).

Jesus' Earthly Ministry: Individual Salvation

National repentance (all Israel, cf. Romans 11.26) was required before the Lord would return to establish His kingdom (Matthew 23.37-39; Acts 3.19-20). National repentance meant individual salvation. What did a Jew have to believe to be saved during Jesus' earthly ministry? The answer to this question is clearly revealed in the Scriptures. One had to believe that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God. Matthew recorded:

¹⁵ He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷ And Jesus said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven (Matthew 16.15-17).

Peter believed *who* Jesus was. He was saved by believing in the *identity* of Jesus. That was the gospel of the kingdom. We find this same belief in Martha. Following the death of Lazarus, Jesus came to comfort the family. Distraught by her brother's death, she told the Lord that had He been present her brother would not have died. He replied Lazarus would rise again in the resurrection and that He was the resurrection and the life. Martha responded:

She said to Him, "Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, even He who comes into the world" (John 11.27).

Martha believed in the identity of Jesus: He was the Messiah. He was the Son of God.

Notice too, Paul's salvation:

³ As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; ⁴ and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" ⁵ And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, ⁶ but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do" (Acts 9.3-6).

Saul believed in the *identity* of Christ—that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God. That was his salvation. What did Saul preach following his salvation? He preached the identity of Christ:

¹⁹ Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus, ²⁰ and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God" (Acts 9.19-20).

This truth is confirmed further in the following passages: John 3.18; Acts 2.21, 38, 3.6, 16, 4.7, 10, 12, 17, 18, 30, 5.28, 40-41, 8.12, 16, 9.14-15, 21, 27, 10.43, 48, 19.5, 22.16, 26.9.

Jesus and Nick

The passage in John's gospel of Nicodemus coming to Jesus at night is familiar to almost anyone who has attended church. Nicodemus acknowledged Jesus had come from God. Jesus replied, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3.3). From this opening ensued a conversation in which Jesus sought to give Nicodemus the understanding that to have a relationship with God required a spiritual birth, not merely a physical birth. Since Nicodemus knew the Scriptures, Jesus took him to his

Bible. He declared:

¹⁴ *As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up;* ¹⁵ *so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.* ¹⁶ *“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life (John 3.14-16).*

Jesus’ reference to the serpent was the account in Numbers in which God sent poisonous snakes as judgment to Israel due to their unbelief and constant complaining. Moses wrote:

⁶ *The Lord sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.* ⁷ *So the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned, because we have spoken against the Lord and you; intercede with the Lord, that He may remove the serpents from us.” And Moses interceded for the people.* ⁸ *Then the Lord said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a standard; and it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he will live.”* ⁹ *And Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on the standard; and it came about, that if a serpent bit any man, when he looked to the bronze serpent, he lived (Numbers 21.6-9).*

Because the people acknowledged their sin, Moses interceded for them and the Lord provided the remedy for the snake bites: a bronze serpent set on a standard (נֶחֱשֶׁת אֲשֶׁר עַל הַמִּצְבֵּה, Nehushtan, caduceus). To effect the cure required faith (obedience): one had to look upon the serpent on the pole. The lesson Jesus wished Nicodemus to learn was that life came from faith (obedience). Notice that Jesus told Nicodemus that it was believing in the *name* of Christ that was necessary for salvation (John 3.18).

Earlier, Jesus had told Nicodemus, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3.5). The water to which Jesus referred was water baptism. Under the kingdom gospel, water baptism was required for salvation as evidenced by the Scriptures (Mark 1.4, 16.16; Acts 2.38, 22.16).

Paul's Gospel

Paul received his gospel directly from the Lord. He wrote the Galatians:

¹¹ For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. ¹² For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ (Galatians 1.11-12).

Paul's gospel, received from the ascended Lord, was that Christ died for our sins and arose from the dead (1 Corinthians 15.1-4). This is the gospel by which we are saved today. Paul called it the "gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20.24), "my gospel" (Romans 2.16, 16.25, 2 Timothy 2.8), the "glorious gospel" (2 Corinthians 4.4 (KJV); 1 Timothy 1.11). No record in the Scriptures exists of anyone proclaiming Christ's death and resurrection for salvation before Paul. In Jesus' earthly ministry and shortly thereafter, one was saved by believing the "gospel of the kingdom," that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, not that Christ died for our sins and rose from the dead. We do not tell people to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God to be saved today. We tell them that to be saved one must believe Christ died for their sins and arose from the dead. Why? Because Paul is our apostle: the apostle of the Gentiles (Romans 11.13; Ephesians 3.1; 1 Timothy 2.7; 2 Timothy 1.11 (KJV)) and after the Council of Jerusalem in 51 A.D., Paul's gospel became the only valid gospel (Acts 15.11; Galatians 1.6-9).

Conclusion: John 3.16

The passage at hand, John 3.16, was spoken by Jesus to Nicodemus, a Jew. During Jesus' earthly ministry He proclaimed the "gospel of the kingdom." For one to be saved under this gospel required believing who He was, the Messiah, the Son of God and water baptism. Therefore, *interpretively*, in context, John 3.16 is not a Christian verse. It is a Jewish verse since Jesus in His earthly ministry came to proclaim salvation to Jews, not Gentiles (Matthew 10.5-6, 15.21-24).

The other thing to notice about John 3.16 is that it says nothing about Jesus' death or resurrection. Interpretively, in context, Jesus' statement that "God gave His Son" did not mean He gave Him to die but to be Israel's Savior. This is what Jesus' words meant to Nicodemus. Only later would it be understood that Jesus came to die and rise from the dead for our salvation.

Applicationally, if one reads Paul's gospel into the message, John 3.16 can have a legitimate Christian use. If the Lord's words, "whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" is presented to mean whoever believes Paul's gospel, that Christ died for his sins and arose from the dead, has eternal life, then the passage can have a Christian sense. But it must be understood that this was not what Jesus meant when He spoke with Nicodemus.

All Scripture is beneficial for us (Romans 15.4; 1 Corinthians 10.11) but all Scripture is not *to* us. For clear communication, especially in proclaiming the gospel, we need to keep the message as simple as possible. We should use passages that clearly define how we are saved. These are found in Paul's writings (1 Corinthians 15.1-4; Romans 3.21-30, 4.1-5, etc.).

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