

A New Look at an Old 3:16  
an ACMS devotional  
Russell W. Howell

“For God *so* loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.” So goes John 3:16 (NASB, italics mine). This verse, one of the most famous in all the Bible, is surprisingly misunderstood by many non believers. A colleague of mine, in fact, informs me that a graduate-school teacher of his at Duke University once remarked how he had been puzzled at the appearance of those John 3:16 signs seen at various sporting events. He told his class one day, “I finally decided to see what the verse said. It’s some trivial, minor reference to the end of the world, or something.” As shocking as this reckless interpretation is, it is even more amazing when one considers that this particular professor had a Ph.D. from Harvard in rhetoric and English Literature, and a law degree also from Harvard.

Our understanding of John 3:16 is certainly different from that of the Duke instructor. But even though we may all know and understand this verse quite well, I believe there are still nuances of meaning which might surprise us. In fact, I was recently struck by something in the verse that enriched it for me, and it is this new understanding which I would like to share with you.

A while back I took a Greek course at Westmont for the purpose of enabling myself to read the New Testament in its original language. One of the first things I remember learning about John 3:16 is that the word *so* from the phrase *God so loved the world* is translated from the Greek word *houtōs*, which is the adverbial form of the word *this* and has as its meaning *in this way*. The word describes the manner in which God loved the world rather than the degree to which God loved the word. In other words, it is incorrect to take the verse as meaning, “God loved the world *so much* that He gave His only Son.” It would be better to take it as saying, “In this way God loved the world: that He gave His only Son.” This would be correct if the phrase *in this way* were a forward pointer to the rest of the verse. After an additional course or two in Greek, however, I looked at the verse again and noticed that something didn’t quite fit. The Greek word translated by *that* carries the meaning *with the result that*. Literally, then, the verse reads, “For *in this way* God loved the

world *with the result that* He gave his only Son ... ." But something seemed awkward. Why would John choose to follow the forward pointer *in this way* with the redundant phrase *with the result that*? I discussed this issue with a colleague in religious studies who teaches Greek. He suggested that perhaps *houtōs* was a *backward* pointer to a previous idea. To see how likely this was, we took a look at the various uses John made of *houtōs* in his gospel.

Besides 3:16, it turns out that *houtōs* occurs 13 times in John. In all but one of those occasions, the word points backward rather than forward. (This same usage appears in the rest of John's works.) For example, John 3:8 states, "The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; *so (houtōs)* is every one who is born of the Spirit." In John 5:21 we read, "For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even *so (houtōs)* the Son also gives life to whom He wishes." Again, in John 7:46, "The officers answered, "never did a man speak *the way (houtōs)* this man speaks." The only exception to this pattern is John 21:1. Leaving aside the fact that many scholars feel this chapter, as a whole or in part, was inserted by someone other than John, the character of John's use of *houtōs* is different here because he is recording a whole biographical description of the way Jesus manifested himself to his disciples after his resurrection. This lengthy string of descriptions is not what we have in 3:16. But even more telling is the use of *houtōs* in the near context of 3:14: "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even *so (houtōs)* must the Son of Man be lifted up ... ." Clearly we have a backward pointer in this verse.

Well, if *houtōs* points backward in 3:16, what does it point to, and what difference does it make, if any, to the meaning of the verse? It must point parallelistically to 3:14-15. We should read this section of scripture, then, as follows: "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even *so* must the Son of Man be lifted up in order that the one believing in Him may have eternal life. For *in this way* God loved the world ... ." Of course, John 3:14 directs our attention to an incident which occurred in the twenty-first chapter of Numbers. You will recall that in the wilderness the Israelites sinned against God by complaining bitterly. He then sent fiery serpents which bit the people, and many died. The people came to Moses in repentance, asking him to intercede, so that in Numbers 21:8-9 we read, "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 shall live.' 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."

This had always struck me as a strange section of scripture, but after discussing it with colleagues, I decided it is not so strange if we understand some things about middle-eastern culture. First, it was not uncommon for people to make models of things bothering them as a means of remedy. So if you had an enemy, you would make a doll of him and stick pins in it. If you had a wart, you would make a clay mold of the wart and destroy the mold. Second, snakes held a certain prominence at that time, and were widely regarded as having curative powers. It would be quite natural, then, for the people to expect a snake to have something to do with a cure for their present distress. In this respect, our bronze serpent played a dual role: first, as a model it reminded the Israelites of their sin--that was the reason *why* the snakes were biting them. Second, as a curative agent, it combined with the Israelites' belief to provide a means of restoration.

Likewise, taking *houtōs* as a backward pointer reinforces for us what John has in mind when he tells us to *believe* in Jesus. "For *in this way* God loved the world, with the result that He gave his only Son in order that the one *believing* in him should not perish, but have eternal life." When we look to Jesus as the Israelites looked to the bronze serpent, we should see two things: First, the enormity of our sin before a Holy God. He became sin for us who knew no sin (2 Cor. 5:21). We should see our sin laid on the Christ of the cross, on His head, His hands, and His feet. Second, in addition to confessing our sin we should be trusting the Man of Sorrows to be our restoration. He reminds us of our sin, and He heals us through our trust in Him. This belief, by the way, should be an on-going process. John consistently uses linguistic devices to indicate duration when he uses the word *believe*, and he does so with a present participle in this verse. "For *in this way* God loved the world, with the result that He gave his only Son in order that the one *believing* in Him should not perish, but have eternal life."

In summary, then, it seems to me that the phrase *in this way God loved the world* serves the purpose of focusing our attention on the nature of our belief, and also on the nature of the One in whom we are to be believing. The One about whom Isaiah said, "He was wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities." (There's our sin.) "The chastisement of our peace was upon Him; and with His stripes we are healed." (There's our restoration.)

"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, in order that the one believing in Him may have eternal life. For in this way God loved the world, with the result that He gave His only Son in order that the one believing in Him should not perish, but have eternal life." Amen.

Let's take some time now for quiet meditation, thinking about the author and finisher of our salvation. May I suggest you use the words of the hymns we will sing next to think about John 3:16. After a suitable period, we'll sing those hymns together.