

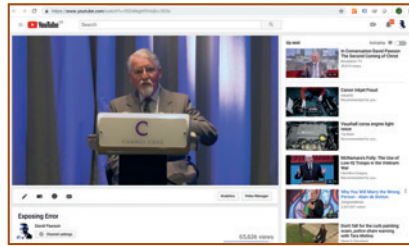
This booklet is based on a talk. Originating as it does from the spoken word, its style will be found by many readers to be somewhat different from my usual written style. It is hoped that this will not detract from the substance of the biblical teaching found here.











As always, I ask the reader to compare everything I say or write with what is written in the Bible and, if at any point a conflict is found, always to rely upon the clear teaching of scripture.

David Pawson

EXPLAINING Three texts often taken out of context

*Expounding the truth
and exposing error*



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EXPLAINING
**Three texts often
taken out of context**
Expounding the truth and exposing error

DAVID PAWSON

ANCHOR RECORDINGS

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Contents

THREE TEXTS OFTEN TAKEN OUT OF CONTEXT	6
REVELATION 3:20	9
JOHN 1:12–13	11
JOHN 3:16	14

The two important responsibilities I have given to you as a teacher: you are to expound the truth and expose error.

A revelation of God given to David Pawson

August 2013

EXPLAINING

Three texts often taken out of context

Expounding the truth and exposing error

The Bible in your hand is not the Word of God as he wanted you to have it. When God gave his Word to us, he gave it to us in books, not in chapters, and not in verses. For many centuries, Christians had a Bible without any chapter or verse numbers in them. Then they had to know their Bible, because you can't find your way around a book by chapter and verse numbers when they are not there. The chapter numbering was done by Stephen Langton, a 13th-century Archbishop of Canterbury. He often got the divisions in the wrong place. Right at the beginning of your Bible we have the week of creation, but the seventh day is cut off into chapter two. It is crazy to describe a week with six days in one chapter and add the seventh day in the next! Then he divided up that song about the suffering servant in Isaiah 53, putting the first verses of the song into chapter 52. In Acts 18 and 19, Paul found some disciples in Ephesus who seemed to be Christian, but there was something missing. The reason for that unusual state of affairs you find in chapter 18.

The worst division of all was in the last book in the Bible, which is full of sevens. There are seven letters to seven churches at the beginning, and each letter has seven parts to it. Later there are seven seals broken, seven trumpets blown, and seven bowls of wrath poured out. Now most people who read the book know about those sevens, but there is one seven

that they don't know about and miss altogether. It is where there are seven visions for the future, but they have been divided up between chapters 19, 20 and 21 so they are never read together as a series of seven visions. If they had been read together we would have no arguments at all about the millennium. I am sure you have heard of the premillennials and the amillennials and the postmillennials. A friend of mine went to Belfast, and as soon as he got off the plane some Christians met him and said, "Are you amillennial, premillennial, or postmillennial?" He said, "That is a pre-post-erous question," which I thought was a good response. Most people today tell me they are pan-millennial. They just believe everything will pan out all right in the end anyway. It is a very important debate because only one of those views represents the belief that Christ is coming back to rule the world. The others don't believe that at all. It makes a huge difference to your hope for the future.

But I am dealing with a different problem now, which has been summed up in the cliché: a text out of context becomes a pretext. This simply means that if you take a verse out of what surrounds it and quote it on its own, you have probably given it the wrong meaning, because every verse in scripture takes its meaning from its context – not just from the verses before or after it, but from the section in which that verse occurs, from the book in which it occurs and from the Testament in which it occurs. The meaning of any verse in the Bible depends on that whole context for its meaning. A text out of context so often leads to misunderstanding of the Bible, because God did not intend chapter and verse numbers.

We have noted that chapter divisions were introduced first. The verse numbers were introduced by a printer from Paris. Travelling in a carriage to Lyons, he thought, "I'll divide the chapters into verses, give them each a number, and

everybody can then find their way around.” It was a worthy cause, but a wrong one because it means that you can take a text by itself and ignore its context. You invariably get the wrong meaning.

Let me give you some examples. One of the texts we will be thinking about here is John 3:16. Many people can recite that verse, but few can remember what John 3:15 and John 3:17 say. However you cannot understand John 3:16 without looking at John 3:15. You will get the wrong meaning.

I want to give you three verses that are quoted out of context and are widely given the wrong meaning. In my book entitled *The Normal Christian Birth* I tried to show from the New Testament how people were born again and how they were birthed into the kingdom. There are four steps in the birth: repent toward God, believe in the Lord Jesus, be baptised in water, and receive the Holy Spirit. I deliberately went to Christian bookshops and bought every booklet on how to become a Christian. Most of them quoted only three texts and used those as the basis for counselling an enquirer to help them to become a Christian. I am going to deal with those three texts and show how every one of them was taken out of context and given a different meaning from the meaning in the Bible: Revelation 3:20, John 1:12–13 and, above all, John 3:16.

First, though, let us look at another verse that is widely misunderstood out of context: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” It is a lovely verse, often quoted. Now I want you to spend just half a minute thinking of something that you can do through Christ who strengthens you – something that you could not do without him. Can you think of anything that comes to your mind from that text? Did you think about money? The context is about money and it is about managing on your income, whether large or small. The meaning of the text is this: whether I have lots

of money or little money, I am content; I have learned to be content with what comes in, and to live on that, because through Christ I can do all things – he strengthens me. I love preaching on this now because there are many people in Britain struggling to live within their income and getting into debt. So it is a most relevant text. At once you can see how a text out of context may lead people’s thoughts astray into something quite different.

Now let us come to some texts that are most widely misquoted out of context. You will have heard sermons using the false meanings. First of all there is Revelation 3:20, and that is quickly dealt with.

Revelation 3:20

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If any man hear my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and sup with him and he with me.” That is regarded as an evangelistic text. I have heard many preachers preach from it, and they say the door is the door of your heart and Christ is knocking at the door of your heart and asking you to let him come in. However, if you put it back into the context, it has nothing to do with conversion.

It has everything to do with churches. It is addressed to the church of Laodicea, a large church with large congregations and large offerings – a church that was regarded by everybody as successful, and yet there was one person who was not attending its services and nobody missed him. That person was Jesus. He didn’t attend that church. Isn’t that astonishing?

The verse is an amazing invitation – teaching us that it only takes one member of a church to get Christ back inside the church. What a promise! A church may be large, successful, wealthy, but in his sight it is desperately poor and sick. The members don’t realise that, but the words of

Jesus mean: I'm standing at the door of the church and I'm knocking, and if one person inside there invites me back in I'll come, and I'll have a meal with that person. We'll sit down together as friends. It is a wonderful invitation. When I went to Laodicea for the first time I was walking through the ruins, which had not yet been excavated, and I came across one door. It wasn't the door of a church but it could have been. It was a Gothic door with a pointed top, and the door and its frame were standing above the grass.

When I went back recently the door had been excavated, but I took a photograph of it all by itself in the ruins. If it had been the door of a church it would have been the door that Jesus was knocking on. Just one person can get Jesus back into a large, successful church that he would love to be in, but people are so full of their success and their prosperity that they have never noticed that Jesus doesn't attend the meetings.

That text does get taken out of context, and this is largely due to the best-known painting depicting Jesus, called "The Light of the World", by the famous artist Holman Hunt. You can see the original in St. Paul's Cathedral in London. It is a picture of Jesus in semi-darkness, surrounded by trees in an orchard, and he is knocking on a door. There is no handle on the outside. The artist said it can only be opened from the inside. Hunt used three young ladies as models for his painting of Jesus. He used a ginger-haired young lady for the hair, another young lady with an angelic face for the face, and even used another, slim, lady for the form, dressing her in ecclesiastical robes. When you know the truth of that painting you somehow lose your taste for it. The artist used a barn door in an orchard a few miles outside London, where he took the three young ladies. That picture has interpreted the verse for everybody since then. It is used in Christian booklets on how to become a Christian. But the verse does

not mean “open the door of your heart to Jesus”. It means any person inside that church can get Jesus back in. Just one could invite him in. Therefore I don’t believe that verse should be used in counselling people in evangelism.

Incidentally, once you find out the true meaning of a verse you can never use it again in its wrong meaning. Many years ago I preached an evangelistic sermon from John 3:16. I cannot remember all the outline, but my first point was the greatest gift, and my second was the largest love. I got a nice alliterative outline and I preached the gospel. But I can never use the verse again that way because now I know what it really means. The meaning I used to love has gone. I dare not use it the way I first used it, and I am afraid I am going to spoil three verses for you now and you won’t be able to use them again except with the true meaning. Then you will have a really powerful message. It is a powerful message to say to a congregation: all it takes is one of you to get Jesus back in this church. But it is not the door of the heart, it is the door of a church.

John 1:12 –13

The next text I want to look at was used in almost every booklet that I bought on how to become a Christian. I bought thirty-four booklets before writing my book *The Normal Christian Birth* to make sure that I was on the right track. One used John 1. “He came to his own, but his own did not receive him.” Then v. 12 – “Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God: children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.” The bit that was taken out and used in nearly all of those booklets I bought was: “To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”

Some of them had even dropped the “d” at the end of the

two verbs and they read it as, “To all who *receive* him [that is, who *believe* in his name], to them he gives the right to become children of God.” That is a very significant change, but they were only quoting the verse as many people read it. Most people overlook the “d”. “Received” and “believed” are in the past tense. They are not in the present tense. They don’t apply to people today. It was a historical description of the time when Jesus was on earth, and he is not on earth now. Therefore you cannot “receive” him now. You receive the Holy Spirit, who has taken his place on earth, but in the days when he was on earth you could invite him in to have lunch. You could receive him into your home.

Look at the context, “He came to his own place, but his own people did not receive him. Yet to all who received him...” [in those days] “to those who believed on his name,” when he was on earth, “to them he gave the right [or the authority] to be children of God,” who were born again, “not of the will of man, but of God.” The two verbs are in the past tense. So they are talking about what happened when he came to his own place and to his own people, the Jews. Some received him. Many did not. Some welcomed him, many did not – but those who did were born again of the will of God. That is a description of what happened when Jesus was on earth, when he came to his own place and his own people. The context tells you it is a reference to Jesus’ physical time on earth, and to the Jewish people – those who received him and those who did not. So we have the real meaning of the verse. Clearly, his physical presence divided them deeply into two groups—those who didn’t receive him and those who did, and that was the result then. But that statement does not apply today. It cannot, because we cannot *receive Jesus* today. We can only receive the third person of the Trinity who has taken his place, and once the heavens received Jesus out of sight, no longer did anybody

talk about *receiving Jesus*. They certainly never talked about “open the door of your life and let him in”. That is not the way the apostles preached. They said: believe in Jesus, who is now at the right hand of God in heaven. That is where he is. Believe in him and receive the Person he sent to take his place on earth.

This means that when you bring someone into the kingdom, you introduce them to the Holy Spirit at the same time as you introduce them to Jesus. Then they are Trinitarian from the beginning. If you just introduce them to Jesus, you have only introduced them to one person of the Trinity – that is “unitarian” evangelism – or you may have introduced them to the Father through Jesus, and that is “binitarian” evangelism. Trinitarian evangelism is to introduce them to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and then when you baptise them you baptise them into the single name—Father, Son and Spirit—because they have been introduced to all three. They understand the Trinity from the beginning. There are many Christians still puzzled by the Trinity who have never been introduced at a practical level to all of the three persons of the Trinity. If we did our evangelism properly, they would understand a relationship with three Persons from the outset, and they would not need to be introduced to them later.

So that is my understanding of John 1:12. It does not say: to as many as receive Jesus “today”, to them he gives authority to become children of God. Just dropping that letter “d” makes all the difference. It is a past tense statement about a past era when Jesus was here among the Jewish people in the land of Israel, and it is a true statement of what happened. The Holy Spirit had not yet been given, so they believed in Jesus’ name, because that is all they had. They believed in him by receiving him, like Zacchaeus when Jesus said, “I want to have lunch with you today in your home.” That was the day salvation came to Zacchaeus, who never knew the

Holy Spirit because the Holy Spirit was not given yet, so he is not mentioned in that connection.

Because the immediate context of John 1:12 is when he came to his own place and his own people physically here on earth, we cannot therefore deduce that what happened then is bound to happen today. We must be careful how we apply the Word of God. Some verses are very clearly for today, but others are a description of what happened then. We must be careful as to how we apply it today. But this verse, along with Revelation 3:20, was in nearly all the thirty-four booklets I bought on how to become a Christian, and both were quoted out of context and given a new meaning.

John 3:16

John 3:16 is probably the most misunderstood and misapplied verse in the whole New Testament. Out of interest I bought a book entitled *The Gospel in Four Thousand Languages*. When I opened it, I found that it is simply John 3:16 in four thousand languages. Is it the gospel? I don't think so. When you read that text in its context it has a very different meaning from the popular one.

Most Christians are not sure about the context. They don't know what the verses before or after v. 16 say, and if you take that verse by itself you will misunderstand it. The word "so" will be the most misunderstood part of it. I will explain what that word really means. It doesn't mean "sooo much", "so deeply".

Let us approach it from a different point of view. It comes at the end of a conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus. It is a wonderful conversation and a surprising one. Nicodemus came under cover of darkness to talk to Jesus, to learn from him. He is described not as "a" teacher in Israel, but as "the" teacher in Israel, which means the top rabbi, the greatest scribe, the man whom all Jews thought knew

everything. That is the man who came secretly to learn from Jesus and that is very interesting. The conversation would have a lasting effect. Nicodemus was one of only two men in the Sanhedrin (the ruling council of the Jews, which had seventy members) who voted against Jesus' death. The other was Joseph of Arimathea.

So it was a vote of 68-2 that condemned Jesus to death – illegally from beginning to end. Voting for Jesus cost Nicodemus quite a lot. It was those two men who arranged the funeral of Jesus and who anointed the body, burying it in a tomb hollowed out of the cliff face in Joseph of Arimathea's garden. It is an amazing account.

So Nicodemus will appear later as a friend and supporter of Jesus. The top teacher of the Jews was humble enough to admit that he needed to learn. A good teacher is always a good learner, constantly listening to others and learning from them. But because he was "the" teacher it would have been bad for his reputation to be seen seeking knowledge from this new teacher who was very popular with the ordinary people, but unpopular with the ruling people, especially the other members of the Sanhedrin. He knew that Jesus had a different kind of teaching. When Jesus taught, miracles happened, God did something. But when Nicodemus taught, he just taught. That is quite an admission for the top teacher of the nation to open his heart about. He wanted to know what the secret of Jesus' teaching was.

We have a summary of the conversation. Jesus confirmed that Nicodemus was missing something. Was he the teacher in Israel and didn't really know the answer? It was obvious that Nicodemus didn't, so Jesus explained. He had been anointed by the Holy Spirit at his baptism. The secret is water and Spirit, because that is when Jesus' powerful ministry began. Until the age of thirty, Jesus did not do a single miracle. But after he had been baptised in water, and

the Holy Spirit had descended on him like a dove, he had a message that produced miracles. So he said, “Nicodemus, you need to be born again of water and the Spirit.” Most evangelicals ignore that word ‘water’, but in fact it is there, and in all the early chapters of John it means “water”. There is water mentioned later in John chapter 3, and it refers to baptism. I believe that he is saying: You need to be baptised in water and baptised in Holy Spirit and then you too can have a ministry like mine. You need to be born again of water and Spirit. Jesus puts water and Spirit together – as they were for him. That is when he began a powerful ministry.

All that is the background, and clearly that night there was a strong wind blowing in the darkness, and they were sitting, probably on the top of a house, and the wind was ruffling their hair. They could feel it and Jesus said that the Spirit is like the wind – you know when it hits you; you don’t know where it has come from, you don’t know where it’s going, but when it hits you, you feel it and you know it. That is what it is like being born again of “water and Spirit”.

The two baptisms a Christian needs are baptism in water and baptism in Holy Spirit, and the two go together. Baptism without the Holy Spirit becomes what we call “baptismal regeneration” – and there is a belief that water does it. That is not biblical teaching. It is water *and* Spirit that do it for the new birth. Both are needed, and baptism in water and baptism in Spirit are part of being saved. They are both on the horizontal line that is the way of salvation, whereas if you have a vertical line in your mind, crossing from unsaved to saved, you put both baptisms on the “saved” side of the line, as if you are saved without them. But in New Testament thinking they are both on the road of salvation and both are needed as much as repentance and faith. Certainly for a powerful ministry you need both. That is what Jesus is teaching Nicodemus.

Neither Jesus nor the apostles told the general public that you must be born again. He only said that to Nicodemus, not to anybody else. And yet, people give John's Gospel to the unbeliever hoping they will get as far as chapter three and read there that you must be born again. Then they drop the water and usually say "born of the Spirit". But Jesus said both, and both belong to the full salvation that he is wanting for us. For a fuller explanation I recommend my book *Jesus Baptises in One Holy Spirit*.

That sets the scene. The conversation went on. How far? I wonder what your Bible says – where the conversation with Nicodemus finished. Some translations use inverted commas that stop the conversation well into the chapter at verse 21. The translators assume that all the rest was spoken by Jesus. That is a mistake. But there is no infallible translation!

You should write the closing inverted commas at the end of verse 15. Verse 16 was not spoken by Jesus and was not spoken to Nicodemus, but is John's commentary. It is John's writing now. I have five reasons for teaching that, and I will give you only two of them here. In v. 15, if you read it carefully, you are looking *forward* to the cross, it is in the future. But in v. 16 you are looking back to the cross as something that has already happened. That is the first big reason why I would stop the conversation at the end of v. 15, and it is a very important one. In v. 14 Jesus has said, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, just so the Son of Man must be lifted up." Then v. 15. "That everyone who believes may have eternal life in him" – that was Jesus' last word to Nicodemus. Looking ahead to the cross, it is indicating this must yet happen, and Nicodemus later saw it happen. But v. 16 says, "For God so loved ... that he gave [past tense] his only begotten Son..." (clearly, "gave" is not just given in birth, but given in death) "so that whoever believes on him should have eternal life." So if v. 15

is looking forward to the cross and v. 16 is looking back to it, then clearly Jesus could not have said it to Nicodemus.

The second reason is this: Jesus always called himself the Son of Man. There are many reasons for that, some of which you find in Daniel and others in Ezekiel. Talking about himself, he said, “The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” Jesus, talking about himself, says that the Son of Man will be lifted up, but in v. 16 he isn’t called that, he is called the *only-begotten Son of God*, a term which Jesus never used. John uses it in chapter 1 and here again in chapter 3. This was John’s title for Jesus, never Jesus’ title for himself, so once again we have a sound reason for putting the closing quotation marks at the end of v. 15.

Had Jesus spoken v. 16, that would be the only occasion in Jesus’ whole life when he talked about the love of God to an unbeliever, because neither Jesus nor the apostles ever publicly preached the love of God. It was not their gospel for the world. This would be the only exception if Jesus had said this, but from v. 16 onwards you have John’s explanatory comment. He has taken up what Jesus said to Nicodemus in v. 15 and carried on with it and explained it more fully. The words that were in v. 15 are that the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life. Picking up those words, John now expands the same words in v. 16 and goes on explaining them and what they mean to the Christian believer in the rest of the section. So we are talking in v. 16 about something that John said about Jesus, not something Jesus said to Nicodemus.

That is so important, because the love of God is not the gospel to preach to the world. I recommend reading my two short books *Is John 3:16 the Gospel?* and *The God and the Gospel of Righteousness*. In them I explain why our gospel for the world is not a gospel about the love of God. Neither Jesus nor the apostles ever preached publicly about the love

of God. In the book of Acts, for example, we know how the church spread and how the gospel spread. We even have a number of sermons of Peter and Paul there, but not once in Acts is the love of God mentioned. Have you ever noticed that? They didn't talk about it. Yet for the last hundred years that has been the gospel that has been preached – telling people God loves them. That is the first major thing to do according to one big plan of evangelism that originated in America. The first of the “four spiritual laws” – God loves you. But that is not what they preached in those days.

So look again at John 3:16. I have given you two major reasons (of five that I could have given you) that John 3:16 is from John and not Jesus, and is a comment on his conversation with Nicodemus. It is John who introduces the word “love” here. Let's break up this verse and look first at the nouns in it, which are fairly straightforward. The first noun is “God”. Here, it means the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Holy One of Israel. That is the God who is being talked about in this verse. He is the only God who exists. When you have the word “God” by itself in the New Testament it means God the Father, the first person of the Trinity.

The next noun is “world”. Now that is not just a geographical term, it is a theological term and it refers to this world as a fallen, sinful world. It is not just the world. It is not just the human race. It is the fallen human race, the sinful human race. That is very important because in John's first letter he says to Christians: “Don't love the world.” The same writer is saying God loved the world – but don't you do that. That is very interesting. He is saying: he loved this sinful place called the world, but you shouldn't. Don't imitate God or try to imitate him. Don't love the world.

He uses exactly the same words as are used here in John 3:16. It is safe for God to love a fallen world. It is not safe

for you to do the same, so that tells you that “the world” is a bad term. It is not just the world, it is the bad world, the fallen world. That is the grace of God, that he loved a sinful, bad world like this. It is not just that he loved everybody in it, but that he loved a fallen, bad world.

The next noun is “Son” and John says to us, “God’s only begotten Son.” That does not mean that Jesus began at some point in time, that God had a Son at some point in time. The Greek word translated “only begotten” has sometimes been translated “his only natural Son”. He has many others, but they are adopted. He has only one natural Son, who shared his nature all along. It does not mean that at some point before his physical birth Jesus came to be. That is the heresy of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, and the heresy of many others today who have not grasped that the Son of God was the only human being who ever chose to be born. I didn’t choose to be born. You didn’t choose to be born. I didn’t choose my parents. You didn’t. He did, because he existed before he was conceived. He chose to be conceived. He chose to become a man. Jesus didn’t say “I was *born* for this”. He said, “I *came* to seek and to save the lost.” Not “I was born for this calling”. He decided to come. He chose the earthly family he would be born into. It is an important truth that we sometimes forget at Christmas time. We think that was the beginning of the story of Jesus. It wasn’t the beginning at all. It was a change for him – a change which he chose.

Now notice the word “everyone”. “That whosoever...” is not the best translation. The word is literally “everyone” or “all”. It is a simple word. “That all who believe....” It is not every *one*, but all of them. “That whoever believes”; “that everybody who believes....” It is an inclusive word that is much wider. You will have to take my word for a lot of this unless you know Greek, but I am telling you the truth.

The last noun here is “life”, but what kind of life? A life

that is both quantity and quality, so translators are divided as to whether to call it everlasting (eternal) or abundant life. It is both. It is life that goes on forever and it is life of the very best kind. So that word “life” is a wonderful word. Whoever believes can have life.

We are moving on from the nouns to the verbs. We’ll look at these verbs from the point of view of their tenses. Now here is a little Greek lesson for you. I hope it won’t be too complicated. Two verb tenses in Greek are the aorist and the present continuous. The aorist refers to something that happened once in the past, a single event that came and went. The present continuous tense is used for something that goes on happening. I illustrate that by referring to the difference between saying of someone who has been knocked down in the road that “he breathed”, which would be like the aorist tense, signifying that he breathed once. If you say “he is breathing”, that is the present continuous tense, in English as well, and means that he is going on breathing.

Now let us look at the verbs, and this is crucial to understanding John 3:16. The verb “loved” is in the aorist tense, meaning something that God did *once*. Now that is the first shock in this verse. Everybody assumes that it is telling us that God loves the world always. Now there is a truth there, but in fact in this verse the truth is that God once loved the fallen world, on one occasion, and it was the occasion when he gave his Son.

Almost every mention of the love of God in scripture is linked to the cross. You find that in Romans. You find that in the letters of John. That was the one event when God loved a fallen world. So that is the word “loved”. It is not those other words of different kinds of love: *epithumia* (the love of addiction), *eros* (the love of attraction) or *philia* (the love of affection). The word translated “love” here is *agape*, the love of action. So this is about the moment when God acted

to help us poor sinners. Love was shown in action. It was born in emotion, in his compassion for us, but it was shown in action on the day Christ died. *So God loved once when he gave his Son for us.*

However, the word “believe” is in the present continuous tense in the Greek. It is not who *believed* but who *believes*. It is best translated in English as: *everyone who goes on believing* – continuously. This means not believing once, but a continuous life of faith. That again makes a very important difference to this verse, doesn’t it? It is not just someone who believed in Jesus twenty years ago. It is someone who goes on believing and who keeps trusting and obeying Jesus.

The next verb is “perish” and that is in the aorist tense so it is a one-off event. It will happen once to some people. They will perish once, and the word “perish” does not mean “cease to exist”. It means to be ruined, made useless. Ruined buildings may be interesting. One wonders what they were like when they were new. But when a building is in ruins it is no use at all, and when a person is ruined they are no use at all.

In English we use the word “perish” for something that has become useless. We talk about a rubber hot water bottle or a rubber car tyre that has perished. When a tyre has perished it still looks like a tyre. It has the shape of a tyre, it still exists, but because the rubber has perished it is of no use on your car any more. A big problem is getting rid of perished tyres, though they can now be recycled and made into road surfaces. But many human beings face being ruined one day, and of no use to God again.

When something is perished, what do you do? You might throw it on the rubbish dump or, if you were in Jerusalem, you threw it into “hell”. The Valley of Gehenna is just on the south side of the city. When I first went there it was a rubbish dump, and the rubbish was burnt. There was blue

smoke rising from it. It is a very deep valley – so deep that the sun doesn't reach the bottom. It is just outside the south gate, significantly called the Dung Gate, because before there were flush toilets and sewers they carried all their human waste in buckets out of the Dung Gate and tipped it over the cliff edge into the Valley of Hinnom or Gehenna.

It was kept burning so as to keep the rubbish down, but as well as fire there was rotten food there, with maggots and worms eating it. It was then a horrible, dirty, smelly place. It is not now. They have “redeemed” it, making it into a beautiful landscaped garden. The young people of Jerusalem can now go there to walk in the twilight and be in love.

I have preached in the bottom of that valley and I have preached therefore in “hell” – in Gehenna. Jesus taught that if you want to know what hell is like, go and look in the valley. He told us that hell is where the fires never stop burning, where all the rubbish is thrown. The Valley of Hinnom is where the body of Judas Iscariot finished up. He hung himself from a tree at the top of the cliff. He put a rope around his neck and threw himself off the cliff and the rope broke. He fell to the bottom and his bowels gushed out, his guts spilled over. To this day, that patch of the valley is called “Akeldama”, the Field of Blood.

That is also where they threw the bodies of all crucified victims. The body of the Lord Jesus himself would have been thrown there had Joseph and Nicodemus not found a tomb, because every crucified victim was regarded as rubbish. No use, throw them away!

So Jesus himself taught that hell is where useless human beings are thrown. He never said that God *sends* people to hell. He always said that God *throws* them into hell. You don't *place* rubbish. You throw it. You throw it away, and God will throw useless, perished people into hell. The best picture of that which we can have is to look down the

cliff into that valley and think about how it used to be. So I underline the truth that the word “perish” doesn’t mean they *cease to be*, it means they go on existing as useless to God. That is the most terrible thing you can say about a human being: that they are no more use to God. That is awful. Imagine a person who has reached the stage where God says: I can’t ever use you again – you’re rubbish.

That is how Jesus talked about hell, and incidentally Jesus gave many warnings about hell. All but two of them were given to born-again believers. Two were given to Pharisees, and all the rest were to people who had been born again, not of the will of man, but of God by believing in Jesus’ name. That is a very important point to those who believe “once saved, always saved”. It is a very solemn thought. *It is Christians who need to fear hell as well as unbelievers.* I fear going to hell. I fear perishing. I will go on believing, and then I won’t perish.

The verb “have” is again in the present continuous. It is not: you now *have* eternal life. It is that you will *go on having it if you go on believing*. Those two verbs link together. I hope you are beginning to see that this verse, written by John, was written to believers, not unbelievers, urging them to go on believing and to go on having life by going on believing. That indeed is what John says at the end of his Gospel. He said: I have written all these things so that you may go on believing that he is the Son of God and, going on believing, you may go on having eternal life. John is concerned about Christians who stop believing, who lose their faith, or, as Paul says, who make shipwreck of faith.

It is so easy for that to happen, and this is why Jesus warned born-again believers to fear hell and to press on in faith, to go on believing to the end. He who endures to the end shall be saved – that is what Jesus was teaching. That is a promise. Not he who *once began* to believe, but he who

endures to the end will be saved. There is a future salvation, waiting for us ahead.

We have looked again at the nouns and the verbs, but some of the smallest words that I have not mentioned are among the most important. The word “in” is very important: those who believe *in* him – not only *that* Jesus died. I am constantly telling people the difference between believing “that” Jesus died for our sins and believing “in” him. Someone may believe *that* a person exists, but do they believe *in* them?

I once asked a congregation in Germany, “How many of you believe in me?” Five people put their hands up, including a well-dressed lady in the front row. I looked at her and said, “You believe in me?”

“Yes,” she replied.

“How do I know? I don’t. You’ve professed belief in me, but I don’t know if you really do.” I continued, “If you will give me all your money to look after I’ll know that you believe in me.”

The whole church froze! I could feel the temperature drop and thought, “What have I said?” They told me afterwards that she was the richest lady in the city. Her late husband had owned property all over the town centre and had left it all to her. She was now a multi-millionaire. I think she had given the money to construct the church building we were in. I am more careful now what I say from the pulpit! There is a huge difference in believing “that” Jesus died for you, and believing “in” the Jesus who died for you. He will only know you believe “in” him when you show him that you do, when you act in such a way that you are trusting him. That is why James, in his epistle, was teaching that faith without works – faith that doesn’t express itself in action – is dead. You can say what you like, but faith is not words. It is not just naming it and claiming it. Faith is action, doing something to show Jesus that you trust him.

Acting in faith proves that you trust him, showing him you trust him. It was when Abraham offered Isaac that God said this amazing thing to him, and the implications of it are huge: “Now I know that you fear the Lord.” He did not know until then. Now God was sure. He wants all of us to prove our faith to show him that we really trust him in some way or another. It means taking a risk of some kind. It means trusting him in a crisis. It means showing him you believe in him. That’s the little word “in”.

Now I want to tackle two other words. This verse begins with the word “for”. That is very important. Whenever you see the word “for” you must ask what it’s there for. There is a reason, and the reason for a “for” is that it follows from what has just been said, that the sentence is based on the previous sentences. “For”, “because” – and so you have to go back to the context to find out why he is saying this. The final word, and the most misunderstood, is the little word “so”. Unfortunately, in English it has come in the wrong place. The Greek says: “For so God loved the world.” It comes before the word “God”, and that is what has misled so many of us. We think it means God so deeply and so wonderfully and so profoundly loved the world, but it doesn’t mean that at all. The word “so” actually occurs in the previous sentence and there we understand its meaning. It is exactly the same word. “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, *so* the Son of Man must be lifted up.” It is the same Greek word *houtos*, which means: in exactly the same way; just so; even so. *So as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, even so, just so, in the same way, the Son of Man must be lifted up.* Here is that word again. For God in this same way loved the world. For God just so loved the world. The best translation I suppose in English is “just so...” – in the same way.

There is a comparison being made between two events of the same kind and that is why you don’t understand John

3:16 without John 3:14 and 15. They all belong together. “For just so God loved the world,” and it goes back to a horrible incident in which many thousands of God’s people died at the hand of God. It goes back to the days in the wilderness. Numbers 21 is what is being referred to. The children of Israel were still in the wilderness in the middle of forty years’ punishment for not having the faith to go into the Promised Land after two weeks.

They could have been into the land of Canaan in less than a fortnight, but they didn’t have the faith. They sent the spies in, and of the twelve spies ten came back and said, “We’ll never get in there. The people are bigger than we are. They’re giants, and the walls of the city reach the skies!” But two of them, Joshua and Caleb, believed that the people would get in because they would be going in on God’s shoulders, and that would make them taller than the tallest people there. I like that—it’s a very neat argument. “And on God’s shoulders we’ll look over the walls of their cities.” Of course, with Jericho, the first town they took forty years later, the walls fell down. But they had to spend forty years in the wilderness until everyone was dead except Joshua and Caleb.

Everybody else perished in the wilderness, but while they were still alive and wandering through the wilderness something happened. They were desperately short of food and they remembered the diet of Egypt when they had onions and garlic and interesting spicy food. They grumbled, and God gave them something they called “what is it” in Hebrew – manna (“what is it”). Every morning, there it lay on the desert floor and all they had to do was go and pick it up. It had all the carbohydrates, protein and vitamins they needed. They called it bread from heaven.

For the first day or two they enjoyed it, but imagine you have had “what is it” for breakfast, lunch, tea and supper for years on end, and the children bother you and say, “What’s

for lunch?” “What is it!” Having eaten “what is it” for every meal for a year or two, they got very sick of it and they grumbled. It was enabling them to survive in the desert where there was no food, but they grumbled. “We’re sick of manna.” They grumbled against God because he had sent it.

To punish them, God sent poisonous snakes by the dozen that came into the camp, and everybody who was bitten died. It was a plague of snakes, and now they realised they had done wrong in grumbling against God. They asked Moses to go and tell God they were sorry and shouldn’t have grumbled. Moses went back to God and said, “God, they’re very sorry now. Will you please take the snakes away?” God said, “No, I won’t. I will leave the snakes, but I’ll give people a cure for snakebite. The cure is you take a wooden pole and you put it up on the top of the nearest hill. Then you make a metal snake and you attach that to the pole. When you lift that up, anybody who is bitten by a poisonous snake, all they have to do is climb that hill and look at that snake on the pole, and the poison will be neutralised. But they have got to do that. I am going to leave the threat of death, but I’ll give you a cure for it.”

So John is saying: *Even so*, God loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son. “Even so,” says Jesus to Nicodemus, “the Son of Man will be lifted up” – on a wooden pole. Anybody who goes and gazes at that, the poison will leave them. You can see the connection and the obvious lesson. That is why the cross is so important. Anybody who is facing death for their sin, just go and look at the cross, gaze at it—God’s provision for your sin. It is amazing!

Now do you see the reason for “for” and “so” in John 3:16? He is drawing the parallel with that incident in Numbers 21. Isn’t it amazing that next door to John 3:16 is a verse talking about the death of thousands of God’s people at God’s hand, and his cure for that? That is the context. If

you don't know Numbers 21, you won't understand John 3:16. The context goes right back to the early books of the Old Testament if we are to understand v. 16.

John is giving this 3:16 to believers who are in danger of being poisoned – and that will lead to the second death, the death that means perishing. He is saying: you can be cured by going back to the cross and looking at it and thinking about it. It is the gospel for believers to go on believing and to go on having life. You see, you can't go on having eternal life if you don't look to Jesus and go on looking. You don't have life in yourself. You are a branch in the true vine, and he said, "Abide in me. Stay in me and then you'll have my life in you." That's what John's Gospel is all about, and that is what this passage at the heart of it is all about.

So go and teach other people what John 3:16 is really saying. Though these three texts I have taken are all used in counselling unbelievers, one of them is not about believers today or unbelievers today, and two of them are for believers, not unbelievers. The tragedy is that if you introduce John 3:16 and say that's the gospel, there is nothing in it about repenting, and nothing in it about baptism. There is actually nothing about repenting in the whole of John's Gospel and that is one of the arguments that the free grace people use. They say we don't need repentance, that there is forgiveness available without repentance because John's Gospel doesn't mention repentance. But it doesn't mention it because it is written for believers who are assumed to have repented already. It is written to keep people believing – to go on believing and thus go on having life and never once perish. What an amazing verse!

Is a lot of what I have explained new to you? Well, think about it, study it in Greek if you can, or go to someone who knows Greek and check out whether what I have taught here is true. Always check a preacher out. Please don't

accept anything David Pawson explains to you without checking it out in your Bible. I don't want you to believe anything I have written if you can't find it there for yourself. So don't say, "Do you know what David Pawson believes?" Go and check me out, and then you go and tell people: this is what the Bible says. That is a much surer foundation for your faith. I do not want to develop a fan club. I want to tell you the truth as far as I know it, and ask you to search the scriptures for yourself and find the whole truth of what God has said to us in his Word.



ABOUT DAVID PAWSON

A speaker and author with uncompromising faithfulness to the Holy Scriptures, David brings clarity and a message of urgency to Christians to uncover hidden treasures in God's Word.

Born in England in 1930, David began his career with a degree in Agriculture from Durham University. When God intervened and called him to become a Minister, he completed an MA in Theology at Cambridge University and served as a Chaplain in the Royal Air Force for three years. He moved on to pastor several churches, including the Millmead Centre in Guildford, which became a model for many UK church leaders. In 1979, the Lord led him into an international ministry. His current itinerant ministry is predominantly to church leaders. David and his wife Enid currently reside in the county of Hampshire in the UK.

Over the years, he has written a large number of books, booklets, and daily reading notes. His extensive and very accessible overviews of the books of the Bible have been published and recorded in *Unlocking the Bible*. Millions of copies of his teachings have been distributed in more than 120 countries, providing a solid biblical foundation.

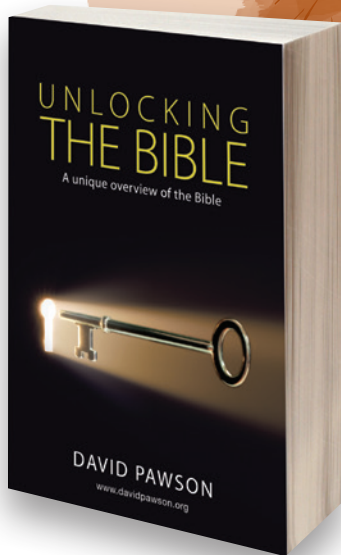
He is reputed to be the "most influential Western preacher in China" through the broadcast of his best-selling *Unlocking the Bible* series into every Chinese province by Good TV. In the UK, David's teachings are often broadcast on Revelation TV.

Countless believers worldwide have also benefited from his generous decision in 2011 to make available his extensive audio video teaching library free of charge at www.davidpawson.org and we have recently uploaded all of David's video to a dedicated channel on www.youtube.com



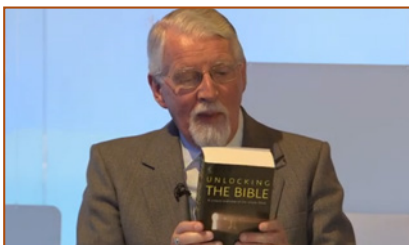
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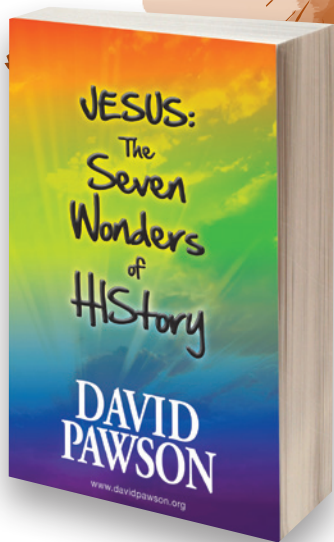
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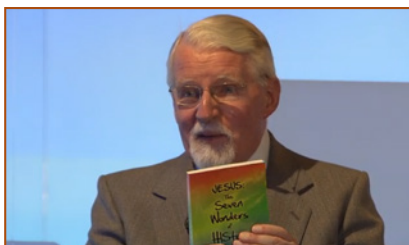


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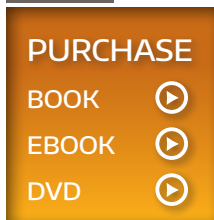
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