

# "Believing" in John 3:16

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*Article In Brief...* 

**In the preliminary sense of the word, to "believe" in Jesus means to mentally acknowledge that He is the Son of God and man's one and only Savior. A John 3:16-type of saving-faith certainly includes this sense of believing, but it also comprises much more—as John 3 and the Bible as a whole demonstrate.**

Several years ago I asked a gentleman if he would be interested in a personal Bible study. He responded to my question by asserting that he knew John 3:16 very well and that John 3:16 was all the Bible he needed. He seemed confident that he was saved by Jesus because he "believed" in Jesus. I have received this same basic response from various individuals through the years. They have read or heard the beautiful, awe-inspiring, truthful words of John 3:16, perhaps many times. And they seem convinced that, since they acknowledge (or mentally accept the factuality of) the existence of Jesus as the Son of God, then they are saved from their sins and will receive eternal life at the end of time. Enough said. Case closed. That's it: "God is a loving God. And since I 'believe' in Jesus, I'm not going to perish, but will receive eternal life."

## AN AWE-INSPIRING VERSE...BUT GOD GAVE US MORE THAN ONE

John 3:16 has undoubtedly been a favorite verse of millions of Christians through the centuries—and rightly so! It is a tremendous statement from our omnibenevolent God. John 3:16 beautifully encapsulates the theme of the entire Bible: God loved humanity (His willfully wayward offspring) so much that He gave the greatest gift He could possibly give, and the only gift that has the power to save man from sin—the perfect sacrifice, the Son of God—and anyone who believes in Him will be saved from punishment and will receive eternal life.

I love John 3:16. It is from the mind of God. It is true. And it is a great summary of the Gospel of Christ. But it is not the only verse God gave to man. It is not the only verse the Holy Spirit inspired man to write. It is not the only soul-saving truth that Jesus ever uttered or that John ever wrote.<sup>1</sup> The psalmist proclaimed: "The **entirety** of Your word is truth, and **every one** of your righteous judgments endures forever" (119:160). Paul wrote that "**all** Scripture is given by inspiration of God" (2 Timothy 3:16). Jesus said that the Spirit of truth would guide the apostles "into **all** truth" (John 16:13), which they subsequently preached and penned (Ephesians 3:1-5). Paul declared "the **whole** counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). Both Moses and John warned about adding to or **taking away** from God's Word (Deuteronomy 4:2; 12:32;<sup>2</sup> Revelation 22:18-19). When a person emphasizes only one sentence of Scripture to the exclusion of all others, he is, in essence, disrespecting and rejecting everything else that God revealed for man's eternal benefit, including many truths that help to interpret other divine statements correctly.

What father is pleased with his son who listens only to 1% of what he says? What teacher will pass a student who completes only 1% of the assigned readings? What employer will tolerate workers content with knowing only 1% of what they need to know—even if that 1% included the most fundamental knowledge of the business?

If John 3:16 were "enough," why did Jesus teach so much more? Why did John write so much more (in the Gospel of John, as well as 1, 2, and 3 John, and Revelation)? And if the Holy Spirit was content with man only knowing John 3:16, why did He inspire men to pen thousands of other eternally beneficial statements (2 Peter 1:20-21)? Both logic and the Bible demand more than a "one-verse Christian."

## THE FOLLY OF ONE-WORD AND ONE-VERSE INTERPRETATIONS

### One Word...Without Context?

Whether you consult an English dictionary or a Greek lexicon, most words have more than one meaning, and some words have a plethora of meanings.<sup>3</sup> In fact, according to Guinness World Records, "The word with the most meanings in English is the verb 'set', with **430 senses** listed in the Second Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary... The word commands the longest entry in the dictionary at **60,000 words**."<sup>4</sup> Some words can function as both a noun and a verb, depending on how they are used within a given context.<sup>5</sup> Other words can be used as

almost total opposites. For example, the word “overlook” can mean “to inspect,” or it can mean “to ignore.”<sup>6</sup> The **only** way to understand words correctly is to understand them **in their context**.

This fundamental truth of interpretation certainly applies to Scripture. Even **very basic words**, which the Bible writers used hundreds or thousands of times, must be carefully considered. The English verb “know”<sup>7</sup> (from the Hebrew *yada* and the Greek *ginosko*) is found well over 1,000 times in the New King James Version. Many times it is used in the sense of merely being aware of something or someone. At other times, it is used in the more intensified sense of being very informed about, and even experienced.<sup>8</sup> Sometimes it is even used to refer to sexual relations (Genesis 4:17; Matthew 1:25). One simply cannot know what “know” means without context. “One-word interpretations”<sup>9</sup> (with all due respect) are ignorant and dangerous.

### One Verse...Without Context?

“Judge not, that you be not judged.” “I can do all things through Christ Who strengthens me.” “Ask, and it will be given to you.” What do these verses<sup>10</sup> actually mean? Are we never to make judgments?<sup>11</sup> Can Christians expect to be so strong that we can lift 10 tons of weight if we so desired (for whatever reason)? Should we actually expect to receive anything that we desire from our “genie” in heaven?<sup>12</sup> The simple fact is, truly understanding one verse of Scripture to the exclusion of all others is as futile and perilous as thinking we can understand a single word without any context. This is certainly true of John 3:16.

Indeed, John wrote “that whoever **believes** in Him [Jesus] should not perish but have eternal life.” But what does it mean to “believe” in Jesus? That’s easy, right? Everyone knows what it means to “believe in” something or someone. And if not, a person can quickly consult a dictionary and discover that believing can mean merely “to consider to be true or honest,” or “to hold as an opinion,” or “suppose” or “think.”<sup>13</sup> These are some of the leading modern definitions and common usages of the English word “believe.” Thus, many conclude, without further knowledge of the Scriptures, or without giving further thought even to other definitions of the modern English term “believe,”<sup>14</sup> that all a person must do to receive eternal life is simply to “consider,” “suppose,” or “think” that Jesus is the Son of God.

## “BELIEVING” AND THE PURPOSE OF THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

We certainly do not want to diminish the necessity and eternal importance of a sinner learning about Jesus and moving from (a) not knowing anything about Him, to (b) coming to understand and accept the evidence for His divinity. A sinner simply cannot be saved by the perfectly just and holy God without “considering” the sinless, loving, sacrificial Savior<sup>15</sup>—“The Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Over the last 2,000 years, billions of people have tragically dismissed the fact-based, soul-saving Gospel of Christ. Yet John affirms that **Jesus is** “God,” “the word,” “the lamb,” “the bread of life,” “the light of the world,” “the door,” “the good shepherd,” “the resurrection and the life,” “the way, the truth, and the life,” “the true vine,” and “the Christ, the Son of God.”<sup>16</sup>

John doesn’t merely suggest that Jesus is divine, he writes for the stated purpose of **proving** such. “And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name” (20:30-31). John arranged his account of the Good News around seven of Jesus’ miracles,<sup>17</sup> including His walking on water, healing of a man born blind, and raising Lazarus from the dead. Jesus performed miracles (and John recorded them) in order **to prove** that **Jesus** was (and is) the Son of God. In response to a group of Jews who inquired about whether or not He was the Christ, Jesus replied,

I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in My Father’s name, they bear witness of Me.... If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; but if I do, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, that you may know and believe that the Father is in Me, and I in Him (John 10:25,37-38).

On another occasion Jesus defended His deity, saying, “[T]he works which the Father has given Me to finish—the very works that I do—bear witness of Me, that the Father has sent Me” (John 5:36). While on Earth, Jesus was “attested by God...with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him” (Acts 2:22, NASB). As would be expected from the One Who claimed to be God incarnate (John 1:1-3,14; 10:30), Scripture records (and John especially so) that Jesus performed miracles throughout His ministry in an effort to provide **sufficient proof** of His divine message and nature.

For any of the billions of atheists, agnostics, skeptics, Jews, and Muslims around the world to be saved from their sins, they must first **listen** to and **learn** of (John 6:45) the powerful defense (*apologia*) John penned—that “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God” (20:31). “He who has ears to hear, let him **hear!**” (Matthew 13:9). But not just “hear,” let him **believe.** But what does it mean to “believe”?

## LET THE BIBLE EXPLAIN “BELIEVING”

What do **you** think it means “to believe”? In one very real sense, it doesn’t matter what you or I think; it only matters what **God** says and what **God** means. The actual, true explanation of the text is ultimately all that matters. If there is a right interpretation, then that particular, correct explanation should be the only interpretation we seek. And such a correct understanding is far from hopeless. Similar to most everyday conversations we have with family members, coworkers, classmates, and clerks, where we generally easily understand what the words in conversations mean, we **can** properly understand the words of Scripture (especially as we diligently and carefully interpret them). But again, we must allow Scripture to interpret itself (as much as possible) and not be deceived by our own preferences and preconceived ideas.

Like most words, the noun “faith”/“belief” (from the Greek *pistis*) and the verb “to believe” (from the Greek *pisteuo*) are used in Scripture in different senses. The words “believe” and “not believe” can certainly refer merely to acknowledging something as being true (evident) or untrue. In Romans 14:2, in a discussion about liberty and matters of opinion, Paul referred to one who “**believes** he may eat all things.” This particular “faith” or “belief” was an **understanding** of the fact that Christians are not bound by the dietary laws of the Old Testament. The apostle John detailed the Pharisees’ interrogation of the blind man whom Jesus healed and noted that “the Jews did **not believe** concerning him...until they called the parents” (John 9:18). These interrogators did not **think** or **consider** that he was telling the truth or that the thing was possible. Recall that when Saul went to Jerusalem after becoming a Christian and “tried to join the disciples” that “they were all afraid of him, and did **not believe** that he was a disciple” (Acts 9:26). These individuals did not **think** that such a prominent persecutor of Christians had actually become a Christian.

James 2:19 provides perhaps the clearest example of the need to carefully consider the terms “belief” (*pistis*) and “believe” (*pisteuo*), and not to assume that a real, saving “belief” in Jesus is merely an “understanding” or “acknowledgment” of Him. James wrote: “You **believe** that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons **believe**—and tremble!” Notice that James parallels the “belief” of demons with the “faith” of some “believers.” Individuals who acknowledge the fact that “there is one God...do well,” since such recognition is the most foundational pillar of Christianity.<sup>18</sup> However, the mere intellectual recognition of the existence of the one true God is an **insufficient** faith. (A “faith alone” type of “faith” will not save.) Mark records one unclean spirit that even confessed that Jesus was “the Holy One of God” (Mark 1:24). Indeed, he **acknowledged** the truth about Jesus. He had a **type** of “faith,” but certainly **not** a **saving** faith. Therefore, as James effectively argued, any person who assents to the existence of God and Jesus “believes” in one respect—but only in the sense that “**demons believe.**” Yet demons are not saved. Thus, it logically follows, neither are those who “merely believe” (i.e., “consider” or “think”) that Jesus is the Son of God.

Recall also that many of the rulers of the Jews “**believed**” in Jesus, “but because of the Pharisees **they did not confess Him**, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God” (John 12:42-43). Did these men “believe”? In one sense, yes: they **considered** Jesus to be the Messiah. But did they have a real, God-approved, saving faith? Surely not, since Jesus had earlier asked, “**How can you believe**, who receive honor from one another, and do not seek the honor that comes from the only God?” (John 5:44). “Believers” who prefer the approval and praise of men are showboating charlatans, not faithful believers in Christ (Matthew 23:5; 6:1-4). A “belief” in Jesus that is not confessed is a shallow, shameful “faith,” not the commendable faith of the saved.<sup>19</sup>

### ALLOW JOHN CHAPTER 3 TO EXPLAIN “BELIEVING” IN JOHN 3:16

If a man says “Shoot!” is he using the word as an imperative statement (a command) or as a frustrated exclamation? If we discover that it is a command, what does he mean? Does he mean to shoot a gun, or shoot heroin, or shoot a ball? And even if we discover that the command is more specific: “Shoot the ball!” does that mean to shoot a basketball, a soccer ball, or a billiard ball? If the statement is still more specific, “Shoot the ball toward the correct goal,” we still do not know if the instruction has to do with a basketball or a soccer ball. Without more information, without context, we simply cannot know.

Twentieth-century American author and children’s book illustrator John McCloskey once stated, “I know you believe you understand what you think I said, but I’m not sure you realize that **what you heard is not what I meant.**”<sup>20</sup> Many make the assumption that God always means what **they** think He means rather than what **He** said (and explained) He meant. In particular, it seems many people within Christendom consider the “believing” of John 3:16 that saves man from his sins is a mere acceptance of the fact that Jesus is the Son of God and “my personal Savior.” Yet, without more information than is provided in this one sentence, and especially without context, a person simply cannot know for sure.

The best place to begin to ensure we have a more thorough and proper understanding of the term “believe” in John 3:16 is John 3. The 36 verses in this chapter can be read in three minutes, and yet the deep, life-changing, soul-stirring truths found therein can be meditated upon for a lifetime.

#### John 3:14-15

In the immediate, previous statement to John 3:16, Jesus referred back to a moment in Israelite history when God punished the ungrateful, complaining Israelites with venomous snakes (Numbers 21). After many died from being bitten by the serpents, the people of Israel confessed their sins and asked Moses to pray to God and intercede on their behalf. "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live.' So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived" (Numbers 21:8-9).

Jesus compared Moses lifting up the bronze serpent in Number 21 with the Son of Man being "lifted up," adding that "whoever believes in Him may have eternal life" (John 3:14-15, ESV). Carefully consider that the afflicted Israelites in Number 21 could **learn** of the critically important, life-saving truth of the bronze serpent and yet still not be healed. They could even "**believe**" (in the sense of mentally assenting to the truth) that if they looked upon the bronze serpent they could be healed, and yet still **not be healed**. Unless they **believed in a deeper sense**, and (a) actually left the comfort of their tent dwelling, (b) walked (or were carried) through (at least a portion of) the vast camp (which was comprised of hundreds of thousands of Israelites—cf. Numbers 1:46), (c) opened their eyes, and (d) looked in the direction of and literally upon the bronze serpent, they would **not** be physically healed by the Great Healer of their deadly condition.

Similarly, anyone who is spiritually "dead in trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:1) and who is "without Christ" (2:12), must look upon the Son of Man and "believe" in Him. This "belief" is no more a mere mental acknowledgment of Jesus being the only answer to the sin problem, than it was for the Israelites to acknowledge and genuinely believe that the bronze serpent was the answer to their deadly physical disorder. God is the Healer, but He only heals those who faithfully follow His approved prescription.

### John 3:5

Interestingly, in this same conversation with Nicodemus, only 10 brief verses earlier, Jesus stated, "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). Notice that Jesus required something of those who desire entrance into the soul-saving, spiritual kingdom of God (cf. Matthew 25:34): they had to be born again—of water and the Spirit. Jesus doesn't say that one merely mentally "believes" an important truth for entrance into God's kingdom. He certainly doesn't say to repeat "the sinner's prayer" for entrance into the kingdom of heaven. Jesus stresses a serious requirement: "**unless**" one follow His directions, "he **cannot** enter the kingdom of God."

So what does it mean to be "born of water and the Spirit"? Perhaps the better question to ask is, "Did God give us any indicators in Scripture to further explain Jesus' instructions to Nicodemus?" Could it be that the inspired apostle John was referring to water baptism? He previously noted three times that John the baptizer immersed sinners in **water** (John 1:26,31,33) as he preached about the coming **Kingdom** (Matthew 3:2). John highlighted the fact that, after Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in John 3:1-21, Jesus and His disciples went to Judea and "baptized" (3:22). John then immediately referenced John the baptizer again, this time noting that he was "baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much **water** there" (3:23). Finally, John the apostle remarked at the very beginning of the next chapter that "Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John (though Jesus Himself did not baptize, but His disciples)" (4:1-2). Given the fact that so many Jews in Jerusalem and in "all the land of Judea" were being baptized by John the baptizer (Mark 1:5), as well as Jesus' disciples, and considering the apostle John's frequent mention of immersion in water, not to mention the dozens of times that water baptism is mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament, doesn't it make sense that Jesus was referring to water baptism in John 3:5? What other action in the New Testament involving water is associated with entering the Kingdom of God?

Paul indicated that Christians have been sanctified and cleansed "with the washing of water by the word" (Ephesians 5:26). He also taught that "by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body" (1 Corinthians 12:13). Peter noted that we have been "**born again**, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, **through the word of God**" (1 Peter 1:23). James wrote that God "**begat**" (KJV) or "**brought us forth by the word of truth**, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures" (1:18). And Jesus said we must be "born of water and the spirit" (John 3:5). It seems biblically consistent to conclude that the **Holy Spirit's** divine "seed" (i.e., His Word/Gospel—Luke 8:11) is planted into the minds of men and works powerfully in their hearts to produce a life-changing understanding of Christ, as well as his own life, which leads to **immersion in water** in order to enter **God's kingdom**.

Still, even if a person concludes that he simply does not understand Jesus' statement to Nicodemus, he surely must admit that Jesus' instructions in John 3:5 do not harmonize well with the shallow, life-unaltering, mere acknowledgement-like view of "belief" in John 3:16.

### John 3:36

In the final verse of the chapter, John makes a very revealing contrast that helps to elucidate further the saving-faith of John 3:16. Unfortunately, the specific contrast is unclear in some versions. For example, the NKJV reads: "He who **believes** in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does **not believe** the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (John 3:36). The KJV likewise contrasts "believing" with "not believing." The

underlying Greek terms, however, are actually different. John did **not** contrast *pisteuo* and *ouk pisteuo*—“believing” and “not believing” (cf. John 9:18). Instead, John actually contrasted *pisteuo* and *apeitheo*—one who “believes” in Jesus with the person who “does **not obey**” Him (ESV, ASV, NASB, RSV). Thus, to really “believe” in Jesus is to fully submit to Him—to obey Him. The Greek lexicographer Joseph Thayer appropriately commented on the verb *pisteuo* (“to believe”) and explained that when it is used “especially of the faith by which a man embraces Jesus” it means “a conviction, full of joyful trust, that Jesus is the Messiah—the divinely appointed author of eternal salvation in the kingdom of God, **conjoined with obedience to Christ.**”<sup>21</sup>

The apostle Peter similarly contrasted the “believing” with the “disobedient,” saying, “This precious value, then, is for you who **believe** (*pisteuo*). But for those who **disbelieve** (*apisteo*), ‘The stone which the builders rejected, this became the very corner stone,’ and, ‘A stone of stumbling and a rock of offense;’ for they stumble because they are **disobedient** (*apeitheo*) to the word, and to this doom they were appointed” (1 Peter 2:7-8, NASB). The Hebrews writer also used these terms (or derivatives thereof) in an enlightening manner when explaining that the Israelites were not allowed into the Promised Land because they “did **not obey**” (3:18; *apeitheo*). Yet the next verse states: “So we see that they could not enter in because of **unbelief**” (3:19; *apistia*). And then six verses later, in Hebrews 4:6, the writer declared that they “did not enter because of **disobedience**” (*apeitheia*). When the Bible is allowed to explain itself (both in John 3 and elsewhere),<sup>22</sup> we learn that a real, trusting, saving faith in God is an **obedient** faith.<sup>23</sup>

### John 3:18-21

A fourth indicator in John 3 that “believing” and “obeying” are closely linked (and that a mere internal conviction is not intended) is found in verses 18-21:

He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.

He who does “not believe” in Jesus loves the darkness and practices evil and does not follow the light. He who really “believes,” on the other hand, “**does** the truth” and so “**comes** to the light, that his **deeds** may be clearly seen, that they have been **done** in God.” Elsewhere the apostle John wrote: “Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, ‘I know Him [God],’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him” (1 John 2:4).

The irrationality of the position that a person is saved from his sins by “faith alone” (apart from any act of obedience) is apparent in the fact that God **commands** man to believe in Him. And thus to believe in God is to be obedient to a command of God. As John wrote in 1 John 3:23: “And this is His **commandment**: that we should **believe** on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us **commandment.**” So, to not believe is to disobey God, and to believe is to obey. In fact, Jesus stated in John 6:29, to “believe in Him whom He sent” is “the **work** of God.”<sup>24</sup>

## A CRITICAL FIGURE OF SPEECH TO CONSIDER

If Bible students fail to recognize the inspired writers’ use of various figures of speech, it will be impossible to correctly understand many sections of Scripture. Just as English-speaking Americans are expected to properly interpret metaphors (“Life is a rollercoaster”), sarcasm (“You don’t say”), and hyperbolic expressions (“I’m so hungry I could eat a horse”), Bible students must also be aware that Scripture contains many figures of speech —“They’re everywhere!”<sup>25</sup>

One common figure of speech (which has a not-so-common name) is known as synecdoche: where a part is put for the whole, or the whole for the part. A person showing off his car might say, “Check out my wheels.” “Wheels” are relatively small parts of the car yet the term is used to refer to the entire car. A military leader might refer to how many “boots they have on the ground,” when he is actually emphasizing the soldiers in the boots.

Bible writers also used synecdoche. For example, to “break bread” was a common, ancient synecdoche where “bread” (“a part”) was put for **all** of the food and drink that would be consumed at a common meal (“the whole”).<sup>26</sup> After the establishment of the Church, “the breaking of bread” also came to stand for the **entirety** of the Lord’s Supper (where consumption of both the unleavened bread **and** the fruit of the vine is actually meant—Acts 2:42; 20:7).

So what does all of this have to do with “believing”? Simply that the verb “believe” and the nouns “belief” and “believer” are often used as synecdoches. A real, saving faith certainly **begins** with the critically important step of coming to “to consider” or “to think” (i.e., “to believe”)<sup>27</sup> Jesus is truly the Son of God, but a biblical, God-approved complete “belief” in Jesus **means so much more** than merely coming to the mental conclusion that Jesus is the

Divine Savior. A biblical believer confesses His belief in Jesus (Romans 10:9-10; 1 John 4:15). He repents of His sins (Luke 13:3; Acts 2:38; 22:16). He is baptized into Christ (John 3:5; Acts 2:38; 22:16). A real believer “obeys”—both on his way to becoming a complete “believer” (i.e., a Christian) and after he becomes a child of God (John 3:36; Hebrews 5:9; 11:6; 1 John 2:3-5; 5:1-5; Revelation 2:10). Though all these elements are involved in faithfully following Jesus, true followers of Christ are often referred to as just “believers.”

When thousands of non-Christians in Acts 2 heard the Gospel preached by the apostles and were “cut to the heart,” they asked, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” (Acts 2:37). “Then Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins’” (vs. 38). “Then those who gladly received his word were baptized.... And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers” (2:41-42). What word did the Bible writer use to describe these who (a) repented, (b) were baptized, and (c) continued in the apostles doctrine, etc.? What were these obedient followers of Christ called? They are referred to as those “who **believed**” (2:44). Were they mere “consenters” to Christ? No. They **became** “believers,” and were “**continuing**” to remain “believers” (2:42-47). That is, they were actively following Christ. They were obedient to Him.

When a pagan Philippian jailor once asked Paul and Silas, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:30), God’s spokesmen replied: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household” (vs. 31). Is coming to “believe” (i.e., “know about”) Jesus necessary? Absolutely. Nothing else matters if a person doesn’t first come to recognize Who Jesus is and what He has done for him. Thus, the apostles then “spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house” (vs. 32). Then, “he and all his family were baptized” (v. 33). Interestingly, as in Acts 2, the Bible does not refer to them as actually “having believed in God” until **after** they were baptized (vs. 34).

A synecdoche is a very real figure of speech that has been used throughout history, including in Bible times. The fact is, regarding the salvation of sinners, the sum total of the God-given conditions to be saved are oftentimes indicated by the use of one or two.<sup>28</sup> And, as D.R. Dungan noted, “Generally the first is mentioned—that of faith—because without it nothing else could follow.”<sup>29</sup> The Bible writers could have referred to God’s children as “repenters,” “confessors,” or “immersed ones,” but much of the time they reasonably referred to them simply as those who “believed.”<sup>30</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In one respect—in the preliminary sense of the word—to “believe” in Jesus means to mentally acknowledge that He is the Son of God and man’s one and only Savior. A John 3:16-type of saving-faith certainly includes this sense of believing, but it also comprises much more. It includes trusting in the lifted-up Savior (3:14-15), rejecting darkness, coming to the light, and doing deeds of truth (3:19-21), being “born again...of water and the Spirit” (3:3,5), and obeying the Son (3:36). Becoming a “believer” in the full sense of the word is to completely put one’s trust in the Savior: not merely to “acknowledge” Him, but to **follow** Him wherever He leads—including to confess Him publicly, to repent of sin, to be immersed in water, and then to live daily as an obedient servant of the King, “even to the point of death” (Revelation 2:10, NIV). As Jesus said in John 12:25-26: “He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also. If anyone serves Me, him My Father will honor.”

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> We cannot say for sure if John 3:16 is a direct quotation of Jesus or a comment by John. The great thing is, we do not have to know this in order to know the teachings of God. Whether John 3:16 is a direct quote from Jesus or not, **it is from God**, and thus divinely authoritative. We should be careful not to assume that red-letter Bibles have all of (and only) Jesus’ direct quotations printed in red. Judgment calls must be made by publishers as to which words they put in red and which words they do not. The fact is, whatever color publishers use for the words of Jesus and the Bible writers, **all of them** deserve our utmost respect because **all of them** come from God.

<sup>2</sup> Consider: would God have been pleased with any Israelites who reasoned that “Deuteronomy 6:4-5 is all I need. I don’t need to know any more than that”? The Shema, as Jews call it, certainly summarizes one of the main themes of Scripture, but treasuring this passage to the neglect of all others would have been perilous for the Israelites, as it would be for us—whether about this verse or any other.

<sup>3</sup> Depending on what dictionary one consults, the words “run,” “go,” “take,” and “stand” each may have 100 or more definitions (i.e., senses in which they can be understood).

<sup>4</sup> See [www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/english-word-with-the-most-meanings/](http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/english-word-with-the-most-meanings/) (emp. added), and specifically its reference to the 1989 printing of the Second Edition of *Oxford English Dictionary*.

<sup>5</sup> Example: “I object to the object hanging in the courtroom.”

<sup>6</sup> Example: “As I overlooked my research paper one last time, I decided to overlook the endnotes, since they are sometimes tedious to read.”

<sup>7</sup> Or derivatives thereof (e.g., knew, known, knowing).

<sup>8</sup> E.g., Exodus 6:3; 1 Samuel 3:7. For more information, see Eric Lyons (2006), “Did the Patriarchs Know Jehovah By Name?” Apologetics Press, [apologeticspress.org/apcontent.aspx?category=6&article=1051](http://apologeticspress.org/apcontent.aspx?category=6&article=1051).

<sup>9</sup> Interpretations based upon merely one word without any reliance on the immediate or remote context.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 7:1; Philippians 4:13; Matthew 7:7.

<sup>11</sup> See Eric Lyons (2003), “To Judge, or Not to Judge,” [www.apologeticspress.org/APContent.aspx?category=11&article=1197](http://www.apologeticspress.org/APContent.aspx?category=11&article=1197).

<sup>12</sup> See Kyle Butt (2010), “Defending the Bible’s Position on Prayer,” [www.apologeticspress.org/APContent.aspx?category=13&article=3483](http://www.apologeticspress.org/APContent.aspx?category=13&article=3483).

<sup>13</sup> “Believe” (2019), *Merriam-Webster*, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/believe](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/believe).

<sup>14</sup> Example: “To have a firm or wholehearted religious conviction or persuasion” ([www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/believe](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/believe)).

<sup>15</sup> John 14:6; Ephesians 2:12-13; 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9.

<sup>16</sup> John 1:1; 1:29; 6:49; 8:12; 10:9,11,14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1; 20:31.

<sup>17</sup> John 2:1-11; 4:46-54; 5:1-9; 6:1-14; 6:16-21; 9:1-41; 11:1-44.

<sup>18</sup> If a person doesn’t first come to believe in the one true God of the Bible, nothing else matters. Everything else a person comes to learn and believe logically **follows** an acceptance of God’s existence.

<sup>19</sup> Matthew 10:32-33; Romans 10:9-10; 1 John 4:15; 1 Timothy 6:12.

<sup>20</sup> “Attributed to Robert McCloskey, U.S. State Department spokesman, by Marvin Kalb, CBS reporter, in TV Guide, 31 March 1984, citing an unspecified press briefing during the Vietnam war,” <http://quotes.yourdictionary.com/author/quote/601648>, emp. added.

<sup>21</sup> J.H. Thayer (1977 reprint), *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker), p. 511, emp. added.

<sup>22</sup> See especially James 2:14-26 and Hebrews 11.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Romans 1:5; 16:26, ESV.

<sup>24</sup> “Faith...is a work of God in the sense it is that which God has ordered man to do”—Guy N. Woods (1989), *A Commentary on The Gospel of John* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Company), p. 125. This phrase does not mean works performed by God; rather, the intent is “works required and approved by God” (Thayer, p. 248). Cf. Wayne Jackson (1997), “The Role of ‘Works’ in the Plan of Salvation,” *Christian Courier*, 32:47, April.

<sup>25</sup> Just another example of hyperbole, i.e., intended exaggeration.

<sup>26</sup> Jeremiah 16:7; Acts 2:46; 27:34-35.

<sup>27</sup> “Believe” (2019), *Merriam-Webster*, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/believe](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/believe).

<sup>28</sup> Where are confession and repentance mentioned in Mark 16:16? Where are belief and confession in Acts 2:38? Where is belief mentioned in 1 John 4:15? Etc.

<sup>29</sup> D.R. Dungan (1888), *Hermeneutics* (Delight, AR: Gospel Light, reprint), p. 305.

<sup>30</sup> Acts 4:32; 5:14; 9:42; 10:45; 18:8; 1 Timothy 4:12; 6:2.

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