

John 3:16 οὕτως γὰρ ἠγάπησεν
ὁ θεὸς τὸν κόσμον ὥστε τὸν
υἱὸν ἑαυτοῦ ἠγάπησεν ὃς
ἔδωκεν τὴν αἰώνιον ζωὴν ἵνα ὁ
πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν μὴ ἀποληται ἀλλ' ἔχη
ζωὴν αἰώνιον

The Meaning of the Word “Should” John 3:16

By Steve Combs

John 3:16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him **should** not perish, but have everlasting life.

Why does John 3:16 say “should” not perish. Is it possible that one could perish even though he believes in Christ? The word “should” is often used to mean an obligation or a condition. It indicates something that is not certain. The answer to this question involves both the English word “should” and the Greek words from the Textus Receptus.

Let’s take a look at the Greek words first and read the verse this way.

John 3:16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, **that** (ὡς-ina) whosoever believeth in him **should** (ἀποληται-apoletai) not perish, but **have** (ἔχη-eche) everlasting life.

These Greek words are significant, because they, as well as our understanding of the word “should,” are the source of the question. The Greek words for “should” and “have” are in the *subjunctive mood* in Greek. The subjunctive mood is the way Greek expresses a *wish* or a *possibility* or a *probability*. It something that is not actually happening, but is a definite possibility or probability. It is not a certainty. The Greek mood of actual reality or certainty is the *indicative*.

Now, before you get too concerned and confused and start doubting your salvation, let me remind you of a couple of things. First, God inspired the Greek words of the New Testament. He chose those words and their grammar. So, it was God who chose to put these words into the subjunctive mood and we are here to find out why He did it. In the meantime, let me also remind you of the assurance the Lord Jesus gave us in John 5:24, where the verbs “hath,” “shall not,” and “is passed” are in the indicative mood. They are certain.

John 5:24 Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.

The key to understanding the problem in John 3:16 is in the little Greek word “ina” –that. The reason John 3:16 is in the subjunctive mood is because it is a *purpose* statement. The purpose for God sending His Son and of believing in Christ is “in order that” (ina) you not perish, but have everlasting life.

The reason God gave His Son is so that you will not perish, but have eternal life. A purpose statement is not a statement of something that is actually happening right now. It is a statement of something that *will* happen *if* you do something (in this case-believe). Since it is not a certainty that you will believe and therefore, it is not certain you will have eternal life, the indicative mood cannot be used. It needs to be the subjunctive. So, in reality the subjunctive purpose statement is an *assurance* that *if* you believe you *will* receive eternal life and you *will not* perish.

So, why did the King James translators use the word “should” instead of “will” or “shall?” The word *should* has several meanings , but we often use it as a statement of obligation or condition. For example, as an obligation, we may say, “I *should* brush my teeth twice a day.” A conditional sentence using this word would be something like this, “He *should* be here soon, if nothing has happened.” In both examples it is uncertain whether the action will truly happen.

However, the word is not used in either of these ways in John 3:16. As you know, there are differences in our current usage of the English language and the way it was used in 1611. You are also aware that there are a few archaic words in the KJV. You may not be aware that there are also some perfectly good words in the the KJV that are used today, but they had definitions in 1611 that are now archaic. *Should* is one of those words. Let’s examine the meanings of the word *should* by comparing the definitions as found in the current Merriam-Webster online dictionary with the 1828 Webster dictionary, which is much closer to the definitions in the KJV.

Current Merriam-Webster	1828 Webster
<p>past tense of shall</p> <p>1 —used in auxiliary function to express condition if he <i>should</i> leave his father, his father would die — Genesis 44:22 (Revised Standard Version)</p> <p>2 —used in auxiliary function to express obligation, propriety, or expediency 'tis commanded I <i>should</i> do so— William Shakespeare this is as it <i>should</i> be— H. L. Savage you <i>should</i> brush your teeth after each meal</p> <p>3 —used in auxiliary function to express futurity from a point of view in the past realized that she <i>should</i> have to do most of her farm work before sunrise— Ellen Glasgow</p>	<p>SHOULD. shood. The preterit of shall, but now used as an auxiliary verb, either in the past time or conditional present ...</p> <p>1. I should go. When should in this person is uttered without emphasis, it declares simply that an event would take place, on some condition or under circumstances.</p> <p>But when expressed with emphasis, should in this person denotes obligation, duty or determination.</p> <p>2. Thou shouldst go. You should Without emphasis, should, in the second person, is nearly equivalent to ought; you ought to go, it is your duty, you are bound to go. [See Shall.]</p> <p>3. He should go. should, in the third person, has the same force as in the second.</p> <p>6. should be, ought to be; a proverbial phrase, conveying some censure, contempt or irony. Things are not as they should be. The biys think their mother no better than they should be. Addison.</p> <p>With emphasis, should expresses determination in the speaker conditionally to compel the person to act. "If I had the care of you, you should go, whether willing or not."</p>

<p>4 —used in auxiliary function to express what is probable or expected with an early start, they <i>should</i> be here by noon</p> <p>5 —used in auxiliary function to express a request in a polite manner or to soften direct statement I <i>should</i> suggest that a guide ... is the first essential— L. D. Reddick</p>	<p>4. If I should, if you should, if he should, &c. denote a figure contingent event.</p> <p>5. After should, the principal verb is sometimes omitted, without obscuring the sense. So subjects love just kings, or so they should. Ktyden. That is, so they should love them.</p> <p>7. " We think it strange that stones should fall from the aerial regions." In this use, should implies that stones do fall. In all similar phrases, should implies the actual existence of the fact, without a condition of supposition.</p>
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Notice that not all the definitions are exactly the same. For example, the fifth definition in each column is different, but the fifth definition in the 1828 Webster is actually still present in modern usage. However, the seventh definition in the 1828 is no longer used in current Modern (American) English. Notice what Webster said of this last definition, "In all similar phrases, should implies the actual existence of the fact, without a condition of supposition." In other words, *should* does not imply an *uncertainty*. It is a statement of actual *fact*.

In John 3:16, "should not perish" is used in the sense of this seventh and final definition. It is not a statement of what *might* happen. It is a statement of *fact*. It is a statement of what absolutely *shall* happen. If you believe, you *shall not* perish.

The KJV generally uses the words "should" and "might" to express the Greek subjunctive. However, the use of the word "should" does not necessarily imply an uncertain event. The KJV often uses the word "should" to describe certain and actual facts. So, be aware of how the KJV uses this word. When we encounter the word *should*, we *should* stop to see why it is there and determine if it is expressing a condition, an obligation, or an actual fact.