

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Worlds and Worlds

He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. (John 1:10)

When you read the word "world" in the New Testament, what do you think? Does the word always mean the same thing?

Most basic New Testament Greek dictionaries identify at least eight distinct meanings for the word translated "world" in this passage. Here is Strong's definition, one of the more basic New Testament dictionaries.

187 occurrences; AV translates as "world" 186 times, and "adorning" once. **1** an apt and harmonious arrangement or constitution, order, government. **2** ornament, decoration, adornment, i.e. the arrangement of the stars, 'the heavenly hosts', as the ornament of the heavens. 1 Pet. 3:3. **3** the world, the universe. **4** the circle of the earth, the earth. **5** the inhabitants of the earth, men, the human race. **6** the ungodly multitude; the whole mass of men alienated from God, and therefore hostile to the cause of Christ. **7** world affairs, the aggregate of things earthly. 7A the whole circle of earthly goods, endowments riches, advantages, pleasures, etc, which although hollow and frail and fleeting, stir desire, seduce from God and are obstacles to the cause of Christ. **8** any aggregate or general collection of particulars of any sort. 8A the Gentiles as contrasted to the Jews (Rom. 11:12 etc). 8A of believers only, John 1:29; 3:16; 3:17; 6:33; 12:47 1 Cor. 4:9; 2 Cor. 5:19.¹

When you encounter the word "world" in a New Testament passage and learn that it was translated from this Greek word, how do you go

AV Authorized Version

¹James Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible : Showing Every Word of the Test of the Common English Version of the Canonical Books, and Every Occurrence of Each Word in Regular Order.*, electronic ed. (Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship., 1996), G2889.

about deciding which definition of the eight (plus the sub-definitions that appear in the list) should apply to the word in this passage? First, let's briefly examine a common English word, "trunk." When you see the word "trunk" in a sentence, how do you know if the writer is referring to an appendage of an elephant, the back storage compartment of a car, the base of a large tree, or several other equally divergent possibilities? You examine the context in which the writer uses the word. If he is describing an experience that he had during an African safari in which he saw a herd of wild elephants, you know that he is referring to the elephant's unique appendage. If he is referring to a trip in an automobile in which he discovered that he had a flat tire and needed to stop and replace it with the spare tire that is stored in the "trunk" of the car, you know what he intended. Likewise as we study Scripture and encounter the word "world," we need to pause and pay careful attention to the context in which the word appears. Here is an informative commentary on the word as it appears three times in our study verse from a respected and conservative commentary.

"The world," in the first two clauses, plainly means the *created* world, *into* which *He* came, says Jn 1:9; "*in* it He was," says this verse. By His Incarnation, He became *an inhabitant of it*, and bound up with it. Yet it "was made by Him" (Jn 1:3-5). Here, then, it is merely alluded to, in contrast partly with His being *in* it, but still more with the reception He met with from it. "The world that knew Him not" (1Jn 3:1) is of course the intelligent world of mankind.²

²Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, A. R. Fausset et al., *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*, On Spine: Critical and Explanatory Commentary. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), Jn 1:10.

Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown here interpret the first two appearances of the word as referring to the material created world. In the Incarnation God entered his material universe, becoming part of His own creation for a brief moment (Thirty three years compared with eternity is indeed brief.). However, it would be senseless to interpret the third appearance of the word in the same way. Did rocks, trees, rivers, and oceans “know him not”? We might discuss the possibility that the first two appearances of the word refer to the same material universe or to two distinct “worlds,” but we cannot interpret the third appearance of the word to refer to the whole of the material world. Obvious by the descriptive “...knew him not” this use of the word refers to sentient (intelligent, thinking) beings in the material world.

Once we establish these basic applications of the word, we have merely started the process of getting to the reason that John made such a statement. For example, John will immediately move from this verse to a fascinating point. Some people who were personal witnesses of the life and teachings of Jesus indeed believed Him, and believed that He was God Incarnate. Others, equally eyewitnesses of His life and teachings, refused to believe that He was God. In fact many of them rather believed that He was deranged and deluded. Based on the same exact evidence, why would one intelligent human being believe the evidence and another equally intelligent human being fiercely reject the evidence? If some humans “knew Him” and some humans “knew Him not,” how do we further define the word “world” in our study verse? We cannot say within this context that all humans “knew him not.” Did John have a more restricted meaning of the word “world” in mind when you used it the third time in this verse?

When John wrote, “*And we know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness*” (1 John 5:19), it is obvious that he viewed “we” who are of God as not being part of the “whole world” that “*lieth in wickedness.*” Many years ago a man was telling me of an experience that he had during his time in seminary. The college that he attended believed in a universal atonement, but not in universal salvation. During a particular chapel service, one of the religious studies professors was preaching to the students. With warm zeal he stated, “I believe in the ‘Whosoever wills’ of the Bible.” Immediately another professor who did not believe in universal atonement jumped to his feet and shouted back, “What about all the ‘Whosoever won’ts’ in the Bible?”

If we apply the definition of the word to its third appearance in John 1:10 that acknowledges the obvious reality of the context—that some of humanity readily believed and received Jesus, and some clearly did not—applying the eighth definition of the word to the passage, “...*any aggregate or general collection of particulars of any sort,*” we face the obvious teaching of the passage. However, answering one question often asks additional questions to drive us to a deeper and clearer truth. Why do some people believe the gospel when it is preached and some do not believe it? I offer at least two Biblical answers to the question.

1. Any person whose essential identity lies with the ungodly “world” that “knew him not,” like his counterparts in John 1:10, will refuse to acknowledge that Jesus is God Incarnate. Rather than offering a personal response, let’s allow John to answer the question, using Jesus’ own words. “*He that is of God heareth God’s words: ye therefore hear them not, because ye are not of God.*” (John 8:47) In this verse Jesus affirms the same principle that John stated in our study passage. Prior to a person believing the truth about Jesus, he/she must have a familial relationship with God, a relationship that occurs through birth, not decisions or philosophical concepts. (John 3:1-10; do not overlook the point that a person must be born of God *before* he/she can either see or enter God’s kingdom.) John 8:47 presents the explanatory principle of the events that began in John 8:12. Not only did Jesus assert that the unbelieving people who argued with Him in this context *would not* believe in Him, He asserted that they *could not*—did not possess the fundamental ability to do so.
2. It is possible that a person whom God has regenerated (He/She has experienced the new birth of John 3:1-10.) may be so deceived by false teachings as not to believe the truth of the gospel. A defining example of this fact appears in Second Timothy 2:14-26. Paul mentions Hymenaeus and Philetus as specific examples of false teachers whose insidious error was so convincing that they overthrew the faith of some. Follow the passage. Paul never questions that those whom these men deceived didn’t “really have faith.” He rather affirms that they did. However, the compelling influence of these two false teachers convinced some who were true believers—truly regenerate elect of God—

that the resurrection had already occurred. Denial of the truth of the resurrection is no small or insignificant tenet of the faith once and for all time delivered to the saints. It forms a core truth of the gospel. Through the influence of false teachers, some of God's regenerate elect were deceived into believing such an insidious error as to think that the resurrection had already occurred and they were left out of it. This doctrine hopelessly compromises the Biblical doctrine of a general resurrection involving both the righteous and the wicked (John 5:28-29).

Thus when we preach the gospel to a group of people and some believe it and some do not, we cannot with any degree of certainty know whether those who do not believe our preaching are not regenerated, or they are regenerated, but grievously deceived. Rushing to judgment and pronouncing anyone who does not believe the gospel as an unregenerate at best, or possibly not one of the elect at all, cannot be done with any degree of Biblical approval. Typically folks who seem obsessed with judging the eternal state of anyone who rejects their message will defensively protest, "I'm only acting as a 'fruit inspector' and refer to the passage in the Sermon on the Mount, 'Ye shall know them by their fruits...', (Matthew 7:16), a passage referring to false teachers; not to regenerate or non-regenerate people who hear the gospel.

"...the world knew him not" forms a clear pronouncement of Scripture related to the Incarnation and to people who were eyewitnesses of God Incarnate in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. Scripture faithfully reports God's truth, including His divine pronouncements that the most faithful of believers cannot with certainty know regarding someone they may meet. Scripture is factual and reliable in its pronouncements. We should respect Scripture when it makes such statements. However, we should not presume to possess the same divine insights as God and attempt to pass judgment on everyone whom we encounter with the presumption of Biblical certainty. Such dogmatic pronouncements may reflect more sinful pride than Biblical fidelity.

We may safely conclude that people whose essential identity is this "world" not only will not, but indeed cannot "know him." We cannot discern in every instance whether a specific individual who does not believe our preaching is so identified, or if he/she has been deceived by

the Hymanaeus and Philetus false teachers that abound in every generation.

Does this inability to discern a person's spiritual state with certainty mean that we should neglect preaching the gospel or personally witnessing our faith at any opportunity that presents itself? Absolutely not! God charges us with being His witnesses, not with judging the eternal condition of folks we meet. Does this inability mean that we should in any way dilute the Biblical commands to hearers of our preaching or personal witnessing to believe the gospel and to repent? Absolutely not!

Occasionally—in fact routinely in our day—Christians offer a cliché that they believe relieves this tension between the extent of Jesus' death and the gospel's call to faith and repentance. They use the term that Jesus' death was "sufficient for all of humanity, but efficient for the elect."

Jim Ellis deals with this cliché in his website: <http://www.graceonlinelibrary.org/etc/printer-friendly.asp?ID=273>

This essentially identifies the doctrine of effectual calling with atonement! It removes any efficacy from the atonement itself and makes Christ's work on the cross merely tentative! If He has died for all sufficiently and the only particularity is in the personal application by the Spirit, then I cannot see how one distinguishes this from the universal atonement of the Arminians, who claim that Christ died for all men, with its benefits accruing only to those who believe. The difference between the two does not lie in the atonement, but in the Spirit's effectual calling.

At its heart the "sufficient-efficient" concept corrupts the very nature of the gospel, transforming it from a glorious declaration into a tentative proposition, an offer to sinful humanity that will only become true if sinful humans accept its "offer." The New Testament gospel is a declaration of fact, not a proposition. Its truths are true, not mere offers of divine favor. John strongly affirms this fact in the context of our study passage. (More on this point later.)

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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor