

What Does “Only-Begotten” Mean?

I was fortunate (or should I say “blessed”?) enough to be born in a home in which Dad and Mom both loved each other. I could tell that. I also could tell that they loved God. And Jesus.

My parents also loved the Bible. They loved it enough to require that we children (there were six of us) memorized Scripture verses. Now, we didn’t memorize a lot of them, but we memorized some important ones.

One of the verses our folks asked us to memorize was John 3:16. In all honesty, I think my Mom was more behind this memorizing bit than my dad, but he certainly did not object. Later on, I attended a boys’ club in our church called “Sky Pilots.” The appeal for us young boys was that we got to make model airplanes. And try to fly them. The justification for the adults was that we were required to memorize Scripture.

At one point, I can recall being asked to memorize John 3:1-21. If you know the Bible at all that is a rather important passage of Scripture. It talks about seeing and even entering Jesus’ kingdom, whatever that is. It talks about believing in Jesus. That sounds pretty important to me. It talks about possessing eternal life. That sounds REALLY important to me. It talks about not coming under judgment, but instead, having eternal life. That also sounds important.

Buried in all this simple, yet important talk was that business about God’s Son. We were supposed to believe, or trust, in God’s “only-begotten” Son. That was important because God’s giving to the world of His “only-begotten” Son was supposed to be a good way to measure how much He loved us.

So what does it mean to be God’s “only-begotten” Son?

Recently I took the time to peer at John 3:16 in quite a number of different Bible versions (all written in English, of course). There were a few versions that used language like “only-begotten.” I get that, but what on earth does it mean? Other versions talked about the fact that God gave His only Son, or His “one and only Son.” Four versions spoke of God’s “unique” Son. But I always get the feeling that some of those versions that emphasize the uniqueness of God’s Son are missing out on something else – something about being born. Doesn’t the word “begotten” have something to do with being born?

So I did something unthinkable. I used a Bible tool. It is called the “BlueLetter Bible.” You can look at it online. I used the New American Standard Bible as my version of choice because I think it is pretty accurate. I looked up John 3:16 in it, and here is what I came up with. The Greek word translated (in the King James Version and the New American Standard Version) as “only-begotten” is the word *monogenēs*. There is a

number attached to this word. It is the number [3439](#). So I looked up the different uses of that word. It is used only 9 times in the entire New Testament, so it shouldn't be too hard to look at each Scripture reference. Why don't you join me? First of all, I think it is safe to say that the part of *monogenēs* translated as "only" is the Greek word *mono*. "one" or "sole" or "only." The part of the word translated as "being born" is *genēs*.

Now the first time the word appears in the New Testament is in the Gospel of Luke. That is interesting. Luke is a doctor. Perhaps he can shed some light on what "only-begotten" means? The first reference is Luke 7:12. It talks about Jesus approaching the gate of the city of Nain. As Jesus came near, a dead man was being carried out. He was "the only son of his mother." That's interesting. I would judge from that verse that this poor widow lady had only one child, and he was a son, now, a dead son. So her son was her "only-born" child or son. Maybe we are getting somewhere. Was there something special about him? You bet! He was her son, and he was her only-born. She had no other children. The fact that he was now gone and she was a surviving widow bereft of her only-born son is a sad thing indeed! Who would care for her in her old age?

In Luke 8:40-42, we read that Jesus was returning to the region of Galilee, when a man named Jairus, an official of the local synagogue, greeted Him. He fell at Jesus' feet and begged Him to come to his house. He had an only daughter, about twelve years old, and she was dying. So Jairus was desperate. He had an only-born child, his daughter, who was twelve years old and dying. Jairus wanted Jesus to save her life! Jesus agreed to go on his way, but he was interrupted by a woman who needed healing (Luke 8:43-48). Jesus took the time to heal her, but then Jairus got word that his daughter had died, and he shouldn't trouble Jesus any longer. Jesus responded, "Don't be afraid, just believe, and she will be made well." When He arrived He told all to leave, except for Peter, James, and John, and the girl's parents. He took her by the hand and said, "Child, arise!" Her spirit returned, and she got up immediately. He instructed that she be given something to eat. Her parents were amazed, but Jesus told them to tell no one what had happened (Luke 8:49-56).

So by now, we have an idea of what "only-born" means. It means someone is the only child of his parents. It makes no difference if he is a son or a daughter. If he is the only child, he is the "only-born."

Luke 9:28-36 describes what we call Jesus' transfiguration. Jesus took Peter, James, and John up into a mountain to pray. Jesus was "transfigured" before them. His face was different, and His clothes became bright and gleaming. Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus in glory, and they were speaking with Jesus about His coming departure back up to heaven, which would be accomplished at Jerusalem.

On the next day they came down from the mountain, and were met by a large crowd. A man from the crowd shouted to Jesus, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son, for he is my "only-born." He went on to describe how his son was tormented by a demon who

would seize him and injure him. He had begged Jesus disciples to cast out the demon, but they were unable to do so. Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. They were all amazed at the greatness of God (Luke 9:37-43).

Once again, we see that an “only-born” child is the only-born son or daughter of a parent.

The next time we run across this term is in John’s Gospel. In John 1:14 we read, “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only-born from the Father, full of grace and truth.” So we learn that Jesus is God’s “only-born” Son.

In John 1:18 we read, “No one has seen God at any time; the only-born God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him.” So Jesus is the only-born Son of His Father, and since the Father is God, His “only-born” is also God. And since Jesus was born as a man, only then could He accurately explain to us who God is!

I think we are beginning to understand what “only-born” means in reference to Jesus. He was not God’s only-born before He was born as a baby. It was not until Jesus was born as a baby that He could accurately be described as being “only-born.” May I state the obvious? One has to be born in order to be his parent’s “only-born.”

So the term “only-born” does indeed refer to Jesus’ uniqueness. He is the only Son of His Father. But He had to be born as a human in order to be God’s “only-born.” This term speaks to us of the Incarnation of Christ as much as it does of the Sonship of Christ.

We encounter the term again in John 3:16 and John 3:18. “For God so loved the world that He gave His only-born Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” Again, “He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only-born Son of God.”

We encounter the term again in Hebrews 11:17. There we are told, “By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only-born son.” The writer goes on to explain, “it was he to whom it was said, ‘in Isaac your descendants shall be called.’” (Heb. 11:18). In this case, Isaac was not really Abraham’s only-born son, because he already had a son, Ishmael. But Isaac was the only-born son of promise – and he certainly was the only-born son promised to Abraham and Sarah!

The final reference to God’s only-born Son appears in 1 John 4:9. “By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only-born Son into the world so that we might live through Him.” This is really a re-statement of John 3:16. It highlights the

incarnation as the only means of God’s demonstrating His love toward us, and the only means of our having life, here only definable as eternal life.

It is my hope that you, the reader, have placed your faith in God’s only-born Son, Jesus. He is God’s spectacular demonstration of His love for you. If you place your trust in Him, you will not perish, but you will, instead, experience eternal life!

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