

Should Not... Shall Not... Will Not

By Ted Gatza

Modern English translations tend to undergo revisions. This is good to ensure that the translations are as accurate as possible. It can also be troublesome as revisions are made that sacrifice accuracy for readability and theological preference. For example, the New American Standard Bible (a modern revision of the 1901 American Standard Version) has gone through three revisions since 1971, with the most recent seeming to be less than accurate.

Let's consider John 3:16 and how it has changed over the years.

NASB 1977 – “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him **should not** perish, but have eternal life.

NASB 1995 – “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him **shall not** perish, but have eternal life.

NASB 2020 – “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him **will not** perish, but have eternal life.

As you can see, the promise of not perishing has gone from “should not” to “shall not” to “will not.” The words “shall” and “will” are very closely related in meaning in today's English. We tend to see them that way. If we worded the Ten Commandments in today's language, it would convey the same meaning to us—“*Thou shall not...*,” “*Thou will not...*” Both words are forceful, and say that something must not be done. Similarly, the NASB 1995 and 2020 revisions' use of “shall not” and “will not” in John 3:16 implies that a person will not lose their eternal life. It gives us the impression of a solid guarantee.

The earlier NASB 1997 revision's use of “*should not*” is entirely different. It is a phrase expressing expectation and does not carry the full weight and force of “shall” or “will.” For example, in Ex. 20:4, God said, “*Thou **shall have no other gods before me.***” What if God would have said, “*Thou **should have no other gods before me***”? See the difference? One is a forceful command, and the other is a recommendation. So it is in John. “*Should Not*” is conditional and not a guarantee. Simply believing in God but acting like the world will not guarantee you an entrance into heaven. It is belief with commitment. Even Paul understood this (1 Cor. 9:24-27), and the NASB 1977 is correct in its translation. “*Should not*” is conditional.

When choosing a Bible in today's modern English, do your research. A good, solid translation will always stand out above the rest.