

John 3:14-22 ¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. { ¹⁵ Or believes may have eternal life in him } ¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, { ¹⁶ Or his only begotten Son } that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. { ¹⁸ Or God's only begotten Son } ¹⁹ This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. ²¹ But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God." { ²¹ Some interpreters end the quotation after verse 15. } ²² After this, Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them, and baptized.

“Believing”

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten (one and only or unique) Son, so that all who believe in him shall not perish but shall have eternal life.” This verse is a cornerstone verse for Evangelical Christianity. It describes quite precisely what God has done in, through, and as Jesus Christ to save the world because he loves it. I consider myself to be an Evangelical Christian rather than Liberal or Conservative because I truly want people to know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour, to know the love of God the Father, and to have and live eternal life through the presence of the Holy Spirit within them. In fact, I am a Trinitarian or Orthodox Evangelical. I want people to know the joy of Christian faith. The part I play in this task, God's task, is carrying out my calling to be a minister working to equip you for your part in this task. To do so I use my gifts of sharing knowledge and wisdom of God through teaching, preaching, pastoring, and hospitality. God has also gifted each of you with gifts for ministry for the role you play in this task. And, to let you in on a little secret, the core focus of our life together these next two years will be helping you discover those gifts and building this church's ministry around your giftedness.

Well, back to John 3:16, as it is a cornerstone verse, it is easily taken out of context and read wrongly. Read wrongly, it becomes the flagship verse of what I will call propositional Christianity which uses an individual's ability to make a purely rational decision about matters pertaining to Jesus to determine whether she goes to heaven or hell when she dies. Propositional Christians say that a person is not saved until they have fulfilled the condition of professing belief in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. For example, I've been to a number of funeral's where the minister says, “If you want to go to heaven like your Aunt Sally, then raise your hand to accept Jesus as your Saviour.” In propositional Christianity, human reason trumps grace. It says “By reason through profession of belief in propositions about Jesus you will be saved” rather than, “By grace

through faith you have been saved.” Propositional Christianity ultimately turns faith into a work.

Faith in God is not something we can just decide to have. It is not blind belief of religious propositions brought about by persuasion or even coercion. Faith is a gift from God, the by-product of God’s gracious work in history and in each of our lives and it comes about from God’s directly acting upon us in the real, historical events of our lives. The theologian, Karl Barth said, “Faith is what happens when the faithfulness of God encounters the fidelity of man.” The Triune God of grace in his great love for us does something real in our lives that hits us right at the core of that part of us that is capable of trusting others and in that moment, true faith is born and it continues to grow.

This is what I’m not saying. We know people who say, “I believe in God because I should have died in that car wreck.” Events like that can’t lead us to believe in God the Father of Jesus Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit. They lead us to suppose that there is a god. The something real that God does in our lives, as it is the work of the Holy Spirit, points us to Jesus Christ and causes us to know and to profess that Jesus Christ is my Lord and my Saviour because God loves me. The how of how that happens is infinite. Along with this knowing and confessing, a change happens in the way we understand ourselves. We become aware that, “I am a new creation. The old life is gone, all is forgiven. A new life has begun and I must now live for Jesus’ sake.” In the end, faith, as it is created in us by the work of the Holy Spirit pointing us to Jesus, faith keeps us looking to Jesus and his purpose for us and striving to fulfill it.

Yet, I think most of us have been accustomed to hearing John 3:16 in a way that is propositional – believe in Jesus and you will have eternal life. But, that reading is not the best reading of John 3:16. The Greek doesn’t sound that way. Furthermore, when you consider it’s meaning within the context of the conversation that Jesus is having with the Jewish elder Nicodemus, it is a statement of reality rather than a proposition for believing in Jesus. Jesus was not saying to Nicodemus believe in the Son of God so that you can have eternal life. He was simply stating that that all who are in the present state of having faith and living faithfully in union with him in the Holy Spirit are presently not perishing, but are experiencing eternal life. John 3:36, the last verse in this chapter, agrees. It reads: “He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.”

Now, let’s take a look at Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus. As I said earlier, Nicodemus was a Jewish elder, a member of the ruling council of Israel. The conversation begins with Nicodemus coming to Jesus at night because he was afraid of being seen and somehow being identified with Jesus (v. 1). That sends us looking to the last our passage where Jesus says the light has come into the world but mankind loved the darkness more than the light and continued to do evil. Nicodemus’ fear of the power of the Jewish authorities was keeping him from the truth. Nicodemus then states that he has come to Jesus to acknowledge that the Council does indeed recognize that Jesus is a great teacher from God because no one could do the miracles that Jesus has done without being from God (v.2). Then, recognizing their short-sightedness, Jesus

instructs him that no one can see nor enter the Kingdom of God unless born again, unless they are born of the Holy Spirit; which means God has awakened saving faith in Jesus Christ in that person (vv. 3-7). Furthermore, God by the work of the Spirit is as indiscriminate and unpredictable in whom he awakens faith as the wind blowing where it will blow (v. 8).

Jesus then gets personal with Nicodemus and confronts him about his blindness: “You are Israel’s teacher and you do not understand these things? (vv. 9-10)” Then he starts to speak in the collective “we” in order to include his followers: “I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still ‘you people’ do not accept our testimony (vv. 11-12).” By “you people” Jesus means the rulers of Israel who are blinded by power and can’t see who he really is. If they were truly of faith they would see he is the Son of God, but being not of faith and rather of power they see him as only a teacher.

Skipping ahead a bit, when Jesus says in verses 19-21 that light has come into the world but men love the darkness because of their evil deeds, he is using a generalized statement to speak prophetically and specifically into Nicodemus’ own life asking the question why it is that Nicodemus has come to him in the darkness. Nicodemus can then only realize that he is using the cover of darkness to protect himself from those who love darkness because they do evil. Yet, Nicodemus’ coming to Jesus is in a small way his coming to the truth, his coming into the light, his coming to faith. FYI, after Jesus died, Nicodemus along with a man named Joseph of Arimathea got permission to take Jesus down from the cross and bury him. In this conversation the Holy Spirit brought Nicodemus to faith with respect to Jesus even though Nicodemus didn’t understand all of the theological stuff surrounding Jesus.

So, what should you carry away from all of this rambling? Firstly, if you find that you have faith that in, through, and as Jesus Christ God has saved you, freed you from an old life by means of forgiveness and given you a new life that centers on being his disciple then know this, not only will you live after you die you are presently partaking of eternal life, life in its highest quality. Unfortunately, in this world that cannot see the light because it loves the darkness, faithfulness – eternal life – ends up being the way of the cross in which we must renounce claim to ourselves and devote ourselves to Jesus and a way of life that is for him and others and not for ourselves so that people might know the love of God. It is living according to the Holy Spirit, indeed a wind-driven life, going where the Spirit leads us to do the work of Christ. Secondly, eternal life is a life of devotion, of letting ourselves be open to hearing God speak to us in prayer, praise, and the study of Scripture both by ourselves and with other Christians. Finally, it is discovering our God-given gifts for ministry in the church and utilizing them for the building up of the church. These are the things that believing in Christ consist of and, for now, where we experience eternal life. Amen.