

3:16 Revisited

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Do you remember when it was common at sporting events to see people holding signs that said “John 3:16”? Or sometimes even just “3:16.” It was so pervasive that professional wrestler Steve Austin went by Austin 3:16. I think it would be fun to go to an event with a poster touting random other verses — like just about anything from Judges, or Song of Songs, or that Proverb about dogs returning to vomit. I’d like to make a sign for Hezekiah 17:12. Frankly, I think it would have nearly the same impact.

The message seems to be, “Something in the Bible is important to me; you should know it too.” Those who grew up Christian are likely to recall the King James translation of the verse; those who did not are not terribly likely to go find a Bible to look up what the fuss is all about.

That whole phenomenon demonstrates how pervasive this verse is in American evangelical culture. And that’s probably why we aren’t all that inclined to talk about it very much. I wonder if we have come to expect a fundamentalist interpretation of the verse — something that goes like this: “For God so loved me (oh, and you), he sacrificed his only begotten son, so that if I believe in him I won’t go to hell, but will go to heaven.” There are various ways we can encounter interpretations like this. Perhaps the easiest is to accept what we have always heard and either embrace or reject it. If that is the approach, I would probably leave John 3:16 to Stone Cold Steve Austin. An alternative is to encounter the text on its own terms, trying to sift through the baggage we carry, keeping what is useful and discarding what is not. Indeed, this is one of the most beautiful and poetically satisfying verses in the bible and it clearly deserves the attention it has gotten over the years. Let’s not throw out the baby with the bathwater.

So yes, this is another one of those, “You have heard it said ... but I say unto you” sermons.

I was fascinated in re-examining this verse that so much of it is cast in the present tense. Approaching it from the perspective of “What happens when we die” misses the point. The “eternal life” here isn’t just a future reality — it is now. Apparently the original reads more like, if you believe, you go on having eternal life. Here and now. And the alternative isn’t hell, strangely enough — the alternative is here and now as well. In verse 18 it says “Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already.” The judgment and the blessing are experienced in this life, not just in an unknowable afterlife.

So these are the alternatives — to live mortally, with our lives defined by our eventual deaths and our actions controlled by that fear; or to live immortally, with our lives defined by the knowledge of Jesus’ victory over death and a freedom from fear.

Of course, this sounds a little like the sci-fi/fantasy genre... I used to watch the “Highlander” TV show and movies. Pop culture has a fascination with a more literal immortality — and particularly, with the idea of remaining young forever. Images of buff, sword-swinging Scotsmen or creepy Transylvanians with pointy teeth make for good fiction. But they represent a fascination with and fear of death and an idolatry of youth. Living free from the fear of death means living fully at every age. It means aging and dying gracefully. It can mean anger when death intrudes early or too often into our lives. And it means knowledge that death does not have the last word.

Eternal life is living re-shaped and reformed by the love of God in Christ. Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, it is the knowledge that the light remains and I approach it.

I think that living eternally also means living in such a way that our love goes on after we are physically dead. What we do now will continue to impact others and the earth when we are gone. The way we interact with people will shape them, and the way we use resources will shape the world. We can either reflect God's love for the world in the way we live and what we leave behind, or we can abuse that which God loves.

The most obvious way this works is through family systems. Habits and patterns can be passed from generation to generation for hundreds of years. María's maiden name is Longoria. Various Longoria families emigrated from Spain to what is now Texas before the pilgrims arrived in Massachusetts. Many colonists during this period were Jews expelled from Spain during the inquisition. In the New World, though they converted to Catholicism, many apparently retained various kosher habits. The person reporting this story claims that his mother, 400 years later, still had vestiges of these cooking methods. They had been passed down mother to daughter for all those years. Many of us can point to the faith of parents and grandparents as preparing us for our own encounters with the body of Christ. Likely as not, many of those parents and grandparents could point to their own parents and grandparents, and so on. Counter examples can, tragically, be just as powerful — the legacies of alcoholism and abuse can be visited upon generation after generation until there is a definitive break with the history.

Another means of shaping the world is through mentoring and teaching. I think of the elementary music teacher that first opened up my love of singing, or the middle school youth sponsor who enjoyed and encouraged my bizarre sense of humor. Pianists often trace their musical lineage through their teachers, and I learned in college that my musical lineage goes back to Beethoven. Each generation passes what it considers to be important on to the next. This is a means of immortality.

This can certainly approach vanity if what we pass on is simply our own way of doing things, or our rules and regulations for encountering the world. That type of thinking, I think, stems from a fear of not mattering. The fear of irrelevancy is really a fear of death — that what we do or make now will not live on beyond us. Freedom from that fear allows us to pass on something other than simply didactic teachings, and this brings us back to 3:16. The alternative to passing on our own image, our own vanity, is to pass on our love — our passion. As God so loved the world, so we can love the world enough to continue bringing God's son into the world. As Christ is the light of the world, we also reflect that light.

This here and now reality of our immortality — the eternal life that we enter into without regard for our own deaths — continues into that undiscovered country when we die. How, and in what form, I don't know — but Jesus makes it clear that our ultimate destination, like his, is resurrection. In fact, that is the ultimate destination of the entire world. Living in and loving the world here and now is our means of preparing for that new reality — the heavens and the earth reborn together as God has promised. Our immortality — our insistence on life in the face of death — is our participation in the new creation. It is our joining with the cloud of witnesses who came before us and with the future generations that will come after us who join together in bringing God's light into the world just as Jesus did.

A few weeks before our wedding, there was a gathering of descendants of Valentine Tice near Shipshewana, Indiana. In 1833 Valentine was the first of our family line to come to America. Though later generations would reside mostly in Pennsylvania, Valentine is buried at the back of an Amish farm in northern Indiana. About 20 of us came together to see a new fence that had been erected to protect the grave site. We had a picnic and sang a few hymns together. The memory that stands out to me is that of a distant Amish cousin leading us in the

next hymn that we'll sing — “Gott ist die liebe.”¹ It was a song that all of us knew by heart, although I was a bit unsure of the German. It was one that Valentine and his family may well have known, and it is one that parents have sung to children for generations. It connected this disparate group of distant relatives together, and it uses the words that bring me to this story today — “For God so loved us, he sent the Savior.”

¹ *Hymnal: A Worship Book* 167.
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