

## FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD...

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Grace Church in New York  
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*Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (John 3:15-16)*

I wonder what would happen if we went out onto the streets of our city and asked people to cite a verse of the Bible and quote it? Well, for starters, we would probably get a lot of strange looks as people walked on by. But if we actually succeeded in talking to some people, I have a strong suspicion that John 3:16 would be the most popular answer.

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*

I would guess most Christians become acquainted with this verse of the Bible through church services, Sunday school, or reading scripture on their own. It is, after all, so treasured that the great Reformation theologian Martin Luther called it “the heart of the Bible--the gospel in miniature.” But for almost 100 million people who googled “John 3:16” in one 24 hour period in January 2009, many apparently learned about this verse through a college football championship. Specifically, a quarterback named Tim Tebow who had painted John 3:16 underneath his eyes, John under one eye, and 3:16 under the other.

Exactly three years later, Tebow would win another game, a professional NFL play-off game. In a later interview, Tebow remembered that after the game, his public relations manager came up to him and said

'It's exactly three years later from the day that you wore John 3:16 under your eyes,'" Tebow responded. 'Oh, that's really cool.'

But the PR guy said, 'No, I don't think you realize what happened. During the game you threw for 316 yards, your yards per completion were 31.6, your yards per rush were 3.16, the ratings for the night we're 31.6, and the time of possession was 31.06.

And once again, millions of people conducted internet searches on John 3:16.<sup>1</sup>

Could it have been a miraculous message? Perhaps so. But whether you believe these were signs or mere coincidences, and whether you like Tebow's particular brand of Christianity or not, it is

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<sup>1</sup><https://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/entertainment/2018/january/tim-tebow-rsquo-s-nbsp-shocking-story-about-john-3-16-lsquo-coincidence-rsquo-goes-viral>

rather remarkable that so many people read part of the Bible because of a football game. For that, I give thanks.

But for those who heard this verse for the first time because of Tebow's witness, or who heard it anew, I wonder what exactly they made of it.

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*

According to Christian tradition, what this verse means is that the world was so full of sin, of brokenness, that God decided the only way to save it would be for the Son of God, God's very self, to come among humankind and die and then rise from the dead. This being accomplished, that's where people begin to disagree on how salvation takes effect. Many Christians believe it is only by believing in God's son and his actions, and that this salvation will mean a life in heaven with God rather than an eternity spent...elsewhere.

This is how I grew up understanding John 3:16. It's how I understood the whole Christian story. It was indeed the gospel in miniature for me, my family, and the church in which I was raised. But there's a lot to unpack in this rich verse, and while I don't want to totally reject the interpretation I grew up with, and that is familiar to so many Christians, I do want to suggest some other ways to understand this central passage of scripture.

First of all, let's take a look at the immediate context. John 3:16 is part of a conversation Jesus has with the prominent Jewish leader and Pharisee, Nicodemus. Jesus tells him that to see the kingdom of God, one must be born from above, or born anew. Jesus explains that this means that one must be born both of water and the spirit, of flesh and the spirit. Nicodemus doesn't get it, and so Jesus continues his cryptic teaching, and says that if Nicodemus doesn't accept his earthly teachings, how could he understand his heavenly ones. He then says, No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. Jesus seems here to be speaking of what Christians would later name the Incarnation, that God became flesh and dwelt among us, as the prologue to the Gospel of John puts it. And then, at 3:15, one verse before our famous John 3:16, Jesus continues, "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. And then for God so loved the world..."

But before God so loved the world, Jesus gives us this often overlooked line, or at least not nearly as famous line, about Moses in the wilderness. The Son of Man, identified with the Messiah of Old Testament prophecy, must be lifted up just as the serpent that Moses lifted up in the wilderness. To fully understand how the lifting up of the Son of Man conveys eternal life, we need to first look more closely into the episode of Moses and the snake.

We heard that story earlier, from the Book of Numbers. The Israelites had escaped slavery in Egypt 40 years earlier, and yet they still haven't found their way to the Promised Land. They are still in the wilderness. They have disobeyed Moses and God, worshipped an idol, complained a lot, and plotted against their leaders. Even Moses's brother Aaron and sister Miriam talked bad about him and his foreign-born wife earlier in Numbers, but they quickly changed their tune after God afflicted Miriam with leprosy. In today's story, the Israelites pick up a familiar theme--that

they don't have enough food and water, and the food they have is tasteless. They ask Moses again, why he brought them out of Egypt to die in the wilderness. They may have been slaves in Egypt, but they at least had better food because of the crops nourished by the Nile. Because of their lack of trust in Moses and God, poisonous serpents were sent among the camp, killing many Israelites. When the people repented, God told Moses to cast a bronze serpent on top of a pole. God didn't take away the live poisonous snakes, but whoever looked at the bronze serpent after being bitten by a real snake would live. The bronze serpent would eventually find a place of honor in the Temple in Jerusalem, until the reformer King, Hezekiah, destroyed it, as recorded in 2nd Kings, presumably because it was associated with the ancient near Eastern cult of the Goddess Asherah.

So what does all this have to do with Jesus?

*Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*

The Israelites in the wilderness, afflicted by venomous snakes, were saved by looking upon an image of the very thing that had poisoned them. In the same way, we behold the wood of the Cross, on which was hung the world's salvation. Through an act of terrible violence, we see mirrored back to us the violence and destructiveness of human society. Lying, theft, adultery, murder. What the 10 commandments we recited earlier warn us against. The innocent killed unjustly. Wars that destroy the lives of soldiers and civilians. Economic models that rely on the exploitation of many to enrich the few. All systems that separate us from our fellow children of God: racism, sexism, classism, colonialism. Slavery, whether official, experienced by the Israelites, or de facto, as experienced by certain low-wage sectors of employment. To be human is to be subject to systems of violence, whether as a perpetrator or victim. Violence is all around us, whether it is physical, psychological, or spiritual. The worst forms of violence are arguably those oppressive systems that try to destroy a person's spirit. This kind of violence was not unfamiliar to those living under Empire in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine.

A young Galilean crucified by Roman soldiers was nothing particularly out of the ordinary. But there were a few things that made Jesus' execution unique. He was a great teacher who, in expanding the consciousness of his followers, broke down traditional barriers. He reached out to impure people, to sinners. He included women as leaders in his movement. He helped a Roman soldier, an enemy of his people. He was not a criminal, but his boundary-breaking was a threat to so many of the organized groups of his time: the Romans because he was a Jew empowering Jews, the religious establishment because he was upsetting the status quo that gave them power, the Pharisees because he didn't follow their purity system, and the Zealots because he didn't seek to overthrow the Romans by force.

But no matter how enlightened and compassionate he was, and no matter how many walls he brought down, Jesus would have been just one more innocent victim had it not been for the Resurrection. Christ lived again, his followers continued his mission, and the church was born. As the young church began spreading the good news, people's lives were transformed, and the idea that God could be a suffering servant who gave his life as a sacrifice for the world began to transform the way people looked at "winners" and "losers" in the violent systems of the world. God had become flesh and not only dwelt among us, but died among us, at our hands.

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There are two more key pieces needed to understand this reading, and they're both used twice in the span of these two sentences. "Believe" and "eternal life." As I mentioned earlier, many Christians assume that if you believe in Jesus as the Son of God who died for us, that you will go to heaven and live forever with God. But what does it mean to believe? It is not just to intellectually assent to an abstract proposition. It's not about being persuaded by a proof. To believe is not just a mystical sense of faith in the supernatural. To believe is to trust. To believe is to give your heart, to be in deep relationship with that something or someone you've give your heart to. To believe in the Son of Man, the Son of God, is to be in a relationship in which one has offered oneself, trusting that the offering is received with love, as much love as was offered to us on the Cross. This kind of belief may come spontaneously, but it is more often cultivated by spiritual practices such as faithfully participating in church, prayer, and the study of scripture.

If we have cultivated this kind of trusting relationship with God, or at least we're in the process of cultivating it, we're told that we will have eternal life. But just what is eternal life? Heaven is commonly thought to be a place where people go to be with God after they die, but the good news of Jesus is that the kingdom of heaven is at hand, that it is in fact in us and among us. The biblical scholar N.T. Wright, who is widely respected across many different camps in the Christian church, translated eternal life as "the life of God's new age." He explained his reasoning:

In the many places where the phrase...appears in the gospels, and in Paul's letters for that matter, it refers to one aspect of an ancient Jewish belief about how time was divided up. In this viewpoint, there were two "aions" (we sometimes use the word "eon" in that sense): the "Present age..and the "age to come..The "age to come," many ancient Jews believed, would arrive one day to bring God's justice, peace, and healing to the world as it groaned and toiled within the "present age."..Jesus has inaugurated, ushered in, the age to come...For [the ancient Israelites] God's great future purpose was not to rescue people out of the world, but to rescue the world itself, people included, from its present state of corruption and decay.<sup>2</sup>

When we believe in Jesus as the Son of Man lifted up as the serpent in the wilderness to show us how to truly live, we experience God's eternal life in the here and now. We may experience God's kingdom more fully in the afterlife, but we can experience a foretaste of it now. Paul Nuechterlein, a Lutheran pastor and theologian writes that,

I have found it meaningful to experience this promise of eternal life as being in deep relationship to the unending source of life itself. We are able to imitate the self-giving life of Jesus Christ with the promise of being connected (as branches to the vine) to the

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<sup>2</sup> Wright, N.T., *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels* (p. 44-45), via Paul Nuechterlein (see below)

unending source of life. We need not fear death. We need not fear a life of self-giving generosity in the midst of a world of the forceful grasping after life that leads to death. When believing in the Resurrection and the Life, one won't really die in the sense of not being conquered by the forces of death in this world. Those forces may yet win some battles, but they will not prevail in the end — not when one is connected to the source of life itself.<sup>3</sup>

John 3:16 is a beautiful piece of scripture. Tens, hundreds of millions, of people treasure it, with a great many agreeing with Luther that it is the heart of the Bible—the gospel in miniature. It is often understood that it is about being saved from hell by belief in Jesus as the Son of God and sacrifice for the sins of the world. But it's about so much more. It's about being in relationship with God's kingdom here and now, in this world, giving our heart to a way of being that turns aside from violence and death to embrace life in its God-given fullness.

I'm not a Biblical scholar like NT Wright, but here is my paraphrase of John 3:16:

God so loved the world that God's son, God's very self, was lifted up in an act of violence that indicted the violent ways of the world, and in being raised to new life, he conquered death and showed us the way to fullness of life through following his path of love and service to God and our neighbors, all of God's children.

I suspect all of us could rephrase this beloved verse in our own words to describe what it means most to us. However you hear John 3:16, in the end, the most important thing is that God loves us, and because God loves us, God comes among us, and God saves us.

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Nuechterlein, <http://girardianlectionary.net/reflections/year-b/lent4b/>