

The nature of eternal life (John 3:14-21)

I memorized John 3:16 as a child—along with a specific interpretation of it.

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John 3:16 was one of the first verses I memorized as a child, in English and Korean. There was an easy melody to go with the Korean version, which I can still sing automatically as if no time has passed. Early on, it was impressed on me that this verse is the crux of the gospel, and while many would easily argue for its ability to summarize the Christian faith, I remember only one interpretation of the verse. It wasn't about God's love for the world. It was that only those who believed in God would make it to eternal life.

I vaguely understood eternal life to mean heaven, and the afterlife. It was the ultimate destination, and belief in God was the golden ticket to it. The only thing that mattered was living forever. Eternal life soon lost its luster. I got older and discovered that it was less desirable—because I looked around at the people who were the most vocal about who would ultimately make it, and they were often the most judgmental, hypocritical, and privileged Christians. And yet, there were many who were well intentioned, and seemed to genuinely care for my soul, for my well-being. But it still felt like there was an insider/outsider dynamic that seemed antithetical to the Gospel.

“Eternal life refers to a kind of life, not its length,” says William Sloane Coffin:

Length is not the most important dimension. Here on earth it may be a long life; it may be a short one. The point is, the world can't destroy eternal life...To avoid sentimentality, however, we have to add that Christ will give no rest to those who seek weapons to blast the world into annihilation. There is no eternal life for those who depose governments abroad. There is no eternal life for those who starve the poor.

When I realized that eternal life includes the enigmatic and beautiful present—the here and now—it changed how I read John 3:16. Through the lens of God's love for the world, I saw that eternal life is about more than our souls. It's about structures and systems, and about our embodied lives, today. This means that I am invited to participate in this love now in meaningful ways, and still make an impact on eternity.