

A Promise to Believe: “Whoever” ... Without an “And”

John 3, 4, 11

Northwest Community Church, March 16, 2025, Todd Havekost

Introduction

Let's begin by thinking about the different types of responses that are appropriate for various types of interactions. If we receive a contract offer, an appropriate response is to negotiate the terms of the contract. If someone makes us an employment offer, our likely response will be to evaluate how what will be required of us compares to the compensation being offered. If we choose to enter into any type of agreement, we will do what that agreement requires of us and expect the other party to honor their commitment.

But we will see today an entirely different dynamic is in effect when someone makes us a promise. We will be looking at the promise Jesus makes multiple times in John chapters 3, 4 and 11, starting out with how He expresses that promise in that most famous of all verses, John 3:16.

John 2:23-3:2

Let's orient ourselves to the context, starting near the end of chapter 2. There, following Jesus' first recorded miracle (changing water into wine at the wedding in Cana) along with other unnamed miracles, we read **now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name,¹ observing His signs which He was doing** (2:23). Throughout his gospel John repeatedly refers to Jesus' miracles as “signs” that point to Jesus being the life-giving Messiah. Even at this early point in the gospel, people are believing in Jesus after witnessing these signs. This is already John's fourth explicit reference to people believing in Jesus, and we are going to see much more of that in today's passages.²

But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them³, for He knew all men (2:24). This is a play on words. People were believing in Jesus for eternal life, but Jesus was not “trusting Himself” to these people, likely indicating He recognized they were not yet ready to become His fully-devoted followers.

Chapter 2 concludes Jesus **did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man. Now there was a man, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews** (2:25-3:1). We have an unfortunate chapter break here. The same word “man” appears three times in these two verses, leading us to understand that one such man of those being discussed at the end of chapter 2 (namely, who believed in Jesus after seeing His signs but who wasn't yet at the point of becoming an all-in follower), is the person now engaging in discussion with Jesus, Nicodemus. In fact, Nicodemus explicitly identifies these signs as being the reason he sought an audience with Jesus. **“Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him”** (3:2).

Nicodemus is often thought to have been alone when he visited Jesus, but there are several indications that he brought others with him. One is his use of first-person plural “we” here in verse 2, which does not likely refer to other Pharisees since **we know You have come from God** was the opposite of their prevailing view of Jesus from the very beginning.

¹ John uses “believed in His name” on multiple occasions in John (e.g., 1:12) as a parallel expression to “believed in Jesus.”

² Verb and noun forms of the word “believe” appear approximately 100 times in John.

³ This expression “Jesus was not entrusting Himself” to people is not found elsewhere in John, but two other references appear to express similar concepts. Jesus “manifested Himself” (John 14:21) and “made known those things the Father showed Him” (John 15:14-15) to believers who obeyed Him (Wilkin, The Grace New Testament Commentary, John, p. 185). There is no implication here that these people don't have eternal life (as is sometimes suggested).

Also, later in the passage (in verses 7 through 12) Jesus addresses his visitors several times using the second person plural ("you all" in Texas parlance). Taken together this makes it likely Nicodemus was accompanied by several of his disciples as one would expect with a respected first century rabbi.⁴

John 3:14-15

Moving ahead to verse 14, we read **and as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness**. A comparison is being made here, so we need to understand the event Jesus is referring to.

In Numbers 21, immediately after God provided a major victory, **the people became impatient because of the journey. The people spoke against God and Moses, "why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this miserable food"** (21:4b-5). This repeated occurrence of complaining resulted in God's judgment. **The Lord sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died** (v. 6).

The people then realized their sin and asked Moses to intercede with God on their behalf (v. 7). **Then the Lord said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent and set it on a standard [pole]; and it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he will live." And Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on the standard; and it came about, that if a serpent bit any man, when he looked to the bronze serpent, he lived** (21:8-9).

Everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he will live. Anyone who believed God's promise through Moses and looked at the bronze serpent was delivered from death.⁵

Now back in John 3. **And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life** (3:14-15, NKJV).

From the vantage point of history John's readers (including us) understand that God's giving of His Son culminating in Jesus' death on the cross for us was the ultimate demonstration of God's love. As we sang earlier:

- Come and see a Savior's love that would die to make you new
Nothing you have ever done, can change what mercy's done for you
And if you ever wonder if you're worth so great a cost
Look up and see the cross.⁶

But at this early point in Jesus' ministry none of Jesus' listeners knew the cross was coming, not Nicodemus and his disciples, not even Jesus' disciples. Earlier in the gospel John the Baptist had identified Jesus as **the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world** (1:29). But this audience did not know that was going to be accomplished through the cross. And just a few verses earlier Jesus had already previewed His death and resurrection by saying **"destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up"** (2:19). But again at the time the disciples did not understand the reality behind that image (2:21-22).

⁴ Think of how Jesus was accompanied by His disciples almost everywhere He went. Also, it is commonly thought that Nicodemus coming by night indicated he wanted to hide that he had believed in Jesus or was even talking with Him. But if he indeed brought his disciples with him, a more likely explanation is that he was honestly inquiring to better understand Jesus and did not want that interrupted and disrupted by attacks against Jesus by fellow Pharisees who had already made up their mind against Him (as was likely to occur if he approached Jesus in daylight). Nicodemus' challenge to his fellow Pharisees in John 7:51 to not condemn Jesus before carefully hearing him out also supports this understanding. Frank Tyler's article "John 3:16: An Evangelist's Dilemma" sheds much light on this aspect as well as the entire passage.

⁵ As is the case so frequently in the Old Testament (OT), God had a dual purpose in Numbers. He was not only providing physical deliverance to the Jews in Moses' day, He did it in such a way as to also create a powerful object lesson that enhances our understanding of the Messiah and His work on the cross. For the snake-bit Israelites, one look at the serpent raised up on a pole brought physical life. For us, whoever believes in the life-giving Messiah raised up on a cross has eternal life.

⁶ Lyrics from "The Cross," Anne Wilson and Chris Tomlin.

So in verse 14 Jesus cites a demonstration of God's loyal love for His people from Israel's history that His contemporary listeners would have been familiar with, to give them a needed frame of reference to comprehend the extent and magnitude of God's love they would be hearing about in the next verse.⁷

But before we get there, let's finish verse 15. So why must the Son of Man be lifted up? For what purpose? **So that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life (3:15).**⁸

John 3:16-17

For God so⁹ loved the world, that He gave His only begotten¹⁰ Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life (3:16).

God expressed His infinite love for the world by giving His unique Son so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life. We will dive into this verse in a minute.

But first verse 17. **For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him (3:17).**

Verse 17 contains the third of three purpose statements in verses 14-17. For what purpose ...

1. **must the Son of Man be lifted up (v. 14)?**
2. **did God ... give His only Son (v. 16)?**
3. **did God ... send the Son (v. 17)?**

That whoever believes in Him [Jesus] shall not perish but have eternal life.¹¹

To sharpen our understanding of John 3:16 I want to call our attention to (a) one word that is NOT there, and (b) one word that IS there.

One word NOT found in John 3:16: AND

First, one word we do not find in John 3:16 is AND.

⁷ Jesus profoundly referenced the Numbers 21 incident that spoke powerfully to both audiences, (1) clearly communicating God's loyal love to Nicodemus and others present that day and (2) powerfully identifying the "God so loved" manifested through the cross for John's readers.

⁸ Along with the "will not perish" found in v. 16, most New Testament (NT) manuscripts also include "will not perish" in v. 15. In that case the repetition further emphasizes that point.

⁹ Translation note 1: The first part of the verse can be understood as: (a) the extent to which God loved the world ("God so loved that He gave His Son"); or (b) that the giving of His Son was the manner in which He expressed that love. The repetition of the Greek word *outos* ("in this manner") may favor the latter. Verse 14 "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, IN THIS MANNER must the Son of Man be lifted up." Verse 16 begins "For IN THIS MANNER God loved the world that He gave His one of a kind Son." Perhaps both ideas are in view.

¹⁰ Translation note 2: The word translated "begotten" here may also be understood as "unique", "one of a kind". It is used of Isaac in Heb. 11:17. Isaac was not Abraham's only begotten son, Abraham fathered other sons including Ishmael. But Isaac was Abraham's "one of a kind" son, he was his only son with Sarah, he was the special son through whom God's far-reaching covenant promises would be fulfilled. More traditional translations (NASB, NKJV) defer to KJV and use "only begotten". But most recent translations (NET, NIV, Lexham) opt for the latter, understanding the compound word not as "only" (mono) + "beget" (*gennao*) but "only" + "kind" or "class" (*genos*). "All Christians are children of God (1:12), but Jesus is God's Son in a unique, one-of-a-kind sense" (NET Bible note 37 on John chapter 3). John uses this word four times in the early chapters of the gospel: 1:14,18; 3:16,18.

¹¹ Verses 14-17 contain 3 purpose statements all using same Greek word *hina*.

V 14b - **the Son of Man must be lifted up ...**

V 15 - **that [hina, purpose] whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life**

V 16a - **God gave His one-of-a-kind Son ...**

V 16b - **that [hina, purpose] whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life**

V 17a - **God sent His Son into the world [not ... to judge the world but]**

V 17b - **that [hina, purpose] the world may be saved through Him.**

In the last few years of his life our son Grant had become a passionately devoted follower of Jesus. He was truly a role model for me. For Grant Bible Study was not an academic exercise. He would often bring interpretation questions to me, because once he was confident he understood a passage he would immediately make any needed changes in his life to align with how Jesus wanted him to live.

That passion to obey Jesus led to countless great Bible conversations at our house during his weekly Sunday afternoon visits. He tended to be very hard on himself, frequently tormented by doubt. On numerous occasions I had explained to Grant Jesus' John 3:16 promise of eternal life to everyone who believed Him and the resulting assurance and peace he could have as a result of that promise.

He was on the path to experiencing that settled confidence when it was again undone by what he read from a book written by a prominent Christian leader. In a chapter entitled "What is Belief?" this author wrote "faith does not exist apart from its action. Faith starts with mental assent, but if this mental assent does not lead to obedience, it is not yet 'faith.'"¹² In other words, if your life doesn't measure up to some standard or measure of obedience, you haven't "really believed", you don't have eternal life.

I will never forget the conversation we had that Sunday afternoon. I don't know how you would have answered Grant, but this was my answer. Jesus knew the meanings of words and how to clearly communicate (that is the understatement of all time, right?). He knew the meanings of words including "believe" and "obey." Jesus was fully aware of the concept of obedience; He talked about it frequently. For example, in John 15 He told His disciples **"you are My friends if you do what I command you"** (15:14).

So we must let Jesus speak for Himself.

- Who are the people Jesus considers His friends? Based on John 15:14, those who do what He commands, those who obey.
- Who are the people Jesus promises have eternal life? Based on John 3:16, those who believe in Him.

Jesus was fully capable of saying "everyone who believes and obeys" has eternal life if that is what He meant. But he did not say that in John 3:16. **There is no AND in John 3:16.** And this is only one of many statements throughout John's gospel affirming that the one and only condition of receiving eternal life is believing in Jesus.¹³

I love how Dave highlights this when he sits down with people who are seeking or are newer to the faith. He asks them to open their Bibles with him to John 3:16.

- Dave reads "everyone who believes in Him AND obeys has eternal life", and the person says "Dave, my Bible doesn't have the word 'obey'."
- Dave offers to try again, "everyone who believes in Him AND cleans up his life has eternal life." Again the person objects.
- Dave offers to take another run at it. "Everyone who believes in Him AND attends church regularly has eternal life."
- After some number of wrong readings, Dave and his friend mutually arrive at the conclusion that there is no "AND" in John 3:16. Jesus said "everyone who believes in Him has eternal life", period.

John 11:25-27

¹² J.D. Greear, *Stop Asking Jesus into Your Heart*, p. 40.

¹³ This opposition to Jesus' clear words that eternal life is a free gift received solely by believing in Him is widespread and deeply entrenched in the broader church today. Here is another example from study notes on the gospel of John published recently by a well-known Bible Study ministry. "Saving faith requires three important elements.... Thirdly, commitment to repent and follow Christ brings willingness to surrender to Jesus' right to control and direct one's thoughts and actions." So their version of John 3:16 is "whoever believes and commits to repent and follow Christ and is willing to surrender to Jesus' right to control and direct one's thoughts and actions has eternal life." That is a lot of ANDs. That is clearly not what Jesus said.

We find another clear expression of this truth in Jesus' conversation with Martha in John 11 following the death of her brother Lazarus. **Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die (11:25-26a).**

- Jesus is **the resurrection**: He promises to raise back to life all who believe in Him, even though they may die physically.
- And Jesus is **the life**: He promises eternal life that can never be lost to all who believe in Him.

We began today thinking about the types of responses appropriate for different types of interactions. The examples we used, of a contract offer, an employment offer, any general agreement, all represented potential arrangements that required actions from both parties.

But with a promise, things are entirely different. How do we respond to someone who makes us a promise? We either believe the person or we don't believe them.

That is just how Jesus' conversation with Martha went. After affirming to her His promise to give eternal life that can never be lost to everyone who believes in Him, what did Jesus ask Martha? **"Do you believe this?" (11:26b).**

In verse 27 we see Martha's great response. **She said to Him, "Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, even He who comes into the world" (11:27).**

Martha could have just given a "Yes/No" answer, but she went much further. First, **"I have believed,"** she affirmed that she had already believed His promise (Greek perfect tense). And not only that, she also explained why she knew Jesus could deliver on that promise. **You are the Christ [the promised Messiah], the Son of God, even He who comes into the world.**

Martha had a profound understanding of who Jesus was and what He was capable of doing. To paraphrase Martha's response, "of course I believe that You will resurrect all believers and that You grant eternal life that can never be lost to everyone who believes, because that is what the Scriptures taught us that Messiah, the Son of God, will do when He comes into the world." We should note that Martha had the level of understanding Jesus expected to find in Nicodemus **"the teacher of Israel"** but did not back in John 3:10.

In fact, Martha's identification of Jesus' Messianic mission was so spot-on that John repeated it word-for-word in his statement of the purpose of his gospel in John 20. **These [signs] have been written so that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that believing you may have life in his name (20:31).**

We have seen Jesus promise eternal life to everyone who believes in Him, to Nicodemus in John 3 and to Martha in John 11. With them and with every person, the question He puts before us is "do you believe Me or not?" That is exactly the response John's gospel calls for again and again. To believe Jesus for His promise of eternal life. Believe. Not believe AND do something. Not believe AND anything. Believe. Period.

Unfortunately, what that prominent Christian leader wrote in the book Grant was reading is far too common. One of the great tragedies of this broken world is the way the church throughout history and very widely today misinterprets numerous other New Testament (NT) passages in such a way so that they think it justifies inserting an "AND" into Jesus' mouth in John 3:16.

So if I come across a verse elsewhere in the Bible that at first reading seems to contradict John 3 and John 11 and the many other crystal clear statements in the gospel of John that Jesus promises eternal life to whoever believes in Him, if some verse seems to suggest conditions for possessing eternal life¹⁴ in addition to believing that Jesus neglected to mention in John 3:16, this should prompt me to reexamine that verse in its broader context to ensure I am interpreting it correctly. We will expand on this idea a bit more later.

¹⁴ The expression "eternal life" occasionally has a future reference (instead of being a present possession), in which case abundance of life arising from faithful living is in view, e.g., **the one who shows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life** (Gal. 6:8; cf. John 10:10).

One word that is found in John 3:16: WHOEVER

In John 3:16 we are highlighting one word that is not there and one word that is there. One word that is not there - AND. Now I want to call your attention to one very important word that is there - "WHOEVER".

This is expressed in the Greek using the word "*pas*" which means "all" or "every." This is followed by an expression that indicates "the believing one" or "the one who believes." So together it means all who believe, everyone who believes, whoever believes.

John's gospel puts an exclamation point on the truth that every person is included in the scope of "whoever" by placing the accounts of Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman back-to-back in chapters 3 and 4. After talking with Nicodemus, Jesus chose¹⁵ to pass through Samaria and in John 4 strikes up a conversation with a Samaritan woman at a well.

Verses 7 through 14 introduce the dialog.¹⁶ **There came a woman of Samaria to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give Me a drink." For His disciples had gone away into the city to buy food. Therefore the Samaritan woman *said to Him, "How is it that You, being a Jew, ask me for a drink since I am a Samaritan woman?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) Jesus answered and said to her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water." She said to Him, "Sir, You have nothing to draw with and the well is deep; where then do You get that living water? You are not greater than our father Jacob, are You, who gave us the well, and drank of it himself and his sons and his cattle?" Jesus answered and said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again; but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him SHALL NEVER THIRST; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to ETERNAL LIFE" (4:7-14, emphasis added).**

Just as with Nicodemus in John 3, just as with Martha in John 11, so also Jesus offers **eternal life** here to the Samaritan woman using "**shall never thirst**" imagery.

I want us to notice several contrasts between the participants in these two chapters that serve to reinforce the scope of "whoever."

1. He was a man / she was a woman
2. He was a Jew (God's chosen people) / she was a Samaritan (considered religious outcast)
3. Morally, he was an upstanding religious leader / she was a serial divorcee now living with a man outside of marriage
4. Socially, he was a widely respected teacher in the community / she was a societal pariah who was out gathering water in the middle of the day because oppressive heat was less painful than the emotional abuse she received when interacting with other women in her community
5. Nicodemus was well known (in his day and ours) / she is unknown (her name is not recorded)

Observing Jesus communicate His promise of eternal life to both of these people highlights that no one is outside the scope of "whoever." Everyone is invited to believe in Jesus for eternal life. Praise God that you and I are included in "whoever." Praise God that every person any of us will ever come in contact with is included in "whoever." **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.**

John 4:17-42

Let's resume the story of the Samaritan woman in John 4. When Jesus displayed knowledge of details of her personal life (vs. 17-18), she recognized that Jesus was at least a prophet (v. 19). Then upon hearing His statement

¹⁵ **He had to pass through Samaria** (John 4:4).

¹⁶ I think "The Chosen" video series does an amazing job capturing the personal and emotional dynamics of this interaction as well as the truth content of John 4 (Season 1 Episode 8). I highly recommend this episode (as well as the entire series).

about God welcoming all true worshippers (vs. 21-24), she astutely dared to dream that He might be the promised Messiah.

The woman said to Him, "I know that Messiah is coming (He who is called Christ); when that One comes, He will declare all things to us." Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am He" (4:25-26). Jesus confirmed her hope that He was indeed the promised Messiah. The following verses make it clear she believed in Him and thus became at that moment a "whoever" who received eternal life.

Let's see what happens next after the disciples arrive on the scene and break up their one-on-one conversation (v. 27). **So the woman left her waterpot, and went into the city and said to the men, "Come, see a man who told me all the things that I have done; this is not the Christ, is it?" (4:28-29)** The woman wasn't uncertain, Jesus had just told her He was the Messiah. She expressed it in this tentative manner to the men of the city so she did not come across as telling them what to do. Remember her social status. She left it open-ended so the men could independently reach their own conclusions.

They went out of the city, and were coming to Him From that city many of the Samaritans BELIEVED IN HIM because of the word of the woman who testified "He told me all the things that I have done." So when the Samaritans came to Jesus, they were asking him to stay with them; and He stayed there two days. Many more BELIEVED because of His word; and they were saying to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we BELIEVE, for we have heard for ourselves and know that this One is indeed the Savior¹⁷ of the world" (4:30, 39-42, emphasis added).

Initially **many believed** based on the woman's testimony. Now **many more believed** based on hearing directly from Jesus. Isn't it just like God that His first large scale evangelistic harvest occurred among the outcast Samaritans? And that the testimony He used to kick off that great harvest, the "Billy Graham of the Sychar campaign" so to speak, was the outcast Samaritan woman.

We have seen three instances of Jesus doing evangelism this morning. Note how He tailored the introductions:

- To Jewish scholar Nicodemus He used Numbers 21 as His point of connection
- To the Samaritan woman at the well He started talking about water
- With Martha grieving the death of her brother He spoke of resurrection.

But in each case, Jesus landed with the same core message:

- With Nicodemus: **whoever believes in Me shall not perish but have eternal life**
- With the Samaritan woman: **whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life**
- With Martha: **everyone who believes in Me will never die**

Jesus wants us to also testify to the amazingly good news that whoever believes in Jesus has eternal life. One barrier to doing that can be not knowing what to say, how to begin. One possible approach can be to follow Jesus' example with Nicodemus and using His words from John 3:16. "Do you know that God loved the world so much that He gave His Son that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life?"

I often do this when teaching the Elementary Sunday School class. We recite John 3:16 together. Then I ask the children "who has eternal life?", and they answer, "whoever believes in Jesus." Then I ask them "what do people have who believe in Jesus?" and they answer, "eternal life." They get it.

Many of you are far better than I am at talking to people about Jesus and have your own approach, which is great. Seeking out opportunities to tell people about Jesus is an area where I need huge improvement. (As a result of preparing this sermon I have now started asking God to change that in me.)

¹⁷ This is the only time in John's gospel Jesus is called "Savior."

I was reading an account recently of a man telling a friend about Jesus using the words of John 3:16. His friend came back with some hard question, “but what about ...” fill in the blank. The man didn’t know the answer, and graciously responded, “I don’t know that answer and will look into that ... But I do know that God loved the world so much that He sent His Son that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life.” When his friend came back with a second hard question, the man again responded, “I don’t know about that, but I do know that everyone who believes in Jesus has eternal life.” I’m sure the man came back with answers to his friend’s questions. But we can also be sure the friend now knows that everyone who believes in Jesus has eternal life.

Interpreting the Bible

John’s explicitly stated purpose for his writing his gospel is evangelistic, **these [signs] have been written so that you may believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name** (20:30-31). So it makes great sense that its clear teaching that whoever believes in Jesus has eternal life should be the foundation for our understanding of what is involved in receiving eternal life.

We should understand that the rest of the New Testament (NT) is primarily addressed to "churches", to "brothers", to "saints", to audiences of people who have already believed in Jesus for eternal life. Thus we should expect that the great majority of that content is intended to provide instruction to us as Christians on how He wants us to live.

Complementing John's gospel, there are a limited number of extended sections in the epistles written to Christians to ensure they maintain an accurate understanding of the gospel. Romans 3 and 4 and Galatians 3 express this teaching in terms of being justified. For example, Romans 3 says "**through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe ... being justified as a gift by His grace**" (3:22a, 24a). In the first half of Ephesians 2 we read **God ... because of His great love with which He loved us ... made us alive together with Christ ... by grace you have been saved through faith** (2:4a,c, 5b, 8a). In each of these extended passages, as in John, the single condition of being made alive / being justified / being saved is believing in Jesus.

Being crystal clear on Jesus’ promise that whoever believes in Him has eternal life can help us avoid all kinds of pitfalls as we seek to understand the NT. As we approach interpreting any given passage, we should ask if this is one of the rare extended passages outside the gospel of John where the subject is receiving the free gift of eternal life. If it is not, we should proceed with the understanding we are reading instruction on how God wants His children to live.

Historical considerations come into play here and contribute to a great deal of confusion across the broader church. This “fog” has existed ever since the Protestant church was birthed in the Reformation 500 years ago, arising as it did out of the prior 1000 years of intense darkness of the Roman Catholic Church of the Middle Ages. Thankfully the Reformers discovered justification by faith, but because they were intensely fighting that battle, their default frame of reference for interpreting any passage was that the subject was the readers’ eternal destiny. The outcome was that they pulled scores of isolated verses out of context as they sought to make their case, instead of understanding those verses within their broader context and thus correctly interpreting them as being intended to apply to the Christian life.

Why is this history lesson relevant today? Because unfortunately much of the broader church continues to be afflicted by this “blind spot.” The teachings of the Reformers and their immediate successors set precedents that remain the default accepted interpretations today.¹⁸

¹⁸ Many denominations, seminaries, and publishers remain heavily influenced by these teachings. Arguments are frequently advanced in scholarly papers seeking to discredit alternative interpretations on the grounds that they differ from the established precedents that have been accepted for hundreds of years. Of course that same argument was used against the Reformers by the established Roman Catholic Church.

There are many symptoms of this. I will mention just one. If a passage contains any of a number of familiar words like "save"¹⁹ or "fire" or "wrath," it is automatically assumed the subject matter must be eternal destiny ("heaven or hell") without any apparent awareness that these and many other such words are frequently used in entirely different ways in the NT. The unfortunate outcome of this is a prevailing tendency to take the "you reap what you sow" teachings of these passages (that were intended to speak to the Christian life) and attempting to somehow insert those concepts into verses like John 3:16 with the result that Jesus' clear teaching is lost.²⁰

Recognizing that "everyone who believes in Jesus has eternal life" provides great clarity for our understanding of the rest of the NT and enables us to identify how that teaching is intended to apply to our lives as Christians.

Conclusion

If today was the first time you ever understood Jesus' promise that whoever believes in Him has eternal life that can never be lost, I ask you the question Jesus asked Martha, "**do you believe this?**" If your answer is yes, rejoice that you now have eternal life that can never be lost. And I encourage you to talk to someone here who will be glad to help you get plugged in with the rest of us as we seek to grow in our experience of that life.

Eternal life involves both duration and quality. When I first believed in Jesus in college I was focused on duration, the wonderful assurance that based solely on Jesus' promise I had become a certain possessor of life that would never end. My fear of death was removed immediately.

But eternal life is not like a present you don't get to open until Christmas. It is not like "life insurance" that only "pays off" when we die. All of us who have believed in Jesus have eternal LIFE. We now have the opportunity to be fully alive in the ways and to the extent God intended when He created us, to experience life indeed, full of joy and purpose and fulfillment even in the face of adversity.

Jesus' promise is amazingly good news for us. And it also challenges us to be like the Samaritan woman who shared this good news with people she knew. Let's encourage one another to be loving witnesses of the grace of Jesus.

¹⁹ The core meaning of save (Gk. *sozo*) and salvation (Gk. *soteria*) involves deliverance. "Deliverance from what" needs to be determined from the context. The great majority of their uses throughout the Bible refer to forms of deliverance other than eternal destiny.

²⁰ Another symptom is that the broader church has largely missed the extensive NT teaching on rewards.