

# The Broader Understanding of the Gospel

John 3:14-21

## INTRODUCTION:

This morning, we are moving into our next section of Scripture which contains probably the most famous verse of Scripture, John 3:16. People who aren't believers know this one by heart. This passage contains a lot within it and a lot from outside of it.

We are still in the middle of the conversation of Jesus and Nicodemus. Setting the state a bit, we have just come out of Jesus saying, "If you don't understand earthly things, how are you to understand when I speak of heavenly things?" Then Jesus gives Nicodemus this straightforward aspect of the Good News of the Lord.

### John 3:14-21 NTWT

<sup>14</sup> 'So, just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, in the same way the son of man must be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. <sup>16</sup> This, you see, is how much God loved the world: enough to give his only, special son, so that everyone who believes in him should not be lost but should have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> After all, God didn't send the son into the world to condemn the world, but so that the world could be saved by him.

<sup>18</sup> 'Anyone who believes in him is not condemned. But anyone who doesn't believe is condemned already, because they didn't believe in the name of God's only, special son. <sup>19</sup> And this is the condemnation: that light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light, because what they were doing was evil.

<sup>20</sup> For everyone who does evil hates the light; people like that don't come to the light, in case their deeds get shown up and reproved. <sup>21</sup> But people who do the truth come to the light, so that it can become clear that what they have done has been done in God.'<sup>1</sup>

### John 3:16 in Greek

Οὕτως γὰρ ἠγάπησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν κόσμον ὥστε τὸν υἱὸν τὸν μονογενῆ ἔδωκεν, ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν μὴ ἀπόληται ἀλλὰ ἔχη ζωὴν αἰώνιον. <sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Wright, T. (2004). [John for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-10](#) (p. 31). Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

<sup>2</sup> Holmes, M. W. (2011–2013). [The Greek New Testament: SBL Edition](#) (Jn 3:16). Lexham Press; Society of Biblical Literature.

## I. Lifted Up As the Snake in the Desert (14-16)

- A. Jesus begins the next bit of his conversation with Nicodemus with a reference to the Old Testament event of the snake in the desert.
- B. This is the beginning of three “lifted up” statements in John’s Gospel. The others are 8:28 and 12:32.
- C. So, what is up with the snakes?

### N.T. Wright

In many cultures, the serpent is seen as positive and powerful, though dangerous. In many others, not least in some parts of the Jewish and Christian traditions, the serpent is seen as a strong negative force, symbolizing the evil in the world and in all of us. The question of what to do about the serpent is a way of asking the question of what to do about evil—or what different cultures have designated as evil.

The present passage gives a clear and confident answer, which has itself been powerful in subsequent thought and culture. Verse 14 looks back to the incident described in Numbers 21:5–8. During their wandering in the wilderness, the Israelites grumbled against Moses, and were punished by poisonous snakes invading the camp, killing many of them. God gave Moses the remedy: he was to make a serpent out of bronze, put it on a pole and hold it up for people to look at. Anyone who looked at the serpent on the pole would live. The serpent entwined around the pole, a symbol which appears in other cultures too, remains to this day as a sign of healing, used by various medical organizations.

The bronze serpent was thereafter stored in the Tabernacle as a sacred object, until, much later, King Hezekiah discovered that the people were worshipping it, and broke it to pieces (2 Kings 18:4). In the time of Jesus, one Jewish writer found it necessary to emphasize that it wasn’t the bronze serpent itself that had saved the Israelites, but the saving power of God (Wisdom of Solomon 16:7). All this shows the strange power of the symbol, and highlights even more the importance of verse 14 for understanding what Jesus had come to do.

This, in fact, is the only place in the New Testament where the bronze serpent is referred to. Here it points clearly to the death of Jesus. Moses put the serpent on a pole, and lifted it up so the people could see it; even so, the **son of man** must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have **eternal life**. Humankind as a whole has been smitten with a deadly disease. The only cure is to look at the son of man dying on the cross, and find **life** through believing in him.

This is very deep and mysterious, but we must ask: how can the crucifixion of Jesus be like putting the snake on a pole? Wasn't the snake the problem, not the solution? Surely John isn't suggesting that Jesus was like the poisonous snakes that had been attacking the people?

No, he isn't. What he is saying, and will continue to say in several ways right up to his account of the crucifixion, is that the evil which was and is in the world, deep-rooted within us all, was somehow allowed to take out its full force on Jesus. When we look at him hanging on the cross (or 'lifted up', as John says here and several times later in the **gospel**; the cross is an 'elevation', almost a 'glorification'), what we are looking at is the result of the evil in which we are all stuck. And we are seeing what God has done about it.

We are seeing, in particular, what God's own love looks like. John refers us back to 1:18, and behind that to 1:1–2, in order to say: when Jesus died on the cross, that was the full and dramatic display of God's own love. It wasn't a messy accident; it wasn't God letting the worst happen to someone else. The cross is at the heart of John's amazing new picture of who God is. He is now to be known as the God who is both father and son, and the son is revealed, 'lifted up', when he dies under the weight of the world's evil. The cross is the ultimate ladder set up between **heaven** and earth.

But evil isn't then healed, as it were, automatically. Precisely because evil lurks deep within each of us, for healing to take place we must ourselves be involved in the process. This doesn't mean that we just have to try a lot harder to be good. You might as well try to teach a snake to sing. All we can do, just as it was all the Israelites could do, is to look and trust: to look at Jesus, to see in him the full display of God's saving love, and to trust in him.

Here there opens up the great divide, which John describes in terms of darkness and light (see 1:4–5). Believing in Jesus means coming to the light, the light of God's new creation. Not believing means remaining in the darkness. The darkness (and those who embrace it) must be condemned, not because it offends against some arbitrary laws which God made up for the fun of it, and certainly not because it has to do with the material, created world rather than with a supposed 'spiritual' world. It must be condemned because evil is destroying and defacing the present world, and preventing people coming forward into God's new world ('eternal life'; that is, the life of the **age to come**).<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Wright, T. (2004). [\*John for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-10\*](#) (p. 34). Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

### According to Walton, Chavalas, and Matthews...

**21:6–7. snakes.** The snakes are not clearly identified but may be a species of desert viper. Their “fiery” or “winged” character may have to do with their association with the cobra or their quick spring as they strike (Deut 8:15). For general information see the comment on Genesis 3:1.

**21:8–9. bronze snake on a pole.** The Hebrew here is actually “copper” snake. Bronze, an alloy of copper and tin, was smelted in the Timnah region where this event occurred, and thus the translation here has a physical background. Excavations in that area have unearthed an Egyptian temple to the god Hathor. During the period of the Judges this temple was adopted by Midianites in the area, who made it into a shrine draped with curtains. In the inner chamber of this shrine was found a five-inch-long copper image of a snake. *It was common in the ancient Near East to believe that the image of something could protect against the thing itself.* As a result Egyptians (living as well as dead) sometimes wore snake-shaped amulets to protect them from serpents. Finally, it is of interest that a well-known bronze bowl from Nineveh with Hebrew names on it depicts a winged snake on a pole of some sort.<sup>4</sup>

- D. If the Ancient Near Eastern belief was “the image of something could protect against the thing itself” then what would the takeaway be?
  
- E. 1.) Christ was to be lifted up like the snake in the desert, which the Israelites of Jesus day would have understood knowing the Pentateuch and understood Jesus was to be the source of salvation.  
  
2.) God was made in the likeness of humanity (Philippians 2:5-10) so that we may be protected from ourselves being the source of sinfulness. Humanity is humanity’s greatest enemy.
  
- F. Because of humanity’s sinfulness, we have abandoned the role of Image-Bearer to take upon ourselves our own image. Therefore, Christ took upon Himself our image as the Son of Man and was “lifted up” like the snake in the desert so we could be restored to our created role as Image-bearers again.

---

<sup>4</sup> Matthews, V. H., Chavalas, M. W., & Walton, J. H. (2000). [\*The IVP Bible background commentary: Old Testament\*](#) (electronic ed., Nu 21:6–9). InterVarsity Press.

## II. Motivation for Redemption (16a)

- A. Notice here the phrase, “For God,” which implies God initiates the action.
- B. The vehicle in which God is motivated is none other than love. Why?  
Because God is love (1 John 4:8, 16).
- C. The World: The Greek word here is the word for the “Cosmos.”
- D. We often read the verse as if the “World” really had nothing to do with the Gospel only humanity.
- E. So, the question is how does the “World” or “Cosmos” get tied up within God’s love for humanity?
- F. This part of the verse would make no sense in how many see the end goal of Christianity as simply going to Heaven when they die, and earth will one day be destroyed.

### 2 Peter 3:8-13

Dear friends, don’t let this one thing escape you: With the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day. The Lord does not delay His promise, as some understand delay, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance.

But the Day of the Lord will come like a thief; ***on that day the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, the elements will burn and be dissolved, and the earth and the works on it will be disclosed.*** Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, it is clear what sort of people you should be in holy conduct and godliness as you wait for and earnestly desire the coming of the day of God. The heavens will be on fire and be dissolved because of it, and the elements will melt with the heat. But based on His promise, we wait for the new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness will dwell.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> [The Holy Bible: Holman Christian standard version.](#) (2 Pe 3:8–13). (2009). Holman Bible Publishers.

- G. Notice in the text that the heavens will disappear, the elements will burn and be dissolved, and the earth as the NIV puts will be “laid bare.”
- H. This is a statement of preparing for judgment and setting things right.
- I. I believe the reference the “the heavens will pass away” may in fact be a reference to Paul’s statement in Ephesians 2:2. Peter even makes reference to Paul at then of 2 Peter 3.

### **Ephesians 2:2**

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins in which you previously walked according to the ways of this world, according to the ruler who exercises authority over the *lower heavens*, the spirit now working in the disobedient. We too all previously lived among them in our fleshly desires, carrying out the inclinations of our flesh and thoughts, and we were by nature children under wrath as the others were also. But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love that He had for us, made us alive with the Messiah even though we were dead in trespasses.<sup>6</sup>

**ἀήρ:** According to the ancient conception of the earth, the sphere of the air reaches to the moon, where the ethereal region of the stars commences. The Greek made a distinction between the impure element of air and the purer ether, thus finding in the former a place of abode for imperfect spirits.<sup>7</sup>

- J. Notice, this is not about doing away with the world, but rather a purification from evil to get it back to what it once was when the Lord could look at His creation and say, “It is good.”

### **Illustration:**

In November ballots are cast to see who the president will be. If you were a Reagan fan, and if the candidate you voted for was considered a second Reagan, then when the new president takes office, one might recognize the difference in

---

<sup>6</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: Holman Christian standard version\*](#). (Eph 2:1–5). (2009). Holman Bible Publishers.

<sup>7</sup> Foerster, W. (1964–). [ἀήρ](#). In G. Kittel, G. W. Bromiley, & G. Friedrich (Eds.), *Theological dictionary of the New Testament* (electronic ed., Vol. 1, p. 165). Eerdmans.

administrations and believe our country is back on track. The administration is new, like a new country, even though the stuff of the country is still the same. There has been in some sense a renewal, redemption, and reinstating of original policies of Reagan. In much of the same way, at the disclosure where the things of the world are held accountable, the new administration (Christ's Kingdom) is restoring things to the way they once were in the Garden.

### **Psalm 98**

Sing a new song to the LORD,  
for He has performed wonders;  
His right hand and holy arm  
have won Him victory.

The LORD has made His victory known;  
He has revealed His righteousness  
in the sight of the nations.  
He has remembered His love  
and faithfulness to the house of Israel;  
all the ends of the earth  
have seen our God's victory.

Shout to the LORD, all the earth;  
be jubilant, shout for joy, and sing.  
Sing to the LORD with the lyre,  
with the lyre and melodious song.

*With trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn  
shout triumphantly  
in the presence of the LORD, our King.*

*Let the sea and all that fills it,  
the world and those who live in it, resound.  
Let the rivers clap their hands;  
let the mountains shout together for joy  
before the LORD,  
for He is coming to judge the earth.  
He will judge the world righteously  
and the peoples fairly.*<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> [The Holy Bible: Holman Christian standard version](#). (Ps 98:1–9). (2009). Holman Bible Publishers.

Until this event happens, the present condition of the world and humanity is what Paul describes in Romans 8.

**Romans 8:18-25**

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is going to be revealed to us. For the creation eagerly waits with anticipation for God's sons to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to futility—not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it—in the hope that the creation itself will also be set free from the bondage of corruption into the glorious freedom of God's children. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together with labor pains until now. And not only that, but we ourselves who have the Spirit as the first fruits—we also groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. Now in this hope we were saved, yet hope that is seen is not hope, because who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with patience.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: Holman Christian standard version.\*](#) (Ro 8:18–25). (2009). Holman Bible Publishers.