

*A Savior in the Wilderness*

**John 3:14-21**

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Some years ago, there was a story in the news about a family who got stranded in the snow as they were traveling in their RV. They set out on what was normally a two-hour trip, but they took some wrong turns and wound up stuck in the snow on a back road somewhere in the wilderness of southwest Oregon. They had enough fuel and dried food to survive for more than two weeks. Finally, two of the adults went looking for help. They were found and they directed rescuers to the RV where their two children and the grandparents were. How exciting to be rescued after being stranded more than two weeks in the wilderness

(<http://www.foxnews.com/story/2006/03/22/all-six-members-missing-oregon-family-found-alive-after-17-days.html>).

The people of Israel had some trouble in a different kind of wilderness. They wandered in a desert for forty years. They had enough to help them survive. God guided them with a pillar of cloud and fire. Moses gave them direction from the Lord. God fed them with manna. Still, they often grumbled and complained and rebelled. Numbers 21 tells how they again spoke against God and Moses and complained about being left to die in the wilderness. They whined about hating the food God was providing them.

“Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died.” So the people came to Moses, confessed their sin of speaking against the Lord and Moses, and asked him to pray for them. So Moses prayed for the people again. And the Lord told Moses to make a snake and put it on a pole. Anyone who was bitten could look at it and live. So Moses fashioned a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake, they’d look at the bronze snake and not die, but live (Numbers 21:4-8).

Do you ever have a wilderness experience? Do you ever feel stranded, stuck, not able to get out of whatever mess you’re in? Do you ever feel lost,

aimless, wandering through a trackless desert, wondering if you'll come out alive? Do you ever feel the bite, the sting of sin and death?

We're all in the wilderness at one time or another, in one way or another. The wilderness experience can be a time of bitterness and complaining and we can stay there. Or, it can be a time when we find salvation, deliverance, healing, and new life. We look to the Savior who rescues us and brings us into a new land, a new experience of God's presence.

Here in John 3, Jesus is speaking of what he came to do. The section we've read, verses 14-21, is part of the answer to Nicodemus' question, "How can this be?" How can a person be born again, born anew, born from above, start a new life? Jesus first tells him that new birth comes through the Spirit of God. Now he shows that new birth is possible because of what he, the Son of God, does. Jesus comes to us in the wilderness. He heals our sin-sick souls, he gives us new life, he leads us into the land of God's promise.

Jesus says that just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man, Jesus himself, must be lifted up. Then everyone who believes has eternal life in Jesus. Jesus draws on the story of Israel in the wilderness to describe how he saves and gives life. Those Israelites who had been bitten were to look at the snake on the pole and God would heal them. Everyone is called to look to Jesus, believe in him, and find eternal life in him.

What does it mean for Jesus to be "lifted up"? He uses that phrase about himself often in this Gospel. First, it refers to his crucifixion. Jesus would be lifted up on the cross. But he would also be lifted up in resurrection and ascension to the Father. His being glorified and returning to the Father would happen through the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. Even Jesus' dying on the cross was part of his glory.

Verses 16-21 spell out the meaning of Christ coming into the world. The main image here is light. There's the light of revelation as God displays his love in the giving of his Son. This light separates those who receive it from those who run from it and reject it. This whole section helps us see

how God sent his Son to be light, to give his life, and then to give eternal life to all who come to him, look to him, believe in him.

John 3:16 is a most beloved and often quoted verse of Scripture. It's almost the message of John's Gospel in a nutshell. E. Stanley Jones tells about his conversion. He was in church when the invitation was given and he went to kneel and pray. One of his teachers read John 3:16 to him this way, "God so loved Stanley Jones that he gave his only begotten Son, that if Stanley Jones will believe on him he shall not perish, but have everlasting life" (*A Song of Ascents* 27). Can you read that verse and put your name there and know that God gave his Son for you, God offers salvation and life to you?

Let's linger over this verse for a bit. We'll hold it up like a diamond and look at its facets.

*God so loved.* God loved in this way. Whatever else we think of God, I hope we believe God loves us. God knows us through and through and still God loves us. Now, God doesn't love in a way that ignores sin. God loves in a redemptive way that deals with sin and changes us. God does love us just as we are, yet God loves us too much to leave us as we are.

God's love isn't syrupy and sentimental. It's *holy*. God's love leaves room for justice and judgment. To speak only of God's love without mentioning his holiness and justice disregards the great price God paid to reveal his love.

This is how God loves: *He gave his only Son*. "Only begotten" means "special and beloved." It's amazing how far God will go to redeem us. The cross shows both forgiveness *for* sin and judgment *of* sin. Our love for people close to us allows us to accept them as they are and to be honest about where they need to change. Our imperfect love is a small glimmer of God's perfect love.

We tend to love those close to us, those who give us a reason to love them. But *God loves the world*. This world is God's creation and God loves what he's made. God loves the people he's made. Usually, in John's writings "the world" refers to people who don't yet follow God's will. The world in that sense is an enemy. Still, God does love the world.

God shows his love by giving his only Son so that *whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life*. Believing is more than just mental acknowledgement; it's a whole-hearted trust in and reliance on Jesus. Perishing is the opposite of eternal life/being saved. It's separation from the source of life. Life apart from Jesus is really death. Eternal life is quality of living, not quantity of days. The life that's in the Word (1:4), the life the Father has in himself and the Son has in himself (5:26), the life of resurrection (11:25) is the life that God gives to everyone who looks to Jesus, comes to Jesus, trusts in him, and stays with him.

One of John's themes is that eternal life, the life of the age to come, can be experienced *now*. This is the life that's in Jesus that he shares with all who believe. We won't experience the fullness of this life until Jesus returns, but we can begin to experience it. When we're in Christ, death isn't a period signaling the end of life; it's a comma signaling a transition in life. Death has lost its sting. We're alive forever. A person who has faith in Jesus and who dies goes to be with the Lord. Our loved ones who believe and have died are with him now. They still await, with us, final and full redemption, including the resurrection of the body.

God's love is the source of salvation and life. Later in this Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples, "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." Then he goes on to say, "I no longer call you servants, but friends" (15:13-15). He laid down his life for us. Sometimes we hear about parents giving their lives to save their children from danger. Sometimes brothers or sisters give themselves for each other. I remember a story about a little boy whose younger brother was ill and needed a blood transfusion. The brothers had the same rare blood type, so the doctors told the older boy that his little brother needed his blood. He bravely agreed. After they put the needle in his arm and began drawing his blood, he asked, "When will I die?" He thought they were going to take all his blood so that he'd die, and still he agreed to do that for his brother.

I once read a book about Medal of Honor recipients. So many of those stories were about soldiers who risked their lives or gave their lives to save their friends. Several of them fell on live grenades to absorb the

explosion and the shrapnel into themselves in order to save those around them.

Those stories point us toward what Jesus did for everyone. Paul says with amazement:

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:6-8)

What do you do with a gift like that? What can we do but accept it and say, "Thank you"?

But we do have the choice to accept or reject the gift. That's why it goes on to say that there is also judgment. God didn't send the Son into the world to judge or condemn the world, but to save it. Still, there is judgment and condemnation when we refuse to believe, to trust, to rely on Jesus.

Jesus' purpose wasn't judgment but salvation. Yet his glory and truth must be received. Judgment is the result for those who won't receive. The rejection carries its own condemnation within itself. Those who do believe aren't judged or condemned. Those who refuse to believe are already condemned.

Christ was the true light shining in the darkness, the light which came into the world to illuminate everyone. But what if some will not come to the light? What if they actually prefer the darkness? [By such an attitude they cut themselves off from the salvation Jesus offers.]

If men and women are judged by their response to the light, they are judged by their response to such light as is available to them. All true light is in some degree [radiance] from him who is the light of the world. Those who accept the partial light that is available to them will gladly accept the perfect light when it shines on them. Those who

refuse the light, in whatever fashion it shines on them, pronounce sentence upon themselves. (F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John*)

My understanding of the final judgment is that when Jesus returns, the glory of God will be fully revealed. For those who believe and do the truth that glory will be light and life. For those who refuse to believe, it will be a consuming fire.

The light came in Jesus. It reveals sin and that's uncomfortable. We don't want to be exposed. But don't hide from the light. Stay in the light so that God's love and grace can deal with the sin revealed by the light. If we live by the truth, do the truth, we have nothing to fear in the light. Doing the truth is done "through God," in union with and relationship with God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit.

That's good news in our wilderness wandering. A Savior comes to us in the wilderness. Jesus is lifted up so we can look to him, come to him, trust in him, and have eternal life in him.