

THE GOSPEL OF BELIEF - Studies in John's Gospel - Part fourteen

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DIVINE GRACE AND DIVINE JUDGMENT BOTH COME THROUGH JESUS CHRIST

John 3:14-21 - "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, [15] that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. [16] For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. [17] For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. [18] Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. [19] And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. [20] For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. [21] But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been carried out in God."

Our text today contains the very first reference in John's gospel to "**eternal life**" - **John 3:15** - "...that whoever believes in him may have **eternal life**." While evangelicals have practically worn that term out, it was, for the Apostle John, a brand new term, bursting with fresh meaning and importance. As far as we know from documentation, while the church has been encouraged and blessed by this term for centuries, this is the very first time the Holy Spirit launched it in the Apostle's mind.

This is one good reason we need to be clear as to what today's text is all about. That there is life in Jesus Christ is not a new thought in this gospel account of John. Only four verses into his first chapter John made the definitive link between Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, and a new dimension of life for mankind - **John 1:4** - "**In him was life, and the life was the light of men.**"

There it is. Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, is all about life for mankind. What is **new** about our text today is John's explanation of **how this divine life is imparted to sinful people like we**. And the reason this matters is our world is full of people who, while not **rejecting** a kind of life-giving effect in Jesus, don't have a clue about how this life is **imparted** and how it must be **received**.

There are people who think if we all just **adopted the teaching** of Jesus we would remake and polish up the quality of life in this present world. There are people who think if we could just **forgive and love** like Jesus did all the hate and war and crime would, if not vanish, be greatly diminished in this wicked world. So, yes, Jesus has a better life for this battered world.

And our text today matters because John tells us that none of these attempts has a ghost of a chance of success. Our text today teaches us the "**eternal life**" John first mentions can't come by adopting the moral principles or teachings of Jesus. Our problem is different than a lack of information, and just the moral principles - the teaching of Jesus - won't give us the "**eternal life**" He brought in His person, not in His moral teaching.

Our text today is John's explanation of the principle laid down in **John 1:4** - "**In him was life, and the life was the light of men.**" And what John offers in today's text in **John 3:15** is the **pathway** into the life John says Christ brought into this world in **John 1:4**. How is this **eternal life** mediated from the One who **brought** it to the ones who **need** it?

Our text starts with an Old Testament incident and continues with a New Testament application.

1) **WHAT DOES ETERNAL LIFE HAVE TO DO WITH SNAKE BITTEN PEOPLE?**

John 3:14-15 - "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, [15] that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

After these two verses the next verse in sequence is **John 3:16**. But **John 3:16** didn't just happen. It didn't come out of nowhere. **John 3:16** came from a story in **Numbers 21:4-9** - "From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. [5] And the people spoke against God and against 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 worthless food." [6] Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. [7] And the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. [8] And the Lord said to Moses, "**Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole**, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live." [9] So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, **he would look at the bronze serpent and live.**"

Now look again at **John 3:14** - "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up..." Notice the comparison words - "...as Moses....so must the Son of Man...." In other words, just as Moses lifted up that brass serpent, the Son of Man must be lifted up. There is a *likeness* between these two events.

Something else. The account of Moses and the lifting of the brass serpent on the pole *explains* what "believing in Jesus" means in **John 3:15** - "...that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." There's no break between verses 14 and 15. The likeness with Moses and the lifting of the brass serpent continues. That means we learn something important here. We learn two very important things about what it means to *believe in Jesus*.

First, we learn what God intended to *do* in sending His only Son into this world. In other words, we learn what John means when he says Father God "gave his only Son...." (**John 3:16**). He *sent* his Son into this world, true enough (**3:17**). But He didn't just send the Son to earth on a *lecture tour*.

No. The focus of our attention on the Son has to do with the way He was "lifted up" *just as Moses lifted up that brass serpent in the wilderness on that pole*. We're immediately forced to the surprising conclusion that the giving of healing, eternal life comes from the *death* of the One bringing it. Without divine revelation this isn't where our minds would naturally go.

I said we learn *two* truths from the way John links believing in Jesus with Moses' lifting up of the brass serpent in the wilderness. And the *second* thing we learn is the Son's death only benefits those who *look upon it* with expectation and faith. This is perhaps the most important link between the lifting up of Jesus on the cross and the lifting up of the brass serpent in the wilderness. The mere lifting up of that brass serpent didn't do anyone any good. There were many people who died because they *ignored* or *rejected* the healing available by *looking at that brass serpent on the pole*.

Christ's death must be *viewed* as saving. This expectation is what John calls "believing" and much of the New Testament calls "faith." God requires the same *expectation* in looking at the Son hoisted on the cross as those Israelites *expected* benefit from obeying God and gazing in faith on that brass serpent. John is showing us *what the death of Christ is for - what it's all about* - by linking it up with the account of the brass serpent being lifted up for the people's healing in the wilderness.

2) BOTH LOVE AND JUDGMENT COME THROUGH THE GOSPEL OF THE CROSS

John 3:16-18 - "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. [17] For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. [18] Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God."

There is debate as to whether **verses 16-21** are the words of Jesus or the Apostle John. The problem being there were no such things as quotation marks in the first century - in any language. If you have a red letter New Testament the decision has been made for you. The verses are all red print right up to the end of **verse 21**.

I've never been fond of red letter editions of the New Testament so have never been bothered by this. There are many who love them. And that's fine. There's no theological issue at stake here at all. Many doubt - myself included - that Jesus is the continuing speaker after **verse 15**. We know for sure Jesus speaks in **verse 12** - "If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?" The "I" in these sentence is clearly Jesus.

And it seems more probable that Jesus continues speaking in **verses 13-15** because Jesus is the only one who regularly uses the title "Son of Man" in the gospels. This is Jesus' favorite title for Himself.

But **verses 16-21** seem to have the feel of an outside party speaking. They *reflect theologically about the "Son,"* or "Son of God" in a way that feels different from previous verses. To me these words sound more *about* the Son of God than *by* the Son of God. You can judge for yourself on that one.

But please don't be distracted by any of this. It's not that important. The words are *true* and *inspired by the Holy Spirit* whether they are Jesus' words or John's. Remember, the *verse numbers* and the *color of print* were never part of the original Biblical text. They're helpful as far as they go, but they aren't a part of sacred, inspired Scripture.

Here *is* something very important and often overlooked. The most famous verse in the whole world begins with the

nondescript little word **“For”** - **“For God so loved the world....”** And that means this verse is **continuing** a previous thought rather than **introducing** a brand new one. And the complete sentence right before **verse 16** fills up **verses 14 and 15** and is all about **Moses and the lifting up of the brass serpent in the wilderness and how that relates to believing in the Son of Man.**

And here’s why all of this detail really matters. We’re studying a clump of three verses under this point - **verses 16-18**. And they clearly present, not **one**, but **two** results arising from the Father giving up His only Son on the cross. There is the happy result of having **“eternal life”** (16) and there is the tragic result of **“perishing”** (16), or being **“condemned”** - **“...whoever does not believe is condemned already....”** (18).

And we know that both of these tragic consequences are serious because **“perishing”** must be more than mere physical death. We know this because even those who **believe** in Jesus will physically die some day. So **perishing** is worse. It is something worse than death. And it is the result, in John’s words, of being **“condemned”** eternally.

But what does all of this have to do with **Moses and the lifting up of the brass serpent in the wilderness**? Why does this wonderful, famous sixteenth verse begin with that pesky word, **“For”**?

And here’s the link. John is going to say something very important about the **tragic consequences of not believing in the redemptive work of God’s only Son on the cross**. He’s going to state quite assertively that the **perishing** and the **condemnation** aren’t the **result** of the Father’s desire or the Son’s work. He’s going to say this emphatically in **John 3:17** - **“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”**

John presses home the important fact that if people remain under condemnation and perish it is neither the Father’s nor the Son’s fault. People don’t **have** to remain under condemnation and they don’t **have** to perish. In short, Father God’s will is to **save the whole world** - **“...in order that the world might be saved through him”** (17).

And to **prove** this point John continues to consider Moses and the raising of that brass serpent in the wilderness. That big brass serpent didn’t **make** any of the Israelites sick. They were **already sick** when Moses constructed that brass serpent and hoisted it up on that pole. In fact the **whole reason** God told Moses to build that brass serpent was to **cure** the people’s sickness, not **cause** it.

But if the people **chose not to look to that brass serpent** - if they **chose not to believe what God provided and told them to do** - they would remain sick and eventually die of their sickness.

And John’s obvious point is Jesus didn’t come to **condemn** any sinner or sinners. He never came to rub our noses in our misery. He came, just like that big brass serpent in the wilderness, to be the **cure** - the **solution** - to give **life** to the worst of sinners.

But people have to believe. If they choose to remain **stubborn** in their sin - if they **refuse** to look to Christ on the cross - to **believe** in Him, in John’s famous words - then they **remain** under condemnation. But this isn’t what Father God desires. God isn’t to be blamed for mankind’s unbelief.

3) **WHY DOES OUR WORLD SO BROADLY REJECT THE GRACIOUS LOVE OF GOD THE SON?**

John 3:19-21 - **“And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. [20] For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. [21] But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been carried out in God.”**

These are very significant words. They’re hard for us to fully appreciate because the church has had centuries of study and reflection on them. But John was unfolding something powerful and radical when he began, for the very first time, to unpack the doctrine of **original sin**. And John got it from Jesus Himself.

We see two things happening at the very same time with the coming of the Word made flesh and His death on the cross. Both **grace** and **blame** are made more vivid. Our **responsibility** before God is deeper than ever before because a brighter

light than ever before has shone.

Here's John point in these verses. Humankind has a totally *unreasonable* - almost *pathological* - hatred of Father God's love and grace in Jesus Christ, God the Son. We learn the presence of Jesus is not always a pleasant experience for sinful people.

And John wants to keep the church from always *blaming herself* for this broad, passionate rejection of her gospel message. The fault isn't in the *message*. The fault is in the *audience*. Sin draws the sinner into a *love* for darkness and a *hatred* for light. Sin always makes us our own *worst enemies*. And the clearest manifestation of this self-destruction is the neurotic turning away from the only source of deliverance from bondage.

Let me tell you how this was made so striking in my own understanding just recently. I heard it again on a popular prime time sit-com. I actually heard the canned laughter as one of the characters blurted out the name of my Lord and Redeemer - *"Jesus Christ!"*

And I immediately thought, *"Why Him? Why only Jesus Christ. There are other religious leaders and teachers. Why is it never, "Mohamed!", or "Holy Buddha!" Why is Jesus Christ the only name we use to curse?"*

And instantly it came to me. There is no light from God in Mohamed or in Buddha. This world is not automatically bent against those names. Look at [John 3:20](#) - *"For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed."*

Mockers only attack God's genuine light. They have nothing else at which to direct their fallenness and sin. *Their curses of Jesus Christ only prove and validate exactly who He is and what He came to do. Mohamed isn't God's light and as a result isn't railed against.*

So the next time you hear some pin-headed verbiage dragging your Lord's name through the mud just lift your head and say to yourself, *"There it is again. Proof of Jesus Christ as God's redeeming light!"*

4) **REDEEMING TRUTH IS WHAT YOU DO. NOT JUST WHAT YOU KNOW**

[John 3:21](#) - *"But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been carried out in God."*

Very quickly, knowing Christ is a matter of *right doing*, not just *right thinking*. John shatters common perceptions in today's church about what it means to *believe in Jesus*. We all too often hear of *speaking* the truth, *learning* the truth, and *knowing* the truth. John uses none of these.

Believing in Jesus is empty and ghostlike when it only means *agreeing* with religious beliefs handed down from parents or church. The light only shines brightly, in a fruitful, joy-producing way when we *do* the truth we already have in our minds.

And the context of these words about *"doing the truth"* make clear exactly what the Apostle John has in mind. *Doing* the truth is the exact opposite of *dodging* the truth - especially the truth about your own sin and need for repentance. Doing the truth is responding to the light in the exact *opposite* was described by the *non-truth* people in the previous verses:

[John 3:19-20](#) - *"And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. [20] For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed."*

Ironically, the first baby steps of *doing the truth* are *admitting you prefer avoiding it*. Doing the truth means finally - *finally* - coming to terms with the depth of your inner deception and rebellion. Doing the truth means wanting to have done with the sin in your life just as *Jesus* wants you to have done with your sin.

In this strong sense you have to *"do the truth"* for yourself. Have you every had anyone close to you all bound up in the

stupidity of sin and you wish you could ***hate their sin for them?*** But you can't. Doing the truth means finally ***hating your own sin for yourself.*** It means ***entering into the truth you've known for a long time to the point of saying for yourself - "Why in the world am I doing this to myself? And how long am I going to flush my God-given life way? Enough already!"***

I hope you're not one of those tired, frustrated, paper-only Christians still awaiting the discovery of that life-changing truth!