

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.”

## LOVE WITH A PURPOSE

Dear friends in Jesus, our Savior,

So that bit of history in the first Scripture lesson from Numbers 21 was kind of crazy, right? First of all, crazy for God’s people to complain like they did when God had miraculously saved them and miraculously provided food for them EVERY DAY! It’s also a wild account, considering the method God used to respond to their rebellion against him! Snakes—venomous snakes that bit people and killed them—how awful! And while God’s divine justice forced him to respond to their rebellion, his divine and undeserved love pushed him to offer a solution to their sin and their deserved punishment. A bronze snake, lifted up on a pole, was the solution. All who were afflicted because of their sin against the LORD, could lift their eyes to it, trust God’s promise to save them, and be saved from the deadly repercussions of their sinful ways. New life was theirs if only they would look up and believe.

That recollection from Israel’s past was the springboard for Jesus to share with a man named Nicodemus, the saving gospel message of God’s love and forgiveness. Now Nicodemus was no “ordinary Joe.” He was a Pharisee AND a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. He was a knowledgeable student of the Old Testament Scriptures and especially of the history recorded by Moses in the first five books of the Bible, which included this account from Numbers. As a member of the religious elite, who had this kind of knowledge, Jesus could approach him with the account of the snake on a pole, confident that he would know exactly what he was talking about and understand the analogy he would make. And if Nicodemus would make that connection, he would understand the love of God in Jesus—LOVE WITH A PURPOSE.

Whether you knew the story of the Israelites and the snakes or remembered the details of it or not—you are able to hear it today and also understand how Jesus uses it to explain God’s love and his purpose in sending Jesus, his only Son, to be the world’s Savior and yours. You and I can also be moved by the purposeful love of God in Christ. It is that purposeful love that creates faith in a person and fills a heart with thankfulness and joy.

---

So often the words of John 3:16, the “Gospel in a nutshell,” are seen without their context, the other verses around them. We see **For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life** and that’s all we see—like we see it on the cover of our worship folder today. It’s probably the most famous of Bible verses; it’s the one a person can put on a poster board and hold up at a football game and be reasonably certain that many, many people know just what that is. It’s also the verse you hope people who don’t know Jesus would run across because it does point to God’s love and salvation.

But, oh what we miss if we just stop there! Not only do you miss the chance to look at the snake story again, you miss just why Jesus was needed, how purposeful God’s love was in sending his Son, and how a person’s eternal life depends entirely on what they think about Jesus! So...it’s fortunate that we have the chance to investigate these words a little more. And it’s excellent timing (and not by accident!) that this gospel is considered in the middle of the Lenten season, which focuses on Jesus’ suffering and death for sinners. In fact, though we may not have realized it, for a long time in the church’s history, this Sunday has had a special name—“Rejoice” Sunday (*Laetare*).

God’s LOVE WITH A PURPOSE is cause for rejoicing because of the great relief it brings. We realize that God had definite purpose for sending those snakes to his sinfully rebellious people. They certainly realized that the holy God was serious about sin! And as he provided a way for them to trust his promise and lift their eyes to that pole, they saw his saving love. God does not do things without a plan or purpose—and there is love behind his plans and actions because that’s who God is!

---

The problem the Israelites had continued to be problem; their sin did not stop after this event. Their children and their children’s children were not without sin. Sin was a continuing problem in need of a solution. And God had a plan for that too—a way to satisfy his divine justice which required a payment for sin, and a way to express amazing, undeserved love to sinful people.

Jesus explained this to Nicodemus, who had come to him in the dark of the night and said, **“Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him (John 3:2).”** See, Nicodemus knew there was something different about Jesus and that he could get good answers from him. And Jesus gave him the simple truth, the simple gospel (or “good news”). **Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.**

Just like the promise of God attached to the snake lifted up on the pole, there was a promise attached to Jesus, who would also be lifted up—on the “pole” of the cross. Jesus always referred to himself as “the Son of Man,” so Nicodemus would have understood that Jesus was absolutely talking about himself.

Jesus continues to explain why he had to be lifted up on the cross—and here is where we see God’s LOVE WITH A PURPOSE. **“For ( or “Because”) God so loved the world (that) he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.**

This had to happen BECAUSE God loved the world so much! God’s love compelled him to do it! Sinful people who continued to slap God in the face and turn their back on him and walk away from him and purposely do every kind of thing God told them not to do and refused to do what he asked them to—these sinful people—God loved so much! I don’t think that this side of heaven we’ll ever be able to wrap our heads around why God has that kind of love. It is so undeserved. And not just by those rebellious Israelites, not just by people like Nicodemus who were trying to earn God’s attention and love by doing everything just right, but by us too.

Are you the modern day equivalent of those Jews of long ago?

Are you dissatisfied with what the Lord has blessed you with?

Do you long for what is different or more than what you have?

Do you forget to offer prayers of thanks to him for your “daily bread?”

Do you believe that God’s chosen path for you is not good enough?

Or are you more like Nicodemus?

Are you constantly thinking that if you were just... “better” then God would bless you more or that you can make up for something bad you did by doing something good for God?

Are you “working” to earn God’s love?

To one degree or another, this kind of thinking, these kinds of actions—or non-actions—affect us all. We don’t deserve the love that God showed when he sent his Son for us. But that’s just it! Jesus’ message, the good news, is that it did not and does not depend on us—it is all God from beginning to end! Because **God so loved the world...he gave his one and only Son.** Because God loved.

---

And what did he want to accomplish? That people would believe in Jesus and have eternal life. That they would not suffer the necessary consequence of rebellion against God, which is eternal death. Looking up to Jesus on the cross and seeing your sin paid for and trusting in that is what brings forgiveness and new life. THAT is what God wants.

But Jesus was not done explaining. **For** (“Because”) **God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.** How important is this for us and for everyone to hear?! People who picture God as an angry Judge who is just looking to take people’s fun away and watching in order to point out wrongs and threaten with hell have it all wrong, don’t they?! Listen again, ...**God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. Because God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.**

God sent Jesus TO SAVE the world. He did not send him to condemn the world. This is a most important point when it comes to understanding God and appreciating his love! This is LOVE WITH A PURPOSE. God acted in love—he sent his Son—in order to save the world through him! That’s what God wanted to do and still wants to do! That’s the whole point of Jesus being born into the world and living perfectly according to God’s will and suffering at the hands of sinful men and dying on the cross. His perfect life was given to pay for your imperfect life and my imperfect life and for the imperfect lives of all people everywhere and throughout time. The condemning of our sins took place at the cross. We look up to Jesus on the cross and the curse of certain death is removed and we are given new life. That’s what it means that God sent his Son to save the world. That is LOVE WITH A PURPOSE.

---

Jesus explains the effect God’s purposeful love has on the world. One of two things happens when people hear about this incredible love of God in Jesus. A person is seen by God as either an evil-doer or a truth-liver—and it is all based on their reaction to his purposeful love in sending his Son. This is the truth: **Whoever believes in him (Jesus) is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.”**

God looks into the very heart and mind of every person and sees either trust in Jesus or not. And the simple fact is that when we believe that Jesus’ coming into this world and his work of saving the world brings forgiveness of sins, we are not condemned but saved by God. And when a person does not have that belief, they stand condemned before God and are like an Israelite who would not look up at the bronze snake on the pole: they are simply awaiting death. Only the death this person awaits is not merely physical; it is eternal. Just as that dying Israelite—as long as he had not stopped breathing—still had a chance to look up and be saved, so a person who does not trust in Jesus—as long as he is still alive—still has a chance to look up at the cross and be saved.

Though God shows tremendous LOVE, the truth is that the battle with sin will continue in this world and some people will prefer sin and evil instead of God and his love. They will avoid church and the Bible and talk about Jesus because it will reveal how they really look; their sin will be exposed and they do not want to hear about it or face the reality.

How different it is for a Christian, Jesus explains. **But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.**

Those who live according to God's truth are not afraid of the light because they are a testimony to God working in their lives. They don't pretend that they have nothing to be ashamed of; they face the truth and confess their sins. And they rejoice in the truth that God loved them so much that he sent his Son to be their Savior and that he has taken those sins away. The joyful and thankful response to the love of God is to then let the light of God's love shine in their lives.

We don't hear how Nicodemus immediately responded to Jesus, but the Bible tells us of his actions that reveal his faith in God's Son. After Jesus died on the cross, Nicodemus, along with Joseph of Arimathea, prepared Jesus' body and laid it in the tomb. He saw the Son of God and Son of Man lifted up. He believed and responded in love for his Savior. May the Holy Spirit, through the powerful saving gospel, also give us a joyful and faithful response to his great love in Christ. Amen.

*Please stand as we join to sing Create in Me, found on p. 7.*