



THE REST OF THE STORY

Numbers 21:4-9, John 3:14-21



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There it was – did you hear it? John 3:16. Quite possibly the most famous and most misused passages of scripture ever. This one verse has provided motivation for some of the most destructive and ‘un-Christian’ impulses of those who take the name Christian.

“Born again” Christians made John 3:16 famous because of how close it is to where Jesus tells Nicodemus that “no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again.” But the current thought is that “born again” – *gennaō anōthen* might not be the best English translation. *Gennaō* is pretty straightforward, it means ‘born,’ ‘begat,’ or ‘brought forth.’ the word *anōthen* is less simple; it means, 1) from above, from a higher place; of things which come from heaven or God -- 2) from the first, from the beginning, and finally, as the last choice on the list, 3) anew, or over again.

In the New Revised Standard Version, they use the phrase “born *from above*” or “born *anew*.” So perhaps we should start speaking of “born from above” Christians, instead of ‘Born Again’ but I doubt it’ll catch on.

Many Christians, if pressed, may remember that one of the reasons John 3:16 is popular with “born again” Christians is that it comes right after the Nicodemus story in verses 1-10. But for some reason, many of these same Christians – me included! – are not nearly as familiar with the verses between the Nicodemus story and John 3:16, particularly verses 14-15: “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

Several weeks into my first semester of N.T. Greek, the professor made us do an original translation of John 3:16 -- as if we didn’t know the verse. We quickly came to see the point of the assignment. The very first word of John 3:16 in Greek is *houtos* (*hoo-tos*). In most Bibles, this word is translated as “so,” as in “God so loved the world.” The problem is that many of us hear that “so” in the wrong way. We hear it in contemporary American English – in terms of *degree*: “God didn’t just love the world; God loved the world a LOT,” or, “my grandbaby is SO smart!” But I’m not sure that’s the way John meant it.

The actual translation of the word *houtos* is: “thus,” “in this way,” or “in this manner.” Try to hear the word “so” like that: “God *so* loved the world -- *In this way* God loved the world. God *so* loved the world -- God, *in this manner*, loved the world.” You can see this “new” understanding in a handful of recent Bible versions that have resisted

the influence of traditional translations. It's hard for translation committees to change the words of popular verses, but now:

- The *Holman Christian Standard Bible* says, "For God loved the world **in this way**."
- The *New English Translation*: "For **this is the way** God loved the world."
- The *New Jerusalem Bible*: "For **this is how** God loved the world."

IF the Gospel writer is talking about *the way* God loved the world, it points us back to verse 14, and suddenly the 'snake-on-a-stick' thing makes more sense. God loved the world *in this way*: God lifted up Jesus in the same manner that Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness — at least according to the theology of the Book of John.

In today's Old Testament reading the Israelites are wandering in the wilderness following the mass Exodus from Egypt. Naturally, they're getting impatient trudging around the Sinai Peninsula year after year. They don't like the food and there's not enough water. In fact, they say it like this: "There's no food, and no water, and we hate this food!" No wonder God's response was to send "poisonous serpents among the people." It's like treating a broken arm by smashing the patient's toe with a hammer. Your arm may not feel any better, but you're too busy thinking about your toe to worry about your arm.

But guess what? They stopped complaining about the food, and started praying for God to do something about the snakes. It seems all those snakes biting everybody gave the Israelites a new outlook. So, God told Moses to "*Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.*" So Moses made a bronze snake, stuck it on a pole; and whenever someone got bitten by a snake, if they looked up at the snake they would live. That is probably what the writer of John has in mind: as Moses lifted up a bronze serpent to cure people bitten by the snakes, so God lifted up Jesus "that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." But let's dig a little deeper, in our search for the rest of the story.

In another rather obscure text, 2 Kings 18, Hezekiah has just become king of the southern kingdom of Judah. He was twenty-five, reigned for twenty-nine years, and according to the author of the book of Kings, Hezekiah "...did what was right in the sight of the Lord." What was that exactly? What did the writer of Kings feel was "right in the sight of the lord?"

Well, in the first part of verse four, we read that Hezekiah, “Removed the high places, broke down the pillars, and cut down the sacred pole.” Now, the high places, pillars, and sacred pole are all associated with idolatry — worshipping gods other than Yahweh.

But it’s the second part of the verse that is particularly significant: “[Hezekiah] broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it.” Apparently, the bronze serpent that Moses lifted up in the wilderness (or a convincing replica) was kept in the Temple as a relic. Over time, people began to worship Moses’ serpent as an idol. Just like the people of Israel found healing from snake bites in the wilderness by looking at Moses’ bronze serpent, hundreds of years later, many Judeans hoped to find healing from the bronze serpent displayed in the Temple.

It’s kind of ironic, the bronze serpent had originally been made to remind the Israelites to trust God, to look to God for healing and salvation — to stop complaining about minor inconveniences like food quality and to be grateful for major events like freedom from oppression. In Hezekiah’s day that same bronze serpent had become the thing to worship — an idol in itself. The people were worshipping the statue instead of the God the statue was pointing to. So, that idol-smashing King Hezekiah “broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made.”

Which brings us back to John 3. The author of John’s Gospel finds healing in the lifting up of Jesus on the cross — just as the Israelites found healing in the lifting up of the serpent in the wilderness. But in 2 Kings we see how the character and purpose of the serpent has changed. No longer does it point beyond itself to something greater, but it’s become a naïve and one-dimensional formula: if you want to be healed, visit the bronze snake in the Temple.

You see the problem don’t you? God cannot be reduced to a formula. So many Christians today have turned John 3:16 into not just a clever catchphrase, but a kind of magic trick — an idol, if you will -- read this verse and you’re saved. Just like that. But God cannot be reduced to a formula — neither can the way of salvation, demonstrated through the life of Jesus. And just as in Hezekiah’s day, this new idol needs to be smashed. Like the bronze serpent, John 3:16 by itself is not enough to provide healing and salvation. We need an authentic encounter with God -- Mysterious, yet Loving,

Merciful, and gracious – as well as definite steps to transform us into the little Christs that we were born to be.

Another downside to taking John 3:16 out of context is that it seems to point solely to Jesus' death, to Jesus being "lifted up" on the cross. Hezekiah was right to smash Moses' serpent when it became an idol, an end in itself. And we are in trouble today if verses like John 3:16 lead us to focus on Jesus' death rather than pointing us toward becoming better followers of Jesus. Just like it's not enough to visit a church and worship some relic (like the bones of a dead saint or the cross on the wall), it's not enough to admire Jesus' death while ignoring his life, especially his call to "take up our cross and *follow...*" (Mark 8:34).

Some Christians have called John 3:16 "the Gospel in a nutshell," but memorizing a bible passage isn't enough to nurture and grow a mature Christian faith. Another verse to look at in addition to John 3:16 is Micah 6:8, sometimes called a "summary of the prophets." Micah says, "God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does God require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Or Jesus' own words – in Matthew, Mark, and Luke -- when asked what the greatest commandment is, he replied:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." 38 This is the greatest and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Today, when we find ourselves snakebitten, wandering in our wildernesses, we can lift up Micah 6:8 and the two Greatest Commandments as our source of healing. But don't let them become idols, offering only lip service that salvation comes from doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God — and from loving God and neighbor. We must live *in such a manner* everyday. May we learn to love the world *in this way* — as God *so* loves the world.

a poem...

THE SERPENT DIES ([Numbers 21: 4-9](#); [John 3: 14-21](#))

*No need to explain how the serpent's bite
surfaces (stealthy as the coming of night)
while you're reading the news; or worried and alone;
or when suffering long; or when a doctor intones
challenging words; or when darkness falls;
or the voice on the end of the telephone call
declares a once-loved relationship done;
when hope seems lost, when joy seems gone.*

*No need to explain how this serpent hides
next door to our hearts, marks left inside
where poison drips from the tip of its fangs:
in rage, in bitterness, in lonely pangs
of guilt and regret; in the resentments we bear.
And in hurts that we cause we do our own share
of spreading its toxin and resulting grief.
The serpent is death – the fear of it. Relief*

*ever seems to elude us; but we may declare
its ultimate defeat; for above its shadow there
rises greater light – see, lifted up,
the one who for us drank the cup
of suffering, whose love even in death
conquered its evil; by whose living breath
we also may thrive. We turn trusting eyes,
snake-bitten, upon Christ, and the serpent dies.*