

“So + Loved”
John 3:14-21
Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 14, 2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text, the Gospel reading, which includes that most famous of verses, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

The words “so loved” are perhaps the most loved words among English-speaking Christians, when put together in that famous couplet that immediately hearkens the mind to that famous passage, “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son.” And that’s sort of what people know of it.

But, if we take the couplet apart – not to forever keep it apart – but to simply examine each word individually before putting the phrase back together again, we can actually better appreciate this phrase and how Jesus uses it in a way that not only instructs the heart with doctrine, not only ‘melts’ the heart in faith, but even more – that snatches up the heart by His grace and safeguards it with the Holy Spirit, who uses doctrine and faith to make that heart (and soul and body, the whole man together) makes it an heir of such a blessed inheritance.

So, let's take these words apart and examine them a bit more... then we can put them back together as they belong and rejoice in such breathtaking divine beauty.

First, the word "so." When we hear that word, we instinctively quantify it: "God so (much)" – in this case "God so much loved the world." That is incorrect, for it doesn't take into account the context. In context, this little word 'so' can be missed the first time it's used, which fools us into thinking this phrase "so loved" is somehow unique unto itself. But, just as we must never think John 3:16 exists in isolation, so we must realize the use of this word "so" doesn't exist in isolation either. In fact, just as 3:16 depends on our starting point for this text, so also does our understanding of the word "so" depend on that starting point.

Go back to verse 14: "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, **so** must the Son of Man be lifted up." It's so well tucked up next to that comma and its pause that we forget its importance!: "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so..." What does that mean? It doesn't mean "also" – that would be the word "kai." Instead, it comes from the word οὕτως and could be translated, "in the same way" or "thusly." In other words, "In the same way that Moses lifted up the serpent on the pole in the wilderness, in this way must the Son of Man be lifted up."

Notice what Jesus does here: he ties the meaning of what is to come with what has preceded... not just grammatically (verse 16

with verse 14), but also the New Testament tied to the Old. One cannot know the love of God in the Christ, says Jesus, unless he learns why Moses put the serpent on the pole. AND when he learns that Jesus goes to the cross, he will more truly understand *why* Moses was told to lift up the serpent in the wilderness.

Remember to whom Jesus speaks here: Nicodemus, one of the pharisees, knew his Old Testament well. He knew the history of Israel's wilderness wandering and, near its culmination and entrance into the promised land, the people *again* began to grumble and distrust God; so God allowed fiery serpents to come and bite the people, as our Old Testament reading indicates. And how did God free them, but by having Moses fashion the image of the serpent on the standard, and all who looked on it would live, just as the promise of God had declared.

Now, why is Jesus making this comparison? It's not only to connect the dots between Old Testament and New Testament, but to help Nicodemus understand that only the Son knows how the Father works. In the verse leading up to this – as Nicodemus is trying to rationalize his way through baptism, faith, and the things of heaven, Jesus says, “No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And, as Moses lifted up the serpent, in the same way the Son of Man must be lifted up.” If it doesn't make any sense, Nicodemus, that the Son of Man must go to the cross, neither did it make any sense for God to save His people

from fiery serpents as He did – stop trying to rationalize it, Nicodemus! It doesn't make any sense, when people are dying from snake bites, to say, "You know what? Let's make a bronze representation of it and, if we put that representation in front of people's eyes, I'll bet it will heal them!" No 'rational person' would argue that way... no scientific expert would say, "Yeah, let's make a serpent statue; that'll save the people!" It's sort of like saying, "Let's put a model of a Covid molecule on display, and anyone who contracts Covid can look at that Covid model, and it will cause him to live." No, if reason religiously follows the science, one will never reach that conclusion about safety from fiery serpents. But that's exactly what God did! What foolishness before the world! And yet, the only thing that saved those people from dying in the wilderness.

But now, here is that Son of Man who descended from heaven, who knows the things of God, who can relay all of them to Nicodemus, and he's saying, "Just as that bronze serpent was put on a cross and all who looked on it *lived* because God had promised such, *in the same way* – thusly – "so" this is how God loves the whole world... in this way, that the Son of Man must be lifted up upon a cross – it's the only thing that saves! – that all who look on him will live, because God has promised it.

This is the height of foolishness in the world's view, just as we heard St Paul say last week, "The word of the cross is folly to

those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

Indeed, for those who benefit – those who are not too proud to know their desperation, their need for deliverance from the venomous bite, they’ll trust even the promise to look on a bronze serpent or – more unbelievable yet – God in the flesh upon the cross!... for them, the scene of the cross is the power of God. This is why the “so” must be properly translated; it means: there is no other way. In fact, the first “so-couplet” to cherish isn’t even the “so loved” of 3:16; it is here in verse 14: “so must.” The word for must is δεῖ, meaning “it is necessary.” It is absolutely necessary because this is God’s plan of salvation. This is what God has planned from Eden and promised for generations. This is the same “must”/(dei) Jesus uses elsewhere when he says “the Christ must suffer many things and be crucified, die and after three days rise again” or, elsewhere, he says, “Was it not necessary” (Wasn’t it a ‘must’; Was it not δεῖ) that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?”... and a third time, he said, “Everything written about me in the Law and the Prophets and the Psalms ‘must (dei)’ be fulfilled.”

Absolutely necessary is this plan of salvation. You can’t get at that salvation or acquire it by an other way, path, means, or price. We say, “I want God to save me *in this way or in that way or thusly.” But none of those other ways – works, good intentions, pious thoughts and feelings, pursuit of life’s happiness... none of those*

contribute an iota of saving grace. God did not say to those bit by serpents, “If you look on the cross *well-enough or long enough or without blinking*, you will be saved.” He did not quantify or grade on a sliding scale their participation . He just said, “Look on it, for the power of salvation is in what I have prepared for you.” Thus, as God had planned a temporary salvation through the call to look on the bronze sin-bearer, in this same way – thusly – he has planned an eternal salvation through the call to look on the flesh-and-blood sin-bearer... for in that sin-bearer is *the power of God*.

All of that defines the ‘so’ in verse 16: “God *in this way* – by lifting the Son of Man up on the cross”... this is how He went about achieving his plan for your salvation.

For salvation! We ought never take that for granted! After all, we are no better than those grumblers in the wilderness, and a number of them died from the serpent’s bite! Was that not the result of God’s *judgment*? Are we not owed the same judgment? Do not the following verses of our text *speak of judgment*?

And yet, the bronze serpent was the visual of God’s mercy; *thusly, in the same way*, the Son of Man lifted up on the cross is the visual of God’s mercy and his love, so that Jesus may say, “God in this way... God so *loved* the world.” This – the fallen world – is the object of his affection. God in this way loved *the world*.

But to appreciate this we must – for a minute – keep the “so loved” couplet separated and focus only on this word “loved.” That

God loved us is no small thing. This God is the great Holy, Holy, Holy. This is the God of all glory and might, whose perfection cannot be equaled, whose majesty is incomprehensible... whose image Adam gave away for his own likeness. What reason does God have to love us? Ought he not seek judgment and condemnation? Have our sins not separated us from our God? Isn't that what Isaiah says?

God knows what we deserve... which is why Jesus uses the words he does. Notice the end of verse 16, "should not *perish* but have everlasting life." To perish is not to 'cease to exist;' it is to die and be punished under divine judgment eternally. And, the Greek sets up this contrast better than the English does, so that we might understand more clearly, "should not have death everlasting, but have life everlasting." Though it's muted in the English, there's a very definitive contrast there – "perish" versus "everlasting life" hints at it, but "death everlasting versus life everlasting" drives the point home.

How many there are who want to redefine the options – "Oh, I don't need to go to heaven, because I just believe that everyone who doesn't go to heaven just ceases to exist." Not so: there's either "death everlasting or life everlasting." You either perish into the former, or you are baptized and resurrected into the latter.

Indeed, out of great love for you, God sent the Son into the world. Verse 17 continues Jesus' rhetorical use of 'polar opposites' when he explains, "God did not send His Son into the world to

condemn the world, to save the world through Him.” That is the love of God – that He does not desire our condemnation, but our salvation. NOT to condemn, but to save.

But we’re not done with that word “loved” yet... we can’t put the couplet back together yet. For, if we keep listening to Jesus, we hear why the whole world doesn’t benefit from this great sacrifice from this loving God. And it has to do with this word, “loved.”

In verse 18, Jesus clearly spells out that salvation is by hoping in the Son of Man – that’s what this whole discussion has been about – expectations regarding this Son of Man lifted up on the cross. And, in verse 18 Jesus says, “Whoever believes *in him* is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already because [that one] has not believed in the name of the only Son of God (notice, up to this point he had referred to himself as the Son of Man; now, he brings the whole picture together and says, “those who reject the Son of Man are thereby rejecting the Son of God – for this divine-man is one and the same.” It’s as if he said, “You, Nicodemus, may not understand baptism, you may not understand faith and how the Holy Spirit works it into your heart, but you have me before you. Keep your eyes fixed on me, trust me and my Word – that Word about faith, about baptism, about all those things beyond ‘the experts of human reason’ – trust *Me*, and you will live.”

But, with the Son of God and Son of Man before our very eyes and in our very midst, Jesus continues in verse 19, “And this is

the judgment: the light has come into the world and people *loved* the darkness rather than the light.” There’s the word *loved* again, and yet this time, it leaves us a sinking feeling of being totally lost and isolated... for while God loved the world, the world loved darkness; we loved the sins that separate us from God. The world would rather have darkness than the light of Christ. You know that to be true... look at the society around you. And, to the extent, that also defines you, repent! – and rejoice that God loved the world!

John’s opening chapter says it this way, “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world... He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born not... of the will of man, but of God.”

Isn’t that what Jesus had just been talking to Nicodemus about? “How can one be born again?” Nicodemus had asked. “Not born from the womb a second time,” Jesus said, “but born from above – that’s Baptism, born of water and the Word, and the Holy Spirit therein will grant you the gift of faith, that you might believe in the name of the Son of Man.”

Such mysterious grace and salvation, won by the blood of the Son of Man so that we may look on him and live. That all may sound foolish to the world that **loves** the darkness, but it is nevertheless the truth of salvation history. Just as Jesus pointed Nicodemus back to the historical record of Moses in the wilderness, so also you are to

know the historical record that the Son of Man once came into the world because – for all of history’s sake and for the world’s salvation – it was necessary that this be done, for God had promised it *in history*, even from Eden. And, where God makes the promise, you have every reason to look on it and believe that even upon that cross is the wisdom and power of God. And by looking on it and seeing that while the world loved darkness, God loved salvation, by keeping your eyes fixed there – fixed on Christ Jesus – you may put that couplet back together and cherish those beloved words, “God in this way loved me”... indeed, God “so loved” the world.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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