

## The Supremacy of Jesus “The Supreme Giver of Life”

Passages: Colossians 3:1–11

John 3:14–21

This is the final sermon in a series entitled, “**The Supremacy of Jesus**”.

Let me remind you (one last time) why we’ve been doing this series: These 5 sermons are designed to set the stage for our Missions Month starting next week. You see, for the next 5 weeks, we will be hearing from a variety of missionaries and evangelists...people who are trying to communicate the Gospel of Jesus Christ in all sorts of different cultures and social situations. **But**, before we hear from them, **we need to be convinced that the work they do is worth supporting!** We need to be utterly convinced that the missionary work of telling people about Jesus is so important, so special, so necessary, that it really is worth disturbing people (who may be quite happy the way they are) by encouraging them to turn to Christ!

Keep this goal in mind as we open in prayer. **Let’s pray.**

One of the best-known and most oft-repeated verses of the Bible is the one that we read in today’s Gospel reading; **John 3:16**. In fact, I’m sure that many of you know this verse by heart! Say it with me:

<sup>16</sup> **“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.”**

Three years ago, an American quarterback by the name of Tim Tebow led his football team from the University of Florida into the championship playoffs. Tebow, a devout Christian, had John 3:16 written in the black strip under his eyes. Not only did they win the game, but it was said that over **92 million people** looked up **John 3:16** on the internet to see what it meant! Some enthusiastic Christians even went on to claim that “over 92 million people heard the Gospel that night”.

But I’m not so confident! I mean, what did they understand when they read that verse? I know many people who think this verse means that God is angry with sin and, unless we believe in Jesus, God will send us to hell to “perish”! But is that really what John 3:16 is saying? I doubt it! And that’s because, as every Biblical scholar will tell you, **the only way to understand a verse of Scripture is by reading it in its context.** In

other words, **John 3:16** cannot be understood as a stand-alone verse! It has to be read in reference to the bigger story of John's Gospel. And that, in fact, is what we have been doing over the last 4 weeks—we have been developing the bigger story of John's Gospel:

- The story of how God created the universe by the Word of His mouth!
- The story of how that same Word of God took on flesh and became one of us in the person of Jesus.
- The story of how, one by one (starting with John the Baptist), human beings recognised who Jesus was and began to follow Him, calling others to come and see the reality of God dwelling on earth as a man.

This is the bigger story that sits behind **John 3:16**.

But there's even more to that story than this...and that's what we are going to finish with today! You see, the immediate context of John 3:16 tells us **why** the Word of God had to become flesh, or (to use the metaphor of today's text) **why** the Father sent the Son into the world as a man. This passage talks about sin and death, and humanity's propensity towards self-destruction. But, most importantly, it tells us of God's love and determination to reverse our self-destructive ways. How? Through the exaltation (the "lifting up") of Jesus Christ, the life-giver!

Let's read **John 3:16** now, but in its wider context-- starting from **verse 14**.

**<sup>14</sup> Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.**

As you can see, our famous verse, **John 3:16**, does not stand alone. Indeed, when Jesus spoke these words, he placed them squarely in the context of an Old Testament story about Israel in the wilderness; in a situation where the poison of snake bites was miraculously neutralised through God's supernatural healing. The OT story that Jesus refers to is found in **Numbers 21:4-9**. Listen.

**From Mount Hor (the Israelites) set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. <sup>5</sup> 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.” <sup>6</sup> Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> 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.” <sup>9</sup> 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.**

Notice three things here:

**First**, although we’re told (in verse 6) that the snakes were sent by God to punish Israel, the over-riding truth of the passage makes it clear that God is not the author of evil. He does not want His people to die! In fact, the snakes represent evil (just like the snake in the Garden of Eden). They have entered Israel’s life as a result of Israel’s evil behaviour—through what we might call, “the Law of Sowing and Reaping”. All throughout the Old Testament, whenever God’s people sowed life (through acts of love, mercy, compassion and generosity), life is what ultimately came back to them. But whenever they sowed death (through selfishness, dishonesty, hard-heartedness or corruption), death is what came back to them. This is the way God created life to operate! And that’s why He is, ultimately, the One who sends the snakes.

But it is also clear that the Israelites are directly responsible for the snakes since they have “sown” complaints and rebellion against their Creator. It is their own evil behaviour (represented by the snakes) that has risen up and attacked them! Their venomous attacks on God are now coming back, quite literally, to bite them! This is the way sin works! You reap what you sow!

Fortunately for Israel, God has an incredible love...even for His rebellious people! His love means that He will find a way of escape—a way of salvation!

And this leads us to the **second** thing of which we must take note. When God commanded Moses to lift up a bronze serpent on a pole, it wasn't some magic trick! It was to neutralise the pattern of sowing and reaping through the transformational power of God's love and forgiveness. Think carefully about how God instructed Moses to take a snake, something totally corrupted by evil, and to glorify it in bronze! Then, Moses was to glorify it again by lifting it up in the air. Why? This totally transformed snake was the public declaration over all the people that God was willing and able to forgive and transform human beings who had been seriously "bitten" by the evil of their own hearts. Although God fully recognises their sin and the damage they have caused, He offers His forgiveness as the only way to break the cycle of sowing and reaping. And, thus, He draws the 'poison' out of them through the transformational power of His love.

But, of course, there's one condition that comes in here (and this is the **third** point we need to stress.) Although God provides Israel with the remedy for their salvation, it will always be up to each individual in Israel to turn and look up, and receive the remedy for themselves. God's corporate offer of salvation still necessitates an individual response! In this story, salvation and life came only to those who turned their faces towards the bronze serpent. Those who refused to turn to God for healing "perished"—that is, they continued in their corruption until the poison of their sin destroyed them!

Now, I hope it's becoming obvious how **John 3:16** fits into this OT story! Jesus clearly uses the story of the snake on a pole to speak about His own coming exaltation in death on the cross.

**"<sup>14</sup> Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.<sup>16</sup> 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."**

Of course, the same three points we just made about the bronze snake of Numbers 21 now apply to Jesus:

**First**, the problem of universal sin can be explained in terms of Sowing and Reaping. All through the ages, when people sow hatred and

division, they eventually reap violence and war. When people sow the abuse of power and manipulation, they eventually reap vengeance and retaliation. When people sow selfishness and greed, they eventually reap jealousy, avarice and theft.

Of course, it may take years before the things we “sow” will ever come to be harvested. Indeed, many times, other people reap what we have sown and thus pay the price for our sins! Here’s a good example: Did you know that, during the 50’s, 60’s and 70’s, an estimated 150,000 Australian babies were taken from their (mostly young and single) mothers? And the horrifying fact is that, at the time, very few people thought this idea was wrong! As NSW Family and Community Services Minister, Pru Goward, said to Parliament this week: “It is true that... thousands of young women in NSW...were persuaded or manipulated to accept that adoption was **in the best interest of their child**. Some women... sign(ed) adoption papers under heavy sedation, when they didn't understand what they were doing. Others... were browbeaten over days, or their signatures forged or not even collected. Some... were told their babies had died, only to find out years later it was all a lie.” The point is that well-intentioned people in our government truly believed that “forced adoption” was the best thing for the children!

Only now do we see that it wasn’t always the best thing! But the fact is, the law of sowing and reaping means that you cannot take back what has happened. You cannot undo the trauma that has continued throughout the lives of so many young mothers and their babies when they were forcibly removed and adopted.

So, how does this relate to Jesus’ exaltation on the cross? John 3:16 says that **“God so loved the world!”** Despite the evil things that human beings have sown (by sinning against God, each other, and against God’s creation) and despite all the horrible consequences that humanity continues to reap because of our sin, there is a God who offers salvation to us in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ. **“God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son...”**

A **second point** now follows: Like the bronze snake, Jesus’ glorification (in life, on the cross, and to His Father’s side in heaven) now has the power to reverse the ill effects of our sin! How? When Jesus, the Word of God, came down from heaven and took upon Himself the form of fallen humanity, He took what was corrupted by sin and glorified it in His own body... like the snake that was glorified in bronze! Later, when

His glorified figure hung from the cross, the healing powers of God's love and forgiveness were poured out for the world! Jesus cried, **"Father, forgive them for they know not what they do!"** For despite the fact that Jesus (the Word of God and the Son of God) was the ultimate victim of all human sin, He freely offers divine forgiveness to the world! By this one act, He forever reverses the law of sowing and reaping that has prevailed over the earth and has caused the world to self-destruct!

And this leads us to our **third** point: although God provides the remedy for universal salvation in the outstretched form of Jesus on the cross, each individual still needs to turn and look up at the remedy in order to be healed. This is the "whoever" of John 3:16-- **"...that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."** It's the same "whoever" found in vv. 17 and 18.

**<sup>17</sup> For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world but that the world, through Him, might be saved.**

**<sup>18</sup> Whoever believes in him is not condemned..."**

Despite what so many people think, God's whole purpose in sending Jesus to earth was to save, and not to condemn. We are perishing in our own man-made cesspool of sin and corruption. We all need to turn our faces towards Jesus in order to finally hear this truth that God loves us and wants, more than anything, to save us from ourselves! Or, to use the metaphor of light, by turning oneself towards the light of God, the goodness of this life given freely to us by God finally becomes visible.

**<sup>21</sup> 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."**

It's abundantly clear that there must be a willingness on our part to seek God's grace and personally receive His living truth in Jesus Christ. But when we do turn and look up, He lifts us up to be glorified in Him! This is what the Apostle Paul so beautifully wrote about in Colossians 3!

**"Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.<sup>2</sup> Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. <sup>3</sup> For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ**

**in God. <sup>4</sup> When Christ, who is your<sup>[a]</sup> life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.”**

However, the flip side of this personal engagement is also stated in these verses. What happens if you refuse to look up to Jesus and receive His offer of grace? This is what Jesus says:

**<sup>18</sup> ... but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.<sup>[c]</sup> <sup>19</sup> This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup> Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.”**

I know it’s an ominous note on which to end our sermon series, but it is an essential truth that we must recognise—people who turn their backs on Jesus’ great salvation have forfeited the offer of divine healing. The law of sowing and reaping will continue to devour them. The poison of sin will eventually destroy them. They, and not God, have condemned themselves to darkness.

Now, isn’t that a good enough reason to tell the world about the Supremacy of Jesus, the exalted Son of God? Isn’t that a good reason to support and send out evangelists and missionaries, so that the beauty of John 3:16 can be truly understood by all creation?

**Jesus, the supreme giver of life!**

**Let’s pray.**