



**rehab: Recovery**

**John 3:14-18**

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It's a pretty strange phenomenon isn't it? Putting a singular bible verse on your face during a sporting event? I mean, I feel like if I were going to claim a biblical passage as my game-time witness, it would be something more like Psalm 46:1, which says, "God is our strength and our refuge." Or maybe 2 Timothy 1:7, which says, "For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love, and of self-discipline." Or perhaps Deuteronomy 31:6, which offers, "Be strong and bold; have no fear or dread of them, because it is the Lord your God who goes before you."

Or, if I was feeling salty, maybe for the big rivalry game, perhaps I'd throw up 2 Kings 6:18, where Elisha prays to the Lord, "Strike these people, please, with blindness." And the Lord struck them with blindness as Elisha had asked. Or perhaps even Judges 6:16, where in the Lord says, "I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites together."

Any of these seem to be far better verses to offer a mentality of strength in the midst of battle.

And yes, I know, many of the folks wearing John 3:16 aren't doing so as a way to embolden themselves for competition, they're do so as a witness of their faith. It's an pious move to increase the visibility of the gospel. I still question the choice of text. I question any singular passage that is used to lay claim to the whole of the gospel message. The reality is, when pulling out singular verses, we are often failing to understand their use in context.

I remember as a college student, I was working as a youth director, and took my youth group to a worship concert. One of the speakers was asking how many of us had memorized Bible passages. He said his personal challenge was to memorize at least one Bible verse a year for every year of his life. So, by age 30, he had 30 Bible passage memorized. By 40, he had memorized 40. He was asking how many of us in the arena could say we had memorized passages at a similar rate. It made me wonder how many passages I knew – and I started searching through my mental database to see how many individual passages I could name.

I know a lot of Bible passages. Without much hesitation, I do believe I could recollect a Bible passage for every year of my life. I may not know the exact book or verse, but I could recite the passage. Yet, as I thought through that list as a college student, what became evident to me was this – while I can recite a lot of Bible verses, I cannot as easily name the context in which each Bible verse is found. I know the verse, but I don't know the story. For example, I know that the shortest Bible verse is "Jesus wept;" and I know that this verse is found in the Gospel of John in the midst of the narrative regarding Lazarus' death. However, I also have memorized Joshua 1:9. I learned this passage when I was 12 years old. It says, "Do not be frightened or

dismayed, but be strong and courageous, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.” I cannot tell you the events surrounding this passage. I would have to look it up to understand the context in which it is spoken.

The problem with knowing verses without knowing their context, is that if we don't know the context, we're likely to fail at understanding the verse. We may know the words, but if we don't know who said them, to whom they were said, or the events that precipitated their speaking, we're likely to fail at truly understanding the significance of the text.

Take John 3:16 for example.

Do you know what events surround this popular verse? To *whom* was Jesus speaking? What led Jesus to speak these words? If we're really going to learn *from* the text, then we have to figure out the surrounding elements that offer the foundational structure *for* the text.

Let's back up just a bit to understand what's happening in John 3.

John 3:1 begins, “There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God.” ... A Jewish leader has come to Jesus, acknowledges that he and his teaching are of God, and this leader in the Jewish temple is seeking spiritual advice. He does this in the dark of night to avoid detection by anyone else. It's no secret that Jesus and the Pharisees had a strained relationship. The Pharisees were always trying to trap Jesus into making a religiously incorrect statement, and yet, Jesus continued to prove their lack of fully understanding God's word.

The exchange between Nicodemus and Jesus continues. Jesus says if Nicodemus wants to enter the kingdom of God, he must be born again. Nicodemus is confused, asking, “how can someone go back into the womb to be born again?”

What follows is Jesus explaining further what he means by new birth, by being born of the Spirit, and by understanding these complicated matters of the kingdom of God. It is in this exchange, in Jesus' articulation of new birth and of entering the kingdom of God, that we find our passage for today in John 3:14-18. So, if anyone asks you in the future, what's the context of John 3:16, you can say, it's Jesus explicating a salvific definition to a Pharisee who sought, but was confused, by Jesus' teachings.

We can now proceed with our scripture for the morning. Before we get to John 3:16, we have to first deal with verses 14 and 15. In this text, Jesus is speaking; beginning in verse 14, we read, “And 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.”

Again, context is important if we're going to understand what Jesus is saying. We had better understand and believe verses 14 and 15 if we're going to claim a belief in 16. These verses are linked inextricably with one another.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a leader among the Jews. When Jesus references Moses lifting up a serpent in the wilderness, Nicodemus would have immediately been transported to the Biblical narrative in Numbers 21. Nicodemus was a Pharisee – a Bible scholar – and Jesus’ reference to this text would have immediately taken Nicodemus back to when the people of Israel were journeying in the wilderness between Egypt and the Promised Land. As the years of journeying in the wilderness dragged on, the people began to grumble. They started to complain about how miserable life in the wilderness was, and how much better life could be had they just stayed in Egypt. This process of complaint happened a few times.

In Numbers 21, we read, beginning in verse 5, “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 detest this miserable food.’ Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, ‘We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.’ So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, ‘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 serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.”

I mean, I know this doesn’t make sense ... but, does this make sense? Instead of taking the serpents away – those things that were killing the people, God has Moses create a bronze statue of a serpent, lift it up on a pole, and if someone was bitten, if someone was going to die because of a serpent’s bite, all they had to do was look up at the bronze serpent, and they would *not* die. Instead of taking the cause of death away, God gave the people a new way to live.

What Jesus is saying to Nicodemus in John 3:14 and 15, is that he – Jesus (the Son of Man) – is like the serpent of bronze. Instead of God taking that which kills us away – sin and death – God sent Jesus to be lifted up, that anyone who looks to him – to Christ – would be given a new way to live.

Now – Nicodemus isn’t a fortune teller. He wouldn’t have really understood what Jesus meant when Jesus talked about the Son of Man being “lifted up.” Nicodemus didn’t know about the cross, and he didn’t know about the crucifixion to come. When Jesus is speaking to him, though the analogy connects quickly with the story of Moses and the people Israel in the wilderness, the “Son of Man being lifted up” part still wouldn’t have made full sense to him.

Nicodemus is probably a bit confused, but Jesus doesn’t stop teaching. Immediately following this metaphorical comparison to the serpent on the stick, we get to John 3:16. And it should come as no surprise that the passage begins with the word “For ...” John 3:16 isn’t meant to stand on its own, it’s building off of the verses coming just before it. The apostle John uses this conjunctive word, “For ....” to tie in verse 16 with the verses immediately preceding.

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

Understood following the connection to Moses and the serpent, what John 3:16 is saying is that God gave the Son – like the bronze serpent – so that everyone who believes in him – that is, everyone who looks up to him – may not perish but may have eternal life – they won't die to sin, but will have new life because of the Son, who is lifted up.

So, then, what does it mean to “believe in him”? How do we receive this gift of eternal life? Some scholars would argue that for John, “belief” is an action word. For John, your belief should lead you in to some form of active response. Yet, if we're trying to compare apples to apples, if Jesus's words in verse 14 carry any weight, one is right to question, if Jesus is just as the bronze serpent, then here, in verse 16, to *believe* would mean, “to look to for new life.” It would mean having trust in and faith in the promise that if you just look to Christ for new life, you will be given new life. If you just look at the Christ, lifted up, you will not perish, but have everlasting life.

And that makes sense if we keep reading. Don't stop with verse 16 ... let's pick the text back up in verse 17. “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.”

Again, go back to verse 14, which sets the stage for these clarifying verses. If Jesus is like the serpent raised up by Moses, then the people are already afflicted. We are already dying. The bronze serpent in Numbers 21 didn't do any good for anyone who had *not* already been bitten by a snake. Its purpose was to give new life to those who were already dying. The bronze serpent was offered so that a dying people could have a way to receive new life.

Christ makes clear, the Son of God wasn't sent into the world to condemn the world. Christ didn't come to bring shame on us. Christ says, those who do not believe are condemned already. The brokenness of humanity – it already existed. Sin – it was already present in our lives. Evil – has been working against God in the world since the garden. Christ didn't come to inflict us with guilt, or shame, or injury, or hardships ... these elements of brokenness, they preceded Christ. God sent Christ that we might have a way to be saved from such brokenness. God sent Christ, his only Son, that we may have a clear vision of new life – of life eternal.

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In this season of Lent, we've been considering the practices of rehabilitation and how they lead us to a better relationship with God, a better relationship with one another, and a better relationship with ourselves. We've talked about having a program in place to guide our path; we've talked about how sometimes, we need an intervention to call us out to name our brokenness; and we've named our truths, that we are all walking in a wilderness. Today, I think our text begins to call us toward recovery.

Recovery begins with having a vision of what new life could look like. Recovery starts by having a path set out before us. In today's text, Christ makes clear that the focus of our attention – the vision that we should focus on as we move down the path to rehabilitation – it's the Son of Man, lifted up.

Lent is a season of repentance. It is a season in which we name the places we are broken, the places we have failed as God's people, the times when we have complained about the food as we wander in search of the promised land. We are all inflicted with brokenness – our world is inflicted with brokenness – our nation is inflicted with brokenness – our global church is inflicted with brokenness. It's into this brokenness that already exists that Christ was sent to give us a path to recovery. It's to heal us of our pride that Christ comes to be lifted up. It's to redirect our narcissism that Christ comes to guide our path. It's to reconcile our prejudices that Christ comes to be raised on a stick. It's to comfort our pains that Christ comes to ascend to the right hand of God, the Almighty.

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I've got some personal issues with John 3:16 eye black ... I don't like it. I don't like it because John 3:16 isn't a text that invites others to look at us so that we can tell them how to live. John 3:16 isn't a text that invites people to even turn to the church so that church can convince them of their sin. Too often we try to use God's love in Christ to condemn one another. But that's not what this text offers. John 3:16 is a text that invites you and me, and all who can hear, to know that we are a broken people. What John 3:16 *does* say, properly set in its context, is that you and me, and everyone around us, we are already condemned. We are a broken people. And it's precisely because of that brokenness that God sends Christ into the world. It's because we can't save ourselves that God raises Christ up. It's because we are already suffering and in pain that the Son of God is raised, high and lifted up, on the cross – so that all may see the glory of God revealed.

God gave his only Son, so that all who look to him – who see him lifted up – may not perish, but may know the direction of recovery – the path of new life – the hope of life eternal. May we see and believe, fixated on the glory of God in the Son of Man, raised for our redemption. Amen.