

John 3:14-16

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/john/john-3/john-314-16/>

Jesus explains why He, God's Messiah, has come to earth: He must die so that the world can receive eternal life. He compares himself to the bronze serpent in the wilderness which Moses raised up for snakebit Israelites to look upon. Jesus too will be lifted up on a cross, and anyone who looks on Him with the belief that they will be healed of sin will be given eternal life.

Now Jesus explains His reason for descending *from heaven*. The Son of Man, who will be given dominion over all, as stated in Daniel 7, will first redeem all of humanity. Jesus explains how, using an image that would have been familiar to any Jew. Jesus says:

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.

The next verse is John 3:16, which is arguably one of the most famous Bible verses. But John 3:16 is explained by John 3:14-15. John tells Nicodemus that the same *Son of Man* Nicodemus would have expected to descend to earth in a cloud of glory and take dominion over the earth, as stated in Daniel 7, will first be *lifted up* on a pole (cross). The reason for His being *lifted up* on a pole (cross) is so that whoever *believes in Him* will have *eternal life*.

Jesus invokes an image from the Old Testament to explain how this will work. *Moses lifted up the serpent* on a pole when Israel wandered in the wilderness. The Israelites had been bitten by venomous snakes, and were dying. They cried out to God, and God told Moses to have Aaron fashion a bronze serpent and raise it up on a pole. Then, whoever had enough faith in Moses's words to look upon the bronze snake, hoping to be delivered from the effect of snake venom, they would have their life delivered from physical death (Numbers 21:4-9).

In the same way, Jesus is telling Nicodemus that He will be *lifted up* on a pole to deliver people from spiritual death. Everyone in the human race has the venomous poison of sin that separates us from God. Death is separation, so this is spiritual death. Without intervention, we will remain separated from God for eternity. But God has made provision in the person of Jesus. If we have enough faith to look on Jesus *lifted up* on the cross, hoping to be delivered from the sin that separates us from Him, then Jesus promises that we will have *eternal life*. Every sin of every human was nailed to that cross and born by Jesus (Colossians 2:14).

We aren't told any more about the reaction of Nicodemus. We are not told whether or not he believed. Perhaps because John wants us to put ourselves in his shoes, and let us know that we too must decide whether to have enough faith to look upon Jesus, hoping to be delivered from death. It seems likely that Nicodemus was being invited to follow Jesus, and become one of His disciples, and that he declined for the time then followed later. But what Nicodemus is hearing is an answer to a longstanding dilemma among the Jews, explaining how the Messiah is both a suffering servant as well as a conquering king. There are many prophecies predicting each throughout scripture. Some Jews concluded that there would be two different Messiahs.

Now Jesus presents that One Messiah, who is God Himself, has come in the flesh as a human. The Messiah will be both a suffering servant as well as a conquering king. As a human *Son of Man*, He will die for the sins of the world on a cross, being *lifted up*, so that whoever has enough faith to look, hoping to be delivered, will be freely given the great gift of *eternal life*. Later, as a divine *Son of Man*, He will fulfill the prophecy of Daniel 7, and have authority over all nations of the earth. He is the God-Man who will suffer and die for the sins of the world, then be raised to defeat death. He later will return as a conquering king, and rule the earth, and ultimately establish a new earth in which righteousness reigns (2 Peter 3:13).

Jesus asserts that believing on Him provides *eternal life* for any person who has enough faith to look upon the cross, hoping to be delivered from sin. The phrase *eternal life* is a translation of the Greek words “aionios zoe”. The Greek word “aionios” means “to the age.” The context determines what age, and whether the beginning or end of the age is being spoken of. The Greek word “zoe” refers to the quality, or fulfillment of life, rather than the mere presence of a pulse. “Eternal life” in this sense was something sought by Jews. This is made clear in the episode of the rich young ruler. That he is called a “ruler” likely meant he was of a similar station to Nicodemus. He asked Jesus:

“Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” (Mark 10:17).

It is worth noting here that the young ruler called Jesus “Good Teacher.” He seems to be eager to find out how to gain “eternal life” through something he can do. This is consistent with Jesus’ use of the term “inherit” in Matthew:

“And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name’s sake, will receive many times as much, and will inherit eternal life” (Matthew 19:29).

In this passage in Matthew, Jesus makes clear that “eternal life” is a reward that anyone will “inherit” if they sacrifice for His name. This appears to be consistent with the common understanding and usage of these terms at the time.

The Mark account of the rich young ruler says Jesus “loved him” which seems to indicate that the young man truly sought to gain “eternal life” through his actions, and that his claim to have followed the commandments were likely genuine. At that point, Jesus told the young man he lacked only one thing, which was to sell all he had and follow Jesus.

This now raises a question, “In order to gain *eternal life*, do we simply have to have enough faith to believe, to look at Jesus on the cross, hoping for deliverance from sin, or do we also have to sell everything and follow Jesus?”

The Bible answers this dilemma by presenting “eternal life” as both a gift received by faith, as well as a prize or reward of experience, granted to those who walk in obedience to God and His commands. This is also made clear in Romans 2:7, which says God will grant “eternal life” as a reward to those who “by perseverance in doing good, seek for glory and honor and immortality” from God.

The new spiritual birth Jesus speaks of in John 3 is a beginning. It shows how to gain the presence of *eternal life*. It is the beginning of a new spiritual life. When we are born again, we have all that is needed to gain the greatest fulfillment of life (“aionios zoe”). We are like a newly born baby, that already has all their physical gifts embedded in their genes. What remains is to develop those gifts. Just as with our physical lives, the actual experience and reward of our physical life comes through the decisions we make, the application of our physical talents and opportunities. In this same way, *eternal life* is a gift as well as a reward. Being born again provides a new spiritual capacity to live a fulfilled life. Walking in faith and obedience to God’s commands provides the full application of that spiritual life, resulting in the full experience of a fulfilled life.

Here in John 3:14-16, Jesus speaks of *eternal life* as a gift. This may have been disorienting to Nicodemus. Like the rich young ruler, he probably thought of *eternal life* as something to be gained by what we do. This is true in the sense that *eternal life* is a reward for obedience. But this is the case only for those who have gained the eyes to see and the capacity to enter the kingdom of God. And that capacity begins with being born again, as Jesus explained in verse 3. And being born again just requires enough faith to look on Jesus, hoping for deliverance from sin.

After telling Nicodemus that He, the “Son of Man” would be the cure for sin like the bronze snake in the wilderness was for snake venom, Jesus now gives the “why?” Why will the Son of Man be “lifted up”? Why will the *Son of Man* not skip this part, and just come to earth and redeem Israel, as most Israelites longed for. It is because of Love.

Jesus says *For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life*. Now perhaps Nicodemus’ head is about to explode, because suddenly Jesus discloses that He plans to die for the sins of the entire *world*. Jesus is deferring fulfillment of the *Son of Man* returning to earth to set up a kingdom for Israel, in order to save the entire *world*. This is bigger than Israel. It goes well beyond the world of the Jews. In that Jesus will die for the entire *world*, he will also die to save the Gentiles, even the despised Romans. Because God does not just love Israel. God *so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son*.

Biblical Text

14 As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; 15 so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.

16 “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.