

John 3:14-21, 'The Gospel in a nutshell'

¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶ '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.

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. ¹⁸Those 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. ¹⁹And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.'

Opening discussion

Luther called John 3:16 the 'Gospel in miniature' or the 'little Bible'. What do you make of this statement? Why is the verse so famous and well loved?

The text

Read John 3:1-13. What is the context for our passage in v 14-21? Who is Jesus talking to? What is the subject of their discussion?

Compare your Bible translations to see where they end the quotation from Jesus. Why is this not clear?

What does the 'lifting up' refer to in verse 14? For help see John 12:31-33.

The OT reading paired with this Gospel is from Numbers 21:4-9 which tells of the event referred to in John 3:14. Read Num 21:4-9 and describe the connection between Moses 'lifting up' the serpent in the wilderness and Jesus being 'lifted up'. What point is John making?

In Christian theology episodes like the one in Numbers 21:4-9 are referred to as 'types' of Christ. What do you make of this term? Can you think of any other 'types' of Christ in the OT?

What are the various meanings of the word 'so'? What do you think it means in John 3:16?

What is God's motive in sending his Son? (v 16-17)

What do you think the word 'world' means here? Read John 1:9-11; 7:7; and 12:31. How does this show us how John uses the word 'world' in his Gospel?

The Epistle reading paired with this Gospel is Ephesians 2:1-10. Read this passage and compare it with ours. Look for common or similar words in particular. What are the connections with our passage?

What do you make of the word 'perish'? See Luke 19:10, Matt 10:28 and John 10:10.

According to this verse when one believes does one have eternal life in the present or as a promise for the future? Compare John 5:24.

In what sense does the coming of the Son bring judgment?

How do verses 18-20 explain why some people will not respond to the Son? Have you seen examples of this among people you know?

In psychological terms, how would you name what is happening in v 19-20?

Application

In times of tragedy and suffering in your life, how can you know that God loves you?

What does this verse teach us about the fate of those who do not believe in Christ? Is there a 'neutral' area between eternal life and eternal perishing? How should this affect our attitude toward mission and evangelism?

Since we know that 'God loved the world' even when it was 'unlovable' and hostile to him, what does it mean for the way we approach the world and our neighbour's in need?

If you haven't before, go home and memorize John 3:16!