

The Gospel in a nutshell. That's what we know this verse from John's Gospel as. In many ways, John 3:16 is the simplest and clearest expression of who Jesus is and what He came to earth to do. Very simply, Jesus came to save the world. And to save it from *what?* To save the world from *itself*, from *Satan*, and, most especially from *death*.

But here's the problem, and it is one which people have been trying to answer since Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. If Jesus conquered death by *His* death on the cross, then why do people still die?

In order to answer that question, we have to turn to the Book of Numbers and look at the Old Testament people of Israel. The children of Israel in Numbers chapter 21 are wandering in the desert. They're partway through forty years of wandering, between their former captivity in Egypt and a new and permanent home in the Promised Land. It's at this point in Numbers 21 when God teaches them how to listen to His Word and trust that He will provide for all their needs, both physical and spiritual. But the children of Israel are... slow. In fact, they're very slow to learn, and above all, they're rebellious. They're so rebellious, in fact, that God sends serpents to go and bite them. Many of the Israelites died. The wages of sin *is* death, as St. Paul reminds us. Then we read the following: "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" (Num 21:7).

Moses agreed, because he recognized their repentance, and that they knew their sin and need for redemption. So, Moses prayed to God and God answered him by giving Moses instructions on how to save the people. 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" (21:8). So, Moses does this. But you have to admit this command from God is kind of . . . odd. "Wait, put a snake on a stick? Wasn't it the form of a snake, that Satan took on in the Garden of Eden in order to deceive Eve and Adam?" Yes. And that's exactly the point.

Two things really stand out in the episode from the people of Israel. First is that the form of their salvation and life isn't much to look at. A bronze serpent, not exactly something to give a person a lot of hope. That point we can see. The second point though is a little less obvious. The snakes still come. Nowhere in the text do we get Moses leading the snakes away like the Pied Piper, sending them into the river to drown. God didn't take **away** the serpents. He gave the people a way **out**, a way of salvation, so that even though they were bitten, the bite did not kill them. Whoever looked upon the bronze serpent in faith, that person lived.

Now fast-forward to Jesus speaking with Nicodemus in John's Gospel today. Jesus uses this event in the life of Israel to show Nicodemus how God works. God works in the world like this. He doesn't take death away. Not **yet** at least. What He does is send His Son into a world of death, so that He dies in **our place**. As we hear in verse 16, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son." Interestingly, this verse can also be translated from the original Greek as, "God loved the world in **this way**, that He **handed over** His only-begotten Son". To whom did God hand Jesus over? He handed Jesus over to **sin, death, and Satan himself**, the unholy trinity that makes up the evil we all live with every day. **This** is the **way** God loved the world.

Jesus then takes the punishment that you and I deserve, gives us eternal life, which is His by nature, and sets us up as kings and queens in His eternal kingdom. All because God the Father hands Jesus over to death in order to reconcile you to Himself now and forever.

Even though Jesus has died on the cross and risen again from the dead, however, we still must suffer the earthly effects of sin. We hurt, and unless Jesus returns first, we'll one day die. But know this. And always remember this: God is **still** loving you (Jn 3:16)!

One good way to think about those lingering hurts is to compare it to a wound that's in the process of healing. The doctor has done the surgery. The cancer is gone. But the wounds will take some time to heal. For now, we still live with the memories of the hurt. But on the Last Day, even the scars will be healed, even the painful memories will no longer hurt like they once did. I, for one, am really looking forward to that!

But for now, for you and me here and now, we still suffer death and the effects of sin. We get sick. We get injured. Our loved ones may die. Things don't work the way they're supposed to work. The serpent still bites at our heels. But Jesus Christ has **crushed** the **head** of that old evil foe. By His death, Jesus has destroyed death, so that what we have to endure and suffer through now are merely the aftershocks, the rumblings and grumblings from a foe that has already lost (and he knows it!) but wants to drag as many people down with him as he can.

Yet make no mistake. If you're baptized, you **belong** to Christ. And that means Satan **cannot** harm you. Jesus doesn't come into the world to wag his finger at you, say "tsk, tsk, tsk", and shame you for all your sins and failures. Nor does Jesus come to shake His head at you and push, push, push you to do better next time. He doesn't even come to give you an example to shoot for or set a target to reach. His goals are much, much higher. Remember again verse 17 from chapter 3: "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might **be saved through Him.**"

That's God's plan for you and for me and for the whole world. He wants to save you, to heal you, to comfort you, to love you, and to give you hope that no matter how much the snake bites, you may lift up your eyes and heart to the cross of Jesus Christ, and in that cross, a symbol of shame as much as any serpent, in that cross you will find **life**—real, abundant **life** that has no end, because **He** has no end.

So come, you who are blessed by God, and receive the gifts of the kingdom of heaven prepared for you before the foundation of the world. *Come and rejoice in His body and blood*, and give thanks for all His benefits, for the mercy of God endures forever. All because 'God loved the world so much that He **handed over** His only-begotten Son for you.' This is the way! Amen.