

COMMENTARY ON ONE OF THE MOST  
FAMOUS PASSAGES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

JOHN 3 14 *And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. 16 For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. 17 For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.* [New King James Version]

JOHN 3 14 *Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.” 16 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. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.* [New International Version]

When Jesus says *the Son of Man must be lifted up* (3:14) he means it is God who lifts him up, since *must (dei)* often refers to God's plan (cf. Grundmann 1964:22-24), and *be lifted (hypsōthenai)* is an example of a passive verb used to refer to God's action, a common form of expression in the New Testament. In this way Moses has a role analogous to that which God plays, but the older revelation is now fulfilled in Jesus (cf. 6:32).

The lifting up of the Son of Man points us to the center of his revelation, the cross. The cross itself is a heavenly thing for it reveals the life of heaven that Jesus has come to offer us (3:15). Since God is love (1 Jn 4:8) and love is the laying down of one's life (1 Jn 3:16), it is precisely in the cross that we see God most clearly. Jesus humbles himself to the point of crucifixion *because* he is God, not despite it (cf. Phil 2:6, reading *hyparchon* as causal). That God is love *is* the good news—this revelation *is* the gospel.

The heart of John's message is summed up in the justly famous sixteenth verse, which declares that the Son of Man's coming down from heaven and being lifted on the cross is the activity of God

himself, of his gracious love, the love that gives. As Jesus will declare clearly at the end of his teaching, summing up his revelation, "the Father himself loves you" (16:27).

Thus in these verses we hear of the agent from heaven and the act whereby he reveals the reality of heaven, the heart of the Father. To believe that Jesus is the Son of Man from heaven and that his revelation of God is true gives one *eternal life*, that is, a share in God's own life (3:15). This message is clear enough to John's readers, including us, but within the story verses 13-15 contain a very cryptic message that, Jesus says, Nicodemus and those like him (the *you* in vv. 11-12 is plural) cannot receive.

With verse 16 we have not only the core of the revelation but also the beginning of a commentary on the different responses to this revelation. Since Greek does not use quotation marks it is sometimes unclear, as it is here, where a quotation ends (see NIV note to v. 21). This section reads like a commentary on what precedes it, but as there is no indication of a change of speaker, it could be either Jesus or the Evangelist. Since the voice of the earthly Jesus and the voice of the risen Jesus through John are so interwoven in this book, there is no great difference between putting the quotation mark at verse 15 or verse 21. However, a similar commentary occurs in 3:31-36, and there it is likely that we have the Evangelist (see comment on 3:31). Accordingly, it may be likely that here also John is stepping back to summarize and reflect on what has just been narrated.

**God's purpose is clearly stated: not condemnation but salvation for the whole world (vv. 16-17). Jesus has come not just for the Jews or the elect, but for the world. He has come not to save some and to condemn others, but solely for salvation. Nevertheless, condemnation does take place—not through God's rejection of some, but by their rejection of him (v. 18). Judgment is a matter of what people do with the light, as Jesus emphasizes at the end of the first half of the Gospel (12:46-48). One's response to Jesus is one's**

## **judgment because Jesus is the revelation of God himself (12:49-50).**

Why is it that some come to the light and some do not? John does not unravel this mystery entirely, but verses 19-21 shed some light. At first glance this passage seems to say that one's response to the light is determined by one's moral behavior prior to encountering the light. This cannot be correct, however, since John describes people living immoral lifestyles, such as the Samaritan woman, who come to the light. The key is in the terms *be exposed* (elencho, v. 20) and *be seen plainly* (phaneroo, v. 21). It is sometimes assumed that the image in verse 20 is of someone working under cover of darkness so no one will know what is taking place. That person does not come into the light lest his or her activity, which is obviously wrong, be seen. But a preferable image is of a person involved in some activity that is morally neutral or even virtuous. This person does not come to the light because it would expose that what was considered virtuous is actually evil. This latter interpretation best fits this context, and we know it was held very early because some manuscripts, including  $\text{p}^{66}$  (from about A.D. 200), read, "He does not come to the light lest his deeds be exposed, that they are evil" (*hina me elenchthe ta erga autou hoti ponera estin*).

*But whoever lives by the truth (ho de poion ten aletheian, literally, "but whoever does the truth")* seems to refer to specific deeds, thus suggesting moral activity and raising again the interpretation ruled out by the context. The only other use of this phrase (1 Jn 1:6) is instructive. The letter is speaking of Christians, so the Gospel's concern with coming to the light is here changed to walking in the light. But the basic meaning of the phrase is the same. In the letter, not to do the truth is equivalent to lying, in particular, to saying one has fellowship with God and yet walking in darkness. This is exactly the problem of the Jewish opponents in the Gospel. They claim to be children of God, yet they reject the Son of God; they are self-deceived and, according to Jesus, liars (8:42-47, 55). Thus "doing the truth" is not just a matter of morality—it involves not being deceived, having a right evaluation of oneself in

relation to God. Truth, for John, has to do with reality, and here the issue is the reality of one's claim to have fellowship with God.

But what does it mean that a deed is evil? In 1 John an evil deed is one that is of the evil one (3:12). John seems to be working with the same idea here, for in the parallel clause (3:21) that which is *seen plainly* about the deeds of those who come to the light is not that they do the truth, but that their actions are done *through God*. Both verses indicate there is something about the deeds that is not obvious on the surface. As the true deeds are seen to have been done through God, the evil deeds are revealed as *evil*; that is, they are of the evil one, which is to say they have not been done through God.

This interpretation finds confirmation as the story unfolds, for what is said to this representative of the Jews is worked out further throughout the story. **The problem with the Jewish opponents is their self-deception (9:39-41). They are self-satisfied, thinking they know God's ways, and they are, in fact, his children. But they only receive glory from one another, and this keeps them from believing in Jesus (5:44).** When Jesus, the Son of God, comes he shows up the opponents' alienation from God. It is this alienation that the opponents cannot stand to have exposed, and so they hate this light that shows them up. Jesus reveals that their virtue is not of God but of their father the devil (8:44). The problem is at the level of their wills—what they love and hate, as our passage puts it. They claim to love God, but they have set their wills against Jesus (5:40), thereby revealing that God's love is not in their hearts (5:42) and that it is not their will to do God's will (7:17).

So the judgment that comes as the light shines reveals the terrible possibility, already recognized in Jewish thought, that even though one may be virtuous and have the Scriptures of God it is still possible to be alienated from God and closed to him. In this passage the issue is not that their deeds were morally wrong, but that these Jewish opponents hate the light, which is to say they share the character of the evil one. No matter how

good their deeds may have appeared to be, these deeds separated them from God, and therefore the deeds were evil. This evil, which is the source of hatred of the light, is the pride and self-satisfaction of religious people who think they know God and yet are far from him.

*The commentary above is an excerpt from the IVP commentary on the Gospel of John available online at Bible Gateway.*