

Historic Commentary

(Fourth Sunday in Lent - Year B)



The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on [John 3:14-21](#) from Selected Church Fathers and John Calvin

[Thomas Aquinas' curated commentary on John 3](#), from a 13th century document called the [Catena Aurea](#) that contains compiled verse by verse commentary on the Gospels from the Patristics and others.

[Chrysostom](#): Having made mention of the gift of baptism, he proceeds to the source of it, that is, the cross.... These two things, more than anything else, declare his unspeakable love: that he both suffered for his enemies and, having died for his enemies, he freely gave them by baptism the entire forgiveness of all of their sins.

[Ambrose](#): It was good that the Lord ordained that, by the lifting up of the brazen serpent, the wounds of those who were bitten should be healed; for the brazen serpent is a type of the cross.... In the same way, the world was crucified in its allurements. Therefore not a real but a brazen serpent was hung. This is so because the Lord took on himself the likeness of a sinner in his body but, in actuality, was without sin. In this way, he imitated a serpent through the deceitful appearance of human weakness, so that when he laid aside the slough of the flesh, he might destroy the cunning of the true serpent.

[Andrew of Crete](#): The cross is raised and appears above the earth, which until recently malice had kept hidden. It is raised, not to receive glory (for with Christ nailed to it what greater glory could it have?) but to give glory to God who is worshiped on it and proclaimed by it.... It is not surprising that the church rejoices in the cross of Christ and robes herself in festal clothes, revealing her bridal beauty as she honors this day. Nor is it surprising that this great throng of people has gathered together today to see the cross exposed aloft and to worship Christ whom they see raised upon it. For the cross is exposed in order to be raised and is raised to be exposed. What cross? The cross, which a little while ago was hidden in a place called The Skull but now is everywhere adored. This is what we rejoice over today; this is what we celebrate; this is the point of the present feast; this is the manifestation of the mystery.... For this hidden and life-giving cross had to be exposed, set on high like a city on a hill or a lamp on a stand, for all the world to see.

[Cyril of Alexandria](#): This story is a type of the whole mystery of the incarnation. For the serpent signifies bitter and deadly sin, which was devouring the whole race on the earth ... biting the Soul of man and infusing it with the venom of wickedness. And there is no way

that we could have escaped being conquered by it, except by the relief that comes only from heaven. The Word of God then was made in the likeness of sinful flesh, “that he might condemn sin in the flesh,” as it is written. In this way, he becomes the Giver of unending salvation to those who comprehend the divine doctrines and gaze on him with steadfast faith. But the serpent, being fixed upon a lofty base, signifies that Christ was clearly manifested by his passion on the cross, so that none could fail to see him.

Justin Martyr: It seems that the type and sign that was erected to counteract the serpents that bit Israel was intended for the salvation of those who believe that death was declared to come thereafter on the serpent through him who would be crucified. But salvation was to come to those who had been bitten by him and had committed themselves to him who sent his Son into the world to be crucified. For the Spirit of prophecy by Moses did not teach us to believe in the serpent, since it shows us that he was cursed by God from the beginning. And in Isaiah he tells us that he shall be put to death as an enemy by the mighty sword, which is Christ

Justin Martyr: By this [lifting up of the serpent], he proclaimed the mystery where he declared that he would break the power of the serpent, which occasioned the transgression of Adam. He [would bring] salvation to those who believe on him because of this sign (i.e., his crucifixion)—salvation from the fangs of the serpent, which are wicked deeds, idolatries and other unrighteous acts.... Just as God commanded the sign to be made by the brazen serpent—and yet he is blameless—even so, though a curse lies in the law against persons who are crucified, yet no curse lies on the Christ of God, by whom all that have committed things worthy of a curse are saved.

Venerable Bede: The sins that drag down soul and body to destruction at the same time are appropriately represented by the serpents, not only because they were fiery and poisonous [and] artful at bringing about death, but also because our first parents were led into sin by a serpent. And from being immortal they became mortal by sinning. The Lord is aptly made known by the bronze serpent, since he came in the likeness of sinful flesh. Just as the bronze serpent had the likeness of a fiery serpent but had absolutely none of the strength of harmful poison in its members—rather by being lifted up it cured those who had been stricken by the [live] serpents—so the Redeemer of the human race did not clothe himself in sinful flesh but in the likeness of sinful flesh, in order that by suffering death on the cross in [this likeness] he might free those who believed in him from all sin and even from death itself.

Just as those who looked at the bronze serpent that had been lifted up as a sign were cured at that time from temporal death and the wounds that the serpents’ bites had caused, so too those who look at the mystery of the Lord’s passion by believing, confessing [and] sincerely imitating it are saved forever from every death they have incurred by sinning in mind and body

Chrysostom: He says that the one who was given was “the Son of God,” and he is the cause of life—of everlasting life. He who procured life for others by death would not himself be continually in death. For if those who believed on the crucified did not perish, much less

does the one perish who is crucified. He who takes away the destitution of others is that much freer from it. He who gives life to others brings forth even more life to himself.

Chrysostom: The text, “God so loved the world,” shows such an intensity of love. For great indeed and infinite is the distance between the two. The immortal, the infinite majesty without beginning or end loved those who were but dust and ashes, who were loaded with ten thousand sins but remained ungrateful even as they constantly offended him. This is who he “loved.” For God did not give a servant, or an angel or even an archangel “but his only begotten Son.” And yet no one would show such anxiety even for his own child as God did for his ungrateful servants....

He laid down his life for us and poured forth his precious blood for our sakes—even though there is nothing good in us—while we do not even pour out our money for our own sake and neglect him who died for us when he is naked and a stranger.... We put gold necklaces on ourselves and even on our pets but neglect our Lord who goes about naked and passes from door to door.... He gladly goes hungry so that you may be fed; naked so that he may provide you with the materials for a garment of incorruption, yet we will not even give up any of our own food or clothing for him.... These things I say continually, and I will not cease to say them, not so much because I care for the poor but because I care for your souls.

Gregory of Nazianzus: Let us praise the Son first of all, venerating the blood that expiated our sins. He lost nothing of his divinity when he saved me, when like a good physician he stooped to my festering wounds. He was a mortal man, but he was also God. He was of the race of David but Adam’s creator. He who has no body clothed himself with flesh. He had a mother who, nonetheless, was a virgin. He who is without bounds bound himself with the cords of our humanity. He was victim and high priest—yet he was God. He offered up his blood and cleansed the whole world. He was lifted up on the cross, but it was sin that was nailed to it. He became as one among the dead, but he rose from the dead, raising to life also many who had died before him. On the one hand, there was the poverty of his humanity; on the other, the riches of his divinity. Do not let what is human in the Son permit you wrongfully to detract from what is divine. For the sake of the divine, hold in the greatest honor the humanity, which the immortal Son took on himself for love of you.

Venerable Bede: Our Redeemer and Maker, who was Son of God before the ages, became Son of man at the end of ages. Thus the one who, through the power of his divinity, had created us to enjoy the happiness of everlasting life, might himself restore us, through the weakness of our humanity, to recover the life we had lost.

Chrysostom: Many of the more careless sort, using the loving kindness of God to increase the magnitude of their sins and the excess of their disregard, speak in this way, saying: There is no hell, no future punishment. God forgives all our sins....

But let us remember that there are two advents of Christ, one past, the other to come. The first was not to judge but to pardon us. The second will be not to pardon but to judge us. It is of the first that he says, “I have not come to judge the world but to save the

world.” But of the second he says, “When the Son shall come in the glory of his Father, he will set the sheep on his right hand and the goats on his left.” And the sheep will go into life and the goats into eternal punishment.... But because he is merciful, for a time he pardons instead of judging. For if he had judged immediately, everyone would have been rushed into perdition, for “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”⁴¹ Don’t you see the unspeakable surplus of his loving kindness?

Irenaeus: Separation from God is death, and separation from light is darkness. Separation from God consists in the loss of all the benefits that he has in store.... This is the same thing that happens in the case of a flood of light: those who have blinded themselves or have been blinded by others are forever deprived of the enjoyment of light. It is not that the light has inflicted on them the penalty of blindness, but it is that the blindness itself has brought calamity on them. Therefore the Lord declared, “He who believes in me is not condemned,” that is, he is not separated from God, for he is united to God through faith. On the other hand, he says, “He who believes not is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God,” that is, he has separated himself from God by his own doing.

Cyril of Alexandria: Jesus says that unbelievers had the opportunity to be illuminated but preferred to remain in darkness. Such people, in fact, by failing to choose enlightenment, determine their own punishment against themselves and provoke their own suffering, which was in their power to escape. God preserved human freedom so that people might justly receive praise for good things and punishment for the contrary. As indeed he shows in another place, saying, “If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land. But if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword.”

Augustine: People love truth when it shines on them and hate it when it rebukes them. For, because they are not willing to be deceived but definitely want to practice the art of deception, they love truth when it reveals itself and hate it when it reveals them. Because of this, truth shall requite them in such a way that those who were unwilling to be discovered by it are not only discovered by it against their will but also without revealing itself to them. This is the way the human mind, so blind and sick, so base and unseemly, desires to lie concealed but still not wanting anything to be concealed from it. Instead, it receives quite the opposite—not only is it not concealed from the truth, but the truth is concealed from it. Yet, even while it is as wretched as that, it still ultimately prefers to rejoice in truth rather than in falsehood. It looks forward to the day when, without any further trouble intervening, it will rejoice in that one truth by whom everything else is true. - Confessions 10.23.34.

Tertullian: The things that make us luminaries of the world are these—our good works. What is good, moreover (provided it is true and full), does not love darkness: it rejoices in being seen and exults over the very recognition it receives. To Christian modesty it is not enough to be so but to also appear so. For its fullness should be so great that it flows out from the mind to the clothing and bursts out from the conscience to the outward appearance.

Augustine: He declares that the works of the one who comes to the light are wrought in God, because he is quite aware that his justification results from no merits of his own but from the grace of God.

John Calvin: *Vs 14. And as Moses lifted up the serpent.*

He explains more clearly why he said that it is he alone to whom heaven is opened; namely, that he brings to heaven all who are only willing to follow him as their guide; for he testifies that he will be openly and publicly manifested to all, that he may diffuse his power over men of every class. To be lifted up means to be placed in a lofty and elevated situation, so as to be exhibited to the view of all. This was done by the preaching of the Gospel; for the explanation of it which some give, as referring to the cross, neither agrees with the context nor is applicable to the present subject. The simple meaning of the words therefore is, that, by the preaching of the Gospel, Christ was to be raised on high, like a standard to which the eyes of all would be directed, as Isaiah had foretold, (Isaiah 2:2.) As a type of this lifting up, he refers to the brazen serpent, which was erected by Moses, the sight of which was a salutary remedy to those who had been wounded by the deadly bite of serpents. The history of that transaction is well known, and is detailed in Numbers 21:9. Christ introduces it in this passage, in order to show that he must be placed before the eyes of all by the doctrine of the Gospel, that all who look at him by faith may obtain salvation. Hence it ought to be inferred that Christ is clearly exhibited to us in the Gospel, in order that no man may complain of obscurity; and that this manifestation is common to all, and that faith has its own look, by which it perceives him as present; as Paul tells us that a lively portrait of Christ with his cross is exhibited, when he is truly preached, (Galatians 3:1.)

The metaphor is not inappropriate or far-fetched. As it was only the outward appearance of a serpent, but contained nothing within that was pestilential or venomous, so Christ clothed himself with the form of sinful flesh, which yet was pure and free from all sin, that he might cure in us the deadly wound of sin. It was not in vain that, when the Jews were wounded by serpents, the Lord formerly prepared this kind of antidote; and it tended to confirm the discourse which Christ delivered. For when he saw that he was despised as a mean and unknown person, he could produce nothing more appropriate than the lifting up of the serpent, to tell them, that they ought not to think it strange, if, contrary to the expectation of men, he were lifted up on high from the very lowest condition, because this had already been shadowed out under the Law by the type of the serpent.

A question now arises: Does Christ compare himself to the serpent, because there is some resemblance; or, does he pronounce it to have been a sacrament, as the Manna was? For though the Manna was bodily food, intended for present use, yet Paul testifies that it was a spiritual mystery, (1 Corinthians 10:3.) I am led to think that this was also the case with the brazen serpent, both by this passage, and the fact of its being preserved for the future, until the superstition of the people had converted it into an idol, (2 Kings 18:4.) If any one form a different opinion, I do not debate the point with him.

Vs 16. For God so loved the world.

Christ opens up the first cause, and, as it were, the source of our salvation, and he does so, that no doubt may remain; for our minds cannot find calm repose, until we arrive at the unmerited love of God. As the whole matter of our salvation must not be sought any where else than in Christ, so we must see whence Christ came to us, and why he was offered to be our Savior. Both points are distinctly stated to us: namely, that faith in Christ brings life to all, and that Christ brought life, because the Heavenly Father loves the human race, and wishes that they should not perish. And this order ought to be carefully observed; for such is the wicked ambition which belongs to our nature, that when the question relates to the origin of our salvation, we quickly form diabolical imaginations about our own merits. Accordingly, we imagine that God is reconciled to us, because he has reckoned us worthy that he should look upon us. But Scripture everywhere extols his pure and unmingled mercy, which sets aside all merits.

And the words of Christ mean nothing else, when he declares the cause to be in the love of God. For if we wish to ascend higher, the Spirit shuts the door by the mouth of Paul, when he informs us that this love was founded on the purpose of his will, (Ephesians 1:5.) And, indeed, it is very evident that Christ spoke in this manner, in order to draw away men from the contemplation of themselves to look at the mercy of God alone. Nor does he say that God was moved to deliver us, because he perceived in us something that was worthy of so excellent a blessing, but ascribes the glory of our deliverance entirely to his love. And this is still more clear from what follows; for he adds, that God gave his Son to men, that they may not perish. Hence it follows that, until Christ bestow his aid in rescuing the lost, all are destined to eternal destruction. This is also demonstrated by Paul from a consideration of the time; for he loved us while we were still enemies by sin, (Romans 5:8, 10.) And, indeed, where sin reigns, we shall find nothing but the wrath of God, which draws death along with it. It is mercy, therefore, that reconciles us to God, that he may likewise restore us to life.

This mode of expression, however, may appear to be at variance with many passages of Scripture, which lay in Christ the first foundation of the love of God to us, and show that out of him we are hated by God. But we ought to remember – what I have already stated – that the secret love with which the Heavenly Father loved us in himself is higher than all other causes; but that the grace which he wishes to be made known to us, and by which we are excited to the hope of salvation, commences with the reconciliation which was procured through Christ. For since he necessarily hates sin, how shall we believe that we are loved by him, until atonement has been made for those sins on account of which he is justly offended at us? Thus, the love of Christ must intervene for the purpose of reconciling God to us, before we have any experience of his fatherly kindness. But as we are first informed that God, because he loved us, gave his Son to die for us, so it is immediately added, that it is Christ alone on whom, strictly speaking, faith ought to look.

He gave his only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him may not perish.

This, he says, is the proper look of faith, to be fixed on Christ, in whom it beholds the breast of God filled with love: this is a firm and enduring support, to rely on the death of

Christ as the only pledge of that love. The word only-begotten is emphatic, (ἐμφατικὸν) to magnify the fervor of the love of God towards us. For as men are not easily convinced that God loves them, in order to remove all doubt, he has expressly stated that we are so very dear to God that, on our account, he did not even spare his only-begotten Son. Since, therefore, God has most abundantly testified his love towards us, whoever is not satisfied with this testimony, and still remains in doubt, offers a high insult to Christ, as if he had been an ordinary man given up at random to death. But we ought rather to consider that, in proportion to the estimation in which God holds his only-begotten Son, so much the more precious did our salvation appear to him, for the ransom of which he chose that his only-begotten Son should die. To this name Christ has a right, because he is by nature the only Son of God; and he communicates this honor to us by adoption, when we are engrafted into his body.

That whosoever believeth on him may not perish.

It is a remarkable commendation of faith, that it frees us from everlasting destruction. For he intended expressly to state that, though we appear to have been born to death, undoubted deliverance is offered to us by the faith of Christ; and, therefore, that we ought not to fear death, which otherwise hangs over us. And he has employed the universal term whosoever, both to invite all indiscriminately to partake of life, and to cut off every excuse from unbelievers. Such is also the import of the term World, which he formerly used; for though nothing will be found in the world that is worthy of the favor of God, yet he shows himself to be reconciled to the whole world, when he invites all men without exception to the faith of Christ, which is nothing else than an entrance into life.

Let us remember, on the other hand, that while life is promised universally to all who believe in Christ, still faith is not common to all. For Christ is made known and held out to the view of all, but the elect alone are they whose eyes God opens, that they may seek him by faith. Here, too, is displayed a wonderful effect of faith; for by it we receive Christ such as he is given to us by the Father — that is, as having freed us from the condemnation of eternal death, and made us heirs of eternal life, because, by the sacrifice of his death, he has atoned for our sins, that nothing may prevent God from acknowledging us as his sons. Since, therefore, faith embraces Christ, with the efficacy of his death and the fruit of his resurrection, we need not wonder if by it we obtain likewise the life of Christ.

Still it is not yet very evident why and how faith bestows life upon us. Is it because Christ renews us by his Spirit, that the righteousness of God may live and be vigorous in us; or is it because, having been cleansed by his blood, we are accounted righteous before God by a free pardon? It is indeed certain, that these two things are always joined together; but as the certainty of salvation is the subject now in hand, we ought chiefly to hold by this reason, that we live, because God loves us freely by not imputing to us our sins. For this reason sacrifice is expressly mentioned, by which, together with sins, the curse and death are destroyed. I have already explained the object of these two clauses, which is, to inform us that in Christ we regain the possession of life, of which we are destitute in ourselves; for in this wretched condition of mankind, redemption, in the order of time, goes before salvation.

Vs 17. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world.

It is a confirmation of the preceding statement; for it was not in vain that God sent his own Son to us. He came not to destroy; and therefore it follows, that it is the peculiar office of the Son of God, that all who believe may obtain salvation by him. There is now no reason why any man should be in a state of hesitation, or of distressing anxiety, as to the manner in which he may escape death, when we believe that it was the purpose of God that Christ should deliver us from it. The word world is again repeated, that no man may think himself wholly excluded, if he only keep the road of faith.

The word judge (πρίνω) is here put for condemn, as in many other passages. When he declares that he did not come to condemn the world, he thus points out the actual design of his coming; for what need was there that Christ should come to destroy us who were utterly ruined? We ought not, therefore, to look at anything else in Christ, than that God, out of his boundless goodness chose to extend his aid for saving us who were lost; and whenever our sins press us – whenever Satan would drive us to despair – we ought to hold out this shield, that God is unwilling that we should be overwhelmed with everlasting destruction, because he has appointed his Son to be the salvation of the world.

Vs 18. He who believeth in him is not condemned.

When he so frequently and so earnestly repeats, that all believers are beyond danger of death, we may infer from it the great necessity of firm and assured confidence, that the conscience may not be kept perpetually in a state of trembling and alarm. He again declares that, when we have believed, there is no remaining condemnation, which he will afterwards explain more fully in the Fifth Chapter. The present tense – is not condemned – is here used instead of the future tense – shall not be condemned – according to the custom of the Hebrew language; for he means that believers are safe from the fear of condemnation.

But he who believeth not is condemned already This means that there is no other remedy by which any human being can escape death; or, in other words, that for all who reject the life given to them in Christ, there remains nothing but death, since life consists in nothing else than in faith. The past tense of the verb, is condemned already, (ἤδη κέκριται,) was used by him emphatically, (ἐμφατικῶς,) to express more strongly that all unbelievers are utterly ruined. But it ought to be observed that Christ speaks especially of those whose wickedness shall be displayed in open contempt of the Gospel. For though it is true that there never was any other remedy for escaping death than that men should betake themselves to Christ, yet as Christ here speaks of the preaching of the Gospel, which was to be spread throughout the whole world, he directs his discourse against those who deliberately and maliciously extinguish the light which God had kindled.