

A Picture Of Love by Jeff Strite

John 3:1-3:21

OPEN: A soldier serving overseas received a Dear John letter from his girlfriend back home. Not only was she cutting off their relationship - adding insult to injury - she wrote, "Will you please return my favorite photograph of myself? I need it for my engagement picture in the local newspaper."

The poor guy was devastated. But the soldiers in his unit came to his rescue. They went throughout the entire camp and collected pictures of all the other guys' girlfriends.

Then they put them all in a shoe box and sent it to the girl along with this note:

"Please find your picture, and return the rest.

For the life of me, I can't remember which one you were!!"

APPLY: Pictures can say a lot.

Most people have pictures of loved ones in their wallets and purses.

Or on their walls at home.

Or on their desks at work.

Or they use them for wallpapers on their computers.

Those pictures are an expression of how much they are loved.

And John 3:16 has always been THE snapshot of how much God loves us.

It's simple, short, and to the point:

"God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son that whosoever should believe in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

Now let's think a moment about what that picture of God's love means to us:

It tells you that God loves YOU and that He showed His love for you by giving you His Son to die for us on the cross. And He did this so that you could build your life on Jesus, because once we've built your life on Jesus – we now have hope.

That's what Ephesians 2:1-13 tells us when it says that we should

"remember that (before you became Christians) you were

* separate from Christ,

* excluded from citizenship in Israel

* foreigners to the covenants of the promise,

* without hope

* and without God in the world.

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through

the blood of Christ.”

In other words, we now are part of God’s covenant. We now have hope in a hopeless world. And we now have a God in our lives who cares what happens to us.

That’s what God did for us when He gave us His son. That’s the PICTURE God gave us so that we’d know how much He loved us.

Now, the question this sermon is this: How can I learn to love others like God loves me? Over the past few weeks we’ve been talking about how we can learn things from Jesus:

- How we can learn to live our lives like He lived
- How we can learn to pray like He prayed
- How we can learn to love our enemies like He loved His enemies

This morning’s question is this: How can I learn to love the world like God loved me? “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son ...”

The first thing we need to realize about this passage in John 3 is that it tells us NOT only that God loves us, but there’s a reason why we need that love. But that truth is introduced in a most unusual way.

Notice in John 3:14 Jesus says: “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up.”

A Snake?

Lifted up in the desert?

What’s this all about?

Well, in Numbers 21:5-9 we’re told that as Israel was wandering in the wilderness those 40 years, they rebelled against God they were filled with bitterness and bickering and complaining. It says there that “(Israel) spoke AGAINST God and AGAINST Moses, and said, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!”

Israel rebelled against God.

They spoke against him.

They sinned by their constant bickering and moaning and complaining, and in their rebelliousness they angered God.

(Just an observation: if you’re tempted to be a complainer because someone hasn’t listened to your opinion in church or you didn’t get your way... I wouldn’t go there if I

were you. God hates complainers).

And so it was in Numbers 21. God wasn't happy with Israel, and so He decided to get their attention.

"Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, 'We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us.'

So Moses prayed for the people.

The LORD said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.'

So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived."

What Jesus was telling Nicodemus was this:

Israel sinned against God, and their sin brought poison into their lives.

The bites of snakes damaged and destroyed their lives.

So also, the people of this world have sinned.

They've chosen to live their lives their own way.

And because they have chosen to rebel against God, they've suffered the bite of Satan, and his venom has damaged and destroyed the lives of millions.

So that's our problem: we've sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

And our sin has brought a painful venom into our lives that poisoned much of our existence.

If that's the problem is there a solution?

Well, yes.

Jesus said: Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." John 3:14

When Jesus died on the cross, He was "lifted up" so that everyone WHO LOOKED to Him could be healed from the poison of their sin, could be cured of the damage their sin had brought into their lives. And that they could be saved from the kind of terrible death that others faced.

Now there's something important to notice about the story in the Old Testament about those snakes. Do you remember how those people were healed?

Were they able to “just walk it off”?

Did someone suck the poison out of their wounds like you used to see on the old westerns?

Or, did they go down to the local CVS and get some medicine?

No, none of that would have worked for these snake bites.

There was only one way for the people to be healed.

And what was it? How were the people healed? (Bronze Snake)

That’s right. Moses had to lift up a bronze snake so that everyone who looked on it could be healed. That was the only way anyone could be healed.

Now this is what Jesus is telling us:

The ONLY way anyone is going to be healed of the poison in their lives caused by their own sinfulness will be if He is lifted up for them to see. It will only happen if you and I lift up Jesus for them to see.

In fact, that is the ONLY way we can love this world like God loved us.

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son that whosoever should believe in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

God loved us, so He sent His son to be lifted up so that we could look on Him.

Now, the reason I’m stressing this so hard is because there are a lot of Christians who don’t do that. They don’t “lift Jesus up” for people to see.

ILLUS: I’ve talked with people who have a friend who’s living with their boyfriend and life isn’t good for them. The guy’s fooling around on her... he’s mean to her... he’s living off her ... he mistreats her kids... etc. etc. etc.

And the Christian will try to solve this woman’s problem with everything EXCEPT Jesus.

Or they might have a relative who has a problem with drugs or alcohol and they’ll try to solve that problem by only trying to get them involved with certain kinds of treatment. Now, there are many valuable and helpful programs to help people with substance abuse, but we fail if that’s all we offer. We fail if we give them answers without talking to them about Jesus.

Or they might have a friend who’s struggling in their marriage and they’ll give them all kinds of advice on how to save that marriage. But Jesus won’t be part of the conversation.

I can stand up here all day and explain WHY you and I need to make Jesus part of the solution to the problems people's lives. BUT unless you are convinced that Jesus can fix their lives we're not going to include Him in the conversation.

You and I need to be convinced of the words that Peter said to Jesus:
"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." John 6:68

Now, you'll notice I said "YOU AND I".

YOU AND I need to be convinced that only Jesus has the words of eternal life.

ONLY Jesus has the words that can fix what is broken in people's lives.

ONLY Jesus has the words that heal the disease that plagues our friends and relatives.

The reason I said YOU AND I need to be convinced is because I'm as likely to forget this as anyone else. I've had to sit down with God and have a little heart to heart because I've been just as prone as anyone else to offer solutions that don't include Jesus in the picture.

ILLUS: I don't want to be like the doctor whose patient came in complaining of a headache. (True story) The doctor did a quick examination and sent the person home with pain medicine. The next day that same patient was taken to the ER... where they died from a tumor in their brain.

I don't want to be like that doctor.

I want to prescribe the right medicine for people I care about.

I want to heal them (with Jesus)...

I don't want to send them on their way with a band aide and an aspirin.

Now, I want to be clear here about what I'm NOT saying.

There are believers who know that Jesus and His morality is the answer to the crisis in others' lives. But those believers often approach it wrong.

ILLUS: I talked a woman who worked in a restaurant a while back and she told me that one of the worst customers waitresses have - the ones they dread most - show up on Sundays a little after Noon.

Do you have any idea who these bad customers might be?

That's right, they're church folks.

You know why?

Because they complain about everything, they rarely leave tips, and they'll often leave notes saying "You ought to be in church."

She told me of another incident where a preacher's wife looked her waitress over. The waitress was pregnant... and there was no ring on her finger. And this preacher's wife's comment was: "You need to get married."

Now, were those church people right?
Should those waitresses be in church?
Should that young pregnant woman get married?
Well, of course.

But that's not how you win people to Jesus.
God so LOVED the world that He gave His Son.
You can't make people become moral. You've got to get them to see the love of God in Jesus so that they WANT to be moral.

ILLUS: I read the story about a young salesman just lost a major client. He called up a friend of his father's, who was the Marketing Manager of a large business and he explained what had happened and how it had happened. Then the young man shrugged his shoulders, and said, "I guess you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink." His father's friend smiled and said this: "Son, your job's not to make them drink. It's to make them thirsty."

If we're going to win waitresses, we've got to do it differently than that Being grateful for all that is served and complimenting the girl on all she's done. Leaving a good tip. Then you've gained the honor of telling the waitress how pleased you'd be if she'd come to church with you some Sunday. Or if they'd go to Bible Study with you. Or if they'd like to have you pray for them. That is how we make people thirsty for you.

People outside of church need to get thirsty.
They need to see WHY Jesus can make such a difference in their lives.
We've got to find ways of making people "hunger and thirst" for the righteousness of Jesus.

And that's got to start with us.
We've got to have the picture of Jesus in our hearts.
We've got to have the message of John 3:16 in our souls in such a way that the people

around us can't see anything other than the love of Jesus in our lives.

We've got to be convinced that "unless a person is born again" they've got no hope. We've got to understand that unless a person is born of the water and the Spirit they've got nothing.

They must be born of the water and the Spirit.

Now Nicodemus understood "the water" part of this.

He knew Jesus was talking about baptism because when someone was converted to Judaism, part of the ritual was to be immersed in a pool of water. And when they came out of the water, the convert was said to be "born again". (See Footnote)

Nicodemus understood that. What he didn't grasp was that the water was only part of the picture. He didn't understand what part the Spirit was to play in people's lives because, up to that time, no one had the indwelling of the Spirit. He hadn't yet been given as He has been since Pentecost.

Thus, Nicodemus may have known the prophecy about God's Spirit... but he'd never experienced Him.

All he understood was the "getting wet" part of the equation.

And in the same way there are Christians who believe that once they get a person wet the job is done. But that's NOT what Jesus said:

"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Matthew 28:19-20

You see, it's NOT enough for us to get people wet.

YES, at that point they receive the Holy Spirit, and YES, at that point, they are born again.

But unless we nurture the power of the Spirit within them... unless we come along side to strengthen and challenge them... their faith will die on the vine.

And we don't want that.

But before we can get them to that point, we first we need to start thinking of HOW Jesus can meet the needs of those who are hurting, so that we can introduce our friends to Jesus. We need to be creative in how we convince them of their need of God's mercy in their lives

We need to post pictures of Jesus in their minds so that they see HIM as their answer.
CLOSE: Max Lucado told about a girl named Christina who lived in a small village in Brazil.

She was bored. She felt like her strict parents have cheated her out of the joys of life. She longed for the excitement of the big city of Rio.

One morning her mother went into her room and found Christina's bed empty and she knew immediately where her daughter had gone.

Knowing the dangers of the big city, she quickly threw some clothes in a bag and headed for the bus station. But on her way, she stopped at a drug store, went into a photograph booth there and had several pictures taken of herself.

When she reached Rio de Janeiro, she put up pictures of herself all over town. But she never found her daughter. Filled with sorrow, Christina's mother got back on the bus for home.

Months later, Christina slowly walked down the hotel stairs. She'd been worn down by the life she'd been living. Her eyes were tired and filled with pain and fear. She longed to go back home to her mom and dad and the safety that gave. But she thought it was too late.

They'd NEVER want her back.

When she reached the bottom of the stairs she looked over at the lobby mirror... and then she looked again. For there on the mirror was a small picture of her mother. She walked across the room and took the photo off the mirror and written on the back were these words:

"Whatever you have done, whatever you have become, and it doesn't matter. Please come home."

And she did.

In John 3, God has left us the same kind of picture.

A picture of His love on the cross.

And on that picture is this message:

"Whatever you have done, whatever you have become, and it doesn't matter. Please come home."

INVITATION

FOOTNOTE: REBORN IN JOHN 3

Early Jewish rabbis spoke of proselytes — gentiles converting to Judaism — as being

"reborn." Encyclopedia Judaica states, "A proselyte terminates all former family ties upon conversion and `is considered a newly born child' " (volume 13, page 1184, article "Proselytes").

The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible states:

The Jewish direction for developing theologically such an illustration as Jesus provided is evident in the somewhat similar rabbinic comparison of the new proselyte with a newborn child.... "I make you a new creature, like a woman who is pregnant and gives birth" (Rabbi Judah bar Simon). (volume 4, page 27, article "Regeneration")

Further discussion of these concepts is found under the subject "Baptism" in Hastings' Dictionary of the Bible and in chapter 6 of *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, by Alfred Edersheim. A summary of these points is also given in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 1985 one-volume edition, pages 114-115, under the heading "gennao."

New birth, as a figure of speech, is known to refer to proselyte conversion. It was understood to mean conversion of the mind and heart, beginning a new spiritual life with a new way of thinking, leaving one's old ways and ideas completely behind.

The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, by Alfred Edersheim: "It is, indeed, true that a Gentile on becoming a proselyte—though not, as has been suggested, an ordinary penitent—was likened to a child just born.... The expression, therefore, was not only common, but, so to speak, fluid."

The Talmud says, "A man who became a proselyte is like a child newly born."

According to Jamieson, Fausset and Brown: "The Jews were accustomed to say of a heathen proselyte, on his public admission into the Jewish faith by baptism, that he was a new-born child. But our Lord here extends the necessity of the new birth to Jew and Gentile alike—to every one."

According to Adam Clarke's commentary, "[The Jews] held that the Gentile who became a proselyte was like a child new born."

The figure of speech 'born again' was not foreign to Nicodemus. It was a figure applied to a bridegroom on the occasion of his marriage, to the Chief of the Academy on his promotion, to the king on his enthronement, and to the proselyte on his entrance into Judaism.⁷² The application of this expression to the entrance of a Jew into the kingdom of God left Nicodemus' head reeling. (Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965, I, p. 384.)

Edersheim, in his *"Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah"*, mentions a number of circumstances to which this applied. Proselytes to Judaism were considered newly born. So too were the bridegroom in his marriage, the Chief of the Academy on his promotion and the king on his enthronement. It was a term used to describe a new beginning in an important circumstance of life, where the person took a new role as a beginner, like a child, having to start at the bottom and learn a role in life all over again.

The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah Alfred Edersheim 1883, Book III The Ascent:
From The River Jordan To The Mount Of Transfiguration

Chapter 6 The Teacher Come From God And The Teacher From Jerusalem - Jesus And
Nicodemus (St. John 3:1-21.)

It has been thought by commentators, that there is here an allusion to a Jewish mode of expression in regard to proselytes, who were viewed as 'new-born.' But in that case Nicodemus would have understood it, and answered differently - or, rather, not expressed his utter inability to understand it. It is indeed, true that a Gentile on becoming a proselyte - though not, as has been suggested, an ordinary penitent¹⁶ - was likened to a child just born.¹⁷ It is also true, that persons in certain circumstances - the bridegroom on his marriage, the Chief of the Academy on his promotion, the king on his enthronement - were likened to those newly born.¹⁸ The expression, therefore, was not only common, but, so to speak, fluid; only, both it and what it implied must be rightly understood. In the first place, it was only a simile, and never meant to convey a real regeneration ('as a child'). So far as proselytes were concerned, it meant that, having entered into a new relation to God, they also entered into new relationship to man, just as if they had at that moment been newly born. All the old relations had ceased - a man's father, brother, mother, sister were no longer his nearest of kin: he was a new and another man. Then, secondly,¹⁹ it implied a new state, when all a man's past was past, and his sins forgiven him as belonging to that past. It will now be perceived, how impossible it was for Nicodemus to understand the teaching of Jesus, and yet how all-important to him was that teaching. For, even if he could have imagined that Jesus pointed to repentance, as that which would give him the figurative standing of 'born from above,' or even 'born anew,' it would not have helped him. For, first, this second birth was only a simile. Secondly, according to the Jewish view, this second birth was the consequence of having taken upon oneself 'the Kingdom;' not, as Jesus put it, the cause and condition of it. The proselyte had taken upon himself 'the Kingdom,' and therefore he was 'born' anew, while Jesus put it that he must be born again in order to see the Kingdom of God. Lastly, it was 'a birth from above' to which reference was made. Judaism could understand a new relationship towards God and man, and even the forgiveness of sins. But it had no conception of a moral renovation, a spiritual birth, as the initial condition for reformation, far less as that for seeing the Kingdom of God. And it was because it had no idea of such 'birth from above,' of its reality or even possibility, that Judaism could not be the Kingdom of God.