

### **John 3:14-21**

The setting for this passage is the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus — “a Pharisee” and “teacher of Israel” (vid. John 3:1, 10) — who struggles to understand Jesus’ teaching about the new birth. Yet Nicodemus is not the only one nonplussed. Apparently, others are confused as well. Since they reject the believing community’s witness, they, like Nicodemus, find it impossible to be “born from above,” to be “born of water and Spirit” (vid. John 3:3, 5). And even though Jesus’ life and teachings are promised by his identity as “the Son of Man” who “ascended into heaven” and “descended from heaven,” some people cannot move beyond “earthly things” and understand “heavenly things” (vid. John 3:11-13). But what is the source of their unbelief? According to the text, their disbelief is misunderstanding Jesus’ mission.

The misunderstanding about Jesus’ mission, was foreshadowed in this way: “And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up” (John 3:14). The specific background for this is Numbers 21:4-9. When the people of Israel complained about their food and lack of water in the wilderness — i.e., they “spoke against God and against Moses” — the Lord sent poisonous serpents. After the serpents “bit the people, so that many Israelites died,” the people repented and came to Moses in order to beg for relief. In response, the Lord told Moses to “make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole.” Then, whenever a serpent bit a person, if that person looked at the bronze serpent, he/she would live. In a similar way, the Son of Man saves those who look on him as well.

Although Jesus must be lifted up in order to save, how will the Son of Man be lifted up? First, he will be lifted up on a cross by human authorities when they despise and reject him (cf. John 8:28). Second, he will be lifted up by God — that is, glorified by God through his death, resurrection and ascension (cf. John 12:32-34).

John seeks to remedy the misunderstanding with two statements. First, he asserts that “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” (John 3:16). Then, he affirms, “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” (John 3:17). John’s testimony about the nature of Jesus’ mission is therefore unmistakable: Jesus came to save, not to condemn, and whoever looks on him will be saved — whether that one is Nicodemus or anyone else.