

Reached From What

The Reach of God:

John 3:16-21
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Many years ago, I heard a story about a drawbridge operator. He raised the bridge when ships approached so that they could pass beneath, and then lowered the bridge for trains to pass over it. One day his young son accompanied him. The boy watched his father raise the bridge to let a large ship pass beneath, and then slipped away. As the train whistle blew in the distance, the operator had no time to search for his son; he began to lower the bridge. Suddenly, the father heard the cry of his son. He looked around and found his precious child caught in the gears of the bridge. It was a terrible moment for that father. If he raised the bridge to free his son, the train and its passengers would plunge into the river, killing many if not all. If he continued to lower the bridge, the train would pass safely, but his son would be crushed to death. He had to choose who to save. The whistle blew as the train approached. Some passengers were napping, some were eating, others were laughing, but none were aware of the broken-hearted father who traded his son for their lives that day.

Although Jesus was not caught in the gears of a drawbridge and though he actually had a choice in the matter, his father and he traded his life for ours. Listen to the single most quoted words of Jesus:

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. (John 3:16, NIV)

There are two telling words that Jesus used. He used the words “love” and “perish.” We don’t know whether the drawbridge operator loved the people on the train, but we can imagine

that he loved his son; yet he valued the passengers' lives above his son's life. It was a costly decision, of which no passenger should be ignorant. Their safety that day, their rescue from death cost a child his life and a father his son. How dare they belittle their value or squander their lives! How dare they fritter their lives away when such a price was paid to preserve them!

Although we don't know about the love of the operator for the passengers, Jesus spoke of his Father's love for us: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son." God so loved: God loved us so, so deeply, so passionately, and so completely that he gave and traded His son's life for ours.

Jesus talked about how valued you are as an individual. He spoke of a shepherd who leaves ninety-nine sheep in the fold to seek out one lost lamb. He declares that the joy over one recovered lamb is more than that for the ninety-nine who are safe. Why? Because each lamb is treasured! Each lamb is so valued and loved. Think about that a moment. Jesus didn't die for the masses. That is not what Jesus communicated. He didn't die because too many people would die if he didn't. He died because your heavenly Father treasures you.

For love, one might share some of their possessions and some of their time; but how about sacrificing their only son? For that kind of gift, there needs to be both love and desperation. The word "perish" comes to mind. Jesus asked his Father, "If it be possible, please take this cup (of suffering) away." The death of Jesus was not an inevitability of history. It wasn't the end of another unfortunate soul. It was the gift of your Father and mine because it is what you needed individually, because you were perishing.

God didn't make us and then go, "Oops! They're dieing. I better do something." Paul wrote that we were chosen in Christ before the creation of the world (Ephesians 1:4). Peter declared that our rescue was affected by Christ, the lamb who was chosen before the creation of

the world (1 Peter 1:18-20). John notes that book of life belongs to the lamb who was killed before the world was created (Revelation 13:8). God didn't get backed into the corner through our sins by surprise. Before he made you and me, he knew the cost. He knew that people he loved and therefore would make would perish. He knew people would not only die; he knew they would die condemned. He made us anyway at the cost of Jesus, treasuring one of us as much as ninety-nine.

Listen again to Jesus:

God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. (John 3:17-18, NIV)

For Jesus, perishing did not mean physical death. Every believer in Jesus since the crucifixion has perished if you define it as physical death. However, Jesus promised, "Whoever believes in me will not perish." He is talking about dying condemned, because he promises that whoever believes in him is not condemned... and he says that without believing in him we stand condemned already.

Like the brokenhearted drawbridge operator, God traded the life of his Son Jesus for ours. Unlike the passengers on the train, we do not merely face physical death. Our situation is far more serious. First, we stand condemned. Second, there is a reason we stand condemned and Jesus uses legal language to describe it. He says:

This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God. (John 3:19-21, NIV)

Jesus notes that we stand condemned because we reject him, the light. If you sin, which we all do, then evil grips your heart. You want to be just in your own mind, so you shy away

from light. God reached into our world with Jesus, the light. Jesus came as truth. Jesus came as God's word. However, we don't receive Jesus as he is. We want to make him and his words palatable because he evokes guilt. He exposes our shame. Do you really want to see what your deeds do? Do you want to know the consequences of your sins? Do I want to hear or see the victims of my deeds? Do I want to know how damaging, lasting and pivotal my sins are? I want to make Jesus over into a comfortable, indulgent mythical figure who accepts me and my behavior. Because of our sins, we become nocturnal creatures who love the night. We want things morally confusing. We want things gray or dark and shadowy so we can do what we want and be affirmed in our doing.

Jesus was hated not because he was so nice and loving. He was hated because he testified that what the world does is evil. John the Baptist lost his head because he told King Herod and his wife that their relationship was unlawful. We don't want God getting in the way of our passions. We love darkness and fear the light.

Deception and denial compose the shelters we construct to shade ourselves from the light. Like a 12-step group gone awry, where addicts enable each other in using, we, in the name of love, comfort and enable one another in our sinning. We become religious, but also rebellious rather than repentant. The Spirit of Jesus comes to expose that deception. Jesus said:

It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned.
(John 16:7-11, NIV)

Even as the presence of Christ once brought division, so the presence of Jesus' Spirit brings conviction of sin. The Spirit exposes our distance from God and our unbelief. The Spirit

spotlights righteousness because Jesus, the picture of righteousness, ascended into heaven. The Spirit opens our eyes to God's righteous judgment.

I become anxious when I hear "Christians" focus on what they are doing for Christ rather than what Christ is doing for them. When they talk about what they are doing, they are not speaking of the reach of God. They are not witnessing to God's activity. They are telling me about their work, but their work doesn't save souls, release people from condemnation, or heal broken hearts. Their work doesn't even save their own souls.

Our work doesn't open eyes to the deception and denial that dim vision and doom lives. God's Spirit does. You may have grown up in the church with a faith in God, but has God opened your eyes to deception and denial? How has God exposed your denial? How has God convicted you of sin, righteousness and judgment? How has God's Spirit, in the words of John Newton who wrote *Amazing Grace*, "taught my heart to fear" and then "my fears relieved"?

What are we witnesses of if we can't speak about the reach of God and share about what God has reached us from? What is Jesus' church about if that testimony does not ring out in the lives of those who assemble?

Perhaps, like me you can't remember a moment in your life when you didn't believe in Jesus. But do you remember moments when Jesus' Spirit showed you your sins, when you repented aghast by them and received the relief of forgiveness? Do you remember moments when you found your heart changing and you realized, to your joy, that you have been given eternal life?

Has the reach of God snatched you from condemnation? Is it pulling you out of denial and deception? Are you increasingly grateful for the salvation (not just protection, not just provision, not just affirmation, but salvation) that is at work within you?