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SAVED, NOT CONDEMNED

John 3:1-17 (18-21); Lent 2A; February 28-March 1, 2026

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him.”

[GREETING]

One of the earliest Christian symbols was a fish. Persecuted Christians used this secret symbol to recognize fellow Christians. If they met someone they did not know, they would casually draw the shape of a fish. If the other person recognized its meaning, he was a brother or sister in Christ. They could trust that they would not be turned over to their persecutors. Why a fish symbol? The Greek word for fish is ΙΧΘΥΣ. Each of the letters spelling “fish” in Greek stand for the first letter of another Greek word:

Iota	Ἰησοῦς	Jesus
Chi	Χριστός	Christ
Theta	Θεοῦ	God’s
Upsilon	Υἱός	Son
Sigma	Σωτήρ	Savior

“Jesus Christ God’s Son Savior”

Christians confess Jesus as “Savior” because He has saved us. What does it mean to be saved and not condemned by God? This is what Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus was all about. Did Nicodemus end up saved or condemned? That’s an interesting question to ponder, but a question more important to each of us is: Will I be saved or condemned by God?

The terms “save” and “savior” are so familiar to us that we rarely stop to consider their underlying meaning. To “save” means to rescue from something dangerous or deadly. Jesus says that the **world** needs saving. By “world” Jesus means sinful, unbelieving people in this world who are destined to die and go to hell forever, that is, be **condemned**. Guilty people are condemned and punished. What does Jesus say the world is guilty of? It is guilty of sinning in the darkness and not believing in the one true God. The world needs saving, rescue from sin and unbelief.

The verses immediately following our Gospel Reading today explain the difference between saved and condemned: **Whoever believes in [God's Son] is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only** (μονογενοῦς, 3:18) **Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed** (3:18-20). The world is dark and needs the light of Christ to shine in it, but unbelieving sinners don't like light because it exposes their wickedness.

Why do we put up security lights? People committing crimes like to do it in secret, hiding under the cover of darkness to not get caught. Security cameras are put up to capture images of people doing wicked things so they can be identified, arrested, put on trial, convicted and condemned by this evidence. Lawbreakers try to avoid being seen and identified to avoid the consequences.

What we sinners need to realize is that God sees everything we do and think. We can try to hide our dark thoughts and actions, imagining that we have gotten away with them when no one confronts us, but God knows everything. We are already guilty before God. Darkness is as light to God. When God's Word of law shines a spotlight on us and our sin, we have nowhere to hide and we will face condemnation and consequences.

Jesus gave Nicodemus an example of what happens when we sin against God. The Israelites in the wilderness during the exodus rebelling against God and His Word. God sent poisonous snakes to bite and kill them. When the people repented of their sin and turned in faith to God for help, God had Moses make a bronze serpent and put it on a pole. Snake-bit Israelites looked to the serpent lifted on the pole and were saved from their sin and death.

Our world is a wilderness where we sin and die, and God has provided a Savior for us. **As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man [Jesus] be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life.**

Our loving God gave His only Son to be lifted up on the cross. He condemned Jesus to die in darkness and perish with our sins, so we will not be condemned, die, and perish in hell. Jesus' cross has forgiven our sins and saved us from being condemned to death. **“For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him.”** Jesus Christ God's Son our Savior, died for our sins and saved us for eternal life. How can we be sure that God has forgiven our sins and we won't die in the dark but live in the light of Christ forever?

All who believe in Jesus, God's Son, are save and have eternal life. Jesus' discussion with Nicodemus focused on this. We become God's children by **believing** in Jesus, His only Son. God saves us by us being **born again of God above** (ἀνωθεν, 3:3, 7, 31; 19:11). How are we born of God above? By **water and the Spirit, Baptism in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.** Nicodemus struggled to understand what Jesus was saying. **“How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?”** Jesus describes two different kinds of birth.

The first is **born of the flesh** by our mothers. Born of sinful parents we came into this world dead in our trespasses and sins as unbelievers before God, condemned to physical death and to perish in hell forever. The second kind is being **born of the Spirit**, born of God above by water and the Spirit, a spiritual rebirth and renewal in Baptism.

I find the expression **“born of God”** in our Bible translations confusing. Jesus is describing what God our Father does for us. Fathers don't give birth to children; only mothers, females, bear children. What men and fathers do is beget children; children are begotten by their fathers.

Why am I making this point? By saying we are **“born of God,”** we miss the connection to Jesus Christ as God's **“only Son.”** Jesus says of God, His Father and our Father, **“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son.”** The word **“only”** (μονογενῆ, 3:16) can be translated as “only-begotten,” as in the Nicene Creed, “the only-begotten Son of God.” It is based on the word translated **“born”** when used of mothers, but **“begotten”** when used of fathers.

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God's only Son was begotten of His Father from eternity. God's children are begotten of their heavenly Father by water and Spirit, Holy Baptism, to be saved, not condemned. We become God's children through faith in God's only Son, who saved us by being lifted up on the cross to die for our sins and rise for our justification.

Whoever believes in God's only Son has eternal life. Faith in Jesus saves us from condemnation to hell; faith saves us for eternal life in heaven. What is this saving faith? It is faith in God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus describes the three Persons of the Holy Trinity working together to save us. The Father gave His Son, Jesus, to be lifted up on the cross to bear our sins and suffer our condemnation. By the Holy Spirit we are born anew from God above through Baptism to become God's children. The same Spirit gives us faith in God the Father. This faith trusts in the saving work God the Son accomplished by being lifted up on the cross.

The Israelites sinned in the wilderness and God sent poisonous snakes to bite and kill them. Have you ever thought it strange that God told Moses to make a symbol of what was causing their deaths, a serpent, and put it on a pole to save them? God did the same thing with Jesus. His perfect Son was lifted up on the cross, an instrument of death, and Himself died on it. Snake-bit in our sinful condition and on the way to death, we look in faith to Jesus on the cross. This God forgives our sins and saves us from death and condemnation.

The ancient Christian symbol of the fish spells this out for us: "Jesus Christ God's Son Savior"

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him."
Amen.