

FROM WILDERNESS TO GLORY

Lent and Easter for Everyone

N. T. Wright

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Introduction

The early Christians were *different*. Different from the Greeks and Romans, the Egyptians and Syrians in whose world they lived, their next-door neighbours and, often enough, their extended families. Different, too, though in a different way, from the Jewish families and communities to whom, again, many Jesus-followers would be related. The early Christians were marked out in many ways, but one of the most distinctive was something they *did* every year. The first solid evidence for this comes from about three hundred years after the time of Jesus, but this clearly reflects an already established practice.

Something they did; or, perhaps we should say, something they didn't do. They kept what we now call 'Lent': a time to abstain, to fast, to clear the mental, spiritual and physical horizon in order to focus on prayer, penitence, holiness and hope in the days and weeks before Easter.

Lent didn't stand alone. Many Christians today, if they keep 'Lent' at all, follow it with only a single day of Easter celebration. But the early Christians celebrated Easter as a prolonged festival, running for forty days until the commemoration of Jesus' Ascension. The present book, ending with a whole week of Easter reflections, is pointing towards that larger reality.

Why did they do all this? What did it mean for them? And what might it mean for us to follow the same kind of discipline?

Perhaps the most important thing they were doing was to remind themselves, in the weeks either side of Easter, that world history divides into two: the time before Jesus' death and resurrection, and the time afterwards. New creation has been launched in the midst of the old. This huge claim challenges the way most of the world thought, and thinks. To get it into our hearts, minds and lives, we

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adopt this ancient practice of a time of lament followed by a time of celebration. Though we do indeed now live in the ongoing ‘Easter season’ – ever since God’s new creation was launched with Jesus’ resurrection, and energized with the fresh gift of his spirit – we can never simply take it for granted. It has to become real, and fresh, in our own lives. New creation requires renewed humans at its heart. Keeping Lent and Easter is an excellent way of maintaining that fresh reality.

The sharp distinction between Lent and Easter reminds us of a double truth many Christians today easily forget.

First, the importance of *lament*. It’s easy, when carried away with the joy of the gospel, to ignore the fact that the world is still in a mess; that the church is often muddled and sinful; that we ourselves still fail miserably in our love for God and for one another. At this point someone might say ‘Oh, that sounds so gloomy! Surely God wants us to be cheerful?’ But, actually, the gift of lament points to the true joy of the gospel. Being a Christian doesn’t mean pretending that everything is ‘all right really’ when actually it isn’t. To lament is to recognize that things still *are* out of joint, and that we can and should bring our puzzled sorrow and frustration into God’s presence. God’s gift of lament (following the Jesus who, according to Isaiah 53.3, was ‘a man of sorrows and acquainted with infirmity’) is the way we join in with God’s own sorrow at the continuing tragedy of his world.

Second, though, the importance of genuine *celebration*. Keeping the season of Easter isn’t whistling in the dark. It is opening our eyes to the light – and, in astonished gratitude, determining day by day to live in that light. Once we get Lent right – once we learn to lament properly, with our bodies as well as our minds and hearts – we can then praise God for Jesus’ death and resurrection, and for the new creation into which we have been brought, without any danger of making it sound cheap or trivial.

The church has always known, intuitively even, that the best way for us to be shaped into the people God wants us to be – the people

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whose difference from the world around is vital to our witness – is to think and pray slowly and carefully through the stories of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. This book is designed to help you to do just that. May God be with you in this journey.

Tom Wright
Wycliffe Hall, Oxford

Prologue

Jesus in the wilderness

Ash Wednesday

Jesus' baptism: Mark 1.9–13

⁹This is how it happened. Around that time, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, and was baptized by John in the river Jordan. ¹⁰That very moment, as he was coming out of the water, he saw the heavens open, and the spirit coming down like a dove onto him. ¹¹Then there came a voice out of the heavens: 'You are my son! You are the one I love! You make me very glad.'

¹²All at once the spirit pushed him out into the desert. ¹³He was in the desert forty days, and the satan tested him there. He was with the wild beasts, and angels waited on him.

A famous movie-maker had a huge legal wrangle with his long-time mentor and guide. The younger man simply couldn't handle criticism, and ended up rejecting the person who had helped him so much. When it was all over, a close friend summed up the real problem. 'It was all about an ungenerous father,' he explained, 'and a son looking for affirmation and love.' It happens all the time, in families, businesses, all over. Many children grow up in our world who have never had a father say to them (either in words, in looks, or in hugs), 'You are my dear child', let alone, 'I'm pleased with you.' In the Western world, even those fathers who think this in their hearts are often too tongue-tied or embarrassed to tell their children how delighted they are with them. Many, alas, go by the

Prologue: Ash Wednesday

completely opposite route: angry voices, bitter rejection, the slamming of doors.

The whole Christian gospel could be summed up in this point: that when the living God looks at us, at every baptized and believing Christian, he says to us what he said to Jesus on that day. He sees us, not as we are in ourselves, but as we are in Jesus Christ. It sometimes seems impossible, especially to people who have never had this kind of support from their earthly parents, but it's true: God looks at us, and says, 'You are my dear, dear child; I'm delighted with you.'

How does this come about? It will take the whole story, particularly Jesus' death and resurrection, to explain. But this is what the Christian gospel is all about.

It is true for one simple but very profound reason: Jesus is the Messiah, and the Messiah represents his people. What is true of him is true of them. The word 'Messiah' means 'the anointed one'; and this story tells how Jesus was anointed with the holy spirit, marked out as God's son. The Messiah is called 'God's son' in a few biblical passages, including the one that the heavenly voice seems to be echoing here (Psalm 2.7). Though the early Christians realized quite quickly that Jesus was God's son in an even deeper sense, they clung on to his messiahship for dear life. It was because Jesus was and is Messiah that God said to them, as he does to us today, what he said to Jesus at his baptism. And without that word from God all we often hear, in our mind's ear, is doors being slammed.

Mark tells the story in quite solemn language, echoing the Old Testament: 'This is how it happened'; 'he saw the heavens open'. If we go back to the biblical roots we will realize what 'seeing heavens opened' means. It doesn't mean that Jesus saw a little door ajar miles up in the sky. 'Heaven' in the Bible often means God's dimension behind ordinary reality. It's more as though an invisible curtain, right in front of us, was suddenly pulled back, so that instead of the trees and flowers and buildings, or in Jesus' case the river, the sandy desert and the crowds, we are standing in the presence of a different reality altogether.

Jesus' baptism

A good deal of Christian faith is a matter of learning to live by this different reality even when we can't see it. Sometimes, at decisive and climactic moments, the curtain is drawn back and we see, or hear, what's really going on; but most of the time we walk by faith, not by sight. One of the things Mark is saying to us is that when we look at the whole life of Jesus that's how we are to understand it. Look at this story, he says, look at this life, and learn to see and hear in it the heavenly vision, the heavenly voice. Learn to hear these words addressed to yourself. Let them change you, mould you, make you somebody new, the person God wants you to be. Discover in this story the normally hidden heavenly dimension of God's world.

Any early Christian reading this passage would also, of course, believe that their own baptism into Jesus the Messiah was the moment when, for them, the curtain had been drawn back and these words had been spoken to them. We need to find ways, in today's church, of bringing this to life with our own practice of baptism and teaching about it.

When we do this, we will be equipped, as Jesus was, to be sent out into the desert. Jesus is acting out the great drama of Israel's Exodus from Egypt, Israel's journey through the wilderness into the promised land. The road Jesus must tread, precisely because he is God's dear son, is the road that leads through the dry and dusty paths, through temptation and apparent failure. So it will be for us as well. If we start the journey imagining that our God is a bully, an angry threatening parent ready to yell at us, slam the door on us, or kick us out into the street because we haven't quite made the grade, we will fail at the first whisper of temptation. But if we remember the voice that spoke those powerful words of love we will find the way through.

Mark tells us that Jesus was 'with the wild beasts'. He doesn't say whether they're threatening, or whether this is a sign of new creation (with Jesus as the second Adam in a new garden of Eden?) or maybe both. But the angels were there, too. They were not to keep Jesus from

Prologue: Thursday

being tested by satan, just as finally they would not keep him from Calvary itself, but to assure him that his beloved Father was watching over him, was there with him, was loving him, acting through him, pouring out his spirit all the time in and through him. Jesus went the way that all his people must go; and he could do it because he had heard the words of love, the words of life.

For reflection or discussion

- Imagine God saying these words to you that he said to Jesus at his baptism: ‘You are my dear, dear child; I’m delighted with you.’ Try reading that sentence slowly, with your own name at the start, and reflect on God saying that to you, both at your baptism and every day since.
- In what ways can you learn to live by God’s heavenly reality even though you can’t see it? What role does faith play in experiencing this hidden dimension of God’s world?

Thursday

Temptation in the wilderness 1: Matthew 4.1–11

¹Jesus was led out into the wilderness by the spirit to be tested by the devil. ²He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and at the end of it was famished. ³Then the tempter approached him.

‘If you really are God’s son,’ he said, ‘tell these stones to become bread!’

‘The Bible says’, replied Jesus, ‘that it takes more than bread to keep you alive. You actually live on every word that comes out of God’s mouth.’

⁵Then the devil took him off to the holy city, and stood him on a pinnacle of the Temple.

‘If you really are God’s son,’ he said, ‘throw yourself down. The Bible does say, after all, that “God will give his angels a

Temptation in the wilderness 1

command about you”; and “they will carry you in their hands, so that you won’t hurt your foot against a stone.”

⁷“But the Bible also says”, replied Jesus, “that you mustn’t put the Lord your God to the test!”

⁸Then the devil took him off again, this time to a very high mountain. There he showed him all the magnificent kingdoms of the world.

⁹“I’ll give the whole lot to you,” he said, “if you will fall down and worship me.”

¹⁰“Get out of it, satan!” replied Jesus. “The Bible says, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve him alone!””

¹¹Then the devil left him, and angels came and looked after him.

One early Christian writer tells us that Jesus was tempted like other humans in every possible way (Hebrews 4.15). We shouldn’t be surprised, then, that after his great moment of vision, when his sense of God’s calling and love was so dramatically confirmed at his baptism, he had to face the whispering voices and recognize them for what they were. These suggestions are all ways of distorting the true vocation: the vocation to be a truly human being, to be God’s person, to be a servant to the world and to other people. Jesus must face these temptations now, and win at least an initial victory over them. If he doesn’t, they will meet him suddenly, in the middle of his work, and they may overwhelm him.

The first two temptations play on the very strength he has just received. ‘You are my son, my beloved one!’ God had said to him. Very well, whispers the demonic voice; if you really are God’s son, surely he can’t want you to go hungry when you have the power to get food for yourself? Surely you want people to see who you are? Why not do something really spectacular? And then, dropping the apparent logic, the enemy comes out boldly: forget your heavenly father. Just worship me and I’ll give you power, greatness like no one else ever had.

Prologue: Thursday

Jesus sees through the trap. He answers, each time, with the Bible and with God. He is committed to living off God's word; to trusting God completely, without setting up trick tests to put God on the spot. He is committed to loving and serving God alone. The flesh may scream for satisfaction; the world may beckon seductively; the devil himself may offer undreamed-of power; but Israel's loving God, the one Jesus knew as father, offered the reality of what it meant to be human, to be a true Israelite, to be Messiah.

The biblical texts Jesus used as his key weapons help us to see how this remarkable story fits into Matthew's gospel at this point. They are all taken from the story of Israel in the wilderness. Jesus had come through the waters of baptism, like Israel crossing the Red Sea. He now had to face, in forty days and nights, the equivalent of Israel's forty years in the desert. But, where Israel failed again and again, Jesus succeeded. Here at last is a true Israelite, Matthew is saying. He has come to do what God always wanted Israel to do – to bring light to the world (see verse 16).

Behind that again is the even deeper story of Adam and Eve in the garden. A single command; a single temptation; a single, devastating, result. Jesus kept his eyes on his father, and so launched the mission to undo the age-old effects of human rebellion. He would meet the tempter again in various guises: protesting to him, through his closest associate, that he should change his mind about going to the cross (16.23); mocking him, through the priests and bystanders, as he hung on the cross (27.39–43, again with the words 'if you are God's son'). This is no accident. When Jesus refused to go the way of the tempter he was embracing the way of the cross. The enticing whispers that echoed around his head were designed to distract him from his central vocation, the road to which his baptism had committed him, the path of servanthood that would lead to suffering and death. They were meant to stop him from carrying out God's calling, to redeem Israel and the world.

The temptations we all face, day by day and at critical moments of decision and vocation in our lives, may be very different from those

Temptation in the wilderness 2

of Jesus, but they have exactly the same point. They are not simply trying to entice us into committing this or that sin. They are trying to distract us, to turn us aside, from the path of servanthood to which our baptism has commissioned us. God has a costly but wonderfully glorious vocation for each one of us. The enemy will do everything possible to distract us and thwart God's purpose. If we have heard God's voice welcoming us as his children, we will also hear the whispered suggestions of the enemy.

But, as God's children, we are entitled to use the same defence as the son of God himself. Store scripture in your heart, and know how to use it. Keep your eyes on God, and trust him for everything. Remember your calling, to bring God's light into the world. And say a firm 'no' to the voices that lure you back into the darkness.

For reflection or discussion

- In facing temptation, Jesus relies on his relationship with God, and on God's words recorded in scripture. How can you cultivate a similar reliance on God's word and a deep trust in him in the face of your own temptations and challenges?
- The temptations Jesus faced were an attempt to distract him from his central vocation and the path of servanthood. How do the temptations you encounter in your life attempt to distract you from your own calling and purpose as a follower of Jesus? How can you discern and resist these distractions to stay true to your calling?

Friday

Temptation in the wilderness 2: Luke 4.1–13

¹Jesus returned from the Jordan, filled with the spirit. The spirit took him off into the wilderness ²for forty days, to be tested by the devil. He ate nothing during that time, and at the end of it he was hungry.

Prologue: Friday

³‘If you are God’s son,’ said the devil, ‘tell this stone to become a loaf of bread.’

⁴‘It is written,’ replied Jesus, “‘It isn’t only bread that keeps you alive.’”

⁵The devil then took him up and showed him, in an instant, all the kingdoms of the world.

⁶‘I will give you authority over all of this,’ said the devil, ‘and all the prestige that goes with it. It’s been given to me, you see, and I give it to anyone I like. ⁷So it can all be yours . . . if you will just worship me.’

⁸‘It is written,’ replied Jesus, “‘The Lord your God is the one you must worship; he is the only one you must serve.’”

⁹Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and stood him on a pinnacle of the Temple.

‘If you are God’s son,’ he said, ‘throw yourself down from here; ¹⁰it’s written, after all, that “He will give his angels a command about you, to look after you”; ¹¹and “They will carry you in their hands, so that you won’t hit your foot against a stone.’”

¹²‘It has been said,’ replied Jesus, “‘You mustn’t put the Lord your God to the test.’”

¹³When the devil had finished each temptation, he left him until another opportunity.

Jesus was not Superman. Many today, including some devout Christians, see him as a kind of Christian version of the movie character, able to do whatever he wanted, to ‘zap’ reality into any shape he liked. In the movies, Superman looks like an ordinary human being, but really he isn’t. Underneath the disguise he is all-powerful, a kind of computer-age super-magician. That’s not the picture of Jesus we get in the New Testament.

Luke has just reminded us of Jesus’ membership in the family of Adam. If there had been any doubt about his being really human,

Temptation in the wilderness 2

Luke underlines his sharing of our flesh and blood in this vivid scene of temptation. If Jesus is the descendant of Adam, he must now face not only what Adam faced but the powers that had been unleashed through human rebellion and sin. Long years of habitual rebellion against the creator God had brought about a situation in which the world, the flesh and the devil had become used to twisting human beings into whatever shape they wanted.

In particular, after his baptism, Jesus faced the double question: what did it mean to be God's son in this special, unique way? And what sort of messiahship was he to pursue? There had, after all, been many royal movements in his time, not only the well-known house of Herod but also other lesser-known figures whom we meet in the historian Josephus. Characters like Simon (not one of the Simons we know in the Bible) and Athronges gathered followers and were hailed as kings, only to be cut down by Roman or Herodian troops. There were would-be prophets who promised their followers signs from heaven, great miracles to show God's saving power. They too didn't last long. What was Jesus to do?

The three temptations can be read as possible answers to this question. The story does not envisage Jesus engaged in conversation with a visible figure to whom he could talk as one to another; the devil's voice appears as a string of natural ideas in his own head. They are plausible, attractive, and make, as we would say, a lot of sense. God can't want his beloved son to be famished with hunger, can he? If God wants Jesus to become sovereign over the world (that, after all, is what Gabriel had told Mary), then why not go for it in one easy stride? If Jesus is Israel's Messiah, why not prove it by spectacular displays of power?

If there are in this story echoes of Adam and Eve in the garden, with the serpent whispering plausible lies about God, his purposes and his commands, there are also echoes of Israel in the wilderness. Israel came out of Egypt through the Red Sea, with God declaring that Israel was his son, his firstborn. There then followed the

Prologue: Friday

forty-year wandering in the wilderness, where Israel grumbled for bread, flirted disastrously with idolatry, and put God continually to the test. Now Jesus, coming through the waters of baptism as God's unique son, the one through whom Israel's destiny was to be fulfilled, faces the question: how is he to be Israel's representative, her rightful king? How can he deliver Israel, and thereby the world, from the grip of the enemy? How can he bring about the real liberation, not just from Rome and other political foes, but from the arch-enemy, the devil himself?

The answer is that he must begin by defeating him at the most personal and intimate level. Christian leaders today sometimes make the mistake of thinking that as long as they are pursuing the right aims in their public life, what they do in private doesn't matter so much. That is a typical lie whispered by the same voice that Jesus heard in the desert. If God is working by his spirit through a person, that person's own life will be increasingly formed by that spirit, through testing at every level. If Jesus could not win the victory there, there was little point carrying on.

Jesus responds to the devil, not by attempting to argue (arguing with temptation is often a way of playing with the idea until it becomes too attractive to resist), but by quoting scripture. The passages he draws on come from the story of Israel in the wilderness: he is going to succeed where Israel failed. Physical needs and wants are important, but loyalty to God is more important still. Jesus is indeed to become the world's true lord, but the path to that status, and the mode of it when it arrives, is humble service, not a devilish seeking after status and power. Trust in God doesn't mean acting stupidly to force God into doing a spectacular rescue. The power that Jesus already has, which he will shortly display in healings in particular, is to be used for restoring others to life and strength, not for cheap stunts. His status as God's son commits him, not to showy prestige, but to the strange path of humility, service and finally death. The enemy will return to test this resolve again. For the moment, an

Temptation in the wilderness 2

initial victory is won, and Jesus can begin his public career knowing that though struggles lie ahead the foe has been beaten on the first field that really matters.

We are unlikely to be tempted in exactly the same way as Jesus was, but every Christian will be tested at the points which matter most in her or his life and vocation. It is a central part of Christian vocation to learn to recognize the voices that whisper attractive lies, to distinguish them from the voice of God, and to use the simple but direct weapons provided in scripture to rebut the lies with truth.

The Christian discipline of fighting temptation is not about self-hatred, or rejecting parts of our God-given humanity. It is about celebrating God's gift of full humanity and, like someone learning a musical instrument, discovering how to tune it and play it to its best possibility. At the heart of our resistance to temptation is love and loyalty to the God who has already called us his beloved children in Christ, and who holds out before us the calling to follow him in the path which leads to the true glory. In that glory lies the true happiness, the true fulfilment, which neither world, nor flesh, nor devil can begin to imitate.

For reflection or discussion

- In facing temptation, Jesus rejects the path of cheap and easy stunts or showy prestige. How can you learn to trust in God's timing and guidance, resisting the temptation to manipulate situations for your own gain or to seek instant gratification?
- The passage highlights the importance of recognizing the voices that whisper attractive lies and distinguishing them from the voice of God. How can we develop discernment and wisdom in identifying and resisting the deceptive messages that surround us in our culture?

Saturday

The snake and the love of God: John 3.1–3, 14–21

¹There was a man of the Pharisees called Nicodemus, a ruler of the Judaeans. ²He came to Jesus by night.

‘Rabbi,’ he said to him. ‘We know that you’re a teacher who’s come from God. . . .’

³‘Let me tell you the solemn truth,’ replied Jesus. . . .

¹⁴Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, in the same way the son of man must be lifted up, ¹⁵so that everyone who believes in him may share in the life of God’s new age. ¹⁶This, you see, is how much God loved the world: enough to give his only, special son, so that everyone who believes in him should not be lost but should share in the life of God’s new age. ¹⁷After all, God didn’t send the son into the world to condemn the world, but so that the world could be saved by him.

¹⁸‘Anyone who believes in him is not condemned. But anyone who doesn’t believe is condemned already, because they didn’t believe in the name of God’s only, special son. ¹⁹And this is the condemnation: that light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light, because what they were doing was evil. ²⁰For everyone who does evil hates the light; people like that don’t come to the light, in case their deeds get shown up and reproved. ²¹But people who do the truth come to the light, so that it can become clear that what they have done has been done in God.’

‘And mind you watch out for snakes!’

My wife gave me a final warning before I set off into the hills. The footpaths had been closed for several months because of a widespread and infectious animal disease. Many creatures that normally kept away from regular footpaths had, apparently, spent the spring

The snake and the love of God

enjoying a new-found freedom. We don't have many dangerous snakes in the British Isles, but the viper is dangerous enough. And, to be honest, I didn't know exactly what I would do if I met one.

Fortunately, I didn't see one on the walk. But it sent my mind back to the way in which the symbol of the snake has been used in many cultures over many thousands of years. From the snake in the Garden of Eden to the serpent Ananta in some branches of Hinduism, to the mythic serpent-ancestor of the Aztecs and the 'old god of nature' in parts of Africa to this day; from poetry to art and medicine, not least psychoanalysis; the figure of the serpent or snake has haunted human imagination from time immemorial.

In many cultures, the serpent is seen as positive and powerful, though dangerous. In many others, not least in some parts of the Jewish and Christian traditions, the serpent is seen as a strong negative force, symbolizing the evil in the world and in all of us. The question of what to do about the serpent is a way of asking the question of what to do about evil – or what different cultures have designated as evil.

The present passage gives a clear and confident answer, which has itself been powerful in subsequent thought and culture. Verse 14 looks back to the incident described in Numbers 21.5–8. During their wandering in the wilderness, the Israelites grumbled against Moses, and were punished by poisonous snakes invading the camp, killing many of them. God gave Moses the remedy: he was to make a serpent out of bronze, put it on a pole and hold it up for people to look at. Anyone who looked at the serpent on the pole would live. The serpent entwined around the pole, a symbol which appears in other cultures too, remains to this day as a sign of healing, used by various medical organizations.

The bronze serpent was thereafter stored in the Tabernacle as a sacred object, until, much later, King Hezekiah discovered that the people were worshipping it, and broke it to pieces (2 Kings 18.4). In the time of Jesus, one Jewish writer found it necessary to emphasize

that it wasn't the bronze serpent itself that had saved the Israelites, but the saving power of God (Wisdom of Solomon 16.7). All this shows the strange power of the symbol, and highlights even more the importance of verse 14 for understanding what Jesus had come to do.

This, in fact, is the only place in the New Testament where the bronze serpent is referred to. Here it points clearly to the death of Jesus. Moses put the serpent on a pole, and lifted it up so the people could see it; even so, the son of man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. Humankind as a whole has been smitten with a deadly disease. The only cure is to look at the son of man dying on the cross, and find life through believing in him.

This is very deep and mysterious, but we must ask: how can the crucifixion of Jesus be like putting the snake on a pole? Wasn't the snake the problem, not the solution? Surely John isn't suggesting that Jesus was like the poisonous snakes that had been attacking the people?

No, he isn't. What he is saying, and will continue to say in several ways right up to his account of the crucifixion, is that the evil which was and is in the world, deep-rooted within us all, was somehow allowed to take out its full force on Jesus. When we look at him hanging on the cross, what we are looking at is the result of the evil in which we are all stuck. And we are seeing what God has done about it.

We are seeing, in particular, what God's own love looks like. John refers us back to 1.18, and behind that to 1.1–2, in order to say: when Jesus died on the cross, that was the full and dramatic display of God's own love. It wasn't a messy accident; it wasn't God letting the worst happen to someone else. The cross is at the heart of John's amazing new picture of who God is. He is now to be known as the God who is both father and son, and the son is revealed, 'lifted up', when he dies under the weight of the world's evil. The cross is the ultimate ladder set up between heaven and earth.

The snake and the love of God

But evil isn't then healed, as it were, automatically. Precisely because evil lurks deep within each of us, for healing to take place we must ourselves be involved in the process. This doesn't mean that we just have to try a lot harder to be good. You might as well try to teach a snake to sing. All we can do, just as it was all the Israelites could do, is to look and trust: to look at Jesus, to see in him the full display of God's saving love, and to trust in him.

Here there opens up the great divide, which John describes in terms of darkness and light (see 1.4–5). Believing in Jesus means coming to the light, the light of God's new creation. Not believing means remaining in the darkness. The darkness (and those who embrace it) must be condemned, not because it offends against some arbitrary laws which God made up for the fun of it, and certainly not because it has to do with the material, created world rather than with a supposed 'spiritual' world. It must be condemned because evil is destroying and defacing the present world, and preventing people coming forward into God's new world ('eternal life'; that is, the life of the age to come).

But the point of the whole story is that you don't have to be condemned. You don't have to let the snake kill you. God's action in the crucifixion of Jesus has planted a sign in the middle of history. And the sign says: believe, and live.

For reflection or discussion

- How does the symbol of the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness relate to the crucifixion of Jesus? In what ways does it reveal God's saving love?
- What role do belief and trust play in the process of healing and salvation?

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