

*14And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 16“For 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. 17“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. 18Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. 19And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. 20For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 21But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”*

I remember a summer day in North Dakota when our young son Matt came home screaming. Our new kitten had wandered across the street into a vacant lot. Matt ran barefoot to catch the kitten and bring it home. He did not want that kitten to be lost.

There was only one problem – the vacant lot where the kitten had strayed was full of flat cactus. Matt saved the cat but at the price of hundreds of cactus needles embedded in his feet. Somehow he walked the length of our block and got to our house. That is when we heard his screams – lifted him off his feet – and began pulling out the needles one by one.

Cactus needles are barbed – they are designed to stay in whatever they puncture. I remember how my heart ached for Matt while Sue patiently used a tweezers to grasp each needle. I will never forget that moment.

Had I been with Matt that day I would have said, “Let the cat go – it is not nearly as precious to me as you are Matt. Forget the cat – I love you.”

For 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.

When God sent his Son to save you it was nothing as simple as some cactus barbs in his feet. Yes, there was the crown of thorns and the lashes of the whip that Jesus endured. Soldiers spit on him and slapped him and mocked him. There were the nails driven into his hands and feet, and the thirst and the struggling to breathe. But the physical pain Jesus endured was only part of the suffering.

There was no one to hold Jesus, to tell him it would be all right, to let him know he was not alone. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” he cried out. Jesus died alone.

What sort of a love is it that goes out into a cactus patch to rescue a kitten? I never remember Matt telling us he was sorry he had done it. When he arrived at our door, cactus barbs and all, that kitten was still in his arms. And maybe you can understand that for a kitten, so cute and innocent and playful. But for people who act the way we do – who are mean to one another and who are greedy, and who are sometimes lazy – would you suffer for a person – a person just like you?

But God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Sometimes Christians have thought that Jesus came to gather just the good people. And they have thought that just the good people could come to the family meal to share Jesus. Sometimes Christians have said that real sinners are not welcome to hold out their hands to receive the mercy of Jesus. Sometimes Christians have said that people who do not have enough understanding or the right understanding are not welcome to receive all that the Father gave when he sent his Son.

But God so loved the world that he gave his Son that whoever believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

I suppose that if there are Christians who are as cuddly as a kitten they are welcome here but so are the people who are mean like a pit bull – who seem to have no kindness in them at all. Jesus died for the world, for every person God created. God’s love is for the whole world – for every one.

For God so loved the world that he gave his Son that whoever believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

That includes you. When you are good and proud of what you have done or when you have failed yourself and others God gives Jesus to you – for you. There will never be a moment in your life when you will hold out your hand to receive mercy and God will not fill your hand with the body and blood of Christ.

Sometimes we speak as if Jesus was the only one who suffered. But I know how a father suffers when his child is in pain – or how a mother would give her very self to bless her child. God so loved you that he sent Jesus to the cross. God witnessed it all – heard Jesus' cry – saw the hatred poured out on his only Son.

And in return for it all – God gives you life – forgiveness – love. God gives you Jesus.

God wants you to believe in Jesus. More than you believe in anything in this world God wants you to believe in Jesus. He gave his life for you went out into the cactus patch to save you – he will hold onto you through anything that could ever happen to you or to this world. Believe – it is true.

For God so loved the world that he gave his Son that you who believe in him will not perish but will have eternal life.