

APO STAHL JOHNTHREE AND THE SALONIANS

*A short story by James "Jamie" Arthur Johnson
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FRAGMENTS

Fragments of paper with handwritten words. That's all they were -- strange things to see in these times of no books, little paper, and even less who can write. My late mother Rabi told me that her grandmother told her about books when she was little. Her grandmother was the last in our family to have them before people came under the rule of The Unity. She said after her family's last book was taken, only the elites -- those working for or promoting The Unity -- had books. So, the fragments of paper were the closest thing to a book I had besides what I had written.

And I couldn't write often. Most people didn't even know how to write. Even if they did, The Unity had made paper quite the commodity. We were allowed to have it, but it was expensive. Yet, there were 2 fragments with writing not of my own making.

One of the papers said, "First, the Salonians -- five to one -- test Althengs and hold fast to Theegud."

The other paper said, "Apo Stahl Johnthree, 60n, offers hope."

I had questions. Who were the Salonians? And who were the Althengs? Why did the Salonians need to outnumber the Althengs five to one in order to test them? Was there a battle? And what was or who was Theegud? Finally, who was this Apo Stahl Johnthree fellow? "Stahl is my name" I thought. So, Mr. Johnthree must've been a man like me. Was 60n a rank or something? Was he a soldier against or for The Unity? And what hope would he offer? My thought was that he was against The Unity if he offered hope -- soldier or not. I could get in trouble for such thoughts, but under The Unity, we lived -- as my mother used to say -- as "poor peasants" compared to those who supported and promoted The Unity: the elite, those who had all things. This was the life I knew, but my mother said her grandmother used that phrase "poor peasants" and recalled the nice things taken from her and her family by The Unity and given to the elite -- those who had all things, which included books and doing things without the oversight of The Unity.

Wait! Those who had all things? Or Althengs?

What if the paper meant, "First, the Salonians -- five to one -- test all things and hold fast to Theegud?" It was a possibility. My late mother taught me to think and to write as her mother taught her and her mother taught her -- all in secret of course. She also taught me about God and Jesus and what He did for me, but The Unity strictly forbid any talk of such things. My mother used to talk about how her grandmother had a book of books called a Bible. Imagine that! A book of books! There were apparently details about Jesus in there, but that book of books was taken from the masses long ago.

My father Saintjay taught me to fight, to challenge, to not step down from what is right. That was probably where his trouble began in demanding that something was true that The Unity hadn't approved as such. Or he got in trouble for declaring false

something The Unity declared true. He took it further, though, and became reactive and was arrested and taken away. He died well before my mother. I never knew how, though our community suspected The Unity mistreated him in prison. What I knew was he came from a line that used to work for The Unity, but his grandfather left The Unity and it seemed every son down the line had incited rebellion with some amount of force only to pay the ultimate price. So, each day, I tried to keep my head down, keep quiet and just work in the field.

Thinking as I did, I was already in trouble. The fact that I referred to my late parents as my "mother" and "father" showed this. The Unity had long ordered since my mother's grandmother's day that each can be referred to as "steward" or "parent" and that we were to be raised in a community with a representative of The Unity known as the Overseer who opened each day of the community to make sure things went as they should. To The Unity, "mother" and "father" were problematic as they were too personal (among other things). Rather, parents were stewards of children who ultimately belonged to The Unity.

I guessed I was destined for conflict. These paper fragments prompted my thinking. Oh, how I missed the conversations with mother in the fields as we worked. Now the conversations were in my head.

Maybe those with all things were the Althengs. Maybe Johnthree was a Salonian who gathered a group and challenged them. Where was Salonia anyway? Never heard of it. I needed to know. I needed answers.

FIRST ENCOUNTER

Every day was the same, except now I had questions in my head in addition to the memories and teachings. Every day, we reviewed the Law of The Unity, the first being, "There is no law but the Law of the Unity," something my late father disputed, and my late mother mentioned as a false god. The Overseer covered the various rules of The Unity each day and we had to recite them. I usually did the duty just to stay out of trouble.

Today was different. Questions. Every time I spoke a rule, I not only had the questioning of it since my parents taught me differently, but I had the additional questions from the fragments. I stopped speaking.

The Overseer happened to notice this and had two of her guards obtain me. They took me without resistance to a room where the Overseer waited. While it got me out of the hot fields, it made me wonder what I would eat that night. We worked to eat. The Unity provided the fields and we worked to eat. The Overseer always had what looked like a glowing paper with her. It didn't bend and she seemed to write on it with her finger in the air above it like I did with a pencil on paper when I got the opportunity. She sat at a table with that in her hand. The room was nicer than any room in the community complex.

She spoke, "Stahl, why did you not say the Law?"

I answered, "Overseer, can I attend to two rows in the field at once?"

She responded, "I ask the questions here! What do you mean by that?"

I replied, "The Law had me on one line of thought, but I have another line of thought on other things."

She asked, "What other things?"

I asked, "Where is Salonia?"

Not wanting to admit that she didn't know (I could see it on her face), she said, "I will get an answer for you so you can recite the Law like a good citizen."

"Thank you," I replied.

She said, "Now may your work produce the fruit for your table."

"Thank you," I replied.

I spent the day working. Everyone turned in their crops at the end of the day to the guards. They took some and divided it among those who were deemed good citizens. Those deemed bad citizens learned their lesson by going without for that day.

BAD CITIZEN

A new day. I recited the Law and the Overseer saw that I did, but she didn't come to me with an answer. I worked and ate that night. And the questions remained.

The next day, I didn't recite the Law and once again. I was taken to see the Overseer. She said, "You are capable of reciting the Law. You are capable of being a good citizen. Do your duty."

I said, "I know, but I don't know where Salonia is."

She said, "There is no place called Salonia. Only The Unity."

I had seen it written and that was exactly what I told her.

She asked me what else I have seen written. I hesitated, but I decided the only way to get answers (or more trouble) was to open up. I asked her if she knew anything about the Althengs or who Theegud or Johnthree was. She tried to give me the same line as the other day about getting answers.

I replied, "But you didn't get one for Salonia."

She firmly pressed into the table and said, "I did. I told you there is no place called Salonia. I checked for myself. There never was such a place."

"Is it even a real word?" I asked.

The Overseer looked at me and said, "Yes, but not a place."

I excitedly exclaimed, "Then a who! Who is Salonia? Wait! That doesn't make sense! What I read said, 'Salonians' implying a place or group or something. Were they named for someone named Salonia?"

The Overseer seemed shocked at my pondering and then narrowed her eyes and said, "Did you read something?"

"Yes, I did," I uttered.

She said, "What did you read?"

I said, "I read on a piece of paper."

"Where was this paper and what did it say?" she asked.

I shared what it said: "First, the Salonians -- five to one -- test Althengs and hold fast to Theegud."

"Interesting, Is that 521 as in a number?" she said as she made motions above the glowing rectangle in her hand. "I will check with the Biblions on this."

I thought to myself, "Biblion, like Bible?"

So, I asked, "Who are the Biblions?" knowing that I dare not mention the word *Bible*.

She said, "Too many questions. They are the ones with the answers."

I said, "I want to be a Biblion."

She laughed and said, "First, you have to be a good citizen."

She next neared me and looked right into my eyes, paused, briefly looked away seeming less robotic and more human, then looked back into my eyes with that Overseer persona and said, "You can do that now, can't you? You're capable of being a good citizen. I have seen it. Still, you have not recited the Law today and so you are deemed a bad citizen for this day. Guards, take him away!"

And just like that, I was dubbed the label of "Bad Citizen" and still had to work, but I did not eat that night. However, I had that question she uttered, "Is that 521 as in a number?" *Five, two, one?*

RAISED HAND

Weeks passed and I did as I had done before. I recited the Law. I also pondered the meaning of the paper fragments and of the questions that had proceeded from them: Are Althings "all things" and was five to one really five, two, one? Salonians 521 didn't make sense, but could it reference something?

One day, I did the usual -- reciting the Law -- but I held my hand up as I said it. The Overseer had her guards escort me to see her once again.

"How are you?" I asked her.

Taken aback, she said, "That is a question I don't usually get from anyone. We are all well under The Unity."

"Is five two one a number?" I quickly asserted before she could ask about my hand-raising.

"Is this why you raised your hand? To ask more questions?" she asked.

"I still have no answers." I said. "I am being a good citizen. You have seen it."

She said, "While you have been saying the Law, good citizens conform. They don't raise their hands. And if you haven't noticed, this is the third time you have come to me with questions. Good citizens do. They do not ask."

I said, "I want to learn."

She said, "Good citizens know what they need to know."

I said, "Bib lions know more than fields."

She said, "Continue to be a good citizen."

"I want to be a good citizen and Bib lion," I dared to say.

She said, "Bib lions are chosen by The Unity, not by the citizen."

"Choose me," I pleaded.

She said with a softer human tone, "The Unity chooses. I don't."

I returned to the fields and was allowed to eat as I had been "good" for weeks and my hand-raising was overlooked *this* time.

SMILE

More weeks, even months, passed and the questions swirled in my mind. Another morning. I recited the Law and this time smiled at the Overseer as I did so. Usually people were stoic as they recited and looked at no one. I wanted to converse. Maybe a good citizen wasn't supposed to smile or make eye contact, but I did.

Again, the guards escorted me to the Overseer.

She asked, "Stahl, why are you smiling at me?"

I said, "I want to talk with you."

She said, "Well, this is the fourth time. And I am here to work and so are you."

I replied, "You are working. That's why I'm meeting with you."

She hesitated and said, "No questions?"

Instead of asking if I was allowed to ask, which would be a question, I simply said, "If you deem it appropriate, please let me know if asking a question is acceptable."

She said, "You have been a good citizen for quite some time now. You may ask a question."

I asked, "What is your name?"

She looked and hesitated again and began to say, "The Unity..." but then seemed to soften and said, "Epis Kope, though those who know me call me Epie."

"Thank you," I said.

"That is all?" she asked.

"Only if you deem it as so," I replied.

"Proceed," she said.

"Do you want to know why I want to talk with you?" I asked.

"For answers," she replied.

I responded with "Partly, but I really enjoy talking with you."

Though she showed no emotion on her face, she smiled nonetheless, and her eyes indicated so.

CHOSEN

As the days passed, I played the good citizen and Epie and I made eye contact. I didn't smile each time or raise my hand, but when I did smile, her eyes smiled back. I stuck to my duty for the time being. I had questions, but I was learning to live with them, accepting that there were some things I didn't know, resting in that while hoping that one day I would know more.

The guards came to me to escort me. Besides eye contact, I wasn't sure what I had done to prompt it. I didn't smile today. Yet, there I was again across the table from Epie.

She said, "Stahl, you have been a good citizen. You have worked hard. You have done as instructed. You have been compliant. I have talked to some persons in Unicity. The Biblians have agreed to train you in their ways."

The blood rushed to my face as my heart leapt. I wanted to hug Epie but restrained myself. I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

"Thank you!" I said to Epie and repeated it multiple times.

Epie said with a smile, "I usually don't say this, but you're welcome." She then became solemn and said, "I must advise you, though, do not give your family name."

I didn't understand. What did that mean? She could see the perplexed look on my face and continued, "You cannot give them your last name as it will raise suspicion."

Last name? I had always been Stahl as long as I could remember. No last name -- just Stahl from Community P at M05. I let her know I didn't have a last name.

She said that I did have a last name and turned her glowing rectangle to me and said, "Here it is on my tablet: Stahl Johnthree. Make no mention of Johnthree as they know your family history, or the history of the Johnthree line. Tell them that you are simply Stahl from Community P at M05. That may be enough."

I wanted to ask more especially having seen another Stahl Johnthree in writing -- Apo Stahl Johnthree. More questions.

She said I needed to pack up and leave while the fields were worked and that it would be best if I just left without saying anything to anyone. Since I had no parents and no siblings (as parents were now restricted to one child of which to be stewards), I just had a few community members come to mind -- more faces I'd seen than people I had really known. I hadn't talked with anyone much since my mother died until Epie. So, I quietly gathered my few belongings (including those paper fragments) and was escorted out of the community with the guards and Epie.

BIBLION

I was transported to Unicity, the capital of the region where The Unity reigned. It was unlike anything I had seen. My mother had told me of such places that her grandmother had told her of -- places with great buildings and books and transporters for all and glowing boxes and rectangles that were like books and more.

The guards were elsewhere on the transport. Epie and I conversed about more things. She seemed at ease, even friendly. We talked easily. There was *something* about her.

After some time, the transport came to a halt, and the guards took me from the transport. I looked at Epie and said, "Will I ever talk with you again?" Her eyes appeared misty, but she showed no other emotion as she wept on the inside.

The guards took me to a large building -- larger than any I had seen -- and there I met with a group of people who lived there -- the Biblions.

They lived in rooms upon rooms -- each one has multiple rooms -- wings off of a large, central, cylindrical room filled with shelves of rectangles and walls of glowing squares and rectangles.

A voice said, "It's beautiful isn't it? A wall of books and screens."

Books? Those were books? They must not have been the glowing ones. Epie called her glowing rectangle a tablet. I guessed that was a screen. I had a lot to learn.

The days and months followed with intense vetting and training on all the resources in the building -- the Library. I learned about so many things. I also learned about things we were not to permit in the society constructed by The Unity. To get the full picture about times before The Unity, I had to dig deep. They even had Bibles there, though I didn't recall seeing any Biblions in that section. There were endless resources. We were able to converse and discuss. I mostly asked questions about all the things I had been learning. Some of my questions from my days at Community P at M05 seemed to fade away until....

JOHNTHREE

The day started like the many others that had passed since my days in the field and my days of training. We read the Law on a screen and the eye-tracking software "verified" that we had read it. Like the mornings in the fields, it became a rote exercise. After that, we were to read and research and have meetings of conversation to help one another with requests and research. Sometimes, the most elite Leader class members made requests of us. Sometimes an Overseer for a community came with a question or dispute to settle. I didn't see Epie. I hadn't for so long.

This day, however, the questions from those fragments of paper came back to mind. I was thinking of how I had gotten here and why I wanted to be a Biblion in the first place. During one of the conversational meetings, I decided to bring up Apo Stahl Johnthree. I dared not mention that my family name is Johnthree, but I asked the group of Bilibions, "Who is Apo Stahl Johnthree, 60n?"

One of the Bilibions asked me to repeat myself. I asked again. He said, "Oh, we don't talk about such things. It is forbidden!" And he left to go to some studying.

Another Biblion asked, "Are you talking about the person Apo Stahl Johnthree or that which is forbidden?"

I replied, "I don't know. How about both?"

She replied, "The person Apo Stahl Johnthree was in one of the earliest communities under The Unity. The name had been Stahl Johnthree and was later preceded by the title *Apo* received from followers to denote separation from The Unity -- a child of a defector named Stahl John II. Apo Stahl Johnthree was originally Stahl John III. After his parent Stahl John II was -- shall we say -- removed by The Unity, Stahl John III was renamed by his other parent to Stahl Johnthree for protection, but we Bilibions were able to figure that out, too. It is our business to know. The remaining parent sometimes added the suffix 16 in naming the child for that which is forbidden. So, you had Stahl John II, the defector, then Stahl John III, a.k.a. Apo Stahl Johnthree, sometimes with 16 as a suffix. Apo Stahl Johnthree was removed and had a child named Saint Johnthree who challenged The Unity and was also removed as well. They weren't original with their names or strategy with The Unity. That last Saint Johnthree had a child also named Stahl Johnthree, but he is a crop-worker somewhere according to what is on record. We Bilibions don't delve much into the crop-world or other material harvest communities unless a dispute arises. Those who are more notorious are noted."

I replied to her, "As always, you have been very helpful." And I held the emotion in as I recalled my father's name -- Saintjay as in Saint J or Saint Johnthree. I remembered Epie's tablet shining "Stahl Johnthree" as I learned my family name in what was seeming a long time ago.

I had answers. I knew now that I was Stahl Johnthree, son of Saint Johnthree, son of Apo Stahl Johnthree 16 (Stahl John III), son of Stahl John II. So, Apo Stahl Johnthree, 60n, offered hope. He was my grandfather. The 60n was a miswriting of 16 if I understood my fellow Biblion correctly.

I had questions. What was so forbidden about the 16? How was it a name for that which is forbidden? And how did my record still show that I was working in the fields?

NUMBERS AND ANSWERS

The next day, during research time, I headed for the forbidden section. There were Bibles, things about freedom, history, western thought and other things. It seemed out of all of those, the Bible was the most forbidden. So, I started there, saying the name of my grandfather to myself and noting the numbers in his name. And as I kept muttering to myself faster and faster while looking through the Gospel and Letters of John, it hit me: "Apo Stahl Johnthree 16, Apostahl John three 16, Apostle John 3:16. My grandfather's name was a Bible verse and my father's was a Bible chapter St. John 3. Apostle John 3:16 offered hope.

I read it: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life." That was what my mother had taught me about God and Jesus is the Son of God given for me. That was the truth my mother taught and for which my father fought. That certainly offered hope. And there it was right there in the Bible.

I was thinking about the other fragment I had found: "First, the Salonians -- 521 -- test Althengs *or* all things and hold fast to Theegud." I went with 521 and proceeded from there. This one took longer as I dug. I had John 3 written right in front of me on the last one. I searched and searched and found nothing on Althengs or Theegud. Meanwhile, I found that Salonia was a Roman slave who became a free woman, but the numbers and nonsensical words came to mind. I recalled Althengs could be all things. So, first, the Salonians 521 test all things and hold fast to Theegud. If this was from the Bible, I should be looking for 52:1 or 5:21. And after some time, I found it: 1 Thessalonians 5:21: "Test all things and hold fast to the good." That was something my father lived by before he took it a step further.

I was a Biblion and had figured it out, only for the text to come to me and not return void. The words had me figured out. Something awakened in me. I had to let someone know, but who? Could I tell anyone?

QUESTIONING

My new findings occupied my mind much of the time. I kept digging in the Bible and learning more and more about what my mother had taught me and what my father had fought for and was finding it to be my own faith.

My mind also went to Epie. Why had she granted my wish of becoming a Biblion knowing that I was a Johnthree? I wished I could talk to her and thank her again.

Later, my fellow Bilibions and I had a meeting. Everyone was curious as to why I was so quiet as to what I was working on and how I didn't need any help.

I finally asked, "Don't you marvel at some of the thoughts about which you read and want to think on them?"

The Biblion who was always keen on mentioning what is forbidden asserted, "We are to know, not to think."

"How can you research without thinking?" I asked.

He replied, "We are to know what we read, but not disagree with The Unity."

"What if The Unity is wrong?" I asked.

Gasps filled the room. Some screamed. Some covered their ears. At least a few of Bilibions left the table in horror or disgust. One threatened to call the guards. Eventually, one-by-one, they left the table until I was sitting alone.

TRUTH

Days passed. Everyone was quiet in the Library. When it came to our meeting times, the conversations were awkward. I looked at the fellow Bibles. Up until at least *that day* of questioning, they had developed a respect for my work and for me. I had been quiet for days. I decided to open the conversation:

"I know I have said things in the past that are shocking. However, my job is to research and to think and to know what I can. We are all thinkers. We cannot know if we don't think. When Overseers bring issues before us or when the Leadership brings disputes before us, we think through them. We determine an outcome based on standards. The standards are supposed to be based on truth. We know, simply by the fact that these disputes come up, that some people have different standards. Yet, this does not mean there is not absolute or objective truth. The truth is higher than us. Yet, it is knowable. Just as we are designed to depend on something outside of ourselves -- just as we need to eat -- the truth is above us. We are in unrest unless we come to know it."

One of the Bibles responded, "Stahl, that is very insightful and thoughtful, but The Unity says there is no truth but The Unity, which says, 'Truth is relative.'"

I replied, "Is it? Is the truth relative? If it is relative, then that means it is false in some cases and we can conclude therefore it is not always true. So, it fails to be truth. That claim cannot be made. If all is relative, then the statement, 'All is relative' is also relative, which means it isn't always true. The correct and true statement is 'Some is relative.' And this also means some is absolute, which means there is objective truth. And by definition, the relative or subjective truth is subject to the objective truth. Do you see the contradictions in saying, 'Truth is relative?' Replace 'The Unity' with someone's name and tell yourself that. We are smart people. We were chosen because we think. We ask questions. We seek the truth."

My fellow Bibles looked at me pensively. I could tell they were respecting what I said. Some said, "That is refreshing insight" and "That is helpful."

As the days went by, I delved further into the Bible as I realized that my faith was also a reasonable one. Many seemed to think it not, but I had found that the reasonable understanding came more so *after* coming to faith and *with* faith, not before. I had begun as one who questioned, who explored, who had a good foundation thanks to my parents. However, I had now come to know the truth.

CANDIDATE

After some time passed, I was in another day, which started as they usually do. Things had again become comfortable with my fellow Bibles. Some were asking questions from time to time about truth. A couple of them even asked about the Bible. This led to some discussions and even some of them reading the Bible with me.

During a following discussion, it was decided that we needed to add another Bible. I remembered last time this happened. I had been chosen. The Bibles proposed polling the Leadership and the Overseers for candidates. I remembered my inaugural day so well. I remembered *her*. I spoke up and said, "What about Epie?"

The Bibles looked at me and asked, "Who is Epie?"

I responded, "Epie is Epis Kope, the Overseer of Community P at M05. She is the one who came to you about me becoming a Bible."

One Bible replied, "That may be feasible. Your insight and work are commendable. We trust your recommendation. Let's think on this and reconvene on it."

The next day, the Bibles agreed with me that Epie was a good candidate. While I didn't share details of conversations, I did share of our earlier conversations when I was at Community P at M05. They seemed to be sold and they agreed that I was a good Bible. So, they went to the Leaders of The Unity to see if she was a good choice. They took my record for work and reputation as a Bible as well as her reputation and work as an Overseer into consideration.

EPIE

Later that month, Epie arrived as a Biblion. She smiled when she saw me. We conversed privately each day, and she often commented how refreshing it is to converse freely, not as Overseer and subject and not under the eyes of guards. She no longer put on the robotic act. That must've been exhausting. Rather, she was warm and charming out of her Overseer persona. I had enjoyed talking with her before, but this was rejuvenating, a breath of fresh air. Before, it was just good to talk. Now we really *talked*. We talked about life and real things, not just Biblion topics. She told me how I was one of the few who expressed interest in her as a person, treated her as such, and desired to spend time with her back in the days at Community P at M05. Sure, it was only a few times, but it impacted her and impacted me. And so, we talked about things of the heart. She shared about her disillusionment with The Unity. And I shared my delving into the truth. I even shared my faith. She did not gasp, and it did not surprise her. She was free to think and speak with me as I was with her.

Epie joined the subset of Bilibions who spent time with me as we looked at the Bible each day. We discussed many things over the months that followed and Epie and I became close friends. What a joy it was to have her as a neighbor and friend.

One night, I was studying at one of the Library tables in the cylindrical common area. Epie came to me and professed that she had embraced the truth of the Bible, that Jesus is God in the flesh who lived a perfect life and paid the penalty at the cross for her sin, was buried and rose again offering her hope of new life. I embraced her. We prayed. We conversed.

APO STAHL JOHNTHREEE AND THE SALONIANS

Time proceeded and Epie grew in her faith, and so did I. Also, the other Biblions who had joined the Bible studies grew in the faith. We referred to ourselves as the Salonians -- once slaves who were now free (and in honor of the phonetic and cryptic writing I had found on the paper fragment in the past). The effects were seen in settling disputes as they resulted in increasingly merciful outcomes from the Biblion group. More and more Biblions joined the truth, but not all. Those who joined learned of my heritage and gave me the title *Apo*, and while it meant to be separate, it implied to be set apart as in sanctified by God. I let them all know that in Christ, we all had that title.

Upon hearing of this, one of the Biblions who hadn't joined asked, "Stahl, you are named for a traitor to The Unity. Are you going to start a revolution? Is it time for me to report you? Be wary my friend. I have respected your scholarship and work, but this is going too far."

I replied, "I am named for my grandfather, and I don't intend to start a revolution or use force. I will work quietly and ethically to accomplish the research and settling of disputes according to the truth."

He seemed satisfied with that answer. And since the majority of Biblions and I were likeminded, even our research and use of information was used in better ways. The Unity was less able to bring destruction on those deemed rebels simply because they were seeking truth or asking questions. Guards were being impacted as were those crop-workers or other material harvesters in the communities, slowly but surely.

And during this time, I grew to love Epie and she grew to love me. We later married under the Law, but had a ceremony privately led by the Salonians in accordance with our faith. We were beginning a movement, which was small but effective. Over time, it grew and as it grew, the effects grew. This was only the beginning.

I am Apo Stahl Johnthree 17. Epie added the suffix 17 as John 3:17 states, "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him."