

Jesus Must Be Lifted Up: John 3:9-15
Ben Reaoch, Three Rivers Grace Church
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What would you say in a voicemail message to your loved ones if you knew that you had only moments to live and this voicemail might be your last opportunity on this earth to communicate anything to them? This past week our family visited the flight 93 memorial near Somerset, the location where that plane went down on September 11th, 2001 after terrorists hijacked it, but then passengers stormed the cockpit and struggled to regain control of the plane. In the memorial center that has now been built there, Stacy and I listened to recordings of a few passengers as they called home, as they called loved ones, sharing their last words in this world. One woman calling her husband said in a very calm voice, “We’re having some troubles on the plane. I just want you to know that I love you. Please know that. I love you.” (paraphrase) Another woman calling her sister, told her how much she loved her and that she might not get to see her again. She melted into tears. She went on to give instructions for how to open the safe that was in her room. And said goodbye.

Todd Beamer was one of the passengers on that flight. I feel a connection with him because he and I both graduated from Wheaton College. I didn’t know him. He was several years ahead of me. But he was a college athlete, like I was. By 2001 he was working hard at his career as a software account manager, married to Lisa, 2 kids and a third on the way, whom he never had the chance to meet. He made 4 calls during those last minutes before the plane went down. On one of them he was speaking to an operator and asked her to pray with him. Todd and some other passengers were making preparations to storm the cockpit, which had been taken over by the terrorists. By now 2 planes had been flown into the world trade center towers, so the passengers of flight 93 knew what was likely for their plane as well. Before Todd ended the call, the operator heard him say, “Are you guys ready? Okay. Let’s roll.”

It was a life or death moment. It ended up being a moment of death for everyone on board that flight, as the struggle in the cockpit resulted in the plane spinning out of control and crashing in that beautiful field in Somerset County, just 90 miles or so from here, and just 20 minutes flight time to Washington D.C. where the hijackers were probably planning to crash it either into the White House or the Capitol Building.

What would you do if you found yourself in a crisis like that? What would you say on that phone call? What would you be thinking? What would you be feeling? Would you be terrified,

thinking that death would be the end of all your hopes and dreams? Or would you have a calm assurance that, even if death comes, you have great hope beyond the grave?

In verse 15 of our passage for this morning we read that the Son of Man (referring to Jesus) must be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. That is the hope we have as Christians, that however long our life is on this earth, or however brief, we have something very great to look forward to. We have a never-ending life to look forward to, a life in heaven with our Savior. We'll continue to meditate on the hope of eternal life as we go through our study of this passage this morning.

Earlier in the passage Jesus made the connection with new birth. In verse 3, "unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." And verse 5, "unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." You must be born again! That was the focus of last week's sermon, covering verses 1-8 of this chapter. Each person is desperately in need of regeneration. We are born dead in our trespasses and sins, needing far more than some renovations and improvements in our lives. We need life. We need to be born from above. We need a second birth. We need to be born spiritually.

And those who are born again believe. The new spiritual life includes spiritual sight to look upon Jesus Christ and trust in Him. Thus all who are born again believe and inherit eternal life. The new spiritual life leads to eternal life. There is a connection with Christ that is never-ending. These are glorious things to consider. I hope this will be a great encouragement to your soul this morning.

In the first part of the sermon this morning we'll look at Jesus' ongoing conversation with Nicodemus which continues to highlight our need for regeneration. We see here the ignorance and blindness of unbelief (verses 9-13).

Then we'll spend more of our time on verses 14-15, looking at this Old Testament illustration which Jesus uses about the serpent lifted up in the wilderness and how that points to Jesus being lifted up. And we'll see that the mention of Jesus being lifted up has 2 connotations here. Jesus is lifted up on the cross . . . to die. And He is lifted up in exaltation to be honored and worshipped. Finally, we'll come back to this theme we were just reflecting on, the gift to those who believe, the gift of eternal life.

The Ignorance and Blindness of Unbelief

In verse 9 Nicodemus continues to give evidence of his ignorance and blindness when it comes to spiritual things. In verse 4 he had asked Jesus, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb?" After

further explanation from Jesus, Nicodemus is still baffled. He asks now, “How can these things be?”

Jesus rebukes him, acknowledging Nicodemus’s prominent place as “the teacher of Israel.” He must have been a significant leader, a very well-respected spokesman for the religious establishment. He would have known the Old Testament very well, including the passages Jesus had been alluding to (like Ezekiel 36 where there’s reference to water and the spirit). But Nicodemus isn’t getting it. And Jesus makes it painfully apparent . . . Religion isn’t going to get you anywhere. Mere knowledge of the Scriptures won’t do it. Going through the religious motions won’t accomplish anything. In fact, a person can do all of that and still be imprisoned in unbelief – in the ignorance and blindness of unbelief.

Jesus is saying, I’m telling you these things, but you don’t receive it. At the end of verse 11, “you do not receive our testimony.” And then in verse 12 Jesus makes His point from the lesser to the greater. “If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?” I think His point is, What I’m trying to teach you is pretty basic, elementary. But you’re still confused. So how can we move on to further, deeper, truth about the kingdom? You’re stuck at this basic point.

If that was the case for Nicodemus, someone who was so well-versed in the Scriptures and such a respected spiritual leader, how much more so for anyone who might come and sit in one of these pews out of a sense of religious duty.

What this conversation shows us is that there is no eternal hope for those who are looking to their own religious accomplishments, for those who are banking on their good deeds, their spiritual résumé, and the good things others have to say about them. There’s no real hope in that, because all of that can be there in a person’s life without that person being born again. Indeed, that person can still be stuck in unbelief.

Unbelief takes many forms. It can take the form of gross immorality or violent rampages. It can also take the form of the model citizen who is very active in his or her religious community. Jesus makes that point ever so clearly in this interaction. Even if you’re a Nicodemus, even if all your peers see you as a good person who deserves eternal reward, that doesn’t count in God’s economy. You must be born again! You must have spiritual eyes to see and believe.

In verse 13 Jesus begins to talk about the content of the belief that is necessary. What is it that a person must believe in? In verse 15 He says, “whoever believes in *him* . . .” In verses 13-15 He refers to Himself with this often-used phrase, “the Son of

Man.” He is the One, and only One, who has both descended from heaven (in the Incarnation), and ascended back into heaven (which He did following His resurrection). Thus He is the One with the authority to teach us what we truly need, namely, new birth. And He is the One who is the object of our faith. He is the One we look to, trust in, believe in.

And that leads to this Old Testament illustration that Jesus uses in verse 14.

The Serpent Lifted Up in the Wilderness

It’s quite a remarkable story. And it may be one you’re not familiar with, since it’s tucked here in a book of the Old Testament that doesn’t get a lot of attention. This is in the book of Numbers, the 4th book of the Bible. It’s part of the Pentateuch, the first 5 books, which bring us from creation and the story of the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the story of Jacob’s sons, especially his son Joseph). And then their descendants multiplying in the land of Egypt and then becoming enslaved in the land of Egypt and then being delivered by God from the land of Egypt in that great event of the Exodus. But then, because of their rebellion, the people are made to wander in the wilderness for 40 years before entering the Promised Land. And that’s where we locate this event in Numbers 21. They are near the end of those 40 years of wandering. They’re getting close to the time when God will usher them into the Promised Land. But there are still some significant hurdles. One is that Edom will not let them pass through their land, even though the Israelites promise, We aren’t going to cause any problems. We won’t take anything or disturb anything, we won’t even drink out of your wells. We just want to pass through because it’s a direct route to where we’re going. The King of Edom says no. That’s recorded in Numbers 20.

This would be like wanting to get to Erie, PA, but you can’t just jump on I-79 and head straight there. Instead, you see a big “Detour” sign that says you have to go all the way over to Cleveland and then up to Erie. And, remember, you’re not driving in your comfortable car. You’re walking the whole way. So this was a big discouragement.

And then there was the death of Aaron at the end of Numbers 20, and the people wept for him 30 days. But then in the opening verses of Numbers 21 we see God’s provision and protection of His people. The king of Arad attacked and took some captives. But then God gave the Israelites victory in fighting against those Canaanites.

And then comes this incident with the snakes. A story that might make you shudder, especially if you have a phobia about snakes. Snakes are awful creatures, aren’t they! It’s fitting that

Satan is in the form of a serpent in Genesis 3, and that we see the serpents in this story as a punishment for sin.

Read **Numbers 21:4-9** (page 129 in pew Bibles)

The Israelites are embarking on this trek around Edom. And as you might expect, knowing their proclivity to grumbling, knowing how we all seem to have that temptation to grumble, and knowing the annoyance of detours . . . here we find them impatient and complaining yet again. They spoke against God, and they spoke against their leader, Moses, when they said, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.”

Matthew Henry summarizes the situation this way: “Though they had just now obtained a glorious victory over the Canaanites, and were going on conquering and to conquer, yet they speak very discontentedly of what God had done for them and distrustfully of what he would do . . .” He points out that most people have to work for their food, but the Israelites had it miraculously provided for them day after day in the manna coming down from heaven. He writes, “What will those be pleased with whom manna will not please? Those that are disposed to quarrel will find fault where there is no fault to be found. Thus those who have long enjoyed the means of grace are apt to surfeit [indulge] even on the heavenly manna, and to call it light bread [miserable food].”¹

And for this the Lord disciplines them . . . severely. He sent these fiery serpents. Maybe they’re described that way because of the intense burning sensation that resulted from the snake bites. There’s a snake known as the carpet viper that is highly poisonous and lives in that part of the world. Maybe these were carpet vipers, or something similar. The snake bites were not only extremely painful, but lethal. Many of the Israelites died, it says at the end of verse 6. But then the people came to Moses, and they repented. They acknowledged their sin in speaking against God and against Moses. And they come pleading with their leader, their mediator (we see Moses as a Christ-figure here) . . . they plead with him to pray to the Lord on their behalf, to intercede for them, that the Lord might take away the serpents. Moses, so graciously, does just that. Like Christ, even though we have spoken against Him, acted out against Him, is still willing to intercede for us. Moses, in this Christ-like way, intercedes for the very people who have spoken out against him.

¹ Henry, M. (1994). *Matthew Henry’s commentary on the whole Bible: complete and unabridged in one volume* (p. 218). Peabody: Hendrickson.

The Lord's response is not exactly what the people had asked for. He doesn't take away the fiery serpents. But He does provide a remedy. He instructs Moses to construct something in the likeness of a fiery serpent and raise it up on a pole. And those who are bitten, when they look up at it, will live.

What a vivid Gospel picture we have here in Numbers 21. Have you ever seen this before? What a compelling story! A piece of Israel's history that is for our instruction and edification.

Grumbling is not just a problem unique to the Israelites. It's our problem too. Sin is not a problem unique to the Israelites. It's a condition that plagues all humanity. And there is punishment for sin. Lethal punishment. Sin brings pain and misery, and eternal death . . . if nothing is done about it.

But God, so graciously, through His Son, has done something about it. Jesus Christ, our mediator, was lifted up on the cross to endure the sting of sin and death for us. And here we have a picture of Him being lifted up, He who came in the likeness of sinful flesh (Romans 8:3), and what are we to do? We are to look upon Him, look up at Him in faith, assured that in the simple act of looking to Him we will be spared. The look of faith will bring salvation.

There's a great testimony (maybe you've heard it before) of a young man, a teenager, who was on his way to church on a Sunday morning. He was not yet a Christian. He was miserable in his sin and the uncertainty of his spiritual condition. He grew up in a Christian home and was familiar with the Bible, but he didn't yet really know Jesus. I suppose he was like Nicodemus in that way. He was familiar with religion, but did not yet personally trust in Jesus.

Well, on this particular Sunday morning in the winter of 1850, he woke up feeling his desperate need, and headed out to go to a worship service. But because of a snowstorm he changed his route and ended up in a little chapel where an unknown lay preacher was filling in that morning. The man's text was Isaiah 45:22, "*Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: For I am God, and there is none else.*" (Isaiah 45:22, KJV 1900)

The man didn't have much to say about the text, but kept repeating it again and again. At one point he even called attention to this teenager and said, "That young man there looks very miserable." And he said to the young man, "Look! Look, young man! Look now!" The great preacher Charles Spurgeon marked his conversion at that point. He was that young man who providentially found himself in that little chapel on that Lord's Day morning. Spurgeon told that story over and over again. He said, at that moment "I had this vision—not a vision to my eyes, but to my heart. I saw what a Savior Christ was. . . . Now I can never tell

you how it was, but I no sooner saw whom I was to believe than I also understood what it was to believe, and I did believe in one moment. . . . And as the snow fell on my road home from the little house of prayer I thought every snowflake talked with me and told of the pardon I had found, for I was white as the driven snow through the grace of God.”

That’s the lesson for us in Numbers 21, and in John 3. Look! Look to Him, and live! You can’t save yourself. There’s nothing you can do to get yourself into the kingdom. You must be born again, which is something God must do. And the call to us is Look! Look to the provision that has been made for our sin. Look to the remedy that the Lord has given. The snake bite of sin is really bad. Maybe you’re trying to ignore the pain. Maybe you’re telling yourself it’s not that bad. But it will kill you. And there’s nothing you can do to stop it. But God, in Christ, has done something for you. So look away from yourself, and look to Him in faith.

Jesus Lifted Up on the Cross

Now I want to talk for a few minutes about this reference to the Son of Man being lifted up. And we’ll look at these next 2 points together.

Jesus Lifted Up in Exaltation

This word in the New Testament mostly refers to some kind of exaltation. For example, it’s used quite literally to refer to a *high* mountain, like when the devil was tempting Jesus and took Him to a very high mountain to show Him all the kingdoms of the world (Matthew 4:8) or at the transfiguration when Jesus took Peter James and John up a high mountain (Matthew 17:1).

And then, figuratively, it refers to being high in honor and respect. Acts 5:31, “God exalted [Jesus] at his right hand as Leader and Savior . . .” At Jesus’ birth, for instance, the angels declared, “Glory to God in the *highest* . . .” That’s a form of this word. Lifted up, high and exalted.

It’s also used in rebukes against pride. “For everyone who *exalts* himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be *exalted*.” (Luke 14:11; 18:14; see also Romans 11:20; 12:16; 1 Timothy 6:17; James 4:10; 1 Peter 5:6). The word is used twice there.

I give you that little word study to highlight the unique way that John uses this word. Everywhere else it has this sense of exaltation. Only in John does it refer also to the cross. The word shows up 4 times in the Gospel of John (here in verse 14, again in chapter 8, and then twice in chapter 12), and it clearly refers not

only to Jesus being lifted up in exaltation, but it also refers to Him being lifted up on the cross.

In John 8:28 Jesus says, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he . . .” He’s referring to when they would crucify Him. And in John 12:32 He says, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” Then 2 verses later the people ask, “How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?”

We have this double meaning going on in some places in the Gospel of John. We saw this last week with the word for “born again.” The word translated “again” can also mean “from above.” And both of those connotations are significant for our understanding of what Jesus is saying to Nicodemus, and to us.

Here again there are 2 layers of meaning. Jesus would be lifted up on the cross to die. And in doing so He would also be lifted up in exaltation, to be seen and trusted as the Savior of the world.

We see this in other places as well, the interconnection of His suffering and His exaltation. Just a couple weeks ago our Sunday School lesson was from Isaiah 53, the Servant Song describing the Suffering Servant, a detailed description written hundreds of years before Jesus came to earth, but giving us a vivid picture of His substitutionary sacrifice. Most of that Servant Song focuses on His suffering, but at the beginning and the end there are references to His exaltation. And it’s interesting to note that the same Greek word for “lifted up” is used in the Septuagint in Isaiah 52:13. The Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew, but there’s a Greek translation of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint, and we find that same word again here. “Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted.”

Another place that quickly comes to mind, when we think of Jesus’ suffering and His exaltation, is Philippians 2. “And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name,” (Philippians 2:8–9, ESV) The same word shows up there, too. This time it’s a superlative form of the word. The preposition hyper is added on the front of it. He is hyper lifted up, hyper exalted.

As you look to Jesus, as you look up in faith at our Savior, you must see both His immense suffering on the cross as well as the immense glory and honor and praise He deserves because of who He is and what He has done. He’s the very last person on the planet who deserved to be nailed to that piece of wood and lifted up for the crowds to scoff at. But He’s the One Person in all the

universe who endured that shame, for the joy set before Him, and is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:2).

He is our One and only Savior. Look to Him! Believe in Him, and be saved! For this is the wonderful and undeserved gift that comes to all those who believe.

The Gift to Those Who Believe – Eternal Life

Leon Morris, in his commentary on John, says this about the term “eternal life,” which is used for the first time (among many instances) in the Gospel of John: “The notion of time is there. Eternal life will never cease. But there is something else there, too, and something more significant. The important thing about eternal life is not its quantity but its quality. . . . Eternal life is life in Christ, that life which removes a person from the merely earthly. As we see from the earlier part of this chapter, it originates in a divine action, the action wherein one is born anew.”²

So you see our eternal life is not only future. It starts with the new life that begins with the new birth. Jesus says, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). He says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). And He says, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die” (John 11:25-26).

The gift of life. True life, abundant life, life in Christ and with Christ, life that will extend beyond this earth and will get immensely better in the new heavens and new earth and will continue to enthrall us and excite us for endless ages.

Coming back to what I shared in the opening of this sermon, this is the hope we have that removes the terror of death. If you were on flight 93, how would you respond to that crisis? How do you respond to other crises in your life? Whether it’s an imminent threat of death like many faced on September 11th, 2001. Or if its the delayed threats of death that face all of us, whether we pay attention to them or not. The simple fact is that none of us are going to live forever in these bodies. It might be cancer. It might be a heart attack. It might be a car accident. It might be Jesus’ return, wouldn’t that be glorious!! But none of us are going to continue on in this world, in these bodies, endlessly. So the question is, Do you have life? Do you have this life that Jesus talks about, that He offers to all who look to Him? It’s a gift, offered to you freely. There’s nothing you can do to earn it. But I’ll say this, too, it will transform you so thoroughly from the

² Leon Morris, John, page 201.

inside out that you will be a new person. This new life will prompt you to do things that you never would have considered doing before.

In closing I'll share one more moving story that illustrates this. It's the story of the Groenewald family, who lived in South Africa and then following those September 11th attacks in the U.S. felt called to go live and minister in Afghanistan. Werner was a pastor. His wife, Hannelie, a doctor. Their 2 children were young at the time, and they knew the dangers they faced. But in 2003 they went, and they had over a decade of ministry there in Afghanistan. But on November 29th, 2014, the family home was attacked by the Taliban. They had been intentionally targeted. Werner was teaching a leadership seminar that afternoon in the same building. The teenage son and daughter were both there at home. Hannelie was on her way home from working at the medical clinic when the driver received a phone call to tell them that the building was under attack. She watched as the building burned, not knowing if her husband and children were alive. Minutes later she was notified that all three of them, along with 2 Afghans who were there, had been shot to death by the Taliban fighters. She says, "I wanted to be there, especially for the children, to just embrace them and hold them and face the bullets." But she's also able to say, "It is well with my soul." She looks forward to seeing her beloved family when she reaches heaven, but also knows that the Lord has further plans for her here on earth.

For those who have assurance of eternal life, we are emboldened to take risks, we're motivated to respond to God's directives and guidance in our lives even when it seems difficult, and we find great comfort even in times of tremendous loss.

That's evident in the lives of men and women like Todd and Lisa Beamer and Werner and Hannelie Groenewald, as well as in the lives of many who are sitting here today. Let's rejoice together that in a dark and dying world we have great hope beyond this world, beyond death. We have the hope of eternal life because our Savior, Jesus Christ, was lifted up on that cross and is lifted up at the right hand of the throne of God. Let us continue to look unto Him in faith.