

Heavenly Testimony John 3:9-15

Our text tonight will be John chapter 3, verses 9 to 15. Once again, we'll read from the start of John chapter 3 to give a bit of context. Before the reading, we'll pray. Please join me in prayer.

Father in heaven, we pray that you would bless your word to us. We pray that we would be given ears to hear, eyes to see, and hearts to understand and to obey. We ask these things in Jesus's name. Amen.

John chapter 3, starting at verse 1: ¹“Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ²This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.’ ³Jesus answered him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.’ ⁴Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?’ ⁵Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.’ ⁷Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’” ⁸The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.’

⁹Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can these things be?’ ¹⁰Jesus answered him, ‘Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?’ ¹¹Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And 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.’” Amen.

Well, we continue with Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, the ruler of the Pharisees. Notice Jesus says to him there in verse 10, “Are you *the* teacher of Israel?”—Nicodemus, a man deeply instructed in the Scriptures; Nicodemus, a man of any man in whom you would expect knows and understands what it is that Jesus is saying to him.

There a play of words going on here in our passage, if you look back to the start of chapter 3. Let's have a look at verse 2. “This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God.’” Now look at the way that Jesus speaks to him in John chapter 3, verse 11: “Truly, truly, I say to you, *we* speak of what *we* know, and bear witness to what *we* have seen, but *you* do not receive our testimony.” It's a plural “you,” by the way. A “y'all” kind of you. “You, the people you're speaking on behalf of, Nicodemus, you do not receive our testimony, and we are speaking of things that we know.”

So Jesus is answering Nicodemus in a similar way to the way that Nicodemus approached Jesus. He's using similar words. He's in some ways repeating some of the words that Nicodemus used. Obviously, He's answering directly at Nicodemus's level.

Verse 9, at the start of our passage: “Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can these things be?’” The confusion persists. The confusion remains. Nicodemus hasn’t come along any further than he was at verse 4, when he asked that question, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” He’s still in that same place. “How can these things be?” Jesus had spoken to him, if you will remember, of being born of water and the Spirit, saying that we must be born of the Spirit to be spiritual. “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” And Nicodemus still answered, “How can these things be?”

Have you ever had a conversation where you speak to somebody, and you tell them about the grace of God in the Lord Jesus Christ, and how if they seek the forgiveness of their sins, they’ll find that God is ever ready to receive them, and they just don’t get what you’re saying? They’ll say something like, “Well, I’m just going to try really hard. I’m going to try really hard.”

People imagine that grace is that God will look favourably upon their efforts to save themselves. They imagine that grace is, you have to try and save yourself, and God being gracious, will accept your attempt to save yourself. Now that’s not grace. Grace is a freely given gift. You don’t earn what is given. God gives to those who are in debt, though He has to give them nothing. Nicodemus is in a whirl, he’s in kind of a mental tizzy. “How can these things be? How can this be?” He’s lost.

Nicodemus has spent all his life training to be a rabbi, a professional teacher of the Scriptures. Nicodemus himself probably had disciples who followed him, just as Jesus had disciples following Him. People paid to be in the company of Nicodemus. When you were a disciple of a rabbi, you supported the rabbi who was teaching you, and you followed him wherever he went, hanging off his words. But—“How can these things be?”

Jesus, verse 10, answers: “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?” Jesus’s reply made me think of a passage from Psalm 119. If you want to turn to there with me, I’ll read you just one part of Psalm 119. We’ll start reading at verse 97. Psalm 119 is an enormously long psalm, but we’re going to read from verse 97. Starting at verse 97:

“⁹⁷ Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day. ⁹⁸ Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is ever with me. ⁹⁹ I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your testimonies are my meditation. ¹⁰⁰ I understand more than the aged, for I keep your precepts. ¹⁰¹ I hold back my feet from every evil way, in order to keep your word. ¹⁰² I do not turn aside from your rules, for you have taught me. ¹⁰³ How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! ¹⁰⁴ Through your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way.”

Back at verse 99: “I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your testimonies are my meditation.” And then down to verse 102: “I do not turn aside from your rules, for you have taught me.” *For you have taught me.* There’s something wrong with Nicodemus’s dedication to learning the word of God. There’s something wrong with his dedication to become an expert in the law of Israel.

The problem is, Nicodemus hasn't been taught of the Lord. He's been taught by other rabbis, he's been taught and trained by and through his own efforts, but he's not been taught by God Himself. He doesn't have the love for the law that the Psalmist has. He respects God's law, he reveres God's law, he creates his own human laws in order to try and keep God's laws. And yet, he doesn't love God's law. It's not his meditation, it's not his thoughts, it's not his way of thinking all the day long. He's never been taught by God. "For you have taught me," said the Psalmist. Poor old Nicodemus doesn't know these things. It seems that Jesus knows more than Nicodemus, but Jesus never came through the classic rabbinic school. Let's read on.

Verse 11: "Truly, truly," Amen, amen—Jesus is now putting some emphasis on this. "I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony." Well, the first question we need to answer then, to get a bit of an understanding of verse 11, is, Who is the "we"? Who is the "our"? "*We* speak of what *we* have seen...*our* testimony." It's a good question to ask. Who is that collective behind the collective words "we" and "our"? Who are the people that Jesus is speaking of?

I can tell you now that there's no general agreement on who the "we" is. I can tell you that there's plenty of argument about it. Some suggest that Jesus was speaking of all the prophets, "we," counting Himself as one in the long line of prophets. Some suggest that Jesus is speaking of "we"—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Some suggest that Jesus is speaking of "we"—Himself and His disciples. Some suggest that Jesus is speaking of "we"—Himself and John the Baptist.

This last option is the one I'm going with, and I'll tell you why. I think He's speaking of "we" as in He and John the Baptist—Himself and the Baptist. Why? Well first of all, look forward. Verses 16 to 21 are either further teaching by Jesus or commentary by the apostle John on what Jesus is teaching in the passage we're looking at tonight. But from verse 22 on, it goes back to the testimony of John the Baptist. And if you look at the wording at some of the things that John says, it's actually quite similar to what Jesus has been teaching previously in John chapter 3.

Look, for example, at chapter 3 verse 27. "John answered," now this is John the Baptist, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven.²⁸ You yourselves bear me witness." See, John's speaking the way Jesus was speaking to Nicodemus—"You, you yourselves, bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.'" Notice just the whole concept where he says there, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven."

Hold your finger there and turn back a page—it's one page in my Bible. What did Jesus say at verse 8? "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." And look at verse 12: "If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man." You see, John is confirming the words of Jesus and using similar metaphors and similar ways of speaking. Look down to verse 31. This is John the Baptist speaking: "He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way." That's very similar to what Jesus said back here at verse 12, isn't it? "If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man."

Remember, we're not really that far in the gospel from John chapter 1, where John the Baptist gets many, many mentions and quotations. John chapter 1, verses 6 and 7: "⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John." That's speaking of John the Baptist. "⁷He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. ⁸He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light."

Then John chapter 1, verses 19 and on: "And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?'" Notice who got sent—priests and Levites. But keep reading: "²⁰He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, 'I am not the Christ.' ²¹And they asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.' 'Are you the Prophet?' And he answered, 'No.' ²²So they said to him, 'Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?' ²³He said, 'I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said.'" Verse 24: "²⁴(Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.)" I wonder if one of the ones who were sent to John the Baptist was Nicodemus. Or I wonder if it was Nicodemus who sent representatives from the Pharisees.

So it kind of makes more sense to me to think that here in John chapter 3 in our passage, that this "we" whom Jesus is speaking of is He and John the Baptist, preaching about the reconciliation that is coming, preaching about the salvation that is going to be delivered through the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. As John the Baptist said, "Behold, the Lamb of God." And then at the end of John chapter 3, John the Baptist says, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven."

So I feel that context most strongly gives us the case for it being Jesus and John the Baptist. They're interacting, you could say, together, or Jesus is now speaking of behalf of John to the Pharisees, who are represented by Nicodemus. "We speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony."

One thing about the learning of the Pharisees—and they had an enormous amount of learning—it was second-hand. If you were to ask a Pharisee about the meaning of the Scripture, what he would do is he would quote to you four, five, six, seven rabbis. He would quote to you the teaching of rabbis in the past. He wouldn't go to Scripture to explain Scripture, he would go to rabbis to explain the Scripture. "Whereas," Jesus says to Nicodemus, "you come with rabbinic learning, you come with human learning, we—John the Baptist and I, come to you with teaching, or testimony—we've come to you bearing witness to what we have seen directly from God. We're testifying to you of that which is our experience. We're testifying to you first-hand."

Remember at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, it said that the people heard Him gladly. Why? "For He spoke as one having authority." He spoke as one who knew what He was talking about, not like a rabbi, not drawing in twenty other quotations—pick your quotation. No. Jesus spoke as one bearing witness, one who is testifying of the things that He knows.

Now we move on to verse 12. "If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?" Once again, there's a lot of discussion about how you interpret this.

Well, I'm going to say to you that what I believe Jesus means when He speaks of earthly things and heavenly things. I don't think that "earthly things" are necessarily negative. He's been speaking to Nicodemus, remember, about the kingdom of God; about being born again, or born from above; about being born of the Spirit; being born of the Spirit and the water; and the sovereignty of the Spirit in the works of God. I think those are the things that Jesus is saying are the earthly things.

And what I think He means by earthly things is, "These things that are already known in the world. If you knew your Scriptures, you would know these things." Or probably more likely to Nicodemus, not "knew," but more like "understood." "If you truly understood your Scriptures, you would understand what I'm saying, for these things have been revealed to the world now for generations." These things have been revealed in God's word. So He's saying, the things that were already known are earthly things, but Jesus has come to teach more.

Remember one thing about Jesus, He's the revelation of God the Father. To know Jesus is to know the Father. When the disciples asked Him to show them the Father, Jesus said, "Have you been with me all this time, and yet you say you do not know the Father? I and the Father are one." Jesus has come to add to the revelation, add to the things that He's calling earthly things. He's now adding heavenly revelation. Why? Verse 13: "No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man."

Once again, what's He saying? You know, it is a little bit cryptic. What's He saying? He's saying that the reason He can reveal heavenly things to Nicodemus, the reason He can reveal heavenly things to the world, is that He has come from heaven. No one ascended. No one climbed themselves up to heaven to get a vision. No one worked their way into the kingdom of heaven to get a vision of God's heavenly kingdom and the things that God is doing.

Jesus is saying there, "I'm the only one. I'm the only one who's been from heaven to earth, to heaven back to earth." Jesus, remember, often says things about Himself that equate Himself with the Angel of the Lord, spoken of in the Old Testament—the Angel of the Lord who appeared to the people of Israel, for example, during the Exodus. Jesus is saying that He is the one who has come down from heaven.

Now let's have a look at a little bit of Scripture and then try and get some kind of background picture of what this might be saying. So in verses 12 and 13: "¹²If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man."

Let's start looking then at a few things. I want us to start back in the Old Testament, in the book of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy chapter 29. There I only want to look at one verse, verse 29. Deuteronomy 29:29: "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law." Now let's just stop and think about that, and I'll try and answer the question of why have I taken us to this.

“The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.” What was revealed, then, to the people to whom Moses was speaking? Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy—the first five books of the Old Testament. Moses also wrote at least one psalm. Psalm 90 is called the psalm of Moses. And many of the rabbis also teach Psalm 91 was a psalm of Moses. There may be some other writings that were available to the people, and the scholars tell us that they believe that the book of Job was even older than the books of Moses. So they may well have had the book of Job, some psalms written by Moses, and the first five books.

These things have been revealed to the people of God. These things have been revealed to God’s people upon the earth. But the heavenly things, or the secret things, belong to the Lord our God. But here’s the thing. Think now of what Jesus said. Jesus said, “How can you believe if you don’t believe the earthly things? Or if you don’t understand the earthly things, how will you believe when I teach the heavenly things?” So Jesus, I believe, is saying that He is opening up the revelation. Things that were secret, and to the Jews those things belonged to the Lord their God, are now being revealed through Christ.

Stay in the book of Deuteronomy and move forward one chapter to verses 11. Deuteronomy chapter 30, verse 11: “For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. ¹² It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’ ¹³ Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’ ¹⁴ But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.”

Notice the similarity there to Jesus speaking of ascending and descending. And here Moses is saying to the people of Israel, “The commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, nor is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you need to say, ‘Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’” It’s close. It’s being brought to you. How? Through the teaching of Moses. Moses has brought them this word, and this is the word that I’m saying that Jesus was teaching them, or in this passage, that Jesus is saying is an earthly word. It’s already established on the earth, it’s well and truly established in Scripture.

Let’s keep looking at these things. When Jesus spoke about heavenly things, remember He spoke about the new birth. He’d already been speaking to Nicodemus about the new birth, being born of the water and of the Spirit. But let’s keep dealing with this ascent and descent idea.

Turn to Proverbs chapter 30. We’ll start reading there at verse 3, reading verses 3, 4, and 5: “I have not learned wisdom, nor have I knowledge of the Holy One. ⁴ Who has ascended to heaven and come down? Who has gathered the wind in his fists? Who has wrapped up the waters in a garment? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is his name, and what is his son’s name? Surely you know! ⁵ Every word of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.” Now if this is another passage that Jesus is sort of alluding to when He speaks about ascending into heaven, descending from heaven, it’s a very interesting passage. What’s being said here? Who has ascended to heaven and come down? Look at verse 3. Who has brought down wisdom and knowledge of the Holy One? Well Jesus’s answer would be, “I’m the one who has ascended and descended from heaven. I’m the one who is bringing the wisdom and knowledge of the Holy One.”

“Who has gathered the wind in his fists? Who has wrapped up the waters in a garment? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is his name”—what a curious question there—“and what is his son’s name? Surely you know! ⁵ Every word of God proves true.” “What is his son’s name?” Notice the question—What is his son’s name?—in the context of speaking about the need for someone to ascend to heaven and come down with the knowledge of Holy One.

And what is Jesus saying of Himself back here in John chapter 3? He’s saying He’s the one who ascends and descends from heaven. He’s the one who travels between the earthly kingdom and the heavenly kingdom. He’s the one revealing the Father. He’s the one bringing heavenly knowledge into the world.

One last point. Back in John chapter 3, verse 13: “No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.” The Son of Man? Once again, He’s saying things that Nicodemus should have Scripture turning over in his head here. “The Son of Man? Why has He just called Himself the Son of Man,” Nicodemus should have thought. And he should have thought of Daniel chapter 7. So let’s turn to Daniel chapter 7. We’ll start reading at Daniel chapter 7, verse 9.

“⁹ ‘As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire. ¹⁰ A stream of fire issued and came out from before him; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him; the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened. ¹¹ I looked then because of the sound of the great words that the horn was speaking. And as I looked, the beast was killed, and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire. ¹² As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a season and a time.

“¹³ ‘I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. ¹⁴ And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.’”

Now picking up some of the threads here in this prophecy, notice that the one like a Son of Man comes to the Ancient of Days, riding upon the clouds of heaven. Now I’m not going to go through what’s literally dozens and dozens of references in the Old Testament. Who rides on the clouds of heaven? There’s only person who rides on the clouds of heaven in the Old Testament—Yahweh, the God of the Israelites. He rides upon the clouds of heaven. He comes upon the clouds of heaven.

And we won’t go there, but if you were going to look for a place, you could think, for example, of Psalm 18. This is David’s psalm of deliverance and rejoicing because of the salvation that God has worked. The Son of Man is riding upon the clouds of heaven as though He Himself were God. “And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.”

One of the things we looked at this morning in the book of Isaiah is the fact that David was promised an everlasting kingdom to come from his line, from his family, and that everlasting kingdom will not pass away. What we're looking at here as we get back to John chapter 3, and this reference to the Son of Man, this reference into the book of Daniel, is that Jesus is saying that He's the one who meets God, riding upon the clouds of heaven. This reference to the Son of Man is actually a reference to the divinity of the Saviour. And this is one of the heavenly things that Jesus is trying to reveal, or speak, or teach to Nicodemus. "No one has ascended into heaven except He who descended from heaven, the Son of Man."

Think back to John chapter 1, verse 18. No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is at the Father's side, He has made Him known. Or I think in the ESV, the word's different: "No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known." Heavenly things are being revealed through Jesus to humanity. And Nicodemus is not picking it up. Why? He's not born again. He's not born from above. Unless you are born from above, you cannot see the kingdom of heaven.

Now no one can see the kingdom of heaven like you can see me standing here in front of you. You can't see the kingdom of heaven like you can see the building that we're sitting in and the roof that's over our head. We understand that the kingdom of heaven is God's rule, God's reign over all things.

Turn back in the book of Psalms to Psalm 10. In Psalm 10, David complains to the Lord about the wicked. We'll start reading at verse 1: "Why, O LORD, do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? ²In arrogance the wicked hotly pursue the poor; let them be caught in the schemes that they have devised. ³For the wicked boasts of the desires of his soul, and the one greedy for gain curses and renounces the LORD. ⁴In the pride of his face the wicked does not seek him; all his thoughts are, 'There is no God.' ⁵His ways prosper at all times; your judgments are on high, out of his sight; as for all his foes, he puffs at them."

What does it say about the wicked there? "Your judgments are on high, out of his sight." This wicked one that David is thinking of, everything seems to be going right for this man, in a worldly sense. In worldly terms, it all seems to be going well. His schemes are paying off, his greed, his money-making plans, his plans to be some kind of a presser, one who wickedly pursues the poor—it all seems to be working just fine. His investments are earning a lot of interest. The money in the bank, the bank account, you know, the graph just goes up and up and up. It's all looking great.

But what he doesn't see, what he can't understand—"Your judgments are on high, out of his sight"—the wicked one can't see that God is looking down from heaven and judging him, even as his ways prosper. Even as it seems to him that all things are going well, the truth is, God is planning judgment. God is planning to crush him. God is planning His vengeance upon one who treads down and grinds into the dirt the poor. He can't see it. He can't see that there's a King in heaven, looking down, judging even now. He can't see it. He can't see the kingdom of God. His eyes are blinded to the fact. He cannot see.

Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus, revealing, or trying to reveal to him heavenly truths, words from God, testimony of things that truly are. He's bringing to Nicodemus wonderful things, but Nicodemus at this point is receiving nothing. He's not receiving the testimony of Jesus. He's not getting it. Why? He's not born again. He cannot see the kingdom of God.

The gospel of John gives us an unfolding story of this man Nicodemus. The day will come, later on, when Nicodemus actually speaks in Jesus's defense. He says, "Do we condemn a man without hearing the words that he has to say?" And then later on when Jesus is dead, Nicodemus joins with a man called Joseph, they take the body of Jesus and lay it in a tomb. Nicodemus makes public his declaration of faith in Christ. But at this point in time, the word's not being received.

Now my friends, there's encouragement there in that for all of us. How many times do you know of that it appears to you that the word is not received? I spoke earlier how you share with someone the gospel, and they say, "I'm going to try harder. I'm going to try harder." Don't worry. Don't be troubled. Scatter the seed. Soil is God's deal. God worries about the soil—the quality of the soil, the type of soil, whether it's choked by the weeds, whether it's good soil, whether it's shallow or stony, whatever. Those things are in the hands of God. Don't be discouraged. Scatter the seed.

Jesus sowed a seed. He sowed a seed here in the heart of Nicodemus. He spoke the words of truth to Nicodemus. And though at that time Nicodemus did not receive the testimony, the seed was there. Something was going to come to life at a later point. We've got to be prepared to sow the seed, even in the face of ignorance and apparent rejection.

Let's move on to verse 14. "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

Well I'm wondering in your reading of the Old Testament, when you got to the book of Numbers in chapter 21, I'm wondering if you ever saw anything of Christ in Moses lifting up the bronze serpent. Because I confess to you, I didn't until I really seriously started to study this. Let's turn to Numbers chapter 21, and get the background. We'll start reading at verse 4. We don't have to read too much. Numbers 21, verse 4:

"⁴ From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. ⁵ And the people spoke against God and against Moses, '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.' ⁶ Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. ⁷ And the people came to Moses and said, 'We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us.' So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸ And the LORD said to Moses, 'Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.' ⁹ So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live."

I'll be honest, I never really got the connection of the bronze serpent and Jesus being lifted up; never really saw any kind of Old Testament metaphor or typology in it for the coming Saviour. But Jesus did. Jesus knew exactly what He was talking about. "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up." So we need to sort of study this carefully, and we need to see what this is about.

First of all, let's look at that phrase, or that word, that term, "lifted up." Lifted up. Remember Isaiah chapter 6. Isaiah saw the Lord. How was the Lord when Isaiah saw Him? He saw the Lord high and lifted up. He saw the Lord high and lifted up. Or Isaiah chapter 52, which we read earlier. Isaiah 52, verse 13. It's at the first verse of the Fourth Servant's Song. Isaiah 5:13: "Behold my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted."

Now we've got to see that there's a deliberate double meaning planted in this phrase by John the apostle, by Jesus, which John the apostle recorded. There's a deliberate double meaning, there's a deliberate play on words.

First of all, we see that term "lifted up." Yahweh was high and lifted up in Isaiah chapter 6. We see in Isaiah chapter 52 that the suffering servant "shall be high and lifted up." And that's where the double meaning starts to come into play, because what happens to the Servant? He suffers, He dies, He sheds His blood, He purchases a people for God by His suffering. So this being "high and lifted up" involves suffering.

Now you come to the way that it's used by Jesus and quoted by John the apostle, and you see that the Son of man must be lifted up, and Jesus is speaking here of being lifted up upon the cross. He's being lifted up upon the cross above the people, and there, shedding His blood, He's purchasing a people for God.

So what's the double meaning, then, with regards to Jesus being high and lifted up? One, it casts our mind back into the book of Isaiah, and we see that Yahweh is high and lifted up. Two, we see that being lifted up on the cross is to be lifted up to die. That's what the cross is about—death, the payment of the price of sin. Jesus is lifted up for the purpose of dying and shedding His blood.

Now go back to Numbers 21, the story of the bronze serpent, and understand what's happening. The judgment of God comes against His people because they complain against God, they complain against Moses. They sin against God, they sin against God's representative, Moses. And God sends amongst them fiery serpents, and they bit the people so that many people of Israel died. It's a judgment from God. What God sent amongst the Israelites was His judgment upon their complaining against Himself, God, and His servant, Moses. He sent them, or visited them, with death through being bitten by a fiery serpent.

Now how are they to be healed? They're to look to a bronze fiery serpent that is lifted up above them—a symbol of what, then? Death and the judgment of God. They look up to the symbol of death and the judgment of God, and in looking at that death and judgment of God, they're saved. It doesn't say that everybody looked. I'm sure there were hardened sinners among those people who would refuse to look. People were no different back in that day to what they are to this day, in terms of sinfulness. Stubborn sinners are stubborn sinners, and there are people who in their

foolish hardness of heart would rather die than confess they were ever wrong. They would rather suffer than confess and abandon their pride. But the serpent, this symbol of death, was high and lifted up.

Now think about the cross. Death—a symbol of death, high and lifted up. What fell upon the Lord Jesus Christ upon the cross? The judgment of death upon the sin of His people. Death fell upon Christ, high and lifted up. And the people under Moses looked to this bronze serpent that was lifted up over them, and there they acknowledged the righteous judgments of God. They acknowledged that they indeed were guilty, and that God had every right to send judgment in among them.

And there's your similarity. There's your typology. The brass serpent, held up above the people of Israel, the symbol of death : the Lord Jesus Christ, lifted up upon the cross, suffering the judgment of God, God's curse of death upon sinners, on behalf of His people. Back into John chapter 3, "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up," verse 15, "that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

I think at the end of this passage, Nicodemus was still about as confused as he was at the start. I think he was about as at-sea as he was at the start, because Jesus has preached the gospel to him. Nicodemus wants to know the way of salvation. Nicodemus wants to know that he's in the right with God. Nicodemus wants to know that he has eternal life, and that he's going to receive the promised covenant blessings of God.

And Jesus says to Nicodemus, "Okay, here's how it works. You don't do works. You must be born from above. You must receive my testimony. You must receive the testimony of John the Baptist. You must receive our words. You must receive our words to you concerning judgment; you must receive our words to you concerning my coming crucifixion; you must understand that I will suffer the penalty of death; and if you, Nicodemus, believe in me, you will have eternal life."

Salvation by faith alone, in Christ alone. Not salvation by works, not salvation by self-righteousness, not salvation by any human effort, but salvation given as a gift from God. Faith—true, genuine faith, acknowledging guilt before God, acknowledging the death penalty that ought to fall upon your sins, but fell upon the Lord Jesus Christ. Faith. Trusting in Christ. That is what Nicodemus could not receive. That's what nobody can receive unless they're given the gift of life. Once again, it's the same message we've had for nearly a month now: You cannot see the kingdom of God unless you be born from above. You cannot enter the kingdom of heaven unless you be born by water and the Spirit. You must be born again. This is the teaching of Jesus.

It's in some ways a complex passage, but I think when we delved into it, or when we saw what Jesus was saying, we realize that this is still Jesus preaching the gospel, and Jesus saying to Nicodemus that John the Baptist preached the gospel. "Put your faith in me. Put your faith in me. Surrender. Surrender. Surrender to God, surrender to the judgment of God, confess your guilt, confess your desperate need of life from God, and you will be saved. Just as the people looked to the serpent, now you must look to me." Let's close in prayer.

Father in heaven, we do indeed thank you that the Lord Jesus Christ has come among us, speaking to us of heavenly things. We thank you that you have given us the gift of life through the power and the work of your Holy Spirit, based on the completed works of the Lord Jesus Christ upon the cross. We praise you for this in Jesus' name. Amen.