

Faith, a Serpent, and the Cross

John 3:9-15

BI: As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.”

This morning as we prepare for the Lord’s Supper I want to continue working through the narrative we have been studying in John chapter three. You will remember that a Pharisee by the name of Nicodemus has come to Jesus in the middle of the night for a secret conversation. It seems that even though Nicodemus was a well known religious teacher and expert in the O.T. he nevertheless knew nothing about how God actually saves sinners.

Having become a respect expert in the prevailing system of works-righteousness he was under the allusion that God saves sinner on the merits of their works - whether they obeyed the law enough; whether they honored the Sabbath enough, kept the feasts, and offered the appropriate sacrifices. It was absolutely unfathomable to him that God might actually save people not on the basis of what they have done but simply as the impulse of His sovereign grace. Jesus was attempting to explain this to him but he just wasn’t getting it.

First Jesus tells him (3:3) that “unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of heaven.” Next, after Nicodemus expressed confusion over this, Jesus explains (5) that “unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” Jesus then gave three clarifying proofs to demonstrate that what He was saying was true.

First he points to a classic New Covenant text in Ezekiel (Ez. 36) to demonstrate that God promised Israel that one day He would send His spirit to actually wash and cleanse His people from their guilt and idolatry (hence the allusion to water), and then to the fact that the Spirit would give them new hearts so that they would obey His word (hence, water *and* Spirit).

The second proof Jesus offers (3:6) is the simple fact that the only thing flesh can produce is flesh. Human life can only procreate human life. We don’t have the ability to pass on spiritual life. In other words, we don’t get salvation from our parents or ancestors (not even Abraham).

The third proof, which serves as an illustration of how regeneration happens, is the wind (3:8). It blows wherever it wishes and though we see its obvious affects we cannot control it. “So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

These were radical thoughts for this premiere teacher of the law. He was an expert in the Old Covenant but it seemed that he knew nothing about God’s promise of a New Covenant (cf. Jer. 31:31-34). He had no understanding of the spiritual realities of regeneration - that saving, God wrought transformation of a human soul. And even after all this explanation Nicodemus is still not getting it.

Read v. 9

From this point on Nicodemus is silent. In verses 10-31 this discussion turns into a one-sided discourse as Jesus rebukes Nicodemus and then offers further explanation. Let’s first look at the rebuke.

I. Ignorant Unbelief:

1. Notice how Jesus goes right after him (v. 10). “Are you *the* teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?” Jesus is shocked! The definite article before “teacher” shows that Nicodemus was a prominent teacher of the law. He was an expert in the O.T. he nevertheless knew nothing about how God actually saves sinners.

Nicodemus was not just any old back-woods rabbi. He was a premiere teacher of Scripture. He was well known and well respected by the nation of Israel. Nevertheless, he obviously was ignorant of the spiritual realities that Jesus was so easily explaining.

2. Why is it that Nicodemus and the rest of the Sanhedrin could understand the truths that Jesus is teaching? Its because they chose not to believe what God has plainly revealed. (Read 11-12).
3. “Earthly things” here probably is a reference to the elementary teachings on the need for new birth. “Heavenly things” are things that would be new revelation from the Lord. Jesus is saying, “Nicodemus, there is so much that I could teach you about God and the kingdom that you have never heard, but I can’t even begin to teach those things because you refuse to believe me about the basic, foundational truths of salvation by a new birth.”
4. And how is it that Jesus could have the authority to teach such “heavenly things”? (Read v. 13).
5. In other words, Jesus is telling Nicodemus that his authority to teach is infinitely higher than the authority than human rabbis and religious councils because He is the very Son of Man who has lived in heaven for all eternity and has now come to earth.
6. This is exactly what John said of Jesus back in chapter 1 when he wrote (1:14): “And the word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.” This is Jesus’ identity. He is the very Son of God. But even though Nicodemus said he believed that Jesus had come from God and that God was with Him, still he could not get himself to believe that Jesus was God in flesh. And because of that He was trapped in ignorant, damnable unbelief.
7. Nevertheless, Jesus had come to seek and to save those - like Nicodemus - who are lost. In verses 14-15 Jesus calls Nicodemus (and all people) to turn from ignorant unbelief to saving belief.

II. Regenerated Belief:

1. Read 14-15
2. Jesus now points to a famous story in the O.T. Turn with me to Numbers 21:5-9. This is the story of when the Israelites kept complaining about their hard life in the wilderness and what God did about it.

Numbers 21:5–9

The people spoke against God and 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 miserable food.”⁶ The LORD sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.⁷ So the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned, because we have spoken against the LORD and you; intercede with the LORD, that He may remove the serpents from us.” And Moses interceded for the people.⁸ Then the LORD said to Moses, “Make a fiery *serpent*, and set it on a standard; and it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he will live.”⁹ And Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on the standard; and it came about, that if a serpent bit any man, when he looked to the bronze serpent, he lived.
3. Why is Jesus pointing Nicodemus to this story? The point of this illustration is to show two things: 1) Israel’s hopeless condition because of their sin, and 2) God’s grace in providing the cure. Why did God send the serpents to judge them? It was because of sin. “The wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). On the other hand, God is gracious and loves His people. Even though we deserve death, He is gracious and eager to save us from His own wrath. The people in the desert cried “We have sinned.” Beloved, that is the cry of every regenerate heart. Its an expression of the conviction that God’s judgment upon us is absolutely deserved. But then it takes the further step of applying God’s cure. To escape the just death penalty for their sins, those who were bitten by the snake had merely look at the bronze serpent. God did not require any works of righteousness, or penance. They didn’t have to make any sacrifice or say 100 hail Mary’s. The prescription was simple: “Look and live.” And those who did so were healed.
4. The analogy is obvious, isn’t it? One day Jesus would be lifted up, not on a pole, but on a cross. And He would be lifted up for the same reason the serpent was lifted up. Sinners are all under

God's judgment. If God doesn't do something to save us we will all be lost. So, in the mystery of His unfathomable grace, God sent His Son and lifted Him up for the world to see so that all who would look to Him in child-like faith would not only be rescued from the just wrath of God, but have eternal life.

5. An important note on this last phrase: "will in him have eternal life," or (ESV) "may have eternal life." In the GK the word "will" or "may" is not there. The term "have" is simply the present tense "has." In other words, whoever believes in Him *already has eternal life*. Why? Because the fact that he believes indicates that he has already been "born again" or "born from above," or "regenerated" by the uncontrollable Spirit of a sovereign God.

6. Last week we learned that the only hope sinners have for salvation is that God's Spirit would come purely by the impulse of His grace and remove the dead heart of stone and replace it with a heart that is alive to God. That is what the New Covenant promises of Jer. 30, and Ezek. 36 were all about. It's what it means to be "born again." It comes about by the sovereign working of "Wind" of heaven - the Holy Spirit.

7. The question we left with last week was, "Where does faith fit into the salvation equation?" It fits right here. Faith is the first breath of a soul that has been "born again." Faith doesn't cause regeneration, it is the fruit of regeneration. That's why Paul in Eph. 2:8 says, "By grace you have been saved through faith and *that* (i.e. that faith) is not of your selves, it is a gift of God."

8. So by the impulse of His grace God the H.S. comes to the sinner like the wind of heaven, regenerates the sinful heart causing it to be born again and when that happens the first thought on the newly born soul is "I believe."

9. All of this fits perfectly with v. 15, "that whoever believes in Him *already has eternal life*. The counterbalance for this verse is v. 18 which reads, "He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged *already*."

10. The new birth is a marvelous thing, isn't it? We can't earn it. We can't work for it. We don't deserve it. We can do anything to force God to give it to you. He must give it as a token of His infinite grace. And when He does, all the glory goes to Him.

11. Some of you may be saying, "I want this salvation. How can I get it?" The answer is "believe." You may say, "Well what if I can't believe?" Then do what the publican in the temple did and pray, "God be merciful to me the sinner."