

Look and Be Saved

John 3:9-15

Now you will remember John chapter 3, starting in verse 1 and running to verse 21, is the Lord Jesus teaching about salvation. And it all happens in a conversation with a Pharisee by the name of Nicodemus.

Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews, comes to Jesus under the cover of night. He affirms in verse 2 that Jesus is **“a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.”** Jesus responds in verse 3 by saying, **“Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”** Nicodemus wonders whether a man can enter into his mother’s womb again and be born.

Jesus answers in verses 5–8 that he is talking about a spiritual birth. He says, **“Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God,”** (3:5). Unless you are born again from above, you will never enter the kingdom of God — you will never be cleansed from sin and have a new heart in which God’s Spirit lives. Jesus insists on the necessity of the new birth saying to all, **“You must be born again,”** (3:7). Then he teaches that the Spirit of God is the one that causes the new birth and the Spirit is as free as the wind in the way He does it. The new birth is not a work of man but a miracle of God that He does in the human heart through His Spirit.

Today we will look at the rest of the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus.

9 Nicodemus answered and said to Him, "How can these things be?"

10 Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?

11 Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness.

12 If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?

13 No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven.

14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up,

15 that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.

First, in verses 9-13 we see that:

1. The only way to understand spiritual truth is to believe the testimony of Jesus (3:9-13).

In verse 9, Nicodemus is still at a loss, and asks, **“How can these things be?”** Nicodemus just doesn’t get it. As Paul says, **“But the natural man does not**

receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.” (1 Cor. 2:14).

Jesus marvels in verse 10 that the teacher of Israel doesn't understand this. For years, Nicodemus had taught others that the way into God's kingdom was to keep the commandments and the traditions of the elders. But now Jesus is telling him that this is the wrong approach. A person needs nothing less than new life imparted by the Spirit of God.

Jesus' retort to Nicodemus makes it clear that he should have known these things from the Scriptures. As we saw last week when we considered Jesus' meaning for "water" in 3:5, He was probably referring to Ezekiel 36:26-27: **"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them."** In Ezekiel 37, the prophet has the vision of the dry bones taking on flesh and coming to life when God's Spirit breathes upon them. God says (37:14), **"I will put My Spirit in you, and you shall live...."**

In verse 11 for the third time, Jesus introduces his statement with, **"Most assuredly, I say to you..."** He assures Nicodemus, **"We speak what We know and testify what We have seen."** The "we" seems to be John the Baptist and Jesus, both of whom have testified to what they have seen. It may also include the witness of the scriptures, the Father, and the Spirit as we will see when we get to chapter 5. Then Jesus gives the result of their testimony, **"...and you do not receive Our witness."** The "you" in that verse is plural. Jesus is indicting Nicodemus and his fellow-Pharisees. They rejected the witness of both John the Baptist and Jesus. They are fulfilling what John wrote in chapter 1, **"He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him."**

Nicodemus' problem was not just that he could not understand, it was that he would not believe. So Jesus points out in verse 12, **"If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?"** Jesus had used two earthly illustrations, birth and the wind, to explain basic spiritual truth about receiving new life from God. If Nicodemus couldn't understand these simple illustrations, how would he ever be able to understand if Jesus explained the spiritual nature of the kingdom of God, or the Trinity, or His incarnation or His substitutionary death for sinners or what heaven is like?

Then in verse 13 Jesus tells Nicodemus the reason why He is able to explain both earthly and heavenly things, **"No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven."** Jesus is asserting that no one besides Him has ever ascended into heaven to be able to report heavenly truth on earth. He alone has come down from heaven. By using the term **"Son of Man,"** He is saying that He is the one Daniel prophesied of in Daniel 7:13-14, whom he saw in heaven with the Ancient of Days. Only Jesus uniquely understands and can reveal heavenly mysteries. To reject Jesus' witness is to reject God's primary source for spiritual truth. Today we have that witness in the entire Bible, which tells us about Christ and points us to Him (Luke

24:27, 44). Jesus will say to the Jewish leaders in John 5:39, **"You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me."**

Jesus is the same Son of Man who is in heaven who is **"given dominion and glory and a kingdom, That all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him,"** (Daniel 7:14). So He tells Nicodemus that He has come down from heaven. Now in the next two verses Jesus tells him why He came. *Jesus came down from heaven to be lifted up on the cross to save us from sin and death.*

So in the next two verses Jesus teaches us that,

2. Those who look in faith to Jesus who died for us and rose again will have eternal life (3:14-15).

"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life."

The background for these verses is Numbers 21:4-9. Edom had denied Israel permission to cross its land on their way to Canaan (Num. 20:14-21). God told Moses not to fight against Edom (Deut. 2:4-5). So, Moses turned the people southeast (the Promised Land was northwest) to make a long, difficult journey around the land of Edom.

At this point, the Israelites grew impatient. They had just seen a victory over some Canaanites (Num. 21:1-3). Why couldn't they march through Edom and kill any Edomites that opposed them? So as they turned southeast, they grumbled against God and Moses (Num. 21:5), **"Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread."** As a result of their grumbling and despising God's gracious provision of manna and His taking care of them in the wilderness all these years, the Lord sent venomous serpents whose bite burned like fire among the people as judgment, so that many died.

This time the people acknowledged their sin, came to Moses and asked him to pray for a remedy. People were dying. They needed relief. God told Moses to make a bronze serpent and put it on a pole. Everyone in Israel that had been bitten would live if they would look to the serpent.

You have to admit, that's a strange story! After all, one of God's Ten Commandments was that His people should not make any graven images. And they knew the story of the detested snake in the garden that had tempted Eve and was at the root of all evil. But now God commands Moses to make an image of a snake and put it on a pole.

But Jesus took that strange story and applied it to Himself, telling Nicodemus ... *Just as those who looked in faith to the serpent in the wilderness were healed, so those who look in faith to the lifted up Son of Man will have eternal life.*

As we think about how Jesus was like this snake in the wilderness, we can learn five things about why we need the new birth and how Jesus provides it for us.

A. Because of sin, all people are under the curse of death.

The people in the wilderness were dying because of their sin. They did not deserve to live, because they had rebelled terribly against God and His goodness toward them. They had a track record of 40 years of grumbling in spite of God's gracious faithfulness. He had delivered them from Pharaoh's army. He had provided water and protection in that barren desert. He had given them food every morning with the manna. But in spite of God's abundant goodness, they grumbled at Him about their circumstances. And so He sent these deadly snakes among them as a judgment because of their sin.

The story of Nicodemus illustrates that even good, religiously zealous people are under the curse of sin and death. Nicodemus thought that his Pharisaic righteousness would get him into the kingdom of God. But Jesus shocked him by saying (3:7), "You must be born again." Why did a good, religious man like Nicodemus need the new birth? Weren't his good works enough to get him into the kingdom? No, he was a sinner. He needed a Savior. He needed the new birth. His good deeds were no cure for the snake bite of sin.

The poison of sin is in all of us and without divine intervention we will all die.

B. God graciously provides the cure for the curse.

The snake-bitten people could not do anything to save themselves. God had to provide a way for them to be healed or they all would die. When they confessed their sin and asked Moses to intercede for them, God provided this strange remedy: Make a bronze snake, put it on a pole, and whoever looks at it will live.

It was *a supernatural remedy*. It came from God. Moses didn't think this up on his own. It was God's cure. Even so, Paul wrote (1 Cor. 1:18), "For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." The cross is *God's* remedy. It didn't come from the world's most brilliant philosophers or religious geniuses. It came from God, who devised His plan of salvation before the foundation of the world.

Also, it was *a sufficient remedy*. Moses didn't say, "Look at the snake, go home and take two aspirin, and you'll feel better in the morning!" There was nothing to add to it. Just look at the serpent on the pole. In the same way, the cross of Christ is sufficient for the salvation of the worst of sinners. You don't have to add anything to it.

It was also *a sure remedy*. No one who looked died. It was a perfect, sure-fire cure for everyone who looked.

Even so, Jesus saves every sinner who believes in Him. As He says (John 3:15), "**Whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.**" The Bible is filled with terrible sinners who looked to Jesus and were saved. If you will believe in Jesus, the remedy is 100-percent effective.

It was *a simple remedy*. You didn't have to crawl on your hands and knees over broken glass to go and look at the snake. No, all you had to do was to look and live. And all you need to do is believe in Jesus as the One who paid the penalty for your sin and you will have eternal life.

Because of sin, all are under the curse of death. But God graciously provided the remedy for our curse. God could have removed the deadly snakes, but instead, He left the snakes, but provided a remedy.

C. The remedy must be lifted up.

John 3:14: **“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up.”** In John, being “lifted up” refers to one continuous action of ascent, beginning with the cross but ending at the right hand of the Father. Step 1 is Jesus’ death; step 2 is his resurrection; and step 3 is the ascension back to heaven. John uses this phrase of Jesus three other times and each time it refers to Jesus’ exaltation which begins at the cross.

John 8:28, “Then Jesus said to them, **“When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am *He*, and *that* I do nothing of Myself; but as My Father taught Me, I speak these things.”**

John 12:32-34 **“And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all [peoples] to Myself.” 33 This He said, signifying by what death He would die. 34 The people answered Him, “We have heard from the law that the Christ remains forever; and how [can] You say, ‘The Son of Man must be lifted up’? Who is this Son of Man?”**

So just as the despised snake had to be lifted up in the wilderness, so Jesus would be despised and lifted up on the cross. **“For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us,”** (2 Cor. 5:21). Galatians 3:13 says, **“Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”).”** In becoming sin and a curse for us our sin and curse was taken away.

Jesus is answering Nicodemus’ question (3:9), **“How can these things be?”** The new birth happens when sinners look in faith to the crucified, risen Son of God. Just as the snake in the wilderness gave “new life” to those who were about to perish, so the lifting up of the Son of Man will give eternal life to those who are perishing.

D. Look in faith to God’s remedy.

Just look to the snake that Moses put up on the pole and you will live. Verse 15 shows us that believing in Jesus is equivalent to looking at the lifted up snake in the wilderness.

A great illustration of this comes from the autobiography of the great preacher, Charles Spurgeon. This is his testimony of his conversion in his own words:

I sometimes think I might have been in darkness and despair until now had it not been for the goodness of God in sending a snowstorm, one Sunday morning, while I was going to a certain place of worship. When I could go no further, I turned down a side street, and came to a little Primitive Methodist chapel. In that chapel there may have been a dozen or fifteen people. . . . The minister did not come that morning; he was snowed up, I suppose. At last, a very thin-looking man, a shoemaker, or tailor, or something of that sort, went up into the pulpit to preach. . . . He was

obliged to stick to his text, for the simple reason that he had little else to say. The text was “Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth [Isaiah 45:22].”

He did not even pronounce the words rightly, but that did not matter. There was, I thought, a glimpse of hope for me in that text. The preacher began thus: “My dear friends, this is a very simple text indeed. It says, ‘Look.’ Now lookin’ don’t take a deal of pain. It ain’t liftin’ your foot or your finger; it is just, ‘Look.’ Well, a man needn’t go to college to learn to look. You may be the biggest fool, and yet you can look. A man needn’t be worth a thousand a year to be able to look. Anyone can look; even a child can look.

“But then the text says, ‘Look unto Me’. . . . Many of ye are lookin’ to yourselves, but it’s no use lookin’ there. Ye will never find any comfort in yourselves. Some look to God the Father. No, look to him by-and-by. Jesus Christ says, ‘Look unto Me.’ Some of ye say, ‘We must wait for the Spirit’s workin’.’ You have no business with that just now. Look to Christ. The text says, ‘Look unto Me.’”

Then the good man followed up his text in this way: “Look unto Me; I am sweatin’ and great drops of blood. Look unto Me; I am hangin’ on the cross. Look unto Me; I am dead and buried. Look unto Me; I rise again. Look unto Me; I ascend to heaven. Look unto Me; I am sittin’ at the Father’s right hand. O poor sinner, look unto Me! Look unto Me!”

When he had gone to about that length, and managed to spin out ten minutes or so he was at the end of his tether. Then he looked at me under the gallery, and I dare say, with so few present he knew me to be a stranger. Just fixing his eyes on me, as if he knew all my heart he said, “Young man, you look very miserable.” Well, I did, but I had not been accustomed to have remarks made from the pulpit on my personal appearance before. However, it was a good blow, struck right home. He continued, “and you always will be miserable — miserable in life, and miserable in death — if you don’t obey my text; but if you obey now, this moment, you will be saved.”

Then lifting up his hands, he shouted, as only a primitive Methodists could do, “Young man, look to Jesus Christ. Look! Look! Look! You have nothing to do but to look and live.” I saw at once the way of salvation. I know not what else he said — I did not take much notice of it — I was so possessed with that one thought. *Like as when the brazen serpent was lifted up, the people only looked and were healed*, so it was with me. I had been waiting to do fifty things, but when I heard that word, “Look!” What a charming word it seemed to me! Oh! I looked until I could have almost looked my eyes away.

There and then the cloud was gone, the darkness had rolled away, and that moment I saw the sun; and I could have risen that instant, and sung with the most enthusiastic of them, of the precious blood of Christ, and the simple faith which looks alone to him. . . . And now I can say —

*E'er since by faith I saw the stream
Thy flowing wounds supply,
Redeeming love has been my theme,
And Shall be till I die.*

(Charles Spurgeon, [AUTOBIOGRAPHY DIARY, LETTERS, AND RECORDS VOLUME 1](#), p. 113-114)

E. The result of looking was life.

Whoever looked in faith at the snake lived. Whoever believes will in Jesus have eternal life. When our sin and God's wrath are taken away, God is for us totally. And if God is for us, we will never die, but live forever with him in joy. Jesus says (John 17:3), **"And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent."**

I like what A. W. Pink wrote in his commentary on this passage:

Man became a lost sinner by a *look*, for the first thing recorded of Eve in connection with the fall of our first parents is that "The woman saw that the tree was good for food" (Gen. 3:6) In like manner, the lost sinner is saved by a look. The Christian life begins by looking: "Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else" (Isa. 45:22). The Christian life continues by looking: "let us run with patience the race which is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of faith" (Heb. 12:2). And at the end of the Christian life we're still to be looking for Christ: "For our conversation (citizenship) is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Phil. 3:20). From first to last, the one thing required is looking at God's Son. Faith is simply the eye of the soul that looks off unto the Lord Jesus, Do not rest, then, on your faith, but on the Savior Himself.

So the question is, "Have you looked to the crucified, risen, and exalted Lord Jesus to save you from the curse of sin?" Are you still looking to Him as you run the race of faith?

Do you want the grace of the new birth? Look!