

Look Up! Be Born Again!

Palm Sunday - April 9, 2017

Readings: John 3:1-15 and Numbers 21:4-9

Born Again?

Today is the beginning of Holy Week, we observe the last week of Christ's human life. It is a time when we mark the most sacred week in human history; it includes Jesus' final meal with His apostles when He instituted the Lord's Supper, His agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, the trial before Annas, Caiaphas and Pilate, His crucifixion and the death of the Son of God, the empty tomb and Jesus' eternal resurrection. Many churches mark this week with ceremonies and events: Palm Sunday, *today marks Jesus's triumphant entry into Jerusalem*, Holy Wednesday *the day Mary anointed Jesus' head and feet with costly oil*, Maundy Thursday *the night of the Last Supper and "Maundy" the name given for the act of washing the feet of the poor* and Good Friday *the terrible but Good Friday of Jesus' crucifixion and Saturday Jesus lay dead in the tomb*. Beloved, do not fear for Resurrection Sunday is coming!

This morning what we are going to see is one of the most shocking and yet wonderful pictures Jesus ever painted of His own death. To set the stage we will have our first reading of God's Word from the New Testament. Brother Adam please read from the Gospel According to John, chapter 3 verses 1 to 15. Please stand for the reading of God's Word.

Let's get the flow of thought in our minds from John's writing. Nicodemus a leader of the Jews comes to Jesus under the cover of night. He says in verse 2 that Jesus is a teacher come from God. Jesus bluntly responds in verse 3 that **"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 to 8 that He is talking about a spiritual birth and that unless you experience it, you will never

enter the kingdom of God. Without spiritual birth you will never be reconciled to God and forgiven. If not forgiven you cannot enter heaven. Then Jesus adds that the Spirit of God is the one that causes the new birth, not man. The Spirit is the one who works and breathes life into dead souls. Man cannot and does not direct the Holy Spirit.

In verse 9, Nicodemus is still at a loss, and asks, “How can these things be?” Jesus marvels in verse 10 that Nicodemus, a teacher in Israel does not understand what the scriptures teach. Then Jesus says in verse 11 that the problem Nicodemus has, is that, even though he is hearing reliable testimony from Jesus and others, he doesn’t receive these testimonies. Nicodemus is trapped in the earthly as Jesus says in verse 12, “If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?” This is the opposite of what was written back in chapter 1 where John made clear, “But to all who did receive ~~him~~ Jesus, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” (John 1:12) So in verse 12 of chapter 3, Jesus says to Nicodemus, I have taken you as far as I can, by way of explaining spiritual truths. You cannot go any higher. In effect, Jesus is saying, “You keep pressing me for deeper and higher explanations of this new birth, but your heart is one of unbelief and you have an unregenerate heart. Therefore, Nicodemus you cannot ascend to the kinds of truth that I have to give you about the new birth.”

Now we understand verse 13 is pivotal. What is Jesus going to do with Nicodemus? Let me ask, “What would you do? Would you walk away in frustration?” Does Jesus say, “Well, since you don’t get it, Nicodemus, I don’t have any more to say to you? Come back after you have been born again and I will give you the explanations you want for you will have a soul that understands.”

That is not what Jesus says or does. What He does is important for us to see and understand, it is important for our own faith and for those we desperately want to be born again. Verse 13 is a pivotal shift. Jesus shifts, before verse 13 He is talking as a witness, a teacher and talking about the new birth like any born-again person might do. However, with verse 13, Jesus starts talking about himself not as a witness or as a teacher who tells people to be born again, but as the Son of Man from heaven who came to do something that makes this spiritual new birth possible.

Basis of New Birth

Another way to say it would be that before verse 13 Jesus is talking about the process of the new birth; it is spiritual, it happens by the work of the Spirit and you cannot explain it. After verse 13, Jesus is talking about the basis of the new birth in what the Son of Man has come to do. What is helpful to understand is that Jesus also tells Nicodemus how to receive the Spirit's work of this new birth.

Let me read verse 13, but first, we need to remember what Jesus has just said in verse 12, **“If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?”** Now continuing to verse 13, says, **“No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.”** In other words, the reason I, Jesus, can give you heavenly explanations is that I have come down from heaven. No man has come from heaven or gone into heaven and returned, so no man can do what I do. I was in heaven with the Father and I have come down. Because I came down from heaven, now I am going to tell you what I came to do. Nicodemus this is the key to answering your question how you can be born again. I will tell you how you can enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus is explaining, there are more obstacles to your entering the kingdom than merely your need to be born again, Nicodemus. Something has to happen to remove the wrath of God so that He will release the power of the Spirit to cause you to be born again.

This is what I, the Son of Man, came to do. It is this simple, as Jesus said, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.” (John 3:36)

Jesus now uses an analogy to explain what He came to do, an analogy that Nicodemus would be familiar with, but it is shocking that He would pick this analogy to describe His own work. Let me read verses 14–15, “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.” Comparing himself with a snake is shocking. To gain an understanding we need to go back and read the story that Jesus is referring to. Please turn in your Bibles to Numbers chapter 21. Brother David please read God’s Word from Numbers, chapter 21 beginning in verse 4. Please stand for the reading of God’s Word.

Let me give you a few observations from this passage. First, the serpent on the pole is not preventative. It is for people who are already bitten as seen in verse 8. The poison is in them and without divine intervention they will die. Second, the snakes in the camp are from the Lord. Verse 6 tells us God sent the snakes. The wrath of God is on these people for their sin of ingratitude and murmuring and rebellion. Third, the means God chooses to rescue the people from His own curse is a picture of the curse itself. Fourth, all they have to do in order to be saved from God’s wrath is look at His provision hanging on a pole.

We know that Jesus would read from the Old Testament knowing that it was all pointing to Him. There were pointers and foreshadowing’s everywhere. But we might expect Jesus to skip this story of God’s wrath. It is shocking to compare the Son of Man to a snake. However, Jesus does not skip this one, but uses it. He goes out of his way to help Nicodemus. Jesus says to Nicodemus, “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.” Jesus is saying, Nicodemus think, you know this story of Moses and the people in the wilderness. Nicodemus you are like these people in the wilderness! What lesson is there here for you?

Basis for Belief

There are at least 5 things to take note of from these two passages of Scripture, one Old and one New.

First, Jesus is the Son of Man and this name was reserved for the Messiah. Jesus, the Son of Man is lifted up on the cross in the same way the bronze snake was. The Pharisees claimed to be the sons of Moses, but rejected Christ when He gave sight to the blind man. They also cast the man who use to be blind out of the temple. **“Jesus heard that they had cast him out, and having found him he said, ‘Do you believe in the Son of Man?’”** (John 9:35) Jesus explained who the Son of Man is and therefore who He is and the man who use to be blind replied, **“ ‘Lord, I believe,’ and he worshiped him.”** (John 9:38) When Jesus speaks of the Son of Man being lifted up, He is speaking about Himself and His coming crucifixion.

Second, we understand Jesus if the source for sinful mans rescue. Jesus is hung on a cross in the place of the snake; He is the source of mankind’s healing. Jesus is the source of rescue from our poison of sin and the wrath of God. Jesus brings us back to God and is the source of eternal life. Moses lifted up the bronze snake, but he is not the rescuer of men’s souls, only Jesus can do that. Jesus will be lifted up, He will be lifted up and crucified, the Son of Man on the cross. Who would dare lift up the Son of God on the cross?

The answer is found in John chapter 8, verses 12 to 30. Jesus explains who the Son of Man is and that, **“When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father**

taught me.” (John 8:28) Who is the “you” in this verse? The “you” are identified in verse 13 as the Pharisees. The Pharisees stand in the place of Moses. Moses was not the rescuer but was obedient to God. The Pharisees, who were disobedient to God, will lift Jesus up to be crucified as ordained by God. Therefore in the Book of Numbers the one who saves is God by means of the bronze snake and in the Book of John the One who saves is God by the means of Jesus.

The third point is that Jesus is portrayed as a curse. Jesus in the place of the snake is portrayed as evil and a curse. This is what was so very shocking to me. The snakes were God’s curse. The snakes bit and killed people. The snake on the pole was the symbol of God’s curse on the disobedient people, but the rescue. So it was also with Jesus. Paul taught in his letter to the Corinthians, “For our sake ~~he~~ *God the Father made him Jesus to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*” (2 Corinthians 5:21) In Paul’s letter to the Galatians we read, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.” How did Jesus redeem us, verse 13 continues, “for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’ — ¹⁴ so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.” (Galatians 3:13-14) Christ being lifted up like the snake was not just a symbol of sin, but also the embodiment of our sin and the curse of mankind that came with the fall in the garden. Jesus, who knew no sin, became our sin and our curse, He took sin away and reconciles us back to God.

Fourth, it is Jesus who gives eternal life. What Jesus did when He was lifted up to suffer on the cross was give eternal life. Reading verses 14 and 15 of John chapter 3, “the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” When our sin is taken away God’s wrath towards sinners is also removed. God cannot be in the presence of sin, but because Jesus suffers God’s wrath for our

sins God sees us afresh and if God is for us then we will be like Adam and Eve before the fall, we will be eternal and live forever in His presence with joy.

The fifth and final point is that Jesus crucified is the One we see. Look upon Jesus and believe and you will be saved. Just as those who looked up to the snake lifted up on the pole and were saved. Jesus is saying all this to Nicodemus, because he is confused about the new birth of salvation and how one is saved. This is what we are to say to those who are not saved – look upon Jesus! Why are we to tell people to look up to Jesus? The answer is because fallen and sinful people, apart from Jesus, are spiritually dead and blind. It is Jesus who raises the dead and gives sight to the blind. They need to see Jesus crucified, on the cross for sinners. Without the cross the resurrection makes no sense.

So Jesus is saying to Nicodemus, “what should you do? What should you do this very day? The answer is, believe! Believe in Jesus, for in verse 15 Jesus says, **“whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”** What does it mean to believe? As those who looked upon the snake and believed were saved, then look upon Jesus, believe in Jesus and the grace of God will give you new birth, eternal birth. God’s grace is seen in Jesus lifted up.

Look Up! Receive God’s Grace

The theme of the Gospel According to John can be seen in the first chapter, verses 14 and 16 as I read these verses see how they relate to what Jesus was teaching Nicodemus. **“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. ...¹⁶ For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.”** (John 1:14 & 16) We behold the glory of Christ when we look at Him lifted up on the cross and as we look we receive God’s grace. Nicodemus you must look if you want to understand God’s grace. So Nicodemus and all who desire the new birth – look!

I do not know of a better way to make plain the importance and the meaning of what I have taught this morning but to end by telling you the story of Charles Spurgeon's conversion. Here are Spurgeon's own words from January 6, 1850. Spurgeon was not quite 16 years old. If only Nicodemus had been able to hear and see Jesus as Spurgeon heard and saw from this straightforward message.

Spurgeon wrote, "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!" from Isaiah 45:22.

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. . . .” Spurgeon ended writing about his conversion with a few lines from the hymn, *There is a Fountain Filled with Blood* by William Cowper. 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. (C. H. Spurgeon
Autobiography, volume 1, pages 87-88.)* The Holy Spirit penetrated Spurgeon's
heart that night 167 years ago because he looked up, saw Jesus and believed.

My beloved, look up, see Jesus and the grace of God for sinners who believe. If you
haven't looked into the face of Jesus on the cross – I say, look and do not wait one
moment longer. Look and be saved! Amen!