



## **So Must the Son of Man Be Lifted Up**

*Series: John – That You May Believe*

John 3:9-15

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Beloved, today we are going to finish up this conversation between Jesus and the paragon of Jewish, religious perfection, Nicodemus. Now let me just tell you that there is some debate over where Jesus' words end and the Apostle John's pick up. Some think that this is Jesus' speaking throughout the whole of the text that we read this morning, while some others believe that Jesus' words to Nicodemus end at verse 15, and the remainder of this section is John's reflection, his application, his commentary on what Jesus has said earlier. There are respected theologians on both sides of the debate. The reason that there is a debate at all is because Greek, the original language of this gospel, doesn't have quotation marks like English does. You have to determine who is speaking, sometimes, from the clues in the text. If you were to ask me where I stand, I believe that the actual conversation ends at verse 15. I think Jesus means to leave Nicodemus to think, to consider what He has already said, and He has said much. So we are going to look at this text through verse 15 today.

You remember that last week, Jesus taught Nicodemus of the need for the new birth. He made very clear the truth that though Nicodemus thought he had Jesus and the things of salvation and the kingdom of God all figured out, the reality was that Nicodemus was spiritually blind and he was spiritually blind because he was spiritually dead. That is the natural condition of all human beings. What Nicodemus needed, despite his religious pedigree, was to be born again, to be born from above. He needed God to give life to His dead heart and soul in order to perceive and to enter the kingdom of God. What he needed, what we all need, was not a new, improved religion, not to be jumpstarted spiritually, not to rededicate himself, not some superficial change, not to grasp some new religious idea, not some temporary religious excitement, no religious improvement program. He needed to be born again. He needed life that only God could give to him. He needed God to give him, a spiritually dead man, life. And that is what we all need. No one believes the gospel, no one sees Christ for Who He truly is, no one repents and believes in the sacrificial, atoning, redeeming, saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ unless He is born again. Our salvation is dependent, not upon us, but upon God's working in us. That is not to say that we

do not have to respond to the gospel in repentance and in faith. We must, but the desire and the power to do so rest in God's work, His sovereign work, to raise us from spiritual death to life. We cannot make ourselves to be born again. God must and so God gets all the glory in salvation. Do you see that? From there, we see a shift in the conversation.

**A Shift in the Conversation (9-13)** Look at this in verse 9. Keep in mind that Jesus has just explained the necessity of the new birth for every human being who would be saved, God's sovereign work to regenerate dead hearts – and by the way has included this religious man in the company of the spiritually dead – and we see Nicodemus' response. **“Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can these things be?’” (John 3:9, ESV)** It is proof of the spiritual darkness in which he still is. Nicodemus doesn't understand. He doesn't get it. He may understand the words that Jesus is saying but he doesn't understand the message because he has not yet experienced the new birth. And let me just say something about that. If you are a Christian and you understand Jesus' words, do not take that for granted. Don't treat that as if it is insignificant. It isn't. That is infinite grace to you on God's part. The most religiously astute, one of the most moral and most learned men in Israel at that time, was clueless.

**“Jesus answered him, ‘Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?’” (John 3:10, ESV)** Here was THE teacher in Israel and he was woefully ignorant of the very things that he presumed to preach. He had no true understanding of spiritual reality, no true perception of God, and he was clueless about Jesus. Remember what Nicodemus had said when he opened the conversation with Jesus? **“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.”** (John 3:2, ESV) Jesus turns that statement around on him. Check this out.

He says, **“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.”** (John 3:11, ESV) Who is the “we” of whom Jesus is speaking? It's John the Baptist who came preaching repentance and of the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” The Pharisees heard him preach, went out to see his ministry, sent people to question him, but he refused to receive his testimony. Jesus is speaking of the prophets throughout the OT who in the power of the Holy Spirit, preached of Christ and testified to God. Those prophets, more often than not, had been rejected and refused by the masses of Israel. But ultimately, He is speaking of the Godhead – Father, Son and Spirit – God Himself. He is speaking of His own testimony – of the religious leaders who heard and saw Jesus and judged His message and ministry and did not receive Him. He is speaking of the Father who was with Him and the Holy Spirit who anointed Him to preach the truth. He is saying, in essence, “Unlike you and the others for whom you speak, we know what we are talking about but you do not receive it. You are too stubborn, too blind, too dead in your sin, to receive it.” These are strong words, powerful words, but Jesus does not stop here.

He goes on to say, **“If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?”** (John 3:12, ESV) Jesus' point is just this, “If I have spoken to you of earthly things, of things already revealed, if I have told you of

regeneration, which you should have clearly seen from the Scriptures, how can you understand the eternal? How can you understand the redemptive plan of God, planned from all of eternity? If you cannot understand the initial work of God in the human heart to bring salvation to lost sinners, how can you understand His eternal plan conceived in eternity past?" How could Nicodemus understand the actual accomplishment of redemption, how Jesus satisfies the law and demands of God, how His death on the cross pays the price of sin and fallen man's redemption, the spiritual significance and cosmic power of a common death on the cross and how it defines the destiny of every human being? The problem of mankind has always been the heart.

And to underscore the importance of what He is saying, of the fact that He alone can answer the great question, Jesus says, **"No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man."** (John 3:13, ESV) This truth can only be found in Him. No one has ever ascended into heaven to lay hold of this truth – the Son of Man, Jesus, has come to reveal it. Jesus is emphasizing that what He says is absolutely reliable and true. There are not versions of the truth. Truth is not what you make it or what you prefer to believe. Spiritual truth is not a matter of preference. We live in a world of inclusivism, universalism, and relativity; where every road leads to heaven and every truth claim is of equal worth, etc. Quite frankly, that is fantasyland. There is truth and it is found in Christ and to prefer or insist on some pleasant fiction of our own invention is to arrogantly assert that we know more about truth than Jesus, the very embodiment of truth who came down from heaven and knows with divine certainty of what He speaks and it is spiritual suicide. We might think that this would be the end of the conversation, but it isn't. Jesus, in His grace and mercy, gives Nicodemus more to think about. He gives to him...

**An OT Picture of Eternal Truth (14-15)** he actually speaks to Nicodemus of heavenly things, and He reminds him of a story from the OT that he will know. Using the connector "and" as an indicator that He is speaking to Nicodemus of heavenly things, Jesus says, **"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."** (John 3:14-15, ESV)

These two verses – wow! There is so much being said here, so much to consider. It foreshadows beautifully the salvation that God will provide through the Son of Man. Again, Nicodemus as a supposed expert in the law, should understand the illustration that Jesus uses here. It's a familiar story in Israel's history. It comes from Numbers 21. Look at it, starting in verse 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. 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.'" Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. 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. 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.'" 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.” (Numbers 21:4–9, ESV)***

This takes place after the nation of Israel had already acted in rebellion and unbelief when they refused to enter the Promised Land that God had provided for them. They had doubted God’s love, doubted His power, doubted His intentions to bring them into the Promised Land and instead saw only the strength and size of the inhabitants of the land and dishonored God and trusted their own wisdom. Rather than destroying them on the spot, they were to wander in the wilderness for forty years until the unbelieving generation died off and the new generation would enter the land. Graciously God still provided for their every need, but that did not keep them from complaining.

They grumbled against God, grumbled against His grace, grumbled against food that He provided for them. They grumbled against His provision, grumbled against His deliverance of them from the bondage of the Egyptians, wishing they could go back! They were completely blind to God’s grace, His goodness, His generosity. Unfortunately, we are not ignorant of this sort of thing, are we? We can be, quite often, guilty of the same thing, right? Grumbling against God for our circumstances, complaining against His sovereignty, refusing to see His grace in our lives.

So God sent judgment upon them. He sent fiery serpents – probably the idea here is that the venom from these snakes burned and caused severe pain and fever. God sent these poisonous serpents to kill the rebellious and wicked Israelites. People were dropping like flies. They came to Moses and begged him to pray to God that He would take away the serpents from among them. But God did not take the serpents away. Instead He instructed Moses to make a bronze snake and to put it on a pole and whoever looked at it would live. God did not take the snakes away or prevent the people from being bitten – they were already bitten – but instead He has Moses lift up a bronze snake on a pole so that everyone who looks on that snake would live, that they would be spared God’s divine judgment.

Let’s give some definition to this word so we have the right idea here. That word for “look” in the Hebrew does not refer to a casual glance, just catching sight of the bronze snake out of the corner of your eye or something like that. The word means “to gaze upon with understanding, to perceive, to consider and give attention to, to understand why it’s there.” It was to look at it, to understand why it had been given – because of their sinful rebellion, because of personal sin, and to see it as the only way given by God to receive the gift of forgiveness and the power of healing. It required faith, real faith to look at the bronze serpent and live. It was not magic. It required real repentance and real faith in God’s grace to forgive and heal and do it in the way that He prescribed. It required a real understanding that this was the only way to be spared and without it, you were doomed. By faith in God’s provision, they were to look, believing, and be healed.

Jesus recalls this story from the OT and then He applies to Himself. Again, He says, ***“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.” (John 3:14–15, ESV)** Jesus makes an analogy connecting the serpent, which was lifted up on a pole, with Himself, with His death on the cross. Do you see that? What is the connection?

Do not miss this. This is amazing, glorious. I want you to see how this remedy of a serpent on a pole compares to Jesus Christ. First of all, this snake on a pole was a supernatural, God-ordained, remedy. This way of deliverance was designed and communicated to Moses from God. Moses didn't come up with this. He didn't call a conference of the smartest and the brightest and try to come up with some way to alleviate the problem. This is not a product of human wisdom in the least and neither is the cross.

Paul said, **“For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.” (1 Corinthians 1:18–25, ESV)** The cross is God's supernatural remedy to the spiritual death and destruction of our sin. The world's leading theologians or philosophers or geniuses did not devise it. It came from God, who devised the plan of salvation, the rescue of guilty sinners, from before the foundation of the world.

Moreover, the serpent on the pole was an all-sufficient cure. Moses did not add anything to the serpent on a pole. There was no additional thing to be done except to look upon that pole with a believing heart. In the same way, the cross is God's all sufficient cure. There is nothing to add to what Christ has done to save sinners from the death and hell we deserve. You don't have to do penance, light a candle, beat yourself with whips and cords, build up a solid religious résumé, bring to God a list of your good works. There is nothing to add. Jesus has done it all. Look to Him, confessing your sin, acknowledging your need, admitting that there is nothing that you can do to save yourself, and look on Him in faith and He will save you.

The serpent on a pole was the sure remedy for everyone, all manner of people in Israel, who looked upon it with faith. Everyone who looked upon the bronze serpent with faith was healed immediately. It did not matter how many times you had been bitten or how much poison coursed through your veins. No one who looked to the serpent died, only those who refused to look with faith and believe in the remedy that God had provided. The same is true for Jesus.

There is no-one who is too far gone, too encumbered with sin, too vile, too wicked, too sinful for the power of Christ to save. Self-righteous murders like Paul. Extortionist tax

collectors like Zacchaeus. Arrogant self-promoters like Peter. The openly sexually immoral or private pornographers, open gossips and secret slanderers, flagrant liars and subtle deceivers, open revelers and closet alcoholics, thieves and glory-stealers, the physically violent and the verbally abusive, the overtly angry and the secretly seething, the jealous and the envious – whoever believes in Him may have eternal life. As Paul so powerfully proclaims, **“Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. (Yes, this is true.) And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”** (1 Corinthians 6:9–11, ESV)

Not only that, but the remedy of the serpent on the pole was a humbling, pride-killing remedy. None of the Israelites could take credit for their cure. There was nothing they added to it, no glory for them in their cure. The cure could not come from within them. It had to come from God. It was all by God and all by His grace. The cross, too, is the humbling remedy for our sin. It requires that you admit and own the truth that you are a hopelessly lost sinner – not a basically good person with a few flaws. It is humbling to admit that you are far more sinful than you want to imagine and you cannot do anything to save yourself, but that’s exactly what is required. The remedy for sin and its death is not in you. It cannot be in you. It had to come from outside of you. It had to come from God in Christ.

One more thing – it is the only remedy that works. Don’t miss that. Jesus said, **so must the Son of Man be lifted up.** That is a divine “must.” There was no other way for Jesus to save sinners than that He be lifted up. The cross was absolutely necessary to atone for our sins. Jesus had to be lifted up on the cross. He had to die, had to taste our death in our place on the tree, had to be crucified and crushed in our place, for our sins, to bring sinners to God. It is a divine must. He had to be lifted up.

Think about this for just a moment and think back to the bronze serpent. Perhaps God could have used another means to deliver Israel from the curse of the serpents, but He didn’t. And He didn’t so that Nicodemus would eventually come to understand and so that you and I this morning could have a deeper understanding of what Jesus did on the cross. Follow with me. That bronze serpent that was lifted up on a pole was the very curse that was killing the people. God instructed Moses to lift up an image of the curse to save the people from the curse. Do you see that?

Sin is the curse that has sunk its fangs deep into each and every one of us. We, too, are bitten and in order for Jesus to save us, He must be lifted up as the curse so that we can look to Him by faith, believing, and be saved. **“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”** (2 Corinthians 5:21, ESV) In our place, Jesus was lifted up on the cross and made to be sin, the sinless Son of God, so that He could experience and satisfy in our place, and so we could see what our sin deserves. In picturesque terms the bronze serpent on a pole pointed to a far greater reality,

**“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”—” (Galatians 3:13, ESV)** Christ became the curse we deserve to save us.

But God did not leave Him on the cross or abandon His holy One to see corruption in the grave. The words, “lifted up,” mean more than to be lifted up on the cross. They mean to be exalted and lifted up in majesty and that is just what God did with Jesus. He raised Him from the dead and exulted Him to His right hand in glory.

Beloved, Nicodemus, at that point did not understand at all what Jesus was saying. Not then. He couldn't. He would come to understand the truth. He would be born again, born from above and come to faith in Christ, everything that Jesus said on this day making perfect sense to him. But not yet, not until the Spirit of God moved upon His soul, to renew heart and open His eyes to the glories of Christ. How Paul spoke of it when he said, **“For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” (2 Corinthians 4:6, ESV)** The message of John 3 is that you must be born again; you must believe in Jesus Christ. JC Ryle said, **“A man may be ignorant of a great many things and still be a Christian, but if a man is ignorant of the things that we find in John 3, then he is on the high road that leads to destruction.”** Oh, beloved,

### **Let Us Not Be Ignorant**

Oh how I pray that you are not ignorant of the things of John 3. I want you to know the truth, but more than that, I want you to know Jesus who is the truth. I don't want you to be satisfied with knowledge of the truth, or with assent and agreement with the truth; I want you to believe it, to cast your whole life and hope and trust upon Christ. I am pleading with you this morning, if you have not come to faith in Jesus Christ, if you have not personally cast all of your hope upon Jesus that you would do it today. That you would come and speak to me this morning.

But more than that, I want you to treasure Jesus Christ, to love Him supremely, to be amazed and undone at His marvelous grace to you. I want us all to reflect the words of Jonathan Edwards as he wrote in his diary, **“The person of Christ appeared (unspeakably) excellent, with an excellency great enough to swallow up all thought and conception... I felt a (passion) of soul to be... emptied and annihilated, to lie in the dust and be full of Christ alone; to love Him with a holy and pure love; to trust in Him; to live upon Him; to serve and follow Him, and to be totally wrapped up in the fullness of Christ, and to be perfectly sanctified and made pure, with a divine and heavenly purity.”**

The purest and greatest joy in the world is joy in Christ Jesus. I pray, join me in praying, that the Spirit of God would be poured out on us in greater measure, on you personally, so that we would, all of us, have our eyes opened to a near and clear view of the Lord Jesus -- that we would cleave to Him, and delight in Him and treasure Him, that we would be revived,

that we would be passionate for Him, passionate for His glory, and so that we would not be so shallow as to think that we have heard it all before and understand all there is to know, that there would be a real hunger and real desire for Jesus.

Augustine said it well, **Christ is not valued at all, unless He is valued above all.**

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