

John the Beloved remembered one of the most powerful conversations ever heard. Nicodemus was a respected teacher of Israel, but he saw that Jesus had something his soul longed for. Last week we had the first half of Jesus' interaction with Nicodemus. Jesus challenged him to be born again, or we could also translate it as "born from heaven". Jesus described it as becoming like the wind, letting God direct your life for His glory and not our own. It is a life uncertain about the direction and even the results. Yet, it is a life that is sure of its ultimate purpose and final destination. (2 Corinthians 5:15)

Last week we ended with what is the introduction to our passage today. Jesus declared that He was the only One to testify to what He had witnessed in heaven and the only One to come from heaven. Jesus isn't speaking merely what He has heard from another, though He speaks what He hears from the Father. (John 12:49) He is speaking of the things He has witnessed. This is revelation with absolute certainty, without the influence of a sinful nature, without the corruption of personality. This is the way it is. I could tell you of Israel from reading a book or having a phone conversation with someone in Israel, but if I've been there, I speak with a completely different frame of reference. Jesus has not only been in the heavenly realm, He inhabits it throughout eternity. (John 1:14)

When we were children we played a game called Simon says. Whoever was Simon would tell people what to do. If you listen carefully and did just what Simon said, you could be the next Simon. What if the winner won entrance into heaven? You'd listen really close and do exactly as Simon says. Jesus' introduction is saying, "Here is what heaven says." The goal is heaven, only this is no game.

So what does heaven have to say to mankind? Heaven says, "You must be born again." Nicodemus knew how to play according to the Ten Commandments, but Jesus is saying, "Heaven says," and then giving a command Nicodemus doesn't understand. Then Jesus told Nicodemus and us exactly how that new birth is possible. ¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

Nicodemus is a teacher of the Laws of Moses. If there were some way to get through to his mind and heart it would be through the most sacred of texts to the Jewish people, the Torah. Remember, the question Jesus is answering is, "How can I be born from above?"

The story Jesus referred to is from Numbers 21:4-9. The nation of Israel was in its 40-year wilderness journey because they had refused to put their faith in God and enter the Promised Land. (Numbers 14:4) During those 40 years they often would complain about difficulties, especially a shortage of water and manna for food day after day. (Numbers 11:4) In this passage, they were at it again. They even spoke against God and Moses. The real problem was their ungrateful hearts. It was their own choice to be in the wilderness rather than face the armies of Canaan. (Numbers 14:2) Instead of gratitude for the miraculous bread from heaven, they complained about a lack of variety. Time and time again they would complain and God would

Commented [notes1]: 15 And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. 2 Cor 5:15 (NIV)

Commented [notes2]: 49 For I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it. John 12:49 (NIV)

Commented [notes3]: 14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. John 1:14 (NIV)

Commented [notes4]: 4 They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; 5 they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!" 6 Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. 7 The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed for the people. 8 The LORD said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." 9 So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived. Num 21:4-9 (NIV)

Commented [notes5]: And they said to each other, "We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt." Num 14:4 (NIV)

Commented [notes6]: 4 The rabble with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, "If only we had meat to eat! Num 11:4 (NIV)

Commented [notes7]: Numbers 14:2 (NIV) 2 All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly said to them, "If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this desert!

send some form of judgment to shake them out of their negativity and show them the error of their ways. (Numbers 11:19-20)

This time God got their attention with venomous snakes. As they complained about their conditions, the snakes overwhelmed the camp and began to inject people with their deadly venom. The death toll began to mount. The people now cried out to Moses for a solution. They had just been speaking against him, but now they are pleading with him to save them. ⁷ *The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed for the people.* Numbers 21:7 (NIV)

The LORD instructed Moses to make a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. This is where we get the medical symbol used throughout the world to this day. Anyone that was bitten could look at it and be healed of the venom coursing through their veins. All they had to do was look and live. To look to the bronze snake, one had to first recognize there was venom in them that would kill them. Then they had to acknowledge that the LORD had provided a cure through His instrument, Moses. They had to acknowledge what was really happening. God is judge and they deserved death, but God is also merciful and had provided a way for them to live and not die. It was the grace and mercy of God that sent the snakes.

To appreciate the use of the story to the fullest, we have to understand that Jesus didn't suddenly think of a great analogy from past history to help Nicodemus understand, rather Jesus orchestrated history to help us all understand. (Read it again.) As Jesus will later say in John's gospel, "Before Abraham was born, I am." (John 8:58) What I am declaring to you is that Jesus used this means to cure the Israelites because He knew it would be good illustration one day for us to understand the meaning and power of what happened on Calvary. Let's try to see what Nicodemus would have thought.

These symbols are very distinct and meaningful to the Jewish student of the Torah. The snake is that old serpent, the Devil. He is the deceiver. (Genesis 3:1) He is the one that encourages us in our rebellion against God. He incites us to speak against the LORD and His ordained leaders. He encourages our ungrateful hearts to whine about the miraculous blessings in our life. He is the original spin master. He calls goodness evil and evil good. He so confuses our thinking that we desire the things that will destroy us. But worst of all, he feeds our pride so that we would dare to speak against God. (Isaiah 14:13-14)

His venom is then coursing through our veins, and the soul that sins will die. (Genesis 2:16-17) We were born bitten (Psalm 51:5), but then we chose to be bitten again and again. Finally, by the grace of God we realize that we are dying. That is why Nicodemus really came to Jesus. He wanted life, eternal life, life from above, but instead he knew there was venom in his veins and that he, like all humanity, is dying.

Bronze is symbolic of judgment. The pole is symbolic of a cursed death. (Deuteronomy 21:23) The serpent is a picture of sin manifest in a creature. Together the pictures symbolize God's just curse upon sin and ultimate defeat of

Commented [notes8]: 19 You will not eat it for just one day, or two days, or five, ten or twenty days, 20 but for a whole month--until it comes out of your nostrils and you loathe it--because you have rejected the LORD, who is among you, and have wailed before him, saying, "Why did we ever leave Egypt?"
Num 11:19-20 (NIV)

Commented [notes9]: 58 "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!"
John 8:58 (NIV)

Commented [notes10]: 1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'"
Gen 3:1 (NIV)

Commented [notes11]: 13 You said in your heart, "I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain.
14 I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High."
Isaiah 14:13-14 (NIV)

Commented [notes12]: 16 And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden;
17 but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die."
Gen 2:16-17 (NIV)

Commented [notes13]: 5 Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.
Psalms 51:5 (NIV)

Commented [notes14]: 23 you must not leave his body on the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him that same day, because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse. You must not desecrate the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.
Deut 21:23 (NIV)

Satan. Jesus was using the picture He painted so long ago to illustrate the answer Nicodemus was searching for.

The confusing part for us, and possibly for Nicodemus, was Jesus said He would be lifted up. We can see that in the cross (Isaiah 52:13), but why would Jesus be the counterpart for the snake? The analogy seems to break down there, unless we understand that Jesus took upon Himself the sins of the world as He hung on that cross. (2 Corinthians 5:21) What better picture of the judgment of all the sins of the world could be found than that the bronze serpent on a pole?

Just as the Children of Israel had to first realize they were bitten, so we must first realize we are in rebellion against God. Then they had to have faith that God had provided a cure through His servant and look to that cure. That is exactly how we enter into eternal life. We see that Christ took the judgment we deserve as He hung on the pole. (Galatians 3:13) We look to Him and live. We are born from above, born spiritually, a new creation. (2 Corinthians 5:17)

Nicodemus had an explanation that he may not have understood completely, but one that would become increasingly significant in the next couple of years. Looking back, we can see what he eventually came to understand, Jesus was the Lamb of God who took upon himself the sins of the world that all who look to Him might have eternal life. (John 1:29)

There are no quotation marks in Greek, so some interpreters end the quotation from Jesus at the end of verse 15 and see the following verses as a comment by the disciple John. I think the whole passage is a quote from Jesus, but it really doesn't matter a great deal. If the rest of the passage is by the servant Jesus appointed to convey His message, and done under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, then either way it is that same revelation of the message from heaven.

Now we come to the verse that summarizes what Jesus was telling Nicodemus in the bronze serpent analogy, a verse that much of the world has heard, 3:16. ¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. We often hear the verse by itself, but it is an explanation of Jesus fulfilling the picture of the bronze serpent on the pole. How could He do that? Why would He do that? The word for world in Greek is *cosmos*, and it is always used in Scripture referring to the sinful world of man. The answer is God's great love for this fallen world of humanity. That is what sent Jesus on this mission. That is what motivated the heart of God to give us His one and only Son, His only begotten to save you and me.

The Greek for "one and only" is *monogenes*. It does not imply a beginning as the English translation "begotten" might suggest. Instead, it *indicates that as the Son of God He was the sole representative of the Being and character of the One who sent Him*.

In John 1:18 the clause "the only begotten son, which is in the bosom of the Father," expresses both His eternal union with the Father in the Godhead and the ineffable intimacy and love between them, the Son sharing all the Father's counsels

Commented [notes15]: 13 See, my servant will act wisely ; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.
Isaiah 52:13 (NIV)

Commented [notes16]: 21 God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.
2 Cor 5:21 (NIV)

Commented [notes17]: 13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree."
Gal 3:13 (NIV)

Commented [notes18]: 17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!
2 Cor 5:17 (NIV)

Commented [notes19]: 29 The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"
John 1:29 (NIV)

Commented [notes20]: — Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words

Commented [notes21]: John 1:18 (NIV)
18 No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.

and enjoying all His affections. It was love for us that caused the Father to give this One that represented Him, the One that was so close to Him so as to be one with Him throughout eternity.

Commented [notes22]: — Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words

This time, instead of lifting up a bronze serpent, it would be the One that is so close to God, who represents Him that was lifted up, but upon Whom the sins of the world would rest. This time it was not just snake venom, but the venom of sin that is death to our spiritual life. This time instead of looking to the bronze snake, we look to the *monogenes*, the one and only Son, and the anti-venom of eternal life removes the sting of death. (1 Corinthians 15:55)

Commented [notes23]: 55 "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" [1 Cor 15:55 (NIV)]

Jesus went on to correct some possible misconceptions that Nicodemus may have had. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. In case we might misunderstand, Jesus clarified the reason that God sent Him. It wasn't as a judge to come and condemn us all. On the contrary, it was to save us all through Him. (John 6:40)

Commented [notes24]: 40 For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day." John 6:40 (NIV)

Now if you stopped there, you would be a universalist. You might think we are all going to heaven and no one will be condemned because Jesus came to save. Enter free will of man. Jesus continues, ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. (Hebrews 2:3)

Commented [notes25]: 3 how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. Heb 2:3 (NIV)

I have played the role of Jesus for three years now in an annual production, and in the last two we have used much of the John 3 passage. I've tried to imagine the feeling and inflection in the words. When I come to the last half of this verse my pace slows and the tone takes a drastic turn from vision and promise to sadness and pain. God never wanted to send anyone to Hell. It is our rejection of the gift of perfect love that condemns us. The Lake of Fire was prepared for the devil and his angels (Matthew 25:41), not man, but man will refuse to look and live.

Commented [notes26]: 41 "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.' Matt 25:41 (NIV)

It doesn't seem like anyone could make the decision to reject such an offer, that is, until you look closely at the lives of people every day, as they turn to some destructive vice. Could anyone choose to destroy himself or herself with a drug? Many do every day. Could anyone choose to do something so dangerous they know it would kill them? (Ephesians 4:19) Could anyone refuse the love of God? It is senseless, but it happens all too often, and Jesus goes on to explain why.

Commented [notes27]: 19 Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.

Eph 4:19 (NIV)

¹⁹ This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. If light had not come into the world, then maybe we could excuse the love of darkness, but light has come. John taught that Jesus illuminates every heart that comes into the world. (John 1:9) The sad reality is that people love darkness. There is a thrill that stimulates the sensual and pulls us into the forbidden. The lure of the forbidden is powerful and tantalizes the mind with promises it will never fulfill while never warning us of the cost we will pay. Those of us who tasted of it know its seduction. It is a lie. It comes from the father of lies (John 8:44), but the allurements are real. Imagination is powerful. It leaves us forever crying for more, but it has nothing more to offer. The more you indulge, the more destructive it is. The more you act on it, the more you shun the light.

Commented [notes28]: 9 The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. [John 1:9 (NIV)]

Commented [notes29]: 44 You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. John 8:44 (NIV)

²⁰ *Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.* That is why the crime rate soars at night. Evil loves the cloak of darkness. (1Thessalonians 5:7) It does not want to be exposed for what it really is. The light ruins the imagination and exposes what is real, and evil is ugly to the core. Those who do evil rarely let others in on their deeds. Unless they find someone of like mind, they prefer secrecy. From pornography to theft to a coveting heart, we prefer that no one ever find out. That's loving darkness.

Commented [notes30]: 7 For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. 1 Thess 5:7 (NIV)

Now the tone returns to one of joy and a smile returns to the face of Jesus.²¹ *But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.* "There are those who by the grace of God prefer truth. They measure their thoughts and actions by the light of the Word of God. It isn't that they are perfect, but they live by the truth so they come to the light. The light illumines the little areas of darkness. They come to the light because they are not perfect, but they want to be instruments of God. And as they walk in the light as He is in the light, they have relationships and communication with others in the light. (1John 1:7) Every day they experience cleansing and renewal. (2Corinthians 4:16) They encourage one another to continue in the light.

Commented [notes31]: 7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. 1 John 1:7 (NIV)

Jesus has explained to Nicodemus how to be born from above. Then He told him how to tell if that had taken place. If you are born from above you love the One that gave you that rebirth. You love the light. You live in the light. But the sad other side of the coin is that there are those who prefer darkness. They are condemned because they were born bitten and then refused to receive the love of God. With Jesus it was one or the other. Unless you are born from above, you will never see the Kingdom of God. Those are Jesus' words. He knows. He came from heaven to tell us, and to make a way for us. He took the curse on sin upon Himself on the tree of the cross, so that we could have eternal life. Are you born from above?

Commented [notes32]: 16 Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. 2 Cor 4:16 (NIV)

"God became a man so we could trust him. He became a sacrifice so we could know him. Don't we need someone to trust who is bigger than we are? Jesus says: I am that person. Trust me."

Commented [notes33]: from 3:16 by Max Lucado

It seems that this week the Lord has been renewing my vision of just how sick humanity is. The venom of the serpent is flowing freely. Man openly flaunts his defiance of Biblical truth. They rage against the Bible and make every attempt to discredit it. They willingly turn from logic and the obvious while they declare Christians are just willingly ignorant. But that same venom runs in the veins of church attendees when they quarrel over the insignificant and turn their back on those in need. When we live for self and refuse to take up our cross and follow Jesus, the venom is just as effective. Turn your eyes upon Jesus. See your sins upon Him as He bore the just judgment for those sins on the cross. And as Jesus said to the woman caught in adultery, "Go now and leave your life of sin." (John 8:11) Live in the light. Look to Him and live!

Commented [notes34]: 11 "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin." John 8:11 (NIV)