

Key:

Purple – Introduction, Conclusion, Main Points, and Sermon Thread

Blue – Explanation/Exposition

Red – Application

Green – Illustration

Brown – Quotation

Yellow – Sermon Notes

Lifted Up—Ye Must Be Born Again

John 3:1–15

Welcome everyone to our Resurrection Sunday service, 2026. Let me invite you now to take your Bibles and turn with me to the NT book of John, chapter 3.

Today’s message is a very simple salvation message, and here’s the gist of it... are you ready for it? “Ye must be born again!” That’s part of the title for our message today, and that’s the primary application from this text, “Ye must be born again!”

I love the story told about George Whitefield, the eighteenth-century revivalist preacher. A woman came up to him once and said, “Mr. Whitefield, why are you always saying ‘You must be born again.’” “Why do all your sermons end with ‘You must be born again.’” To which, Mr. Whitefield defended himself by saying, “Because, *you* must be born again.”

The key figure in today’s passage of Scripture, John 3:1–15 is a man named Nicodemus. Jesus met with him. Jesus talked with him. And Jesus said to him, “Ye must be born again.” Those of you who know, know that I’m using the KJV with that statement and the Old English “ye.”

And Jesus’s words are curious. Because “ye” is plural. And Nicodemus was the only person there during that conversation. So it’s instructive to know that when Jesus said to Nicodemus in this passage, “You must be born again” (3:7, ESV), he wasn’t speaking singularly about Nicodemus. He didn’t say the Greek equivalent of “thou must be born again.” He used the plural equivalent to “Ye.” “All of Ye.” **All of y’all must be born again.**

In other words, Jesus was saying, “It’s not just you, Nicodemus, but it’s also all of your constituents in the Sanhedrin!” “And it’s not just your constituents in the Sanhedrin; it’s all of the Jewish people everywhere.” “And it’s not just all of the Jewish people; it’s Gentiles too.” “Every single person, every single member of humanity ‘must be born again.’”

Now to be quite honest, the terminology of being “born again” has fallen on hard times in America. If you tell a person that you are a Christian in today’s world, they may hem and haw a bit uncomfortably. But if you tell them, “I’m a born-again Christian,” that’s when they raise an eyebrow. “Oh, you are one of ‘those’ Christians!” As if there is a type of Christianity that doesn’t require second birth.

What does it mean to be born again? And who actually needs to be born again? Who is Nicodemus? And why did Jesus utter these words to him in John 3? Let’s take a look at this passage and find out.

Look with me at verse 1.

¹ Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ² This man came to Jesus by night

Now just a few things about Nicodemus. First of all it says that he was a “Pharisee.” The Jewish historian, Josephus, said that there were about 6,000 Pharisees in Jesus’s day. And they were a very religious and very devout sect of the Jews. They were the religious moralists of Jesus’s day.

They were also the great enemies of Jesus during his ministry. They didn’t like his teaching. They didn’t like his ministry. They didn’t like how he was taking people away from their authority. And even though some would eventually come to believe in Jesus, at first they rejected him.

And not only was Nicodemus a Pharisee, John says he’s a “ruler.” More than likely, this means that Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was made up of seventy Jewish leaders that ruled over the Jewish people. So Nicodemus wasn’t just a run-of-the-mill Pharisee. He was a power-broker in the time of Jesus. **He was big time.**

And the reason he came to Jesus by night was either because he didn’t want to be seen conversing with this adversary, Jesus, or he was wanting to negotiate a peace between Jesus and the religious leaders. **Maybe he**

can get Jesus to “play ball” with the religious leaders. Maybe they can pool their resources and work together.

I say that because watch how Nicodemus tries to butter up Jesus in **verse 2**.

² This man [Nicodemus] came to Jesus by night and said to him, “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.”

Now this is a remarkable admission by Nicodemus calling Jesus a “rabbi” and “a teacher come from God.” That’s an amazing concession here!

If Nicodemus was in the Sanhedrin, then he was probably an older man. He was probably rich. As a Pharisee, he would have been well-educated in the Pharisaical tradition. He knew the OT backwards and forwards. He was a Scripture-scholar. And he held a lot of authority and was well-respected in the community.

And for a person like this to call Jesus “Rabbi,” that was huge. Jesus was thirty years old and was uneducated by their standards! But Nicodemus complements him.

But here’s the thing [And we know this from Jesus’s response]; that’s not enough. Jesus is more than just a “Rabbi” or a “teacher come from God.” That’s high praise, but not high enough! We know from **John 1** that he is God in the flesh. And we know, from **John 1**, that he didn’t come to earth just to teach good stuff. He came to save people from sin.

Now watch how Jesus responds to Nicodemus. Watch his reply! Because Jesus doesn’t say “Aw shucks, thanks for being so complementary of me.” Jesus doesn’t say, “I’m so flattered by your approval of me. Let me say some nice things about you too, Nicodemus.” Jesus cuts through all that fluff and gets right to the heart of the matter.

Here’s what he says in **verse 3**.

³ Jesus answered [Nicodemus], “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Wow! That’s quite a non-sequitur. Nicodemus says, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God.” To which, Jesus replies, “Truly, truly... unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Not only does Jesus take this conversation with Nicodemus in a different direction, Jesus also says something that totally baffles Nicodemus.

Write this down as the first point from today’s message. I’ll give you four statements today about those who are born again. Here’s the first.

Those who are born again...

1) will see the **kingdom** of **God** (3:1–3)

Jesus says, “unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Implicit within that statement, Jesus is saying, “**You think that you are righteous before God, Nicodemus, because you are a Pharisee, because you are a member of the religious elite in Israel? You think that you will be part of God’s coming kingdom? You won’t be! Not unless you are born again.**” **That’s a pretty brazen statement to make to a religious leader by this upstart young rabbi.**

And look at Nicodemus’s reply in **verse 4**.

⁴ Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”

This is actually a really comical statement here. I don’t know if Nicodemus says this in jest, or if he says it sincerely. But the idea of a person being born twice by his mother is beyond ridiculous. And maybe Nicodemus was trying to deflate Jesus’s statement with some *comic relief*. If he was, notice that Jesus doesn’t let him off the hook.

Jesus presses his point home even further in **verse 5**.

⁵ Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

Now let me be crystal clear about what Jesus is saying here. Jesus is saying nobody goes to heaven (the kingdom of God) without being born again. The kingdom of God is a reference to heaven and eternal life. That’s how the Pharisees understood it. And Jesus says, “**Not born again! Not going to heaven!**” “**No second birth, no eternal life.**”

Now that’s a shocking and bracing statement for a moral and upstanding Jew like Nicodemus. But it’s just as shocking in our day. Because we have people in our day going around saying, “**Yeah, I’m a Christian. But I’m not one of those born-again Christians.**” As if that’s a thing!

There was an ABC poll recently that showed that 83% of Americans today identify themselves as Christians. And yet only 37% of Americans describe themselves as born-again or evangelical.¹ Where does that come from? Born-again Christian is redundant! **There's no such thing as a "non-born-again Christian."** That's like saying, "I'm a non-human human." That's like saying, "I'm a fish that doesn't get wet."

Now here's why what Jesus said is so powerful. And this is why it's so countercultural to our modern-day understanding of what it means to be born again. Nicodemus is part of the ruling class of Jews. Nicodemus is part of the religious elite. **He's not a drug-addict looking for a crutch. He's not an emotional person looking for a support group.** Nicodemus has it all together.

In the next chapter of this book, you see a woman whose life is a total failure. The Samaritan woman in **John 4**—she's a mess. She needs to get born again. But Jesus isn't talking to the Samaritan woman here. He's talking to Nicodemus. He's saying, **"You, even you, Nicodemus... You need to be born again."** Jesus says, "unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Now, let's get back to Nicodemus's question in **verse 4**. It's a good one, even if it was asked in jest.

⁴ Nicodemus said to [Jesus], "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"

I actually think that Nicodemus was poking fun at Jesus here. **"Can a man enter into his mother's womb a second time?" "Come on, Rabbi Jesus! I'm an old man. How am I supposed to do that?"**

And of course Jesus wasn't talking about another *physical* birth. **Even if you could be born again through your mother's womb a second time, what good would that do you? You still come out a sinner just like you did the first time!**

But look how Jesus answers this in **verse 5** all the way down to **verse 8**.

⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Write this down as a second point from today's message. This is really important.

Those who are born again...

2) are **born** of the **Spirit** (3:4-8)

This is not a physical birth and you can't see it with your eyes. Those who are born again... are born of the Spirit.

What's Jesus saying here? How does he address Nicodemus's ridiculous and maybe even playful question? Jesus says, **"Listen up, Nicodemus. What's born of the flesh is flesh! What's born of the Spirit is Spirit! It's not another physical birth that you need, Nicodemus; it's metaphysical birth. It's not another natural birth; it's supernatural birth. You need to be born again from above. You need spiritual rebirth."**

In other words, you can't muster up this rebirth in your flesh. You can't physically accomplish it. You can't work for it. You can't manufacture it. You can't engineer this on your own or reverse engineer it on your own. This is God's work!

Just like the wind blows and you know it's happening even though you can't see it. The Spirit is just like that. You can't see this rebirth but you know it has happened. You've seen its effects. You've felt its effects

So how is a person born again? How do we produce that experience? How do we accomplish that? Here's the answer. Are you ready? You don't. You don't do anything. You can't do anything to accomplish that. All you need is nothing, and if you come with anything else, you're disqualified. It's God's work. God has to do it.

The Apostle Peter says in **1 Peter 1:3**, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to his great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." The Apostle Paul says likewise in **Ephesians 2:8-9**, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."

¹ <http://abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=90356&page=1>

You might say, “Okay, I want God to do it. How do I get him to do it? I want to be born again. I want to be saved. I want to believe. How do I go about that?” Here’s the answer—you receive God’s work by faith. It’s not your work. You can’t bring it about on your own. Instead you receive it as a free gift.

You believe! And you let God do the work from there. Here’s how the Apostle Paul puts it, “You confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and you believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead” and if you do that “you are saved” (Rom 10:9). Your confession as a demonstration of your faith is actually evidence that you’ve been born again.

Here’s how John puts it in just a few verses, in **John 3:16**. You ever heard this before? “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever *believes* in him should not perish but have eternal life” (**John 3:16**).

When you believe the truth about God’s Son... when you believe the truth about Jesus... that he died on the cross for your sins, that he was crucified, dead and buried, and yet three days later was raised from the dead... when you believe that, then you are saved. You are born again.

The Holy Spirit has come upon you, and he indwells you, and you are what’s called *spiritually regenerated*... You are reborn, not by flesh, but by the Spirit. And if you’ve done that, if you’ve believed on Jesus for your salvation then you are born again. If you haven’t, then you are not. And you’re not a Christian.

And once again, there is no such thing as a non-born-again Christian. The Loch Ness Monster is in the same category as a non-born-again Christian. It doesn’t exist. It’s a figment of our contemporary world’s imagination.

To that some of you might say, “Okay Tony, I think I’m born again. I might be born again. How do I know? How can I know that I know that I know?” Well Jesus says in verse 8.

⁸The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

So the question for you is the following: “Is there evidence of the Holy Spirit inside of you?” You can’t physically see a second birth, not even your own. You can’t physically see spiritual regeneration, just like the wind in Jesus’s illustration. But you can sense that it’s there. You can see evidence that it’s moving. You can sense the changes that the Spirit has wrought upon your soul.

“How do I know that I know that I know that I’ve been born again? That I belong to Christ?” Well John the Apostle says about his book, **1 John, “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life” (5:13)... so that you may know that you are born again. And John offers these tests for discerning the genuineness of your faith. Do you love your brothers and sisters in Christ? If you do, that’s evidence of salvation. That means the wind (i.e., the Holy Spirit inside you) is blowing. You don’t see it, but you hear its sound and you know it’s there.**

John says also in **1 John, “Do you walk in the light as he is in the light?” That’s a test. Do you see evidence of the wind blowing? John says, “Do you obey Jesus’s commandments?” John says “Do you love his commandments?” “Do you walk in the same manner in which he walked?” Not perfectly, but increasingly! That’s evidence of saving faith. That’s evidence that the Holy Spirit is blowing inside of you. A person who has been born again, by the Holy Spirit, will inevitably show evidence of the Holy Spirit in his or her life. And that’s going to become increasingly evident after one year, five years, ten years, and fifty years of faith in Christ.**

Let me give you an example. The church father Augustine, before he became a Christian, was pretty much a sex addict. And after he got saved, he went to visit a town where a woman who he had a sexually-charged relationship with came up to him. And he was courteous towards her and kind, but there was no pursuit of anything sexual. And the woman was confused by this, and she said “Augustine, it is I.” And Augustine replied, “Yes, I know, but it is not I.”

What did he mean by that? His name was still Augustine. He was still the son of the same parents. He was still the same intellectually brilliant person he was when he used to know this woman. What changed? How was he different now?

The reason that Augustine said, “Yes, but it is not I” was because Augustine had been born again. He had become, as Paul puts it, a new creation in Christ Jesus (2 Cor 5:17). Not that he didn’t have his sin issues after he got saved; he did. But he was a categorically different person. He was born again.²

Tim Keller gives the following illustration. If you had an apple orchard. And let’s say next year you say to yourself, “I’m tired of apples; I want peaches instead.” Fine. What would you do? Do you water and fertilize your apple tree far better than you did the previous year. Do you say to yourself, “I’m going to work these trees and feed these trees and prune these trees... then they’ll give me some peaches?” No! Is that going to work? No! You might get better apples if you do that, but you’ll never get peaches.

So what do you do? Here’s what you do. You take an axe to that apple tree and you reseed the ground completely with peach seed. Right?³

You see that’s the difference between Nicodemus and Augustine. Nicodemus was trying to produce peaches from an apple tree. And Nicodemus may have had really good apples; maybe even the best apples in Israel. But he was never going to produce peaches.

But Jesus knew, and Augustine knew, you’ve got to start over completely. The ground is level at the foot of the cross. Everyone, no matter how moral or immoral, has to start over completely. You’ve got to be born again. Peter says in **1 Peter 1:23**, “you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God.” **You don’t need pruning! You need to be reseeded. You don’t need reformation. You need complete transformation. You need Holy Spirit rebirth!**

Now Nicodemus isn’t done asking questions. He continues to press Jesus for understanding. Look at **verse 9**.

⁹ Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?”

Nicodemus is less playful this time than last time when he asked “Can [a man] enter a second time into his mother’s womb?” (**John 3:4**). This is not the playfulness from earlier. This is incredulity. This is exasperation, even. **“Born again? What? How can these things be?”**

Watch how Jesus responds. Notice Jesus doesn’t respond by saying, “Okay Nick, let me walk you through this again. From the top. Here we go.” No! Jesus, in a sense, rebukes Nicodemus.

¹⁰ Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel

Notice Jesus says “the teacher” here, which intimates more than just “a teacher.” Nicodemus was top dog in Israel. And yet he’s all “How can these things be?”

“Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?”¹¹ 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.

Jesus says, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?” **“Shouldn’t you know this already, Nicodemus?”**

Now here’s the question I had as I studied this passage—how would Nicodemus have known? I mean really, isn’t Jesus being a little unfair here? Isn’t he being a little hard on the well-meaning, Nicodemus? **“Have a heart, Jesus. Can’t you see he’s trying to understand? He’s just a little slow.”**

You know one of the things that I’ve noticed about Jesus in his ministry is this: Jesus is profoundly compassionate to the lowly, the downtrodden, the uneducated, and the oppressed. But not so much for the ruling elite and the supposed spiritual authorities! Have you noticed that? Jesus is tender towards those who require tenderness. And he’s tough on those who deserve toughness. And so he doesn’t let Nicodemus off the hook here.

So back to my question: **“How would Nicodemus have known? How would he have known that “Ye must be born again?”** There’s no “born again” language in the OT. There’s no reference to being born of the Spirit in the OT. Or is there?

Actually, there is. **Jeremiah 31:33** speaks about a new covenant between God and his people where God says, “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

² Keller, “The New Birth – John 3:1-15,” 2013.

³ Ibid.

Also in **Joel 2:28–29**, God says, “I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit.” That passage of course is what Peter references in **Acts 2** when the Holy Spirit comes upon the people at Pentecost.

Now to us, that might seem a bit obscure and cryptic. But Nicodemus was a teacher in Israel. Jesus expects him to understand this.

And by the way, if you think that’s cryptic... wait till you see what Jesus says about “The Serpent on a Stick” from **Numbers 21**.

Look again at what Jesus says in **verse 11**:

¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know,

The “we” here, I think, is Jesus and God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. The “we” was definitely not Jesus and his disciples, because Jesus’s disciples at this point were just as clueless as Nicodemus.

And the “we” here has to include the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit cowrote the OT. So with that understanding in mind, look at Jesus’s words in **verse 11**.

¹¹ 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.

Write this down as the third point from today’s message.

Those who are born again...

3) Believe the **Word** of **God** (3:9–12)

What is Jesus telling Nicodemus here? He’s saying, **“You don’t receive what you’ve already been told, Nicodemus! You don’t receive what Moses and the Prophets told you. You don’t receive what I’m telling you. We can’t move on to deeper stuff, because you haven’t even received the basics yet!”**

How many people in your life are like this? They come to you again and again with the same questions. They never seem to extinguish their doubts. The reality is that if you don’t respond in faith to what you’ve already been told, you will never receive greater wisdom and clarity on deeper issues.

I think the question we need to ask ourselves is what are some things that we’ve been taught by Jesus and by the Word of God that we still lack understanding on? If Jesus were here right now, would he rebuke you with a “You are an elder at Messiah Bible Church and yet you do not understand these things?” “You are a deacon and you do not understand these things?” You are a 5-year Christian, a 10-year Christian, a 20-year Christian, and you still do not understand these things?” What have you been doing all this time? Binge-watching your favorite TV shows!

Jesus says in **verse 12**,

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

“You don’t believe what I tell you about this world, Nicodemus? How will you believe when I tell you about those things that are otherworldly? If you don’t even understand being born again, how can you understand eternal life? If you don’t even understand Spiritual rebirth on earth, how can you understand the eternal life to come in the heavenly realm? You don’t even receive the basics, Nicodemus. How can we move on to the advanced stuff?”

I remember a really frustrating moment years ago when I first went to Croatia. I took my little nephew, Dani, an American football. And I was determined to teach him the game. That was a colossal disaster. And I was teaching him how to throw the football, and he just didn’t get it, didn’t care, had no context. It was a massive failure. Like Nicodemus, he didn’t understand the basics, he had no context for what I was trying to do, so there was no hope for moving on to bigger things.

That’s the position that Nicodemus is in here. He doesn’t even know the basics. He hasn’t even reckoned with his own human sinfulness and need for a Savior. He hasn’t received Jesus’s testimony. He hasn’t believed the basics yet. And Jesus is trying to get him there.

Now watch where Jesus takes this conversation next in **verse 13**. He goes a different direction with it, and, for the first time in the gospel of **John**, Jesus references his cross. I’m not so sure that any of this conversation made any sense for Nicodemus until later in his life... until he saw Jesus’s crucified body.

And by the way, that’s not the only “first” in these verses. We’ll see in a moment the first time that “eternal life” is mentioned in the gospel of **John**. And, you probably know this already, “eternal life” is a very important theme throughout the gospel of **John**.

So let's take a look at what Jesus says here, and then we can talk briefly about how Nicodemus responds after this conversation with Jesus. Jesus says in **verse 13**.

¹³ *No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.*

Jesus is saying, **"Here's why you should take my word on these things, Nicodemus. You don't trust me? You don't think I'm being truthful about the need to be born again? The reason that you should trust me even over and above yourself is because I've been there. I'm from there. Heaven is my hometown! No one has ascended into heaven, in other words, no one has access to heaven like I do because I came from heaven."**

And of course we know this already because John told us this in **John 1**. **But now we hear it straight from the horse's mouth so to speak.** Jesus says, **"I descended from heaven."**

Now Jesus says it more indirectly than that. He doesn't use the first person "I" or "me"; he uses his favorite third person reference for himself "the Son of Man."

Now some people think that "Son of Man" is a reference to Jesus's humanity whereas "Son of God" is a reference to his deity. Jesus is called both the Son of God and the Son of Man. But actually that needs to be nuanced a bit because when Jesus calls himself "The Son of Man" that's more than just a reference to his humanity. In fact that's just as much a reference to his deity as "the Son of God."

Here's why I say that. Because in **Daniel 7:13-14**, Daniel writes, "I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed."

So "Son of Man" wasn't just a reference to Jesus's humanity. It also was a reference to his deity. When Jesus calls himself, "The Son of Man," he's saying, **"I'm that guy. I'm the one that Daniel prophesied in Daniel 7."** It was a messianic title that was also an affirmation of his deity.

And here's evidence of that in **John 3**. Jesus says...

¹³ *No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man*

"No one has access to God the Father except for me, Nicodemus." "And no one, other than me, has authority from God the Father in the heavenly realm. Just me, Nicodemus." "I'm the "Son of Man." "I have that authority. You should listen to me, Nicodemus. I'm not just a teacher. I'm not just a Rabbi. I'm so much more than that."

And watch what happens to this "Son of Man." Look at **verse 14**.

¹⁴ *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* Whoever believes in this Son of Man... whoever believes in this lifted up one... Whoever believes in him... *may have eternal life.*

Wow. Jesus took this conversation somewhere that Nicodemus probably never expected.

Write this down as the final point from today's message.

Those who are born again...

4) look to the **Son** of **Man** (3:13-15)

Now let's talk about this. "The serpent in the wilderness!" "The serpent in the wilderness!" What in the world!!!?

Those of you who were here on Good Friday know exactly what Jesus was talking about here. For everyone else, let me get you up to speed. The Israelites rebelled and murmured against God and his servant, Moses in the wilderness. They said, "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" (**Num 21:5**). And so God gets angry with them. God gets so angry that he unleashes a pack of wild snakes against them. And they start biting and killing the people.

And so, get this. This is where the story gets *really weird*. God tells Moses to make a bronze serpent, a serpent just like the serpents that are biting and killing the Israelites. And God tells Moses to set it on a pole before the people. And whoever looks to the serpent on the pole is healed from the venomous poison in their bodies. And they are allowed to live.

Now what's interesting about that passage is how abruptly the passage ends. **Numbers 21:9** reads like this, "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."

The end! That's the end of the story! And in the next verse, they're off to their next destination. No explanation. No commentary on what happened. Just another cosmic encounter with God in the wilderness! Just another mystery that won't be unveiled completely until Christ comes 1,500 years later.

What in the world did that story teach us? Well that episode in the life of the Israelites was recounted in Scripture to teach us a few things. It teaches us that God hates sin. It teaches that we are naturally sinners and rebels. And it teaches us that the punishment for sin is death.

The question isn't why is God so hard on these Israelites, punishing their disobedience with death? The question is why doesn't God do that all the time? Because that's what we deserve!

So the story teaches us that God hates sin. We are sinners. The wages of sin is death. And also that God responds to repentance by providing a remedy for sin and death. And that little episode in the life of the Israelites was a real historical event that taught the Israelites a self-contained theological principle about God.

And Nicodemus should have known this. And Jesus is alluding to the fact that he is too self-righteous and stubborn to turn and repent.

And so, in the NT, Jesus picks up on this historical event in the life of the Israelites, and he says to Nicodemus, **"I'm like that snake on the stick."**

[Just] 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.

In other words, **"That filthy disgusting creature, the snake... that's me,"** says Jesus. **"I'm like him."** **"That animal that Satan embodied in the Garden of Eden when sin first came into the world, that's me,"** says Jesus.

And all of us collectively gasp in horror at this. "Jesus, a snake!" "Jesus, a serpent!" Can you imagine comparing the Prophet Mohammed to a snake? Can you imagine comparing another religious leader to a snake. It seems blasphemous to do that with Jesus—except for the fact that Jesus drew that comparison himself!

Sanja told me after the Good Friday Service that I was too hard on people that like snakes. I said that people who like snakes are weird. Sanja said maybe I should walk that back a bit. No! I'm doubling down. Snakes are *disgusting* creatures. People say that anacondas are beautiful creatures. I've heard that before. Yeah, maybe they are. Just before they swallow you whole and then digest you.

My dad told me the other day that there was this snake on Lake Travis that kept creeping around the boats at his marina. And it kept getting on his boat. And, you know, this is Austin, Texas, so everyone was like "respect the wildlife. Respect the creatures." And I said, "Dad, get your machete out and take care of business."

The only good snake is a dead snake. That's my theological opinion. So again, why would Jesus compare himself to a snake? Why would Jesus be typified in Scripture as a serpent? Why would Jesus be linked in any tangible way with Satan? **Are the Mormons correct that Jesus and Satan were originally brothers? No!**

Jesus links himself with a serpent, because that was the moment in time where humanity as a whole became snake-bit (**Gen 3:1–24**). And so what did Christ do? The answer to that is found in **2 Corinthians 5:21**, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." **"He became snake-ish for those who were snake-bit, so that we might become the righteousness of God."**

You might say, **"I don't understand that, Tony!"** That's okay, I don't understand that either... not completely. **But you know what we aren't asked to understand it completely. We're asked to believe. We're asked to exercise our faith in the Son of God who was crucified and died for our sins and is resurrected from the dead.**

¹⁴ 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.

By the way that "whoever" in **verse 15**. Out of all the things that Jesus said, that "whoever" might just be the most difficult thing for Nicodemus to accept. **"Whoever? Really?" "You mean those lousy Gentiles,**

Jesus?” “Those Roman dogs that persecute us? Those Scots-Irish pagans? Those Asians and Africans and Latin Americans? Those non-Jewish, non-God-fearing people? They might get eternal life?”

Yes. Jesus was lifted up on a cross...

¹⁵ that **whoever** believes in him may have eternal life.

What’s fascinating about Nicodemus is that he shows up two more times in the book of **John**. He doesn’t say another word to Jesus in this meeting. He just leaves, as far as we can tell, after this conversation. No repentance. No faith. More than anything he got rebuked by Jesus. He came to broker a deal and do some backroom politicking with Jesus. But he didn’t leave with any of that. Just a whole lot to think about.

Well later in **John 7** it says, the Pharisees were arguing about what to do about Jesus. And Nicodemus stands up for Jesus. **John 7:50–51** says, “Nicodemus, who had gone to him before, and who was one of them, said to them, ‘Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?’ They replied, ‘Are you from Galilee too? Search and see that no prophet arises from Galilee.’”

They just insult Nicodemus and tell him to pipe down. But we can see that Jesus had already gotten ahold of Nicodemus’s heart. And Nicodemus was starting to come around.

Later this is confirmed in **John 19** after Christ was crucified. After Jesus’s crucifixion it says in **John 19:38–40**, “After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took away his body. Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight. So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews.”

What Nicodemus does here is essentially “women’s work.” This is what women would do after death and before burial. And as a member of the Sanhedrin, he also touches this dead body. And he puts it in a tomb. And he anoints it with oil. What happened to Nicodemus?

Well I think very clearly, John is presenting him to us to show us, Jesus had gotten ahold of his heart. And Nicodemus is a changed man.

And Nicodemus may have been really confused about what Jesus meant by saying...

¹⁴ [Just] as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up

I’m sure Nicodemus at the time was like “**What? What in the world does that mean?**” But he saw him. He saw Jesus lifted up. He saw Jesus on a pole. On a cross. Jesus predicted his death. And Jesus told him ahead of time, “**I did this so that those who believe in me might have eternal life.**”

I think Nicodemus got saved. I think John knew his story and that’s why he records it here. I think we’ll see Nicodemus in heaven someday. Some scholars disagree with that. I don’t really want to get into that. I’m less concerned about Nicodemus than I am about the people in this room.

Have you looked to the Son of Man lifted up on a cross? Have you beheld him? Have you believed in him. He’s your only way to salvation. There’s no other way to be born again, and ye must be born again! Look to Jesus and put your faith in him. Pray with me.

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