

John 3:13-15 "Whose Got the Anti-Venom?"

The entire third chapter of the gospel of John is devoted to Jesus Christ addressing one of the Pharisees of the Jews, by the name of Nicodemus.

The significance of this chapter is that Jesus shows us and the world the utter futility of religion as it pertains to the traditions of men and how only a spiritual solution to man's sin can cut through religion and place man in a personal relationship with God.

The irony here is that Nicodemus is supposed to be the spiritual leader of Israel and yet he doesn't have eyes to see or ears to hear as we've seen from his responses to our Lord's discussion of the Kingdom of God, of which no one can be a part unless he is ***born from above***.

Jesus Christ is the Messiah spoken of through the prophets which Nicodemus read on a daily basis, and yet he isn't able to see the Messiah who is standing right in front of him, or understand the spiritual truths which would explain the ways in which God works in the lives of His people to bring about this spiritual relationship.

If a supposed spiritual giant can't see spiritual things, how in the world could the common man have a chance of knowing God? Well, as Jesus would later say to His disciples, with man this is impossible, but with God nothing is impossible.

And yet, the truth remains that Nicodemus doesn't see Jesus as the answer to his sin problem at this time. He doesn't see earthly things as we're told in verse 12, which is to say, he doesn't comprehend what is around him, or right in front of him; that which he can see with his earthly eyes. How then could he comprehend spiritual things which he can't see?

And then our Lord goes on to say something very interesting to make His case that He is most qualified to teach Nicodemus spiritual things which only Jesus could know.

JOH 3:13 "No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven - the Son of Man."

Jesus is saying to Nicodemus that He has a unique perspective on spiritual things because He came from the place everyone wants to go. In fact, no one has ever gone into heaven except Him.

Now, this is a bit misleading in this translation of the NIV. A better translation would be, "no one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man."

The difference in these two translations is the *ascended* as opposed to simply *going into* heaven. We know for example that all of the Old Testament saints went to heaven at their death. In fact, Elijah, who didn't experience death, also went up to heaven.

2KI 2:1 "When the LORD was about to **take Elijah up to heaven** in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal."

Abraham also went to heaven to be with God when he died. Jesus Himself makes mention of this when speaking of the two places people go to after death as He describes a beggar going to be with Abraham.

LUK 16:19-23 "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. 20 At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores 21 and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. 22 "The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side [bosom]. The rich man also died and was buried. 23 In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side."

Jesus is teaching the contrast between heaven and hell. But someone might say, well Abraham's bosom was a wonderful place where people went before Jesus Christ rose from the dead, thus opening the gates of heaven at that time.

And so, there are those who teach that Abraham's bosom was a kind of way station for all Old Testament saints until Christ rises from the dead, thus opening the gates for all believers, both Old and New Testament saints at that time.

But it must be noted that Abraham's bosom is not addressing a place other than the present heaven, but a shared presence in the present heaven. In other words, where Abraham was is where God was. And so, to be at Abraham's side or bosom was to be with God in heaven.

How do we know this? Well, we know it from what the writer of Hebrews tells us of Abraham's longing to be with God.

HEB 11:8-10 "By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. 9 By faith he made

his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. 10 For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God."

That is another way of saying that Abraham was looking forward to being with God in heaven and ultimately on the new earth in the new Jerusalem, which at that time will literally be heaven on earth.

And it only makes sense. Since Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever it stands to reason that His present heaven is the same with the same purpose; for mankind to share in it, whether they are Old Testament saints, or New Testament saints.

But the point of this passage here in John is that no saint has ever ascended into heaven, though they have certainly gone to heaven. To ascend is to have the power and ability to choose to go to that place you came from. Saints are taken to heaven by God. Only Jesus can ascend on His own as we see in His ascension back to the Father.

The significance of this statement to Nicodemus is that Jesus is more than qualified to speak of heaven and spiritual things relating to how to get to heaven, because that is where He came from.

No man has ever been able to make that claim. Why? Because man is flesh and his home is in this world. Jesus is God and His home, if you will, is heavenly. And that's why we're told in our text in verse 13 that this is where Jesus comes from. He has descended from heaven.

But all of this has to do with the reason as to why our Lord descended from heaven to come into this world. No one else could have revealed God the way Jesus did, because He is God.

**Hebrews 1:1-3** <sup>NAU</sup> God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, <sup>2</sup> in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. <sup>3</sup> And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,

No one could have redeemed men except the God/man, who had to take on flesh to pay the penalty for man's sin. And so, in His descending from heaven He is saying to Nicodemus that He came

from the Father with a mission; a mission which was foretold in the Scriptures which Nicodemus should have known so he could prepare Israel for the Messiah's entrance into this world.

But because Nicodemus is having a problem with spiritual things, Jesus will now continue to teach him using the Scriptures Nicodemus had in his possession, the plan God has for mankind.

JOH 3:14-15 "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 would have immediately known this reference to Moses and this particular incident. What is being referred to here is a rebellion among the Jews in the desert and God's response to it.

Keep in mind that Jesus has been talking about being born again, or born from above. And so, life is what He is talking about. And yet, the example He is using from Israel's past has to do with death.

NUM 21:4-6 "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."

Because the people sinned against God and Moses, the Lord judged them and carried out His justice on them with a penalty of death for all who were bitten by these serpents.

It is at this point that Israel understands what they did in sinning against God and they recognize what they need to do next.

NUM 21:7 "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."

The first thing Israel does is to realize that it was God who sent the snakes and it was only God who could take them away. And so, they come to Moses who is their mediator and ask him to intercede on their behalf.

But what is interesting about their request is that they ask only for the snakes to be taken away. They want to cut their losses and

allow the remainder of the Israelites who have not been bitten to live. But that's not what God has in mind.

NUM 21:8-9 "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."

They assumed everyone who was bitten was going to die. The Lord gives them abundantly more than what they expected. He gives them a way to live, especially those who were already bitten.

And so, in His grace God is going to take the results of His justice, (the poisonous snakes in this case), and He is going to bring a remedy. Now, when we think of remedies to poisonous snake bites the last thing we think of is putting a symbol of a snake on a poll. We're talking anti-venom. We're talking about an injection of a substance which will counter act the effects of the poison.

But as always, God's ways are not our ways. So, what is it that God is trying to accomplish here in the book of Numbers, which Jesus reminds Nicodemus of, which is all going back to being born again?

Israel had sinned against God. God sent the snakes. The Israelites were dying. God sends a savior; a bronze serpent on a poll. What is all of this?

It's all about Jesus who brings this new birth. It's about how our life is given to us. It's about how just as the bronze serpent was lifted up in the desert, so too Jesus must be lifted up so that all who look to Him may have this life.

The comparisons are uncanny. This pole on which the bronze serpent was to be put was a device which allowed a focal spot for Israel to look for their salvation. Jesus was lifted up on a cross as the one men must look to for their salvation.

But the word for lifted up in our text is a word which denotes not only a literal lifting up but also exaltation in glory. And so, as F.F. Bruce points out in his commentary, Jesus is glorified by being crucified.

And of course our Lord points this out to His disciples shortly before His crucifixion.

JOH 12:23-24 "Jesus replied, *"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.* 4 I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds."

But let's go back to the desert and this bronze serpent on a pole to see the connection to Jesus being lifted up, which is the point our Lord is trying to make to Nicodemus.

First of all, what is the connection between Jesus and a bronze serpent? Well, what do we know about serpents in a spiritual sense? We know for example that it was Satan disguised in a serpent in the Garden of Eden who deceived Adam and Eve into rebelling against God.

And so, the serpent has always come to describe the curse God has placed on mankind because of his sin. And we know that Jesus became that curse for us.

GAL 3:13 "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."

There is no better representation of Christ becoming a curse for us than to represent Him in the desert by a bronze snake. And by the way, bronze in Scripture is used as a symbol for judgment.

The bronze altar in the tent of meeting and later in the temple was used to bring burnt offerings to God which was designed to take the judgment on the people and transfer it to the animal sacrifices.

In the book of Leviticus bronze is used to express God's judgment on the people who are disobedient.

LEV 26:19 "I will break down your stubborn pride and make the sky above you like iron and the ground beneath you like bronze."

And so, a bronze serpent is a picture of God's judgment on the curse, which in Israel's case are the real serpents biting and killing the people. And so, the curse is displayed on the pole in the desert.

And since Christ has become a curse for us He too must be lifted up on the pole or the cross. But why a bronze serpent and not a real serpent? Why wasn't Moses instructed to kill a serpent and then place that on the pole?

The reason for this is because the bronze serpent only represented the curse which the people were actually experiencing, it was not the actual curse. And for God to use this parallel between what He

instructed Moses to do in the desert and Jesus Christ, it had to be a representation, not the real thing. And the reason for this is clear.

Jesus was not the actual curse. Jesus never sinned. Jesus became a curse for us even though He was sinless. And yet, as He assumed the curse for us we are delivered from the curse of death even as the Israelites were delivered from death as they looked to the bronze serpent.

A.W. Pink in his commentary on John puts it this way.

“The remedy which God provided was the exhibition of the *destroyer destroyed*. Why was not one of the actual serpents spiked by Moses to the pole? Ah, *that* would have marred the type: that would have pictured judgment on the sinner himself; and worse still, would have misrepresented our sinless Substitute....

...In the type chosen there was the likeness of a serpent, not an actual serpent, but a piece of brass made like one. So, the one who is the sinner’s Savior was sent “in the likeness of sin’s flesh” (Rom.8:3), and God made Him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him” (2Cor.5:21).”

And here again is another beautiful picture of Christ as He becomes our curse and Savior in one act. But notice what the people are required to do, or maybe we should look at what they were not required to do.

They were not required to crawl up to the bronze serpent; they were not required to come up with their own cure; they were not required to beat and kill these serpents; they were not required to look to Moses at this point; they were not required to look at their wounds. They were not even required to pray after the serpent was put on the pole. They were instructed to do one thing and one thing only.

NUM 21:8 "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*."

That’s all the people had to do. They merely needed to lift their eyes in the direction of the pole with the bronze snake and they would live. And the reason they would even do this is they had no other cure. What did they have to lose? They realized that they were out of options and by faith they simply looked up to the pole.

That is what God is calling people to do today. We need only look to Christ who was high and lifted up as He became our curse and

died for our sin. We need only look to Him by faith, realizing that God is able to lift our curse from us and give us life.

However, unlike those people in the desert, people today don't seem to know they've been bit. People today don't seem to realize that they have the poison of sin running through their veins and it will kill them.

They have all the symptoms, but they deny they have them, or they have just become so used to sin's effects that they think it's normal and acceptable.

When a President of the United States uses the excuse for sin that everyone else does it, and then proceeds to parade past Presidents before the people and point out their sin, you know we've reached new lows.

The curse of sin will not just go away. God has got to provide the solution even as He did in the desert for Israel. Moses didn't come up with the bright idea of putting a bronze serpent on a pole. God is the One who came up with their solution to a sin problem. And it is God who has given us the ultimate solution to our sin problem in Christ.

But part of our job as believers is to alert the world that they have been bitten and to encourage them to understand the effects of this bite.

If you don't know you've got a problem why would you seek a solution? You ever hear of people not going to the doctor because what they don't know won't hurt them? 'I mean if I go to the doctor and he finds something wrong then I'll have something to worry about.' Ignorance is bliss.

And in many cases this is how people think about God. If I don't know what God says, then I won't be responsible before Him when I face Him one day. Or if I ignore the truth maybe it will turn out not to be the truth and all will be well ultimately.

People are living in a spiritual Disney World if they think this is the way things are. To simply have this fantasy that God will never hold them accountable for their sin is just that, fantasy.

We, as God's people have an obligation to bring some reality back into the picture. And the reality is that all men have sinned against God and are therefore guilty of their sin and they must pay the debt, which is death, eternal separation from their God.

Now, I know this is not very popular, but the option is to let the people die in their sin. But this is not the message we want to leave with people. Who wants to hear about a problem if you're not going to give them a solution?

We can feel a lot better going to a doctor knowing that he's got the cure. I've been through major surgery a number of times over the years. And in each case I've never been afraid. Maybe a little anxious as anyone would be under those types of situations, but not scared.

In fact, in my last surgery when they operated on my esophagus I was actually looking forward to that day because I knew they could fix the problem. I was tired of the problem and was ready for the solution.

Mankind needs to come to grips with the problem. But if they don't believe they've got a problem they won't seek the solution and we've got the solution. It's a bronze serpent lifted up on a pole.

It's the curse of sin embodied in our sinless Savior, Jesus Christ, who was lifted up on a cross at Calvary and who died for the penalty of sin we deserved. And the only thing men need to do is to look to this Savior for forgiveness and eternal life.

Can you imagine the joy and the gladness those Israelites experienced after they were bit when they looked to that bronze serpent and the life which was ebbing out of their bodies was returned to them with vigor?

Can you imagine any of them being silent as they then went to others who had not yet looked up as they ran over to those being bitten and directed their eyes to the pole and the bronze serpent?

'I was dying and I looked up to God's solution and my life is back. Look up. Look up and live.' They sensed the urgency at hand and they did everything they could to make sure everyone looked to the solution.

If we've been delivered from our sin and have been given eternal life we ought to consider others around us who haven't looked up. We need to love people enough to direct their eyes to the Savior.

And if they don't see their need then we need to love them enough to show them their need. And we don't have to do that in a condemning way. Believe me, once you indicate the consequences

of sin, they'll see God's condemnation without you pointing a finger.

But if the Spirit of God is working in their lives they'll be more than excited to know the solution to their sin problem. We don't ever need to be afraid of what people will think of us as faithful witnesses to the truth of who Christ is and why He came into this world.

The same God who descended from heaven to give us life is the same God who ascended back to the Father and who is almighty and faithful to be with us and to use us to His honor and glory as we extend His Kingdom through the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ.

Nicodemus, learn from the Bronze serpent and look to Me your Savior.' That was our Lord's message to this Pharisee. And that's the same message for all men today.

Look to Me, Jesus says.

In fact, this is the message God has always given to Israel.

ISA 45:22 "Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other."

And for every believer today we never want to take our eyes off of Christ. It's when we start looking elsewhere that we get ourselves in trouble. Remember it was a look that got us in trouble in the first place.

GEN 3:6 "When the woman *saw* that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, *she took some and ate it*. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, *and he ate it*."

It's so easy to look at our circumstances, or our trials or other people, to where we become so bogged down, or even dependent on the things of this world, that we stop looking to the One we first looked to for life eternal.

HEB 12:2 "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

And as we look to Him we will find that He is there for us always, since nothing can separate us from His love. And as we look to Him on a daily basis may we also look for His coming again.

PHI 3:20-21 "But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await [and look for] a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body."

May we encourage each other with these words.