

**Look and Live!**  
**John 3:9-15**  
**The Gospel According to John**  
**Series #17**

**Introduction:** Take your Bible and join me in John chapter 3, the Gospel of John, chapter 3. We have the joy of coming back this morning to this great text in John 3. As we work our way closer to the celebration of Christmas we really couldn't be in a better spot in our study of the Gospel of John. You wouldn't probably put John 3 in your list of Christmas texts, but I think we will find over the next two weeks that the Lord has been good to us to have us hear as we seek to worship Him this Christmas season.

What we find in our text for this morning is the unbelief of Nicodemus put side-by-side with a call to Nicodemus to believe in the Son of Man and be redeemed. He is living in the spiritual death of unbelief and Jesus calls him to the spiritual life of belief in him. The larger context, as you remember from the last several weeks, is this conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus where they are discussing how one gains entrance into the Kingdom of God. And there is no important question to be discussing is there? How is it that a soul gains entrance into the kingdom of God – the kingdom of eternal life and bliss and joy? There is no important question. And remember that the common assumption was that if you were a son of Abraham – if you were a Jew, then you were in the kingdom. And you were really in the kingdom and would be part of running the show in the kingdom if you were someone of Nicodemus' caliber. He was the teacher of Israel, he was on the ruling council in Jerusalem, he was from a wealthy family, and he was obviously concerned about when the kingdom was coming. He was a shoo-in from the human perspective. But then Jesus halts the parade of self-assurance and assumption and tells him that no one can enter into the kingdom of God unless they are born from above. There is no natural way into the kingdom of God. It is not an entrance we can gain by our own efforts or based on our own merits. As Jesus told Nicodemus, we must be born of water and the Spirit to enter into the kingdom of God. We must be supernaturally cleansed from our sin and brought from spiritual death to spiritual life. And this is all dependent upon the all-powerful work of God in us. He must do this – we cannot. It is a marvelous extension of his matchless grace which reaches into our soul and rescues us from sin and redeems us through Jesus Christ.

So, does that mean that we just have to sit around and wait to be zapped by the sovereign grace of God? If there's no steps we can take to be born again of our own initiative, then is all hope lost? Well, of course not! This is the glorious good news of the Gospel. This is where the deep truths of the Christmas story bring us real and true and lasting hope. What we could not do, God has done through the sending of His Son. And that is the pinnacle truth presented in this text – that the Son of man was sent to reveal truth and to redeem us from sin – thereby giving us entrance into the kingdom of God. And the sovereign grace of God which brings salvation to you

is coupled in John's gospel at every turn with the call to believe. This is what you must do – you must believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. That is the call of this text. Let's read John 3:9-15.

Did you catch how the sovereignty of God is set right next to the responsibility of man in this text? We will see it again and again in John's Gospel. Jesus has just told Nicodemus that he cannot enter the kingdom of God without being born from above by the Spirit of God. And now he exposes Nicodemus' unbelief and calls him to look to the lifted up Son of Man in faith and find eternal life in him. He must look and live! To whom must he look in faith? He must look to the Son of man. Well, who is this Son of man, and what does it mean to be the Son of Man? Well, it is Jesus' favorite title to use of himself – he uses it over 80 times in the gospels. And what does it mean for him to himself the Son of Man? Well, it was obviously an official title, and it is from Daniel 7 where the Ancient of Days gives all power and authority to the Son of Man – which is clearly a prophetic text pointing to the coming Messiah. Jesus was essentially then, calling himself the Messiah – the fulfillment of all of God's Old Testament promises about a coming redeemer King. But he was using a term which was unfamiliar to the Jews and the Romans alike. So, he didn't just show up wearing purple and announcing to everyone that he was going to be the next King of Israel! Rather, he carefully and wisely used a messianic title which he could fill with meaning by his teaching and his miracles and eventually by his death, burial, and resurrection. The Romans had no idea what was meant when he claimed to be the Son of Man and so they were not threatened by him. And the Jews knew enough to know he was claiming something divine and unique and messianic, but they didn't really know what he meant either.

And this is the title Jesus uses here in his interaction with Nicodemus. So, I want to point you this morning to two aspects of Jesus' role as the Son of Man to lead you to the ultimate conclusion that eternal life is only found in him. In verses 9-13 we see the Son of Man's revealing work, and in verses 14-15 we see the Son of Man's Redeeming Purpose.

#### I. The Son of Man's Revealing Work – 9-13

- a. What does it mean to be the Son of Man? Well, in part it means that you have a revealing work to do. And that is what we already learned about Jesus in John's prologue didn't we? That the Word became flesh and dwelt among us so that he could make God known to us. As the Incarnate Word – the Word of God in human flesh – he came to make the Father known to us. And that is what he tells Nicodemus here in verses 9-13. Nicodemus' last words are in verse 9 – “how can these things be?” He is talking about the new birth that Jesus has just described, and he still just cannot fathom how these things will actually be brought about.
- b. *Revealing Unbelief*
  - i. And here is where the revelation entrusted to the Son of Man confronts Nicodemus directly. He responds to Nicodemus' question by revealing Nicodemus' own unbelief. As the teacher of Israel, Nicodemus was there speaking to Jesus as a representative of the best and brightest of the Israelites. And Jesus questions him – you still don't understand these things? You know the Old Testament Scriptures so well, but you don't understand this truth about the New Birth Nicodemus? Jesus is exposing

his unbelief. And not just his unbelief, but the unbelief of the whole nation. In fact, that will be a theme of Jesus' interactions throughout John's gospel – that people hear what Jesus says and they see it verified with miraculous signs, but they just don't comprehend the truth.

- ii. But why? Well, Jesus goes on to chide Nicodemus for this unbelief. So, he doesn't understand the new birth because of his own unbelief. Jesus says – we speak of what we know and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. Who is the we Jesus is talking about? He might be referring to himself and his apostles who will one day give public and bold witness to the truth about Jesus. Or he might just be using language similar to how Nicodemus started the conversation to contrast the two camps. Nicodemus represents the camp of the unbelieving Jews who think they know that Jesus is a teacher come from God. But in contrast to them, Jesus is here to give witness to what he truly knows and to what he has been an eyewitness of.
- iii. But he goes further with Nicodemus and his unbelief in verse 12. Jesus is here to reveal these great truths to Nicodemus and the Jews, but they will not believe the earthly things Jesus has just told him, how will they believe if Jesus tells them heavenly things. So, what are the earthly things as opposed to the heavenly things Jesus is talking about? Well, the earthly things have to be related to the new birth they were just talking about. It is a spiritual re-birth that is from heaven for sure – but it happens in the realm of human experience and reality. And if they won't believe those truths about how an earthly soul gains entrance into the eternal kingdom of God, then they are certainly not ready for the heavenly things Jesus could reveal. And those heavenly things are probably things related to that kingdom that Nicodemus wanted to know about. In other words, he had probably come to Jesus to talk about the coming Kingdom and all of its heavenly glories and Jesus is essentially cutting that intention off at the knees and pointing him back to essential truths like how to even get into that kingdom.
- iv. In essence, what's happening here is that Jesus as the Son of Man is revealing Nicodemus' unbelief – and not just that of Nicodemus, but of the whole nation he represents. He shows Nicodemus that you can have lots of knowledge – even good knowledge about good things like the Old Testament – but still lack faith. And if you lack faith then you lack the ability to truly understand all those things you have stored in your knowledge bank. Nicodemus simply did not receive by faith the truth Jesus was telling him about the new birth. Knowledge minus faith always equals unbelief.
- v. He also shows Nicodemus that he wanted answers about more complicated matters because he assumed he already had the more elementary matters figured out. And this is the seedbed of unbelief – the pride of assumption about key parts of my understanding. For Nicodemus

it was his assumption about getting into the kingdom of God. He assumed that this was a self-evident and settled reality – he was in. And because he wrongly assumed that to be true, he was driven to find the answers about more complicated matters. But Jesus shows him here that this is nothing more than unbelief. Answers to those more complicated matters are not what Nicodemus needs. He needs the sand foundation of assumption that he has built this tower of assurance upon to be washed away by the waters of truth – which is exactly what Jesus does here. He addresses primary matters – elementary truths – and then he calls for faith from Nicodemus before he will ever go to the deeper and more complicated truths troubling Nicodemus.

- vi. And this is so often how it goes with the skeptic. They know a lot, but they don't have faith to take God at His Word and believe what He has said. And they are self-assured about primary matters and so they go on to more complicated issues. But they are not fit for those answers because the whole structure of their worldview is built upon these false assumptions that actually are not true. And Jesus, as the Master Teacher, reveals Nicodemus' unbelief because that is the core issue. And as the Son of Man, this is why he came – to reveal unbelief.

c. *Revealing Truth*

- i. And he also came to reveal truth. Particularly truth from and about Heaven. So, he tells Nicodemus in verse 13 that no one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, namely, the Son of Man. What he means is that no one has the revelation of heavenly things, like the ones Nicodemus wants to hear from Jesus, unless they have ascended to Heaven and returned to reveal what they saw and heard. In fact, in the First Century there were many stories circulating of past saints who had indeed ascended into heaven to receive some form of special revelation. Kind of like that Heaven tourism rage we went on in broader evangelicalism a few years back where we heard this flood of stories of people dying and going to heaven and then returning to Earth and living to tell us all about it. Jesus says here – it never happened! No one has ascended to heaven and returned so as to bring back some revelation of heavenly things. Rather, there is only one who has been in heaven who descended to earth to tell us heavenly things. This is the work of the Son of Man – this unique one sent from God. He came to exegete the Father to us. And he can do this because he has come down to us from Heaven. This is the incarnation beloved. This is Jesus lying in a manger. This is the Christmas story here in verse 13. He descended so that he could reveal the truth about God, about us, and about how we can enter into the eternal kingdom of God through Him. This Son of Man came to accomplish his revealing work, and he also came to accomplish his redeeming purpose. That is the truth of verses 14-15.

II. The Son of Man's Redeeming Purpose – 14-15

- a. Having descended to earth, the Son of man must now be lifted up so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. This is Jesus' answer to Nicodemus' question of "how can these things happen?" How is it that the new birth is possible? Answer – because the Son of man descended from heaven and must be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. The cure to human inability to save ourselves from our sin problem has always been provision of God. Nicodemus is looking for a human way to solve this problem and enter into the kingdom of God. But Jesus' solution is absent of any human element in its accomplishment. And to prove that to Nicodemus, and to us, Jesus points him back to the Old Testament again. Have you noticed this pattern with Jesus? This is the second time he has explicitly pointed him back to the Old Testament to teach him about the new birth. In verse 5 he clearly alludes to Ezekiel 36, and now here he points Nicodemus back to Numbers 21 and the incident with Moses and the serpent. In other words, Jesus views the Old Testament as a sufficient witness to validate these truths to Nicodemus. Those Old Testament texts point to this Son of Man, and Jesus is making that connection clear to this teacher of Israel.
- b. So, why does Jesus use this incident with Moses and the people and the fiery serpents? Well, just like the serpent had to be lifted up, so must the Son of man be lifted up so that people could look and live. Flip back with me for a minute to Numbers 21, Numbers chapter 21. The children of Israel are in the wilderness wandering for their 40-year sentence because of their unbelief. They are nearing the end of that time – Miriam and Aaron have already died. And then this happens starting in verse 4. *Read Numbers 21:4-9*
- c. Here they are in one of the most desolate spots in their wilderness wanderings, over 3 decades into their journey, during which the manna from heaven has been their main supply of food. I say all of that to put it into context for you because it is so easy to read this from our plush life and look down our proud nose and wonder how it is that they could ever complain against God. This was a difficult situation to be sure. And so, they are tempted by their circumstances to question the goodness of God and the sovereign care of God and the leadership of Moses. They became impatient with God's provision and God's leadership and God's providence over them. And what is always the result when that happens to God's people? Complaining! Why Lord? This is terrible Lord! What are you doing to us Lord?!
- d. You know your Bible well enough to know that this was not an isolated incident for them, don't you? I decided to skim through Numbers and see how many times something like this happened in this book alone, and I counted 9 different incidents like this. 9 different times where the people grow impatient with God's provision and God's leadership over them and they complain against God and against God's appointed leader. Meaning that this is not an isolated incident, or a momentary lapse of judgment, but rather, this is a constant struggle for God's people. The temptation is always there to doubt God's goodness and question his

current providence – especially when things are tough – like pretty much all of 2020!

- e. So, what did they complain about? Well, they complained about why the Lord had brought them out into the wilderness to die because it was so desolate and difficult, this was obviously what was going to happen. In other words, they doubted God's ability to get them through their wilderness trial. And then they also loathed God's provision. The very thing he had given them to guarantee their successful journey through the wilderness – this manna from heaven – became the object of their loathing and their complaint. I mean, we would never do this, but they did, right?
- f. And this obviously provoked the righteous anger of God and he sent these fiery – or very venomous – serpents into their camp, and many of the people of Israel died. And notice what this does. It causes the people to evaluate what they've been saying about God and Moses and it brings them to confession and repentance and to pleading with Moses for mercy. And here is where it gets really good. God does not just take away the servants, but rather he provides a way for them to be saved from the curse of the serpents. But notice what he does not say to them. He does not say, go and brew a concoction of medicine to take and pass on this recipe to others so that they too can be part of the solution. He does not say, now here is the path to self-reform. You've gotten yourselves in a bad spot, but here is the secret to overcoming the serpents and getting them out of your camp. He also does not say, form a serpent fighting club and craft the best weapons and the best methods to trap and destroy all these serpents and get them out of the camp. He does not even tell them to pray to the bronze serpent lifted upon the pole as though some religious exercise will rescue them.
- g. So, what is the solution to their curse? Moses is to make a bronze representation of the fiery serpent and put it on a pole and lift it up for all to see so that when they are bit by the serpents – instead of dying from the venom, they can look to the bronze serpent and live. That's it – look and live! Receive by faith the way of salvation provided by the direct intervention of God himself. If Moses didn't lift up the serpent there would have been no way of salvation from the fiery serpents provided. And if they did not respond and look at the serpent, they would not be cured.
- h. So, also, back in John 3 – it was necessary for the Son of Man who descended from heaven to be lifted up so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. The lifting up of the Son of Man is obviously referring to the cross that Jesus would soon face. But it is more than just him being lifted up on an execution stake. It is that through this sacrifice of himself he will redeem lost sinners from their deadly curse and give them eternal life, and this will prove to be the most exalting aspect of Christ's work. The humility of descending to earth and the shame of dying on the cross will prove ultimately to be the supreme glory of the Son of Man. Jesus will say this multiple times in this Gospel where he will combine the idea of the Son of Man being lifted up and how this will glorify Him.

- i. So Jesus said to them, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me. – John 8:28
  - ii. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself. – John 12:32
- i. This is why he came – so that he might be lifted up. He ate the dust of the ground as a servant to all men – like a serpent does. So that he could be lifted up on the cross of Calvary as a sacrificial lamb – offered in our place – so we could look on him in faith and live. This is part of the Son of Man’s revealing work too because in the cross we see the character of God on display like nowhere else – which we will see next week in verse 16. And this all combines to exalt this Son of Man. He who came so humbly as a babe in a manger will rise to unimaginable heights of glory and exaltation as the redeeming Son of Man!

**Conclusion:** And there is salvation offered in him. You must simply look and live. There could be no simpler way to be saved from your sin curse than to simply look at Christ. This means that you have abandoned all other ways to cure yourself. This means that you understand that you need a cure – that you have indeed been bitten by the serpent of sin and its venom is coursing through your spiritual veins and will ultimately kill you forever unless you find a cure. This means that you turn your eyes of faith to this Son of Man who descended so that he might be lifted up on the Cross. You can have eternal life in him! Do you? Have you looked to Christ in this saving faith? If you haven’t, then don’t delay another second. You don’t know when that venom is finally going to win out and your life on this earth is over. If you haven’t looked to Christ to save you then you will die in your sin and be forever cursed under the judgment of your sin. This is no game friend! Turn to Jesus today and look upon him and believe that His work is sufficient to cure you from all of your sins!

If you are already in Christ by faith, then brother or sister, don’t miss the obvious application of this text to your heart. Being in Christ and knowing the cure to your sin he has provided, then follow His way. He has revealed to you the path you are to tread. Like he descended from the greatest glory to the lowest depths, so too you are to be servant to all. You are to humble yourself and let God take care of the rest. Christ’s model and Christ’s redemption give you the way and the power to humbly serve as He did.

And lastly, take heed to your heart about putting Christ to the test. That is how Paul talks about the Numbers 21 incident in 1 Corinthians 10. He tells us that these Old Testament accounts are given to us for our instruction that we might take heed lest we fall. So, are you putting Christ to the test – pushing the limits of his patience with you by grumbling against his sovereign care and love? Have you grown impatient with God? Have you loathed his provision and his oversight of your life? Have you doubted his goodness and questioned his authority? Beloved – repent! Turn your eyes of faith back to the Son of Man who descended from Heaven and was lifted up on that cross so that you might never doubt God’s goodness again!