

You must look to the Son

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[0 : 00] Well, warm welcome to you all this rather dreach and nasty day. I hope that as you've got cold coming here, you'll at least leave warm inside, even if rather damp and cold on the outside.

Particularly warm welcome to you if you are new or haven't been here often before. Hope you'll enjoy the next few moments with us. Let's begin with a prayer. Amen.

Dear Father, we come to you, many of us busy, from busy workplaces and busy lives, and we pray that over the next few moments you would grant us not only calm and peace, but that you will speak to us in your power, refreshing and renewing our hearts and our minds, preparing us to serve you with great gladness and joy over the next few days.

Equip us to serve you in the world, we pray. Amen. So I'm going to read in a moment a passage from the Bible and then speak to you from that.

So if you would like to turn with us to page 887 in the Bibles in front of you, that's John chapter 3 on page 887.

[1 : 34] Page 887, John chapter 3. John chapter 3, starting at the beginning.

Now, there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man 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.

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

That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is Spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, you must be born again. The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.

[2 : 59] So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. Nicodemus said to him, How can these things be? Jesus answered him, Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

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

No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

So we are in a short series on this chapter, John 3, and last week looked at the first part of what we have just read.

We are looking at what it reveals about real Christianity, what it means to be really a Christian. And in this section, 9 to 15, we see how completely, how utterly, real Christianity revolves around Jesus Christ himself.

[4 : 19] Not, and this is very clear, out of any kind of sentimentality, but because of what he said and because of the claims he makes here and in countless other places, we must, as someone has pointed out before, either totally reject him as an evil liar or a demented madman or totally accept him as the center of everything.

And this passage, verses 9 to 15, which we're focusing on today, it makes it clear that unless we accept the testimony, the teaching of Jesus Christ, it is impossible to have real Christianity because he is not merely a human teacher, but he is the one, the only one, who can truly reveal God himself to us.

Not as people think he is, but as he actually is. And again, it reveals that that testimony of Jesus about God centers absolutely on one single fact, that the only way for any person to be reconciled to God, to receive the life God offers us, is through belief.

Belief in Jesus' own sacrificial death in our place, lifted up on the cross for us so that we might look to him for our rescue. Now, we're going to look at the passage in two sections.

Firstly, in 9 to 13, we see that Jesus brings us a message straight from heaven. And in 14 to 15, we'll see that that message centers on his death on the cross.

[5 : 52] So firstly, Jesus brings us a message straight from heaven. 9 to 13 make it very clear that Jesus is a teacher like none before or since.

There are an awful lot of people in our world who will tell us what they think about God, about heaven, about life, the universe, and everything. And most of us have some opinions. There have even been, and their words are recorded in the book that we're holding in our hands, those whose words are straight from heaven.

But only one person, only one, has ever himself brought a message straight from heaven, from God himself. So that he wasn't passing on what he heard, but speaking truly of what he knew firsthand. You'll see that Nicodemus starts this section rather confused. He is, as we saw last week, a great Bible teacher, but he's rather perplexed.

He says in verse 9, how can these things be? He's been told about what it means to be born again, and he just cannot understand. These things don't fit with what he's thought he knew.

[7 : 01] And Jesus' response is twofold. Firstly, he says, and we mentioned this last week, are you the teacher of Israel and you don't understand these things? In other words, you're a great Bible teacher, and you haven't understood, you haven't even seen these fundamental truths that run through the whole Bible.

And that's very important. Jesus' message is very radical, but it's not new in that sense. Nicodemus should have understood it. But there was something new in what Jesus was saying and doing. And of course, it wasn't the content of the message. It was the authority of the messenger. Verse 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.

We speak of what we know. Jesus here is not talking about his ideas or his philosophy, and this is completely unlike the messages of the philosophers or of Buddha or of Muhammad or of anyone else.

This is a claim that Jesus has not only seen the fundamental realities of the universe, but that he is fundamentally at home with them. We cannot even begin to evaluate what he has to say without getting to grips with this.

[8 : 19] He's not claiming to have a friendly discussion with Nicodemus, teacher to teacher, comparing interpretations and ideas and opinions. He's saying, you Nicodemus, you need to receive my testimony because it is the only testimony there ever will be to these realities, a testimony like no other.

Jesus has the authority to speak, the power to speak, because he comes straight from heaven. And he says, if I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?

If you won't listen to me about some things that happen in this world, the new birth changes in human lives, how will you begin to understand what I can tell you about the Father and his love and his plan from before the beginning of time, which is what he's about to go on to talk about in the next passage?

Verse 13, no one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. Now this is a slightly odd sentence. You might misread it to think that Jesus had been zipping up to heaven and down again.

But it's quite plain in its meaning really, isn't it? That anyone else to speak of the things Jesus claims to speak of would have to go up to heaven, see what was going on, have a word with God and come down.

[9 : 43] Jesus didn't need to. He's been up there. And, you know, in the time when Jesus was there and Nicodemus was there, there were all sorts of myths and stories about prophets who'd gone off to heaven in a dream or whatever and come back with a message explaining what heaven was really like for people like us.

There are plenty of myths like that in our time. You can find in many Christian bookshops books about people who claim to have near-death experiences, been to heaven and seen what's there. Jesus says, no, there is only one who has been to heaven and it's the one who came from heaven, the son of man, that is himself.

He tells us what he knows and understands. He's speaking about what he's seen, about his home, about the life of father, son and spirit, the life of which he has been apart from all eternity.

And so he says to Nicodemus, you need to accept this testimony which I bring you just as we do.

And before we go on to the next section, it's worth pausing a moment and thinking.

From the very beginning, from his disciples onwards, people have not only taken this testimony seriously, when they have investigated, they have found it to be utterly compelling in a way that shows and demonstrates the truth of what Jesus said in a way that nothing else can.

[11:04] From his disciples who in chapter 6 see lots of others leaving Jesus, not wanting to follow him because his words were hard and following him was hard. And they said, Jesus said to them, are you too going to go away?

And they said, no. To whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. They saw in his words something that no other words, no other person could begin to speak or have.

And that carries down to our day. Just a week ago I was speaking to someone who hasn't been a Christian very long and they're full of questions, full of thoughts, including troubles and difficulties and things they don't understand about the Bible or the Christian life, some of which are very hard for them to work through.

And we talked a little about some of that, but then they go on to say, but when it comes to Jesus, when I see his words and what he did and what he said, I can't help but love him.

There's something about him, about his words and about what he does that you cannot escape.

And I paraphrase slightly his words, but they're exactly the same as so many people down the ages who when they read his words discover that this is truly testimony from another place with a power that is not equaled by anything else.

[12:24] Now, if we understand that we need to pay attention to that message, then we need to, of course, think about what that message is about.

And Jesus makes that, I was going to say, clear in 14 and 15. That's maybe a little unfair. They're quite difficult verses. But Jesus makes it clear that his message centers on his death on the cross. Now, as I said, these are not the clearest verses. You remember that Nicodemus was a teacher of the Bible of the Old Testament.

He likely knew it by heart. So, for Jesus to explain something to him, it was better for him to make a quick reference back to the Old Testament. And Nicodemus would understand much more quickly than if he had a long and complicated explanation.

So, Jesus says in verse 14, As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

[13:29] And Jesus is making a reference to a famous and rather strange event in the Old Testament. It's in the book of Numbers, chapter 21. The people of Israel had been slaves in Egypt for hundreds of years.

The Pharaoh they served then sought to wipe them out in a long, slow genocide. And he would not let them go. So God rescues them with power and miracles and wonders and brings them out through the desert and was leading them to a new home where he promised them peace and plenty.

And day by day he gave them food and drink that they needed on the way. He protected them from the attacks of their enemies and he kept them with all his care. But, it says, the people became impatient on the way.

And the people spoke against God and against Moses. Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water and we loathe this worthless food.

They rebelled. Instead of thankfulness they were full of bitterness. They'd just been rescued from a lifetime of slavery and yet, you know, can you imagine in the time of American slavery in the deep south a slave escaping and being handed from person to person along the underground railroad coming to the next person and complaining about the quality of the accommodation saying, you know, the food's not quite up to scratch.

[14:51] They're on their way to freedom. Nothing else matters more. And so these people as they moan and they say, why have you brought us out of Egypt? They're saying, we'd prefer the slavery.

We'd prefer the threat of genocide than being with you, God. Not only do they have no faith to reject God, they reject his rescue, they reject all that is good. And so God punishes them.

He sent fiery serpents among them, it says. Fiery probably meaning that their bite caused burning pain and a hot fever. As I'm told and hope never to experience is still the case with the kind of adder you get in the Sinai region.

And many of them died. The people realized they'd sinned. They said to Moses, we've sinned. We've spoken against God. We've spoken against you. Pray to God that he take these snakes away from us.

But God says to Moses, make a statue of a snake out of bronze and put it on a pole and lift it up high and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, he will live.

[15:59] And that is exactly what happened. If a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live. Now, why is Jesus reminding Nicodemus of this story? Well, if Nicodemus thought carefully about that story, see, there's a lot of truths packed into it.

I'm going to focus on four in particular. The first is simply that people sin. They rebel against God. Not only are they selfish in small ways, but they choose to live without him and to reject his kindness.

And so God is angry. He is wrathful towards them. He is a just and impartial God and he punishes sin. He will not let it go unpunished. And he can't just let them off when they ask.

There needs to be real justice. But God himself here provides a solution to that. He tells them that they need the bronze serpent. He is angry, but he wants them to be saved.

He provides a solution. All they have to do is look at the serpent. It's not much, is it? It's not very demanding. But it shows to them that they must look to God for the rescue that is offered.

[17:09] And fourthly, the solution is the defeat and the destruction of evil. This is a bit more symbolic, but snakes in the Bible are not symbols of nice things. They are symbols of evil, of the devil, of uncleanness, of deception.

And so God says, put it up in a pole. Just like in those days if you defeated an enemy, you tended to string them up, show who's boss.

Just like Edward I did with William Wallace when he was finished with him. Stuck his head in a pike over London Bridge and said, yeah, this is what happens to my enemies. He dealt with.

That's the idea. Not just the people's particular sin in that moment. but evil itself must be dealt with. Jesus was reminding Nicodemus of those four truths and he said, the Son of Man must be lifted up. That is, he himself, Jesus himself, just as that serpent was strung up on the pole, so I will be strung up.

[18:13] So that those who believe, those who look to me, they will live. Not just being saved from a sickness, from a snake bite, but living forever.

that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. Because the snake was the symbol and Jesus is the reality. We have all sinned.

God is angry and God does punish evil and he will not let rebellion continue and he will destroy us unless our sin is dealt with.

But God himself provides a solution. He comes in the person of the Son so that we might look on him in faith. And as the snake, the symbol of evil was strung up in a symbol of evil's defeat.

So Jesus, the Son of Man, would be lifted up on the cross. That's how he uses the words lifted up in the rest of John's Gospel. Chapter 8 and chapter 12.

[19:10] For his death on the cross, he would be lifted up on a cross of wood to die and he would bear our sin and evil in himself. As it says in another place, he who knew no sin was made sin for us.

In him, the one who was perfectly good, evil, was displayed, defeated forever. So that everyone who is under the sentence of death for sin can look to him and see in him God's wrath dealt with, satisfied forever by the punishment that Jesus bore.

God has provided the solution for our problem in his death. That is exactly how I came to know him. Once I thought I was a pretty decent sort of person and being rather full of myself thought it not too surprising that someone as nice as Jesus would want to die for me.

But then I was told the reality. He died for me when I was an utter rebel. He died for me when I was under the sentence of death. And I realized suddenly that what it meant to be his enemy and how great his love must be if he would die for me.

[20 : 31] And that of course is the next verse that comes next in our passage just after our passage. And as I sat at the kitchen table I was broken and wept with the reality I was a sinner and here was a God who died for me and I could look to him and see him and have life everlasting.

Now if you're not a Christian it may be that you do not feel you can do that yet because you're not too sure what Jesus' message was. The message he talks of when he tells us that is bringing testimony from heaven.

In which case do talk to us. We run a course here Christianity Explored which looks through the life and the message of Jesus and is designed for exactly that situation so you can weigh and evaluate what he said and what he did and see whether it truly is what we are saying it is today.

But Jesus is asking all of us he's asking you and me will you look to me? Will you take the solution I have provided? Will you accept what I have done for you?

Not getting to heaven by your own ways or your own ideas but accepting my testimony. The testimony of the only one who's ever been there. The only way to eternal life. The way I have provided.

[21 : 55] The way of looking to me as I bleed on the cross. Let's finish with a prayer. Lord Jesus you speak of realities we cannot understand without you.

Cannot fathom. You speak of how you came to bear testimony and to die for us.

out of love you were willing to suffer for us so that we might look to you and live look to you and have life and not just brief life but eternal life full and rich with you and the Father forever.

Help us to look to you always. Amen. Amen.