
John 3:14-21

¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹But those who do what

is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

This passage from the book of John is a partial conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, and it contains one of the most memorized and recognized verses in all of the bible: “For God so loved the world that He have His only Son, so that whoever believes in Him shall have eternal life.” However, there is more going on in this passage than just that. First, I want to bring in some perspective for verse 14: “And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up”.

This verse is referring to Numbers 21:4–9 which states, “From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and

against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live."

As cool as this may sound, this bronze serpent eventually led to trouble because people began worshipping it, like an idol. According to the story in 2 Kings, Hezekiah decided

to destroy the pole because this sign of God's healing covenant had become an idol. From 2nd Kings, "He removed the high places, smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles. He broke into pieces the bronze snake Moses had made, for up to that time the Israelites had been burning incense to it."

It's good to remember that the bronze serpent had the power to heal only because God graciously gave it that power. The power resided in God, just like with the elements of bread and juice we take during communion. They're not magical; they're signs of God's grace and love that come to us through Jesus. These elements are sacred signs to be held with honor, but they're not idols to be worshiped. The same was true with the Bronze serpent. The important thing to remember is that the healing power

of the covenant is really just God's grace which we experience because we have faith.

This conversation with Nicodemus is one of my favorite parts of the ministry of Jesus. Yes, the miracles are awesome and I am sure they were incredible to actually witness. Yes, the parables are inspiring once you dig in deep and understand what Jesus is saying. And yes, our faith is rooted in the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus. But, this conversation with Nicodemus is so real. It touches me so much because it shows real faith.

Remember, Nicodemus was a high priest of the Jewish faith. The Jews waited and waited for the Messiah to show up, yet when He did appear, in living flesh right in front of them, they rejected Him. They called Him a blasphemer, a

sorcerer and eventually had Him put to death. They believed so strongly in their laws and rituals that they didn't see what was right in front of them. Except Nicodemus.

The things Nicodemus heard and witnessed gnawed at his soul. He knew that this person could not be anything except the Son of God. Yet, he was so afraid to admit this that he requested to meet Jesus at night and in private when he said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him." And the words that Jesus spoke were so compelling that he eventually converted to Christianity. Nicodemus understood what the prophets had predicted. He knew that every covenant made between God and the people of Israel had been broken. He knew there was a need for a new covenant -

one that would last. Nicodemus knew of the verse from Jeremiah, which happens to be the Lenten verse that I am preaching on. Jeremiah 31:31-34 states:

“The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD. “This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,” declares the LORD. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, ‘Know the LORD,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the LORD. “For I

will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

If you missed my Lenten sermon, here is an excerpt:

Jeremiah 31:31-34 is a significant passage in the Bible. It speaks of God making a new covenant with His people, different from the old covenant given through Moses. God promises a new covenant marked by grace, mercy, redemption, and the transformative power of His love.

Grace was a new concept for people. They were used to having to atone for their own sins through sacrifices, feelings of guilt and even punishment by God. This idea of God having a complete change of heart for his people - the idea where he takes on all of their sins is radical and amazing. God wanted to “write His law in our hearts” so

that we know Him and can have a personal relationship with Him. This isn't to say that He still doesn't want us to follow the written laws, but He will no longer punish us if we break them. He will love us regardless. We will be given a new outlook on life. We will be redeemed and forgiven through someone outside of ourselves. And the only way for that to be possible is because of His mercy and love for us. Talk about transformative power and grace when God said, "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."!

This passage doesn't go into detail about how this new covenant will take place, but we all know the beautiful story. The new covenant was established the day God came to Earth and lived among His people. His promise was fulfilled when He went to the cross for us. No longer did the blood of animals need to be used for sacrifice. It is now the blood of Jesus that washes us clean. So when

Jesus said on the night in which he was betrayed, “This cup is my blood, my new covenant with you. Each time you drink this cup, remember me,” He clearly and strongly established this new covenant. This is infinite grace and mercy.

Now back to today’s gospel. Nicodemus first appears in the Bible in John 3, when he sought out Jesus by night. That evening Nicodemus learned from Jesus that he must be born again, and he was. Then, about six months before the crucifixion, the Chief Priests and Pharisees attempted to have Jesus arrested for deception. Nicodemus protested, urging the group to give Jesus a fair hearing. Nicodemus last appears in the Bible after the death of Jesus. Together with his friend and fellow Sanhedrin member, Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus lovingly cared for the body of the crucified Savior, placing the Lord's remains in Joseph's tomb at great risk to his safety and reputation. These

actions challenged the legalism and hypocrisy of the Sanhedrin and Pharisees, but Nicodemus had to be sure Jesus' body was treated with dignity and that he received a proper burial. Nicodemus donated 75 pounds of expensive myrrh and aloes to anoint the Lord's body after his death. This amount of spice was enough to fittingly bury royalty, signaling that Nicodemus had recognized Jesus as King.

After Nicodemus had become a follower, his life was changed forever. He never hid his faith in Jesus again. Jesus is the source of all truth, the meaning of life. When we are born again, as Nicodemus was, we should never forget that we have forgiveness of our sins and eternal life because of Christ's sacrifice for us. Nicodemus is a model of faith and courage for all Christians to follow. According to the Gospel of Nicodemus from the Torah, as well as other works, indicated that Nicodemus lost his position as

a Pharisee and was kicked off the Sanhedrin, and was eventually banished from Jerusalem by the hostile Jews.

I wonder how many of us would have been willing to give up everything in order to show our faith? Nicodemus had a good life - much wealthier than most people of the time. He was well respected in his position as a chief priest in the Sanhedrin. But, what he knew in the depths of his heart to be true went against all that he had practiced and preached.

So, perhaps the reason Jesus said to Nicodemus, “And just 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” is because it invites us to hold fast to the one who truly brings healing to our lives. In

pointing back to the story of the Bronze serpent, Jesus tells us that when we look upon the cross, which is a sign of the brokenness of this world, we will see in the cross a sign that light has come into the world so that we might live. Therefore, let us lift high the cross of Jesus.

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, let us always remember the broken covenants because they remind us of the sinners that we are. More importantly, they remind us of the need for your Son and for His death and resurrection. All that He suffered was for us, so that we can have a deep and personal relationship with you, and so that we can all be saved from our sins and have eternal life. Without your eternal grace and forgiveness of our sins, we would be banished to a dark place without you. But, your Son brought us the light we need. For that, we are forever grateful. In His name we pray, Amen.

