



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

John 3: 9-15

Winter 2021-22

"Look And Live"

TRANSCRIPT

Thank you Seth, and good morning. We began this great chapter, the third chapter of the Gospel of John, last week and looked at verses 1 through 8. And so we're going to look at verses 9 through 15 this morning. But it picks up in the middle of this conversation that the Lord is having with Nicodemus, so I'm going to begin with verse 1. We'll read through the entire passage from verses 1 through 15,

3 Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; ² this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God *as* a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him." ³ Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

⁴ Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into 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 be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

⁹ Nicodemus said to Him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰ Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things? ¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony. ¹² If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man. ¹⁴ As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; ¹⁵ so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.

John 3:1-15

May the LORD bless this reading of His Word and bless our time in studying it together.

(Message) One of Augustine's famous statements is, "Believe in order to understand." Faith in God's Word must precede human reason in order to know God. Logic's very important. We need to think logically but logic, the value of it, depends on where we begin. And where we begin must be with faith in God's Word. It's what the author of Hebrews said in Hebrews 11, verse 3, "By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible."

God's Word, divine revelation, reveals reality; material and spiritual. We will never know truth apart from it. That is where we begin. But to begin there, we must believe. Now it's foolish to the world, "Believe in order to understand", but they really live by the same principle; they live by faith. They put their faith in human reason rather than in divine revelation.

Naaman, the Syrian general, is an example of that. (I think some of you were reminded of Naaman this morning in Sunday School.) He was a leper. When he was told that the prophet Elisha could cure him, he came to him with treasures to buy the cure. Elisha didn't see him, didn't take his treasure; he just sent word to go wash in the Jordan

seven times. Naaman was offended. He was expecting some elaborate ceremony and great cost. There were probably fifty things Naaman would have been ready to do but not something so simple as that, dipping in the Jordan River. And the Jordan River, of all places!, why not one of the great rivers in Syria?

Well he was about to leave in a huff when his servant said, 'A prophet has spoken. If he told you to do some elaborate thing you would have done it. All he said was wash and be clean. Why not?' So he did it, seven times, and was cured. In spite of his world view, in spite of everything, he believed the word of the prophet; the revelation of God. He believed in order to be clean.

Nicodemus was like Naaman—and the world. He came to Jesus one night with questions. He wanted to know for sure how to enter into the kingdom of God. When Christ told him, "You must be born again", (vs7), he was mystified. If the Lord had told him to do some great work he would have believed. But he couldn't understand grace; couldn't understand "be born again".

That's where the conversation was in verse 9. Nicodemus was like Naaman, turning away from the River Jordan, believing in human reason rather than divine revelation and thinking, 'How foolish!' So he responded to the Lord, "How can these things be?" (vs9). It went against everything that he had believed, everything that he was taught, everything that he taught—which was, 'Obey the Law'.

Now he hears that entrance into the kingdom is not by Law obedience but by 'new birth'. He was puzzled. It stood everything on its head, everything that he had learned. It was the opposite of that.

But his confusion was no excuse. And the Lord answered him with a firm reply—even with amazement of His own: "Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?" (vs10). Jesus wasn't teaching some novelty, some new, fantastic idea—it was right out of Scripture; the Scriptures that this man should know. And here he is, not just a teacher, Jesus called him, "the teacher of Israel".

This was a smart, well-educated man preeminent in his field who should have been well acquainted with the great passages of Scripture that Jesus based His

teaching on: Jeremiah 31, The New Covenant, the promise to place and write God's Word on their hearts; Ezekiel 36 and 37, the promise of the New Heart and the new life for dry bones.

But the Lord didn't dismiss him. He's a patient Savior, and He was patient with this rabbi, this great Pharisee, this teacher—and patiently continued to instruct him.

No more is heard from Nicodemus from this point on. "The dialog", as someone said, "becomes a monologue." That speaks well of Nicodemus, who sat silently listening to the Lord answer questions. Well, I say it spoke well of him; we assume it did. He's sitting there, we assume, listening to what the Lord said, and how it happens that a person enters the kingdom of God.

But first the Lord gave His authority for what He would say. He explains why His teaching is absolutely reliable; because others support Him and what He was teaching. He said, "We speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen...", (vs11), probably referring to both John the Baptist and the Lord's disciples. They believed what the Lord taught here—Nicodemus didn't. That was the root of his problem; he didn't believe the Lord—like Naaman who didn't believe the prophet. "...you do not accept our testimony," Christ said. (vs11b). Nicodemus' problem was not a failure of intellect. He was a bright man, no doubt. His problem was a failure of faith.

It's the problem today with materialists who believe the universe, the cosmos, is all that there is; all that was or ever will be. How can they know that? How can they know that this universe is all that there is and there's nothing else beside it—and there will be nothing else? Well, it's a faith position, meaning it's a problem of unbelief.

Skeptics claim there's no evidence for God. Of course there is; it's all around us—we're evidence of it. But we look up and we see the evidence: "The heavens are telling of the glory of God..." the psalmist said, Psalm 19, verse 1. But they do not accept the Lord's testimony. Their faith is Darwinism and naturalism—not revelation.

And Nicodemus' faith was *rabbinical*, the traditions of men, rather than Scripture; so he stumbled over grace. He could not believe in the new birth: That he,

a Jew, a son of the covenant, a man of the Law *must* be born again—that he can do nothing in and of himself; God must do it all.

But if he could not believe that basic teaching and take the first step of faith, then he certainly could not advance any further into the truth. That's what the Lord told him in verse 12. "If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?"

Now the Lord didn't explain the meaning of *earthly things*, but the most natural way to understand His statement there is the things that He has just talked about; the new birth, of being born from above, and the work of the Holy Spirit. He explained the supernatural change, salvation, by earthly things—earthly examples. So the new birth, being born again, is like a natural birth. So you see, there's an analogy there that a natural birth is complete. The new birth is, (the One who causes it, the Holy Spirit), He said, 'It's like the wind.'

Now these are basic things. But if Nicodemus can't understand these, he won't be able to go on to the more difficult truth; heavenly things; higher things, truths about God's kingdom which comes down from heaven.

No one can speak on heavenly things as the Lord can. He has unique authority to teach on that subject. Verse 13, "No one has ascended into heaven," He says, meaning no one has gone up and come down again to talk about it, (which is actually a reference to Agur's statement in Proverbs chapter 30, verse 4). No one's done that—but the Lord is the exception. He "descended from heaven", He said. (vs13b). That's His origin—and that marks Him out from all the rest of mankind. He alone has come down from heaven. He knows all of the truths intimately. He is the authority.

He's "the Son of Man", He says. (vs13b). That's how He identifies Himself so often in the Gospels. And He identifies Himself here as "the Son of Man", which is a reference that, (again), Nicodemus should have understood from the vision of Daniel chapter 7, where a man is seen in heaven, described as the "Son of Man", who approached the throne of the Almighty to receive a kingdom. And He was telling Nicodemus that He, the Son of Man, that man of Daniel chapter 7, had come down from heaven with revelation.

So, Nicodemus was to believe Him on that authority; as Naaman was to believe Elisha on his authority as a prophet.

Now there's an interesting difference between some versions here. In my text, the New American Standard Bible, verse 13 ends with the words, "the Son of Man." So does the New International Version. The King James Version ends, "the Son of Man which is in heaven," or ("*who* is in heaven"). So verse 13 would read, "No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven, the Son of Man who is in heaven." There's a division among scholars on this and the evidence for the proper text. But many think that that is a good ending, the proper ending. And assuming that it is, assuming that's correct, it does give further insight into the Lord and His right to speak.

Put it this way, it is certainly true, whether that's the original text or not. The Son of Man is more than a prophet, more than an Elisha. He is God the Son. He is the God-Man. As a man, He was on earth. His human nature was a genuine human nature. He was a true man, born of a woman. But that human nature was added to His eternal, divine nature, so that He is, as I say, the God-Man; and His divine nature has not been compromised in any way. He is who He has been eternally. He is omnipresent, both on earth and in heaven. In His deity, as the Son of God, He was still in the bosom of the Father. So what He said had authority and was to be believed because of who He is. Nicodemus would not advance any further in his understanding if he could not receive, by faith, the Lord's teaching. That's where we all must begin.

Now having corrected Nicodemus for his unbelief, and given His authority to teach on these matters, the Lord returns to the subject of the new birth and entering the kingdom of God. He did that by recalling a familiar story, one that Nicodemus would have known from his childhood, the story of the bronze serpent found in Numbers 21, verses 4 through 9.

The people of Israel were being led by Moses through the desert. Traveling became difficult and the people got discouraged and began to grumble against God and

Moses. So God sent poisonous snakes into the camp, "fiery serpents", as they are called. They bit the people, who got sick, and many died. Those who repented cried out to Moses, asking him to pray, asking him to intercede with God for them. When he did, the LORD told him to make a serpent out of bronze, lift it up on a pole in the middle of the camp, and He promised that whoever looked at it, just looked, would be healed. Look and live—it's that simple. Not look long and hard and feel the pain of your bite or the great remorse over your folly, just look—even with a glance, and you'll live.

Now I wonder if that seemed too simple to many of the people—or if it seemed rather strange or foolish. You can imagine how some might have dismissed it as foolish. They knew about snakes and they knew about snake bites. So they tried other remedies; potions, salves, tourniquets, all the things that they knew would possibly work—and they died. There was only one remedy for the venom. It was to look at the serpent on the pole. It was to believe God's Word, His revelation, and receive His cure.

All who looked were healed. And if asked, those who had been at death's door consumed with fever, might have said, "It was like being born again, and given a new lease on life." It was a miracle. It was supernatural healing. God gave new physical life to these people, these infected people, by simply looking at the bronze serpent.

Now Nicodemus believed that story. He knew it was true. So why should he think it strange or contrary to the Bible for God to give new spiritual life? That story is a clear illustration of the way into the kingdom of God—of how a person receives life for the age to come, eternal life.

It's a great object lesson on the human condition—and the cure of it. Mankind is a dead and dying race of people. We are all born into this world snake bit, fatally infected with sin. It's the picture that Naaman himself gives, full of leprosy, and unable to cure himself. That's our condition. We're spiritual lepers. We're infected with sin's poison. But more than the condition, it is the cure that the Lord was concerned to illustrate, which He did by comparing Himself to the serpent on the pole. It's a picture of the cross, the sacrifice that saves men from sin and death.

That's His analogy; "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life." (vs14-15). As the bronze serpent lifted up brought health and life to the bitten Israelites, so too Christ lifted up on the cross has brought eternal life to lost sinners. It's an analogy, an illustration, from the physical for the spiritual.

But it's just that; it's just an illustration. There was no healing virtue in that bronze serpent. It's only a piece of bronze, that's all. Later, people venerated it. They came to see it. They paid homage to it as though it had spiritual value or power. When King Hezekiah recognized the problem, that idolatry, he broke it in pieces. But it's so much like mankind, isn't it? They turned a blessing into an idol. Maybe our health—that's one of the great idols of our age, preserving our health, preserving our youth, preserving our attractiveness of the body, 'health is so important'—it's all an idol.

Or taking the Lord's Supper and turning that into an idol: 'This is the body and the blood of Christ.' And we can go on and on with the things, the good things: 'revelation that God has given' that's turned in some way in the wrong way, as an idol. Calvin said it. "The heart of man is an idol factory." And we see that throughout.

It's not the bronze image that healed any more than it was the water of the Jordan that washed the leper clean. It was the saving grace of God alone that healed bitten Israelites when they believed.

But healing virtue is in Christ, the Son of Man. His death on the cross does heal and save—and it does so in an infinitely greater way than those Israelites that were cured. Their cure prolonged their lives physically but later they died. Christ crucified and raised up, gives to all who look to Him spiritual life, eternal life—because He is the living Savior.

Now that's implied here, Christ as 'the living Savior'. As F. F. Bruce wrote, "The verb for His being *lifted up* was carefully chosen. It denotes not only His being lifted up on the cross but being lifted up to glory." The cross wasn't the end. God showed His approval of His Son's sacrifice by raising Him from the dead, exalting Him to heaven and to the throne above all the universe; where He is exalted and seated in glory.

The cross wasn't the end. We have a living Savior who gives His life to those who trust in Him. And so, this is the answer to Nicodemus' question, "How can these things be?": The new birth is experienced and the kingdom is entered through the saving work of Christ, the saving work of Christ on the cross, and received through faith alone.

This is the first place in the fourth Gospel, interestingly, that this important term, "*eternal life*", (vs14b). is used. It's about unending life in the age to come: Resurrection life in the kingdom to come; and the new heavens and the new earth.

But it begins now. At the moment of faith we enter into that life. We have eternal life in this fallen, condemned world. And it's forever, it can never be lost. That's God's grace. And it's all due to the cross. That's where salvation was accomplished. The cross saves. That's why Jesus said, "...even so, *must* the Son of Man be lifted up." —*Must*. (vs14b).

F. F. Bruce called the *must*, called it "the *must* of the divine purpose, foretold in the writings of the prophets. It was predestined. It was foretold it *must* occur." But I would add to that, it was the *must* of moral and spiritual necessity. There's no other way that the lost, infected with deadly sin, can be rescued and saved. And no other way they can be qualified to enter into the kingdom; cleansed in order to enter into the kingdom.

There's only one remedy for sin and its terrible, eternal consequences—and that is the cross of Christ. And why is that? Because it was at Calvary that He took our place in judgment. "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law...", Paul wrote in Galatians 3, verse 13, "...having become a curse for us." He took our sins, and its penalty, on Himself. It's what Paul wrote so graphically of in 2 Corinthians 5, verse 21, "He," (meaning God the Father), "made Him," (God the Son), "who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."

He didn't make Him a sinner, He made Him a sin bearer for us, for His people, for His elect one—that innumerable multitude, like the stars of the heaven, who by the work of the Spirit alone, believe. So Nicodemus asked, "How can these things be?" The

only answer is, 'Christ bought eternal life for every believer at the cost of His own, perfect, sinless life.'

Now this, it seems, is when the conversation with Nicodemus ended during that breezy evening in Jerusalem. So, what happened to Nicodemus? He appears again in the Gospel in chapter 7 when the Pharisees sent police to arrest Jesus, Nicodemus attempted to defend Him from the Law: this would suggest his sympathy toward the Lord. It was a weak defense, but a defense. And then later, we see him in chapter 19 being bolder, participating in the Lord's burial with Joseph of Arimathea—which took courage. It's an open identification with Christ. And not only with Christ, the Great Teacher, the Great Rabbi; but the crucified Christ.

So I don't think it is unreasonable, in fact I think it reasonable, to conclude that Nicodemus became a follower of Christ. The attention John gives to him all through the Gospel would support that. Apparently Nicodemus was at the Lord's crucifixion; and any hesitancy he had was resolved there as he looked at Christ hanging on the cross. He thought of their conversation, thought of the serpent on the pole, and as he looked,,, it clicked: He believed. Countless others have done that.

You know the story of young Charles Spurgeon and the snow storm that forced him into that little Primitive Methodist church, where he heard a simple man preach a simple Gospel. Spurgeon had been troubled over the state of his soul when he sat down with the few people there. The man, who was a substitute for the regular preacher who was snowed out, the man took a text from Isaiah; Isaiah 45, verse 22, "Look unto Me and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth." He began saying, "This is a very simple text. It says, 'Look.' That doesn't take any effort. You don't need to go to college to 'look', don't need a lot of money to 'look'. Anyone can 'look', even a child." Then he said, "Look unto Me. Don't look to yourself, look to Christ. 'Look unto Me,' the text says."

And he developed that for about ten minutes: and that pretty much exhausted his knowledge of the passage. So he began to look around this small, rather empty congregation and fixed his eyes on Charles, sitting under the gallery—and he knew this

was a stranger. "Young man," he said, as he looked at him, "you look miserable. And you'll always be miserable if you don't obey my text. Young man, look to Jesus! Look. Look. Look! You have nothing to do but look and live."

All at once this boy, who had been struggling with his lost condition, saw the way of salvation, "Like it was", he said, "when the brazen serpent was lifted up and the people only looked and were healed! He'd been waiting to do fifty things", he said, "but when he heard that word, 'Look!', he understood."

And in simple faith he looked to Christ and was saved. That is where everything begins, with faith, believing the Gospel, the Good News of salvation in Christ alone. Augustine said, "Believe in order to understand." How can a person do that? Only by the sovereign grace of God.

But a person should do two things. Pray and read. Ask the Lord to do, what only He can do, 'give eyes to see and ears to hear.' The God who made 'the blind to see and the deaf to hear' listens to prayers of that nature.

And read. The Scriptures are God's Word. The author of Hebrews describes it as "...living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword...", (Heb 4:12). It dissects us spiritually. It exposes our thoughts and motives. The Bible, as I often say, is a supernatural book. It's unique; there's no book like it. It is supernatural. And the Gospel is a supernatural message. It is God's revelation, therefore it is self-authenticating. That is to say, it makes itself known to those who read it. It impresses itself upon the mind so that, as we read it and we see the obvious connection with reality, as we read it we're enlightened. It makes itself known as true to those who read and study it.

How, after all, did Jesus talk to Nicodemus, this celebrated teacher of Israel, a man of great learning and sharp intellect. How did He speak to him? Well, He didn't speak to him in lofty, abstract terms. He didn't engage in theoretical discussion or go to the Mishnah and deal with all of the rabbinic rulings and discussions—not at all. He spoke to him in very simple terms from Scripture: of the supernatural salvation the prophets promised; of being born from above and the bronze serpent—what must have

been a childhood story for him. He spoke to him from Scripture. He gave him divine revelation and told him to believe.

He could not know God and he could not see the kingdom unless he believed. He told Nicodemus, first of all, you must believe. It's very much what David said in Psalm 34:8, "O taste and see that the LORD is good." Taste if you want to know the goodness and the greatness of God's saving grace. Taste, look, believe.

And that's what, as Christians, we do, what we say. Like Moses holding up the bronze serpent and calling for all to look, we hold up Christ crucified and say, 'Look, and "be you saved, all the ends of the earth." ' (Is 45:22). It's a foolish message; foolish message to those who don't think they are snake bit; or those who are convinced that the cosmos is all that is; or was; or ever will be. —They won't look.

But those who are maybe a little miserable, who know they aren't right, who have a sense of lostness; they will believe, understand, and be saved. That's grace. It's free grace, God's grace.

So, if there are any here who have not believed but you're wondering, as Nicodemus did, 'Look to Christ'. Believe in Him. You have nothing to do but look and live. May God help you to do that.

May God help all of us to continue to progress in faith, and the life that God has given us.

Father, we thank You for the sacrifice You made for us; and we do marvel at the cost, as we reflect upon it. In fact, we can never reflect upon it enough and come to the end of it. And so we cling to Him alone, not ourselves. And we thank You, Father, for the great mercy You showed to us; that He showed us on the cross. We pray that we'll come to understand it more deeply, and more deeply, and have a greater appreciation: And as

a result of that, live lives that bring honor to You. We thank You for Him, and it's in His name we pray.

And now, the LORD bless you, and keep you; The LORD make His face shine on you, and be gracious to you; The LORD lift up His countenance on you. and give you peace. In Christ's name. Amen.

(End of Audio)