

March 6, 2011

Living Out The Gospel In Real Life

Look and Live

John 3:11 – 21

Last week we saw that the story of Nicodemus is the story of a man who was trusting in something other than grace for salvation. He was a Pharisee which meant that he thought that the way to enter the kingdom of God and being right with God was all by means of something He could do. But at some level, there must have been a suspicion in his mind that all he could do might not cut it; because while Jesus was in Jerusalem during the Passover, Nicodemus saw something in what He did during the feast that compelled him to come and speak with Him about the kingdom of God. This was a man who all his life had kept the law as best he could and because of that expected the favor of God in recognition of his faithfulness. But when he came to Jesus he is told that not just that all that he had been trusting in was inadequate, but that wasn't the way in at all.

What he needed was not better behavior, more teaching, or more strict observance of the Law – **what he needed was to be born from above**. He couldn't even begin to understand the kingdom of God, much less enter it unless he had been born of water – the word of God – and the Spirit of God. Jesus tells him that what he needs is not remodeling or renovation, but re-creation. His natural life, inherited from Adam and unchanged by Christ, is not fit for heaven. He needed the cleansing and filling by the Holy Spirit – he needed the Spirit of God working through the word of God to cause faith to spring up in a sin-deadened heart to understand and embrace the truth of the gospel to the end that **something new is born** – a new creation. *'Truly, truly I say to you, you must be born again.'*

And all Nicodemus can do is say is: *"How can these things be?"* John 3:9 *Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?"* John 3:10 In other words, **'Nicodemus, you know the Holy Scriptures, you've studied the word of God, you call Me teacher and you yourself teach this word; and yet you don't know the first thing about what these Scriptures really say. You are truly a religious man, but all that religion will do is keep you out of the kingdom.'** All he had gotten out of his dedicated labor in the word was a system of rules and regulations that were supposed to get him into the kingdom.

Up to this point, Jesus has only told Nicodemus that to see and enter the kingdom of God, he needs to be born again. And He tells him that this is a **sovereign, mysterious, and irresistible work of God**. That is, just like the wind that no one knows where it comes from or where it is going, the Spirit of God works in the world to bring men to faith. **This is the divine side of salvation**. God chooses unconditionally whom He will bring to faith and save. Even before the foundation of the world – God chose who would be rescued from the Fall and who would not, without respect to their having met any conditions as the basis of His choice. All are guilty, all deserve punishment – no one deserves heaven – all deserve hell. All of our sins – all of our righteousness – means nothing in the face of God's choice. There are no conditions to His choice. In choosing whom He will choose – God does not look to anything in us to recommend us to His mercy. None of your reasons as to whether you are among the elect or not hold any weight at all.

But just as there is a divine side to salvation – **there is a human side**. That is, God chooses – and we must choose. And so in these next few verses Jesus begins to bring that out to Nicodemus. Up to this point He has said nothing about what Nicodemus must do for this new birth to be a reality. And the key word in all this next section is the word **'believe'**. This comes up at least seven times from verses 11 – 21 – believe. To appropriate this new birth, to be born again, born from above, belief is crucial. However there is a huge initial problem. **Unbelief**. This is the problem we see in the next two verses, 11 – 12. *'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. If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?'* John 3:11 – 12

Nicodemus was a teacher of Israel but apparently he was ignorant of what the Scriptures really taught – and here Jesus points out the cause of his ignorance – unbelief. Unbelief is the root cause of ignorance. The problem is not that men cannot believe, it that they will not believe. Look at Romans chapter 1: *For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them.*

For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Romans 1:18 – 21 Men had the truth of God, but refused to believe it – as a result, their thinking became futile and their minds were darkened – in other words, ignorance grew out of unbelief. **Ignorance is the result of unbelief.** That is one reason why all men are responsible before God. If we couldn't help our ignorance, how could a righteous God hold us responsible? But men are not helplessly ignorant – they are willfully ignorant. They do not understand because they will not understand. They won't believe.

Nicodemus says, 'How can these things be?' And Jesus says in verse 11 **'You don't receive what I'm saying'** because – verse 12 – **'You won't believe'**. Nicodemus was willing to believe that Jesus was *from* God – but not that He *was* God. When he came to Jesus he said as much – **'We know that you are a teacher come from God.'** But he was not willing to take the next step and acknowledge that the signs he was witnessing all proved that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God. I think that at the bottom of it Nicodemus was not unlike the rest of us, unwilling to admit that he was a sinner in need of a Savior. His problem was not unwilling ignorance but willing disbelief. His will was engaged to unbelief.

We often think of the effects of the Fall of man in terms of moral failure – that is we do wrong things because we are sinners. But there is a more profound problem the Fall produced and that is the problem of our minds, our intellect, our thinking. Biblical scholars talk about the **noetic effects of the Fall**. That is, **there are intellectual consequences to sin**. As a result of the Fall, our reason is now opposed to God. **The fallen will produces a fallen reason.** This doesn't mean that unbelievers know nothing. The reason is not destroyed. It is rather, given over to sin. An unregenerate mind can know that two plus two equals four. But when it comes to the fundamental issues of the meaning and purpose of life, that is where our reason is most corrupted. The unregenerate mind sees the gospel as folly. *'How can a man be born when he is old?'*

But thankfully Jesus doesn't leave Nicodemus with the problem of unbelief – He gives him the answer to unbelief – **believe** – and He begins to unfold that in verse 13: *"No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven : the Son of Man.* John 3:13 In other words, 'The answer, Nicodemus, is not that you should, by your own effort, get an understanding of heavenly things – the answer is that heaven came down to earth'. The Son of Man, God-incarnate, has invaded your space to make the answer known. Every religious system in the world is man's attempt to break out of the box and find God – ascend into heaven. But God's solution to our problem is to break into the box as the Savior. In effect what Jesus is saying is that you won't find God through some religious process – you can't get into heaven to find the answers, you have to believe in the One who came down from heaven.

And then Jesus gives him a word picture of how this works: *"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.* John 3:14 – 15 The Jews were looking for a Messiah who would be lifted up – but lifted up in a manner entirely different than Jesus indicated. They expected Him to be elevated to the throne of David – not elevated on a criminal's cross. New birth, new life is the impartation of the Divine life of God – but it could not happen apart from the death of the Son of God. The way God works is always life out of death. **The sacrifice of Christ is the basis of the work of the Holy Spirit and the ground of God's gift of eternal life.** And the astounding thing is that this truth is presented throughout the Old Testament, something with which Nicodemus was entirely familiar. But he wouldn't believe.

The story Jesus refers to comes from Numbers 21: *Then they set out from Mount Hor by the way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom ; and the people became impatient because of the journey. The people spoke against God and 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 loathe this miserable food." The LORD sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. So the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned, because we have spoken against the LORD and you; intercede with the LORD, that He may remove the serpents from us." And Moses interceded for the people. Then the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a standard ; and it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he will live." And Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on the standard ; and it came about, that if a serpent bit any man, when he looked to the bronze serpent, he lived.* Numbers 21:4-9

What Jesus was saying to this teacher of Israel was that here in the Old Testament, if you would believe it, is a picture of what is necessary for you to be born again. The serpent's bite is the sting of sin Paul talks about in I Corinthians. Everyone who gets bitten dies – and as we have all sinned, we all die. But the remedy for the bite of the serpent was the exhibition of the destroyer, himself destroyed on a pole or tree, and everyone who looked at that exhibition, lived. This was a type, a foreshadowing of what would happen in history when Christ was nailed to a tree.

What seems repugnant however is the fact that Jesus seems to be referring to Himself as the serpent. How could a snake typify the Holy One of God? That doesn't seem to be a good picture. But note carefully the language in Numbers. It doesn't say that Moses nailed one of those snakes to the pole – it says he made a bronze serpent. It was not the actual thing, but something like it. And the Scriptures tell us that: *For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh,* Romans 8:3 And in 2 Corinthians: *He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.* 2 Corinthians 5:21

The serpent was a reminder of the curse – through that old serpent, the devil, Adam and Eve were seduced to disobey God and all things were brought under the curse. And on the cross, Jesus was made a curse for us as Paul tells us in Galatians 3:13. Moses made this snake out of bronze because in the Bible that is the symbol of divine judgement – the sacrificial animals were slain on the brazen altar – God tells Israel that if they fail to obey Him and go their own way that they would find themselves under the curse and warned them that *'The heaven which is over your head shall be bronze...'* Deuteronomy 28:23 – and we see the Lord as judge inspecting the churches with *'...feet like fine brass...'* Revelation 1:15

And the admonition of God to the snake-bitten people, was not to do anything, but rather to look: *and it came about, that if a serpent bit any man, when he looked to the bronze serpent, he lived.* Don't try to fix anything – just look. Don't fight the snakes – just look. Don't make an offering – just look. Don't pray to the serpent – just look. Don't look at your snake bite – look at the crucified snake. Look away from yourself to the divinely appointed object of faith – look away to Jesus. **We were lost by looking** – the Bible records that: *'...the woman saw that the tree was good for food...'* Genesis 3:6 **And we are saved by looking:** *"Look unto Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth ; For I am God, and there is no other.* Isaiah 45:22

Perhaps nothing illustrates this better than the story of how C.H. Spurgeon came to Christ: I sometimes think I might have been in darkness and despair until now had it not been for the goodness of God in sending a snowstorm, one Sunday morning, while I was going to a certain place of worship. When I could go no further, I turned down a side street, and came to a little Primitive Methodist chapel. In that chapel there may have been a dozen or fifteen people. . . . The minister did not come that morning; he was snowed up, I suppose. At last, a very thin-looking man, a shoemaker, or tailor, or something of that sort, went up into the pulpit to preach. . . . He was obliged to stick to his text, for the simple reason that he had little else to say. The text was *"Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth."*

He did not even pronounce the words rightly, but that did not matter. There was, I thought, a glimpse of hope for me in that text. The preacher began thus: "My dear friends, this is a very simple text indeed. It says, 'Look.' Now lookin' don't take a deal of pain. It ain't liftin' your foot or your finger; it is just, 'Look.' Well, a man needn't go to college to learn to look. You may be the biggest fool, and yet you can look. A man needn't be worth a thousand a year to be able to look. Anyone can look; even a child can look. "But then the text says, 'Look unto Me'. . . . Many of ye are lookin' to yourselves, but it's no use lookin' there. Ye will never find any comfort in yourselves. Some look to God the father. No, look to him by-and-by. Jesus Christ says, 'Look unto Me.' Some of ye say, 'We must wait for the Spirit's workin'.' You have no business with that just now. Look to Christ. The text says, 'Look unto Me.'"

Then the good man followed up his text in this way: "Look unto Me; I am sweatin' great drops of blood. Look unto Me; I am hangin' on the cross. Look unto Me; I am dead and buried. Look unto Me; I rise again. Look unto Me; I ascend to heaven. Look unto Me; I am sittin' at the Father's right hand. O poor sinner, look unto Me! Look unto Me!" When he had gone to about that length, and managed to spin out ten minutes or so he was at the end of his tether. Then he looked at me under the gallery, and I dare say, with so few present he knew me to be a stranger. Just fixing his eyes on me, as if he knew all my heart he said, "Young man, you look very miserable." Well, I did, but I had not been accustomed to have remarks made from the pulpit on my personal appearance before. However, it was a good blow, struck right home. He continued, "and you always will be miserable—miserable in life, and miserable in death—if you don't obey my text; but if you obey now, this moment, you will be saved."

Then lifting up his hands, he shouted, as only a primitive Methodists could do, "Young man, look to Jesus Christ. Look! Look! Look! You have nothing to do but to look and live." I saw at once the way of salvation. I know not what else he said—I did not take much notice of it—I was so possessed with that one thought. *Like as when the brazen serpent was lifted up, the people only looked and were healed*, so it was with me. I had been waiting to do fifty things, but when I heard that word, "Look!" What a charming word it seemed to me! Oh! I looked until I could have almost looked my eyes away.

There and then the cloud was gone, the darkness had rolled away, and that moment I saw the sun; and I could have risen that instant, and sung with the most enthusiastic of them, of the precious blood of Christ, and the simple faith which looks alone to him. . . . And now I can say—

*E'er since by faith I saw the stream
Thy flowing wounds supply,
Redeeming love has been my theme,
And Shall be till I die.*

(C. H. Spurgeon Autobiography, Volume 1, 87-88)

Our gracious Father, Saviour, Redeemer, Lord,

We give You glad, eternal thanks for granting us that life-look that healed us and saved us. Thank you for breaking through our darkness and night, the cloud of unbelief and willful ignorance to see Jesus – to see the cross of Christ, to be healed and to know Your gracious gift of life eternal. We need no other sacrifice, we rest in no other hope than Christ crucified for us, we want no other look than that which gazes on the cross. Forgive us for trying to add anything to Your gracious gift and relying on our own knowledge, deeds, goodness or experience. We were lost by looking away from You – we are saved by looking to You alone. Grant those still under the cloud of unbelief and darkness that one brilliant moment of light to see Your wrath appeased, death destroyed, sin forgiven and their souls saved, so that we would be those who delight in God through Jesus Christ, spreading His joy through the gospel to all people we pray, in the precious, soul-saving power of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.