

The Dialogue Between the Lord and Nicodemus Continues

John 3:9-15

John 3:9-15 - *“Nicodemus answered and said to Him, “How can these things be?”*

¹⁰ Jesus answered and said to him, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things? ¹¹ Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. ¹² If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven. ¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”

Background Notes

Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling body of the Jews at the time of Christ. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, but he was not a legalistic, self-righteous hypocrite, like many of the Pharisees. He came to Jesus as a sincere seeker. Is it possible that you are a sincere seeker? The Lord never turns away from any sincere seeker. If you're sincerely seeking God, you can be sure that He won't turn you away.

The Lord explained to Nicodemus that *“you must be born again,”* or born from above, or born anew, in order to enter the kingdom of God. You must have spiritual rebirth. You must be “born of the Holy Spirit.” That's not something natural or physical. The Lord was talking about new **spiritual** life.

Nicodemus said, *“How can these things be?”* (v9). He really wanted to know what this spiritual change was all about, and how it took place. He wasn't being sarcastic - he really was a sincere seeker. *“Jesus said to him, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?”*(v10). Notice - Nicodemus was not only a Pharisee and a member of the ruling body of the Jews, but he was a teacher, a rabbi. He was a teacher in Israel, but he didn't understand the spiritual change that the Lord was talking about - the spiritual change that was needed to enter the kingdom of God.

The Lord indicated that Nicodemus **should** have understood (v10). The Old Testament Scriptures certainly predicted that when the Messiah came, the Spirit of God would work in the hearts of the people. Listen to God's message through the prophet Ezekiel: *“Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh”* (Ezekiel 36:25-26). Nicodemus should have known this Scripture and its implications.

Notice, by the way, the connection between water and the spirit in this passage from Ezekiel. Based on this Scripture (and other Old Testament Scriptures where the water and the work of the Spirit are mentioned together), some Christians

interpret the “water” mentioned in John 3:5 as symbolic of “cleansing.” This was a Scripture that, as a rabbi, Nicodemus would certainly have known.

The Lord went on to say, *“Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness” (v11)*. The Lord, the prophets and the disciples were testifying to the truth. They were speaking what they knew was true, and what the Lord had seen.

In the phrase *“and you do not receive Our witness,”* the word “you” is plural. We don’t pick that up in English. If you know the Greek language, or read some commentaries, you would see that the word “you” is a plural word. Jesus was speaking to Nicodemus when He said, *“We know and testify what We have seen,”* but when He said, *“you [plural] don’t receive our witness,”* he meant all the rulers of the nation. You - the religious leaders, the Sanhedrin, the rulers of Israel – **you** don’t receive our witness.

The Lord went on to say, *“If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?” (v12)*. All the words “you” in verse 12 are plural, so the Lord was not specifically speaking to Nicodemus. In essence, Jesus was saying, I have talked to the people of Israel about the **basics**. I have used earthly stories like the parables, and easy-to-understand natural illustrations of earthly things (such as the wind illustration that He used with Nicodemus), yet they didn’t understand these things. How, then, will they understand heavenly things, or deeper things? How will they understand things like the incarnation, or the doctrine of the Trinity, or the coming work of redemption? How would they be able to understand these deeper truths, if they didn’t understand the natural, earthly, basic things that the Lord was speaking about?

Doctrinal / Teaching Points

1. The Son of Man descended from heaven.

“No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven.” (v13).

The title “Son of Man” was the Lord’s favorite designation for Himself. It was a Messianic title from Daniel 7. One emphasis in this title was the **full humanity** of Christ. Jesus is **fully God**, and He is also **fully man**.

As the Son of Man, however, Jesus was unique among men: He had come from heaven. No human being had ever ascended to heaven and come back to relate heavenly things, except the Son of Man who had come from heaven. Therefore Jesus knew all there was to know about heavenly things, about the spiritual realm, and about spiritual things.

Do you believe this truth? Do you believe that Jesus was not only Man, but also the divine “Son of Man” from heaven? He was not just born - **He came from heaven!** He spoke of heavenly things, things we cannot figure out or reason out by mere human intelligence or experience. We need divine revelation. The Son of Man came to communicate these truths. The Son of Man descended from heaven.

2. The Son of Man was lifted up from earth.

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life”(v14-15).

The Son of Man came from heaven to earth to reveal heavenly truth – but He also came to die. The phrase “lifted up” refers to our Lord’s crucifixion. Notice – Jesus said that He **must** be lifted up (v14). There would be no salvation for anyone if Jesus Christ had not been lifted up.

When the Lord said, *“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up,”* He was referring to the Old Testament event in Numbers 21. This event took place near the end of the forty-year “wilderness wanderings” of the children of Israel. The people murmured and grumbled against Moses, and complained about the manna that God had given them for food, so God disciplined them by sending fiery serpents. The venom of these serpents was poisonous, and many people died.

When the people cried out to the Lord that they were sorry, the Lord told Moses to mold a serpent out of bronze, put it on a pole, and lift it up in the midst of the wilderness camp. Anyone who was dying from the snakebites could simply look at the bronze serpent that was lifted up on the pole, and they would be healed. The “caduceus,” the medical symbol of snakes around a pole, likely began long before that symbol was used by Greek healing cults. It likely originates with the event in Numbers 21.

Why did God choose that method of healing? Why would He have Moses lift up a bronze model of a fiery serpent, and people looking on it would be healed? Why didn’t God just tell them to “Say a prayer” or “Be really repentant”? Why look at a snake on a pole? Answer: Because it was to be an illustration, or a “type,” or a picture of the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. That is what Jesus meant when He said, *“as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up.”*

Another important question: Why a *serpent*? Wouldn’t it have been more symbolic if God had said to Moses, “Put a bronze lamb on the pole” – to represent or picture the “Lamb of God”? Why a *snake*? The reason is that when Jesus was lifted up, He was not only lifted up as the Lamb of God - He was lifted up as the **sin bearer**. That is the point of the serpent. When Jesus was lifted up on the cross, He was dying there for our **sins**. To put it in another way: when Jesus died, He took on Himself the curse of sin.

2 Corinthians 5:21 says, *“For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”* The point is not that the Lord “became sin” intrinsically, but when He died on the cross He was bearing our sins – so God’s judgment came down on Him **as if He were a sinner**. On the cross, Jesus Christ took care of the whole problem of sin. He took upon Himself the curse of sin when He died as our substitute. It was as if **He** had sinned! The Lord Jesus died on the cross for the sins of the world. That was the reason why the Son of Man was lifted up from earth.

Practical application

1. Have you “looked at Jesus -- lifted up”?

Once again, verse 15: *“that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”*

Do you want eternal life? Do you want to be delivered from perishing? Do you want to be saved from eternal ruin? Well, the Bible gives the answer to that question right here: *“whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.”* Whoever believes in Jesus as the One who was “lifted up” for our sin will not perish, but will have eternal life.

Notice how verses 14 and 15 go together: *“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”* In other words, we must believe in Jesus **as He was lifted up** – that He was dying to pay the penalty for sin. Have you looked at Jesus as He was lifted up?

Believing that Jesus was the perfect Model is not enough. Believing in Jesus as a great Miracle Worker who did all those miracles is not enough. Believing in Jesus as a great moral Teacher is not enough. Even believing that Jesus was the Son of God is not enough. You must believe in Jesus as the sin-bearer. You must believe in Jesus as He was lifted up **to die for your sins**. Have you “looked at Jesus - lifted up”?