

SALVATION THROUGH THE EYES OF JESUS
(John 3:3-15)

We have been looking at this visit which Nicodemus paid to Jesus one night during the first week of his public ministry. Now Jesus had been in and out of the temple during his childhood and at least on one occasion when he was twelve years old, he made an impression on his elders when he sat with them and discussed the Scriptures. They must have been astonished at his grasp of the weightier matters.

But as far as we know Jesus made no public announcements. He didn't perform any miracles or cause a public stir during his minority. He deferred on all of that while he was a child because his time had not yet come.

But when his time came he marched into Jerusalem and threw down the tables of the money changers and told them to take their business outside the temple. Actually, this was a demonstration which asserted that the temple was not Herod's Temple; it was not primarily the Jew's temple; but it was His temple. (Malachi 3:1)

Now, we are not given the details, but Jesus began to perform many miracles there in Jerusalem. And it says, many believed on him when they saw the miracles which he did, but Jesus did not commit himself to them. (John 2:23, 24) That is, he did not commit himself to them in a saving way. These were people who believed something about Jesus. They believed that his miracles were from a supernatural

source. They were convinced of the authenticity of his miracles. But they were not yet convinced that he was the Messiah. Perhaps he was a prophet. Perhaps he was a great teacher endowed with the gift of miracles. But they were not convinced he was the Savior of the world.

And one of these people who witnessed his miracles was Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. Nicodemus was an old man (John 3:4) at this time. And apparently the Sanhedrin sent him out one night to investigate this man Jesus. And so, Nicodemus came to Jesus and said,

We know that thou art a teacher come from God, for no man can do these things that thou doest, except God be with him.

John 3:2

And in next 19 verses of the discourse, Jesus tells Nicodemus the essentials of salvation. Now, Nicodemus didn't come to Jesus asking how to be saved. But Jesus told him anyway. Nicodemus came to Jesus probably with eschatological questions about the kingdom. (John 3:3) But with great love for Nicodemus, Jesus instructed him as to the theology of salvation.

Nicodemus was not qualified to enter the kingdom. Though he had every Jewish credential; he was a descendant of Abraham; he was the preeminent teacher of Israel (John 3:10); he had risen in the ranks of Judaism to be called a ruler of the Jews (John 3:1); he was a fundamentalist Pharisee; yet, he was not qualified to enter into the kingdom.

And in the course of this great discourse with Nicodemus, Jesus lays out the fundamentals of salvation.

Does anyone want to know how to be saved? Then here are the very words of Jesus. Do you want to hear how to be saved from the Savior himself? Then, here you are. This is evangelism 101. This is straight from the horse's mouth. When can study Paul and Peter and the other apostles, but in this passage we have salvation according to Jesus.

And we have seen that the first qualification for "seeing" the kingdom (John 3:3) or "entering" the kingdom (John 3:5) is the new birth.

Regeneration

- I. Regeneration is something that happens to you.

Except a man be born again.

You notice the passive voice used here. This indicates that the action is done by someone or something other than Nicodemus. Nicodemus is merely the recipient of the action.

Example: If I say, "I was stung by a bee," what I mean is that I was just there and a bee came up and stung me. You can easily see that I was the recipient of the action, but the actor was a bee.

And the new birth is not something that I do to myself. It is something that is done to me or for me.

This is why this act of regeneration is described as a birth. Now we are all aware of how physical birth works. We have nothing to do with it. We are born conceived and born physically by the will of someone else. And we are completely passive in the process of our physical birth.

And regeneration is described as a birth because it also is by the will of another.

But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

John1:12, 13

II. The source of regeneration is the Holy Spirit of God.

We see in John 3:3 that we are passive in the process of the new birth. That means that we are not the acting force behind it. So the question would be, "Who or what is the acting force behind it."

And of course we have seen in John 1:13 that we are born of God. And Jesus makes this point very clearly to Nicodemus.

Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.

John 3:5

Now we saw in a previous message that the source of regeneration is obviously the Holy Spirit of

God. We see this not only in verse five, but also in verse eight. It is the Holy Spirit that is described as being the source of the new birth. (You will notice that the Holy Spirit is described by comparing Him to the wind in verse eight.)

Some people like to say from verse three that water baptism is a co-source with the Holy Spirit of the new birth. In other words, the Holy Spirit must do his work and you must be baptized in order to be born again. However, we demonstrated that it is very unlikely that the word water would have conjured up the image of baptism to Nicodemus. The word water was an agent of purification to the Jews. They had waterpots available at all times to accomplish all the water purification ceremonies.

So, it seems best to associate the word water with washing or cleansing. And this is exactly how the New Testament describes regeneration.

Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost.

Titus 3:5

What we are doing here is showing that the efficient cause of regeneration is the work of the Holy Spirit. We have a beautiful example of this in the book of Acts. Paul was speaking to a group of women one day down by the river side.

And a certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira, which worshipped God,

heard us: whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul.

Acts 16:14

So, we see that regeneration is something that happens to you and the source of regeneration is the Holy Spirit of God. He is the actor in regeneration and we are the ones who are acted upon.

III. Regeneration is a sovereign act of the Holy Spirit.

If we did not have the Word of God, we could still certainly surmise that God does not regenerate all human beings. We know by experience that some men live their entire lives without being born again. There are human beings who come out of the womb cursing God and go to the grave cursing God. And it is evident that they never have a change of heart.

If we believe that God has created a hell for the wicked and if we believe that some people in fact go to such a place (and the Bible clearly confirms this) then we must admit that God does not regenerate all human beings. God is in sovereign control over the affairs of the hearts of men. And the Holy Spirit implants new life to whom He wills. And this is what Jesus intimates when he discusses the movement of the Holy Spirit in verse eight.

The wind bloweth where it listeth . . .

John 3:8

You know, when it comes to the wind, sometimes it blows and sometimes it doesn't blow. And sometimes you see it rustling the leaves in a tree

over here, but not over there. And the wind blows where it wants to blow. And so does the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the sovereign God. And God regenerates at his sole discretion.

IV. Regeneration is the sovereign impartation of life.

This is the nature of regeneration. It is the giving of spiritual life. This is the very meaning of a birth. Life springs up where formerly there was no life.

Now Nicodemus was a dead man spiritually. There was no life in him. Oh, he was walking around. There was physical life. But, there was no spiritual life. And in order to enter the kingdom of God, it was necessary that God create in him a spiritual life.

This concept is dramatically explained in Ephesians.

And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins.

Ephesians 2:1

Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace are ye saved)

Ephesians 2:5

And so, regeneration is the instantaneous imparting of life. The Bible often states it as the impartation of light because when he gives us life, we are able to see the light of spiritual knowledge and understanding.

For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

II Corinthians 4:6

- V. Regeneration was a known concept in the Old Testament.

You will notice here that Jesus scolds Nicodemus for not knowing these things. This would imply that Nicodemus should have been aware of these things from the Old Testament. And of course if you read the Old Testament at all, you will certainly discover that the condition of the heart was a central focus.

Wherefore the Lord said, Forasmuch as the people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear towards me is taught by the precept of men.

Isaiah 29:13

Of course, one of the most important rituals for Israel was the ritual of circumcision. But this was just a picture of true circumcision which was a circumcision of the heart. And God told Israel in the Old Testament that He would circumcise their hearts and cause them to love God. (Deuteronomy 30:6)

Regeneration was always a crucial concept even in Old Testament times, and Nicodemus should have been alert to things of the heart.

Now Jesus is instructing Nicodemus in the doctrines of salvation. He has told him about regeneration. And now he begins to tell Nicodemus about another great concept, and that is the atonement.

Atonement

I. The necessity of the atonement.

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up.

John 3:14

You will notice that it says the Son of man must be lifted up. There can be no entering the kingdom without and new birth. And there can be no new birth unless the Son of man is lifted up.

Now when the people of Israel sinned while they were in the wilderness, God sent a plague of poisonous snakes upon them. And these poisonous snakes were so numerous that many of the people were bitten and they died. And the people asked Moses to beg God for relief from the snakes. And God told Moses to make a brass snake and hang it on a pole in the midst of the camp. And whoever was bitten by a poisonous snake, if they would look at the brass snake on a pole, they would be healed. And sure enough, when they were bitten, those that looked on this brass snake were healed.

Now this brass snake was a type. It was a type of Jesus Christ. And as we now know in retrospect, Jesus was to give himself to die. And he was to be

hanged on a tree and lifted up above the earth. And whoever looks upon Jesus in faith shall be healed.

Now, we are talking about the necessity of Jesus being lifted up, for it says, “even so must the Son of man be lifted up.”

It seems that the clear teaching of Scripture is that God, because of his divine righteousness and holiness, cannot simply overlook the sin of his creatures. Rather, he is required by his sense of justice, to punish sin. And it is more than just a sense of justice. By his very nature, God hates sin with a divine hatred. And he is determined to visit sin with divine punishment. And he is not merely determined to do it, but he is compelled to do it by his very nature. This is why the Scriptures state without equivocation that God’s wrath will be visited on sinners.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness.

Romans 1:18

God would violate his own nature and his own perfections if he did not punish sin. And therefore, when a man sins, the wrath of God is activated. Now God is not required to execute judgment immediately. But he is required to execute judgment eventually.

Example: The Court may convict a man of murder. But the state then sets a day of execution.

And with God there is a day of execution. It is that final Day of Judgment where the wrath of God will be poured out upon sinners.

But until that day, men keep sinning. And the Bible says that God is storing up wrath. Sinners think they are getting away with it. They steal, and they don't see any punishment immediately inflicted. They commit all kinds of adulteries and murders and they don't see any punishment immediately inflicted. And they keep on sinning day after day. Look what God says about that:

But after they hardness and impenitent heart treasurest up unto thyself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God.

Romans 2:5

Now notice that when sinners sin, they are treasuring up wrath. It is like there is a giant vat in heaven and when you sin, the wrath of God is stored in this vat. And the more you sin the more wrath is stored.

But also notice that when the wrath is poured out on the sinner in the Day of Judgment it will be righteous judgment. God will be so right to pour it out on the sinner. And because of his nature, God must do right. He must pour his wrath out upon the sinner. God cannot do wrong. He must do right. And in the Day of Judgment he will do right and he will pour wrath upon the heads of sinners.

So why does our text say that Jesus must be lifted up? The answer is that He must be lifted up if

sinner are to be set free. If it weren't for sinners, there would be no need for Jesus to be lifted up. If God were content to let all sinners be punished, then there would be no need for Jesus to be lifted up.

But the fact of the matter is that God has determined to love sinners. We don't know why. We just know that he has chosen to do so. But that puts God in an untenable position. He wants to forgive sinners, but he is compelled by his own nature and by the definition of right and wrong to punish them.

And that's where the work of Jesus comes in. Jesus agreed to take the punishment upon himself. Jesus agreed to be lifted up and punished severely on behalf of sinners. And the wrath that was stored up for sinners was poured on Christ instead. And this paved the way for God to forgive sinners. God's justice was satisfied by punishing our representative and now He is free to forgive us.

Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.

Romans 3:25, 26

So, we see that Jesus must be lifted up.

- II. The purpose of the atonement as to sinners.

You will notice the first word of verse 15 – “That.” This suggests that there was a reason why

Jesus must be lifted up. His death had a very specific purpose as to sinners. It was in order that whosoever believeth should not perish.

III. The extent of the atonement.

That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

John 3:15

Now some people see in this verse a universal atonement. And the word that jumps out at them is the word “whosoever.” And they see the same word in John 3:16. And so, they teach that Jesus died for everyone.

But I see in these verses a limited atonement. It doesn’t say everyone will have everlasting life. Rather, it says, everyone who believes will have everlasting life.

Example: Let’s say you had a bag of marbles and some of the marbles were red and some were blue and some were white and some were purple and so forth, and a child was ready to throw the bag off the bridge into the bottom of the lake. But then a passerby stopped and said, “Wait, whichever of those marbles are red, I will pay you for those and then you can throw them off the bridge.”

Now I ask you, is the passerby rescuing all the marbles or is he rescuing only some of the marbles? He said, “Whichever.” However, he limited his choice by designating only the red ones.

And Jesus said, “Whosoever believes.” The word “whosoever” sounds universal until you limit it by the word “believes.” And so, by saying “Whosoever believes,” Jesus has limited the atonement to a very exclusive group of people – believers.

Now Arminians and Roman Catholics believe that the atonement of Jesus Christ only made salvation possible for the sinner. But we believe that it not only made it possible, but it secured it. Jesus died so that believers should not perish but have everlasting life.

Now I know that the people for whom Christ died here are called believers. But they could have been called any number of things. They could have been called “sheep.”

I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep.

John 10:11

Those for whom Christ died could have been called “the Church.”

Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.

Acts 20:28

Those for whom Christ died could have been called “his people.”

And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.

Matthew 1:21

Here in John 3:15 and 16, John uses the phrase “whosoever believeth,” but far from suggesting a universal atonement, it is a phrase that refers to an atonement that is limited in scope.

IV. The method of appropriating the atonement.

That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

John 3:15

So, God has ordained eternal life for you. Christ has died to take your penalty and make eternal life possible for you. And, the Holy Spirit applies life to your heart by the new birth. It is only then that you are equipped and thereby inclined to receive it. And the divine method that God has designed for you to receive this life is by believing.

Now remember that believing is simply receiving. There is no doing in believing. Believing is the opposite of works. Believing is simply the instinct of the regenerate soul.

Example: Just as a newborn babe has the instinct to suck in the mother’s milk, the regenerate soul has the instinct to suck in or receive the Word of God.

And so, John the Apostle says, “That whosoever believeth in him should not perish.” He could just have easily have said, “That whosoever has been born again, shall not perish,” because believing is the natural and certain result of being born again.

It is interesting to me that in this discourse Jesus discusses the new birth (John 3:3, 5) before he discusses believing (John 3:15, 16). And I think that gives us a clue as to the logical order of things.

Nevertheless, believing in the saving work of Christ is a necessary and indispensable link in the process of salvation. True faith separates the saved from the lost. It separates those who are born again from those who have only been born once. It separates those for whom Christ died from those who had no part in it. It separates the sheep from the goats. It separates the perishing from those who have eternal life.

Believing is the outward sign of an inward reality. It is the sure sign of a new birth.