

The Son of Man Must Be Lifted Up

John 3:8–15

Kuyper puts it, “There is not one square inch in all creation where Jesus Christ does not point, and say, ‘Mine!’” Sproul says it this way: “There is not one rogue molecule in all of creation, or God is not sovereign.” Today we see, and bow to sovereign God, who rules all things well for our eternal good, and his eternal glory.

John 3:1–15 — 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 are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” ³ Jesus answered 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? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?” ⁵ Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter 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 marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

⁹ Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

PRAY

This is a brilliant trinitarian passage describing the work of the One God. What is described theologically in Ephesians 1 we see worked out by the triune God — this is how he accomplishes his redemptive plan: God the Father, out of his redeeming love, elects from eternity those whom he delivers and adopts into his kingdom. God the Son comes in human form to pay sin's price and redeem those the Father has elected. The Holy Spirit brings about the spiritual birth of those chosen

2

by the Father and redeemed by the Son. He brings, he baptizes them into union with Christ. Watch for the beautiful, gracious work of our *God in three persons* as we go.

Now, let's consider the sovereignty of God for a moment. Consider the irresistible power of him who holds all things together by the power of his word. Be still and know this God, who alone says, "I will it; I bring it to pass," in **Isaiah 14**. And in **Isaiah 43**, "I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins." How can you resist the will of him who, in every way, holds you together. Do you feel the weight of your dependence on him who determines that your lungs take in the next breath, and that your heart provides one more pulse of blood to sustain your very being. How can you resist him?

The spiritual birth that is required to enter the kingdom is accomplished by the Holy Spirit according to the sovereign counsel of the triune God. The act of being born again originates in heaven with God, and is accomplished by God. It does not enter the mind of man to bow to God, nor does man have the capacity to make himself be born again any more than you had the capacity to *will* yourself to be conceived and born physically. As you did not choose your physical parents, you do not choose your heavenly Father. Salvation is of the Lord, as Jonah 2 says.

John gives us this illustration from nature about how the Spirit works to cause one to be born from above. The wind blows where it wishes, where it will, and you hear it, but you don't know where it comes from or where it goes, this is how the Spirit works. We can see evidence of the wind when trees move. We can hear it, rushing by our ears. We can feel it. But where it comes from as a mystery to us. Where it goes is unknown to us. This is the sovereignty of God in salvation.

God uses the proclamation and publishing of the gospel as a means to make dead hearts live. This is why we preach, again and again, the Gospel as the means God has appointed. Those who argue against the sovereignty of God in salvation may attempt "*gotcha*" statements like, "If you believe God is sovereign and salvation, and he's going to save who he will, why even tell the gospel." Such an argument fails to grasp, first, the means through which God works — means that involve not only the preaching of the gospel, but also the prayers of God's people. And secondarily it fails to grasp that way and work of the Holy Spirit cannot be known to us in advance. We can see, and feel, and perhaps hear the work of the Spirit in a moment in time — and we can and must plead with God to send the Spirit to reap a harvest of souls to eternal life. We can see evidence of a transformed life,

3

but we cannot transform it. I cannot predict or produce his work any more than I can stand in a field and produce and predict a cool breeze to blow on my hot face in the summer.

Our assignment is to faithfully use the means of the proclaimed gospel regularly and randomly so that when the wind of the Spirit blows on those he chooses, deaf ears will be unstopped to hear that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; that he was buried and raised on the third day according to the scriptures, that he has ascended to his rule and reign, and that he is coming again to judge the living and the dead. So, in the words of the hymnwriter, Give the winds a mighty voice: Jesus saves! Waft it on the rolling tide: Jesus Saves! The Spirit blows where he will, opening blind eyes to see Jesus, who alone saves.

The fact that God at this time retains the Lamb's book of life to his divine counsel is why we are taught the random distribution of the seed of God's word in the parable of the sower in Matthew 13. Since we do not know where the Spirit will blow or whom he will cause to be born again, we sow Gospel seed everywhere as we go, because we don't know if it is falling on rocky ground, among the thorns, or good soil. We simply declare his glory among the nations, and his wonders among all people. Salvation is of the Lord.

Is this stunning to you? It is stunning to Nicodemus. How can these things be? How can one be born again? I don't understand what you are describing about the Holy Spirit and being born again. I've studied. I keep the law. You seem to be telling me that those things don't get me into the kingdom. I'm a Jew; I'm born into this, right? I don't understand."

Then an admonishment from Jesus. "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?" You're a theologian? You are well respected? People look to you — and yet you don't understand what it means to be born from above? Jesus's response to him relentlessly addresses the heart of the problem without regard for social protocol. Nicodemus began with deference to Jesus, "Rabbi, we know you are from God." Jesus does not defer to Nicodemus as though some genteel social etiquette would help heal the desperate sickness of his soul.

Jesus is revealing himself, entrusting himself, to Nicodemus as the Messiah. Nicodemus acknowledges that he is from God. Jesus clearly states the only way that he can move into the kingdom is that he must be born from above. But Nicodemus remains dull and without understanding.

4

When Jesus says, “**Truly, truly... we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen,**” he is making sure that Nicodemus knows that he is the Messiah, he is the second person of the Godhead who **descended from heaven**, who is the **Son of Man** in **Daniel 7:13**. He has the sovereign right to establish who enters his kingdom. He has exclusive heavenly authority. When he says that new birth is necessary he’s not speaking from what he learned, he’s speaking from what he ordains. Notice that he has taken Nicodemus to the scriptures that we call the Old Testament to show that he is the Messiah. All the word of God points to Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus gives the new heart that Ezekiel wrote of. The Spirit comes and makes dead bones live.

Note the very important distinction that Jesus makes next. “The reason that you do not embrace Jesus as the Messiah is **not** for lack of knowledge. “**We speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen**— the triune God says, This is how I save; this is what I determined from before the foundation of the world: I give my children a new heart; they are born from above. This is what I know, because it is what I ordained. I told you this; I’ve shown it to you in the scriptures. It is not just a lack of knowledge, but of rebellion and unbelief: “but you do not receive our testimony. If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?” **You do not receive; you do not believe.** The heart of stone, which is the natural condition of the human heart, cannot learn its way out of rebellion and unbelief. A new heart must be given that loves God and desires to walk in his ways, and faith must be given to believe.

Mainline denominations that have embraced a social gospel that chases education, or teaches people how to be nice, or get a better job, and then assume that God will be pleased with both them and those they have so catechized — they are in danger of the greater judgment because they have not dealt accurately or faithfully with a deep need of the human heart. The human heart cannot be repaired. It must be saved.

Nicodemus is a stand in for all of us, because all of us are rebellious and unbelieving. But Jesus has compassion on him and is going to make it clear again how he must be saved, and he’s going to go back to the scriptures during the Exodus, in **Numbers 21**. *Lord, so have compassion on all of us.*

Look with me in **Numbers 21**. [Gen, Ex, Lev, Numbers] **Numbers 21:4–9** — ⁴From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. ⁵And the people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up

5

out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.” ⁶ Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. ⁷ And the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸ And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” ⁹ So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

God has brought Israel out of slavery. He supernaturally feeds them, clothes them, protects them, dwelling in their midst— and they are impatient, stiff-necked, and rebellious. They dare to speak against God and his servant Moses. This is not the first time. **God sends a righteous judgment** on them of fiery, venomous serpents. Many people died as a result of the poisonous bites.

This is the stuff of nightmares, but it gives us an idea of what the judgment of God on sin looks like. This particular judgment is moderated as God extends a day of grace to them. The punishment has the desired effect, and they confess their sin and plead for mercy. And God graciously relents. This is the way that God provides to escape the fiery bite of judgment: Moses, craft a bronze serpent, lifted up on a pole, and everyone who has been bitten is to look to it, and he will live. So Moses makes the bronze serpent, lifts it up to a pole as God instructed, and when the righteous bite of judgment came from a snake that God sent, the one who was bitten is to look at what God provided, and live. There is no medicine to purchase. There is no treatment to be performed. What God has provided they are simply to take on faith. They are to obey God and look away from themselves, believing that he would save them. Look and live! Look and live!

God sovereignly established the means to save them from his judgment, which they could not achieve on their own. They could not save themselves; there was no human remedy. All they could do is look away to what God provided to save them. They had to act in faith based on God’s promise.

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. Nicodemus, the Scriptures all point to me as the only way to have eternal life. I must be lifted up. That phrase **lifted up** was a reference to Roman capital punishment on a cross. In our day, we might refer to the punishment of the death penalty by some phrase that captures the event. They’re gonna give you the chair for that. They’re going to give you

6

the needle for that. Those are references to the punishment of death. In first century Rome, it was, they will lift you up for that. It captured the horrendous reality of crucifixion on a bloody cross as a man was nailed to it, and it was lifted up. The Son of Man must be lifted up on a cross, that Colossians one describes as a peacemaking cross. The way of redemption that God has provided is that Jesus came, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

As Moses lifted up the serpent and they were to look away from themselves, abandon any self-cures, any home remedies, and look in faith to what God provided, so it is with Jesus and the eternal life that he provides. You cannot cure yourself because there is no remedy from God's righteous judgment, except that someone else pays it. Jesus is that someone and he paid it and finished the work on his cross. Look to him and live. Look and live. There is no other way. This is what God has provided.

Perhaps the wind of the Spirit is sovereignly blowing through your heart and life today. Is he opening your eyes to see the grace and beauty that are in Jesus? Are you feeling the fiery sting that sin and rebellion produce? Unbelief, sin, rebellion — these will ultimately produce the only thing they can produce: Death. Are you now ready to turn from death of rebellion and sin and look to Jesus? You have only to look away to Christ, believe that he will save you, and live. Whoever believes in him will have eternal life. Turn to him and be saved, for he is God, and there is no other. This is the message of the Gospel, and so we proclaim it in hope of the Spirit's effectual work.

PRAY