

Anticipating Christmas

The Exalted Savior

John 3:1-16; Numbers 21:4-9

December 28, 2025

HDBC

It's time to wrap up our Christmas sermon series. We've been looking at O.T. passages that **Anticipate the coming of Jesus**.

***Warrior** who would defeat Satan for us and secure our victory.*

***Substitute** who would step in our place and pay our sin debt.*

***Suffering Servant** who would suffer and die for our salvation.*

Today we'll look at one of the more tragic events that happened to the people of Israel prior to them entering the promised land. It's one of those O.T. events that most of us read, scratch our heads, and then tend to move on and forget. **Not Jesus**.

He not only knew the account, but spoke of it in an important conversation with a religious leader. The account is found in Numbers 21. But first I want you to turn to John 3. We know that this chapter contains one of the most well-known verses in all the Bible, John 3:16. It may be the most important verse in all the Bible. If I could have only one verse to share, I would choose it. But it was uttered by Jesus in the middle of conversation with Nicodemus. Let's take a moment to understand the context here. Then we'll jump over to Numbers 21.

1. The Seeker of Truth (1-2)

What do we know of Nicodemus?

- 1) **Pharisee** – Religious leaders who believed in literal interpretation of OT. For them it was all about following rules. They were rigid, harsh, and even mean-spirited. Quite frankly, they tended to be unhappy, bitter, controlling people. Little joy in their lives. When I hear the word **Pharisee** I think of **Ebenezer Scrooge**.

2) Ruler of the Jews

That means he was part of the **Sanhedrin**. They were a group of men who were like a religious supreme court. Very powerful group.

3) Curious about Jesus

He came to Jesus by night. Almost certainly because he did not want to draw attention to the fact that he was seen with Jesus. Jesus was considered a radical, young, controversial teacher who was shaking things up with his message of the kingdom of God. To the average Pharisee, who was interested in maintaining power and control over the people, Jesus was a major threat.

Yet, Nicodemus was drawn to Him. He was curious. He wanted to know more.. Notice what he said to Jesus. *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.* **It reveals** a couple of things.

First, it revealed his perspective. He was looking at life through the eyes of religion. Religion is all about learning how one can reach up to God . . . thus the focus on teaching. Jesus was a teacher and Nicodemus liked that. The Pharisees were all about knowledge. For them the **head** was more important than the **heart**. If you could just **know enough**, you might make it to God.

Second, he had noticed something different about Jesus. **He did things that could only be done** by someone who had God with him. He was partially right. Jesus did not simply have God with him, He was God. **Nicodemus was closer to the truth than he knew.**

A similar thing happens today. Even among those who run in very anti-God circles there are those who develop an interest in spiritual things. They are often nervous about others knowing it. Manifested in a number of ways; **curiosity about God, concern about death and what comes after it, sudden interest in going to church**

2. The Mystery of Salvation (3-9)

Nicodemus wanted to talk religion. **Jesus would have none of it.** Notice how he totally brushed off the flattering words & the invitation to get into a theological discussion. He cut right to the point. Don't you love that! *Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.*

What a surprising statement! It shook Nic's world. His entire perspective was that one could only see the kingdom of God if they **could earn it; do enough good, keep enough laws, obey enough rules.**

That statement still surprises people today. Many people think that they must earn their way into favor with God to go to Heaven. **Not so,** according to Jesus. It is not a matter of how religious you are, but of Having the right relationship. That is what being born again is all about. It is about establishing a new relationship.

On October 30, 1980, our daughter, Julie was born. Her birth instantly brought her into a permanent relationship with her parents.

February 11, 1987, Joy was born. Instantly, she was brought into a permanent relationship with her parents.

July 13, 1988, Jana was born. Instantly, she was brought into our family and there was a permanent relationship with us.

That is what the new birth is all about. It does not get us into a religion, but **establishes a new relationship.** It is **only through the new birth** that you can have a relationship with God. Notice Jesus' words: *Unless one is born again.* Pretty exclusive. It's the only way.

If the kingdom of God is about relationships, not religion, and it is, and **if the new birth is the only way to have a relationship with God,** and it is, **then it is pretty important to understand the new birth.** **Jesus explains it in verse 6.** *That which is born of flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.*

That's it! Science can understand and explain physical conception and birth. When certain things happen in a certain way, conception and birth follow. Nicodemus knew that and was trying to put the **new birth** into that same scientific category.

Jesus quickly explained that the new birth is spiritual. It has nothing to do with our bodies or even with our minds, but with our spirits. **People are triune beings:** body, soul, spirit. The new birth happens at the spirit level. Quite literally it is your spirit coming to life. *Though we were spiritually dead because of the things we did against God, he gave us new life with Christ.* Eph. 2:5

With the new birth you are instantly brought into a right relationship with God. Sins are forgiven & you are given a new identity with Him. According to verse 9, Nicodemus was still struggling to grasp it. So, Jesus offered an O.T. illustration that Nicodemus would remember.

3. The Illustration of Jesus (10-16)

Jesus challenged Nicodemus' inability to grasp this truth. So, He took him deeper. Vs.13. This is pivotal in their conversation.

The **Son of Man** had to come from Heaven to earth in order to secure salvation for all who would be saved. Salvation had to be initiated in Heaven, rather than on earth. Or, to put it another way, **salvation had to start with God, not by man.** Jesus is the one who came from Heaven to be the basis of salvation. He then pointed to an event in Israel's history which pointed to his birth, life and death. *As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up.*

Jesus did a shocking thing! He compared Himself to a serpent, a snake. Let's turn back to Numbers and read the story.

4. The Exalted Serpent (Numbers 21:4-9) *Read the text*

Wow! What a story! Just a few short verses, but it was a powerful event in their history. On the surface it was simply about the judgment of God

on a people prone to whine and complain. But Jesus made it clear that it was much more. **Their death was a picture of the judgment of God on sin. That bronze serpent that Moses made was a picture of Jesus who was to come.** The healing of the people was a picture of forgiveness and salvation.

Five observations about the historical event and what they illustrate.

1) The people sinned against God.

They became selfish and began to blame God for their predicament. They were guilty and deserved judgment from God.

Spiritual Application: All people are sinners & are guilty before God. None of us are righteous. We have all fallen short of God's standard. As the people in Moses' day were guilty, so we are guilty.

2) God sent deadly snakes as a judgment on their sins.

The coming of those deadly snakes was not some random act of nature. The text makes it clear that they were sent by God as a direct result of the sins of the people. The death from the snakes was directly tied to their sin. Sin brought judgment and death.

Spiritual Application: Because of our sins, we deserve the judgment of God, spiritual death. The wrath of God is not simply a product of a broken world. It is a direct judgment from God on sin.

3) God provided a remedy as an act of grace.

Note four important things about this remedy:

a. It was supernatural.

It came from God not **people**. **Moses did** not form a committee to come up with the idea of a bronze snake attached to a long staff. This was God's idea and it would require an act of God for it to be effective. A bronze snake on a staff had no power to overturn the effects of a poisonous snake bite.

b. It was sufficient.

Moses didn't say to look at the bronze snake and then go home and rub olive oil on the bite. He didn't tell them to do anything other than look toward the remedy. It and it alone was sufficient for their cure. **In a similar way, Jesus is sufficient for our salvation. We don't need faith in Jesus plus anything. It is faith alone in Christ alone!**

c. It was sure.

Everyone who looked to the bronze serpent was healed. EVERYONE. Not a single person was disappointed. **All who look to Jesus are saved. No one is disappointed. No one comes away without receiving the salvation promised by God.**

d. It was simple.

It simply required an act of faith to look toward the bronze serpent. **In a similar way our response to Jesus is simple. It requires no physical strength, mental greatness, deep wisdom, or emotional power. It requires a simple act of faith.**

4) The remedy was made available to all in need.

It was lifted up so that it would be available to all who were dying. It was not formed and then stored away. It was lifted up for all to see.

Spiritual Application: The fact that snake was placed on a staff is a picture of Jesus placed on a cross. Just as the snake was lifted up so all could see, Jesus was lifted up to die on a cross for all to see and for history to record. Anyone in any generation can be saved.

5) The remedy required a response of faith by each person.

For a person to be cured, they had to look toward the bronze snake. In other words they had to exercise faith that God could and would heal them. **The act of looking was an act of faith.** If a person was an unbeliever and refused to look to that image for their healing they would die. It required a response.

Spiritual Application: Spiritual salvation requires a response of faith. **The Bible repeatedly speaks of faith as the requirement for our salvation.** Believing that Jesus is the Son of God who died on a cross and was resurrected from the death. Belief that Jesus is Lord and worthy of my allegiance. Yielding of myself to Him as Lord, repenting of my sins and trusting His forgiveness.

That response happens at a point in time when a person makes a conscious commitment to follow Jesus. This is what Jesus was communicating to Nicodemus when He said *you must be born again.*

And speaking of Nicodemus . . . that encounter with Jesus changed his whole perspective and his entire life. No longer would he need to worry about following a rigid set of rules and regulations, he simply needed to have a **relationship with God through being born again.**

And he was born again. In John 7 we find him defending Jesus before the other religious leaders. In John 19 we find him helping Joseph care for and bury the body of Jesus.

He became a follower of Christ. And it started with clearing up some misconceptions about the kingdom of God and how one might get into it.

He began with the belief that it was all about religion . . .

He learned that it was all about a relationship.

He began with the conviction that he had to earn his way in . . .

He learned that he simply needed to be born again.

As the people of Israel were invited to look to the serpent on the pole and live, we are invited to look to Jesus and live.