

2019 John's Gospel Study
Lesson 6

THE SON OF MAN MUST BE LIFTED UP

John 3:1-15

Key Verse 3:14-15

"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."

In John chapter 3, Nicodemus appears and has a dialogue with Jesus. As the passage goes on, from verse 11, he disappears and Jesus seems to give his teaching not just to Nicodemus but to all people. The author of this gospel, John, made the purpose of his account very clear in John 20:31, which says, "But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." The goal of today's passage is the same. From Nicodemus, we can learn about the root problem of all men. We can also learn the way to eternal life which our Lord Jesus teaches. Through this passage, may God help us to know who Jesus is and receive life by his name.

Look at verse 1. "Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council." Who was Nicodemus? First, he was a Pharisee. In Jesus' time, the Pharisees referred to a group of conservative religious leaders. Their number was about 6,000. In order to become a Pharisee, one had to be brought up in a family of good reputation. One had to be thoroughly trained by law. Nicodemus was a man of the Pharisees. Second, he was a member of the Jewish ruling council. In those days, Israel was a theocratic nation, and the Jewish ruling council, which was called the Sanhedrin, had supreme authority over national administration, legislation and justice. The Sanhedrin consisted of 71 life members including the high priest. To be a member of the Sanhedrin meant to come up top of the social class. Also, later, John 19:39 says that Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds, for Jesus' burial. The myrrh and aloe were a highly expensive perfume, and that he brought such a large amount tells us that he must have been extremely wealthy. Further, in John 3:10, Jesus said of him that he was Israel's teacher. In short, Nicodemus was a man of integrity and of success, highly respected by his own people. Truly, he was a victor among all his people, true to his Greek name "Nico-" ("victor"), "-Demus" ("the people").

He was an idol for many young people in Israel. He did not seem to have any problem in life. Yet what did he do? Look at verse 2. "He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." He came to Jesus at night. Why at night? It may have been a news of some sensation that Nicodemus, the icon of the time, visited the unknown preacher, Jesus. If this were to

be on the front page of the Jerusalem Times the next morning, Nicodemus might have been deeply embarrassed. In order to avoid people's attention, he secretly visited Jesus at night. However, from the perspective of John's gospel, the night refers to the dark condition of his inner person (John 1:5). Later, when Judas betrayed Jesus and went out, the author mentions that "...it was night" (13:30b). In spite of his great success in every aspect of his life, Nicodemus' heart was dark.

God created men as spiritual beings. God set eternity in the hearts of men (Eccl 3:11). Therefore, unlike animals, men can never be happy with just physical satisfaction. In his book "Confessions", St. Augustine said, "Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee." Nicodemus spent sleepless nights, and one night he got up from his bed and came to Jesus on his luxurious Mercedes chariot. That he visited Jesus without appointment at night when people had to rest tells us that he was desperate.

How did Nicodemus address Jesus? "Rabbi." The word "Rabbi" means "a teacher of the Torah." It also means "my lord." Nicodemus called Jesus as "my teacher," and "my lord," while, in fact, he was a Rabbi and Jesus was just an unschooled former carpenter. Why did he come to Jesus? Verse 2b says, "We know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." He saw Jesus' miraculous signs. KJV says he saw "miracles." He was interested in miracles and in Jesus' power to perform them. At that time, the Greeks looked for wisdom and Jews demanded miraculous signs (1Co 1:22). Perhaps Nicodemus wanted his inner problem to be instantly solved by Jesus' miraculous power. Whatever the case, Nicodemus's coming to Jesus revealed his humility and courage.

Jesus wanted to help Nicodemus. Jesus looked through him and understood him. Look at verse 3. "In reply Jesus declared, 'I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.'" Verse 3 is a doubly emphasized sentence which begins with the phrase, "I tell you the truth," and using two negative terms makes it a strong affirmative statement. What was Nicodemus' fundamental problem? It was that he could not see the kingdom of God. Here the word "see" is "hor-ah-o" in Greek which also means to see with the mind or to experience. In verse 5, Jesus indicates that "to see" is the same meaning as "to enter". In short, to see the kingdom of God means to enter the kingdom of God, to savor it, to enjoy it, and as we can see in verse 15, to have eternal life.

Why then could Nicodemus not see the kingdom of God? It was because he was not born again. What did he need to do? He had to be born again! Nicodemus was a man of success. He secured all things, achieved everything - money, fame, power, honor - which other people thought they would be perfectly happy if they had them. Yet Nicodemus felt something missing in his heart. He felt a deep emptiness. His soul was troubled and fearful of the future. What was missing in his heart was a right relationship with God. This could not be gained by his rigorous life as a Pharisee. As

he did not have the right relationship with God, "God's hand was heavy upon him and his strength was sapped as in the heat of summer" (Ps 32:4).

The reformer Martin Luther was brought up in a godly family. He was an exemplary student studying liberal art and law. He did not seem to lack anything. Yet he could not overcome his inner anxiety and fear of God's judgement which was heavy upon his heart day and night. He knew that he did not have the right relationship with God. He knew that he was not good enough for salvation. When he was 22, travelling on foot, he heard a crash of thunder and shouted, "St. Anna, I will live as a monk!" He gave up studying law and entered an Augustine monastery. He led an austere way of life confessing sins many times a day. His priest was so bothered by his confessions and said that he should gather all his sins together and come to him just once a day. Luther became a priest yet he did not have peace in his heart. He visited Rome and confessed his sins ascending 28 steps of the Lateran Cathedral on his knees, because people believed their sins would be forgiven by doing so. But even after ascending the steps he did not feel any change in his heart. On top of the steps he exclaimed, "What is the point of doing all these!" Yet when he was reading Romans, he rediscovered the truth of justification through Romans 1:17. He received salvation and eternal life not by his own righteousness but by accepting God's righteousness. Nicodemus was like Martin Luther of the 1st century. In spite of his extraordinary struggles and success, his sin problem remained unsolved. His soul was plunging into a bottomless pit of despair.

In order to see the kingdom of God what did Nicodemus have to do? He had to be born again. Then, what is it to be born again? It literally means to be born a second time. In order to be born a second time, what has to come first? He had to die to himself. Dying to oneself means to accept the fact that "I cannot solve my inner problem with my effort, I cannot attain salvation through my struggle, I am totally corrupt, utterly bankrupt, and I am a beggar before God." To accept this truth means to die to oneself. The gospel means "good news." Yet why are people offended when they hear the gospel? It is because the gospel cuts through our pride. What the gospel says is this: "You have no hope no matter how much you may struggle. There is no goodness in you at all that makes any contribution for your salvation. You are totally bankrupt." Therefore, those who are eventually saved are not the able, not the smart, but the humble who honestly admit their sinfulness. Nicodemus could not accept his total failure. So he says in verse 4. "'How can a man be born when he is old?' Nicodemus asked. 'Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!'" He said that being born again was nonsense.

But Jesus patiently and kindly explains to him. Look at verse 5. "Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit." We can be born of water and the Spirit. Here "to be born of water" refers to the work of the Spirit that cleanses men's sin. Long time ago, Ezekiel prophesied about this. "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and

put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." (Eze 36:25, 26) To cleanse our sin from our hearts by water is the work of the Spirit, and changing it into a new heart is also the work of the Spirit. Therefore, in the following verses 6-8, Jesus refers to the work of water and the Spirit as simply the work of the Spirit.

Look at verse 6. "Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit." Flesh comes from the flesh. A reborn spirit comes from the Holy Spirit. This is truly a miraculous work of God. Christianity is not mysticism yet it is full of mysterious things. Spiritual rebirth is like how the wind blows. Look at verse 8. "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." Chicago is called the windy city. P. Ron said it means a city of the Holy Spirit! When the wind blows, tree branches are shaken and flurries of snow fall aside. When we see this happening we know that the wind is blowing. Yet we do not know where the wind began and where it will stop. We do not know when and to what direction the wind will blow again. The work of the Spirit is the same. It is unpredictable. The work of the Spirit in one's heart only can be perceived afterwards.

There was a man. Night after night he went to a club which was in a basement floor of a building. He enjoyed drinking and dancing in the club so much. One day he studied the Bible and the Holy Spirit worked in him. A few days later, he was passing by the night club. He was disgusted by the stink that was coming up from the basement. He realized all kinds of dirty smells, like those from a dead body, were coming up from the club. He could no longer go near the club. What had happened? His inner person had changed into a man who hates the dirty things and loves holiness. No matter how much a pig may be trained it can never sit down and eat with a serviette on his breast. Even if it is washed it will go back to its wallowing in the mud (2Pe 2:22). One cannot make a pig behave like a man through training. Only when it is changed into a man will he behave as a man. Spiritual rebirth is the same.

Most of the work of the Holy Spirit is quiet yet powerful. It changes one's deep-rooted disposition and inclination. It changes the desires of one's heart. In this way, one becomes a totally different person. When one's inner person changes, everything changes. Through changing one's heart, one is born again, becoming a Christian who has salvation and eternal life. A changed heart refers to a new heart (Eze 36:26) and the heart on which God's law is written (Jer 31:33). Nicodemus strived hard through education and religion in order to make progress, pushing himself upward in the hope to solve his inner problem. He struggled hard with his own efforts for salvation. Yet Jesus teaches him a totally different way, which is through spiritual rebirth. As Israel's teacher, Nicodemus should have understood Jesus' teaching. Yet he did not accept and said, "How can this be?"(9) If he does not accept what actually happens in this world, the spiritual rebirth, it will be hard for him to understand even though Jesus speaks about heavenly things, such as the coming of the new heaven and new earth and life in the kingdom of God (11-12).

Jesus understands Nicodemus and continues to teach him with an incident which Nicodemus knows well. Look at verse 14. "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up..." The incident in which Moses lifted up the snake happened about 1,400 years before Christ and it was written in Numbers chapter 21. One day, on the way to the Promised Land, the Israelites were walking in the wilderness. They forgot God's grace of coming out of Egypt and spoke against God and Moses. God sent fiery snakes among them. Those who were bitten by the venomous snakes died. The people repented and asked Moses to intercede for them. God told Moses to make a bronze snake and put it up on a pole so that anyone who was bitten could look at it and live (Num 21:6-8).

Think about the situation! The earth was filled with snakes, and in order not to be bitten, the people had to look down. Realistically, anyone bitten had to see a doctor for detoxification. That if they would just look at the snake on the pole they would be healed does not make sense at all. God did not tell them why they had to look at the bronze snake. He simply said that whoever trusted in God's word and looked at the snake would live. Of course, here, to look at the snake does not just mean like a spectator casually looks at it. It means to firmly look at it trusting in God's promise of salvation. What happened to those who looked at the snake on the pole? Numbers 21:9 says, "So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived." When they simply believed God's way of salvation and obeyed, they lived.

Why did Jesus remind Nicodemus of the incident? Look at verse 14 again. "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up." This verse talks about what Jesus will do. What is the most important work Jesus has to do as the Messiah of the world? It is to be lifted up. Jesus also clearly mentions this in John 12:32, 33 which says, "But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself. He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die." His being lifted up refers to his death on the cross. Jesus would not be assassinated with a sword by a disappointed people who expected a political Messiah. Jesus would not be stoned to death because of blasphemy by the religious leaders. He had to be condemned to death at the Roman court so that he might be crucified according to the Roman way of execution. Jesus had to be lifted up according to God's sovereign plan.

Yes, Jesus had to be lifted up high on the cross like the bronze snake on the pole. Just as whoever looked at the snake on the pole lived, whoever looks at Jesus hung on the cross will live. This is the way of salvation God presented men so that those who are bitten by the venomous snake of sin will live. Look at verse 15. "...that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." Because of sin we all became like loathsome snakes. We should be crucified because of our own sins. Yet in our place, Jesus was lifted up and was hung like a loathsome snake. It was to give eternal life to whoever believes and looks at him.

Let us think about practical directions this passage gives us. First, for those who are not yet born again. Darren Hildrow is a Bible shepherd in London, England. Many years ago, Darren's father Bob was an evangelist. He was so bold that he preached the gospel even on the street. He invited many people to his home and talked about the gospel. Yet, in fact, he was not born again. He did all those things out of his own passion. These days Darren prays for his father that Bob may accept Jesus as his personal savior. Even though one may be active in the ministry teaching others the Bible, it is possible that one is not born again.

In the meantime, some extreme people put other believers in difficulty by asking questions such as, "When were you born again? What date and what time? What word of God made you be born again?" Normally, we do not know when and how we are born again. C.S. Lewis, the famous English writer and Christian apologist, had weeks of discussion about God with his friend J. R. R. Tolkien who wrote "The Lord of the rings." Yet he was not convinced of God's existence. One day, he rode a motorcycle with his brother to a zoo. Later he said, "When we set out I did not believe that Jesus is the Son of God and when we reached the zoo I did." He was born again on the motorcycle. The moment and situation of conversion can vary yet there is a clear border line for everyone.

How can we be born again? Of course it is entirely by God's grace. Yet in accepting the fact, there are things that we must do on our part. Firstly, we must study the Bible and understand the meaning of Jesus' death on the cross. Without this knowledge of God's word, no matter how long we may look at Jesus on the cross, nothing will happen.

Many years ago, through Bible study I came to understand why sin was the root problem of the world including myself. This understanding was an eye opening experience for me. We must study and logically understand why the only solution to our sin problem is Jesus' death on the cross. Secondly, in addition to our understanding, we must look at Jesus who was crucified for our sin. Trusting in God's promise of salvation we must firmly look at Jesus. Then the Holy Spirit will work through our faith and change us to be born again. Spiritual rebirth is not just an emotional or psychological experience. It is a spiritual experience of perfect change. What gives you the confidence that you will wake up tomorrow morning as Christians? It is because our spiritual rebirth is irrevocable and permanent.

Second, for those who have been born again. What should we do as those who have been born again by God's grace? Firstly, we must give thanks to God for the grace of salvation, and continue to live by faith. In verse 15, "that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life", "to believe" means to continue to believe right now. Eternal life is not just what we will receive when we leave this world, but we already have and can enjoy right now. Not many believers enjoy eternal life in this world. How great is the eternal life we already have! How joyful and happy it makes our lives! How free and courageous we become when we live without fear of death!

I was traveling many miles last December/January. Some people asked if I was not afraid of flying so often. I was not. I did not tell this to my wife, but at one moment during my flight, up in the air, I thought, "How nice it would be if my plane went missing! Then I would be with the Lord!" You may think it weird and how painful it would be if the aircraft crashed! Yet in fact when you crash you do not feel anything. I had a car accident when I was a senior in high school. I was hit by a car. All I remembered was that I had been crossing the road, and woke up in the hospital. At the time of the crash you don't feel anything. Up in the air, I thought, "Oh, how good it is that I will instantly be in the kingdom of God!" Yet soon I repented of my selfishness. "If I go to heaven right now, how lonely would my wife be? What about my children? What about God's flock of sheep that I have to look after! God invested many years in me, and I am trying to run away from all my responsibilities as a Bible shepherd!" How hard these days, to raise even one disciple of Jesus. I repented of my selfishness and decided to live long. Last month, I signed up at Xsport fitness and began to exercise. Yes, as Bible shepherds we must live long and pray to feed God's flock of sheep with all we can.

Those who are sure of eternal life never get tired. When we are sure of eternal life we do not store things up in this world. One senior missionary said that before we die, we must return all our wealth to God and God's people, and leave just \$5,000 to our children. Why \$5,000? He said it's for the funeral. May we have such a great faith like him! If we have eternal life, what more do we need? Eternal life is not a fanatic's dream. It is exactly what the Bible promises us. We can sum up all the promises in the Bible into one promise, and that is eternal life! That we have been born again and received eternal life is not a theory. It is real. May we enjoy eternal life here and now. With the faith and joy of eternal life, may we preach the gospel to campus students without fear. In season or out of season, may we pray earnestly and teach the word of God. May we pray and challenge ourselves to achieve weekly 500 one-to-one Bible studies.

In conclusion, Nicodemus strived to earn salvation through a life of making progress and development, pushing himself up to a higher level of morality and religion. Yet God's way of salvation is different. It is to believe in Jesus who was lifted up on the cross. When we believe, the Holy Spirit makes us be born again. Think and understand why Jesus was lifted up on the cross. Look at Jesus hung on the cross. God's grace of spiritual rebirth will surely come upon us. We praise Jesus who was lifted up on the cross. May God help us to live as witnesses of Jesus with the assurance of eternal life! Amen!