

Night School, part 2

(John 3:9-21)

(preached 6/24/18; Pine Grove BC Sun AM)

Introduction

On August 5, 1966, a construction project began in New York City..

That project would continue for 5 years until on July 19, 1971, the twin towers of what would be called the World Trade Center were finished.

The high rise buildings would soar over the landscape of lower Manhattan and at that time in 1971, these two buildings were the largest buildings in the world.

Tower 1 was 1,368 feet and Tower 2 was only 6 feet shorter and for 30 years, those towers would mark the landscape of New York City until the terrorist attacks of 2001...

You can see those two towers in the background of the outline on the screen this morning..

The reason I chose that picture is that these towers represent two large structures that stood so close together but never met in the air..

They were side by side but each were their own separate building and each had their own place in the New York skyline...

As we think about the idea of biblical salvation, two truths dominate the idea of what it means to be saved...

In fact, these two truths really define what salvation is..

They are the twin towers of how a person goes from being lost in sin to being saved by God...

Last week, we looked the first 8 verses of John 3 at what we can call tower 1 of salvation truth and that is the idea of being born again...

In fact, the word “born” is used 8 times in those 8 verses.

And the reality of salvation is that saved people are those who have been born again, not of their own will but simply by an act of God...

Just like none of us determined when we would be born as babies, no Christian determined when he would be born again unto salvation in Christ.

Jesus told Nicodemus that being born again is an act of God apart from any human accomplishment....

Any human work or good deed.

In fact according to John 3:8, a person has a better chance of changing the direction that the wind is blowing than being able to bring himself spiritually alive to salvation..

In other words, Jesus clearly told Nicodemus that salvation, eternal life, entrance into the kingdom of God was impossible by anything that Nicodemus could do...

Now, that shook Nicodemus' world...

If you recall, Nicodemus was a Pharisee and not just any Pharisee, Nicodemus was the teacher of Israel...

He was an expert in the OT.

He was a strict follower of the laws of God..

Yet, Nicodemus had taken the law of God too far because he thought that keeping the law was his ticket to heaven..

He assumed that heaven was only for those who were the best of the best...

Yet, Jesus is now telling him that no one gets into heaven unless he is born again from above by the power of God..

In other words, Jesus is dropping the bombshell that all of Nicodemus' obedience to every little letter of the law is worthless in terms of his salvation...

The truth of salvation is this..

No one works or wills himself into heaven..

Instead, it is all a work of God...

Now, we can't know for sure but I can just the blood rushing out of Nicodemus' face..

His knees buckling a little bit..

To think that he has worked all his life and he is no closer to heaven than when he started must have crushed his soul...

Yet, Jesus does not let him off the hook..

Jesus does not tell him it will be okay...

Jesus simply gives him the truth on this dark night, and lets Nicodemus wrestle with it...

However, that salvation trust of being born again from above by the power of God is not the only truth of salvation...

That truth tower has a twin that stands right beside it...

And in verses 9-21 of John 3, Jesus is going to help Nicodemus see that second truth of salvation...

And the key word of verses 9-21 is going to be the word “believe.”

In fact, we are going to see the word “believe” 7 times in these verses this morning...

And the reality is this...

The twin towers of salvation are this...

God must cause us to be born again from above, but we must believe the truth of the gospel...

This is where we find that salvation has a heavenly element and a human element...

On one hand, God is fully responsible for salvation from beginning to end, and on the other hand, we are fully responsible to believe the truth about Christ...

These are the twin towers of salvation...

God is fully sovereign in salvation but we are fully responsible to believe.

And both of those truths are what Nicodemus needed to hear..

Salvation was not matter of working his way into it...

Salvation was not a matter of improving his standing with God..

Salvation was a work of God on the human heart that causes man to believe in Him...

Nicodemus didn't need more good works, he needed to be born again from above with a new heart that was capable on believing in Christ alone to save him...

And that is also what we need to understand as well in our own lives..

If you want to be saved, God must cause you to be born again and you must believe the gospel..

Now, let's see how Jesus explained this to Nicodemus in verses 9-21 of John 3...

We will look at it in 3 parts..

Let's begin with the picture of unbelief in verses 9-12..

I. The Picture of Unbelief (9-12)

Verse 9..

***9 Nicodemus said to Him, “How can these things be?”
10 Jesus answered and said to him, “Are you the
teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?
11 Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know
and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept
our testimony. 12 If I told you earthly things and you
do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you
heavenly things?***

As we jump back into verse 9, let's remind ourselves of the setting...

It is the Passover in Jerusalem...

Jesus is just beginning his ministry...

He is still a nobody in Israel.

He has been living for 30 years under the radar in Israel in the nothing town of Nazareth..

He has kept every law of the OT.

He has lived in perfection.

He has lived more obediently than the most devoted Pharisee, yet no one knows his name other than his family and friends..

But the time has come for Jesus to go public with his ministry...

And so he has left the cover of Nazareth and went to the only true prophet of God, John the Baptist to be baptized and begin his public ministry...

But as he begins his 3 year ministry, he heads to Jerusalem for the Passover along with his family and his early followers...

When he gets to Jerusalem, he is outraged with the false worship in the temple there..

He is outraged that the temple is now a corrupt business where the religious leaders of Israel rob people by selling them overpriced animals to offer as sacrifices..

He is outraged that the religious leaders cheat the people with outrageous money exchange rates...

So in chapter 2, Jesus cleans out the temple with a whip, which was an incredible miracle considering the size of the crowds that would be there at Passover...

And though that cleansing was good, it drew attention to Jesus..

First, the religious leaders show up to question him about his display of authority and power...

But after that confrontation cools off, Jesus is visited by another religious leader...

However, he comes alone and he comes at night...

And last week, we met this leader named Nicodemus..

And for 8 verses, we watched him come to Jesus and have his entire view of how to be right with God shattered..

Well, Nicodemus isn't buying it...

As you see in verse 9, he simply can't understand how being saved isn't a result of what he can but rather a result of God causing him to be born again...

So he says the only thing that an unbelieving person can say, which is...

How can this be?

You see this is the picture of unbelief...

It hears the truth but struggles to embrace it...

It hears the truth but refuses to acknowledge it...

It hears the truth but looks for ways around it..

Nicodemus had just been told that his entire worldview was wrong, and all he can say is how can this be?

Yet, that is the picture of unbelief...

It struggles to make sense of a world that excludes the existence and sovereignty of God...

Nicodemus is at a dead end, and he is simply overwhelmed that all he ever thought was right is actually wrong...

However, Jesus is not very sympathetic to him..

He is even amazed that someone with such a knowledge of the OT thinks that salvation comes by works...

So he tells Nicodemus...

You are THE teacher of Israel and you don't understand that salvation is a work of God on the heart..

You don't understand that salvation requires a second birth?

You don't understand that salvation is a matter of being born again?

What Jesus is implying is simply that an expert in the OT should know that no one can be saved by good works..

In fact, no one in the OT was saved by keeping the law...

And in case you don't believe me, think about Abraham who was the father of Israel...

Abraham was a saved man, but was Abraham saved by good works?

No Genesis 15 makes it clear that Abraham was saved not because of anything that he did but because he believed in the promises of God..

OT salvation was always a matter of believing in God..

It was never a matter of being better than you neighbor..

God has never saved anyone on the basis of good works, and Nicodemus should have known that as an expert of the OT and teacher of Israel...

But that is how corrupt the Jewish religion was in Jesus day...

It had the grace of God to save on the basis of belief and turned it into salvation on the basis of human accomplishment...

Nicodemus was wrong as the teacher of Israel..

Salvation was not a matter of good works, it was a matter of God's grace..

And Nicodemus was in danger personally if he refused to believe that simple truth...

Jesus even tells him in verses 11-12...

IF you don't believe what I am saying about how salvation is a matter of being born again from above, how will you understand anything about God?

And that is true...

In other words, if you don't understand how God saves people, how will you understand anything else about God?

So, the ball is really in Nicodemus' court at this point in the conversation that night...

And what must Nicodemus do?

He must move from unbelief to belief...

And that is exactly what anyone must do who wants to be truly saved...

So let's move from the picture of unbelief to the promise of belief in verses 13-18...

II. The Promise of Belief (13-18a)

In verse 13, Jesus begins to lay out Nicodemus must believe in order to be saved...

Verse 13..

13 No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man. 14 As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; 15 so that whoever [d]believes will in Him have eternal life.

In verse 13, Jesus affirms his deity...

He is not just another rabbi...

He is not just another earthly teacher...

Jesus is from heaven...

Jesus is God in the form of a man.

Jesus is not offering just another religious opinion..

Jesus is not just another god among many gods..

Jesus is the God of heaven who has come to earth..

And then in verse 14, Jesus makes a reference to the cross...

He doesn't come out and say exactly what will happen to him, but he does tell Nicodemus that he will be lifted up..

And then he uses an OT illustration that Nicodemus would know about...

So take your Bibles and turn with me to the book of Numbers...

It is the 4th book of the OT...

And find chapter 21 in the book of Numbers...

We may not get much further than this verse this morning but this will be very helpful to those who ask what a person must believe in order to be saved..

So, let's look at verse 4 of Numbers 21...

When we arrive at verse 4, the nation of Israel has been freed from slavery in Egypt and are on their way to a land of their own...

However, Israel is a nation with a short memory, and though God has miraculously freed them from bondage, they are still filled with complaints against Him..

Verse 4..

***4 Then they set out from Mount Hor by the way of the [f]Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the [g]people became impatient because of the journey.
5 The people spoke against God and Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no [h]food and no water, and [i]we loathe this miserable food.”***

Israel is the child who is never pleased no matter what you do..

As a treat, you take the kid to Bojangles, but when he gets there, he wants Zaxbys..

Well, this is the attitude of Israel..

God has brought them out of hard labor in Egypt..

They are no longer under cruel Egyptians masters..

They have freedom...

They have food as God is feeding them bread from heaven, but none of that is remembered by Israel..

All they are concerned about is how long it is taking them to get to their land...

So they begin to complain to God...

And what does God do?

Verse 6...

6 The Lord sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.

Now that should tell you how seriously the Lord takes the sin of complaining and grumbling..

He takes it so serious that sometimes God sends immediate judgment into your life to stop it...

Well, that certainly was the case for Israel...

Verse 7...

7 So the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned, because we have spoken against the Lord and you; intercede with the Lord, that He may remove the serpents from us." And Moses interceded for the people.

Take note of what complaining actually is..

According to verse 7, complaining is a form of speaking against the Lord...

So Israel sees their sin after they feel the pain of judgment in the form of snakes that bite and kill...

So they go to Moses and ask him to go to the Lord in hopes that he will remove the judgment...

Verse 8...

8 Then the Lord said to Moses, “[j]Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a standard; and it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he will live.” 9 And Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on the standard; and it came about, that if a serpent bit any man, when he looked to the bronze serpent, he lived.

In what may seem to be an unusual act, God tells Moses to make something that looked like one of the deadly snakes and put it on a pole in the community of Israel...

And the instruction was clear...

If a person gets bit by one of the snakes, all he had to do was come to the serpent that Moses made and look up at it and he would be headed and live..

Though that may have seemed odd to Israel, it was God's instruction to them if they wanted to avoid dying from a snake bite.

So Moses makes a bronze serpent, puts it on pole, and it become a way of survival to anyone in Israel bitten by a fiery serpent.

Now flip back to John 3..

Verse 14...

14 As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; 15 so that whoever [d]believes will in Him have eternal life.

Just like the bronze serpent was lifted up and put on a pole in Israel, Jesus will be lifted up and put on a cross...

And just like the snake bitten Jews who found life by looking at the bronze serpent, sin-bitten people will find life by looking to Jesus on the cross..

In fact, if you don't look to Jesus on the cross and believe in the forgiveness that the cross provides, you cannot be saved..

Were there some snake bitten Jews who refused to look at that bronze serpent on the pole in the book of Numbers?

Well, the Bible doesn't tell us that, but I could certainly imagine someone in Israel who refused to look up at that serpent in order to be healed..

Think about this...

A man gets bitten while out working in the field that day and he comes home to take care of the bite..

He tells his wife and kids about the bite, and they tell him..

“Dad, you are going to die. There have been so many people who have died from that same bite recently.”

But guess what dad?

We got great news.

Moses made a way for people to live...

Just head down to see him, and he will pull out this stick with a bronze snake on it and when you look up at it, the bite will go away..

And then imagine the dad saying this..

“I ain't going to leave work and go and look up at some sane that Moses made and put on a pole. I will be alright in the morning.”

And though his family pleads with him to go and put his trust in that snake on a pole, he lays down and never gets up again..

As crazy as that sounds, I think that was a very possible scene in the book of Numbers...

And do you know why that is a very possible scene?

Because it is a very likely scene today...

Dad, you are a sinner and you are going to die from that sin..

But guess what?

God has made a way for you to be healed from your sin..

Look to Jesus on the cross and believe in the forgiveness that it provides to the guilty sinner and you can be saved and not have to die..

And then hear that dad say...

I ain't going to put my faith in some man who died on a cross 2000 years ago...

That is ridiculous..

I will be alright when I die...

I have done way more good stuff than bad...

The point that Jesus was making to Nicodemus is this...

You are not saved by believing in the good works that you have done..

You are saved by belief in the work that Jesus will do by being lifted up on the cross to forgive guilty sinners..

Now to be fair to Nicodemus, we must remember that Jesus isn't calling Nicodemus to look back to the cross..

In fact, Jesus is telling Nicodemus this a few years before he is lifted up on a cross..

But the instruction is clear...

Salvation is not a matter of believing in yourself and all your good works...

Salvation is a matter of believing in Christ.

You see, the Israelite who was bitten by a snake in the book of Numbers had a choice...

He could believe in himself and his power to overcome the snake bite, or he could look outside himself and put his trust in the word of God which told him to look at a bronze snake on a pole for healing..

That same choice faces you today...

I know that you know you are snake bitten with sin and living on borrowed time...

And the choice is real clear...

You will either believe in yourself and your good works to save you or you will look outside yourself for help...

And let me tell you something...

Help for your sin will never come from within...

Help for your sin must come from without...

So stop believing in yourself, and start believing in the one who was lifted up on a cross to remove the sin that you cannot....

Conclusion

I feel for Nicodemus.

He had probably lived an incredible life of obedience to the law of God..

He was probably the holiest man you would ever meet.

He was probably the smartest man you would ever talk to..

He was probably the man that everyone in his family admired..

He was the guy who had everything together and in order.

Yet, all of his neat little worldview was absolutely and positively wrong.

All of his good works were filthy rags before God.

All of his outward religion had never transformed his heart...

All of his long robes and his seats up front in the synagogue were not impressive to God.

There are many Nicodemus' in our area of the world.

There are many Nicodemus-like pastors in pulpits this morning who like to look the part and love the praises of man, but whose hearts are filled with unbelief...

There are many Nicodemus-like Sunday school teachers who brag about their love of the word of God but aren't filled with a love for God.

There are many Nicodemus-like people in the pews of churches who love to look like religious people but their religion is empty because their hearts are far from God.

And there are many Nicodemus-like people in Christianity who say they believe in Jesus but the truth is that they believe in their own ability and good works to get them to heaven.

And the sad reality of their misplaced trust will hit them when they stand in the presence of Christ and he tells them to depart because he never knew them...

If you are a Nicodemus this morning, follow his example and come to Christ...

Dont stay where you are.

Dont let your pride keep you in chains..

Come to Christ.

Stop believing in your own goodness to get you to heaven..

Stop believing in your outward show of religion to get you to heaven.

Stop trusting in the fact that you are better than most people..

Heaven's gates are open only to those who trust fully and only in Christ to get them in...

The gate to heaven is too small for you to try and squeeze your good works in.

You must repent of your sin and put your trust in Christ..

Only then will be able to fit in the door of heaven.

Let us pray.

III. The Penalty of Unbelief (18b-21)

