

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Jesus said: ***"And 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"*** (John 3:14-15).

By night, a prominent man came to visit Jesus. This man was Nicodemus, who was a Pharisee and a member of the 70-member Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin.

Nicodemus came by night. He came in secret and with great fear. He was afraid, because if he was caught with Jesus, he could lose everything. Despite his fear, he came anyway since he had been deeply impressed by Jesus' teaching and His signs. Yet, he still wasn't sure about Jesus. So, he thought he must visit Jesus to find out if his first impressions were valid or not. So, he came to the source.

First, a little about the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin consisted of 70 men who were high priests, elders, or scribes who acted as a Jewish supreme court. The high priests and elders were among the Jewish sect called the Sadducees, who were known for not taking seriously the Old Testament on many points, the most prominent being the resurrection of the dead. For that reason, as the youth song goes, the Sadducees were sad, you see. For the most part, the Sadducees were worldly men.

Yet, among the high priests and elders of the Sanhedrin were also the scribes, who were among the Jewish sect known as the Pharisees. Unlike the Sadducees who cared little for Scripture, the Pharisees professed to accept all the books of the Old Testament and they were well versed in Scripture.

Although the Pharisees took the Old Testament seriously, they had reduced the observance of the Law to the performing of outward works. So, sins of thought were not counted as sins. Only sins of word and deed were counted as breaking the Ten Commandments.

As a group, the Sanhedrin opposed Jesus. They saw Jesus as a threat. Despite this, Nicodemus was deeply impressed with Jesus and wanted to learn more from Him. So, he came in private – *and by night* – to see Jesus.

Now, this was not the first conversation Jesus had with a Pharisee. Normally, the Pharisee would attempt to trick Jesus into a false teaching, which never worked. But this conversation was not met with any hostility or rejection. Instead, Nicodemus begins by complimenting Jesus. ***“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”*** (John 3:2).

Nicodemus is rather polite. He was extremely curious. From a distance, he had seen some of these miraculous signs. You could say, Nicodemus had a spectator faith. At first, he was fine blending in with the crowd, but eventually he realized that wasn't good enough.

Unlike the others, Nicodemus had to investigate. He had to learn more. He believed that what he saw and heard could not be done unless God was with Jesus. To Nicodemus, this proved that Jesus was a prophet sent by God.

But Jesus did not want Nicodemus to stop there. Yes, Jesus was sent by God the Father. But Jesus is not merely a prophet among prophets sent by God. In fact, the preaching and signs were intended to confirm that Jesus is the promised Messiah in whom alone salvation and eternal life is found. Jesus is not merely a teacher sent by God, but the Savior of the world, who is Prophet, Priest, and King.

Jesus says, ***“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God”*** (John 3:3). To Nicodemus, Jesus was talking in riddles. “He can't mean what I think He means!” No, Jesus isn't talking about literally being born again from your mother's womb. Jesus was speaking of re-birth through Holy Baptism when ***“one is born of the water and the Spirit”*** (John 3:5), through which the Spirit works saving faith. What Jesus was teaching him was the power of faith!

You see, without Jesus, we are only human flesh in a fallen sinful condition. We were all born with the sinful condition, which was passed down to us through Adam and Eve. We are held in bondage to sin. But to those who are ***“born of the water and the Spirit,”*** God gives them new life from our fallen sinful nature.

As Nicodemus was pondering on what this all means, Jesus says to him: ***“Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again’”*** (John 3:7). You see, being born again is not something we do. Being born again is something that is done to you – and only by God.

But Nicodemus says: ***“How can these things be?”*** (John 3:9). Jesus replies: ***“Are you a teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?”*** (John 3:10). You see, Nicodemus, I am speaking of faith. This is nothing new. Remember Abraham? He and his wife left their home country with nothing – and from nothing, God made for Abraham a great nation (Genesis 12:2). And ***“Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”*** (Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:3).

Moses, too, lifted up the serpent in the wilderness among the dense, slow to learn, rebellious children of Israel. They were so rebellious that God sent serpents to go and bite them. Many of them died. After all, the wages of sin is death. But eventually, the people said to Moses: ***“We have sinned, for we have spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord, that He take away the serpents from us.’ So Moses prayed for the people”*** (Numbers 21:7).

Moses prayed to God and God answered him by giving him instructions on how to save the people. 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”*** (Numbers 21:8). Moses did this. And this does seem rather odd. Put a snake on a stick? Hey, isn’t that the form that Satan took in the Garden of Eden? Yet, it is. And that is the point.

Now, this bronze serpent isn’t something that gives a lot of hope, because the snakes still come. God never took away the serpents. But God does give His people a way out, a way of salvation, so that even though they were bitten, the bite did not kill them. Whoever looked upon the bronze serpent in faith, that person lived.

Jesus used that event to show Nicodemus how God works in the world. There will be tribulations, but God promises salvation to all who believe in Him. ***“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”*** (John 3:14-15).

That bronze serpent was a strong visual reminder of the fierce wrath of God over sin. It was lifted high so that every Israelite might see it, repent of their sin, and look to it in obedient faith. To everyone who followed the call to do so, their faith resulted in the preservation of their life.

The snake was lifted up on a pole; Jesus would be lifted up on a cross. Everyone who looked in faith at the snake was healed from the deadly bite. Everyone who would look in faith at Jesus would be saved from the bite of eternal death and have eternal life.

Jesus says whoever believes in Him will never perish but have eternal life. Whoever is the promise. So, whoever – *no matter how bad, how despicable, how wrong, how lazy, how negligent* – whoever believes in Jesus Christ, whoever trusts in Him, whoever clings to Him, whoever looks to Him with repentance and faith is forgiven and finds peace. Whoever looks to Christ alone finds comfort, hope, and joy.

Jesus Christ, true God and true Man, was lifted up and sacrificed for the sins of the world. That is how God loved the world. That is how God has loved you. He gave His only begotten Son over to the death we each deserve because of our sins. He declared the Innocent One guilty so that He could declare you innocent and righteous. He has had mercy upon you! He did not send His Son to condemn the world, but to save it, and to save you!

Yes, we still suffer death and the effects of sin. We get sick. We get injured. We weep. Our bodies break down. The serpent still bites at our heels. But Jesus Christ has crushed the head of our evil foe. By His death lifted up on the cross, Christ has destroyed death's power, so that what we endure and suffer now are mere aftereffects, rumblings and grumblings from a foe that has already lost but wants to drag as many down with him as he can.

Make no mistake. Through Holy Baptism, you were re-born as a child of God. So, when you cling to Christ, Satan cannot harm you. By looking in faith to the crucified Jesus, we escape from eternal death ***“for God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life”*** (John 3:16).

Through faith in Christ, we possess eternal life now, no matter how weak or imperfect that faith may be, and eternal life continues throughout our days here on earth. Not even death interrupts it. The eternal life we have now will merge with the perfect life in God's presence in heaven.

God wants to save you, to heal you, to comfort you, to love you, and give you hope! So, look to Jesus! Believe and live! Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +