

CHAPTER NINE

CHRIST AND NICODEMUS (CONCLUDED)

[JOHN 3:9–21](#)

We begin with an Analysis of the passage which is before us:—

1. The Dullness of Nicodemus, verses [9](#), [10](#).
2. The Unbelief of Nicodemus, verses [11](#), [12](#).
3. The Omnipresence of Christ, verse [13](#).
4. The Necessity of Christ's Death, verses [14](#), [15](#).
5. The Unspeakable Gift of God, verse [16](#).
6. The Purpose of God in sending Christ, verse [17](#).
7. Grounds of Condemnation, verses [18–21](#).

In our last chapter we dealt at length with Nicodemus' interview with Christ, and sought to bring out the meaning of our Lord's words on that occasion. We saw how the Savior insisted that the new birth was an imperative *necessity*; that, even though Nicodemus were a Pharisee, a member of the Sanhedrin, nevertheless, unless he was born again he could not see the kingdom of God, *i.e.* come to know the things of God. We also saw how the Lord explained the character of the new birth as a being "born of water (the Word) and of the Spirit"; that regeneration was not a process of reformation or the improving of the old man, but the creating of an altogether new man. That which is born of flesh is flesh, and no artifices of men can ever make it anything else. If a sinner is to enter the kingdom of God he must be born again. Finally, we saw how the Savior likened the operations of the Spirit in bringing about the new birth to the sovereign but mysterious action of the wind. The Savior had used great plainness of speech, and one had thought it impossible for an intelligent man to miss His meaning. But observe the next verse.

"Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be?" ([John 3:9](#)). How this reveals the natural man! It is true that Nicodemus was an educated man and, doubtless, one of exemplary moral character; but something more than education and morality are needed to understand the things of God. God has spoken plainly, and in simple terms, yet notwithstanding, the natural man, unaided, has no capacity to receive what God has recorded in His Holy Word. Even though God became incarnate and spoke in human language, men understood Him not. This is demonstrated again and again in this Gospel. Christ spoke of raising the temple of His body, and they thought He referred to the temple standing in Jerusalem. He spoke to the Samaritan woman of the "living water," and she supposed Him to be referring

Arthur Walkington Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Swengel, PA: Bible Truth Depot, 1923–1945).

to the water of Jacob's well. He told the disciples He had meat to eat they knew not of, and they thought only of material food ([John 4:32](#)). He spoke of Himself as the Living Bread come down from heaven which, said He, "is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world," and the Jews answered, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" ([John 6:51](#), [52](#)). He declared, "Yet a little while am I with you, and then I go unto Him that sent me. Ye shall seek me, and shall not find me; and where I am, thither ye cannot come," and His auditors said, "Whither will he go, that we shall not find him? Will he go unto the dispersed among the Gentiles?" ([John 7:33–35](#)). Again, He said, "I go my way, and ye shall seek me, and shall die in your sins: whither I go, ye cannot come"; and the Jews replied, "Will he kill himself? because he saith, Whither I go, ye cannot come" ([John 8:21](#), [22](#)). He declared, "If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free," and they answered, "We be Abraham's seed, and were never in bondage to any man: how mayest thou, Ye shall be made free?" ([John 8:31–33](#)). And so we might continue through this Gospel. What a commentary upon human intelligence; what a proof of man's stupidity and blindness!

And Nicodemus was no exception. Master in Israel he might be, yet he was ignorant of the ABC of spiritual things. And why? What is the cause of the natural man's stupidity? Is it because he is in the dark: "The way of the wicked is as darkness: they know not at what they stumble" ([Prov. 4:19](#)). The testimony of the New Testament is equally explicit: "Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart" ([Eph. 4:18](#)). How humbling all this is. How it exposes the folly of the proud boasting of men upon their fancied wisdom and learning! The natural man is in the dark because he is blind. Yet how rarely is this stressed in the modern pulpit. How very rarely do most of the Bible teachers of the day emphasize and press the blindness of natural man, and his deep need of Divine illumination! These things are not palatable we know, and a faithful exposition of them will not make for the popularity of those who preach them: yet are they sorely needed in these days of Laodicean complacency. Let any one who desires to follow the example which our Savior has left us, read through the four Gospels at a sitting, with the one purpose of discovering how large a place He gave in His preaching to the depravity of man, and most probably the reader will be greatly surprised.

"How can these things be?" Nicodemus was at least honest. He was not ashamed to own his ignorance, and ask questions. Well for many another if they would do likewise. Too many are kept in ignorance by a foolish pride which scorns to take the place of one seeking light. Yet this is one of the prime requirements in any who desire to learn. It applies as much to the believer as to the unbeliever. If the Christian refuses to humble himself, if he disdains the attitude of "What I see not, teach thou me" ([Job 34:32](#)); if he is unwilling to receive instruction from those taught of God, and above all, if he fails to cry daily to God "Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law" ([Ps. 119:18](#)), he will not, and cannot, grow in the knowledge of the truth.

"Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?" ([John 3:10](#)). It is to be noted that our Lord here employed the same term in interrogating Nicodemus as this ruler of the Jews used at the beginning when addressing Christ, for in the Greek the word for "teacher" in v. [2](#) is the same as the one rendered "master" in verse [10](#). It is exceedingly striking to observe that in the brief record of this interview we find the Lord employing just seven times the very expression used by Nicodemus himself. We tabulate them thus:

1. Nicodemus declared, "We know," verse [2](#).

Christ said, "That which we know we speak" (Gk.), verse [11](#).

2. Nicodemus said, "*Thou art a teacher*," verse [2](#).

Christ said, "*Art thou a teacher?*" verse [10](#).

3. Nicodemus said, "*Except God be with him*," verse [2](#).

Christ said, "*Except a man be*," verse [3](#).

4. Nicodemus asked, "How can a *man be born*?" verse [4](#).

Christ answered, "*Except a man be born*," verse [5](#).

5. Nicodemus asked, "*Can he enter*?" verse [4](#).

Christ answered, "*He cannot enter*," verse [5](#).

6. Nicodemus asked, "*How can?*" verse [9](#).

Christ asked, "*How shall?*" verse [12](#).

7. Nicodemus asked, "How can *these things* be?" verse [9](#).

Christ asked, "knowest not *these things*?" verse [10](#).

It is really startling to behold this remarkable correspondency between the language of Nicodemus and the words of the Savior, and surely there is some important lesson to be learned from it. What are we to gather from this employment by Christ of the terms first used by Nicodemus? Does it not illustrate a principle and teach a lesson for all Christian workers? Let us state it this way: Christ met this man on his own ground, and made his own language the channel of approach to his heart. How simple, yet how important. Have we not often been puzzled to know how to approach some person in whose soul we were interested? We wondered just where was the place to begin. Well, here is light on the problem. Make his own utterances the starting point of your address. Turn his own words around against him, and whenever possible, invest them with a deeper meaning and a higher application.

"Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?" What a rebuke this was! It was as though the Lord had said, "You a teacher, and yet untaught yourself? You a lightholder, and yet in the dark! You a master of Israel, and yet ignorant of the most elementary spiritual truths!" How searching, and how solemn! To what extent is this true of the writer and the reader? Ah, must we not all of us hang our heads in shame? How little we know of what we ought to know. How blind we are! So blind that we need to be *guided* into the truth ([John 16:13](#))! Is not our sorest need that of going to the great Physician and seeking from Him that spiritual "eyesalve," so that He may anoint our eyes that we can see ([Rev. 3:18](#))? God forbid that the haughtiness of Laodicean-ism should prevent us.

Ere passing on to the next verse let us point out one more lesson from that now before us—v. [10](#). Even a religious teacher may be ignorant of Divine truth. What a solemn warning is this for us to put no confidence in any man. Here was a member of the Sanhedrin, trained in the highest theological school of his day, and yet having no discernment of spiritual things. Unfortunately he has had many successors. The fact that a preacher has graduated with honors from some theological center is no proof that he is a man taught of the Holy Spirit. No dependence can be placed on human learning. The only safe course is to Arthur Walkington Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Swengel, PA: Bible Truth Depot, 1923–1945).
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emulate the Bereans, and bring everything we hear from the platform and pulpit, yes, and everything we read in religious magazines, to the test of the Word of God, rejecting everything which is not clearly taught in the Holy Oracles.

“Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness” ([John 3:11](#)). As pointed out above, this was Christ’s reply to what Nicodemus had said in his opening statement. “We know that thou art a teacher come from God” declared this representative of the Sanhedrin. In response, our Lord now says, “We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen.” At a later stage in the conversation, Nicodemus had asked, “How can these things be?” (verse [9](#)). What Christ had said concerning the new birth had struck this ruler of the Jews as being incredible. Hence this solemn and emphatic declaration—“We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen.” Christ was not dealing with metaphysical speculations or theological hypotheses, such as the Jewish doctors delighted in. Instead, He was affirming that which He knew to be a Divine reality, and testifying to that which had an actual existence and could be seen and observed. What an example does our Lord set before all His servants! The teacher of God’s Word must not attempt to expound what is not already clear to himself, still less must he speculate upon Divine things, or speak of that of which he has no experimental acquaintance. Bather must he speak of that which he knows and testify to that which he has seen.

“And ye receive not our witness.” There is an obvious connection between this statement and what is recorded in the previous verse. There we find Christ chiding Nicodemus for his ignorance of Divine truth; here He reveals the cause of such ignorance. The reason a man does not know the things of God, is because he receives not God’s witness concerning them. It is vitally important to observe this order. First receiving, then knowledge: first believing what God has said, and then an understanding of it. This principle is illustrated in [Hebrews 11:3](#)—“Through faith we understand.” This is the first thing predicated of faith in that wonderful faith chapter. Faith is the root of perception. As we believe God’s Word, He honors our faith by giving us a knowledge of what we have believed. And, if we believe not His Word we shall have no understanding whatever of Divine things.

“If I have told you earthly things and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you heavenly things?” ([John 3:12](#)). This is closely connected with the previous verse. There, the Lord Jesus lays bare the cause of man’s ignorance in the things of God; here He reveals the condition of growth in knowledge. God’s law in the spiritual realm corresponds with that which operates in the natural world: there is first the blade, then the ear, and last the full corn in the ear. God will not reveal to us a higher truth until we have thoroughly apprehended the simpler ones first. This, we take it, is the moral principle that Christ here enunciated. “Earthly things” are evident and in measure comprehensible, but “heavenly things” are invisible and altogether beyond our grasp until Divinely revealed to us. As to the local or immediate reference, we understand by the “earthly things” the new birth which takes place here upon earth, and the Lord’s reference to the “wind” as an illustration of the Spirit’s operations in bringing about the new birth. These were things that Nicodemus ought to have known about from [Ezekiel 36:25–27](#). If, then, Nicodemus believed not God’s Word concerning these earthly things, of what avail would it be for Christ to speak to him of “heavenly things?” We pause to apply this searching principle to ourselves.

Why is it that our progress is so slow in the things of God? What is it that retards our growth in the knowledge of the truth? Is not the answer to these and all similar questions stated above: “If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you heavenly things?” The earthly things are things pertaining to the earthly realm. They are the things which have to do with our present

life here upon earth. They are the commands of God which are for the regulation of our daily walk down here. If we believe not these, that is, if we do not appropriate them and submit ourselves to them, if we do not receive and heed them, then will God reveal to us the higher mysteries—the “heavenly things?” No, indeed, for that would be setting a premium on our unbelief, and casting pearls before swine.

Why is it that we have so little light on many of the prophetic portions of Scripture? Why is it that we know so little of the conditions of those who are now “present with the Lord?” Why is it that we are so ignorant of what will form our occupation in the eternal state? Is it because the prophecies are obscure? Is it because God has revealed so little about the intermediate and eternal states? Surely not. It is because we are in no condition to receive illumination upon these things. Because we have paid so little earnest heed to the “earthly things” (the things pertaining to our earthly life, the precepts of God for the regulation of our earthly walk) God withholds from us a better knowledge of “heavenly things,” things pertaining to the heavenly realm. Let writer and reader bow before God in humble and contrite confession for our miserable failures, and seek from Him that needed grace that our ways may be more pleasing in His sight. Let our first desire be, not a clearer apprehension of the Divine mysteries, but a more implicit obedience to the Divine requirements. As we turn to God’s Word, let our dominant motive be that we may learn God’s mind *for us* in order that we may do it, and not that we may become wise in recondite problems. Let us remember that “strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses (spiritual senses) *exercised* to discern both good and evil” ([Heb. 5:14](#)).

“And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven” ([John 3:13](#)). The connection between this verse and the preceding one seems to be as follows. The “heavenly things” to which the Lord had referred had not till then been clearly revealed to men. To ascend to heaven, and penetrate the hidden counsels of God, was an utter impossibility to fallen man. Only the Son, whose native residence was heaven, was *qualified* to reveal heavenly things.

But what did the Lord mean when He said, “*No man* hath ascended up to heaven?” This verse is a favorite one with many of those who believe in “Soul Sleep” and “Annihilation.” There are those who contend that between death and resurrection man ceases to be. They appeal to this verse and declare it teaches no man, not even Abel or David, has yet gone to heaven. But it is to be noted that Christ did not say, “no man hath entered heaven,” but, “no man hath *ascended* up to heaven.” This is an entirely different thing. “Ascended” no man had, or ever will. What is before us now is only one of ten thousand examples of the minute and marvelous accuracy of Scripture, lost, alas, on the great majority who read it so carelessly and hurriedly. Of Enoch it is recorded that he “was translated that he should not see death” ([Heb. 11:5](#)). Of Elijah it is said that he “went up by a whirlwind into heaven” ([2 Kings 2:11](#)). Of the saints who shall be raptured to heaven at the return of Christ, it is said that they shall be “*caught up*” ([1 Thess. 4:17](#)). Of Christ alone it is said that He “*ascended*.” This at once marks His uniqueness, and demonstrates that in all things He has “the pre-eminence” ([Col. 1:18](#)).

But observe further that the Lord said, “even the Son of man which is in heaven.” In heaven, even while speaking to Nicodemus on earth. This is another evidence of His Deity. It affirmed His Omnipresence. It is remarkable to see that every essential attribute of Deity is predicated of Christ in this Gospel, the special object of which is to unveil His Divine perfections. His eternity is argued in [John 1:1](#). His Divine glory is mentioned in [John 1:14](#). His omniscience is seen in [John 1:48](#) and again in [John 2:24, 25](#). His matchless wisdom is borne witness to in [John 7:46](#). His unchanging love is affirmed in [John 13:1](#). And so we might go on indefinitely.

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up” ([John 3:14](#)). Christ had been speaking to Nicodemus about the imperative necessity of the new birth. By nature man is dead in trespasses and sins, and in order to obtain life he must be born again. The new birth is the impartation of Divine life, eternal life, but for this to be bestowed on men, the Son of man must be lifted up. Life could come only out of death. The sacrificial work of Christ is the basis of the Spirit’s operations and the ground of God’s gift of eternal life. Observe that Christ here speaks of the lifting up of the Son of man, for atonement could be made only by One in the nature of him who sinned, and only as Man was God’s Son capable of taking upon Him the penalty resting on the sinner. No doubt there was a specific reason why Christ should here refer to His sacrificial death as a “lifting up.” The Jews were looking for a Messiah who should be lifted up, but elevated in a manner altogether different from what the Lord here mentions. They expected Him to be elevated to the throne of David, but before this He must be lifted up upon the Cross of shame, enduring the judgment of God upon His people’s sin.

To illustrate the character, the meaning, and the purpose of His death, the Lord here refers to the well-known incident in Israel’s wilderness wanderings which is recorded in [Numbers 21](#). Israel was murmuring against the Lord, and He sent fiery serpents among the people, which bit them so that some of the people died and many others were sorely wounded from their poisonous bites. In consequence, they confessed they had sinned, and cried unto Moses for relief. He, in turn, cried unto God, and the Lord bade him make a serpent of brass, fix it on a pole, and tell the bitten Israelites to look to it in faith and they should be healed. All of this was a striking foreshadowing of Christ being lifted up on the Cross in order that He might save, through the look of faith, those who were dying from sin. The type is a remarkable one and worthy of our closest study.

A “serpent” was a most appropriate figure of that deadly and destructive power, the origin of which the Scriptures teach us to trace to the Serpent, whose “seed” sinners are declared to be. The poison of the serpent’s bite, which vitiates the entire system of its victim, and from the fatal effects of which there was no deliverance, save that which God provided, strikingly exhibited the awful nature and consequences of sin. The remedy which God provided was the exhibition of the destroyer destroyed. Why was not one of the actual serpents spiked by Moses to the pole? Ah, that would have marred the type: that would have pictured judgment executed on the sinner himself; and, worse still, would have misrepresented our sinless Substitute. In the type chosen there was the likeness of a serpent, not an actual serpent, but a piece of brass made like one. So, the One who is the sinners Savior was sent “in the likeness of sin’s flesh” ([Rom. 8:3](#), Gk.), and God “made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him” ([2 Cor. 5:21](#)).

But how could a serpent fitly typify the Holy One of God? This is the very last thing of all we had supposed could, with any propriety, be a figure of Him. True, the “serpent” did not, could not, typify Him in His essential character, and perfect life. The brazen serpent only foreshadowed Christ as He was “lifted up.” The lifting up manifestly pointed to the Cross. What was the “serpent?” It was the reminder and emblem of the curse. It was through the agency of that old Serpent, the Devil, that our first parents were seduced, and brought under the curse of a Holy God. And on the cross, dear reader, the holy One of God, incarnate, was made a curse for us. We would not dare make such an assertion, did not Scripture itself expressly affirm it. In [Galatians 3:13](#) we are told, “Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us.” There was no flaw, then, in the type. The foreshadowing was perfect. A “serpent” was the only thing in all nature which could accurately prefigure the crucified Savior made a curse for us.

But *why* a “serpent” of brass? That only brings out once more the perfect accuracy of the type. “Brass” speaks of two things. In the symbolism of Scripture brass is the emblem of Divine *judgment*. The *brazen* altar illustrates this truth, for on it the sacrificial animals were slain, and upon it descended the consuming fire from heaven. Again; in [Deuteronomy 28](#), the Lord declared unto Israel, that if they would not hearken unto His voice and do His commandments (v. [15](#)), that His curse should come upon them (verse [16](#)), and as a part of the Divine judgment with which they should be visited, He warned them, “Thy heaven that is above thy head shall be *brass*” (verse [23](#)). Once more, in [Revelation 1](#), where Christ is seen as Judge, inspecting the seven churches we are told, “His feet were like fine brass” (verse [15](#)). The “serpent,” then, spoke of the curse which sin entailed; the “brass” told of God’s judgment falling on the One made sin for us. But there is another thought suggested by the brass. Brass is harder than iron, or silver or gold. It told, then, of Christ’s mighty strength, which was able to endure the awful judgment which fell upon Him—a mere creature, though sinless, would have been utterly consumed.

From what has been said, it will be evident that when God told Moses to make a serpent of brass, fix it upon a pole, and bid the bitten Israelites look on it and they should live, that He was preaching to them the Gospel of His grace. We would now point out seven things which these Israelites were *not bidden* to do.

1. They were not told to *manufacture some ointment* as the means of healing their wounds. Doubtless, that would have seemed much more reasonable to them. But it would have destroyed the type. The religious doctors of the day are busy inventing spiritual lotions, but they effect no cures. Those who seek spiritual relief by such means are like the poor woman mentioned in the Gospel: she “suffered many things of many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was nothing bettered, but rather grew worse” ([Mark 5:26](#)).

2. They were not told to *minister to others* who were wounded, in order to get relief for themselves. This, too, would have appealed to their sentiments as being more practical and more desirable than gazing at a pole, yet in fact it had been most impracticable. Of what use would it be for one to jump into deep water to rescue a drowning man if he could not swim a stroke himself! How then can one who is dying and unable to deliver himself, help others in a similar state. And yet there are many today engaged in works of charity with the vain expectation that giving relief to others will counteract the deadly virus of sin which is at work in their own souls.

3. They were not told to *fight the serpents*. If some of our moderns had been present that day they would have urged Moses to organize a Society for the Extermination of Serpents! But of what use had that been to those who were *already* bitten and dying? Had each stricken one killed a thousand serpents they would still have died. And what does all this fighting sin amount to! True, it affords an outlet for the energy of the flesh; but all these crusades against intemperance, profanity and vice, have not improved society any, nor have they brought a single sinner one step nearer to Christ.

4. They were not told to make an *offering to the serpent* on the pole. God did not ask any payment from them in return for their healing. No, indeed. Grace ceases to be grace if any price is paid for what it brings. But how frequently is the Gospel perverted at this very point! Not long ago the writer preached on human depravity, addressing himself exclusively to the unsaved. He sought by God’s help to show the unbeliever the terribleness of his state and how desperate was his need of a Savior to deliver him from the wrath to come. As we took our seat, the pastor of the church rose and announced an irrelevant hymn

and then urged everybody present to “re-consecrate themselves to God.” Poor man! That was the best he knew. But what pitiful blindness! Other preachers are asking their hearers to “Give their hearts to Jesus” — another miserable perversion. God does not ask the sinner to give anything, but to *Receive* HIS CHRIST.

5. They were not told to *pray* to the serpent. Many evangelists urge their hearers to go to the mourners bench or penitent form” and there plead with God for pardoning mercy, and if they are dead in earnest they are led to believe that God has heard them for their much speaking. If these “seekers after a better life” believe what the preacher has told them, namely, that they have “prayed through” and have now “got forgiveness,” they feel happy, and for a while continue treading the clean side of the Broad Road with a light heart; but the almost invariable consequence is that their last state is worse than the first. O dear reader, do not make the fatal mistake of substituting prayer for faith in Christ.

6. They were told not to *look at Moses*. They had been looking to Moses, and urging him to cry to God on their behalf; and when God responded, He took their eyes from off Moses, and commanded them to look at the brazen serpent. Moses was the Law-giver, and how many today are looking to him for salvation. They are trusting in their own imperfect obedience to God’s commandments to take them to heaven. In other words, they are depending on their own works. But Scripture says emphatically, “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us” ([Titus 3:5](#)). The Law was given by Moses, but *grace and truth* came by Jesus Christ, and Christ alone can save.

7. They were not told to look at *their wounds*. Some think they need to be more occupied with the work of examining their own wicked hearts in order to promote that degree of repentance which they deem a necessary qualification for salvation. But as well attempt to produce heat by looking, at the snow, or light by peering into the darkness, as seek salvation by looking to self for it. To be occupied with myself is only to be taken up with that which God has condemned, and which already has the sentence of death written upon it. But, it may be asked, “Ought I not to have that godly sorrow which worketh repentance before I trust in Christ?” Certainly not. You cannot have a godly sorrow till you are a godly person, and you cannot be a godly person until you have submitted yourself to God and obeyed Him by believing in Christ. *Faith* is the beginning of all godliness.

We have developed the seven points above with the purpose of exposing some of the wiles by which the Enemy is deceiving a multitude of souls. It is greatly to be feared that there are many in our churches today who sincerely think they are Christians, but who are sincerely mistaken. Believing that I am a millionaire will not make me one; and believing that I am saved, when I am not, will not save me. The Devil is well pleased if he can get the awakened sinner to look at anything rather than Christ—good works, repentance, feelings, resolutions, baptism, anything so long as it is not Christ Himself.

Turning now from the negative to the positive side, let us consider, though it must be briefly, one or two points in the type itself. First, Moses was commanded by God to make a serpent of brass—it *was of the Lord’s providing*—and the spiritual significance of this we have already looked at. Second, Moses was commanded to fix this brazen serpent upon a pole. Thus was the Divine remedy *publicly* exhibited so that all Israel might look on it and be healed. Third, the Lord’s promise was that “it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live” ([Num. 21:8](#)). Thus, not only did God here give a foreshadowing of the means by which salvation was to be brought out for sinners, but also the manner in which the sinner obtains an interest in that salvation, namely, *by looking away from himself to the Divinely appointed object of faith*, even to the Lord Jesus Christ. How blessed this was: the brazen serpent

was “lifted up” so that those who were too weak to crawl up to the pole itself, and perhaps too far gone to even raise their voices in supplication could, nevertheless, lift up their eyes in simple faith in God’s promise and be healed.

Just as the bitten Israelites were healed by a look of faith, so the sinner may be saved by looking to Christ by faith. Saving faith is not some difficult and meritorious work which man must perform so as to give him a claim upon God for the blessing of salvation. It is not on account of our faith that God saves us, but it is through the means of our faith. It is in believing we are saved. It is like saying to a starving man, He that eats of this food shall be relieved from the pangs of hunger, and be refreshed and strengthened. Eating is no meritorious performance, but, from the nature of things, eating is the indispensable means of relieving hunger. To say that when a man believes he shall be saved, is just to say that the guiltiest of the guilty, and the vilest of the vile, is welcome to salvation, if he will but receive it in the only way in which, from the nature of the case, it can be received, namely, by personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, which means believing what God has recorded concerning His Son in the Holy Scriptures. The moment a sinner does that he is saved, just as God said to Moses, “It shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live.”

“*Every one* that is bitten.” No matter how many times he may have been bitten; no matter how far the poison had advanced in its progress toward a fatal issue, if he but looked he should “live.” Such is the Gospel declaration: “*whosoever believeth* in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” There is no exception. The vilest wretch on the face of the earth, the most degraded and despised, the most miserable and wretched of all human kind, who believes in Christ shall be saved by Him with an everlasting salvation. Not sin but unbelief can bar the sinner’s way to the Savior. It is possible that some of the Israelites who heard of the Divinely appointed remedy made light of it; it may be that some of them cherished wicked doubts as to the possibility of them obtaining any relief by looking at a brazen serpent; some may have hoped for recovery by the use of ordinary means; no matter, if these things were true of them, and later they found the disease gaining on them, and then they lifted up a believing eye to the Divinely erected standard, they too were healed. And should these lines be read by one who has long procrastinated, who has continued for many long years in a course of stout-hearted unbelief and impenitence, nevertheless, the marvelous grace of our God declares to you, that “*whosoever believeth* in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” It is still the “accepted time”; it is still “the day of salvation.” Believe now, and thou shalt be saved.

Man became a lost sinner by a *look*, for the first thing recorded of Eve in connection with the fall of our first parents is that “The woman saw that the tree was good for food” ([Gen. 3:6](#)) In like manner, the lost sinner is saved by a look. The Christian life begins by looking: “Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else” ([Isa. 45:22](#)). The Christian life continues by looking: “let us run with patience the race which is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of faith” ([Heb. 12:2](#)). And at the end of the Christian life we “re still to be looking for Christ: “For our conversation (citizenship) is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” ([Phil. 3:20](#)). From first to last, the one thing required is looking at God’s Son.

But perhaps right here the troubled and trembling sinner will voice his last difficulty—“Sir, I do not know that I am looking in the correct way.” Dear friend, God does not ask you to look at your look, but at Christ. In that great crowd of bitten Israelites of old there were some with young eyes and some with old eyes that looked at the serpent; there were some with clear vision and some with dim vision; there were

some who had a full view of the serpent by reason of their nearness to the uplifted type of Christ; and there were, most probably, others who could scarcely see it because of their great distance from the pole, but the Divine record is “It shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live.” And so it is today. The Lord Jesus says, “Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” He does not define the method or the manner of coming, and even if the poor sinner comes groping, stumbling, falling, yet if only he will “come” there is a warm welcome for him. So it is in our text: it is “whosoever believeth”—nothing is said about the strength or the intelligence of the belief, for it is not the character or degree of faith that saves, but Christ Himself. Faith is simply the eye of the soul that looks off unto the Lord Jesus, Do not rest, then, on your faith, but on the Savior Himself.

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” ([John 3:16](#)). Christ had just made mention of His death, and had affirmed that the Cross was an imperative necessity; it was not “the Son of man *shall* be lifted up,” but “the Son of man *must* be lifted up.” There was no other alternative. If the claims of God’s throne were to be met, if the demands of justice were to be satisfied, if the sin was to be put away, it could only be by some sinless One being punished in the stead of those who should be saved. The righteousness of God required this: the Son of man *must* be lifted up.

But there is more in the Cross of Christ than an exhibition of the righteousness of God; there is also a display of His wondrous *love*. Verse [16](#) explains verse [14](#), as its opening word indicates. Verse [16](#) takes us back to the very foundation of everything. The great Sacrifice was provided by Love. Christ was God’s love-gift. This at once refutes an error that once obtained in certain quarters, namely, that Christ died in order that God might be induced to pity and save men. The very opposite is the truth. Christ died because God did love men, and was determined to save them that believe. The death of Christ was the supreme demonstration of God’s love. It was impossible that there should be any discord among the Persons of the Godhead in reference to the salvation of men. The will of the Godhead is, and necessarily must be, one. The Atonement was not the cause, but the effect, of God’s love: “In this was manifested the love of God towards us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” ([1 John 4:9, 10](#)). From what other source could have proceeded the giving of Christ to save men but from LOVE—pure sovereign benignity!

The Love of God! How blessed is this to the hearts of believers, for only believers can appreciate it, and they but very imperfectly. It is to be noted that here in [John 3:16](#) there are seven things told us about God’s love: First, the tense of His love—“God so loved.” It is not God loves, but He “loved.” That He loves us now that we are His children, we can, in measure, understand; but that He should have loved us before we became His children passes knowledge. But He did. “God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners Christ died for us” ([Rom. 5:8](#)). And again: “Yea, I have loved thee with *an everlasting love*: therefore with loving-kindness have I drawn thee” ([Jer. 31:3](#)). Second, the *magnitude* of His love—“God so loved.” None can define or measure that little word “so.” There are dimensions to the breadth, and length, and depth, and height of His wondrous love, that none can measure. Third, the *scope* of God’s love—“God so loved *the world*.” It was not limited to the narrow bounds of Palestine, but it flowed out to sinners of the Gentiles, too. Fourth, the *nature* of God’s love—“God so loved the world that *he gave*.” Love, real love, ever seeks the highest interest of others. Love is unselfish; it gives. Fifth, the *sacrificial character* of God’s love—“he gave *his only begotten Son*.” God spared not His Best. He freely delivered up Christ, even to the death of the Cross, Sixth, the *design* of His love”. That whosoever believeth

Arthur Walkington Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Swengel, PA: Bible Truth Depot, 1923–1945).

on him *should not perish*.” Many died in the wilderness from the bites of the serpents: and many of Adam’s race will suffer eternal death in the lake of fire. But God purposed to have a people who “should not perish.” Who this people are is made manifest by their “believing” on God’s Son. Seventh, the *beneficence* of God’s love—“But have *everlasting life*.” This is what God imparts to every one of His own. Ah, must we not exclaim with the apostle, “Behold, *what manner of love* the Father hath bestowed upon us”! ([1 John 3:1](#)). O dear Christian reader, if ever you are tempted to *doubt* God’s love go back to the Cross, and see there how He gave up to that cruel death His “only begotten Son.”

“For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved” ([John 3:17](#)). This verse enlarges upon the beneficent nature and purpose of God’s love. Unselfish in its character—for *love* “seeketh not her own”—it ever desires the good of those unto whom it flows forth. When God sent His Son here it was not to “condemn the world,” as we might have expected. There was every reason why the world should have been condemned. The heathen were in an even worse condition than the Jews. Outside the little land of Palestine, the knowledge of the true and living God had well nigh completely vanished from the earth. And where God is not known and loved, there is no love among men for their neighbors. In every Gentile nation idolatry and immorality were rampant. One has only to read the second half of [Romans 1](#) to be made to marvel that God did not then sweep the earth with the besom of destruction, But no; He had other designs, gracious designs. God sent His Son into the world that the world through Him “might be saved.” It is to be remarked that the word “might” here does not express any uncertainty. Instead it declares the *purpose* of God in the sending of His Son. In common speech the word “might” signifies a contingency. It is only another case of the vital importance of ignoring man’s dictionaries and the way he employs words, and turning to a concordance to see how the Holy Spirit uses each word in the Scriptures themselves. The word “might”—as a part of the verb—expresses *design*. When we are told that God sent His Son into the world that through Him “the world might be saved,” it signifies that “through him the world *should* be saved,” and this is how it is rendered in the R. V. For other instances we refer the reader to [1 Peter 3:18](#)—“might bring us to God” implies no uncertainty whatever, but tells of the object to be accomplished. For further examples see [Galatians 4:5](#); [Titus 2:14](#); [2 Peter 1:4](#), etc., etc.

“He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God” ([John 3:18](#)). For the believer there is “no condemnation” ([Rom. 8:1](#)), because Christ was condemned in his stead—the “chastisement of our peace” was upon Him. But the unbeliever is “condemned already.” By nature he is a “child of *wrath*” ([Eph. 2:3](#)), not corruption merely. He enters this world with the curse of a sin-hating God upon him. If he hears the Gospel and receives not Christ he incurs a new and increased condemnation through his unbelief. How emphatically this proves that the sinner is *responsible* for his unbelief!

“And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil” ([John 3:19](#)). Here is the *cause* of man’s unbelief: he loves the darkness, and therefore hates the light. What a proof of his depravity! It is not only that men are in the dark, but they *love* the darkness—they prefer ignorance, error, superstition, to the light of truth. And the reason why they love the darkness and hate the light is because their deeds are evil.

“For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved. But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God” ([John 3:20, 21](#)). Here is the final test. “*Every one that* doeth (practices) evil hateth the

light, neither cometh to the light,” and why?—“lest his deeds should be reproved.” *That* is why men refuse to read the Scriptures. God’s Word would condemn them. On the other hand, “he that doeth truth,” which describes what is characteristic of every believer, “cometh to the light”—note the perfect tense—he comes *again and again* to the light of God’s Word. And for what purpose? To learn God’s mind, that he may cease doing the things which are displeasing to Him, and be occupied with that which is acceptable in His sight. Was not this the final word of Christ to Nicodemus, addressed to his *conscience*? This ruler of the Jews had come to Jesus “by night,” as though his deeds would not bear the light!

For the benefit of those who would prepare for the next lesson we submit the following questions:

1. What does the “much water” teach? verse [23](#).
2. What was the real purpose of the Jews in coming to John and saying what is recorded in verse [26](#)?
3. What is the meaning of verse [27](#)?
4. What vitally important lesson for the Christian is taught in verse [29](#)?
5. What is the meaning of verse [33](#)?
6. What is meant by the last half of verse [34](#)?
7. How does verse [35](#) bring out the Deity of Christ?