

# The Snakebit World God so Loved – *John 3:9-21*

**Introduction** – “How can these things be?” Nicodemus’ response to Jesus’ declaration that we must be born again (v3) and that this is all a work of God alone (v8) reveals every self-righteous man’s spiritual ignorance towards the gospel. And we are all self-righteous accusers, serpent-bitten, already condemned men and women, doomed to die. But God so loved this snakebit world that He determined to save it.

**Overview of the Passage** - We pick up where Nicodemus asks Jesus “How can these things be?” (v9). Jesus replies with a question that acts as an admonition; Nicodemus is a teacher of Israel and so he should know these things (v10). Jesus says that “we” speak what “we” know, and if He does so with earthly images that leave Nicodemus still in unbelief, Jesus fears that there is no chance Nicodemus will receive the heavenly things (vv11-12). Only the Son of Man has descended from heaven (and so knows these things firsthand – v13). Jesus now turns to another OT image, that of Moses lifting up the cursed serpent in the wilderness. The Son of Man will be lifted up in a similar way to save those cursed in their sins and grant them eternal life (vv14-15). God will do this because of His great love for the world (v16). This is why God sent His son: to save the world (v17). He who simply believes in Jesus is not condemned, and he who does not is already in condemnation (v18) because men loved their darkness due to their evil deeds (v19). This is the nature of those practicing evil, they hate the light (v20). In contrast, the one who does the truth comes to the light (loves the light) revealing that God has done those true and good deeds in him (v21).

**Nicodemus, the Man** (vv9-12) – This Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin came by night, telling Jesus that they knew He was a teacher come from God. Jesus confounded this well-educated teacher with his explanation of the Old Testament prophecies requiring a new birth, the sovereign work of the Spirit, and not the works of man, in order to see the kingdom of God (vv1-8). Nicodemus represents the best educated religious men, the class of scholars who should know better. And in another sense, Nicodemus represents all of us who believe we can come to understand spiritual things. We can’t (1 Cor 2:14-15) because we are spiritually dead (Eph 2:1-3). The problem for all of us is our natural ignorance of heavenly/spiritual things. Verses 10-12 indicate that we must first confess that on our own we are unable to attain true knowledge of God, that what we naturally conclude about spiritual things is normally wrong, and that apart from God’s gracious intervention (like the blowing of the wind), we will only persist in this folly. But this problem is circular. Men who are dead cannot decide to come alive. Men who are ignorant are ignorant that they are ignorant until Someone else enlightens them.

Jesus said, “*We speak and We know and testify what We have seen, and you (y’all) do not receive our witness*” (v11) – The “We” in Jesus’ language is most likely the Father Whom Jesus will speak of later in John’s gospel with regard to Their interrelationship in great detail. The only way into this knowledge is to be in communion with Them. And God must stoop to us in order for this to happen.

**Jesus, the Son of Man** (vv13-15) – No one has access to this spiritual knowledge except the One Who has descended from there, even the “*Son of Man*” (v13). That Son of Man must be looked to in faith in order to remove the condemnation that has afflicted us all. How does that work? To explain, Jesus takes Nicodemus to another Old Testament account he must have known well. When the Israelites were in the wilderness and spoke rebellious complaints against the Lord, God sent fiery seraphim, little devils, snakes that would bite the people and cause them to die (Num 21). Realizing this was happening because of their sin, the people asked Moses to intercede for them. God told Moses to make a bronze serpent, attach it to a pole and set it on high. When someone was bitten, there was only one cure – they had to gaze upon the cursed serpent on the pole.

Jesus said that this was His mission, to be lifted up like the bronze serpent. For we too have been bitten by the Serpent and received the deadly poison. We must be “born again” (v7). And the Son of Man must be lifted up (v14). The two *musts* go together, so that “*whoever believes in Him may have eternal life*” (v15). But why the title, “*Son of Man*” here? Because Nicodemus must also see that this lifting up would not only point to a sign of great cursing (“*cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree*” – Gal 3:13-14), but also to the lifting up of the Son of Man in His ascension as foretold in Daniel 7:13-14). Jesus would be lifted up as the Great Curse-Absorber, taking our sin and death upon Himself, and lifted up as well as the Great Victor over sin and death to be seated at the throne of God over all creation (Phil 2:8-11).

**Jesus, the Son of God** (vv16-21) – Note: As do many, I take these verses as John’s meditation and not Jesus’ words (so not in red). Jesus refers to Himself as “the Son of Man” but normally not as “the Son of God” and only John uses the word “monogenes” (only-begotten, or unique one) elsewhere (1:14, 18, 1 John 4:9).

“God so loved the world” – Love is ultimately defined for us here in v16. The Father gives His only Son for you; that is what love looks like. He placed Him on that gibbet for you, instead of you, on behalf of you. And our response is only one – to believe that we might receive. And what we receive is from infinite love; it is eternal life. “*The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord*” (Rom 6:23).

“...that the world might be saved” (v17) – Jesus didn’t need to come and condemn the world for the world was already condemned (v18). There will be a final judgment, a final separation of the sheep and the goats, at His Second Coming, but in this first Advent, He came to save, and He came to save a world. We are not to love the world with the selfish love of participation (1 John 2:15-17), but God loves the world with the selfless, costly love of redemption (Carson). And Jesus reigns at the right hand of God in that love now until all His enemies are put under His feet (Psalm 110:1-2). Jesus, by the Spirit, is making His enemies His friends (Rom 5:1, 8, 10-11). The seed of Abraham, those with his faith, will outnumber the stars or the sand on the seashore.

And in our final verses (vv19-21) we see again our lost estate unless God moves. We love our sin. We love our darkness. And when the Light comes, we hate it. We hate Him. And this is why we stand already condemned. Therefore, when someone comes into the light, it is only because God has done the work (v21). There is nothing to boast in except the cross of Christ (Eph 2:9, Gal 6:14).

**And So, For You** – “*the only way you can look to the cross and see your salvation there is if you look to the cross and see your damnation there. The message is repent and believe. That means unless you see the wracked serpent there (repentance), you are not really seeing Jesus there (belief)*” (Wilson). Another way to look at it is that your sin, your serpent, your dragon, must die, impaled on that cross with Christ. But that poison is in you; it is who you are. “*Sin in a wicked man is like poison in a serpent; it is in its natural place*” (T. Brooks). And so, you must die in Christ that you might live anew in the resurrection of the love of Jesus Christ.

**And For This Snakebit World** – All of our societal problems stem from our sin, from the snakebite. You cannot gather a bunch of snakebit people to form a club or a group of experts on snakebite consequences and expect them to come up with a solution. All they can do is make it worse. The world is a hard place, and we murmur against God, or our gods, and all that brings is more fiery serpents with all their poisonous accusations, pointing the fingers here or there, but never upon ourselves. This is why we pray for reformation and revival, for our people to look away from themselves and all their useless expertise, and instead, look to the serpent on the pole, the Lord Jesus Christ, our Curse, our Savior, our Lord.

**Treasure God’s Love** (Eph 3:18-19) – Finally, we are guilty of only seeing the world in materialistic ways which is why we are afraid of physical death. Even Christians in this generation tend to think only of being a better person, a better spouse, a better parent, a better neighbor, a better citizen. But we don’t think much about eternal love, an eternal heaven, of eternal condemnation and torment, and eternal bliss. John 3:16 is important. So is 3:18. And so is Eph 3:14ff on the immeasurable love of God that has eternally changed everything for you. Everything. God loves the world and so, if you have ears to hear, God loves you. What are you going to do with that? What will that do with you? Come, and welcome to Jesus Christ.

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