

The following is a rough transcript, not in its final form and may be updated.

## A Bronze Serpent John 3:14-15

**Intro:** We have, in effect, come to the end of the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus Christ. What started out as a dialogue seems to have turned into a monologue because Jesus “has the floor” and apparently refuses to concede any more time to His esteemed visitor from Jerusalem. But to be fair to Jesus, Nicodemus doesn’t seem to be a very good conversationalist. Here he stands, the best Israel has to offer and all he can muster is a salutation (2) that he thinks is laced with flattery but falls well short of the truth. Then he asks 2 questions in quick succession (4); the second one being the most ridiculous question ever asked by an adult – it has to be! His final participation in the conversation is also a question but it’s a question that actually reveals his heart. As we saw last time, His question is actually a *rejection* of the observable evidence of the new birth, of the visible change in those born of the Spirit. After this, it’s all quite on the Nicodemus front and the silence from Nicodemus is deafening!

I have to imagine that Nicodemus was pretty used to hearing his own voice. I’m sure he had grown accustomed to having people listen to him when he spoke. He was in the Sanhedrin – this political body was known for its raucous meetings (Acts 23:6-10). Nicodemus was no slouch. He was quite capable of making a statement, getting his point across; he had to be in order to survive politically. Yet it seems, as he stands before Jesus, silence suits him better. This is the guy you would want to represent you – intelligent, wealthy, powerful, influential! Nic is successful in every way humanly possible and yet, the representative of the Jews is silenced before the representative of the Father!

The irony doesn’t end there. Nicodemus was known as *the* teacher of Israel, which means he was at the very least a preeminent teacher. This title may mean that Nic held some official position but if he did, we don’t know what it was. Regardless, this leading Pharisee professed to know the things of God well enough to teach them to others. But, Nic has run out of things to say. In fact, the teacher has now become the student because he is finally standing before the true Teacher of men, *the Logos* – the word of God! The lesson of the day (or *‘night* rather) is on the new birth.

In response to Nicodemus’ last question, Jesus emphasizes the fact that the Gospel message is not just a matter of hearsay but is based on observable evidence, personal experience and irrefutable testimony. In vs13, Jesus reveals

the credentials that uniquely qualify Him to speak with authority about things in heaven, though no one else can. No man ever ascended up into heaven but Jesus descended from there. Thus, divine wisdom belongs to the Son of Man. He didn't have to ascend into heaven to acquire it – He has come down from heaven to *impart* it! It is exactly this heavenly origin that gives the Son of Man the *right* to speak about **earthly things** and **heavenly things**.

For the remainder of this section of **ch3**, from **vs14** to **vs21**, Jesus will deliver an impressive teaching on the purpose and significance of His eventual death by crucifixion. It's impressive because we must remember that all of this is occurring just days after the first week of His public ministry and already, Jesus is letting people know the real reason He has come. Not to do miracles, heal the sick, teach the uninformed, improve Jewish society or defeat the Romans. His singular reason for coming down from heaven to this earth was so that He could die for the sins of the world. So He could provide the greatest miracle to mankind (salvation), the greatest healing (from sin), provide the greatest lesson (God's love), institute the greatest improvement (regeneration), defeat the greatest enemies (sin, death, hell).

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**14-15** – Nicodemus had failed to understand the Lord's teaching about the new birth when it was presented to him in terms associated with Ezekiel's prophecy of the dry bones. Now, Jesus presents it to him again by means of an object lesson; a story Nicodemus would have been familiar with from his childhood; a story found in **Num 21**. Before we look into the substance of the story, I would like to point out the significance of this OT story to NT theology.

This is just 1 of hundreds of stories from the OT and as such, it's not very memorable. On its face, it doesn't quite compare to the stories of Creation, the Flood, Abraham's sojourn, Jacob's wrestling match, Joshua bringing down the house at Jericho; etc... What makes this story significant is that it uniquely illustrates humanity's greatest dilemma (poison of sin); God's gracious remedy (a lifted up Savior) and how humanity acquires relief (look in faith). Jesus takes this OT story and applies it directly to His purpose for coming to this earth and walking among men. The story in Numbers concerns a renewal of natural life for the affected Israelites but Jesus uses this story as a parable for the receiving of spiritual life. This is the 1<sup>st</sup> time in John's Gospel that Jesus uses an event or practice from the OT as an illustration or foreshadowing of some aspect of His earthly ministry and He's delivering it to an unbeliever!

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**Num 21:4-9** There's a lot going on here but we'll limit our study to 3 points: it's a story about sin, grace and faith!

**1) Sin** – This is 1 of many times when Israel “took offence” to the way Jehovah was caring for them. The region they were traveling through was and still is some of the most inhospitable territory on earth and the Bible says that they “**became very discouraged** (impatient) **on the way.**” We might sympathize with them at first – nobody likes being stuck out in a desert, especially with a million other people. But, it wasn’t as if God had left them destitute – they had plenty of manna and they had witness God provide sufficient amounts of water for them countless time, even from a rock! No, the real problem was in their minds, this is not what they signed up for. So, they began to complain about how bad God was treating them and how wrong Moses was for letting this all happen. Obviously, they had never learned the invaluable lesson that no matter how bad you think your life is, it still has the capacity to become far worse! Because of their rebellion, God sent fiery serpents into the camp that bit the people and many of them died from it.

Clearly, Jesus associates Himself to the bronze serpent in the story but how can the serpent of **Num 21** be a picture of the holy Jesus? True, serpents are often used as pictures of evil in the Bible (**Gen 3:1-5; Rev 12:9**). But, Moses’ serpent was made of bronze and in the Bible, bronze is a metal that’s associated with judgment. Bronze is an alloy metal that can only be made by passing it through the fire (of judgment). Thus, a bronze serpent does speak of sin, but its sin that’s been *judged*! In the same way, Jesus, who knew no sin, became sin for us on the cross and our sin was judged in Him. A bronze serpent is a perfect picture of sin that has been *judged* and *dealt with*! Remember, even tho Jesus bore our sins on the cross, He never became a sinner. Even His becoming sin for us was a holy, righteous act of love. Jesus remained the Holy One throughout His entire ordeal on the cross.

This truth is also shown in the phrase *lifted up*. This phrase has 2 meanings: **1)** lifted above the earth, suspended – a clear reference to crucifixion and **2)** exaltation in glory and majesty. For sinful man, these definitions are mutually exclusive. If a man were lifted up on a cross, to die as a criminal, he could never be exalted in glory and majesty. That is not the case with Jesus. On the contrary, Jesus didn’t show forth His ultimate glory and majesty *in spite* of His earthly humiliations, but precisely because of those humiliations. To the eye of flesh, Christ’s death on the cross was the ultimate in degradation and shame but to the eye of faith, it was and still is His supreme glory (**Phil 2:5-11**).

**2) Grace** – The people had sinned and the serpents were the just punishment of their sins but when they repented, Moses interceded for them and God provided a remedy. He told Moses to make an image of a serpent and lift it up on a pole for all to see. Anyone suffering from snake bite who looked at the serpent would

immediately be healed.

Let's be clear – there was *zero* healing power within the bronze serpent. It was just a piece of bronze! Centuries later, King Hezekiah discovered that this “religious artifact” had been retained and the people of Israel were still paying homage to it. When he found that out – he destroyed it! He called it *nehushtan*: a thing of brass, it's nothing!

What brought relief to the stricken? It was nothing other than the *saving grace of God* that healed the bitten Israelites when they believed His word and obeyed His command. Sin brought judgment but God's grace provided a remedy!

3) Faith – There are many things that distinguish true Christianity from the other religions of this world, but the most important is this: Christianity's not a works religion. All the other religions or belief systems known to us thru history or anthropology have at their base some system of good works whereby the follower of the religion earns merit. In contrast, Christianity insists that we can't earn anything; all that could possibly be done has already been done for us by Jesus Christ and that salvation is acquired, not by doing anything but by receiving God's gift. This truth is taught in many places in Scripture – **Eph 2:8-9**; **Titus 3:5** just to name a few.

The heart of the story in **Num 21** lies in God's promise that everyone who'd been bitten by the fiery serpents need only look to the bronze serpent on the pole to be cured. Now, it almost goes without saying that in itself the remedy provided by God and faithfully enacted by Moses was absurd! It only begins to make sense when we realize that the sole purpose of lifting up the bronze serpent on a pole was simply a way of pointing Israel's faith *back* to God. We see what Israel was told to do to find relief but, what is just as important in this story is what Israel was *not* told to do.

1<sup>st</sup>, the people could have made some medicines, brewed some potions or concocted some salves. This would have given them something to do & would satisfy the natural instinct of the human heart to work on behalf of its own cure. None of this was mentioned. In fact, Israel was to reject human remedies and turn to a divine remedy. This points to the greater fact that there is *no* human remedy for sin. All humanity has been poisoned by the serpent of sin. How can they be cured? Death awaits all men as a result of their sin unless God provides a remedy. Men run around in the fury of human religion seeking a cure for sin. They perform the rites, follow the ceremonies, chastise the flesh, humble themselves thru fasts & pilgrimages. They're like the Israelite who refused to look at the bronze serpent but spent all his time making potions to relieve his painful condition. Just like him, they're carried off to spiritual death by the poison

that's inside them. The man who trusts in religion instead of looking to Jesus will be eternally lost.

Note: there's no call for self-reformation, no declaration that, "We'll be more careful! This will never happen again!" Even if they had done this, it still wasn't a cure because the poison was already inside them & those bitten will die.

Turning over a new leaf doesn't erase all the failure of your past. **Ecc 3:15 God requires an account of what is past.**

Israel wasn't told to band together and "fight" the serpents. They weren't told to pray to the serpent on the pole. They weren't told to buy some relic or possess some fragment of the pole it was erected on. All they had to do was believe God's word concerning the serpent on the pole and obey God's command to look to it to receive complete healing.

In the same way, we're to look to Christ's cross. We've been bitten by sin, as they were bitten. We're dying of sin, as they were dying. God sent His Son in human flesh to pay the price for sin so we might believe on Him and not perish. This is the answer to Nicodemus' question, "**How can these things be?**" The new birth is experienced; the kingdom of God is entered, through the saving work of Jesus Christ, accepted into the heart of lost sinners *by faith*.

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The bronze serpent that was lifted up possessed no healing power but, the Son of Man that was lifted up possessed infinite healing power, far more potent than anything the Israelites experienced in the wilderness. They were merely cured of a physical disease and received a prolonged mortal life. But those who look in faith to the Son of Man are ensured to receive eternal life. More than just life that never ends (quantity), this phrase points to a *quality* of life – God's kind of life! It's the kind of life that we can experience now and will enjoy throughout all eternity. Do you have it? Are you experiencing it? Look to Jesus! Look and live! (Isa 45:22) 😊