

### **John 3:1-17**

It seems appropriate that Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, because he is completely in the dark about who Jesus is and what He is doing. And I don't think he is any more clear on these things after their conversation is over. Perhaps, however, this first encounter with Jesus is the appetizer; the full meal comes at Jesus' crucifixion. Here again we see Nicodemus, and again he comes to Jesus in the darkness - the blackness of Good Friday; but now Nicodemus is no longer in the dark, for now he sees Jesus for who He is and why He has come.

The only way to understand Jesus is the way Nicodemus eventually did: by seeing Him lifted up on a cross. We can talk about Jesus. We can sing about Him. We can even pray to Him. But none of this has any meaning unless we behold Jesus as He wants to be seen: raised up for us on the cross of Calvary.

The last words Jesus speaks to Nicodemus are these: "*As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up...*" That's a great Bible story from the Book of Numbers. God's people are complaining in the desert. They are giving God the finger, we could say. They are judging Him to be a God who does not care about them, or for them. So God brings judgment upon them. He sends poisonous snakes among them. Everyone who is bit dies, and they are biting many of the people. Now the people are sorry. They beg Moses to intercede for them. And God acts in mercy. He has Moses put a bronze snake on a pole, and everyone who is bit by a snake can look at that bronze serpent, and he will not die but live.

This is how Jesus leaves Nicodemus - with this Bible narrative in his ears. Nicodemus knew the story well, but that meant nothing until he saw that it was pointing to Jesus. Nicodemus did not see the bronze snake on a pole in the desert. He wasn't there. But he did see Jesus on a pole on the deserted hill of Calvary. And now Nicodemus steps forward in faith. He asks Pilate for the body of Jesus to give it a proper burial. The darkness is closing in as Nicodemus takes Jesus' body down from the cross, but Nicodemus is now in the light, for now he sees Jesus clearly.

How clear are you about Jesus? Jesus is everywhere these days. We see Him up on billboards. He is all over Facebook and the internet. Everyone, it seems, knows about Jesus, and everyone has an opinion about Him. But so many are in the dark as Nicodemus was. We should not think badly of them. We, too, were once in the dark, and in some ways we still are.

Having a conversation about Jesus can be interesting, yet unproductive. Nicodemus had such a conversation with Jesus Himself, and left still in the dark. Something must take place before Jesus is seen in the proper light. The snakes must come.

Think about this...would you have a conversation with your doctor about a medical cure if you were not aware of any illness? That conversation would be pointless and unproductive. But when disease strikes, we welcome such a conversation.

The Israelites would not have cared less about looking at a bronze snake up on a pole if there were no snakes biting them. But facing the judgment of death, they were turned gladly to seek and grasp the cure up on the pole.

I share the woe of all other pastors in desiring more sinners, like me, to come and fill the pews. But we must be patient and first let the snakes come into their lives. And even when they do, some refuse to seek the cure. They do not want that conversation with their doctor. I suppose some Israelites were like that. In their anger and pride they refused to believe God's promise and they would not look at the bronze serpent.

It is not God's way to force and coerce. It is His way to invite. And it is His way to send snakes into our lives to drive us to the cure: Jesus Christ. In this picture, such snakes are a blessing, even though their bites hurt. Some of you, maybe even all of us, are keeping our eyes fixed upon Jesus for the simple reason that we have snakes constantly biting us. Take them away, and you take away the need for the cure.

Now that cure is not the simple truth that God loves you. He does, but everyone already knows this. John 3:16 has been beaten to death: "*God so loved the world...*" The cure for sin; for the judgment of death; the cure for the snake poison which is in us, and which would kill us in hell unless we are treated throughout our life, is not that God loves us, but that God loves us in this way: that He sent His Son, Jesus, to be lifted up on a cross for us.

We dare not speak of our loving God apart from the death of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus' sufferings, death, and resurrection are the antidote to the poison within us. And this antidote is given to you in Baptism, here in the words of absolution, and in the Holy Supper.

Every Israelite...every single one of them who looked to the bronze serpent lived. This story is for you. You will not die in your sins, but you will live, and live forever. It's because Jesus is the cure for you. God's promise for you stands behind the cross. His promise stands behind your Baptism, for the cross is in those waters. And the cross is in the words of forgiveness, and in the Sacrament on the altar. Here in these holy things is where we speak of God's love. He loved you, for you are in the world, so that He gives to you right now the cure and antidote to the deadly poison within you; to the judgment hanging over you.

You are freed from your fears. Death does not await you, for already now, in Christ Jesus, you have eternal life. You and I, like Nicodemus, were in the dark about Jesus, but no more. He is your living Savior. He was lifted up for you. For this reason God forgives you. Every sin of every one of you is completely forgiven. The water of your Baptism washes it all away. The blood of Christ in the Sacrament cleanses out the poison from within you.

Understand this...Jesus told Nicodemus that He *must* be lifted up. Why must He? Because God is merciful. He wants no one to perish. Jesus was lifted up to perish there on the cross for you and all sinners, so that you may have life. Look at Him and believe this. Look today, and look every day, at the One who was lifted up on a cross for you so that you, now, are lifted out of your sins; and on the Last Day, you will be lifted out of death and the grave into the Paradise of heaven. Amen.