

Bible Study Guide: Week of 3-8-2021

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

John 3:14-21

¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

We begin this week’s gospel lesson in an odd place. The passage we have today is the second half of a cohesive unit that runs from 3:1 to 3:21—the visit of Nicodemus to Jesus at night. Nicodemus was a member of the Jewish ruling council. His coming to Jesus in the immediate aftermath of Jesus’ clearing of the temple would have been a risky move for a person in Nicodemus’ position. He begins his visit with Jesus with words of praise for Jesus’ miraculous signs, but Jesus quickly turns the conversation to Nicodemus’ need to be born *anōthen*—a Greek word meaning both “again” and “from above.” Nicodemus understands Jesus only on the level of being born “again,” that is a second physical birth. Jesus focuses also on his need for being born “from above”—a spiritual rebirth. It is Jesus’ being “lifted up” that will make this possible. “Lifted up” here has multiple layers of meaning. It means literally “lifted up” on the cross, it means “lifted up” from the grave in the Resurrection, it means “lifted up” into heaven in the Ascension, and it also means “lifted up” in terms of Jesus’ exaltation. In fact, in John’s Gospel, Jesus calls the passion, crucifixion, death, resurrection, and ascension his “hour” or his “hour of glorification” (see John 2:4 and John 12:23). When he is lifted up, he will make possible this rebirth “from above” for Nicodemus and for all those who look to him in faith. For this connection between the cross and rebirth, see John 19:34, where on the cross Jesus’ side was pierced and blood and water flowed forth.

The connection with Moses’ lifting up of the serpent refers to Numbers 21:4-9. During their wandering in the wilderness, the people complained against God and Moses and God sent poisonous serpents to bite the people. When they begged Moses to intervene, he prayed to God and God had him fashion a bronze serpent on a pole to hold before the people. All who looked to it, though they had been bitten by the serpents, would live. In that same way, the image of Jesus on the cross will be a sign and symbol of life for God’s people.

Note that in 1 Kings 18:1-4, King Hezekiah had to reform the worship practices of the people because they had begun worshipping Canaanite gods and goddesses and had also, among other things, been making offerings to the bronze serpent on a pole which they named “Nehushtan.” Such idolatry was, of course, condemned by the 10 Commandments. But it is worth noting how quickly God’s people can turn a symbol of life into an object of worship. Idolatry is always a temptation.

¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

This is arguably the best-known verse in the Bible. Here it serves as a link between the assertion that Jesus is to be lifted up and the explanation of the salvation he will make possible. The first clause of this verse is noteworthy for two reasons: First, the word “world” (Greek *kosmon*) implies the whole created order of things—the world or universe—but also the whole ungodly mass of humanity that dwells on the earth—all those who are at odds with God or enemies of God. A commentator once rendered this clause as “For God so

loved this God-hating world...” That God can look upon the sorry state of fallen humanity in love is a remarkable theological statement for John to make here. Second, this is the only place in John’s gospel where we read that God “gave” the Son. Elsewhere, we read that God “sent” the Son. It is a subtle distinction, but an important one. Jesus was not only sent on a mission, he was given to and for us as a gift from God. The eternal life Jesus offers is not just a promise of heaven after death, but is new life that begins in the present for those who believe. It is a different mode of existence—alive not just physically, but alive with and to the presence of God.

¹⁷“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

Verse 17 further clarifies Jesus’ mission and purpose: He is not the one who stands to condemn humanity. That condemnation is already in place. Rather, Jesus comes to make a new alternative possible. Since the fall of humanity, death or “perishing” as John puts it, has been the only reality available to us. Now, a new way is made possible for us. Jesus has come to save those who were perishing. Verse 18 makes clear that condemnation is the default—apart from Jesus, no one will have life. But those who believe in him have a new and better alternative—life with God forever.

¹⁹And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

As Gail O’Day writes in her commentary on this passage from the New Interpreter’s Bible, “Who people are is determined by their response to Jesus. These verses provide a telling conclusion to the Nicodemus narrative. Nicodemus did not believe (3:12); therefore, he remains in darkness. He came to Jesus at night and he will stay in the night.”

I would add that this is not the last we will hear from Nicodemus. He comes up twice more in John’s gospel. Once in John 7:50, when he half-heartedly defends Jesus against the accusations of his fellow council members. And lastly in John 19:39 when he brings 100 pounds of precious ointments and spices to anoint Jesus’ body and provide for his burial. It is obvious that his encounter with Jesus here at night had some lasting effect on him. In John 6:44 Jesus says, “No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father.” Nicodemus demonstrates that he is on that trajectory of being drawn to Jesus, little by little. It is not clear by the end if he has become a disciple of Jesus, but he repeatedly comes to the light and is on his way to “doing what is true” as he defends, anoints, and buries Jesus. In some ways, Nicodemus is a mirror image of the reader of this gospel. As the reader works through the gospel, the reader is being drawn toward Jesus and is on the road to faith and, indeed, eternal life.

Discussion/Reflection Questions:

- 1. The people of Israel had a hard time avoiding idolizing the bronze serpent Moses lifted up. Do you think such idolatry is still a temptation for God’s people today? In what ways?**
- 2. Why do you think John 3:16 has become so well-known today? What does this verse mean to you?**
- 3. How do you reconcile the statement that “those who do not believe are condemned already” with Jesus’ command to go and make disciples of all nations?**