

Under New Management 2024  
Numbers 21:4-9 John 3:1-17

### Numbers 21:4-9 (New Revised Standard Version)

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

### John 3:1-17 (New Revised Standard Version)

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. "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. "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.

The comedian Jack Benny's old Vaudeville routine told about  
a lost tourist who asks a street musician for directions,  
"How do I get to Carnegie Hall?"

The musician answers, "Practice, practice, practice."

For a musician to be good enough to perform at Carnegie Hall,  
obviously it takes many years of practice and hard work.  
But as Jesus will explain to Nicodemus,  
that is absolutely not true concerning the Kingdom of God.

In our reading from John's Gospel, Nicodemus went to see Jesus, vs. 1-2,

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."

Nicodemus was a Pharisee. He was a leader, scholar and a teacher ---  
-- all of these titles are very specific and technical terms  
that point to a man very committed to following God's Law.

By definition, a Pharisee was one who had taken a vow  
to devote his whole life and effort to study and to obey God's Law.  
**This was a man who was doing all that he could to gain God's favor.**

In terms of good works, of being a faithful and godly religious man,  
he was doing everything that any human possibly could,  
and yet in his heart of hearts, he wondered if it was enough,  
and so Nicodemus came to see Jesus late in the dark of night.

Nicodemus may have come **at night** to avoid the crowds of the day,  
or as a religious leader, to avoid attracting public attention.

On a deeper and symbolic level, in John's Gospel certain words  
such as **light and dark, night and day** go beyond their literal meaning.  
**At night** is poetic language or metaphor that's intended to infer,  
that Nic was in **theological darkness**, that he does not understand.

As Nicodemus explained, he came because he was impressed  
by the signs, wonders and miracles that Jesus was doing.

The Gospel is inferring and pointing out that  
a faith dependent on signs and wonders is inadequate,  
and that there is more much to an authentic faith  
than just being impressed by signs and miracles.

But at least he is open and came seeking to understand,  
for he recognized that Jesus came from the presence of God,  
& comes to Jesus searching for something authentic from God.

Jesus is very upfront and challenges this very religious man,  
that as things stand, he won't even see the Kingdom of God, vs. 3,  
Jesus said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born  
from above."

The phrase, 'born from above' is also often translated, 'born again'.  
**Born from above** or **born again** are both metaphors saying that,  
the Kingdom of God is not about fixing, but a whole new life.  
It's not just make a few small changes or external corrections,  
but from the inside out, **start over & live life under new management.**

Jesus is telling Nicodemus, God's Kingdom is not something we do,  
any more than our physical birth was something  
that we did or accomplished on our own for ourselves.

Now, concerning your birth, you can check with your mother on this,  
and that though it's true that you were present at the event,

she was doing all the work, entirely her effort and not yours -  
- so too, as Jesus explains, the Kingdom of God,  
is entirely by God's effort, and not ours at all.

It seems that Nicodemus was a bit confused by this,  
and he didn't quite understand or connect with  
the metaphor & poetic language Jesus was using, vs. 4,  
"How can anyone be born after having grown old?"

So Jesus tried to explain it again in another way,  
this time using a different metaphor to make that same point, vs. 5

Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water  
and Spirit.

Since Jesus was speaking with a respected teacher and Pharisee,  
to someone very knowledgeable in Scripture and its meaning,  
Jesus refers to a familiar text and promise from Ezekiel, 36:25-27,

I will sprinkle **clean water** upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all  
your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a **new spirit** I will put within you; and I will remove  
from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you.

Through the prophet, God promises that even though Israel  
still can't seem to get it together and be faithful to the Lord,  
**yet God will show grace and mercy by the water and spirit,  
and accomplish for them what they are not able to do.**

By pointing to this passage, Jesus was showing Nicodemus  
that the Kingdom of God is not about our own religious good deeds,  
but it is being born anew through the Spirit of God, vs. 6-8

What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said  
to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do  
not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

**It's not something we can make happen through our own human effort,  
any more than we can determine where or when the wind will blow.**

But Nicodemus was still not seeing the connection, vs. 9,

Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"

So Jesus switched to a story from the book of Numbers, vs. 14-15,

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

The book of Numbers is about the long wilderness journey  
of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery into the Promised Land,  
and chapter 21 has the story about the "poisonous serpents",  
**God's response to their constant griping, grumbling & ingratitude.**

It seems that all through the book of Exodus and the book of Numbers,  
these people grumbled & complained nearly every step of the way, vs. 5

The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the  
wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food."

So since they found gathering & eating manna each day a little bland,  
 God sent them something more exciting, **God sent in the snakes!**

The Lord punished them, by sending deadly biting serpents,  
 which got their attention and brought them to repentance.

**God sent poisonous snakes to help adjust their perspective.**

**When they repented**, God had Moses place a bronze snake up on a pole,  
 and then those bitten could look up at the “snake on a stick”,  
 as by God’s compassion, they were restored back to health,  
 which was to receive forgiveness, healing and salvation,  
 and escape the consequences of their sin.

The healing was not a magic bronze serpent or by just looking at it.  
 It was just a symbol of God's grace that healed their disease.

Just as that bronze snake lifted up on a pole became the antidote,  
 the cure for the poison of the Israelites' sin and complaining,  
 so too our cure, healing and remedy to sin's deadly poison is,

~ **when Jesus was lifted up on the cross, taking on our sin**  
 ~ **when Jesus was lifted up from the grave, he arose,**  
 ~ **when Jesus was lifted up in the clouds at his ascension.**

As the Israelites were to look, trusting that God would indeed heal,  
 so we are to look and see Christ lifted up, which means **to believe,**  
 and **to believe is to trust & receive God's grace and eternal life,**  
 for the Holy Spirit to take charge & to be under new management.

Just as the Israelites could not cure themselves on their own,  
 but received healing from their sin by looking up to  
 the graciousness of God, the bronze snake lifted up on a stick...

... so too we cannot save ourselves on our own, by our good works,  
 but we receive cleansing, healing and saving from our sin  
 by looking up and trusting the graciousness of God,  
 grace through Jesus Christ lifted up on the cross.

**I know of no greater truth than that of God's gracious love, vs. 16-17,**

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. 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.

Jesus didn't come like the biting snakes of judgment and death,  
 but **as the bronze serpent to heal and save the broken and lost.**

**Not to condemn, but the save those who were dying spiritually to sin.**

God's focus is not so much on the particulars of our wrong doing,  
 as it is our sinful nature inside from which our sins emerge,  
 and so, our sinful acts are what leaks out from within us--

-- our fear of scarcity, that makes us selfish and greedy  
 -- our sense of unworthiness, that makes us harsh & judgmental  
 -- our sense of failure & shame, that makes us attack and be vicious.

The wrong selfish, damaging and hurtful things we do and say,  
are because of the wounds we haven't yet allowed God to heal,

because we haven't quite learned to trust God fully,  
his promises, and his never ending loving kindness.

We're just not buying into that truth fully, and what it means,  
that God loves us always, no matter what & that will never change.

I am constantly amazed by the healing power of God's grace and mercy,  
and that as we begin to accept that the Good News is true,  
**then we can begin to actually experience for ourselves  
how much God really does love us, even just as we are,**

**and that becomes the most significant truth of our lives  
a life changing power and totally transforming truth  
that redefines and reorients everything about how we live,  
under new management, the Spirit guiding our response to God's grace.**

For more than just choosing to accept Christian doctrines and dogma  
such faith is believing, **a self-abandoning trust in Jesus Christ,**  
that then **reflects that cure back out to other people,  
to bring God's truth, healing & grace to the world,  
to the troubled & wounded, the lost and the dying.**

Nicodemus stands as an example of the many who say & believe that  
we must be good, enough good works to enter the Kingdom of God.  
But that is not true, it's not by our will and determination.  
It's not a human achievement, and our efforts cannot accomplish it.

Salvation comes as a gift of God we receive through Jesus Christ,  
by faith we choose to either accept, or we choose to reject.  
It's only the gracious love, the power and strength of God  
which alone accomplishes what we ourselves cannot do.

I remember a time, when as a very young and determined believer,  
a fresh new Christian focused on trying to live a faithful life,  
but I'd blown it completely and messed up in a terrible way.  
**I felt so discouraged that my best efforts had meant so little,  
and I thought, how can God possibly forgive me, now? again?**

But then it struck me **like a flash of gracious hope and insight,**  
that more than 2m years ago, Jesus died on the cross for **all** my sins.  
He knew and loved me back then, completely and without limit,  
knowing full well every sin & failure that I'd ever commit,  
**for gracious love is a fact that doesn't depend on me.**

No one is beyond the scope of God's gracious love & new possibilities.  
No one has **sinned so grievously** as to move beyond God's grace,  
and at the same time, neither are any of us **such good people**  
that we don't entirely depend upon God's grace & love alone.

There is nothing that I can or will ever do, ever think or speak  
that can or will ever cause God to love me any less or any more,  
because **God's gracious love is a fact that doesn't depend on me.**

A young man, was the beloved son of a great and very successful man,

but the son never had anywhere near his father's abilities,  
and he never seemed to succeed, achieve or finish anything.

This son could never measure up, so he finally gave it up.  
He left home, a bitter and frustrated failure, never to return.

When his father died, a lawyer found him to bring an inheritance.  
Not expecting to be in his father's will, the son was surprised,  
and so he asked, "But how can this be?  
My father knew what a loser and failure I was,  
and I even heard him say how disappointed he was."

The lawyer explained to this son, "I don't think you ever understood,  
that your father wasn't disappointed that you crashed and failed.  
Your father was disappointed that you never realized,  
that you never knew how very much you were loved,  
and how truly precious to him you've always been."

Here's the Good News for us today,  
**that though we are still wounded sinners with failures and flaws,  
yet we can celebrate and live in confident peace and hope,  
joy knowing that the cure is far stronger than the disease.**

As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:17,  
So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; *see*, everything has  
become new!