

3:16

Love That Costs
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December 16, 2007



Love That Costs John 3:14-16

If you have a Bible, and I hope you do. Let me invite you to open with me to John 3. If you don't have a Bible, let me encourage you to find somebody around you who does have one. It's good to be able to follow along as we listen to what God has to say to us when we've got His Word in front of us.

I am a week and a half into life with two kids, and I mention that only because I think it would be unfair for you to hold me accountable to anything I say that may not make sense. Many of you know that when you sleep at two to three hour intervals, here and there, your brain cells are not all functioning the way they're used to functioning, and so just want to ask that you would cut your pastor a little slack and over the next couple weeks and months, years. At this rate, of two kids every nine months, we're going to need a lot of slack, so just keep that in mind.

In all seriousness, I want us to see in God's Word, an incredible picture of God's love. In a verse that is infamous, that everyone in this room knows, but in a way that I'm guessing many of us have not seen based on the context of John 3:16. And I want to speak especially to people who do not know for sure what will happen to you when you die. If I were to ask you the question, just you and me, point blank, face to face, do you know for sure that when you die you have eternal life in Heaven? And if you cannot answer with absolute 100 percent certainty to that question then I want to speak to you especially.

"For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him," and the key word there is "believes." It's one of John's favorite words. He uses it all throughout this Gospel. In fact, he uses it in a couple of verses right before John 3:16 and that's where I want you to look. I want you to go with me to John 3, but before we read verse 16, I want us to read the two verses before that.

Start with me in verse 14 and listen to what Jesus says in His conversation with this guy named Nicodemus. A good, Jewish, religious man, Jesus says to Nicodemus, *"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life"* (John 3:14-16).

What Jesus does in His conversation with Nicodemus right before He gives us these infamous words in John 3:16 is He reaches back into the Old Testament, Book of Numbers, fourth book in the Old Testament. Reaches all the way back there to a story about Moses lifting up a snake in the desert to help Nicodemus understand how God so loved the world. What that means is, in order for us to understand John 3:16 and how God so loved the world, you and I have got to go back to Numbers and we've got to see why Jesus would bring this picture, this story from Numbers into the equation at this point in John 3.

So I want you to hold your place or just kind of mark your place in John 3, because we're going to come back here, but take a journey with me, left, all the way back into the Old Testament, Book of Numbers, fourth book in the Old Testament—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers 21, Numbers 21. And while you're turning there and finding that story, I want to kind of set the stage for what has happened up to this point in Numbers.

God's people, the people of Israel were slaves in Egypt and God miraculously, in a powerful way delivered them out of slavery in Egypt. They were miserable slaves and He delivered them out of that slavery through the Passover, led them away from Egypt. The Egyptians coming after them, led them to the Red Sea, split the sea in half, sent His people through and saved His people from the Egyptians.

And then He brought them to the edge of the Promised Land. Now, this was a land, land was huge in Old Testament day, having land was big and God had promised this certain land, the land of Canaan, He promised it to them. It was a land flowing with milk and honey, abundant land. And ever since the beginning of the Old Testament, God had told Abraham, the father of the people of Israel and all those who came after him, I'm going to give you this land.

And so He brings them to the edge of that land and He says here is the land I promised to you. And there they are on the brink of the Promised Land, and many of you know what happens. They get scared and they decide not to take God at His Word and they say, I don't think we can take this land. And what they do is they turn back from it. They even say why we don't just go back to Egypt where we were slaves.

They're standing on the brink of what God had promised to them for years and they turn around. And so for the next 40 years they wander in the desert, the wilderness outside of the Promised Land. An entire generation is going to pass away before the people of Israel, the people of God are going to go into the Promised Land.

Now, when we get to Numbers 21, we're coming close to the end of the 40 years. And so for a long time, these people have been wandering in a very difficult land, and at different times they need water and God has provided water miraculously through rocks, and they've needed food, and God has sent down food from Heaven for them to eat. And so He's provided for them in all these different ways and you get to Numbers 21, they have a great victory over a certain group of people, and so things are looking up and they're getting close to the end of this 40 years. And it's that scene that sets the stage for Numbers 21:4.

Listen to what it says. "They," being the people of God, the people of Israel,

They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!' Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, 'We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us.' So Moses prayed for the people. The Lord said to Moses, 'Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.' So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived (Num. 21:4-9).

So you got the picture. On the brink of the Promised Land, yet another time after years and years of wandering, have this great victory and then all of a sudden it says that the people were impatient and they began to complain, and all of a sudden snakes start appearing everywhere, venomous snakes that are biting the Israelites and Israelites are dying all over the place. What is this about? What is God trying to teach the people of Israel in Numbers 21? What is He trying to teach us by giving us this story? And why in the world does Jesus reach back to this story right before He gives us these words in John 3:16?

The Illustration...

Well, in order to understand their significance in John 3, I think we need to see three different facets of this illustration that He uses in Numbers 21, and really get our arms around the picture here.

A Sinful People

Facet number one, in Numbers 21, is a sinful people, a sinful people. The people of God turning against God, rebelling against God. Now, when we initially read this it doesn't seem like it's that severe of a thing, for them to say, well, we don't like the food that we're eating. But what we've got to realize is that when we see this sort of thing happening in the Old Testament, there is a lot more at work, there is a lot more at play than simply a son saying to his mom I don't really like the food you put on the table tonight or a husband saying to his wife, or wife to her husband, I don't like the food you've prepared, or going into a restaurant, I didn't like the food. This is much deeper than that.

In fact, turn back one chapter to Numbers 20, and I just want to show you an example of that. I want you to look at Numbers 20. We'll start in verse 3. This was one of those times where they needed water and God provided water from a rock for the people of Israel. And I want you to listen to what happened. It says in verse 3, it says, "*They quarreled with Moses...*" This is the people quarreling and they said,

'If only we had died when our brothers fell dead before the Lord! Why did you bring the Lord's community into this desert, that we and our livestock should die here? Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to this terrible place? It has no grain or figs, grapevines or pomegranates. And there is no water to drink!' Moses and Aaron went from the assembly to the entrance to the Tent of Meeting and fell facedown, and the glory of the Lord appeared to them. The Lord said to Moses, 'Take the staff, and you and your brother Aaron gather the assembly together. Speak to that rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water. You will bring water out of the rock for the community so they and their livestock can drink' (Num. 20:3-8).

So God says, Moses, you and Aaron go out there. You speak to a rock and I'm going to provide water through the rock. And so they go out there. "Moses," verse 9, "*took the staff from the Lord's presence, just as he commanded him. He and Aaron gathered the assembly together in front of the rock and Moses said to them, 'Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?' Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff"* (Num. 20:9-11). That's not what God had told him to do. God had said speak to the rock. He strikes the rock twice with his staff. "*Water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank. But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, 'Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them'"* (Num. 20:11-12).

Did you catch that? God just told Moses, the leader of the people of Israel, who has led them so dutifully, so faithfully in so many ways throughout these many years, God just told Moses, you're not going into the Promised Land, all because he hit the rock instead of speaking to the rock.

Now, we don't have time to dive into Numbers 20 and see why that was such a serious thing, but I give that as an illustration to remind you that when we come to Numbers 21 and we see them complaining about food, there is something much deeper here than just not liking what's on the menu.

And what I want you to see, is just a variety of different facets of their sinfulness that are being expressed here in Numbers 21. Number one, they distrusted God's guidance, they distrusted God's guidance. When you come to verse 4 and it says they traveled "*along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom*" (Num. 21:4), we don't have a map here to see what's going on, but basically, they couldn't go through Edom and so they had to backtrack. They had to go away from the Promised Land in order to get around Edom and go toward the Promised Land.

And so what was happening is they start to complain, they get impatient, it says, because they're backtracking. They've been wandering for all these years and now they find themselves doing it again. It's similar to how you or I in our spiritual journey, maybe things were going good at one point for you, and things are going – progressing well in your spiritual journey and all of a sudden something happens that you don't quite understand and things don't work out quite the way you planned. And it seems like things are now going backwards in your spiritual journey and you start to ask God, why is this happening, why am I doing this, why is this happening to me? That's kind of the situation they were in and they were distrusting God's guidance of them, the God who had guided them and had led them to that point, they were saying again, maybe we should go back to where we came from.

First, they distrusted God's guidance, second, they blasphemed God's greatness. It says in verse 5, "*They spoke against God and against Moses*" (Num. 21:5). Literally, they "blasphemed" God or "cursed God and cursed Moses." The people of God – here's what's going on in Numbers 21, the people of God are looking in the face of the God of the Universe, Yahweh, and they are cursing His name. You see how this is much deeper than just not liking the food.

Third, they doubted God's goodness. They asked the question that they ask all throughout the Old Testament, why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? Is God even good to do this to us? They are doubting, questioning God's entire plan of salvation for the people of Israel in the Old Testament. Why did you even deliver us out of slavery to be here? Doubting God's goodness, blaspheming His Greatness, distrusting His guidance.

Fourth, they spurned God's generosity. Listen to what they said, "*There is no bread! There is no water*" (Num. 21:5). You don't have to go back very far – we just looked at one instance in Numbers 20, over and over and over again, God is providing, literally on a daily basis for His people. From the moment He led them out of Egypt, He was guiding them with a cloud by day and fire by night. And when they were thirsty, He would give them water from the rocks, and when they were hungry, He literally provided bread from Heaven, manna, food from the sky that was sitting out there. He laid a table for them, set a table for them, day after day. They didn't have to worry about having food at any point in the middle of the desert, because God provided it day after day after day. And here they are,

absolutely denigrating the provision that God had made for them, time and time and time again, spurning His generosity.

Next, they despised God's gifts. You get to the climax here, where they say at the end of verse 5, "*And we detest this miserable food*" (Num. 21:5). And that's a reference to the manna that God had provided from Heaven, and that word miserable literally means "worthless," "good for nothing." This food that God has given us is worthless, we detest it, we hate this good for nothing food. They were despising the gifts God had given them.

You don't realize even how serious that is until you get to the New Testament and in John 6; Jesus equates Himself with the true bread from Heaven. And He uses this picture of manna and God's provision there for His people to describe God's provision for His people through sending His son. And based on that New Testament picture, this picture in Numbers 21 is tantamount to them literally rejecting the Son of God.

That's the picture, rejecting God's gifts and ultimately, get to this last facet of their sin, they rejected God's grace, they rejected the grace that He had shown them. Now, picture it this way, its Christmas season, people giving gifts. If someone you love, greatly, deeply and someone you have great respect for gives you a gift, even if that gift is not at the top of your wish list, maybe even if it's nowhere near your wish list, they give you that gift and part of you really doesn't even want the gift. But simply because this person that you love deeply and respect so greatly gave it to you, you would obviously be thankful for that gift, right? It would have a meaning attached to it. You would want the gift simply because of who it came from.

Every guy knows, I think – I've made mistakes in giving gifts to Heather. I've given her some gifts that as soon as she opened it, the look on her face, I knew that that was not the best gift to give that particular Christmas or anniversary. Am I alone in that? No, okay, maybe I am. Well, all right, I've done that. But every time I give her a gift she is extremely thankful, extremely appreciative. There are wives, they're looking at their husbands, yeah, you've done that.

So anyway, even if it's not something you wanted, who gave you that gift makes a big difference in how you perceive it. Similarly, if there is somebody who would be considered an enemy, who for some reason you have developed great bitterness and anger in your heart toward that person because they have hurt you in some way, if they were to give you a gift, even if it was the top gift on your list, there's a large part of you that really wouldn't even want it. That even if it is this great gift, simply because of who it came from, you would look at that gift with disdain.

Now, I want you to bring that frame of mind into Numbers 21 and I want you to realize that what's happening here is not a commentary on the bread, on the gift. What is happening here, it's a commentary on the people's view of the One who is giving that gift. It wasn't about the food not tasting good, it was about a disdain and disrespect and irreverence for the One who is giving that gift. You see the depth of their sin here, and before we harp too much, too hard on the Israelites, before we look at them, and this is the eighth time they've complained like this in the Book of Numbers alone -. You'd think they'd learn their lesson after 40 years. You'd think we'd have some new material from Israel to preach on, but it's the same old thing right here, over and over again, complaining.

Before we harp too much on them, let's realize that this is the sinfulness that plagues you and the sinfulness that plagues me. We are a people who return to the same patterns and the same cycles of sin. We are the people who let these attitudes creep into our hearts, the

distrust for God's guidance, doubting His goodness and direction in our lives, yawning in the face of His grace sometimes. A sinful people to see the depth of their sin.

So what does God do? Listen to verse 6, "*Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, 'We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us.'* So Moses prayed for the people" (Num. 21:6-7). We've got a picture of a sinful people.

A Sympathetic Provider

Now, second, a sympathetic provider, a sympathetic provider. Now, as soon as I say that some of you are thinking what's sympathetic about sending snakes among the people. Well, I want you to follow with me here, and I want you to see three characteristics of God that are coming to the forefront in Numbers 21.

Number one, see the wrath of God, the wrath of God. He sends venomous snakes among His people. Some translations say "fiery" or "burning serpents" and they're biting Israelites, and the Israelites are dying left and right as a result of these venomous snakes that God has sent among His people.

This picture in Numbers 21 does not square with the popular 21st Century crowd-pleasing, made-for-TV picture of God that is so prevalent in our culture today, but this is the God of the Bible. The God of the universe is a wrathful God, whose character is dead-set against sin. He is infinitely Holy and their sin, your sin, my sin is infinitely offensive in His sight, and His wrath is infinitely just. And the wrath of God is being experienced by the Israelites in Numbers 21.

Thankfully, though, the story does not end there. The Israelites realized their sin. They go running to Moses and they say, we spoke against you and we spoke against God. We need God to forgive us, to save us from dying. Everybody's dying. Enter the second characteristic of God.

See the wrath of God, second, see the mercy of God. See the mercy of God. Now, even at this point some of you are thinking, well, it's kind of hard to see mercy in this picture, but I'm going to read to you from Psalm 78. We don't have time to all turn there, but listen to Psalm 78; it's recounting this whole picture. Listen to what it says in Psalm 78, you might write this down, verse 17. It said,

But they continued to sin against him, rebelling in the desert against the Most High. They willfully put God to the test by demanding the food they craved. They spoke against God, saying, 'Can God spread a table in the desert? When he struck the rock, water gushed out, and streams flowed abundantly. But can he also give us food? Can he supply meat for his people?' When the Lord heard them, he was very angry; his fire broke out against Jacob and his wrath rose against Israel, for they did not believe in God or trust in his deliverance (Ps. 78:17-22).

That recaps what we've just seen. But then you get down in this chapter to verse 38 and listen to what it says about God working among His people. It says, "*Yet, he was merciful; he forgave their iniquities and did not destroy them. Time after time he restrained his anger and did not stir up His full wrath*" (Ps. 78:38).

Psalm 78 reminds us that Numbers 21 is not a picture of the full wrath of God. This is wrath restrained by mercy. God did not, in Numbers 21, give His people over to their sin for the rest of their existence; He did not give them over. It's the same picture we see in Romans 1. The worst thing that could happen is for God to give us over to ourselves and our sin. See the mercy of God.

Now, how can we have a God of mercy and a God of wrath and it be the same God? They come together in this third characteristic. See the wrath of God and the mercy of God and see the faithfulness of God.

God had begun a covenant relationship with the people of Israel. He had committed Himself to them. He had committed Himself to be faithful to provide for them. And they had committed themselves to worship Him, but then they had turned from that covenant. They had turned in complete unfaithfulness. But when Moses comes running to God and calls out to this God on behalf of a people that had looked at His face and profaned His name, a God listens to their prayer and He answers.

Do not miss this. Let's pause here for just a second. Aren't you thankful that despite constant unfaithfulness among the people of God, He still hears their prayers? Aren't you thankful that despite constant patterns and cycles of sin in your life and my life, we still find a listening ear in Heaven? What an incredible picture of the faithfulness of God.

So what does He do? And this is where it gets weird. Moses says, "Save the people. They're dying with snakebites all around." And he prays to the God who has the power at that moment to strike down all of those snakes, the God who has the power at that moment to heal all of those people, and this God looks at Moses and says let's do an art project.

And think about what God tells Moses to do here. He says, "Moses, make an image of a snake." This is the same God who said over and over again before this, "Do not make images of any animal or anything. It leads to idolatry. You make no images." He says make an image of a snake, of all images, the last thing Moses wants to do is craft a snake at this point.

This is the animal that is equated with Satan, himself, in Genesis 3, the serpent, cursed by God. This is the agent of God's judgment on the people's sin in Numbers 21, and he's supposed to make an image of a snake, and this is supposed to comfort the people. He's supposed to put it up on a pole. Think about all the taboos that Moses is being asked to break here.

Take a symbol of evil, of utter degradation in your culture, a picture of the judgment of God on sin, you put it on a pole and you lift it up to people who are dying all around you. And as soon as you lift that up, if those people will just look at the snake, that they will live.

A Surprising Paradox

That is extremely strange, and it leads us to the third facet of the story that we've got to see. A sinful people, a sympathetic provider, and third, a surprising paradox, a surprising paradox. And do you remember what a paradox is? A paradox is two words or ideas, thoughts, when you put them together they seem to contradict, jumbo shrimp or same difference or Microsoft Works. You got all kinds of different paradoxes. Okay? Seem to contradict.

So we come to Numbers 21 and what's the paradox? God has just told Moses to take the clearest picture of His judgment and His wrath on sin, clearest picture of sin altogether in

Scripture in the serpent, make an image of that and lift it up and when everybody looks at that image that represents sin and judgment and death, then they will experience life.

The paradox of Numbers 21 is that the symbol of death was transformed into a source of life and all you had to do to live was to look. You don't have to take a sacrifice or offering to the tabernacle, you don't have to go to this person or that priest to ask for forgiveness. You don't have to do anything but look at the image of a serpent on a pole and you will live. The determining factor in whether or not you live as an Israelite in Numbers 21 is, did you look at the serpent on the pole? That one look determines whether or not you live or you die.

Now, it's that picture that when you fast forward to John 3, and Jesus is talking with a Jewish religious man who is very familiar with that story, it's that picture that Jesus draws on in the middle of a conversation in John 3 about being born again, and Nicodemus is asking how do I avoid death, how do I be born again? And Jesus says in John 3:14, *"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."*

The Invitation...

Why did Jesus use this story in Numbers 21 to help us understand the love of God? And here's why? He did it because at that moment He was extending to Nicodemus, and He was extending to every person in all the world and every person here (receiving this sermon) an invitation. That invitation was based on this illustration and it was twofold.

Recognize the Extent of your Rebellion

The invitation was, number one, Nicodemus, every person in the world, every person here (receiving this sermon), number one, recognize the extent of your rebellion. Jesus uses this illustration to show very clearly that every single person born into this world has been bitten by the fiery serpent of sin and sin's deadly venom pervades every one of our veins.

And Nicodemus did not realize that. He thought he was safe, he was a good man, a religious man. He followed all the laws. He would not have equated himself with the rebelling people in Numbers 21, but Satan had blinded him to the depth of his sinfulness.

And there are men and women, students that sit here (receiving this sermon) blinded by Satan, himself, to the fact that God is infinitely Holy and your sin is infinitely offensive in His sight, and His wrath is infinitely just upon you.

And Satan would want nothing more than to blind every person in this church and every person in this community to the fact that every single one of our lives is extremely brief and every single one of them is headed either to everlasting joy or everlasting suffering. And he is blinding people with nice houses and nice cars and nice jobs and nice families and nice churches. And we need to realize the extent of our rebellion, and we have a disease we cannot cure.

Just like the people in Numbers who have been bitten by a snake and can do nothing about it, there is no snake kit to handle this. There is no medicine to overcome this. They can do nothing. That is the position we are in. They could do no religious sacrifices to make this go away, and there is no amount of good works, no amount of religious activity, no matter how many resolutions you make to live a better life, no matter how many promises you make that things are going to be different, no matter how many commitments you make to this

person or that person, to God, no matter how many times you do it, there is nothing you can do to cure this disease, nothing.

And as soon as you start to think, well, I thought I could do this, no, nothing. There's nothing you can do to cure this disease. We have a disease we cannot cure and we have a destiny that we cannot change just like people who have been bitten by a snake and are dying.

Because of sin, every single person, every single person is on a road that leads to eternal death and there is nothing you can do to change your destiny, nothing. That is the truth of God's Word.

And as soon as we undercut that truth by either ignoring God's judgment and wrath or by thinking we can do something to change that, we have missed the whole point of the Bible. Nothing we can do.

Look to the Expression of His Love

Recognize the extent of your rebellion. The invitation is not, though, to stop there, because the invitation didn't stop there in Numbers 21. Recognize the extent of your rebellion, and number two, look to the expression of His love, look to the expression of His love.

Jesus says, "*Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up*" (John 3:14). Jesus is comparing Himself to the snake on the pole, and He says, "The Son of Man must be lifted up."

Now, this is an interesting phrase that He uses here, "The Son of Man must be lifted up," what does that mean? Because this is an idea in Scripture that is misquoted all the time. In fact, go over to John 12, Jesus says this same phrase two other times. This is the second time He says it. Go to John 12:32. One of the most misquoted Scriptures in the Bible. Listen to John 12:32, this is Jesus talking, and He uses this same word that He uses in John 3:14, He uses it over here in John 12:32. Listen to what He says, "*I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself*" (John 12:32). You ever heard that quoted before?

Oftentimes it's quoted in the context of a worship service and whether it's a preacher or musical worship leader will say something to the effect of, "Jesus said, if He is lifted up, He will draw all men unto Himself, so we're going to lift Him up in this room and we're going to trust He's going to draw men to Himself. We're going to lift Him up, we're going to sing songs to Him." That is not what Jesus is talking about in John 12.

Look at the very next verse, verse 33, Jesus "*said this to show the kind of*"—what? "*Death He was going to die*" (John 12:33). When Jesus says, "I will be lifted up from the earth," He is not talking about us singing a song to Him, He is talking about dying on a cross. "When I am lifted up on a cross I will draw men to myself."

John 3:14, the Son of Man must be lifted up on a cross. So the picture here, this idea of being lifted up is that Jesus was lifted up to suffer as the Savior of all the world. When He talks about being lifted up, He's talking about His suffering on the cross. He was lifted up to suffer.

Now, here's the really cool thing, once Jesus is lifted up on the cross and He dies on the cross and He rises from the grave, and you get past the Book of John to the Book of Acts, this same word is used two times in the Book of Acts. Acts 2:33 and Acts 5:31, and in Acts it's used different. When Jesus talks about it in the Gospels, He's talking about how He will

be lifted up to suffer as Savior. In Acts 2:33 and 5:31, it talks about how after Jesus died on the cross and rose from the grave, He was lifted up to the right hand of the Father to reign as Lord.

And so in this one word in the New Testament, we've got two meanings based on which side of the cross you're on. He will be lifted up to suffer as Savior, He is now lifted up to reign as Lord. It's the same word that Paul then uses in Philippians 2:9, "*Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father*" (Phil. 2:9-11).

When He talks about being lifted up, He is talking about being lifted up to suffer as Savior and then the New Testament gives us a picture of Him being lifted up to reign as Lord. And Jesus brings that picture in John 3 because...

Now, this is the whole reason John 3:14-15 are there. It's giving us the reason for the cross; it's giving us the reason for Jesus being lifted up. The purpose of it was so that when He is lifted up on a cross, His life and His love will be available to anyone who believes in Him, to anyone and everyone who believes.

Now, remember, remember the picture in Numbers 21. You're dying of snakebite; the only way to live is to do what? Is to look, to see a symbol of evil. God has said to Moses, "Take a symbol of evil that depicts my great judgment on sin, my wrath on sin, and you lift that picture up and anyone who looks at that picture can be saved just by looking at it."

Fast-forward to the New Testament and God says, "I will take my Son, and I am going to lift Him up, and I am going to pour out my wrath on Him. I am going to pour out my judgment on Him." And God takes the picture, ultimate picture, of sin and death and judgment and humiliation and He says to all people in all history, "If you will look at my Son and believe in what He did, you will live."

That is the ultimate paradox. This is more than a snake on a pole. This is the ultimate symbol of death and sin becoming the ultimate source of life for sinners. Looking to the cross, because at the cross, the price for sin is paid by the least expected person. The price for sin is paid by the perfect Son of God. That makes no sense. And it is the radical truth of Christianity, please don't miss it.

He says, all you do is believe; anyone who believes. Just like they have looked, you believe. This is the point where Christianity, Scripture is scrutinized and criticized. "It can't be that easy, just to believe, no matter what you've done, no matter how deep your sin is, even if you've never gone to church or never even looked at yourself as religious and all you have to do is believe and that moment you have eternal life?" Brothers and sisters, "believing" is the word that separates the entire world into two separate groups. There are those who believe and those who don't believe. And those who believe are eternally linked to the unfathomable love of God, and those who don't believe remain under the wrath of God. Which group are you in?

I plead with you, with the plea of Moses in Numbers 21, just look at the serpent. You'll live if you just look. I plead with you; look at Christ on a cross, the Son of God taking the infinite judgment of God upon Himself so that you don't have to bear it. Believe in Him.

Not just believe that it happened, that's not the way John uses that word. Even the demons believe that. Come to the end of yourself and realize, recognize the extent of your rebellion and the venom that fills your veins in sin and look to Him as the only one who can remove that and you believe in Him and you will have eternal life.

We don't know how Nicodemus responded on that day. We don't know exactly what he was thinking or what he said or what he did, but you fast-forward... Look at this with me, fast-forward a few more chapters in John, to John 19. In John 19, "Jesus dies on the cross, He is lifted up to suffer as the Savior." And you get to verse 38, John 19:38, "*Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jews. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away.*"

Listen to verse 39, John 19:39, "*He was accompanied by*"—who? Nicodemus. He reappears. "*The man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. Taking Jesus' body, the two of them,*" Joseph and Nicodemus himself, "*the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen*" (John 19:39-40).

Is that not a beautiful picture of a man who undoubtedly on that day realized the significance of the words that had been said to him back in John 3? The Son of Man must be lifted up so that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life. Then Nicodemus knew that God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son. He's holding Him in His arms, that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life.

Will you bow your heads with me? Every head bowed, eyes closed, and I ask you to do that because there is nothing that the adversary would like more than to distract you. I started by asking the question, "Do you know for sure that you have eternal life in Heaven when you die?" Can you answer that question with absolute certainty? Do not start thinking about all that you've done or what you think might qualify you to answer that question with absolute certainty. This question hinges on one thing, believe. Have you come to the end of yourself, looked at Christ on the cross and said I believe?

And if you have never done that, and in the quietness, right now in your heart, I want to invite you—I want to plead with you—to look to God, look to Jesus on the cross and right now say to Him, I believe.

It does not matter what your church background is, how many years you've been a part of church, it matters nothing. Does not matter if you have committed all kinds of sins that you would be ashamed for anyone to know about or if you think you're a great person, it doesn't matter. Will you say to Him right now, I believe, I believe, and I trust in the love that you have shown for me. And if you believe then the promise of God's Word right now is that you have eternal life, no catch, no catch, all grace.

And if you are saying that, and I pray that you'll know that certainty, and I want to give you an opportunity to put feet to that certainty. There's nothing you need to do to make that decision real, it is real if it has happened in your heart. But at the same time, I want to give you an opportunity right here in this moment to go to another person and say I believe, to confess your belief.

I want to invite believers here, those of you who have believed in Jesus and you do know for certain that you have eternal life in Heaven... Have you come to a point in your spiritual journey where you have begun to distrust God's guidance and where you have begun to

doubt His goodness? Or maybe somewhere along the way your heart has become hard toward Him and you've let a complaining nature creep into your faith that has affected the way you receive the grace of God and the gifts of God?

If you fall into one of those categories, then I want to invite you, while others are responding and saying we believe, I want to invite you, between you and the Lord, do a Numbers 21, where you go running back to Him, knowing that your forgiveness has already been paid for on the cross and returning in faithfulness to Him.

Father, we praise you for your wrath, your mercy and your faithfulness. And we praise you for lifting up your Son on a cross that all who believe in Him might have life. We pray that you would give us grace to put feet to our singing and to run to you with all abandonment and to trust in you with everything. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

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