

PM John 3:1-16 & John 12:20-36 Jesus Lifted Up

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[0 : 00] First of all, from John chapter 3, and we'll read verses 1 to 16. John's Gospel, chapter 3, from verse 1.

Now, there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, Rabbi, We know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with them.

Jesus answered him, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus said to him, How can a man be born when he is old?

Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born? Jesus answered, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is Spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, you must be born again.

[1 : 22] The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, 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 the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?

No one has ascended into heaven, except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And 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, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

[2 : 37] Just to there, now we'll read in John's Gospel, chapter 12, reading from verse 20 to verse 36.

John's Gospel, chapter 12, from verse 20, entitled, Some Greeks Seek Jesus, and then the second paragraph, The Son of Man Must Be Lifted Up.

Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, Sir, we wish to see Jesus.

Philip went and told Andrew. Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. And Jesus answered them, The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

Truly, truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone. But if it dies, it bears much fruit.

[3 : 48] Whoever loves his life, loses it. And whoever hates his life in this world, will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me.

And where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honour him. Now is my soul troubled.

And what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour. But for this purpose, I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.

Then a voice came from heaven. I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again. The crowd that stood there and heard it said that it had thundered.

Others said, An angel has spoken to him. Jesus answered, This voice has come for your sake, not mine. Now is the judgment of this world.

[4 : 51] Now will the ruler of this world be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself. He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die.

So the crowd answered him, We have heard from the law that the Christ remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up?

Who is this Son of Man? So Jesus said to them, The light is among you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you.

The one who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going. While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light.

We'll just read to there. May God bless to us this reading too. Now we're going to look at John chapter 3 and verses 14 and 15.

[5 : 59] John 3 at verse 14. And 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.

Now let me just refresh our minds about the story of the serpent in the wilderness that's mentioned here.

God had brought his people out of Egypt. He had done great things for them then, which ought to have made them trust in him. He had supplied for them already in the wilderness manna to feed them in the morning and quails to feed them at night.

But then the people keep complaining and saying, God would have been better to have left us in Egypt. And we loathe this food that we're getting morning after morning after morning.

They're ungrateful. They're failing to trust in God's promises. They're complaining and thinking they know better than God. It's a pretty serious position that they're in through their lack of faith.

[7 : 14] And God punishes them accordingly. He brings these serpents, fiery serpents, that is serpents with a fiery bite, and people are dying.

And this brings them to their senses. And they come to God and they say, we have sinned. And they seek God's help. And they ask especially that Moses would intervene and pray and that the plague of the serpents would be removed from them.

And then there's this curious incident where Moses is told to make a replica of the snakes, the serpents that are biting them, to put this replica of bronze up in a pole.

And then they're told, whoever looks at this will live. Now, this morning I dealt with this, of course. And that looks something sort of mechanical.

All you needed to do was obey. But really, we looked at that and suggested that there really was much more to it than that. Because people are going to say, why should I obey?

[8 : 22] What good can a bronze serpent make to me? How can I get well simply by looking at the bronze serpent? And there would be a natural disinclination to do that because it doesn't make sense at a human level.

And the thought that we had then was that there was only one answer to that question. Why should I look at that? And the answer was, because God told you to do it. You just got to trust God's word that it would work.

You just got to take him at his word and act accordingly, believing it would be as he had promised. So that behind that act of obedience, there was an act of faith.

So, we saw the story this morning, not in terms simply of disobedience and then final obedience, but we saw it in terms of a disobedience that had been caused by a lack of faith and an obedience that was motivated by true faith, taking God at his word.

And that's the way we understood that story. And then, if you look at it in that way, you can see how appropriate it is that it should be used in the New Testament as an illustration of the work of our Lord.

[9 : 40] And that's what Jesus does here. Here he is, and he's taking up this Old Testament story and he's making a parable of it, if you like.

He's saying, what happened then runs parallel with what's happening in my experience. To use technical language, which I generally don't like to use, that was a type of Christ.

It was a pattern for Christ to follow. It was a model situation and Jesus follows that same sort of pattern in his experience. And that's the general idea that lies behind this.

And there are all sorts of ideas you can bring from this. But I think on the face of it, there are three things here that are quite evident. Three similarities between what happened in the desert and what happened in this occasion.

The serpent was lifted up, so Jesus will be lifted up. And we believe that that means in part lifted up on the cross. So, as the serpent was lifted up, so Jesus was lifted up.

[10:51] That's the first point. The second thing is believe. Now we said that that was applied in the Old Testament story. If they didn't believe, there was no motivation for obedience.

And that was what was behind it all. They had to believe the promise of God. And that is made explicit in this case so that whoever believes...

So that's the second point of similarity, believing. And the third point of similarity is the giving of life. Those that looked in faith and rested upon God's promise discovered that they were cured of their bites.

And that the serpents left them. So, there was life given to them then. And this is made more explicit in the New Testament. Eternal life will be what comes to those who believe in Jesus lifted up on the cross.

So, three ideas. The lifting up, the believing, and the life that comes. And that's the simple illustration that's given. Now, what I'm going to do this evening is not develop these similarities.

[12:05] Because what I'm trying to get at here is that actually, there's much more in the New Testament than there is in the Old Testament. I'm not saying that that was a prediction, but I'm saying the story is fulfilled.

There's something more in the New Testament story than there is in the Old Testament story. The way that it's put over makes us see that. And that, I think, should be the focus of our attention.

There were similarities, yes, but there were differences. Differences in the sense that this is fuller, this is more developed, this is more wonderful than the Old Testament story is.

And that's the emphasis that I want to try and give to that this evening. Now, that's what we see, of course, in general, when it says that Jesus fulfilled this or fulfilled that.

We generally see that he gave it more meaning, that he added a new layer of meaning to it. That he brought out things that were hidden there and filled it with meaning.

[13:09] So, that's the way that things usually work in the New Testament. So, we're not too surprised if it works this way in this case as well. And in this way, you see, what we're trying to do is show the wonder of the Gospel.

The remarkable features that makes this so distinctive. And in that way, I hope that our faith will be drawn out and our sense of wonder excited and our faith, therefore, will be developed the more.

So, let's look at these three points and start with the similarities but show how the New Testament here develops what was said in the Old. So, we start with the lifting up.

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up. A clear similarity there. Moses made a bronze serpent.

He put it onto a pole and then he lifted the pole up so that folks could see the bronze serpent that he had made. Very simple. And I don't think there's any doubt that any sensible person would recognize that this is something that happened to Jesus in regard to the cross.

[14:27] He carried his own cross to the place of crucifixion. And notice then the way they did things. They didn't then erect the cross and then try and put a body on it nailing it on the cross when it was erected.

It's well known that they laid the cross on the ground and they nailed those to be executed on the cross in that form. And then once the person was attached to the cross they then lifted the cross up into position.

and that's exactly what was done in Jesus' case and you can see how it speaks therefore of the way in which he died.

This reminds us of the cross. It makes us think about the crucifixion. When Jesus was lifted up it means at least first of all it means that he was lifted up to die on the cross.

And this comes out in John 8 in verse 28. We didn't read that passage but we read another which we'll come to in a minute. But in John 8 28 it says When you have lifted up the Son of Man then you will know that I am he.

[15:38] So the lifting up of the Son of Man was done by human initiative. By human agency. People did it. It wasn't simply an act of God.

People did it. When you have lifted up the Son of Man what can that refer to? Except he's been put on the cross and the cross being lifted up into position. This refers to his death.

But now here's where an extra layer of meaning comes in. It's a very strange word that is used here to say he was lifted up on the cross.

Because usually this word is translated exalted. And that's part of its meaning. It's lifted up in the sense of exalted and highly honoured and given a place of importance.

And that's the way it is used in other parts of the scriptures. And that would make us ask is that perhaps also in mind here? Is he looking beyond the lifting up of the cross to another thing to a fuller exaltation of Jesus?

[16:49] Because that's the word what the word most naturally means. And it's here that the passage that we read in John 12 comes in. He says there I when I am lifted up from the earth will draw all people to myself.

What's he talking about here? Well he says himself he said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die. So in a sense he's still speaking about his death.

But the whole context of the story there as we read it speaks of glory and glorification. Father glorify your name.

And he gets the reply I have glorified it and I will glorify it again. So the whole context there doesn't simply speak of crucifixion in terms of suffering and death which it is connected with.

But it's the context of glory being given to the Father through it. and that's the context of this word. Lifted up means to glorify to exalt.

[17:56] And therefore that does make us ask if something more than simply dying on the cross is what's in mind here. I am lifted up from the earth he says in John 12 there.

And from the earth really means out of the earth. Now I have to say quite honestly I don't know if we can press that. But it allows us to think that he's not just thinking about the cross being raised up into that position he's raised out of the earth which allows us to say surely surely the resurrection is in mind here.

Surely his resurrection and ascension are in mind here. Because that's the way this word is used in other parts of the New Testament. In Acts 2 he was exalted at the right hand of God the same word lifted up.

He was lifted up at the right hand of God. That doesn't refer to his death it refers to the fruit of his death. It refers to what lay behind death. It refers to his exaltation to God's right hand.

And later on in the Acts of the Apostles God exalted him at his right hand as leader and saviour. Again God lifted him up to his right hand as leader and saviour.

[19:13] And that's what makes me say there's much more in this than simply the cross. There's the fruit of the cross the results of the cross. He became obedient to death even the death of the cross.

Therefore God highly exalted him and gave him the name that was above every name. And I think that has got to be brought into account when we ask ourselves what does lifting up of the Jesus means?

It means that he died on the cross and he was raised from the dead and he was taken up into heaven and he was exalted at the Father's right hand and he was given the name that was above every name and he's seated at the Father's right hand waiting and all his enemies are brought into submission to him.

Now is the time when all he's going to be given all nations as his inheritance as we were singing about in Psalm 2 and all that is part and parcel of the picture here.

So it goes beyond the simple similarity and the words used suggest something much bigger than that and so what we have to think about Jesus when we look at him raised up, lifted up, how do we see him?

[20:30] Yes we see him as a bleeding saviour. Yes we see him as one that died for the sins of his people but we also see him as the one that triumphed over death. We see him lifted up to glory and exalted in heaven and we've got a full picture of who Jesus is.

Not just the death that he died but the glory that followed. Not just the purchase of redemption for his people but all the splendours of him being seated at the Father's right hand and that therefore fills our mind with a bigger meaning than simply oh this is a picture of Jesus crucified.

Yes by all means we must think of him crucified but let's not neglect to see him as risen and ascended and exalted in heaven. That's what it means to see Jesus lifted up.

And so you see how the Old Testament story well it points the way to that but it's the New Testament way of expressing it that brings out that fullness and this is something useful for us.

Don't just look at Jesus crucified. Okay that's going to be the centre of our thoughts hopefully that's the way we should always be thinking but remember that the crucified one rose from the dead and he was exalted to heaven and sits at the Father's right hand and all authority in heaven and earth is now his.

[21 : 55] Think of him in that way and then we'll learn to trust in him not just as the saviour from sin but as the one as we'll see who will give his spirit and bring us to glory.

It's a more wonderful picture than sometimes we have in mind. So that's the first point. Jesus was lifted up. The second point that we're going to deal with is the question of life.

That whoever believes in him may have eternal life. Now this was very much using the same sort of language as in the Old Testament passage of the same thoughts.

what were they going to do by looking at the serpent who had been lifted up? They were going to live. They were going to have life. The serpents were going to stop biting them and they would be healed from their sickness and from imminent death.

So life was there in the picture in the Old Testament and life is here in the picture in the New Testament. So there are similarities. But again we're going to ask what was the nature of that life that they were being given in the Old Testament.

[23 : 05] And what is the nature of this life that is promised in New Testament terms? Because we'll see again that this presents something much cooler than the Old Testament picture did.

Now we haven't to downgrade the Old Testament picture as if all that they got was freedom from sickness. Because these serpents represented God's anger.

they were instruments of God's justice. And therefore if they are removed then it's an assurance that God's anger is removed.

So they didn't just get a sense of healing. They got a sense of wholeness. They got a sense of restoration. That God's anger was passed and that his love had been set upon them once again.

And that they were under his care and protection. protection. And that is no light thing. To be saved and to have the assurance of it these are big things.

[24 : 05] To know that our sins are forgiven and that we have a right standing with God that is the sort of thing that they got. So we're not going to downplay it over much.

But we have to recognise what the New Testament says goes beyond that. It speaks in terms of eternal life. You see and that's the difference. This is eternal life that these people that believe, that we who believe are going to have or have.

Eternal life is what is in mind here. Now this is of course a very familiar idea and I think in part because it's familiar it tends to have lost some of its meaning.

And if we think about what it means we probably come up with two ideas. Firstly we think of it as a future possession. Eternal life is what begins at death.

And secondly we think about it as referring to the duration of time. It's everlasting life. It goes on forever and ever and ever. And I'm not saying that these ideas are wrong but I'm saying that these ideas are incomplete and they don't sum up the fullness of what is meant in the scriptures when Jesus speaks about eternal life.

[25 : 26] It's not just that it starts at death. It's not just that it refers to duration of time forever and ever. It's not as simple as that.

That's to downplay certain aspects. It's to limit it in some way. Eternal life is much bigger than that. So what does eternal life involve?

If it isn't simply something that begins at death for the believer and if it doesn't just mean living forever and ever? Well I think it means that we have to reflect on it in this way.

Firstly that eternal life is something that begins now. Okay there is a major development when the believer dies and there's a new stage of life that takes place then.

we're not denying that. But the way that the New Testament can speak about it is as a present possession. And that's the way it is spoken of here.

[26 : 28] Whoever believes in him may have eternal life. And the implication is that he's got it now. In the Gospels or in the scriptures it is frequently represented as a present possession.

not something that will begin but something we've got now. So let's not think about eternal life as beginning at death. Let's think about it as beginning in the here and now.

On believing this is something that becomes ours. life. And that leads us to other consideration. If it's not simply talking about living forever what does it mean?

And what we've got to say is it doesn't refer to the quantity of life. It refers to the quality of life. It doesn't mean that this life is going to go on forever and ever and ever but it refers to a new experience of life that will go on forever and ever and the emphasis then is on its new quality not its quantity.

Okay you got it? That's the idea that's in mind here. This is what eternal life is. It's different from natural life. It's different from life as sinners live it now.

[27 : 43] It's life on a new plane. Eternal life. Life fit for the eternal ages. And if you ask a wee bit more about that what does it mean?

I think we must relate this to what is said here in John chapter 3. And we must ask about the context because here he speaks about eternal life but in the earlier part of the chapter he has quite obviously been speaking about a new type of life.

And so we can very well explain eternal life in terms of what he says in the earlier part of the chapter where he speaks about being born again, about being born of water and the spirit and so on.

Here you see the idea of being born implies life. The idea of being born again implies life coming to us another time.

And that obviously means not physical life again because as Nicodemus said can a man enter into his mother's womb and be born? Obviously not. So he's speaking about a different type of life.

[28 : 54] So with good grounds for thinking that at the beginning of the chapter when he speaks about being born again he's speaking about a new experience of life.

And when he says eternal life I think we can relate the two things together. So what are the characteristics some of the characteristics of this life that begins when we are born again?

And the most obvious feature is for example that it is born of the spirit. Not born in a natural way of the flesh but born of the spirit.

Just as by the natural process we have life so by a spiritual process the spirit gives us spiritual life. That's the analogy that there is here.

So eternal life is life begotten by the spirit. Life created in us by the work of the Holy Spirit. It's his life in our heart and soul by which he comes to us when we're dead in our sins and he makes us new.

[30 : 03] And he gives an experience of life that we were deprived of because we were dead in our sins. He brings us to life spiritually speaking.

Formerly we were dead and unresponsive and blind and incapable of seeing and we couldn't walk in his ways because we were paralyzed to do so.

We had no desire or ability to do so. But when the Holy Spirit comes he gives us life which means that now we're capable of seeing things we couldn't see before and now we're capable of walking in God's ways that we couldn't do before and now we have a new heart, a new attitude, a new outlook in life engendered engendered, not by any natural causes engendered by the work of the Holy Spirit.

That's what he's talking about here. An inner work of the Holy Spirit giving us a new experience of life and that I think we can therefore say is the sort of thing that he's got in mind when he speaks about eternal life.

Another way of putting it is that it's the work of the Spirit, yes, it's a work from heaven. These words born again, some people think should be translated born from above and I'm not saying whether it should be translated that way or not, I'm just saying that if it is translated that way that's perfectly good sense.

[31 : 36] The Holy Spirit comes from above and he creates life in us which is in effect the life of heaven. We are born from above. So that we are now not children simply of our parents but children of our heavenly father in this special sense.

The life of heaven becomes ours and no wonder we can therefore speak of that as eternal life. So you see what is in mind here. It's not just that in looking to Jesus we have the forgiveness of sins and the assurance that the wrath is passed over and that we are now at peace with God.

God. Because we are not simply looking to somebody that was raised up on the cross but somebody that was raised up to heaven to a place of honour and authority.

Therefore we are thinking of one who endows us with the spirit. This was so. Was it not in the passage we read that the spirit comes from Jesus.

This is one of the things that he does because all authority in heaven and earth is his. He sends his spirit to work amongst us to do this work of redemption.

[32 : 49] So when we see Jesus lifted up on the cross we say oh yes forgiveness of sins. Fair enough. And when we see him lifted up and exalted we see him as the one capable of sending the Holy Spirit to make effect of the work that he had accomplished on the cross.

And therefore we have the gift of eternal life. So make sure that we understand the fullness of what comes to us in Christ. The Old Testament is a good picture of some of it but this surpasses it. It goes beyond what the Old Testament was pointing to. Because it shows us Jesus not just on the cross but we see him raised up in the fullest sense of that word.

And when we see him lifted up in that way we see him as the one capable of working this great work of new creation of new birth in us so that we have the life of God in the soul of man as somebody a long time ago used to say.

The life of God in the soul of man. That's eternal life. That's what's been spoken about here.

Sometimes I do think we may restrict what we get from Christ.

[33 : 58] Not deliberately but just by focusing on the most important things we may just give the impression of some degree of limitation. And all I'm trying to say is we should look for a lot more from Jesus than simply the fact that he died on the cross for sinners.

He was raised for our justification. He's there in heaven acting on our behalf. Giving us what we need to be born again. To experience this new life giving his spirit to work in us.

And that's the way we have to understand redemption. Not just in terms of the forgiveness of sins but in terms of a new life implanted in us by the spirit of God. It's wonderful.

It's bigger than many people imagine and sometimes that bigness has been a wee bit watered down. And we must recognize the wonder and glory of this. That the gift that comes to us through believing is eternal life.

The life of the spirit. the life of God implanted within us to grow and prosper there. And that leads us to the last thing which is the call to faith.

[35 : 07] Now I do acknowledge that this isn't explicit in the Old Testament. But it was the only thing, the only way that I think we can explain that unless we think about it as a bit of magic which it can't possibly be because it's in the scriptures.

what would lead them to do what they were asked to do to look at the model of the serpent. Only the fact that God had told them to.

He had promised something. And if somebody said why should I do that? All that you could say is well God has asked us to. We've just got to trust him. Believe that this word is right.

So I believe as I said this morning that faith is implicit there. But faith is explicit in the New Testament that whoever believes in him may have this eternal life.

So there's a difference in the situation here. I find it difficult to explain exactly what that difference is. But look at it as we've said. What could you say to a person that said why should I look to that serpent?

[36 : 18] What good is he like me to do me? There's no rational explanation of how I'm going to get better by looking at that serpent. And all that you can say is well I see what you mean.

But all you've got to do is trust. Trust in the word. But if somebody says to you why should I look at the cross? How is that going to give me the forgiveness of sins?

We don't say oh you've just got to trust God that's all that matters. Just take him at his word. We do say that but we don't only say that because we can explain how it is that by dying on the cross sins are forgiven to us.

It's laid out in the scriptures and the teaching of the Bible makes it plain. We can say you will find forgiveness because Jesus died as a representative of his people.

Jesus took upon himself the guilt of others and he paid the penalty on the cross. there's a mechanism if you like to call it that way that explains how we can get forgiveness of sins through looking to the cross.

[37 : 27] They couldn't do that in the Old Testament but they can do that in the New Testament because things have been more explicit here and we know the method by which God works, the mechanism if you like by which he accomplishes redemption.

Why should we look at Jesus on the cross? Because we know what he was doing there. He was bearing the sins of others and that's why we can say look and live because Jesus died on the cross

for sinners.

And the same way how can that bring me eternal life? Well you can say because he died and rose again. Death didn't hold him in his power. He ascended up into heaven.

Life is his and he gives life. That's why you can look forward to being born again. And that's where that fits into the picture.

There's a rationale behind it all. There's an explanation that is given in scriptures how this is going to work. It's not just more or less blind faith which there was in the sense in the Old Testament.

[38 : 31] It's informed faith we've got here. It's not rational in the sense of if you just think about it it will work. But it is faith that's backed up by reason and it's got a sound rational basis because it's explained to us how it works.

In the Old Testament they didn't see how it could work. In the New Testament we can. And that's why I think this goes beyond the Old Testament. Believing now is something informed.

And that you see is an important thing to reflect on. This is the nature of the call that's given to us. It's not put your faith in Jesus whether you understand it or not.

It's put your faith in Jesus because he died on the cross for sinners. And you can reasonably expect that if he died for sinners he will give forgiveness if you will put your trust in him.

There's an explanation given and so on. That's the way we have to look at this. And so the faith is of a different nature. It's an informed faith.

[39 : 35] It's not a mere leap in the dark. It's a leap of faith but it's not a leap in the dark. Because we know why Jesus died on the cross and we know he was ascended to heaven as well and so on.

And that's the difference between their faith in the Old Testament and this faith in the New. And this you see does things for us. It makes us responsible. More responsible.

If they did it without knowing how it was going to work. How much more should we do this knowing how it does work. And if there are good reasons given and good teaching given then we're responsible if we don't respond in faith and if we don't put our trust in the Saviour.

And in those ways therefore as I say the picture that we have of Christ corresponds to what happened in the desert. But it goes far far beyond that.

It's much greater and it's more wonderful than that. And therefore the message to them was look and you'll be saved. And the message to us is look and be saved.

[40 : 44] Look at Jesus on the cross. Look at him raised from the dead. Look at him seated in heaven. Look at what he did by dying on the cross. Look at why he died there.

Look at what he does when he's in heaven. Giving gifts to men, the gifts of the spirit to people.

Looking after his own. Look at who he is. Look at what he's done. Fill your mind with that.

And trust in him. And if we have our minds filled with these things, we'll culpable if we don't look to him in faith. So let's make sure that each one of us are responding to this basic message.

Look and live. May God bless to us his word. Amen. Amen.