

## The Story of the Life of Christ – Lesson 14

**Date: After Passover, April, 27 AD**

In the last lesson we studied John's account of Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem for the first Passover during His ministry. In Jerusalem He preached and performed miracles. He also overturned the tables of the money changers. In effect they were extorting the Jewish people for money to celebrate Passover. Passover was the Feast which was meant to celebrate God's free grace in providing the lamb of God. Jesus, who was the Lamb of God took offense at that. After Passover, and before Jesus left Jerusalem, He was approached by Nicodemus.

**John 3:1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council.<sup>1</sup>**

Interestingly, Nicodemus was a Greek name (Νικόδημος {nē-ko'-dā-mos}). Although the Latin speaking Romans ruled the country, Greek was still the language used for trade and government in the eastern part of the Mediterranean. It was the result of over two hundred years of Greek rule by Alexander the Great's generals after they divided his conquests of the Persian Empire. Nicodemus' name means "victor over the people." Nicodemus is mentioned twice more in the Gospel story. In John 7 he tried to defend Jesus in the Sanhedrin:

John 7:50-52 "Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their own number, asked, 'Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?' They replied, 'Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee.'"

In John 19 he helped Joseph of Arimathea to bury Jesus:

John 19:38-42 "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. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, 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 wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid. Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there."

I think that we can conclude from these two other incidents that this conversation with Jesus took root in Nicodemus' heart and later blossomed into faith.

**John 3:2a He came to Jesus at night**

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<sup>1</sup> It was also known as the Sanhedrin. It was usually made up of seventy men. In the 1<sup>st</sup> Century AD, they only had authority over religious matters.

The fact that he came to Jesus at night indicates that he didn't want to be seen. He knew that most of the rest of the Sanhedrin would not have approved of the questions he wanted to ask or the opinions he expressed.

**John 3:2b and said, “Rabbi,<sup>2</sup> we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.”**

By using the phrase “we know,” Nicodemus disclosed that a conversation must have been going on in the Sanhedrin about Jesus. Just a few days before He had overturned the tables of the money changers and driven the sacrificial animals out of the Temple that were being sold at a steep profit. Besides the miracles He had performed in Galilee, He had evidently been performing many miracles in Judea and Jerusalem ever since He had come south. However, the leaders of the Sanhedrin never came close to admitting to the people that He might be a teacher “come from God.” Early on, after they discovered that Jesus disagreed with them, they were determined to destroy Him. What Jesus said about them near the end of His ministry was true:

Luke 11:52 “Woe to you experts in the law, because you have taken away the key to knowledge. You yourselves have not entered, and you have hindered those who were entering.”

Out of the seventy-man Sanhedrin, only Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea seem to have come to the correct personal conclusions about Jesus' life and ministry. They concluded that He really was “a teacher come from God” and responded with faith.

**John 3:3 In reply Jesus declared, “I tell you the truth, no one can see *know* the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”**

The concept of being “born again” in the sense of a spiritual birth as distinct from a physical birth was not new in Scripture. It was also taught in the Old Testament. It is taught in Psalm 87:

Psalm 87:1-7 “He has set his foundation on the holy mountain; the LORD loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob. Glorious things are said of you, O city of God: Selah. I will record Rahab and Babylon among those who acknowledge me-- Philistia too, and Tyre, along with Cush -- and will say, ‘This one was born in Zion.’<sup>3</sup> Indeed, of Zion it will be said, ‘This one and that one were born in her, and the Most High himself will establish her.’ The LORD will write in the register of the peoples: ‘This one was born in Zion.’ Selah As they make music they will sing, ‘All my fountains are in you.’”

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<sup>2</sup> “Rabbi” was a title of honor given to respected teachers.

<sup>3</sup> Mount Zion was the place where it was foretold that death would be destroyed (Isaiah 25:7-8). It was also the place where Jesus died on the Cross and was later raised from the dead.

The Greek word translated “see” in John 3:3 is εἶδω {ā'-dō} which is translated “know” in the Scriptures about half the time. Although they can be similar in meaning, “see” can mean “know” in the sense of “perceiving the truth.” I think “know” is a better translation since it removes all doubt about whether it means seeing with the eyes or perceiving with the heart and mind. The same word appears in verse 8 where it is translated “tell” and I have made the same substitution there.

**John 3:4 “How can a man be born when he is old?”<sup>4</sup> Nicodemus asked. “Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!”**

It strikes me that the phrase “when he is old” meant that Nicodemus immediately applied this to himself. This tells us that he was old. He wasn’t asking this philosophically. He was asking this personally. He wanted this new birth in his old age.

**John 3:5 Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.**

The water that was necessary for salvation was the Spirit’s Word of Salvation. We will see it later in John’s writings in John 4:10, John 7:37, and Revelation 7:17. It is also mentioned in the Old Testament in Zechariah 14:8, Jeremiah 17:13. Paul spoke of it in Ephesians:

Ephesians 5:25b-26 “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word.”

The Spirit that was necessary for salvation was the Holy Spirit. The Spirit’s function in salvation mentioned here first had to make the Gospel clear to the spirit of men. This process was prophesied in Ezekiel:

Ezekiel 36:24-27 “For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.”

Before the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit couldn’t indwell believers, but He could instruct them as He did the ancient Israelites:

Nehemiah 9:20 “You gave your good Spirit to instruct them (*the Exodus generation*).”

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<sup>4</sup> The Greek used here for “old” is γέρων {gher'-own}. It is the root word for the English “geriatric.”

**John 3:6** **Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.**

The birth that Jesus was talking about had nothing to do with the body of men, but with their spirit. The human spirit is that dormant part of the soul which is designed for communion with God.

**John 3:7** **You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’**

1 Peter also spoke of this birth:

1 Peter 1:23 “For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.”

**John 3:8** **The ~~wind blows~~ Spirit breathes wherever it pleases. You hear its sound voice, but you cannot tell know where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”**

The Greek word translated “wind” here by the NIV is πνεῦμα {pnyü'-mä}. The same Greek word appears at the end of this verse and is translated “Spirit.” This raises the probability that the first phrase should be translated “The Spirit breathes wherever it pleases.” This is a concept taught in the Old Testament - Job 32:8 “But it is the spirit in a man, the breath of the Almighty, that gives him understanding.” The Greek word translated “sound” here is φωνή {fo-nay'}. It is translated “voice” 15 out of the other 16 times it appears in the Gospel of John.

This is a concept also taught elsewhere in the New Testament:

John 6:44 “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him (*by the Spirit*), and I will raise him up at the last day.”

1 Corinthians 2:14 “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.”

John 20:22 “And with that he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’”

**John 3:9** **“How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.**

In spite of the fact that this was a truth taught in the Old Testament, Nicodemus was not familiar with it.

**John 3:10** **“You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things?”**

Nicodemus' response revealed how little the Pharisees and members of the Sanhedrin really understood the Scriptures. Jesus expressed amazement at their ignorance.

**John 3:11 I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony.**

Jesus knew of what He spoke and had been teaching. It was truth, but the leaders of the Jews couldn't accept it because they were the enemies of the truth.

In this passage Jesus used the first-person plural "we" and "our." Jesus never spoke of himself in the plural anywhere else in the scripture, and he didn't here. He was speaking of the testimony of Himself and the Holy Spirit. They were the "we."

**John 3:12 I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?**

The implication of Jesus' words was that Jesus understood that Nicodemus wanted to ask Jesus about unknown things related to the Father's heaven. Those were things which he could not possibly understand because he had not even understood the basic earthly part of the Father's plan which was to begin by being born again through faith not by works. Anyone who tries to approach God based on his own works doesn't understand mankind's sinfulness or God's mercy and grace. You can't start with two such foundational misunderstandings and build any meaningful knowledge on such a foundation.

**John 3:13 No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man.**

The Greek word correctly translated "no one" here <sup>5</sup> is οὐδείς {ü-dā's}. Its use here also indicated the exclusion of angels from this knowledge.<sup>6</sup> This was speaking of a level of communion and understanding that only God the Father shares with God the Holy Spirit and God the Son. To some extent, the questions Nicodemus wanted to ask were beyond his or mankind's understanding. The LORD had previously explained this in Isaiah:

Isaiah 55:9 "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

**John 3:14-15 Just as Moses lifted up the ~~snake~~ *serpent* in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."**

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<sup>5</sup> The King James Version uses "no man."

<sup>6</sup> Although angels meet with the LORD (Job 1:6), they do not have the intimate access to the Father and Spirit that the Son has.

The story of “the serpent in the desert” is told in Numbers 21:4-9. It was a picture of Israel recognizing their sin (represented by the serpent) and understanding that their sin had to be lifted up to God for judgment. Until Jesus came and became sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21) and was lifted up on the cross on Mt. Zion there was no real cure for the sting of sin which meant death. That cross loomed above the crowd on Mt. Zion as they gathered for the slaying of their Passover Lamb on the Temple Mount to the east. There He received judgment for our sin. The bronze serpent was one of the many symbols in the Old Testament which was meant point to the real solution which was coming. Here Jesus made clear that the bronze serpent had been meant to point to His coming death when He would be raised up on the Cross. At the end of this lesson we will study Numbers 21:4-9 in more detail.

Another Old Testament example of that type of symbolism was demonstrated in the staff of Moses which symbolized (1 Corinthians 10:4) the cross striking Christ (the Rock). When it was cast down it turned into a serpent. The serpent that came from the staff of Moses ate up the other serpents that came out of men (Exodus 7:10-12). That demonstrated that all sins were covered at the cross.

Although Jesus only spoke about it here in imagery, this seems to have been first of many times that Jesus spoke of His being raised up on a cross. His disciples never took it into their hearts.

**John 3:16 “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.”<sup>7</sup>**

God loved the whole world, not just the Jews and not just those who would believe on Him. However, the salvation that was paid for in advance could only be claimed by those who believed God’s gift of salvation. In Hebrew, Jesus’ name meant “Jehovah is salvation.”

**John 3:17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.**

This was contrary to the teachings of the Pharisees who taught that the purpose of God’s Law was to condemn those who didn’t practice it. They thought the Messiah was coming, but they saw His coming as being for the condemnation of the non-Jewish world. The non-Jewish world was to be condemned because they didn’t obey the Law.

Notice also that contrary to one of the teachings of Calvin and Luther, namely limited atonement, Jesus came to save the whole world, not just the part of the world that He predestined for salvation apart from the exercise of their free will.

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<sup>7</sup> *Some believe that John 3:16-21 are the parenthetical comments of John the Apostle, the writer of this Gospel. I believe that these verses are a continuation of Jesus’ remarks to Nicodemus. Either way the truths are the same.*

**John 3:18a** **Whoever believes in him is not condemned,**

The purpose of the Messiah's coming was to open up the avenue of grace to everyone.

**John 3:18b** **but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.**

Condemnation was not for failure to keep the Jewish Law, but for the lack of faith in God's gift. Just as God's true election is of all who believe, so God's condemnation is against all who do not believe. Each man is saved or condemned on the basis of their choice in the matter of faith. God never tampers with free will.

**John 3:19** **This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.**

Even at this time Jesus could see that only one of the seventy members of the Sanhedrin had come to seek His light. This was after years of the testimony of John the Baptist. This was after His recent preaching in Jerusalem. This was after the miracles He had done. By the time John wrote this Gospel in 95 AD, the rejection of the work of Jesus by the Jews had resulted in the destruction of their Temple and their nation by the Romans in 70 AD. As Jesus would say of the leaders of the Jews later during His ministry: John 8:44 "You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire."

**John 3:20** **Everyone who does (*thinks*) evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.**

The word translated "evil" is not speaking of sin. The Greek word for "sin" is the Greek word ἁμαρτία {hä-mär-tē'-ä}. This was speaking of being committed to Satan's way of thinking, as the Scribes and Pharisees were. The word translated "evil" used here in John 3:20 is φαῦλος {fau'-los} which has the concept of a way of thinking.

**John 3:21** **But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God."**

Those who have received salvation through faith in God's truth would automatically seek God's light to see that what they had done was according to God's will. The Scribes and Pharisees hated the light of God's Word which proved that what they were doing was not from God.

**Dates: May, 27 AD to January, 28 AD**

**John 3:22** **After this, Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them, and baptized.**

This first Judean ministry took place over the course of about nine months. It is only recorded in the Gospel of John. It is not mentioned in Matthew, Mark, or Luke. It was probably during this time that Jesus got to know Lazarus (who He later raised from the dead) and his two sisters Mary and Martha. They were a prosperous and prominent family who lived in Bethany, just on the other side of the Mount of Olives from Jerusalem.

**John 3:23** Now John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water,<sup>8</sup> and people were constantly coming to be baptized.

This location (see map on page 9) is on a major north-south road west of the Jordan just south of Beth Shan.<sup>9</sup> This scene would have taken place sometime during the five months of the rainy season preceding Passover. John always placed himself on the roads serving the most pilgrims going to the feasts in Jerusalem. During the rainy season, the Jordan was flooded and impassable at Jericho and probably at Beth Shan. Those traveling from Galilee, Syria, and Babylon would have taken this route down the west side of the Jordan and the Sea of Galilee to Jericho and then up to Jerusalem.

**John 3:24** (This was before John was put in prison.)

This was the only time that John the Apostle mentioned the imprisonment of John the Baptist.<sup>10</sup> Since Aenon was in the territory west of the Jordan and just south of Galilee, it was in the area under the control of Pilate.

**John 3:25** An argument developed between some of John's disciples and a certain Jew over the matter of ceremonial washing.

This "certain Jew" was evidently not a disciple of either John the Baptist or Jesus. It sounds like he was a legalist.

**John 3:26** They came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan—the one you testified about—well, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him."

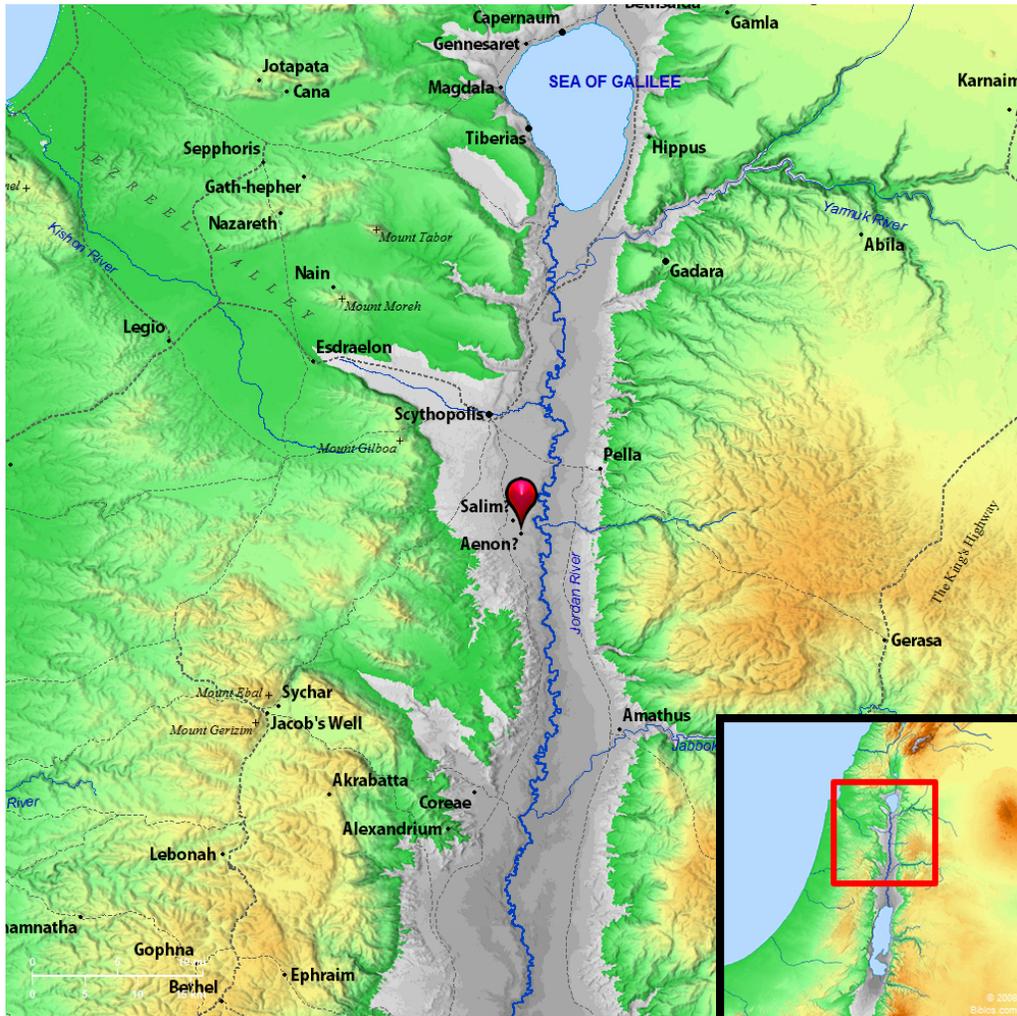
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<sup>8</sup> This supports my assertion that it was in the months before January which was the rainy season.

<sup>9</sup> Eusebius (circa 300 AD) supported this location in his *Onomasticon* where he said it was at "a village in the (Jordan) valley, at the eighth milestone (south) from Scythopolis (Beit She'an), called Salumias (Salem)."

<sup>10</sup> This short mention of John the Baptist's imprisonment implies that John knew that the other Gospels (already written) had made his readers aware of the circumstances of John's imprisonment.

This seems to indicate there were others of John’s disciples with him besides John and Andrew when he “testified about” Jesus (John 1:29, 36). This also confirms that John’s encounter with Jesus had been on the east side (“the other side”) of the Jordan.



*Approximate location of Aenon*

**John 3:27** To this John replied, “A man can receive only what is given him from heaven.

We already noted what must have been John’s terrible disappointment when Jesus walked past him without saying a word to him. He did it twice. He had been preparing the way for the ministry of Jesus for up to ten years and now was denied being a part of that ministry.

John’s attitude here should be a lesson for all of us. We should be satisfied with the ministry and gifts God has given us. We should be careful not to try to expand them through gimmicks and human schemes.

**John 3:28** You yourselves can testify that I said, ‘I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.’

John reminded them that he had always testified that the One that came after him would be greater than him:

Matthew 3:11b “After me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry.” Also Luke 3:16, and Mark 1:7.

**John 3:29 The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete.**

John the Baptist was learning to be content with the role of being just a friend at the wedding. Throughout scripture, the characteristics of a wedding or marriage are used to portray the unification of Jesus the Messiah with His body, which is made up of all those who have believed in Him.<sup>11</sup> The wedding of Christ the Bridegroom with His Bride is referred to many times in Scripture as below:

Isaiah 62:5 “As a young man marries a maiden, so will your sons marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you.”

Matthew 9:15 “Jesus answered, ‘How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.’” Also Mark 2:19-20, Luke 5:34-35.

Ephesians 5:23 “For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior.”

Revelation 21:2 “I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.”

**John 3:30 He must become greater; I must become less.**

Although John’s desire must have been to have followed Jesus, he seemed to have realized that his presence in Jesus’ entourage would have distracted from the person of Jesus. Jesus’ light had to burn more and more brightly while John’s had to dim.

It is the consensus of most commentators that what follows in John 3:31-36 is not the continuation of John the Baptist’s address to his disciples but the parenthetical reflection by the author, John the Apostle, on what he had just written.

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<sup>11</sup> *In the Song of Songs, the “Solomon” (the One of Peace) there is the coming Messiah and the Bride is Israel.*

**John 3:31** “The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all.

Jesus the Messiah, was sent from Heaven. According to Old Testament prophecy the coming King must be the Son of God and the LORD Almighty:

Psalms 2:4-8 “The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them. Then he rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath, saying, ‘I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill.’ I will proclaim the decree of the LORD: He said to me, ‘You are my Son; today I have become your Father. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession.’”

Psalms 24:7-10 “Lift up your heads,<sup>12</sup> O you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The LORD strong and mighty, the LORD mighty in battle.<sup>13</sup> Lift up your heads, O you gates; lift them up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is he, this King of glory? The LORD Almighty-- he is the King of glory.”

If Jesus was the Messiah then He was Himself God, and was far greater than any prophet that ever lived. His word must be the last word. It is made clear in these two Psalms that the Messiah (“the Anointed One”) would be the “Son of God.” This assertion of these Psalms was not acknowledged as true by the Jews in Jesus’ day. They would ask Jesus if He claimed to be the Messiah. They were willing to consider that as a possibility. In fact, there were many in the last century before Christ who made that claim. However, when Jesus claimed to be the “Son of God” they wouldn’t even consider the possibility but immediately demanded Jesus’ death.

**John 3:32** He testifies to what he has seen and heard, but no one accepts his testimony.

John, the author, referred to what Jesus had told Nicodemus in verse 11: “I (*Jesus*) tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony.

**John 3:33** The man who has accepted it has certified that God is truthful.

Those who accepted the testimony of Jesus’ words and life have therefor certified that the Word of God is true.

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<sup>12</sup> That is: “look to God.”

<sup>13</sup> Who is this King, this Messiah, this one who is the spotless redeemer? He is nobody less than the LORD himself!

**John 3:34 For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit.**

Jesus spoke the exact truth of His Father through the power of the Spirit.

**John 3:35 The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands.**

Jesus the Son is the expression of everything the Father is, has done, and will do.

**John 3:36 Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him."**

Through faith in the work and life of the Son we are forever reconciled with the Father. If we reject Him, we reject the Father, and we reject the LORD. In rejection we are forever separated from the LORD who created us for blessing. We are separated from God by our own choice. That separation is the ultimate definition of Hell.

### **The Old Testament Account of the Bronze Serpent**

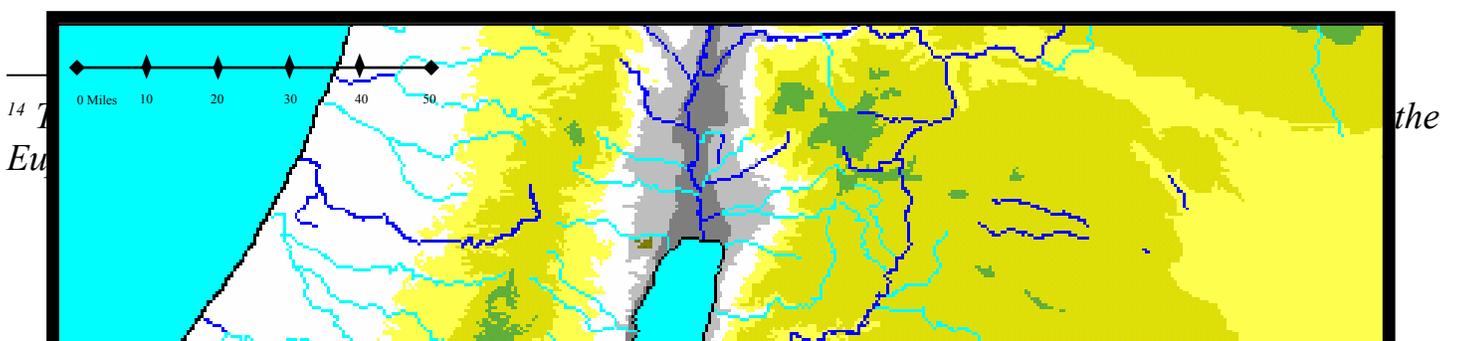
As promised, we will take up here the incident of the bronze serpent to which Jesus had referred in His conversation with Nicodemus.

**Numbers 21:4a They (the children of Israel) traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom.**

This was during the fortieth year of their wanderings during their final approach to cross the Jordan. It is clear they were travelling south toward the Red Sea, to go around Edom. This would take them back through the Wadi Rum just northeast of the northern end of the Gulf of Aqaba for the fifth time in their wanderings.

From the account given in Judges, we know that the Israelites had requested permission to pass through Edom, probably up what is called today the Wadi Dana which would lead them through the middle of Edom. They also asked to pass through Moab, possibly up the valley of the Brook Zered which was the border between Edom and Moab. They had been refused on both counts, and the Lord took them around <sup>14</sup> as is explicitly explained in Judges:

### **The Route around Edom to the Zered Valley**



Judges 11:15-18 “This is what Jephthah says: Israel did not take the land of Moab or the land of the Ammonites. But when they came up out of Egypt, Israel went through the desert (*for almost forty years*) to the Red Sea and on to Kadesh. Then Israel sent messengers to the king of Edom, saying, ‘Give us permission to go through your country,’ but the king of Edom would not listen. They sent also to the king of Moab, and he refused. So Israel stayed at Kadesh. ‘Next they traveled through the desert, skirted the lands of Edom and Moab, passed along the eastern side of the

country of Moab, and camped on the other side of the Arnon. They did not enter the territory of Moab, for the Arnon was its border.”

Finally, the LORD told Moses to turn north from the old caravan road which ran through Ezion Geber and travelled east across the desert toward Tema and Central Arabia. They were then to turn north and travel up the eastern side of Edom and Moab on the caravan road that ran along there.

Deuteronomy 2:2-9 Then the LORD said to me, “You have made your way around this hill country long enough; now turn north. Give the people these orders: ‘You are about to pass through the territory of your brothers the descendants of Esau (*the Edomites*), who live in Seir. They will be afraid of you, but be very careful. Do not provoke them to war, for I will not give you any of their land, not even enough to put your foot on. I have given Esau the hill country of Seir as his own. You are to pay them in silver for the food you eat and the water you drink.’” The LORD your God has blessed you in all the work of your hands. He has watched over your journey through this vast desert. These forty years the LORD your God has been with you, and you have not lacked anything. So we went on past our brothers the descendants of Esau, who live in Seir. We turned from the Arabah<sup>15</sup> plains road, which comes up from Elath and Ezion Geber, and traveled along the desert road of Moab. Then the LORD said to me, “Do not harass the Moabites or provoke them to war, for I will not give you any part of their land. I have given Ar to the descendants of Lot as a possession.”

As you can see, the LORD had forbidden Israel from going to war with either the Edomites or Moabites. That was why they hadn’t fought Edom previously.

**Numbers 21:4b 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!”**

You should understand that first the LORD had led them up the west side of Edom and Moab and then had them turn around to go back south and then around and up the east side of Edom and Moab. Those of little faith thought it showed that the LORD’s guidance wasn’t reliable. Then as they came up through the desert on the east side of Edom and Moab, the LORD sent them another test in the form of a short supply of water. All the people could see was that the land they were passing through wasn’t getting any more promising looking (see what they saw on the next page). These people never learned to believe that the LORD knew what He was doing. It was probably little more than a couple of months since the last time they had complained. At that time Moses’ exasperation at them had caused him to strike a rock to bring forth water. He had disregarded the LORD’s instruction to speak to the rock.

**Numbers 21:6 Then the LORD sent venomous snakes serpents among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died.**

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<sup>15</sup> Arabah means "plain."

This time the LORD sent poisonous serpents to bite them. This was another sign which was not only to be a lesson, but was also meant to be prophetic. The Hebrew word here translated “snakes” by the NIV is שָׂרָפִים {nä·khäsh'} which is the exact same word that appears in Genesis 3:14 in the account of the Garden. There the word is translated “serpent.” Here it is translated “snake.” The same word is also translated “snake” in the rest of this chapter by the NIV. It is important to understand the typology here is related to “that ancient serpent, who is the Devil or Satan” (Revelation 20:2) who was the originator of sin against the LORD. As a result, I have changed the NIV translation to “serpent.”

**Numbers 21:7** **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 serpents away from us.” So Moses prayed for the people.**

The people acknowledged their sin which they had committed by speaking against the LORD. They prayed for relief.



**The Route East of Edom and Moab**

**Numbers 21:8** **The LORD said to Moses, “Make a snake serpent and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.”**

So the LORD told Moses to make a symbol of a serpent and raise it up. The bronze serpent was a picture of Israel recognizing their sin (the serpent) and holding it up to God for judgment. In the fullness of time, Passover 30 AD, God raised Jesus up on the Cross. There He received judgment for the sin of all mankind. During the Exodus in 1500 BC, the LORD could withhold judgment on the Jews because He knew the atonement was coming. Those who had been bitten by the live serpents in the desert only had to look at the bronze serpent which was a figure of Christ's atonement for our sins. If they did, they were healed. This was a powerful image of God's saving grace. It was only one of many images of Christ's coming ministry which the LORD presented during the Exodus. However, the perfect symbolism was not really made clear until Jesus connected the dots as recorded in the Gospel of John when He said:

John 3:14-15 "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."

Another example of the prophetic imagery of the Cross which occurred during the Exodus was when Moses struck the Rock of Horeb <sup>16</sup> with his staff (symbolizing the Cross) and water poured out to satisfy the thirst of the people:

1 Corinthians 10:1 "For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud <sup>17</sup> and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ."

That staff had also turned into a serpent when Moses threw it on the ground.<sup>18</sup> That serpent ate up other serpents. That act symbolized how Christ's atonement for sins on the Cross had defeated all sin.

**Numbers 21:9** **So Moses made a bronze snake *serpent* and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake *serpent* and looked at the bronze snake *serpent*, he lived.**

Looking at the snake in expectation of healing was a symbol of faith. Even so, when we look to Jesus on the Cross for salvation from sin we are saved. The Israelites kept the bronze serpent, but by seven hundred years later it had become an idol to worship and was destroyed by Hezekiah (2 Kings 18:4).

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<sup>16</sup> *Exodus 17:6*

<sup>17</sup> *The Lord appeared in a pillar of cloud that led the people of the Exodus and also in a cloud that covered them (Numbers 14:14, Psalms 105:39).*

<sup>18</sup> *Exodus 7:10*