

COMMENTARY ON JOHN

LESSON NUMBER 32

John 3:13 “**And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but He that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven.** ¹⁴ **And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up:** ¹⁵ **That whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.**”John 3:13-15)

THE INDISPENSABILITY OF BELIEVING

INTRODUCTION

Jesus is the central theme of Scripture. He is the “*Foundation*” upon which the church is built for a habitation of God (1 Cor 3:11; Eph 2:22). He is the One in whom spiritual completeness is found (Col 2:10). He is the appointed Means through which we receive from God (Eph 1:3; Phil 4:19), and have access to God (Rom 5:1-2; Eph 3:11-12). Because He is in heaven, and we are upon earth, faith and believing become paramount. Faith is to believing, what power is to doing. **It is the Divine aptitude that makes us capable of believing.** Faith is the well, and believing is what comes from the well. Faith substantizes the things that are not seen, so that we require no outward proof of their reality. The Lord offers no more evidence than faith, which itself is “*the evidence*” (Heb 11:1). Believing involves persuasion, trusting, and dependency. There is no doubt in believing, and it produces both joy and peace (Rom 15:13). The Gospels refer to the various forms of the word “*believe*” one hundred and twenty-one times, and “*faith*” twenty-nine times. In the Gospels, there are only five references to believing prior to this time and text (Lk 1:20; John 1:7,12,50; 3:12). After this, nearly everything Jesus said had some reference to believing or having faith. While there were people who had faith prior to Christ, they were proportionately very few, and there were very few words said about believing (eight texts refer to believing in its various forms). **This accents that Jesus inducted an era in which faith would be the most critical possession, and believing would be the greatest expression.** While there were those with faith prior to Christ (Heb 11), it was not found often. The eleventh chapter of Hebrews, for example, mentions Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Joseph, Moses’ parents, Moses, Israel when they crossed the Red Sea and the walls of Jericho fell down, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthae, David, Samuel, the prophets, together with certain other groups. During the first 2,500 years, only eleven persons are mentioned. Those people, and a few others like them, gave God a reason to spare the race until the Savior came. However, once Jesus appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself, much was said about faith and believing, what would be accomplished by faith and believing, and how they were absolutely indispensable. In our day, much should be said about faith and believing – and, even more, they should be evident in increasing measures.

NO MAN HAS ASCENDED UP INTO HEAVEN

John 3:13 “**And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but He that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven.**”

NO MAN HATH ASCENDED UP TO HEAVEN. Other versions read, “*no one has ever gone into heaven,*” ^{NIV} “*no one has ever gone up to heaven,*” ^{BBE} “*And yet no one has ever gone up to heaven.*” ^{AMPLIFIED}

This statement is made in view of what Jesus just said to Nicodemus: “*how shall ye*

believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?" (John 3:12). That is, Jesus is saying, "There is no other way you can know of these things if I do not tell them to you! No one has ever ascended into heaven, and returned to testify of these things, and you certainly cannot go there to confirm their existence." This word is not a reference to Christ's own ascension, which will take place following His resurrection and forty-day presence with His disciples. He is accenting that He is the only Source of the information to which He refers – *"heavenly things."* In fact, the things of which Jesus will testify had never before been divulged to anyone. Adam did not know them. Nor did Enoch, Noah, Abraham, or others to whom God had spoken. Moses alluded to the inaccessibility of *"heavenly things"* when he said to Israel, *"It is not in heaven, that thou shouldest say, Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it unto us, that we may hear it, and do it? Neither is it beyond the sea, that thou shouldest say, Who shall go over the sea for us, and bring it unto us, that we may hear it, and do it?"* (Deut 30:12-13). Even though the things revealed at that time were preliminary, and not to be compared with the revelation that comes to us through Christ, the things had to be revealed from heaven. No person could go to heaven to obtain them, then return to earth to tell them. Moses and Elijah came from heavenly realms to speak with Jesus when He was transfigured – but they revealed nothing to anyone else (Lk 9:31). Both Enoch and Elijah were taken up to heaven – but it was not to obtain something to bring back to men! Paul had an unexplainable experience in which he did not know if he was in or out of the body. The words he heard could even be spoken upon earth (2 Cor 12:2-4).

In his doctrine, Paul makes a point of the revelation that comes from Christ alone. *"But the righteousness which is of faith speaketh on this wise, Say not in thine heart, Who shall ascend into heaven? (that is, to bring Christ down from above:), Or, Who shall descend into the deep? (that is, to bring up Christ again from the dead.)"* (Rom 10:6-7). The point Paul is establishing is this: There are two things that must be done before men can be made righteous. Jesus must be raised from the dead, and He must return to heaven to pour forth the Spirit, and govern the Kingdom. If men are really saved by works, then they must do these two things, fulfilling their requirement. If they cannot do this, then they have no alternative but to believe what Jesus has said about God's great salvation.

Let us be clear about this. It is not possible to acquire the knowledge that is necessary to be delivered from sin and made righteous before God apart from the revelation of Jesus Christ. This is the knowledge to which both Paul and John referred. **PAUL:** *"But ye have not so learned Christ; If so be that ye have heard Him, and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus:"* (Eph 4:10-21). **JOHN:** *"And we know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may know Him that is true, and we are in Him that is true, even in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life"* (1 John 5:20).

HE THAT CAME DOWN FROM HEAVEN. Nicodemus said he knew Jesus *"was a Teacher come from God"* (John 3:2). It appears that Nicodemus was thinking of Jesus being sent, or commissioned, like Moses. Jesus accents that He *"came down from heaven,"* something that no man *"Man"* had ever, or would ever, do. Jesus told the multitude He fed with five loaves and two fishes, *"I came down from heaven"* (John 6:38), and they stumbled at the saying (John 6:42). John the Baptist referred to Jesus as *"He that cometh from heaven"* (John 3:31). Jesus said of Himself, *"For the bread of God is He which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world"* (John 6:33).

EVEN THE SON OF MAN. This is the term Jesus most often used when referring to Himself (84 times). By it, He meant that He was the chief member of the Human race, not the offspring of Adam – but the One to whom Isaiah referred when he prophesied of *"a Child"* that was *"born,"*

and "a Son" that was given (Isa 9:6).

WHICH IS IN HEAVEN. Later versions omit this phrase. Those including the phrase are KJV, ASV, DARBY, DOUAY, ERV, GENEVA, MRD, PNT, RWB, TNT, WEB, YLT, ISV, ABP, EMTV, JUB, LITV, AMPLIFIED. Some versions translate it, "will return to heaven again,"^{LIVING} and "whose home is in heaven"^{WEYMOUTH}

The sense of the expression is simply this: **Jesus lived in constant communication with His Father.** He said what the Father told Him to say (John 12:49-50), and did what He saw the Father doing (John 5:19). The Father is "in heaven" (Matt 5:16), and yet Jesus was "in the Father," and the Father was "in" Him, and was dwelling in Him (John 14:10-11). If it is true that "our conversation is in heaven" (Phil 3:20), how much more was that true of the Lord Jesus when He dwelt among us?

AS MOSES LIFTED UP THE SERPENT

"¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up . . ."

Jesus is accenting the centrality of His own Person and work. The Law did not accent a person, but a Divinely imposed duty. Christ's words are being said within the context of the necessity of a person being "born again" – something that no person can himself accomplish – anymore than a person could accomplish their own natural conception and birth. The Law, which "made nothing perfect" (Heb 7:19), affirmed the essentiality of spotless morality – within and without. Now, Jesus introduces to Nicodemus a way of acceptance that depends solely upon what Deity does – a new birth: "born of the water and the of the Spirit." There is a "form" involved (Rom 6:17), but **the power is not in the form.** It is "the operation of God" that makes the difference, and that "operation" is accessed by faith, not form (Col 2:12). The Divine "operation" takes place during the form, but not because of the form.

AS MOSES LIFTED UP THE SERPENT. The occasion of reference is recorded in the twenty-first chapter of Numbers. After having delivered up the Canaanites into the hands of Israel, the people "journeyed from mount Hor by the way of the Red sea, to compass the land of Edom: and the soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way" (Num 21:4). As they were wont to do, they did not ask for Divine help, but "spake against God, and against Moses, Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? for there is no bread, neither is there any water; and our soul loatheth this light bread" (Num 21:5). The Lord was not indifferent to their murmuring, but "sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died" (Num 21:6).

The judgment was so grievous that "the people came to Moses, and said, We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD, and against thee; pray unto the LORD, that He take away the serpents from us. And Moses prayed for the people" (Num 21:7). The Lord instructed Moses, "Make thee a fiery [bronze^{NKJV}] serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live" (Num 21:8). Moses "made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived" (Num 21:9). The lifting up to which Jesus referred was the placing of the brazen serpent on a pole, apparently hoisting it up high where it could be seen when the people had made their way to it. The people had to get where the lifted serpent was, and look intently upon it. If they did this, God promised they would be healed – and all that did it were healed. **Healing was granted in exchange for a look!** The word of God was thus fulfilled, "Look unto Me, and be ye saved" (Isa 45:22).

EVEN SO. In the same manner, provision for those smitten by sin would be addressed by a prominent figure being raised before the people. This would be something God would accomplish.

The benefit would be realized by looking upon Jesus, or becoming enamored by His Person – particularly as associated with His death.

MUST THE SON OF MAN BE LIFTED UP. Jesus later referred to this lifting up: *"And, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Me"* (John 12:32). **"All men" refers to all who "look" upon Him, as those who looked upon the brazen serpent.** Through the Spirit, John provides the following editorial remark: *"This He said, signifying what death He should die"* (John 12:33). The NASB reads, *"But He was saying this to indicate **the kind of death** by which He was to die."*

THE CENTRALITY OF CHRIST'S CRUCIFIXION. Paul wrote, *"But we preach Christ crucified"* (1 Cor 1:23). He said, *"For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified"* (1 Cor 2:2). Signifying the effectiveness of Christ's crucifixion, he wrote to the Galatians, *"But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world"* (Gal 6:14). *"The cross"* is mentioned nine times in the epistles, and is always a central matter (1 Cor 1:17-18; Gal 5:11; 6:12,14; Eph 2:16; Phil 2:8; 3:18; Heb 12:2). It was on the cross that Jesus was *"made a curse"* (Gal 3:13). There is where He was made *"to be sin for us"* (2 Cor 5:21).

Jesus is not saying if He is preached He will draw all men to Himself, but if He died on the cross He would do so. That death is preached, to be sure, but Jesus draws men because He died. In other words, His death was not an end of itself, but a basis for His ongoing ministry. He will not leave this "drawing" to men. He will send His ministers to the appropriate people (1 Cor 3:5) **because He was lifted up in His death** – whether they are in Macedonia (Acts 16:9), Corinth (Acts 18:10), or Seleucia, Cyprus, Salamis, Paphos, Perga, and Antioch of Pisida (Acts 13:2-14).

The lifting up of Jesus upon the cross was necessary in order that sin might be judged and condemned (Rom 8:3). Sin could not be glossed, or settled with a word. God is offended by sin, and hates sin – and *"sin"* is what makes men sinners. When men see the cross as it is depicted in the Word of God, a Divine drawing will take place. I understand that this is an effective drawing, not a passing inclination. He draws men through His death! This drawing accounts for them coming to Him.

WHOSOEVER BELIEVETH IN HIM

"¹⁵ That whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life."

THAT. Other versions read, *"so that,"*^{BBE} *"then,"*^{GWN} and *"in order that."*^{WEYMOUTH} This is a statement of the result of believing on Jesus, whose vicarious death has been proclaimed. Believing on Jesus is not the guaranteed means of correcting all injustices, fulfilling the dreams of the people, guaranteeing the healing of all the sick, resolving financial difficulties, or stabilizing marriages. That such things do take place cannot be denied –but that is not why Jesus died, being *"lifted up."* That is not why Jesus draws people to Himself, and if He is approached as though that is why He died, the benefit will be missed.

WHOSOEVER. Other versions read, *"whoever,"*^{NKJV} *"everyone,"*^{NIV} and *"anyone."*^{LIVING} This refers to every single person who meets the following requirement. That requirement is preceded by the drawing of Jesus, which necessarily follows beholding Him as being lifted up in His death. None of these can be omitted.

BELIEVETH IN HIM. Other versions read, *"has faith,"*^{BBE} *"trusts,"*^{CJB} *"is believing,"*^{YLT} *"commits himself to Me,"*^{IE} *"believing into Him,"*^{LITV} *"looks up to Him,"*^{MESSAGE} and *"who cleaves to Him, trusts Him, and relies on Him."*^{AMPLIFIED}

Lexically, the word *"believe"* means *"TO THINK TO BE TRUE, TO BE PERSUADED OF, TO CREDIT, PLACE CONFIDENCE IN; CONVICTION AND TRUST TO WHICH A MAN IS IMPULSED BY A CERTAIN INNER AND HIGHER PREROGATIVE AND LAW OF SOUL,"*^{THAYER} *"BE CONVINCED OF."*^{FRIBERG} **There is no doubt in believing, no hesitancy or reluctance. There is trust,**

reliance, and confidence – and it has all come because the attention of the individual has been drawn to Christ crucified.

The believing is *“in Him”*—i.e. the believer is persuaded of the identity and accomplishments of Jesus, trusts implicitly in Him, having confidence in Him, banking on Him, and fully relying on Him to do what He has been appointed by God to do. Where this kind of trust and reliance is not found, there has been no believing! Where they are found, Jesus has drawn the individual, and the promised benefits will be realized.

SHOULD NOT PERISH. Other versions read, *“may not perish,”* ^{DARBY} *“perish not,”* ^{PNT} and *“none that believeth in Him perish.”* ^{TNT} Most versions omit this clause, even though they include it in the next verse. While some Greek texts do omit these words, several reliable ones include the phrase *“not perish, but have.”* I see the phrase as perfectly harmonious with the thought being developed. Salvation, or having eternal life, is set within the context of a state of condemnation and perishing. That is the state of all men by nature (Rom 5:16,18), and only believing on the Christ who has been *“lifted up”* can avert that state.

BUT HAVE ETERNAL LIFE. Other versions read, *“have in Him eternal life,”* ^{BBE} *“will have eternal life,”* ^{CEB} *“life everlasting,”* ^{DOUAY} *“have life age-during,”* ^{YLT} *“have the Life of the Ages,”* ^{WEYMOUTH} *“will gain a real life, eternal life,”* ^{MESSAGE} and *“eternal life and [actually] live forever!”* ^{AMPLIFIED}

The expression *“eternal life”* occurs twenty-six times in Scripture – never prior to Matthew. *“Life eternal”* occurs four times – never prior to Matthew. *“Life everlasting”* occurs four times – never prior to Matthew. *“Everlasting life”* occurs eleven times – once prior to Matthew. *“Life for evermore”* occurs one time (Psa 133:3). *“Length of days for ever and ever”* is found in Psa 21:4. Preserving one *“even for evermore”* is found in Psa 121:8. *“Live forever”* is found in John 6:51. There are at least forty-one references to eternal life, or living forever. **This is a Divine privilege given to everyone who believes in Jesus.**

“Eternal life” is more than longevity, or being without an end. Those who are condemned to the lake of fire will have longevity, and their existence will never end – but they will not have eternal life. Eternal life is defined by Jesus Himself: *“And this is life eternal, that they might know Thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom Thou hast sent”* (John 17:3). The Amplified Bible reads, *“And this is eternal life: [it means] to know (to perceive, recognize, become acquainted with, and understand) You, the only true and real God, and [likewise] to know Him, Jesus [as the] Christ (the Anointed One, the Messiah), Whom You have sent.”*

This is not knowledge that is achieved, but that is given. Even as God did for Moses, God will make Himself known to those who believe in His Son. He will show, or manifest, Himself to them. That is how they will gain their acquaintance. Jesus promised He would *“manifest”* Himself to the one who loves Him (John 14:21). The Father and Himself would make their *“abode”* with such a person (John 14:23). **That is how the acquaintance of reference will be obtained.** To put it another way, Jesus comes to give us an understanding of God (1 John 5:20). That understanding is, in a definite sense, *“eternal life.”*

The knowledge of and acquaintance with God is the well from which all other benefits flow. Perhaps unwittingly, Eliaphaz hinted at this when he said to Job, *“Acquaint now thyself with Him, and be at peace”* (Job 22:21). But the true acquaintance does not come from us acquainting ourselves with the Lord – like studying Him. It rather comes by Him revealing Himself to us BECAUSE we have believed in, trusted, and placed our confidence in His Son. Life in exchange for looking and believing!