

Notes on Jn 3.11

Nicodemus has twice asked “how” people can receive the work of the Holy Spirit that Jesus is describing. His answer to Nicodemus is that any person can receive the ‘second birth from above’ by the power of the Holy Spirit through believing in HIM as the death and resurrection Savior of the world. Faith in Jesus is the secret to receiving the Spirit. This theology was introduced by John the Baptist in 1.33, “HE (Jesus) is the One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit,” and it continues to be explained and developed by Jesus throughout John’s gospel. So Jesus begins to explain His own unique role in our salvation as the Messiah.

Jesus emphasizes two aspects of His own ministry as the Messiah in this crucial section (3.11-15), so we will take our time to unpack these bedrock teachings of Jesus. First we will introduce the outline of this passage, and then we will feast upon the details. What are the two essential aspects of Jesus work as Messiah for our salvation?

First, Jesus is the World’s Most Authoritative, Unique Witness to the Truth, including the Truth About Salvation. 15.11-13. Jesus makes three subpoints to underscore this fact.

- (1) He is One of an utterly unique team of witnesses to the Truth. He says: “WE speak...”
- (2) This “team” witness is grounded in a unique depth of experience of what has been “seen” and “heard” about the nature of salvation.
- (3) Jesus is the unique member of this “team” that has left heaven and come down to earth to deliver this authoritative, absolutely reliable witness.

Second, Jesus is the Unique Substitutionary Sacrifice, who Cleanses our Sins through His Death and Gives Eternal Life through His Resurrection to ALL Who Believe. 3.14-15 Two subpoints:

- (1) Jesus will be lifted up on the cross as a substitutionary sacrifice, like the Moses lifted the bronzed serpent in the wilderness.
- (2) Jesus will rise from the dead and give His kind of Eternal Life (the Spirit) to all who believe in Him as Messiah.

There are so many different opinions about salvation in the world today. To make matters worse, they mutually contradict each other. If the question we are dealing with is something mundane, like “who makes the best hamburger in town?” it doesn’t matter if we cannot reach a clear conclusion, and our opinions contradict each other. But when it comes to our eternal salvation, the plethora of conflicting views pose a serious problem indeed. Who can you trust with the right answer? On what authority do they speak? How can you be sure they are right?

The first claim of Jesus in verses 11-13 lays all these questions to rest. Jesus has utterly unique qualifications, experience, and credentials to lay down the trust-worthy WORD on what salvation is, and how to get it. He saves us from confusion, indecision, and doubt by the Absolute Authority with which He speaks. That is why He begins this section with His 4th “Truly, truly” statement in this gospel, and the 3rd in His conversation with Nicodemus.

This phrase is literally, “amen, amen” in the original language. Not once, but twice Jesus says “So be it!” regarding the reliability of His Words. Faith, gratitude, praise, and worship all rolled into one expression is the only appropriate response to such Words from THE WORD of God Himself, Jesus the Messiah.

### Sub-point One

Now we will look at the first of three sub-points Jesus makes to underscore His Messianic Role as the ultimate, absolutely authoritative, reliable witness to the Truth, and in this context, the way of salvation. Jesus is the **“Light of the World.”** He will later testify to Pilate: **“For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world; to bear witness to the Truth.”** J 18.37 In sub-point #1 Jesus emphasizes to Nicodemus that He is an Authoritative Witness, on a ‘team’ of witnesses.

We have seen in past readings that a basic principle of the civil legal system outlined in the “Torah” (Law) of Moses was the concept of corroborating witnesses. That is, every testimony had to be confirmed by multiple witnesses. This principle still applies in legal systems throughout the world today.

Since Jesus is an authoritative witness to the truth, He must have corroborating testimony. Therefore He speaks to Nicodemus in the first person plural: **“WE know... WE are bearing witness...”** Who does Jesus have in mind in His “WE” team? John answers this question in the course of his narrative.

John uses seven groupings of seven items for emphasis in his gospel. There are seven: (1) signs (2) confessions of faith (3) “I AM” statements (4) “it is necessary” statements (5) kinds of faith (6) responses to Christ and (7) witnesses to Him.

These seven witnesses are: (1) the Father (2) the Son (3) the Spirit (4) the Scriptures (5) John the Baptist (6) the miraculous works of Christ (7) the Apostles, and ultimately all believers. I have not listed them here in the order John mentions them. Five are set forth by Jesus in John 5.30-47, and the last two in 15.26-27.

This is the most impressive witness list in the history of human testimony. No other religious, political, spiritual, civic, or business leader can match any two of these witnesses, much less all seven. Because Jesus is a member of a witness team of this caliber, all people need to listen and receive the truthful testimony of Jesus Christ.

In addition, Jesus uses the perfect tense to further elevate the authority of the “WE” team (“we know” and “we have seen”). The Greek perfect is a powerful thing. It describes an action that was completed in the past, with results that remain unchanged all the way into the present.

If a person says: “I have built a house” in the Greek perfect, it means that not only was the construction completed in the past, but the house remains standing in the same condition at the time the speaker is affirming, even if the house was built 2000 years ago. In other words, “we have come to know” these truths in the past, and we still know them in exactly the same way, with nothing diminished in the present. And “we have seen these truths about the Holy Spirit” in such a manner that the vision and perception of them remain unchanged in our mind’s eye, in exactly the same way we first saw them. Jesus’ employment of the perfect tense is the equivalent of omniscient recollection, and therefore utterly truthful, reliable testimony.

In contrast to Jesus and his corroborating witnesses, all the theories about salvation loose in the world today are just that: theories. I heard a renowned spiritualist say on television recently that all paths to the Supreme Being are the same, and Jesus’ claim to uniqueness were simply not true.

How can a fallible, relatively ignorant human being make such an authoritative statement, in direct contradiction to Jesus’ claims? Has this gentlemen met the Supreme Being he speaks for? Has the Supreme Being of whom He speaks spoken absolutely and finally of these things? If not, for a human being to make absolute declarations about the nature of access to the Supreme Being is nothing more than one more ignorant speculation.

On the other hand, Jesus is claiming to BE the Supreme Being, and to have a team of corroborating witnesses of the same degree of reliability and omniscience as Himself to back up His claims. This is in a totally different league from the claims of a spiritualist who freely admits he has only limited knowledge and understanding. Whose opinion are you going to trust?

Sub-Point Two: This witness team has unique “heavenly” and “earthly” experience to testify about.

Jesus spoke of “the things of earth,” and “the things of heaven” in 3.12 He is referring here to what happens in heaven and on earth regarding salvation, and particularly the work of the Spirit in imparting salvation. Much can be said about this, but I will limit our meditation here to the key point: Jesus is talking about His deep knowledge of the DIVINE side of salvation. Make sure you get this.

As a member of the Trinity, Jesus has been co-active with the Father and Spirit in the Divine work of saving every person in history who has truly believed. He knows from experience the “heavenly” side of what happens within the Godhead to produce, receive, protect, grow, and perfect the faith of every person the Trinity has ever saved. And, He knows the “earthly” side of how the Godhead works within the heart of every person who believes. That is why He could say to Nathanael: ***“I saw you before Philip called you, when you were still under the fig tree.”*** 1.48 (

Jesus has been telling Nicodemus about the work of the Holy Spirit in salvation from the beginning of this conversation from his Divine database of experience, testifying to the things that the Spirit literally does on earth, in human hearts, to produce the “second birth from above” in all who believe in Him. Yet Nicodemus, and the human race in general, refuses to receive HIS authoritative, truthful “WE” testimony. Jesus is the Creator of the human race; He therefore knows everything that must happen in heaven and on earth to save any and everybody. Our LORD is claiming that kind of knowledge and experience in these verses.

We desperately need this kind of absolute authority to step up and give us the truth about things we can never figure out for ourselves. We have no clue about the things of heaven. And, because of our sinful nature we cannot accurately judge and interpret spiritual things that happen on earth. We are helpless to save ourselves.

That is why this aspect of Jesus’ saving work is so important: we need a bona-fide authority to testify truthfully about things we cannot judge and evaluate reliably on our own. The “WE” team testimony should silence all speculation and objections, and shine like a halogen light—indeed, as the “light of the world”—into every dark and searching heart. The only problem with that is human pride.

Sub-Point Three: Jesus is a Unique Authority because of His Incarnation.

Verse 13 includes three primary truths regarding the Uniqueness of Christ’s Incarnation.

(1) Jesus makes the subject of this sentence “no one except,” which He matches up at the end of the sentence with Himself, as “the Son of Man.” This is a claim of absolute uniqueness—there is no one else in the world, or in history, other than Jesus, to whom His next statement applies.

(2) Jesus used the perfect tense again when He went on to say: “has ascended into heaven...” The reason why Jesus has ascended into heaven is because He “descended from heaven.” This is another claim, and statement repeated many times in John. “Descended from heaven” refers to Jesus’ eternal pre-existence as a member of the Trinity that kicked off this gospel:

***“In the beginning was the Word (a title for Jesus), and the Word was with God (the Father), and the Word was (eternally IS) God. 1.1***


Because Jesus is an eternal member of the Trinity, He is the only Person that has ascended permanently (perfect tense) “back” into the heavenly love-fellowship of the Trinity. Jesus is on earth as He speaks to Nicodemus, but He is also “ascended into heaven” at the same time—He continued to live in the same conscious love-fellowship and communion of the Trinity on earth that He enjoyed so much in His pre-existence. Because Jesus made a one-of-a-kind descent from heaven in His incarnation, He is also permanently ascended in the Godhead as well.

(3) Jesus ends this sentence with another much-used (especially in the synoptics) title, or Biblical Name for Himself: “the Son of Man.” This is an incarnation-title for Jesus. The “man” part refers to His true humanity. Jesus is the most human person that has ever lived, because He is the perfect prototype—without sin or blemish of any kind. When we look at Jesus we see what HE created Adam to become, and what Adam (and each of us) failed to become because of sin. But this title also has a Divine side to it. We have seen that it goes back to his Pre-Incarnate appearance to the prophet Daniel.

There is only One “Son of Man,” and therefore only one eternal Kingdom that He reigns over. It is entry to this Kingdom that Jesus is speaking about to Nicodemus. “No one except” Jesus has ever made and fulfilled these mind-boggling, Divine claims. Therefore He is the Unique, Authoritative Witness to the Truth, and the way of salvation. We need to listen to Him!

Jesus is constantly making God-sized, one-of-a-kind statements about Himself in John’s gospel. This is one of many to come. Buddha, Mohammed, the Dali Lama, Moses...the “great” religious and spiritual leaders of history NEVER made statements like these about themselves. Only God, and crazy people talk like this.

When you hear people say that they respect Jesus as a “great spiritual leader,” but do not believe he is any different than any other of the great leaders of world religions, you are listening to someone who has never really paid attention to these “unique,” God-claims of Jesus. “Great spiritual leaders” do not make absolute statements like these unless they are true. If this statement is true, then Jesus is in a totally different class from other so-called “spiritual leaders.” In fact, He is in the “Divine, Creator of the Universe” class, and all others “leaders” are humans HE created. Furthermore, they are responsible to Him and must answer to Him as Creator and Judge.

“Great spiritual leaders” are not crazy men who believe themselves to be God, against the facts. And of course real “spiritual leaders” do not lie about themselves, as Jesus would be doing if He is just a man. The Messiah  staking out a unique, Divine status for Himself when He says: “no one else but Me...”

This completes our examination of 3.11-13, and Jesus’ Work/Role as the Primary, Authoritative Witness on the “WE” Team.

***“And in the same way that Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness...”*** John 3.14

Now we will begin to examine Jesus’ second major point to Nicodemus about His own Messianic Work/Role as Savior: to Be the Life-Giving Substitutionary Sacrifice for our sins.

Jesus chose the perfect OT experience and scene to illustrate His saving work when He said: “in the same way that Moses lifted up the serpent...” Numbers 21.4-9 We will briefly survey the OT salvation scene that Jesus is referring to here, and then we will see how Jesus specifically applied the OT background to Himself. Please read the passage in Numbers 21.

I am going to make a running list of the important points in this passage.

(1) the incident occurred when the people sinned against God by speaking against Him (and Moses) in unbelief. 21.5

(2) God sent poisonous snakes among the people in judgement for their sin, and many died. 21.6 These serpents were an obvious reminder of Satan, and the way he brought death through sin upon all people.

(3) The people confessed their sin to God through Moses, and asked Him to intercede for them. Moses did so. 21.7

(4) God told Moses to make a figurine of a serpent, and lift it high up on a piece of wood so that anyone could see it. 21.8 Moses made the figure out of bronze, the metal used to illustrate judgement in the OT sacrificial system. 21.9 God was judging the people's sin through death by the serpents.

(5) This final point is KEY: God also gave a promise that ever person who had been been bitten by a serpent would not die, but live, if they "looked up to the (bronze) serpent." This promise required people to BELIEVE God's promise to them and act upon it, by looking with eyes of faith at the judgement-serpent, in order to receive the gift of life. **"And it came about that if a serpent bit any, when he looked to the bronze serpent, he lived."** 21.9B Jesus was applying all of this to Himself in John 3.14: "in the same way as Moses..."

Jesus wisely selected a scene that applies to every person in the world, for we have all been bitten by the serpent's deadly poison of sin and death; we have sinned, and we are under the judgement of eternal death as a result. But, God gives us the promise of salvation from sin and death through Jesus.

However, it is only effective if we believe His Word and "look to His saving sacrifice" by faith. We must confess our sin to the Intercessor He has appointed. In the OT scene the mediator was Moses, but that was a temporary ministry that only gave an extension of physical life.

Jesus is both the eternal Intercessor for our sins, and the eternal judgement-sacrifice at the same time. He received the bite of the serpent in our place, and accepted the judgement of death that was due each of us for sin when He died in our behalf. And, His promise is not just an extension of physical life, it is ETERNAL life—God's own special kind of life imparted to us, forever.

Sub-point one about the cross:

Now we consider the first of two critical sub-points Jesus makes about His death in John 3.14. Let's **reverently** and thoughtfully reflect upon this priceless insight into the death of the Messiah, from Jesus' own mouth.

John employs another of his classic double-meaning word-plays for the cross here, in the first of many similar uses in this gospel. Most translations use the English phrase "lift up" for what Moses did with the bronze serpent in the wilderness, and what Jesus says must happen to him in 3.14. "Lift up" is one of the meanings of the greek verb used here, and this is an excellent translation. Jesus will physically be "lifted up" on the cross, even as the bronze serpent was "lifted up" into a high position where all could see it to be saved from death.

However, this Greek word also means "exalted," in the sense of receiving glory and honor. For Jesus, and therefore for John, and all who believe, the death of Jesus is His ultimate glory and honor. That is why I combined both meanings of the Greek word in the phrase: "lifted up in exaltation" in my own translation.

Jesus' view is a complete reversal of the typical attitude of the 1st century toward the cross, which saw it only as the worst possible suffering, humiliation, shame, and dishonor. Jesus' own disciples could not accept the fact that He would die on a cross. When you add the fact that it was the result of a totally unrighteous, false judgement against Jesus based on lies, hate, and the most venomous kind of evil intent, the idea of "exaltation/glory" becomes even more incompatible with His death. Yet for Jesus, the cross was His ultimate glory on earth. What gives here?

Countless books have been written about the Atonement, and the meaning of the cross. Obviously this is one of the deepest mysteries and highest revelations of history, so our meditation here is just the tip of the iceberg. It all boils down to this. Out of all the things that God has done to unveil His Divine nature and character to the human race, such as creation, the many miracles of salvation history, His written Word, fulfilled prophecy, or His covenant faithfulness throughout the ages, the most revealing thing God has ever done is to become a man and die out of love, not just for His own, but even for His enemies.

Yes, God is Holy. He is All-powerful. He is all-knowing. Jews, Muslims, Christians all agree on this, as do most Theists of any stripe. But Jesus believed that the most telling thing about the Trinity that will ever be revealed—even in eternity—is that He is Gracious enough, Humble enough, Good enough, Merciful enough, Compassionate enough, and LOVE enough to take all the evil and wrongdoing the entire race has done, let us heap it all up together in one bundle, and hurl it at Jesus all at once (when He took all the sins of history into Himself at one time on the cross). Watch Him take it all, and then say: "Father, forgive them, because they do not know what they are doing."

This is who GOD IS! And this revelation is His Highest Praise, His Greatest Honor, His Eternal grounds for Adoration and Worship—even if not one of the sinners for whom He gave His life ever believed in Him or received the truth about His sacrifice. Only GOD loves like that; only GOD is that GOOD and RIGHTEOUS and LOVELY and GLORIOUS and WONDERFUL and PURE and BEYOND COMPARE!

Yes, the most evil thing that has ever been by created beings—the crucifixion of the sinless Son of God—reveals the most GLORIOUS thing that can ever be known about GOD! And so for Jesus, the humiliation and suffering of His cross is His "exaltation and glory." John consistently uses this double-meaning verb that fell from Jesus' own lips when he writes about the cross.

Sub-point Two about the cross:

***"so it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up in exaltation."***

This is the second "it is necessary" statement (out of seven) of John's gospel so far. (We noted #1 in 3.7.) There, the second birth from above by the power of the Holy Spirit was not optional, it was essential and necessary for seeing and entering the Kingdom. Now Jesus says His glorious death is also essential and necessary for salvation.

No sacrifice, no salvation. No death, no eternal life. No judgement, no justification. The death of Jesus was not one option among many, it was the singular, irreplaceable way of salvation in God's plan.

The Early Judean Ministry began with a season of intense Messianic temptation. The final test involved the Devil's false promise to grant Him the crown of glory without enduring the suffering of the cross, if He would just worship the Devil. Jesus rejected that outright. The cross was necessary for Him. Then, in His final moments before entering into His sufferings, Jesus prayed in Gethsemane: ***"Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me. Yet not as I will, but let Yours be done."*** MT 26.39 Thus from the beginning of Jesus' ministry to the end, "it was necessary" for Jesus to die.

The New Testament takes this concept of the necessity of Jesus' death one step further in I Peter 1.20 and the Book of Revelation, where Jesus is revealed before the throne in heaven in John's vision as **"the Lamb of God that was slain, before the foundation of the world."** The death of Jesus was so essential to the eternal purpose of God that it was pre-planned and determined by the Trinity long before creation, and the first sin was ever committed. That was why "it was necessary" on earth.

Why is it impossible for an omniscient, omnipotent God to formulate any alternative plan to the cross? God declared at creation that the wages of sin would be death. **"You shall surely die."** Gen. 2.17 Death occurs because God alone is the author and sustainer of all life. He is the only self-existent Being in the universe. Everything else is both created, and sustained in life by Him. So, when we sin and reject the only LIFE-source that exists in the universe, we are choosing our own death.

To reject Life is to choose self-destruction; to "perish" (Jesus will deal with this in much greater detail in 3.16-21). To make this clear, the Trinity declared death to be the inevitable consequence of sin from the beginning of creation, and His continued revelation through the Old Testament constantly re-emphasized this point.

Here's the problem. Every human being has sinned, and the wages of sin is death, so every person has already forfeited the right to eternal life. We have lingering physical life, but we are born spiritually dead, separated from the Presence of God and His life, and will be eternally separated in the future because of our sin. Therefore we are functionally incapable of paying the penalty that has been decreed.

We are like a criminal who loses everything they own in the commission of a crime. The penalty for the crime is a \$100,000 fine, but the criminal has already lost the means to pay the penalty in the act of committing the crime. They can never go back in time and regain what they lost, and so they can never get out from under the ongoing consequences of their inability to pay the prescribed penalty.

God has to maintain the punishment for sin that He already determined, otherwise He would become a liar and forfeit His own Righteousness. The ONLY way left for God is to maintain the penalty He has declared, AND become one of us to pay the penalty Himself in our place. **"It is necessary"** for the penalty to be paid in order for God to maintain His Righteousness. So **"it was necessary"** for the Messiah to be lifted up in exaltation on the cross and die, in order to be able to rightly say: "I forgive you."

Only the person who pays the penalty in behalf of the criminal can say to the guilty party– "I set you free from consequences of your sin, because I have paid the penalty for you, and I do not require you to repay me in any way. It is a free gift: you are forgiven, and free of all the consequences." That is why only GOD can forgive sin in the Scriptures–He is the only One who has paid the penalty.

#### JN 3.15

3.15 is Jesus' final statement regarding His own role/work as the Life-Giving, Substitutionary Sacrifice. It is short and sweet, and draws together many of the key themes of John's gospel in his trademark phrase: **"believing in Jesus results in the possession of God's Eternal kind of Life."** We will briefly note several important aspects of this central promise of Jesus.

(1) 3.15 is the thesis statement and purpose of the entire Gospel. John states this at the climax of his gospel: **"Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples that are not written in this book. (see 21.25) But these have been written in order that you all may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that those who continue to believe may have God's kind of Life in His Name."** 20. 30-31 John carefully selected the signs,

conversations, and teachings of Jesus' ministry that would most effectively lead to faith in Him as God, and issue in eternal life.

(2) It is no accident that John quotes this trademark phrase of Jesus' ministry for the first time in the context of the cross. Once again he is highlighting the death and resurrection of Jesus as THE sign of all signs that reveal who He is, and is the fulfillment that John's 7 sign-miracles are all pointing to.

(3) Jesus here applies the object lesson of Moses and the bronze serpent to Himself. All who "looked in faith" to Moses' uplifted serpent received an extension of their physical lives, and did not die from the serpent's poison. All who look in faith to the "exalted Jesus on His cross" will receive not temporary life, but eternal life.

(4) I have translated "eternal life" as "God's eternal kind of Life." We often think of eternal life in terms of quantity, or its duration. "Eternal" is an adjective modifying the noun "ZOE," which Jesus and John used for God's own special QUALITY of life. (see 1.4) Merely extending a poor quality of life is actually a horrible thing. If God chose to extend the duration (eternally) of the kind of life I am experiencing while passing a kidney stone, it would be eternal hell. The duration of the life is a sub-point, the Key is the quality; it is GOD'S own kind of life. (Zoe is used by John many times without the adjective "eternal" for this very reason.)

Jesus keeps on adding additional aspects of the QUALITY of God's kind of Life-Form throughout the gospel. We can say for now that "God's Quality of Life" is spirit, it is self-existent and therefore can never die, it is unconditionally loving, it is ever new, it is powerful enough to birth the universe out of nothing in an instant, it is unchanging, it is infinitely intelligent... just to get started! It was necessary for Jesus to die in order for us to have the option of receiving this God-Life as a free gift.

(5) Verse 15 is a result-statement for what happens when people believe in the Divine meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection, just as some of God's people in the wilderness believed His promise and looked up in faith to the uplifted figurine. In other words, eternal life is a promise, with the pre-condition of believing in the Divine Person and Work of God's Son. God's Quality of Life is limited to those who believe in Jesus.

(6) The kind of faith that fulfills Jesus' pre-condition is the "keep on believing" kind. Not a momentary, flash in the pan kind of faith, but a lifetime commitment and life-style of dependance upon Jesus that never ends. This kind of faith may fluctuate in its intensity, but it never goes out—we never stop believing in Who Jesus IS and what HE does, come what may.

God's LIFE is a free Gift that comes from a personal faith-relationship with Jesus. The point is not the LIFE, apart from Jesus, it is to know JESUS, who gives us His LIFE so that we can become like Him and glorify Him forever.

Too much evangelism offers people the LIFE of God as if it was a commodity independent of Jesus Himself, that can be offered to people like a pill. "Would you like to have the gift of eternal life? Would you like to live forever? Would you like to be sure that you will go to heaven when you die?" This kind of evangelism markets "eternal" life like an independent commodity. Who wouldn't want that product as an unconditional, free gift?

Read the Gospels and the New Testament again. You will NEVER find that kind of evangelism. The offer is a personal relationship with the Trinity-God, in which believing means we die to self and live to Him, joyfully enrolling ourselves in His School of complete character renovation as His disciple, and eternally abandoning all rights to self-control by signing up as His bond-slave, to wait upon Him and serve His good pleasure.

For a sinner like me to be invited into that kind of relationship with GOD ALMIGHTY, the TRINITY is the offer of the ages, it is grace beyond description, it is much more than my highest dreams and hopes can grasp. And HE



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says: “In order to make this all possible on your end, I am going to breath MY kind of life into you, and my SPIRIT will live in you to make this all happen, forever. I have died for you to remove every barrier that separates us, so come serve me in humility like Mine.”