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The Bible Student

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AN EXPOSITORY STUDY OF ST JOHN'S GOSPEL

F. F. BRUCE, M.A.

II. Jesus reveals Himself to the World (John 1: 18—12: 50)

(b) MINISTRY OF JESUS IN GALILEE, JERUSALEM AND SAMARIA
(John 2: 1—4: 42)

iii. *Nicodemus and the New Birth* (2: 23—3: 21)

Ch. 3, v. 9—*Nicodemus answered and said unto Him, How can these things be?*—Although Jesus, in verses 5 to 8, has amplified the reply He gave in verse 3, Nicodemus is still unable to grasp the meaning of His words. No doubt he himself had often taught others the conditions required for seeing and entering the kingdom of God, for enjoying the life of the age to come, but he had never heard these conditions expressed in such terms as Jesus used. Keeping the law of God, doing His will day by day, were terms which he would have understood; but what was meant by this strange language about being 'born of the Spirit?'

v. 10—*Jesus answered and said unto him, art thou the teacher of Israel, and understandest not these things?*—Jesus' description of Nicodemus as '*the teacher of Israel*' (not simply, as in A.V., '*a master of Israel*') suggests that Nicodemus was specially eminent in rabbinical circles. All the more surprising was it, therefore, that he should display such failure to comprehend teaching which was not really new, but was implicit in much of the Old Testament narrative. The implication of Jesus' question is that Nicodemus might have been expected to understand something of the new

authorities for the text, including the Sinaitic and Vatican codices and other representatives of the Alexandrian family. But it is present in the representative texts of the 'Caesarean' family and in a formidable array of other ancient authorities, so that the textual evidence for retention or omission is fairly evenly balanced. It may well be that the phrase is original, but was omitted by a scribe or editor who did not see how Jesus could speak of Himself as being 'in heaven' when He was actually on the earth. Possibly, however, this verse is an inserted comment by the Evangelist on the words just uttered by Jesus. In any case, the thought is very much the same as is expressed in similar terms in Ch. 1:18. There 'no man has ever seen God'; here 'no man has gone up into heaven'. There the Divine Son is the revealer of the Father; here the Son of man is the unfolders of heavenly truth. There He is said to have His being in the Father's bosom, and here (if we follow the longer reading) He has His being in heaven. Even when He was on earth He did not surrender His heavenly origin and character or His mutual intimacy of heart with the Father. And long before the Evangelist began to indite his Gospel, He who came down from heaven had ascended up where He was before (Cf. Ch. 6:62; Eph. 4:9 f.).

v. 14—*And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up:*—Whether the previous verse is part of what Jesus said to Nicodemus or not, this verse certainly is. Nicodemus had failed to grasp the teaching about the new birth when it was presented to him in language reminiscent of Ezekiel's prophecies; it must now be presented to him by means of an object-lesson, from a story with which he had been familiar since his infancy. The Israelites in their wilderness wanderings between Egypt and Canaan fell into one of their recurrent fits of dejection and complaint because of the hardships of the journey, and spoke against God and His servant Moses. Then fiery serpents were sent among them, and many of them died from the serpents' poisonous bite. The survivors appealed to Moses in confession and repentance, Moses prayed to God for them, and in accordance with the command of God he 'made a serpent of brass, and set it upon the standard: and it came to

pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he looked unto the serpent of brass, he lived' (Num. 21:4-9). If one of those bitten Israelites, who looked and lived when he was at death's door, had been asked how he felt, he might well have said that he felt as if he had been born all over again and received a new lease of life. That was a renewal of natural life, but it served as an illustration of the receiving of spiritual life. For, said the Lord to Nicodemus, 'as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up'. The setting of the brazen serpent aloft on a standard in the midst of the camp of Israel is a picture of the Saviour's being raised aloft on the cross; but when John speaks of the Son of man being lifted up he means more than that. For the word he used (*hypsōō*) is carefully chosen; it denotes not only literal lifting up in space but also exaltation in glory. And John uses it deliberately because in his eyes the Son of man achieved His highest exaltation by being crucified (Cf. Chs. 8:28; 12:32, 34.). He who descended from heaven has now once more ascended up on high, but He has ascended by way of suffering and death; the cross on which He was lifted up has become the ladder of His ascent to the Father's right hand (Cf. Ch. 1:51 and comments there).

There was no healing virtue in the serpent which Moses made and raised on the standard. It was in itself a mere *Nehushtan*, 'a piece of brass'; and when in later days the people paid homage to it as though it had some inherent sacredness or power, good King Hezekiah broke it in pieces (2 Kings 18:4). It was the saving grace of God that healed the bitten Israelites when they believed His word and obeyed His command. But in the Son of man who was raised aloft upon the cross there resides infinite healing virtue, far more potent than that which brought new life to the Israelites in the wilderness. They were delivered from a physical disease, and received a prolongation of mortal life; but the Son of man was 'lifted up'—

v. 15—*That whosoever believeth may in Him have Eternal Life.*—Thus the teaching of the prologue is confirmed by the testimony of Jesus. There we learned that the right to become children of God was bestowed on 'as many as received' the Divine

Word, on 'them that believe on his name', who thus are 'born . . . of God' (John 1:12 f.). Here too we learn that all who believe receive eternal life in Him, but we also learn that He must first be 'lifted up' before this eternal life could be made available to believers. Now He has indeed been lifted up, and believers do have eternal life in Him—no mere prolongation of the old life, but new life of a higher order and endless duration, the life of the age to come appropriated here and now through the exalted Son of man, appropriated by faith. Here is the answer to Nicodemus's bewildered question, 'How can these things be?' It is through the work of Christ that believers can enter the kingdom of God, can possess in this present age the life of the resurrection age, can be accepted as children of God by a new and spiritual birth. As Christ died and rose on high with the new life which He received out of death, so those who are united to Him by faith rise with Him and share His new and unending life.

The Received Text inserts the words 'should not perish, but' which are consequently found in the A.V. of this verse. The ancient and most reliable authorities for the text do not have them here; they were added later from v. 16. The phrase 'in him' (Gk. *en autō*) is to be attached to 'may have eternal life', not to 'believeth'; the similar phrase in v. 16 represents Gk. *eis auton* (literally 'into him'), which there does go with 'believeth'; the preposition *eis* is the regular Johannine construction after the verb 'believe' (*pisteuō*).

(To be continued)

THE NEED FOR DOCTRINE

It is easy to decry doctrine, and yet the power of science to-day is in its dogmas, not in its generalisations. Great ideas, like the conservation of energy, gravitation, the indestructibility of matter, as held and taught by scientists, are a great power. In the same way Christianity must be strong in its ideas of the personality of God, the Person and Work of Christ, the Holy Spirit, and other related truths. If it be said that religion is possible without doctrine, it may be fully admitted, and yet the question at once arises of what sort will it be. It can only be suited to spiritual childhood, not manhood. Great music involves the theory of great music, and a religion without theory will be like a babe with love, but with no ideas. It is doctrine that makes grown men. It is simply impossible to have religion worthy of the name without some dogma.—*Dr. W. H. Griffith Thomas* in his *Introduction to the Thirty-Nine Articles*.