

## Believing Heavenly Things (John 3:9–21)

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### Introduction

The issue of believing and its relation to saving faith is taken up in the interaction with Nicodemus.

This section of John is a sub-theme in his Book of Signs, the issue of *believing* (2:23–25).

The focus of this transitional passage is that believing something about Jesus does not in itself save anyone. Here John uses a play on the word *believe* (*pisteuo*)—“Many believed in his name” ... *but Jesus on his part did not believe in them*” (v. 24).

Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, demonstrates this truth and why his belief in Jesus was insufficient to save him.

### I. The New Birth Essential

1. The divine method of granting God’s people eternal life (new spiritual unending life) is *re-generation*—being born from above.

Nicodemus’ ignorance of God’s method of saving people sprang from his blindness and false beliefs. The Jews assumed that the kingdom of God was theirs by virtue of their descent from Abraham.

Only those who are *born from above* can even see the kingdom, let alone enter it. Only those who have been born from above are able to believe savingly. Saved people are called believers because they act, believing or trusting in Jesus and all He represents (John 5:24).

2. What about free-will consent of faith?

Objectors to the regeneration-before-faith view cite the *active commands* as evidence that consent of faith is required before God can act to save anyone. These active commands also relate to *perseverance* in faith, raising the question of the possibility of one’s losing salvation through failure to continue in faith because of sin, apostasy, or neglect (Hebrews 10:23, 26, 27).

Admonitions, commands, and exhortations are directed at the *will*. The will is influenced by the *desires* of the mind—what one deems best and most useful to himself. The natural man does not receive the things of the spirit realm and being spiritually dead, he cannot know them. However, when one is born anew by the Spirit of God, Christ is seen as exceptionally desirable to the mind and the will responds accordingly. Christ’s value to the believer will enable him to persevere in his faith regardless of his situation (Revelation 2:13).

Those who fall away prove that they were never regenerated in the first place.

3. Jesus knows the heart and thinking of everyone, and He often addresses the problem before it is even spoken.

If Jesus was the Messiah, then, according to the prophets, He would sit on David’s throne and rule the world. Nicodemus assumed that he would be a citizen of the kingdom due to his Hebrew origin. Jesus destroyed this notion. Israel defected from the covenant that God entered with them, and God rejected them (Hebrews 8:9, citing Jeremiah 31:32; Malachi 4:1).

Nevertheless, there was a righteous remnant in Israel by His grace. To them, Yahweh promised, “*But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings*” (Malachi 4:20). How God is raising up new citizens for His kingdom is explained by the doctrine of regeneration (Ephesians 2:1, 5).

Two things stand out with respect to this discussion: (1) earthly versus heavenly things and (2) loving the light (truth) versus the darkness.

## II. Earthly Versus Heavenly

1. Nicodemus asked, “*How can these things be?*” (v. 9).

a. Jesus replied with a third truth statement (v. 10).

Jesus did not direct this statement only to Nicodemus, but to the Jews in general because “*you*” is plural.

b. The Jews did not and would not receive the testimony. Why? “*A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven*” (v. 36).

2. Jesus argued, “*If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?*” (v. 12). Jesus declared His authority to make this judgment: (v. 13). Christ’s preeminence is in that “*He who comes from above is above all*” (v. 31). Jesus bore witness to spiritual reality because He came from that realm. There is a spiritual realm and those of earth cannot naturally perceive it until they have been born from above.

## III. Christ lifted Up.

1. A word from God of condemnation and hope

In a cryptic statement, Jesus explained to Nicodemus the consequences the Jew’s refusal to receive His testimony (v. 15). This statement holds both condemnation and hope—condemnation for the rebellious nation and hope for the righteous remnant. The reference is to Numbers 21:4–8.

2. Look to Jesus and be healed

The bigger question here is, how does this verse relate to the previous statement, for verse 15 is tied to verse 14 with a conjunctive, “*and*”? No one can ascend into heaven because no one is worthy to do so. However, because God is gracious, He is giving hope to rebellious sinners in the same way He did in the wilderness. Jesus, like the bronze snake, will be lifted up so that repentant sinners may look to Him and be healed (Revelation 21:27). This is where Jesus’ descent come in. He came to be lifted up, not on a throne, but on a cross. In the wilderness, the remedy was restored physical life, but with Jesus, it will be *eternal* life.

## Conclusion

Only Jesus is qualified to speak of heavenly things and bring light and truth into this sin-darkened world. Jesus can relate the truth because He came from heaven, His true and eternal home. He is the revelatory *Son of Man* (Daniel 7:13, 14). Like Israel in the wilderness, some love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil (3:19–21).