

## Martin Luther on John 3

Today's Gospel reading from John gives the account of Jesus speaking with Nicodemus. The following is an interesting insight by Martin Luther upon our text in his sermon on John 3:

But now let us meditate on the story. The Lord delivers an excellent sermon to Nicodemus, a Jew, who supposed that keeping the Law of Moses offered him a way to heaven and that his own ascension into heaven depended on his fasting, his praying, and his ascetic life. Now Christ interprets and unravels Moses to him correctly and says to him: "That will never do it. Your mode of ascension is not the way, but you must be born anew. Therefore listen to what I tell you. You are a Jew. I shall take your Moses and cite from him passages which you have not understood until now." Who else would have interpreted Moses in this way before?

He says, "In Num. 21 you read that the Lord our God sent fiery serpents among the children of Israel when they murmured because the Lord did not do what they wanted Him to do." In that country, where the heat is so intense, such serpents are called asps. When they bite a man, he swells, turns red, and his whole body becomes so feverish that he is soon past help unless the bitten member is amputated at once. For if such a serpent bites into a finger or a foot, the limb must be amputated immediately. Otherwise the fire or fever will penetrate the whole body and affect all its parts, and death will be inevitable. In his song in Deut. 32:33 Moses sings of "the incurable venom of asps." They are called "fiery serpents" because they inflame the body with their sting so that the affected member must be cut off at once, or death will result. These serpents were not actually fiery; but when they bit a man, his flesh grew so fiery red and feverish that he died of thirst. This thirst suggested the name *dipsades* to the Greeks. For heat induces thirst, and one reads that the angry breath of these serpents is so intensely hot that the very air becomes fiery as though it were aflame. That is why they were called "fiery serpents." We Germans have no descriptive name for them, since these serpents are unknown in our lands, although I am told that they have been seen out there in our Speck . . .

In this story many were undoubtedly offended because it was all so unpretentious. None but the believers understood Moses' words and recovered through their faith in the Word. But who would have had the boldness to refer this story to Christ? I would never have ventured to interpret this story as Christ Himself did when He plainly related it to Himself, saying: "This is the bronze serpent; I, however, am the Son of man. Those people were asked to look at the serpent physically, but you must look at Me spiritually and in faith. Those people were cured of bodily poisoning; but you, through Me, will be delivered from eternal poison. They recovered from a physical ailment, but I bestow eternal life on those who believe in Me." These are very strange statements and sayings.

In this way the Lord shows us the proper method of interpreting Moses and all the prophets. He teaches us that Moses points and refers to Christ in all his stories and illustrations. His purpose is to show that Christ is the point at the centre of a circle, with all eyes inside the circle focused on Him. Whoever turns his eyes on Him finds his proper place in the circle of which Christ is the centre. All the stories of Holy Writ, if viewed aright, point to Christ. (AE 22:337–39)