The Friend of the Bridegroom

Department of CHRISTIAN EDUCATION ORTHODOX CHURCH in AMERICA

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In Chapter 3 of John's Gospel Jesus has an encounter with Nicodemus, who does not understand His words about being born again.

Jesus asks Nicodemus, a well-known teacher of Israel, "If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?" It's significant that Our Lord puts the question not in terms of understanding, but of believing. He then tells us how to strengthen our belief, making reference to the Old Testament. He refers to Numbers 21:9, when fiery serpents were biting the complaining people of Israel as they followed Moses through the wilderness. God told Moses to raise a bronze serpent on a pole, and promised that everyone "who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live." Jesus says that just as Moses lifted up the serpent, "so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." We are to look up to Jesus, lifted on the cross, as the people looked up at the serpent raised on the pole. Making the effort to look at Him, to see Him and keep looking to Him, will lead us to belief and to salvation.

This passage shows that John the Baptizer or Baptist, the Forerunner, truly looked up to Christ. In these verses, John's disciples come to him and tell him that the one to whom he bore witness, Jesus, is outdoing him. John was used to having many followers and being a leader, but now the people are following Jesus. Certainly John might have been tempted to feel jealousy and resentment. But he refers to himself as the "friend of the bridegroom." This was a position like that of the best man at a wedding. The "friend" had important responsibilities during the marriage ceremony, but once it was over he stepped down and gave the bridegroom the prominent place, rejoicing for the bridegroom's joy.

John reminds his disciples that he had always said he was not the Christ. Then he makes a wonderful statement of humility: "He (Jesus) must increase, but I must decrease." In other words, he will now look up to Christ, as many people had looked up to him. He further compares himself to Christ by saying, "He who is of the earth belongs to the earth, and of the earth he speaks; he who comes from heaven is above all." Jesus is the One, John knows, who is "from heaven" and so He is the only one who can claim authority over every person and thing. That authority is based not on coercion but on love: "The Father loves the Son, and has given all things into his hand." As the true friend of the Bridegroom, John humbly steps down from his own position and encourages all of us to look up to the One whom the Father loves.