

# SNAKES, SINNERS AND THE SAVIOR

One of the best-known verses in the Bible is framed by one of the strangest scenes in the Bible. What are we learning this morning? John 3:16 and the story of Nicodemus.

What is the setting? Snakes, Sinners and the Savior. Jesus uses a strange scene, snakes attacking and killing people as the backdrop for John 3:16 and the God who so loved that He gave. Wow what a lesson, what a passage, and what a joy to learn from Jesus the Message of Salvation this morning!

Welcome to the Gospel of Jesus Christ!

We are learning in these weeks of Bible Study **The Master's Message In John.** We are watching Jesus through the eyes and ears of the Apostle John. What is the Gospel? Christ Jesus answers through the book He prompted John to write as the Apostle captures numerous powerful scenes where our Lord Jesus Christ explains the truth about salvation. We have already seen Jesus describing believers as those who:

Possess Jesus Christ; understand salvation is only by substitution; have been overwhelmed by the Holy Spirit; hang on to Christ alone; and finally -- get to start life over again --only this time brand new and in the right way

Turn to that truth with me. It is the best-known verse in God's Word John 3:16. As we stand follow along as I read John 3:14-16.

Jesus is in an evening visit by seeking Bible Teacher named Nicodemus. The Nicodemus of the New Testament, may have been the Nicodemus known in secular history as Nicodemus ben Gurion. If so he was the 3<sup>rd</sup> richest man of early 1<sup>st</sup> Century Israel. His brother was Josephus ben Gurion, as in the world famous historian we read today called Josephus.

This may explain why Jesus refers to being "born of water". This may point to John's Baptism of humble repentance. Nicodemus may have been in that delegation sent to query John at the Jordan River. If so that explains why Jesus

dealt so directly with him in John 3. But in our text in the midst of Christ's talk with Nicodemus, in the midst of His explanation of the New Birth, being Born Again, He says you need another birth, you need to become a baby again.

That is a very striking to think about. Why? ***Because, a baby has no past, just a future!***

Our passage this morning reveals Christ's present mission.

The Son ***came down*** (3:13)

To be ***lifted up*** (3:14)

In order for man to ***enter in*** (3:15)

And ***get out*** of perishing and ***into*** everlasting life (3:16)

To explain the magnitude of this New Birth, Jesus goes back to a strange<sup>1</sup> Old Testament story which is told in Numbers 21:4–9. On their journey through the wilderness the people of Israel murmured and complained and regretted that they had ever left Egypt. Because of their complaining, ***“the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people: and much people of Israel died.”*** When they repented, the Lord told Moses to erect a serpent of brass upon a pole, symbolizing sin judged and put to death. Moses had to attach the serpent of brass nailed it to a tree to hold it on! ***“... and it came to pass that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived”***. This is an Old Testament picture of Christ, who “bore our sins in His own body on the tree” (1 Peter 2:24). Jesus Himself said: “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:14-15)<sup>2</sup>.

What does the Brazen Serpent point at? The great similarity<sup>3</sup> between their condition 3500 years ago and ours today!

1. **We share a similar deadly infection.** ALL INFECTED WILL DIE.
  - All touched by the poison of the serpents would die. All infected by the SIN virus, will die. The devil is the old serpent, a fiery serpent, hence he appears (Rev. 12:3) as a *great red dragon*. Sin is the biting of this fiery serpent; it is painful to the startled conscience, and poisonous to the seared conscience.
2. **We share a similar offer of a cure.** THERE IS ONLY ONE CURE
  - It was God himself that devised and prescribed this antidote against the fiery serpents; so our salvation by Christ was the contrivance of Infinite Wisdom; God himself has found the ransom.
  - It was a very unlikely method of cure; so our salvation by the death of Christ is *to the Jews a stumbling-block and to the Greeks foolishness*. It was Moses that *lifted up the serpent in the wilderness*, so the law is a schoolmaster to bring us to Christ, and Moses wrote of him, John v. 4-6.

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<sup>1</sup> Drawn from comments written by Barclay, William, Daily Study Bible Series: The Gospel of John - Volume 1 Chapters 1-7 (Revised Edition), (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press) 2000, c1975.

<sup>2</sup> Morris, Many Infallible Proofs, Master Books.

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from the commentary on Numbers by Henry, Matthew, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Bible*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers) 1997.

Christ was lifted up by the rulers of the Jews, who were the successors of Moses.

- That which cured was shaped in the likeness of that which wounded. So Christ, though perfectly free from sin himself, yet was *made in the likeness of sinful flesh* (Rom. 8:3), so like that it was taken for granted that this man was a sinner, Jn. 9:24.
  - The brazen serpent was lifted up; so was Christ. He was lifted up upon the cross (Jn. 12:33, 34), for his was made a spectacle to the world. He was lifted up by the preaching of the gospel. The word here used for a *pole* signifies a *banner*, or *ensign*, for Christ crucified *stands for an ensign of the people*, Isa. 11:10. Some make the lifting up of the serpent to be a figure of Christ's triumphing over Satan, the old serpent, whose head he bruised, when in his cross he made an open show of the principalities and powers which he had spoiled and destroyed, Col. 2:15.
3. **We share a similar choice. ONLY GOD'S WAY WILL WORK..**
- IT WAS SIMPLE. They looked and lived, and we, if we believe, shall not perish; it is by faith that we look unto Jesus, Heb. 12:2. *Look unto me, and be you saved*, Isa. 45:22. We must be sensible of our wound and of our danger by it, receive the record which God has given concerning his Son, and rely upon the assurance he has given us that we shall be healed and saved by him if we resign ourselves to his direction.
  - IT WAS SPECIFIC. The brazen serpent's being lifted up would not cure if it was not looked upon. If any pored on their wound, and would not look up to the brazen serpent, they inevitably died. If they slighted this method of cure, and had recourse to natural medicines, and trusted to them, they justly perished; so if sinners either despise Christ's righteousness or despair of benefit by it their wound will, without doubt, be fatal. Not a Christian if go to church any more than married if go to wedding.
  - IT WAS POWERFUL. But whoever looked up to this healing sign, though from the outmost part of the camp, though with a weak and weeping eye, was certainly healed; so whosoever believes in Christ, though as yet but weak in faith, shall not perish. There are weak brethren *for whom Christ died*.

When Jesus met one of the most religious people of His day where did He take him? To the Old Testament book of Numbers 21 and the mysterious account of the Brazen serpent where we see -

#### THE PROMISE OF SALVATION REFLECTED IN:

- **GOD'S SUFFICIENCY**: The lifted up brass serpent was all that was needed to supply a complete cure.
- **THEIR HOPELESSNESS**: The snakes' venom was deadly, as is sin. The burning pain reflected how desperate was their need.
- **GOD'S POWER**: One snake on a pole worked no matter how many bites or how bad their condition.

- **THEIR PERSONAL NEED**: The antidote was only good for an individual, no one could look at the Bronze serpent on the pole to get another healed.
- **GOD'S PERFECT SOLUTION**: One source of hope and salvation saved those of any age, of any family, anywhere in the Camp.
- **GOD'S RELIABILITY**: The Bronze Serpent never failed to work, no matter how often they tried it.
- **GOD'S SIMPLE PLAN**: It was an easy, instant look that was required. But, it had to be at the only source of help. "Look and Live"

Looking at the Bronze serpent was such a wonderful portrait of our salvation. Think of these powerful truths:

1. **SALVATION IS SO SIMPLE**. The *simplicity* of the remedy—the bitten had only to look up in faith,
2. **SALVATION IS SO IMMEDIATELY POWERFUL**. The antidote for the snake venom is amazing in its *immediateness* and its *completeness*.
3. **SALVATION IS SO EXCLUSIVE**. The bronze serpent was the *only* and also the *all-sufficient* remedy for the deadly wound of the serpent.

The bronze<sup>4</sup> serpent pictures our Lord Jesus because:

1. JESUS WAS LIKE THE BRONZE SERPENT BECAUSE it had the form of the deadly serpent without the venom, just as Jesus was 'in the likeness of sinful flesh' yet without sin (Rom. 8:3), 'made ... to be sin for us' though he 'had no sin' (2 Cor. 5:21); the bronze serpent seemed a most unlikely means of curing the serpents' bites, just as the condemned Christ seemed most unlikely to save the condemned;
2. JESUS WAS LIKE THE BRONZE SERPENT BECAUSE the serpent was lifted up on a pole so as to be visible to all the Israelites, just as Jesus was 'clearly portrayed as crucified' (Gal. 3:1), so that all the 'ends of the earth' by looking to him may 'be saved' (Is. 45:22); he was 'lifted up from the earth', so drawing all people to him (John 12:32–34);
3. JESUS WAS LIKE THE BRONZE SERPENT BECAUSE the cure of the body by physical looking corresponds to the cure of the soul by spiritual looking; faith is the eye of the soul turned to the Savior (Heb. 12:2); a look will save, from no matter how far away (Heb. 7:25; Eph. 2:17; Acts 2:39), just as the Israelites were healed by a look from any distance.

As these<sup>5</sup> truths were explained to Nicodemus he was speechless. When Jesus proceeded to answer his "how" He was revealing not only the how of the new birth but glorious succession addressing every side of the question:

- *How can one be saved?* By believing on the Son (3:15)
- *Why can one be saved?* Because "God so loved" (3:16a)
- *Who can be saved?* "Whosoever" (3:16b)

<sup>4</sup> Alexander, T. Desmond and Brian S. Rosner, editors, *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press) 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Adapted from notes by McQuaid E. , *The Outpouring: Jesus in the Feasts of Israel*, (Bellmawr, New Jersey: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, Inc.) 1997.

- *What is salvation?* "Should not perish, but have everlasting life" (3:16c)
- *Where can one be saved?* In this present world; "God sent his Son into the world ... that the world through him might be saved" (3:17)
- *When can one be saved?* At this moment—"he that believeth on him is not condemned" (3:18a)

The 1<sup>st</sup> great phrase is "*whosoever believeth in Him*". It means at least three things.

- It means believing with all our hearts that God is as Jesus declared him to be.
- It means believing that God loves us, that God cares for us, that God wants nothing more than to forgive us.
- It means believing that Christ's death in my place is the only way to God, the only hope of forgiveness, and the only salvation I can ever have.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> great phrase is "*hath everlasting life*". Eternal life is the very life of God himself. So answer this with me: if we possess eternal life, what do we have? What is entering into eternal life here and now, today? The answer is simply this<sup>6</sup> - eternal life surrounds every relationship we have in life with peace.

1. **PEACE ABOVE.** It gives us peace with God. We are no longer cringing before a tyrannical king or seeking to hide from an austere judge. We are at home with our Father. ***Romans 5:1 Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,***
2. **PEACE AROUND.** It gives us peace with men. If we have been forgiven we must be forgiving. ***Ephesians 4:32 And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.***
3. **PEACE ALONG.** It gives us peace with life. If God is Father, God is working all things together for good. ***Romans 8:28 And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.***
4. **PEACE WITHIN.** It gives us peace with ourselves. ***Isaiah 26:3 You will keep him in perfect peace, Whose mind is stayed on You, Because he trusts in You.***
5. **PEACE TO COME.** It makes him certain that the deepest peace on earth is only a shadow of the ultimate peace to come. ***Philippians 3:21, 4:5b-7 who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself... The Lord is at hand. 6 Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; 7 and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.***

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<sup>6</sup> Drawn from comments written by Barclay, William, Daily Study Bible Series: The Gospel of John - Volume 1 Chapters 1-7 (Revised Edition), (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press) 2000, c1975.  
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For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that every one who believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life. All great men have had their favorite texts; but this has been called "Everybody's text." Herein for every simple<sup>7</sup> heart is the very essence of the gospel. This text tells us certain great things.

1. GOD MADE THE FIRST MOVE. It tells us that the initiative in **all salvation lies with God**. This text tells us that it was with God that it all started. It was God who sent his Son, and he sent him because he loved men. At the back of everything is the love of God.
2. GOD IS PROMPTED BY LOVE. It tells us that the **mainspring of God's being is love**. The tremendous thing about this text is that it shows us God acting to satisfy his love. God does not smash men into submission; he yearns over them and woos them into love.
3. GOD HAS PERFECT LOVE. It tells us of the **width of the love of God**. It was *the world* that God so loved. It was not a nation; it was not the good people; it was not only the people who loved him; it was the world. The unlovable and the unlovely, the lonely who have no one else to love them, the man who loves God and the man who never thinks of him, the man who rests in the love of God and the man who spurns it—all are included in this vast inclusive love of God. As Augustine had it: "God loves each one of us as if there was only one of us to love<sup>8</sup>."

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<sup>7</sup> Drawn from comments written by Barclay, William, Daily Study Bible Series: The Gospel of John - Volume 1 Chapters 1-7 (Revised Edition), (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press) 2000, c1975.

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## Appendix

The healing power lay not in the brazen serpent; it was only a symbol to turn their thoughts to God; and when they did that they were healed. There is a wonderfully suggestive thing here. The verb *to lift up* is . The strange thing is that it is used of Jesus in two senses. It is used of his being *lifted up upon the Cross*; and it is used of his being *lifted up into glory* at the time of his ascension into heaven. It is used of the Cross in John 8:28; 12:32. It is used of Jesus' ascension into glory in Acts 2:33; 5:31; Philippians 2:9. There was a double lifting up in Jesus' life—the lifting on the Cross and the lifting into glory.

When<sup>9</sup> the serpent-bitten Israelites lifted up their eyes not simply to Moses' serpent of brass but to God Himself, who was extending mercy to those who would look to Him. Jesus drew Nicodemus a verbal portrait of the historical event His hearer's eyes were later to behold. He spoke of the Lamb of God's being "lifted up" as the serpent in bygone days had been "lifted up." This lifting up was done so that whoever looked by faith would live. And so Nicodemus was led to the center pole of the New Covenant, not now set in the intricacies of Levitical ceremonialism but forever hereafter grounded in the fact that eternal life would be found through the "look" of faith to the Lamb of God, who was made sin for us. "For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Travelers give remarkable<sup>10</sup> confirmation and illustrations of the number and poisonous character of the serpents in that district. One explorer wrote of this region: "The sand on the shore showed traces of snakes on every hand, stretching in every direction, many trails appeared to have been made by snakes, which could not have been less than two inches in diameter. My guide told me that snakes were very common in these regions." Another traveler on exactly the route of the children of Israel states: "In the afternoon a large and very mottled snake was brought to us, marked with *fiery* spots and spiral lines, which evidently belonged, from the formation of its teeth, to one of the most poisonous species. The Bedouins say that these snakes, of which they have great dread, are very numerous in this locality." From the fact that the brazen serpent is also called "*fiery*" (a *Saraph*), we infer that the expression describes rather the appearance of these "fire-snakes" than the effect of their bite.

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<sup>9</sup> Adapted from notes by McQuaid E. , *The Outpouring: Jesus in the Feasts of Israel*, (Bellmawr, New Jersey: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, Inc.) 1997.

<sup>10</sup> Edersheim, Alfred, *Bible History: Old Testament*, (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.) 1998.