

SERMON JOHN 3 THE POWER OF THE CROSS

June 2, 2024

Jesus was a people person; He was not one of those guys who stayed in the temple or office all day long; He liked to be out among the people. He was always open to discuss God with anybody and welcomed questions. In the third chapter of the Gospel of John, He has a visit one night from Nicodemus, one of the Jewish religious leaders. Now I have often referred to this visit as “Nick at Night.” The teachings of Jesus intrigued Nicodemus and he wanted to learn more. But because he was one of the leading Pharisees, he could not meet with Jesus in public. So, he sought a late-night private meeting with Jesus. Nicodemus was seeking a closer, more meaningful relationship with God. During their conversation, Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born again. Listen to this conversation as found in the third chapter of John, the first 21 verses.

Read John 3:1-21

Now many of us can recite John 3:16 by heart; in this one verse we have a summary of the Gospel and Jesus’ purpose here on earth. In addition, we could spend a lot of time discussing what “born again” means. Jimmy Carter was the first President to announce that he was a “born again” Christian. Since then, many politicians have said they were born again. One person said that because of this trend among political candidates, Christianity is getting a bad name! But this morning, I want us to focus on the 14th verse: “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life.” After Jesus told Nicodemus that he must be born again to enter the Kingdom of God, Jesus then shifted the conversation to how He would die and the purpose of His ministry here on earth.

As an illustration, Jesus recalled the story from the Old Testament found in Numbers 21:4-9. As Moses was leading the Israelites across the wilderness to the Promised Land, they became impatient because they didn’t think that Moses was taking the quickest and most direct route. Sounds a lot like your kids on a road trip, doesn’t it? You have heard it before: “Are we there yet; are we there yet!” They were second guessing Moses and complaining about the lack of water and the quality of the food that the Lord was providing. So, the Lord sent poisonous snakes among them and many of them died when they were bitten. As was their wishy-washy pattern, the Israelites quickly found religion again and asked God to take the snakes away. So, God told Moses to make a bronze snake and put it on a pole. Whenever an Israelite was bitten, they could look to the bronze snake and be healed.

The Israelites in this story from Numbers are in the pits, so to speak. Grumbling and complaining were items on their daily menu. Instead of looking up to God, they were looking

down at what was going on around them, focusing on their personal problems. From this point of view, they were upset, so they took it out on Moses, God's point man.

In reality, this is a journey of faith that all of us as the children of God are called to make in each and every generation, and each and every day. Who among us has not complained to and against God when things didn't go the way we planned. Who among us has not gotten impatient and upset with the events in our lives, our church or our country? This journey of faith through life can at times be a demanding and challenging pilgrimage. Sometimes we feel like things are going at a snail's pace. As a result, we get bogged down, and rather than respond with gratitude to God for His guidance and the many blessings that He bestows on us each day, we complain that nothing is happening. Let's be honest, in our world of modern technology, we are a people who can easily get bored and distracted these days.

If things are not always happening that are exciting and continually whetting our appetite for fun and excitement, then we pull up to the table of God's grace and say things like: "We don't like this stuff. We don't like the way things are going in our lives. We detest the miserable state of our lives and the church." We, like the Israelites, are more apt to look down at what is occurring around us rather than to look up to God for help. Thus, we find ourselves in the pits more often than not.

When the Israelites looked down, they not only found themselves in the pits, but they also found that they were not alone. God sent poisonous snakes that bit them and many died. Now did God really send snakes to bite the people as a result of their ingratitude? Would our God be so vindictive, so cruel as to punish the people for their lack of faith? The people came to Moses and were convinced that the infestation of the snakes was a direct consequence of their arrogance toward God.

But let's be sure of one thing; this is not a story about a vindictive God. This is the story of an arrogant people and a merciful God – a merciful and loving God; we must never forget that! God was not punishing the people for complaining. The complaining was a symptom of a much deeper problem – a distrust of God; the people refused to take God at His word that He would take care of them. To be saved they had to look at the bronze snake; in other words, they had to put their trust in God and His Word again. The gist of the story is this: whenever we are tempted to look down, to look around and complain about what is wrong in our lives, the church, and the country, God calls us to look up to Him. We are called to focus on God and trust in His empowering love and Word.

Do you see the correlation between the story from Numbers and Jesus' statement about it in the third chapter of John? Moses used something repulsive, unwanted and rejected such as a

poisonous snake to heal the people. And Jesus, unwanted and rejected by the world on the way to Calvary, healed us by being lifted up on a wooden cross.

The point of this illustration is that just as healing came to the snake-bitten Israelites by looking up at the bronze serpent hanging on a pole, so life is given to those who look up with eyes of faith upon the Son of God hanging on the cross. Just as God offered love, mercy, grace, and power to heal and save the Israelites, so today God through the life, death and resurrection of His Son Jesus Christ offers the same love, mercy, grace, and power to heal and save us. God did not choose a bronze artificial image this time, but rather an old rugged, despised cross on which His Son gave His life so that those who believe in Him can find forgiveness, healing, grace, and salvation.

Just as the Israelites had snakes back then in the wilderness, there are all kinds of snakes in our lives today. Of course, there are the real ones – rattlesnakes, copperheads, and water moccasins, but there are also those snakes that the master serpent the devil sends our way to bite us and suck the very life out of us. These are the snakes of drug addiction, abuse, greed, lust, selfishness, pride, jealousy, hatred, and gossip. I could go on and on, but you get the picture. The devil sends all of these snakes to crawl around in our lives and keep our attention and focus on the ground, looking down into the pit, and not where it should be, to God.

It has been said that the geographical center of London, England, is Charing Cross. It is in the form of a cross; you can find your way to anywhere in London if you are at Charing Cross. The story is told of a little boy who was lost. A bobby came along and wiped away the boy's tears. When he had calmed the little fella down, the bobby asked him: "Can I take you home, son?" To which the boy replied: "Oh, no, sir, just take me to the cross, and I'll find my way home." In the same way, when we are lost, feel discouraged and things are not going right, all we have to do is to look to the cross. Then we will be able to see clearly and have hope in our lives; we can find our way "home."

As Christians, we have the cross and the communion table. Thus, when life and all its demands crash in on us, we just need to go back to the Cross, and remember the empty tomb and call to mind the fact that Jesus is neither on the cross nor in the tomb, but He lives and He stands ready and able to give us victory over whatever we are going through at the time. So, by grace we come to the cross and to the communion table recognizing that this is our only true source of hope in this world.

Every one of us at some time gets down and feels like life is throwing us a high inside curve ball. Sometimes we are not satisfied with the way things are headed in our individual lives and our country. At times we feel snake bitten; that there are snakes and evil all around us. But my friends, there is hope and healing for us, and it is found in the Cross of Jesus Christ. There is

power in the cross, and we – like all those who have gone before us – must realize that the only way is the way of the cross. The real freedom for us and our country is found in the cross and the truth that it reveals to all believers. Don't go through life looking down; look up and behold the glory of the cross.

As we prepare to receive communion in a moment, consider these questions: Are you in the pits, always looking down? Are you dissatisfied with your life? Do you feel snake bitten? Is there something sucking the life out of you? If so, as you come forward to receive communion give it to the Lord. As you receive the elements look up at the cross on the communion table – the symbol of our salvation, hope and future. Take a moment as you take the bread and the cup, and thank God for His amazing gift of grace, mercy, hope, and the healing power that He has given us. There is truly power in the cross! Amen