

The Serpent and The Savior
John 3:1-16 & Numbers 21:4-9

Introduction

When I was hired at Sixth Street, Pastor Matt had me stand and tell the church a little about myself and my convictions. That morning, I said that if those students stuck around me for any length of time, they would hear the gospel often. It is simply something I don't believe we can or should ever stray away from.

The gospel is of utmost importance. To the believer, it is a reminder of the grace and mercy God extended to you when you were at your absolute worst. It is the catalyst that should drive you out into a dark and dying world with the light of life held out in an open hand. It is the occasion that should lead you to worship God joyfully, not just on Sunday, but every day of the week. To the unbeliever, the one still bound under the curse of sin that we'll be seeing this morning, the gospel is the proclamation that the king has come to set the captives free. It is the good news that redemption is available. It is the, frankly, incomprehensible offer of grace and mercy from a God who has every right to instead deal out justice and judgment.

This week, we will continue our series The Cross by beginning in the gospel of John and, then we'll move to the book of Numbers in the Old Testament. Maybe you, like others, are wondering where the cross and salvation can be found in Numbers. We know there are some prophecies in Isaiah and such, sure, but Numbers? Way back near Genesis? Surely the cross wasn't spoken of back then. Multiple times, however, Jesus made it clear that all Scripture points to Him. In John 5, Jesus told his listeners, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me..." In Luke's Gospel, when Jesus met two disciples

on the road to Emmaus, just after his resurrection, Luke records that “beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted for them the things concerning himself in all the Scriptures.” All Scripture is about Jesus. Every part of the Bible points us to the cross. So this morning, we will see how Jesus uses an incident from Israel’s history to explain the gospel to a Pharisee named Nicodemus, and we will further examine what we should take away from this encounter. Our main idea is this: **Because God is just, our sin brings us under a curse of death. Because God is merciful, He provides a means of redemption from the curse.**

1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 2 This man came to Jesus[a] by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” 3 Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again[b] he cannot see the kingdom of God.” (John 3:1-3)

I want to use John 3 as our background this morning, to get our minds moving in the right direction. Here we see the famous meeting between Jesus and the Pharisee, Nicodemus. There are quite a few important things we can gather from this meeting, one of which is our first point this morning.

You Must Be Born Again to See the Kingdom of God

Nicodemus approaches Jesus at night. Scripture doesn’t tell us if Nicodemus arranged a meeting or if he just made his way to where he knew Jesus would be, but it’s clear that he is interested in knowing more about Jesus and what he is teaching. However, he has to approach Jesus under cover of darkness because Jesus is unpopular with the Pharisees, having just driven everyone out of the temple courtyard during Passover.

Nicodemus begins the meeting by telling Jesus he knows that he is a teacher from God, because no one could do the things he is doing unless God were with him. Now, at first glance, it seems that Jesus' response in verse 3 is disconnected from Nicodemus' statement. I believe that what we see in these verses is the great importance of the gospel. Jesus ignores the niceties that Nicodemus opens the conversation with in order to cut to the heart of the matter: The state of Nicodemus' soul. In response to Nicodemus, Jesus in verse 3 states, "Truly I tell you, unless someone is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." The manner of this conversation indicates the gravity of this one statement. Jesus brushes past Nicodemus' praise to communicate this truth. The rest of Jesus' conversation with this leader of the Pharisees will revolve around this truth: Unless someone is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Nicodemus has some questions. How is this possible? How can a man be born a second time? In verses 5-8, Jesus further testifies to Nicodemus about the necessity of being born again, but Nicodemus still doesn't understand. He doesn't understand what Jesus means. He doesn't understand Jesus' purpose on earth. He keeps pressing Jesus for more and more and finally, in verse 12, Jesus effectively tells Nicodemus that he seems to have come as far as he can by way of explanation. "If I have told you about earthly things and you don't believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?" Jesus asks. So what does Jesus do with Nicodemus now? Does he leave him to wrestle with questions and concepts that he clearly doesn't grasp? "Well, Nicodemus, I don't really have anything else to say to you right now. Come back when you're born again and I'll finish explaining." No. Jesus doesn't

abandon Nicodemus. We've seen already and we know from Jesus' ministry that this is the truth he came to proclaim: Unless someone is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. We know from his early interaction with Nicodemus that he considers this important enough to blow off the greeting of a leading Pharisee. And so Jesus does not abandon Nicodemus, but turns to an example Nicodemus would have been intimately familiar with in order to help him understand.

In verses 14 and 15, Jesus says, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." Jesus points to this moment in Israel's history, to this foreshadowing of the cross in the Old Testament, in order to demonstrate both *why* man must be born again and *how* man can be born again. These are the questions we will examine this morning. Keeping in mind our first point, that unless one is born again, he or she cannot see the kingdom of heaven, *why* and *how* must we be born again?

The *why* brings us to our second point this morning.

The Curse of Sin is Death

Turn with me to Numbers 21 in your Bibles. When Jesus referenced the serpent Moses lifted up in the desert, he knew that Nicodemus would immediately know what he was talking about. Nicodemus' life's work was to study, memorize, and teach from the Jewish Scriptures. Let's look together at the incident Jesus wanted Nicodemus to remember.

4 From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. 5 And the people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food." 6 Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. (Numbers 21:4-6)

Some background: Israel is doing what Israel always seems to do. They are complaining, grumbling, moaning about how terrible everything is. They're complaining about the food, complaining about the lack of water, complaining about the direction Moses is taking them. Sounds a lot like us, doesn't it? Israel has done this over and over during their journey through the desert, and they have seen both mercy and judgment from God. Israel complained about food and God delivered manna from heaven. Israel rebelled against God and Moses by building an idol to worship while Moses was on Mount Sinai, and God relented from his decision to destroy them all and start over with Moses. Just a few chapters prior to this one, Israel finally arrived at the border of Canaan, but they refused to go in. We know Israel wandered the desert for 40 years, but did you know they didn't have to? They arrived at Canaan much earlier, but when the scouts who spied out the land brought back reports of giants, the people of Israel lost their faith in God's promise to give them the land and instead rebelled, saying it would have been better if they had died in the desert. And so, in righteous judgment, God granted them what they wished for. He declared that none of that generation of Israel would enter the promised land, and that they would instead wander the desert until all of them had died.

And here we are with the Israelites rebelling yet again, complaining about lack of food and the long journey Moses is taking them on. Verse 6 tells us that, in response, God sent poisonous snakes among the Israelites. Many were bitten, Scripture tells us,

and many died. Some people might read this and think, “Wow, God is really overreacting. It was just some complaining. No need for all of this, God.” But we must understand that the problem here is much deeper than complaining. The great problem in Numbers 21 is the same problem that we encounter today: the sin nature that lives inside of us. It’s the sin nature that leads us to rebel against God. In complaining about the lack of food and water, Israel is challenging God’s love for and provision for His people. In complaining against Moses, Israel is challenging God’s chosen and appointed leader and, thus, God himself. In the Garden of Eden, sin entered the world when Adam and Eve began to question God’s motives and goodness; when they set their own judgment in opposition to His and determined that they knew better. Israel now repeats that same pattern, questioning God’s motives, accusing Him of rescuing them from Israel just so he could kill them in the desert. Israel has once again set herself in open rebellion against God and the consequences are severe. Romans 6:23 tells us that the consequence of sin is death. In this instance, death came to the Israelites in the form of poisonous snakes. Imagine the terror and fear that must have spread through the Israelite camp. Imagine the Israelites seeing family and friends bitten and knowing that death will follow shortly. Numbers tells us that many Israelites died. And here’s the important thing for us to recognize this morning: This is right. This is just. God is completely within his rights to execute this terrible judgment.

Let’s return to one of our original questions. Why must we be born again to see the kingdom of God? Because we are originally born under the curse of sin and its natural consequence is death, both physical and spiritual. Everyone in this room was born under the curse of sin. It comes naturally to us. If you have or have had children,

you know this is true. No one has to teach children how to lie. No one has to teach children to be disobedient. It comes naturally. Let me repeat: Everyone in this room was born under the curse of sin. And as a consequence of that, everyone in this room was born condemned to death, both physical and spiritual.

There are many people who feel, maybe like some of us felt about God sending poisonous snakes among the Israelites, that this is a little extreme. We ask ourselves, “Does a little white lie really deserve death? Does that very brief lustful thought about that man or woman really deserve death?” I suggest to you that we’re asking the wrong questions. The better question is “Does treason deserve death?” And the answer is a resounding yes.

This is what sin makes of us, church. Sin makes us traitors to the king of all the universe. Throughout history, man has always understood treason to be an incredibly serious offense almost always punishable by death. Think back to your history classes, to the Middle Ages when Europe was ruled by kings, and remember how any act of treason against the king resulted in public execution. Remember names like Benedict Arnold, who was fortunate to escape with his life after committing treason against the United States. In the epic Dante’s *Inferno*, Dante imagines that Hell is separated into nine levels, each for a different class of sinner and worsening as the levels progress deeper. There are many things wrong with this idea, but it is interesting to note that the deepest circle of hell in *Inferno* contains people such as Cain, Brutus, and Judas: traitors. Even today, treason is one of the 41 capital offenses recognized by the United States. Church, sin makes us traitors to the king who is owed our allegiance and if treason against an earthly king deserves punishment by death, how much more does

treason to the King of all creation deserve death? We have no excuse and we have no defense. We have set ourselves in open rebellion and treason against the very King who breathed life into us. We have taken up arms against the One we owe our allegiance to and the right, fair, and just consequence is death. This is the depth at which we find ourselves and, fortunately for us, this is where God, in a shocking, scandalous, incomprehensible move, displays His infinite mercy.

God Provides an Escape from the Curse

Let's return to Israel. Remember, many Israelites are suffering and dying, rightfully so, as a consequence of their sin. Then in verse 7, we see that, as it often does in the history of Israel, God's judgment leads to repentance. Read with me:

7 And the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. 8 And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live." 9 So Moses made a bronze[c] serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live. (Numbers 21:7-9)

The people of Israel approach Moses and acknowledge their sin, asking Moses to intercede before God on their behalf. "We have sinned against the Lord and against you," they cry out. This is a step in the process of redemption that cannot be missed. We cannot hope for God to remove his wrath from us and deliver us from the consequences of our sin if we do not first repent of that sin. The Israelites, faced with the understanding that they have sinned against God and Moses, acknowledge it and resolve to turn away from their previous sinful behavior. And as Moses intercedes for Israel, asking God to remove the curse He has set upon them, God demonstrates His

mercy by providing a means of escape from the death that has come. In response to Moses' intercession, God gives Moses directions to make an image of a snake from bronze and mount it on a pole high above the Israelite camp. He then instructs Moses that any Israelite bitten by the snakes need only look at the bronze serpent and he or she will live.

You may ask again, "How is this merciful? For God to provide relief from the snakes that He Himself set upon Israel?" The mercy is in the fact that all Israel did not die. Remember that every single Israelite was under the curse of sin and, therefore, every single Israelite justly deserved death. That most of Israel was spared was mercy on God's part.

There are a few things for us to notice from this bronze serpent before we move on. First, notice that the bronze serpent is not preventative. It is not to keep people from being bitten; it is for people who already have the poison in their veins. Second, notice that God used a picture of the curse as the means of rescue from the curse. In order to be cured of the deadly snakebite he had received, an Israelite had to look upon an image of the very thing that had delivered the poison. And third, notice that the Israelites had to physically look upon the serpent. In order to be cured, an Israelite had to demonstrate his or her faith in God's promise of healing. All these things, while certainly meant to instruct and rescue the people of Israel, God also orchestrated to foreshadow a much greater moment in history.¹

¹ Credit to Danny Akin for these examples.

Christ is Our Means of Redemption

Return with me now to John 3. Remember that Jesus is explaining to Nicodemus his purpose in coming to Earth.

*And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, **15** that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. **16** “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*

If you recall, our first question today was “*Why?*” Why do we need to be born again to see the kingdom of heaven. As we have already seen, we need to be born again because our first birth placed us under the curse of sin and our sin makes us traitors to the King of Kings. This is our greatest need and it is critical that you understand it this morning, because we can never truly understand our need until we truly understand our problem. As long as we convince ourselves that we’re good people and that has to count for something, as long as we tell ourselves that we don’t commit all the sins *those people* do, we will continue to believe in our own righteousness. We have to confront our own treason and our own death sentence before we can accept our need for a Savior.

Our second question, then, echoes that of Nicodemus: “*How?*” How can a person be born again? How can a person be rescued from the curse? And it is here that Jesus makes plain He is the rescue from the curse. By pointing Nicodemus to the incident recorded in Numbers, he takes the characteristics of the bronze serpent and maps them onto Himself.

Just as the serpent was lifted up for people with snake venom in their veins, so Jesus was lifted up for people with the curse of sin in their hearts. In Matthew, Jesus

states, "It is not those who are well who need a doctor, but those who are sick...I didn't come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Just as the Israelites looked upon the image of their curse to be saved from it, so we look to the image of our curse to be redeemed. 2 Corinthians 5:21 reads, "He made the one who did not know sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Jesus, as he hung on the cross, bore the full weight of the wrath of God toward sin. Every cut, every lash from the whip, every crushed nerve and torn muscle, every hole driven through tendon and bone by nails, every drop of blood spilled on the ground, every insult, every moment of shame, every second straining upward for one last breath, to hold off suffocation just one second longer, should have been yours. It should have been mine. Jesus on the cross is the very image of what awaits those who do not repent of their sin. It is the very image of the curse sin places upon us, the curse of God's wrath that leads to physical and spiritual death. And it is the very thing we look to for redemption.

Just as the Israelites had to look upon the serpent in faith that God would honor His promise, so we are redeemed from the curse by placing our faith and trust in Christ. Galatians 2:16 tells us that "we know a person is not justified by works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ..." As far as we see from Scripture, the Israelites had no method among them for curing the snakebites. No work they could conceive could prevent death once someone had been bitten. In the same manner, doing good things cannot save you from spiritual death. Coming to church every Sunday cannot save you. Singing worship songs cannot save you. Giving to charity, picketing abortion clinics, saluting the American flag, rescuing stray animals, or avoiding alcohol and R-

rated movies cannot save you. We so often seek refuge in the fact that we are “good people,” but our goodness cannot save us. Jesus told the rich young ruler that no one is good except God alone. Scripture tells us that our righteousness, all the things we do that we think make us better than others, is like filthy, used rags covered in blood and waste before God, and filthy rags cannot save us. We try to inherit our faith from our parents, believing that being raised in a Christian home makes us Christians. But nothing short of repentance and faith in Christ can save us. This is the answer to Nicodemus’ question. This is the answer to “*How?*” Just as the Israelites looked upon the serpent in faith, so we must look upon Christ in faith to be redeemed from the curse.

This is Jesus’ summary of the gospel for Nicodemus: “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. For God loved the world in this way: He gave His one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life.”

Conclusion

So what do we do with this information this morning? Five years wandering in my own desert as a teacher taught me to always end a lesson with takeaways. What was the purpose of learning this? What do we do now?

There are two classes of people in this world: Christ-followers and unbelievers. Those who have repented of sin and placed their faith in Christ, and those who have not. If you are a Christ-follower this morning, what do you do with the message of the gospel? You remember it. You rejoice in it. You preach it to yourself daily and you let it

move you to worship the God who redeemed you. Not the way we so often approach worship in our churches, where we find ourselves disconnected or dissatisfied, as if it were about us. Not the way we get distracted by all the things we have to do later or the stuff that happened yesterday or what the person across the aisle from me is doing. True focus on God's redemption, true focus on the gospel of Jesus Christ, moves the believer to genuine worship that has eyes for nothing and no one except the One who saved her soul. Christian, allow the gospel to move in your heart in this way and then you spread the message of redemption to others.

If you are an unbeliever this morning, if you've never repented of your sin, never placed your faith in Christ and really, truly committed your life into His hands, what do you do with the message of the Gospel? You respond to it. I pray that you understand what a severely dangerous situation you find yourself in. The Israelites' treason led to physical death, but the spiritual death that sin ultimately leads to, eternal separation from God in Hell, is infinitely worse than death from a snakebite. Statistically, one out of every one people will die. There is no escape from that reality and, if you die without gazing upon God's means of redemption, repenting of your sin, and surrendering your life to Christ, eternal spiritual death awaits. The good news of the gospel, however, is that Christ stands ready, now, this minute, to redeem the unbeliever and to rescue from the curse of sin. We've addressed the why. We've addressed the how. Now all that remains is for the unbeliever to respond in faith, repent of sin, and trust in God's promise of redemption. Interestingly, the next time we see Nicodemus, he is helping prepare Jesus' body for burial. Evidently, he understood and responded to Jesus' presentation of the gospel. I pray you do the same.