

INTRODUCTION

A teenage preacher was filling in for his pastor in a little country church. The pastor had surgery and was going to miss a month, so the congregation asked the teen to fill in. He had never preached before. On that first Sunday he was extremely nervous. His knees weren't just knocking, they were passing each other.

He got up and said, "Does anybody know what I'm going to talk about today? Nobody raised their hands, so he said, "Well, neither do I, church is dismissed."

The next Sunday he was still nervous and started the same way. "Does anybody here know what I'm going to say today?" This time the members decided to use a different tactic, so everyone raised their hands. The preacher said, "Good, since you already know then I don't have you tell you. Church dismissed." The next Sunday there was a large crowd because word had spread about the young preacher's strange behavior. He was more nervous than ever. He asked, "Does anybody know what I'm going to say today?" This time some of the people raised their hands and others didn't. The preacher said, "Great! Those of you who know please tell those who don't know. Church dismissed."

That's a funny story, but I like that last line. "Those of you who know, please tell those who don't know." That's a great definition of evangelism. Those of us who know the Lord should be telling those who don't know the Lord.

This is the second message in John chapter 3 which is one of the most evangelistic chapters in the Bible. In the last message we met Nicodemus, who came to Jesus at night. Nic at night. Nick was an important religious leader. To us, he would be like a combination of a U.S. Senator and a Supreme Court Judge. But Jesus said, "Nick, religion won't get you into heaven. You MUST be born again." We learned that if you are born once, physically, you'll die twice; you'll die physically, then you will suffer the second death of God's judgement against the lost. But if you're born twice, you'll only die once, physically, and you will have eternal life. Born once—die twice. Born twice—die once.

We stopped our study in the middle of the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. And we can pick up the conversation in John 3:14-15. Jesus refers to an unusual Old Testament event to illustrate what it means to be born again. He said, "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."

Some of you are familiar with this fascinating episode from Moses' life, but in case you don't remember the details, let's read about it in Numbers 21:5-9. The setting is in the desert where the Children of Israel have been wandering for almost forty years. Their favorite pastime was grumbling and criticizing God and Moses.

Numbers 21:5. "The people spoke against God and Moses: 'Why have you led us up from Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread or water, and we detest this wretched

food!*" Then the Lord sent poisonous snakes among the people, and they bit them so that many Israelites died. The people then came to Moses and said, 'We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you. Intercede with the Lord so that he will take the snakes away from us.' And Moses interceded for the people. Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Make a snake image and mount it on a pole. When anyone who is bitten looks at it, he will recover.' So Moses made a bronze snake and mounted it on a pole. Whenever someone was bitten, and he looked at the bronze snake, he recovered."

*That was the manna God provided for them.

A snake coiled around a pole is still used as a symbol for medical care and pharmacies. Sometimes there are two snakes wrapped around a pole. This is called the Rod of Asclepius. Asclepius was a Greek god of healing, and used a rod with a snake coiled around it. But many scholars believe the roots behind the symbol go all the way back to Moses in the desert.

This snake story might have remained one of many obscure Old Testament stories, but Jesus gave it a prominent standing when he mentioned it to Nicodemus. Jesus said there is connection between what Moses did with that snake on a stick and what would happen when He was lifted up on the cross. It was a salvation lesson for Nicodemus, it is also a salvation lesson for us. So let's learn four practical lessons about salvation.

1. AS SINNERS, WE ARE UNDER THE CURSE OF DEATH.

The Israelites were a bunch of whiners. As you read Numbers you see they were constantly grumbling against God and against Moses. They kept longing for the good old days back in Egypt when they were slaves. The good old days are never as good and we remember them to be. There was no food in the desert, so God had provided manna for them for decades and now they were complaining about the manna.

Keith Green wrote a funny song about this entitled, "So You Wanna Go Back to Egypt?" Part of the lyrics say: "You wanted to live in the land of promise, but now it's getting so hard. Are you sorry you're out here in the desert, instead of your own backyard? Eating leeks and onions by the Nile. Ooh what breath, but dining out in style. Ooh, my life's on the skids, give me the pyramids. Well there's nothing to do but travel, and we sure do travel a lot. Cause it's hard to keep your feet from moving when the sand gets so hot. And in the morning it's manna hotcakes. We snack on manna all day. And they sure had a winner last night for dinner, Flaming manna soufflé. Well we once complained for something new to munch. The ground opened up and had some of us for lunch. Ooh, such fire and smoke. Can't God even take a joke? Huh? No!"

So once again, we see them grumbling and this time God sends poisonous snakes into the camp. People started getting bitten and they started dying. Now, at about this time, you're supposed to be scratching your head and asking, "What kind of God kills people for complaining and grumbling?" Their negative attitude was only the outward symptom of a deeper, root sin of UNBELIEF. Years earlier at Kadesh Barnea they had expressed their unbelief

by saying that God couldn't give them victory over the giants in the land. Since then, they had been wandering in the desert of discontent.

There are a lot of people today who have been snake-bitten with a spirit of dissatisfaction. Social media sites have given us a platform where we can sit alone and gripe, complain, and criticize to our heart's discontent and never have to confront the people who are the targets of our dissatisfaction. Let's take a test. Where would you place yourself on a satisfaction scale? At one extreme you have the attitude of constant complaining at one end of the spectrum and cheerful contentment on the other end? So where are you on that scale? What if I asked your spouse or your children, or your coworkers where they see you on that scale?

The Bible says godliness with contentment is great gain. And remember when Paul wrote in Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me", he wasn't talking about winning a football game, or getting a job, he was talking about Jesus giving him the power to be cheerfully content even when he was in prison.

There is a direct correlation between sin and death. James gives us the steps of the deadly spiral of sin. "But each person is tempted when he is drawn away and enticed by his own evil desire. Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and when sin is fully grown, it gives birth to death." (James 1:14-15 CSB)

So, the truth about us is that we have all been snake-bitten by the sin of unbelief. The deadly venom of unbelief is coursing through our veins and if it remains untreated by a cure, it will ultimately lead to our eternal death. Here's the second lesson we learn from this episode.

2. IN HIS GRACE, GOD HAS PROVIDED A CURE.

As people were getting bitten by the swarm of snakes in the camp, they started dying. They probably tried fighting away the snakes, but there were just too many of them. The snakes were everywhere. They were dropping like flies. So finally the people recognized their sin and repented. They went to Moses and they didn't blame him or God, they said, "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you. Intercede with the Lord so that he will take the snakes away from us." So even though Moses was tired of these complaining people, he prayed to the Lord on their behalf.

I'm sure the people wanted God to take away the snakes. But He didn't remove the snakes, He did something better. Sometimes we want God to take away the pain, but He is going to do something bigger and better in us. God gave them a cure that would be so powerful, it would not only heal them from their snakebites, but it would serve as a powerful symbol of salvation for thousands of years.

Here is one of the best examples of God's grace in the Old Testament. These people who had a proven track record of rebellion, unbelief, and nagging didn't deserve a cure. But because it is God's nature, God graciously provided a means for healing. He had Moses make a brass snake and put it on a pole. Then God said, "Whoever looks at the serpent will be healed."

Like the Israelites, before we can find God's cure for sin we must REPENT. We must admit that we have sinned, and seek God and trust ourselves to His cure. None of us deserve forgiveness, but that's what grace is. It is God giving me what I need rather than what I deserve. The Bible says, "But God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8 CSB)

Jesus told Nicodemus that the brass snake Moses lifted up is a symbol of who He is and what He would do on the cross. Now think about it. If someone dared compare Mohammed to a snake, they would be charged with blasphemy. You don't like it when someone calls you a snake in the grass. But Jesus self-identifies with that brass serpent. Why? Because the serpent is a symbol of sin. Satan slithered into the Garden to tempt Eve. And on the cross, an amazing transference took place. "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Corinthians 5:21 NIV) On the cross, Jesus took the near-fatal strike of the serpent on His heel, but at the same time Jesus crushed the head of the snake.

3. GOD'S CURE MUST BE LIFTED UP.

God told Moses to make an image of a snake, the one thing that was the source of so much death, and to put it on a pole and lift it up high enough so that everyone who had been bitten could look at it and live.

In other words, this wasn't some magical secret that was to be passed from person to person with some kind of fraternity secret handshake or something. God wanted EVERYONE to be able to look and to live.

That's what Jesus meant when He spoke of being lifted up. He was predicting to Nicodemus that He would be lifted up on a cross. Jesus made another reference to it in John 8. Jesus said to them, "When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own. But just as the Father taught me, I say these things." (John 8:28 CSB) In John 12:32 Jesus said, "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men unto me."

But this lifting up wasn't confined to the cross. In Acts and in the Epistles, we read that Jesus was lifted up in other ways. After His death and burial He was lifted up from the grave. Then after forty days of appearing to the disciples after the resurrection Jesus was lifted up to the Throne in Heaven. And the Bible says God has highly exalted Him—lifted Him up—and given Him a name that is above every name.

And we must lift high the cross of Jesus to a lost and dying world. We all must lift up the saving message of Jesus with our testimony. We live in a world where billions of people are still suffering from the snakebite of sin. We must lift up the cure.

Michael Card is a gifted singer, songwriter, and theologian. Years ago he wrote a song about this experience with the snakes and the cure. The song was entitled "Lift Up the Suffering Symbol." Some of the lyrics say: "They grew tired of bread from heaven; And of Moses and of

God; And longed to live the life of slavery once again; So they muttered and they grumbled; And they whimpered and they whined; With each faithless word, sank deeper into sin." Then Michael sings about how the deadly snakes decimated the people. His last verse says: "So Moses made a metal snake, And nailed it to a pole; Sent out the saving word so they would know; That the symbol of their suffering was now the focus of their faith; And with a faithful glance, the healing power would flow." Then the chorus goes: "Lift up the suffering symbol; And place it high upon a pole; Tell the children to look up and be made whole."

For those of us who have been saved, our job is to lift up the cure for those who don't know about God's healing gift of eternal life.

The main take-away from this message is simple:

4. WE ONLY HAVE TO LOOK TO THE CROSS AND BELIEVE TO HAVE LIFE.

Listen again to the words of Jesus. "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." (John 3:14-15 CSB) The snake-bitten Israelites were given healing and physical life—but they all died afterward. Jesus promises that to all who look to the cross and believe we will have eternal life.

What a simple solution! God didn't say, "Bow down before the snake!" He didn't say, "Bring an offering to the snake!" "Bring a sacrifice to the snake!" All God said was "Look at the snake!" I am sure Moses lifted that snake on a pole tall enough that wherever you were in the Israelite camp, you could look over and see that snake on a pole and all they had to do was look and live!

I want to finish by doing something a little unusual. Let's step into a time machine and go back 3,500 years ago to this scene described in Numbers 21. As we arrive we walk into the camp of the Israelites. There are thousands of slithering snakes biting people. We are going to meet some snake-bitten people who will remind you of some of your East Texas neighbors.

For instance here's a man who has just been bitten by a snake and you walk up to him and say, "Hey. I see you have been bitten. Don't you know that there is a cure? Moses has put a snake on a pole and if you will look at that snake, you can be healed!" The man says, "Well, yeah! I'm bitten. But you know what? I'm not bitten any worse than anybody else around me. In fact you have folks down there at your church who are bitten worse than I am. I don't believe any of that this venom will kill me!" Did you know there are a lot of people who will never come to Jesus Christ because they say, "I'm no worse than anybody else!"

Then, we approach another guy who still has a snake attached to his arm. You say, "I see you have been bitten. You have a problem there!" He says, "Yeah. I have a problem. I admit it but you know what? I'm just going to shake this thing off myself. I've been able to handle every other problem in my life and I think I can handle this one too." There are a lot of people today who, when they experience sin in their lives and they realize they are a sinner, they say, "Well, I'm just going to do better! I'm going to improve myself!" That guy would die.

Then you lift the flap to look inside one of the tents. There is a snake-bitten man reclining on a mat. His leg is already bruised and swelling. His wife has rushes into the tent and she says, "Sweetheart! Sweetheart! I know you have been bitten, but, sweetheart, I have good news for you! There is a cure! There is a way you can be healed! Moses put a snake on a pole and God said, "All you have to do is look at it!" Honey, let me pull you over here to the opening in the tent. I want you to just look at that snake. If you will just look at that snake and believe God, you will be healed!" That man says to his wife "Are you talking about the snake on the pole theory? That old myth? Would you explain to me rationally how looking at a bronze snake on a pole could improve my condition! That's just foolishness." She says, "I can't explain it but just look and live!" The man says, "I'll have none of that superstitious mess!" 1 Corinthians 1:18 says, "For the preaching of the cross is foolishness to those that perish."

Then we stand beside a wife and mother named Rachel as she piles stones on the grave of her husband who died from a snakebite. She hears a cry and she looks and there's her 11-year-old boy, Joseph. He has just been bitten by a snake! She says, "Oh, Joseph! Joseph! Not you too." Already his temples are beginning to pulse and his leg is beginning to swell. Rachel takes him up in her arms and she rushes him to her tent and lays him down and gently takes a wet, moist cloth and wipes his forehead. "Oh, no, Joseph! Not you!"

Then we watch as a man comes to the door of the tent and says, "Listen! Rachel, there's a cure! There's a cure! Moses put a snake on a pole and if you just look at it and believe God, you'll be healed!" Rachel looks at him with hope mixed with skepticism. She asks, "How can you know for certain the cure will work?" The man holds out his arm and show her the healed scars of two puncture marks and says, "I know it works because I was bitten and I was dying, and now I'm healed!"

Every one of us ought to be proof of the evidence of changed lives. So, the mother picks up her little boy and carries him over to the door of the tent and says, "There it is, honey. Look just look!" and the little boy looks at the snake in the distance and when he looks I can't explain it to you, but it happened! But he looked and believed God and immediately the swelling goes down! The color goes back into his skin and before long he is running around happy, healed and delivered. That's exactly what happened to us! Whatever age you came to know Jesus Christ, all you had to do was look at the cross of the Lord Jesus and believe God. Immediately from the inside God brought about a spiritual healing. Just look to the cross and live!

CONCLUSION

One final footnote. So what did the Israelites do with that snake on a pole? They kept it. They carried it with them when they entered the Promised Land. It was still around almost 800 years later when Hezekiah was the king. But instead of a saving snake, it had become a sacred cow. The Israelites were worshipping the symbol, which is idolatry. We're told in 2 Kings 18 that King Hezekiah destroyed it because people had been burning incense to it. They were worshipping the symbol instead of the substance.

There's a final lesson here. It is okay to wear a cross or to look at a crucifix, but don't ever make the mistake of worshipping the cross, or a crucifix. Remember, they are the symbols, but it is the King of King and Lord of Lords, Jesus that we worship. Because He alone deserves all the glory and the praise.

Look and live. It's all about a look. Think about the power of a look. Our problem began with a look. Eve looked at the fruit in the Garden and saw that it was good for food. That was the look that got us in this condition. But then God said through Isaiah, "Look unto me and be saved all the ends of the earth." Then as we run the race of the Christian life, we are looking until Jesus the author and finisher of our faith. And we are looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let's keep on looking and living!

OUTLINE

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For the Joy...
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