

Snakes and Salvation

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Preacher: Pastor Kenoyer

[0 : 00] I suppose one of the responsibilities that rests on me, and I am a preacher by God's appointment,! One of the responsibilities that rests on me is to make clear what preaching is.

! And so before we actually look at the passage, what I want you to turn in your Bible to 1 Corinthians 2. I am going to, by the enabling of the Spirit I trust in your prayer and my prayer, and relying upon the Word of God, I'm going to preach the Word, but I do want you to know what preaching is. I want you to remember that.

1 Corinthians 2, let me read the passage. It says, And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom.

For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling.

Now the next part. And my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and in power.

[1 : 37] Now listen carefully. I cannot guarantee that today I can preach with the power of the Spirit. Do you understand that? He chooses to do as he sees fit.

But it is my prayer. I trust it's your prayer. And we are desperately dependent upon the enabling of the Spirit of God in preaching the Word.

And you have a responsibility to engage in that task. Amen? With prayer. Amen. John chapter 3, verse 9 through 15.

You who know me know that I'm given to hyperbole.

That means exaggeration a little bit when it comes to the matter of preaching. And I have to tell you that there are many Sundays or there are many weeks in the process of studying that I will at one point or another say to the rest of the staff, Man, this is a phenomenal text.

[2 : 48] This is excellent. And there are just times where my heart, when I'm bubbling in the office, it's like I cannot, I'm an emotional person, just, you know, don't know me. I am. That's the way I am. Hardwired.

And it just kind of comes out of me and it's like, Oh, man, that's good. And then I've got to wait until Sunday. I mean, it's hard.

But I've got to tell you, this is one of the best passages. It really is. And this morning, what we are going to see in our study in John chapter 3, beginning there in verse 9, is the man who had come to Jesus kind of trying to understand.

He had a spiritual emptiness. And so Nicodemus came to Jesus by night and he said, Hey, talk to me about the kingdom. And Jesus really cuts to the chase and nails him, right?

And then Jesus, as we will find in this passage, opens up and he answers the simple question, So how does a person get saved? How does a person get saved?

[4 : 04] And I have to tell you, there are some of you sitting here today that are not saved. There are some of you that are sitting here today. I don't know where you are spiritually.

And some of you may have made a variety of different professions. You said certain prayers or whatever. But really, there is no evidence of a life's transforming power that is a mark of the work of God.

And without question, one of the ambitions of a pastor's heart is to bring the gospel with clarity and simplicity and to do so with the enabling of the Spirit of God so that people who are struggling in the dark hopelessness of their sin would be drawn to the Lord Jesus Christ.

As we look at John 3, verse 9, let me begin by tracking the passage with you there in verse 9.

Nicodemus said to him, How can these things be? And Jesus answered him, Are you the teacher of Israel?

And yet you do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony.

[5 : 17] If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ever ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whosoever believes in him may have eternal life.

Will you join me in prayer? Father God, it is our privilege this morning to gather freely and to gather with just an unbelievable comfort in the practical, physical issues.

But more importantly, we gather because of the work of your grace. You're the one who in so many of our lives, first of all, gave us that deep abiding sense of guilt and shame and led us by conviction to the foot of the cross where looking up we saw the Lord Jesus who had died in our place and we understood that we, justly condemned, had no hope except in him.

And you in your infinite mercy and love were willing to sacrifice your own Son to be the full payment for our sins. And we believed and have everlasting life.

[6 : 38] And you have taken us from being idolaters and pagans to being worshipers of the one true God. And as we study the Scriptures this morning, we want our hearts to be filled, to be joyful, to be encouraged.

And we pray, Lord, that those that are here today that do not know Christ will be drawn by your grace to know complete forgiveness for all of their sins because of what Christ has done and to trust him as their Lord and Savior.

And we're dependent upon you to do a great work today in the preaching of your Word. And it's application in the life of people. And we ask this in Jesus' name.

Well, as we move our way through this text, let me kind of break it down and explain that the first part is actually going to be some background, and there's a reason for that. I think it's always important for us when we are studying Scripture to take the time to get the frame around which the lesson sits.

And if this is a superbly, supremely important lesson, and it is, it's always very important to take some time to get our hands around, okay, where is the passage set?

[7 : 53] And so, as we look this morning, we're going to look, first of all, at the fact that salvation is the supernatural work of God. And that is actually what chapter 3, verse 1 through 8 is all about.

You'll remember that in John chapter 1, or John chapter 3, verse 1 through 3, we have the account of Nicodemus coming to Jesus by night, and he comes with some spiritual concern.

Evidently, there was a prompting of the Spirit to recognize a vacancy, an emptiness, and there was nothing that he could really fill it with. He was a supremely accomplished leader of the Jews.

He was a man who understood the Old Testament completely, and yet, despite all this, he had it all together on the outside. Inside, there was an emptiness. And so, we find here that he comes, and one of the things that we understand is that he makes it clear that the religion of self-help will really never offer lasting spiritual comfort.

And that's what Nicodemus does at the very beginning. He comes, and he says, hey, listen, let me ask you about the kingdom. And despite the fact that he was on the Sanhedrin, he was a Pharisee, he was the top teacher, or one of them anyway, here he comes to Jesus, and he says, listen, I need to understand a little bit more.

[9 : 16] And we read in verse 3 that true conversion is more than improved behavior. Hey, we've all decided on one occasion or another that we need to do something to clean up the mess.

Haven't we? We've all looked at the ugliness of what's going on in our life, and we may on occasion kind of excuse the fact that we're not as bad as some of the other people we know, but the truth of the matter is is that in the quiet inner part of our heart, we know we're not where we need to be, and so, all right, I need to make some improvement, go buy a couple self-help books, and off I go.

Well, I want you to understand that what Jesus makes clear here is that true conversion is a complete restart or a new birth. It's the supernatural work of God alone.

And here was Nicodemus coming to Jesus, and he said, hey, why don't we talk a little bit about the kingdom? And Jesus says, hey, let's cut to the chase. You can't get there from here.

You need to be reborn. And in saying that, he was talking to a person who had reached the very pinnacle of religious excellence.

[10 : 32] He was top shelf. And yet for all of that, when he comes to Jesus with this inner emptiness, Jesus says, you have to start all over again because you can't make it by yourself.

And that brings us to another truth in relationship to salvation that we see in verse 7 and 8. And I want you to mark what it says there. It says, do not marvel that I say to you, you must be born again.

The wind blows where it wishes and you hear it sound. You do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So, it is with everyone that's born of the Spirit.

Now, here's the point that Jesus is making. He's saying, you don't understand all the ramifications and dynamics of the way in which the wind functions.

How many of you here are meteorologists? Anybody here a meteorologist? I remember a number of years ago there was a young man that was going to OSU to be a meteorologist and we always just tease him of the fact that someday he was going to be on TV.

[11 : 38] I don't see him there. Chris, where are you? You do this for a living, right? Not on TV, but Chris is a meteorologist for AEP. And here's how that plays out.

Chris has to predict what the weather is ahead of time so that AEP knows whether or not they need to buy extra power. And if he messes up, it's not just an oh-so it's okay.

If he messes up, AEP ends up with not enough electricity for you to stay cool or not enough gas for you to stay warm. And when that happens, Chris is in trouble.

You got that? Well, Jesus is talking about meteorology here. He says, you know, you don't understand all about the wind and all how it happens and blah, blah, blah. But you do at least see the evidence that the wind is there.

And he says, let me help you understand something. There are some parts of spiritual conversion that you just, you'll never get.

[12 : 41] But you can see the evidence, right? You don't understand, how did it happen? I mean, how many of you figured out why God chose you? Anybody have that one down?

No. But when Christ in his grace has called you to the cross, one of the undeniable things that changes is that you are not the same person that you used to be.

Right? And Jesus there in seven and eight is making this point. True salvation brings true change that can be seen, can be evidenced.

Now, I want you to understand that not all the evidence of grace is manifested in a moment. But just as Jesus' miraculous healings did leave undeniable evidence of the fact that something supernatural had happened, so you can be certain of this, genuine conversion brings change that can be noticed.

I can remember on more than one occasion praying for my grandchildren and saying, they need to be saved. Do you know what I was saying? Does anybody have an idea? They needed a little bit of help besides just parental encouragement.

[13 : 57] Parents can deal with the outside. How many of you understand that? But at the end of the day, one of the greatest allies in bringing about genuine change in a child's life is not good parenting, good parenting is important, but the work of the Holy Spirit.

Would you agree? And so it's reasonable for a grandparent to pray, oh, they need to be saved. I want you to understand that this is important.

Jesus, here in this passage, is pointing out that genuine conversion brings undeniable evidence of something being different in our life. So, let me say this.

If you're here this morning as a professing believer and you cannot see any of the evidence of the power of the cross playing out in your life, it would not be wrong for you to go back and revisit the question of the authenticity of your conversion.

Do you follow that? I'm not all that I will be, but because of Christ, I am not who I used to be.

[15 : 07] And one of the blessings that I can track in my life, now 66, is kind of look at the fact that even there have been undulations. How many of you wouldn't know what I mean by undulations? There have been ups and downs.

But I can tell you, I'm moving uphill and that's the work of God. And Jesus says, you know, you don't understand the wind, but you do see the evidence.

You don't understand all about salvation, but you can track the evidence. Well, that brings us to the question that Nicodemus asks in verse 9. How?

How? How? How can this happen? And what we find, Jesus say, second, is very, very important because he's going to come to the answer later.

But the first thing he wants us to understand is the authority on which he gives us the insight.

Salvation salvation is supernaturally revealed.

[16:11] Salvation is supernaturally revealed. Look there. Nicodemus asked the question, how can these things be? Jesus answered him, are you the, the, the, the, the, the, the, the, the, the, come on, help me out here, are you a teacher?

We got plenty of them. Are you the teacher? What's that? You're the top of the food chain. Okay? And Jesus says to Nicodemus, are you the teacher of Israel?

This guy was way up there. And here was a guy, and by the way, you know, we were talking with Pastor Andrew about ordination. He's not here to defend himself this morning, so you can tell him I said this, but eventually, Lord willing, we will go about having an ordination council here, and I can tell you that the review and the preparation for his ordination will be worse than what he will go through when he's examined by other pastors because the inside work is going to be heavy lifting for our young man, right?

Okay? But in the old days, ordination councils were just, I mean, here's what they would do. They would say, well, you know what? We would like you to recite Psalm 109.

The guy was expected to be able to do that cold turkey. The expectations and ordination were phenomenal, but that even paled in relationship to what a teacher in Israel was expected to know about the Old Testament.

[17:46] Rumor has it that, and by the way, they didn't want to mess with the scrolls, but rumor has it that if a rabbi took a pin, remember scrolls?

They were sheepskins. They were kind of sewed together and they were on these big rolls, right? And they would take a little needle and they would kind of bore through about four pages and then they would say to the rabbi, what letter of the Hebrew alphabet is this pin resting on?

They had to know it pretty well. You get that? And so here is Jesus, and this is kind of a backhanded slap. Do you follow me? Pow!

Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? Now, verse 11, truly, truly, pay attention.

When you see a truly, truly, or if you're in the King James, it's verily, verily, do you know what that is? That's a little bit like the teacher who grabs the chalk and says, this will be on the test.

[18:54] It's pay attention time. Jesus says, I say to you, we speak of what we know and bear witness of what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony.

Now, let's go back and let's pay a little attention because it helps to pay attention. Earlier in John chapter 3, Jesus in verse 3 says, truly, truly, I say to you, and then in verse 5, truly, truly, I say to you, and we find that he is speaking in the first person.

Now, he goes to the plural, we. Who's the we? There are times when my wife will say, we need to pick that up and I say, we do?

I go ahead and pick it up, but I want you to understand that sometimes the other side of me says, do you have a mouse in your pocket? You know, it's like, where's the we? When Jesus says, we, he is not just using the divine plural, he is speaking clearly and accurately for our sake.

Where's the we? In the Old Testament, in order to have a matter verified, you had to have more than what? One witness. We meets the requirement.

[20:09] Who are the witnesses? As you look at this passage, here is the Old Testament scholar saying, how does a man get saved? And Jesus says, what's the problem with you, Bubba?

Don't you understand that there are ample witnesses to this issue of salvation? Well, let's deal with the facts. The we is the two-fold testimony on salvation.

First of all, the Bible reveals the truth. And we know this because of what we find there in verse 10 and 11. Here was a teacher of the Old Testament, particularly one who was atop of the heap, and Jesus says, you ought to have got this by now.

Now, I want you to understand that earlier in John 3, you'll remember in verse 6, and let's go back just for a moment to verse 6, when Jesus says this, that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is Spirit.

You remember also that he said, that which is born of water and of the Spirit. And when he makes that statement, Jesus, speaking to the Old Testament scholar, was making a recitation, or he was

relying upon Ezekiel chapter 36.

[21 : 30] And he expected Nicodemus to understand that reference. So now here he says, hey, listen, we, for one, the Old Testament speaks of salvation through faith alone.

But there's a second testimony that has to be accepted or understood or at least heard, and that is that the Son of Man or Son of God reveals the truth.

What we have next in verse 13 is here is Jesus pointing out that he, in his divine nature, is allowed to speak with authority about what heaven is.

Verse 13, No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, and who does he say that is? The Son of Man. He's talking about himself.

He says, I'm the one. We got the Old Testament who's telling you the truth about salvation, but there is another person, and it's me and who I am.

[22 : 31] I'm the Son of Man, Son of God, and I have authority to speak about heaven because I came down from there. A little side shot.

How many of you, well, I don't want to have you raise your hands, so let's just kind of stay with it this way. Any of you heard of Don Piper?

Not John Piper, Don Piper. Don Piper wrote a very popular, it was a bestseller for a little while. You can find it on the used discounts, and you know, it's where those books now go after they're done making money.

And Don Piper, had a bad accident, and he had a dream that he went to heaven, and so, hey, if you want to sell books, have some kind of catastrophic event, and then say you came back from the dead, and people will buy your book.

And then there's a better one, well, it's a newer one. We have Todd Burpo. Anybody heard Todd Burpo? I mean, there's a movie, Todd Burpo. Heaven is for real.

[23 : 35] I want to tell you a little secret. If you believe the Bible, you can't believe Todd Burpo. Let me say that again slowly because I said it too fast. If you believe the Bible, you can't believe Todd Burpo's explanation of what heaven is.

Why would I say that? Well, take your finger. I'm being a little testy here, but bear with me, okay? I want you to put your finger on verse 13 and read that in the English to yourself.

No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. What does that tell you about what Todd Burpo wrote about? Hello?

It's a great fantasy. What I think heaven's like. Would that sell books? What do you think? Nah.

But when you say, I died, I went there, I see a big blue Holy Spirit and I see blah, blah, blah. I was like, yeah. You know what? You can stack them all together. Jesus on this side says, nobody else has been there.

[24 : 45] I came down and I'm going to tell you the truth. So you got your choice. Just don't go buy the extra books. Stick with this one. So here we are. Jesus says, I want you to understand this is how you understand the issue of salvation.

You've got the word of God and you've got me. I want you to turn back just for a moment to John chapter 1, verse 18. John chapter 1, verse 18, it says, no one has ever seen God.

There's another shot for Don Piper and Todd Burpo. No one has ever seen God, the only God who is at the Father's side. He has made him known. In John's opening lesson, what we find here is that Jesus says, you know, I'm the light, the truth, and I'm the one, I am the only one who reveals the truth of salvation and eternity.

Christ is the only one who has descended from heaven and so can speak accurately. And so I want you to understand as Jesus begins to answer the question that Nicodemus asked, how do you get saved?

Nicodemus hears this response. Well, number one, you have to believe what the Old Testament says and number two, you better believe what I have to tell you. So let's move forward into what we understand now in the remaining part of the passage where we find Jesus to make it clear that salvation is something that starts with sin and looks to Jesus.

[26 : 21] And so I want you to look at Numbers chapter 21, verse 1 through 9. I saw a picture on Facebook of a friend of mine who's a pastor.

He'd gone to Answers in Genesis and he and his grandchildren were down there and I guess they have a pet boa constrictor that is down there for entertainment.

You know, there were about six or seven of them holding this pet boa and this large snake was draped over all their shoulders and they were sitting there grinning. I do not grin when I am in the proximity of snakes.

Snakes and me are like death. One of us is going to die. Now you know I grew up in India and growing up in India there was never any question when you saw a snake, are you one of those that causes death or are you just one of these little things that goes around eating eggs and bugs and stuff like that?

When you saw a snake you grabbed something long and you kept on hitting it until it was dead. Snakes were hated. Numbers chapter 21.

[27 : 32] verse 21. We kind of pick up here after verse 3. They had a little bit of difficulty in the journey and in this particular case it says from Mont Hor verse 4 they set out by the way of the Red Sea to go around the land of Edom and the people became impatient on the way.

Hello? How many would like to get there already? Okay. I would. And verse 5 when we get impatient there is a tendency to do verse 5.

And the people spoke against God and against Moses. Now listen to what they had to say. Why have you brought us out up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness and for there is no food and no water there is no food and we loathe this food.

Now how can you put those two together logically? Do you follow me? We have no food we have no water and we hate the stuff you're feeding us. How many of you understand the logic that's kind of not working?

Who? Verse 6 So then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people so that many people of Israel died.

[28 : 53] Now this was a supernatural snake rodeo. Do you follow that? I mean they came out of all over the place. Remember the quail that came? They were fussing about not having meat and God just brought just a whole flock.

I mean it says that they ate meat until they kind of got sick of it. Some of them died there too. So here they are. We have all how many of you just love snakes?

Put your hand down. I hate snakes. Do you hate snakes? All the snake haters stand up. No forget it. That's alright.

Okay listen. I mean here they are out of nowhere snakes all over the place and biting people and people dying. How many of you remember the old black and white movies when a guy got bit by a snake and he took his knife and he cut himself and just sucked the blood out and spit it over to the side?

Doesn't work. Does not work. And before Hollywood people just died. You know it's like just dead. Snake bite.

[29 : 58] Left and right. And so the people this is nice. Verse 7 look at it. The people came to Moses and said we have sinned.

Hello. Have you ever wondered why God brings some things into some of our lives that sometimes to get our attention? And this time the people at least did the math and they figured out that what was going on was because of their sin and they said yeah yeah we've done wrong.

We've sinned. And he said pray to the Lord that he would take away the serpents from us. So Moses prayed for the people and the Lord said to Moses make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole everybody who is bitten when he sees it shall live.

I've got to speed forward a little bit. In this case what happened is that Moses made a serpent kind of a facsimile or whatever of a snake and put it up on a pole high and then he went through the camp and he said listen if you've been bit by a snake look at this and you won't die.

And those who looked lived. now let's take that picture and go back if you will to John chapter 3 because it's important for us to make this connection.

[31 : 27] Now listen here is Nicodemus coming to Jesus and he said help me understand you mean I can't work my way into heaven by being a good Jew and keeping the law and you know being a Pharisee and being a teacher and you know I'm a pretty good person at least I'm better than the guy across the street you know I'm alright and he says no no no you can't do it that way well how how oh do you remember Nicodemus the story about the time that God sent serpents into the camp and a lot of them were dying and Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a stick remember that story yeah yeah yeah oh okay we got that one and then Jesus says this look there as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness so must the son of man be lifted up that whosoever

believes on him may have eternal life so what really was happening in the old testament when the Jew looked at that snake on a stick on a pole some of you are thinking hot dog on a stick so that's why he changed it so you know when you looked at a snake on a pole what was happening what was the significance of that

I want you to understand first of all there was an admission of guilt many many people had been bitten by the snakes all over the place and Moses said to them if you are willing to look at that snake up there on the pole you'll live in essence what looking at the snake represented is saying hey I have sinned and I deserve death by snake but amazingly they also understood that there was faith in God's promise of undeserved grace now can you understand the simplicity the absolute almost illogical connection between getting bit by a snake which is very real and looking at something in the air and being saved it seems counterintuitive doesn't it so what do I have to do to be saved

I've been bit by a snake you got to do something for me and we do understand that the Hollywood deal of cutting your skin and spitting out the blood doesn't work so what do I do you look all you do is look I want you to turn to one other passage this morning I love this one this is a great one Luke chapter 23 verse 40 and 43 Jesus is hanging on the cross he is hanging between two thieves do you follow that I want you to look in your Bible I want you to put your eyes on this Luke put your eyes on this passage one of the criminals verse 39 this is one of the criminals one of the criminals who were hanged railed at him saying are you not the Christ save yourself and us but the other rebuked him saying do you not fear

God since you are under the same sentence of condemnation now listen to verse 41 we indeed justly for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds do you know what he was saying we deserve to be on this cross because what has happened to us is justice we're receiving the right and truthful penalty for our rebellious behavior but not Jesus and then he says there in verse 42 he says Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom so what Jesus is saying over there in John chapter 3 follows this pattern he says listen in order to be saved in order to have the burden and the death that is certain because of your sin in order to have the sting of sin removed and to have new life what you have to do first of all is look to see the clear justice of God executed against you you know where the starting point of salvation is it is having the humility to say

I have sinned against God and I deserve eternal death there are some of you sitting here this morning that have never been willing to say that I have sinned against God and I deserve eternal death but that's not the end of the story because when Jesus says what he does in John chapter 3 he points out that those who would look to him lifted up and would believe on him what he was saying is this is that those who come to me admit that they are justly judged for their sin but then are willing to say I believe Jesus took my place and died my death when he was hanging on the cross he wasn't dying for his sins he was dying for yours and there he hung a willing sacrifice in your place and salvation means saying first of all

[37 : 30] I deserve that but I look and I see that Jesus has already satisfied my debt and he's paid my price and I accept that he has taken my place and I call him to be my Lord and my Savior do you know why I love this passage because it is so clear in its gospel presentation I a sinner stand justly condemned before a holy God for the arrogant stubborn hardness of my heart against the righteousness of a holy God and he willingly brought his son down from heaven and put him on the cross to be the perfect sacrifice for my sins and for your sins but that sacrifice is not applied apart from a humility that says that's what

I deserve but I believe God in his mercy and his kindness willingly put Jesus in my place and Jesus has died for my sins and I believe him and I receive him as my Lord and Savior can I tell you the purpose of preaching is to put you on the spot of saying yes or no to God does that make sense huh I mean here's the truth there are some of you here that need Christ there are some of you here that know Christ but your heart has grown cold to the beauty and the simplicity and the awesomeness of the gospel he wants us to do something about that I'm going to leave that in the hands of the Holy Spirit but I would plead with you this morning do not walk out of here and say no when the spirit of the living God is prompting your heart to take care of the burden you have let's pray father

God this morning as we study the scriptures together we we revel we glory in the cross that you would willingly send your son the Lord Jesus Christ to die in our place to die our death to bear the full weight of our wicked rebellion against you and you and your unbelievable kindness and mercy

offer salvation to whoever will believe that you're a God that is that way I pray for those that are here this morning that do not know Christ that this morning your spirit would break through the hard veneer of their stubborn self righteousness bring them to see the hopelessness of their sin and the satisfaction of calvary where jesus died for their sin and cause them to cry out in faith believing that jesus is indeed the satisfaction for the penalty and to receive him as lord and savior we ask this in your precious name amen to to to!
to