

Good Friday Saviour on a stick

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Preacher: Steve Jeffrey

[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. If you'd like to grab your Bibles and just keep them open there, if you already got them open at John 3. But if you haven't, it'd be great if you could grab one. I'm going to pray and then we'll take a look at that passage.

Gracious God, we thank you for the wonderful privilege of being able to gather right now in this place and to again look at the central message of what it means to be Christian.

We pray that you would help us in our understanding this morning as we look at the person of Jesus, that we would not be clouded by darkness as Nicodemus was, but by your Spirit help us to see Jesus and to see what he's done for us so that we may long for and may receive new birth, that we might be born again.

And we thank you for the wonderful testimony we just saw of someone who, of Laura, who responded to you, was born again last year at this time.

We pray that there might be many more. Come to that point this morning, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Some of you have heard the less than true story of four people on a plane that lost all its power.

[1 : 26] The pilot announced an imminent crash and added that there were four of us, but there was only three parachutes. And he added, it's my plane and my parachute, so I'm taking one of them.

He strapped on a chute, jumped to safety. No one sort of disagreed with that. The three left on the plane were a brilliant professor, minister of religion, and a backpacker. And the professor jumped to his feet and insisted, I'm one of the greatest minds in this country.

I need to survive. This country needs me to survive. I must have one of the remaining parachutes. He grabbed one of the chutes, strapped it on and jumped out the plane.

The minister pipes into the young backpacker and says, look, I've lived a long life. I don't fear death. I know where I'm going after death. And so you take the last parachute.

And the backpacker stopped him before he could finish and said, no, no, no, it's fine. The brilliant professor just jumped out with my backpack strapped on. Obviously, it's a really good joke, or maybe you haven't heard it as much as I thought you might have.

[2 : 42] I didn't think it was that great. But anyway, there's something great about that story. There's something inadequate about a PhD in that moment.

None of us, none of us is an expert in everything. It's an obvious statement. I know it's an obvious statement, but it is worth letting it sink in.

Despite the collective brilliance represented here this morning, what we don't know and can't do far exceeds what we do know and can do.

And so, expertise in one area counts for little in another area. And so, therefore, humility is just plain common sense.

It's common sense. None of us knows everything. And it's true when we come to the subject of God, Jesus, and the truth surrounding the first Easter weekend.

[3 : 53] We all have our opinions. And on the most part, we'd say that we would believe in Jesus. That's why we've come here this morning, I assume. And are positive towards Jesus.

And we get this great encounter here in John 3 about a man or with a man who kind of figured he had all God worked out.

He was positive towards Jesus. He was positive towards God. He believed in Jesus as we see at the end of chapter 2. Interestingly, it was, in fact, his area of expertise.

He was a teacher of the law, of God's law. But his PhD on God was about to be revealed as lacking. Nicodemus is a Pharisee.

He's a member of the Jewish ruling council. He was a very religious man. He was zealous to obey God's law. He was even a teacher of God's law to others. His morality and his piety was well respected in the community.

[5 : 04] From one perspective, you'd look at a Nicodemus and you'd just say, this guy has got it all together when it comes to God and religious matters. And that is why this encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus is so crucial for us to see.

You see, Nic hasn't got it all worked out just yet. It says he came to Jesus at night. He came secretly, but more specifically, it wasn't just that he came secretly under the cover of darkness, but that he came blindly.

He came in the dark. This clever man was in the dark when it came to Jesus' true identity and what it meant to have belief in him.

He was one of those people who, at the end of chapter 2, saw the miracles of Jesus, saw all the great things Jesus did and believed, it says. He didn't doubt that Jesus performed miracles, but merely seeing the miracles wasn't in itself faith.

He hadn't understood who Jesus really was because right at the very beginning here it says he comes and calls Jesus rabbi, teacher. And so, Nic puts Jesus in amongst the category of a bunch of other teachers, possibly even comes asserting himself over Jesus as he himself is a teacher of the law.

[6 : 30] Nicodemus, though clever and highly accomplished, stumbles around in the dark blindly to the true identity of Jesus. His confusion is pretty obvious in the next number of verses as we go through.

He thinks Jesus is a teacher come from God and yet Jesus says something apparently completely bluntly and had nothing to do with the topic at all.

Jesus comes back to him in verse 3 and says, I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. Now, Nicodemus is really confused.

How on earth can a person re-enter their mother's womb? Jesus then responds in verses 5 to 8 that he's talking about spiritual birth and unless you experience it, you will never enter the kingdom of God, you'll never be part of God's family, you'll never be reconciled to God, forgiven, you'll never be able to receive eternal life unless you are born again.

Then he adds that it is God who causes this new birth and not man, it is a work of God, it is not a work of a clever man with a PhD in religion, not even the work of good people like Nicodemus.

[7 : 47] And in verse 9 we see that Nic is still at a loss, Jesus marvels in verse 10 that a teacher of God's people doesn't even understand how it is that you enter to be part of the family of God.

And then in verse 11 Jesus reveals the problem. Even though Nic is hearing reliable truth about Jesus, he isn't receiving it.

That is, it's an issue of belief in the heart. That's the problem. And so in verse 12, Jesus sort of says to Nicodemus, you keep pushing me here for clearer and clearer explanations of being born again so that you can get your mind around it and you can fit it into your theological systems, but a heart of unbelief can't understand the sort of explanations that are needed here.

And it's at this point we see this remarkable transition in this encounter with Nicodemus. Jesus now makes a shift and he starts talking about himself not so much as a teacher of God's people, telling people that you need to be born again, he now starts saying I am the son of man from heaven who came to do the thing that makes it possible for you to be born again.

Jesus makes the claim to be more than just a teacher about God but as the one who came from God to reveal God. And so as Nicodemus, PhD in one hand, comes with these clever arguments to try and understand Jesus, the expert in the law comes, Jesus says in actual fact, Nic, I am the expert on God.

[9 : 48] I have just come from God. I am God. And so listen to me. And as the expert on God, Jesus says there is an obstacle to being born again and entering the kingdom of God, being part of his family.

Something has to happen to remove the anger of God for our sin and unbelief and rebellion.

And to help Nic understand what Jesus is talking about here, he picks up an analogy from the Old Testament. and it gives us a picture of what Jesus is about to do, what he's about to do to remove the obstacle so that we can be born again and be part of the family of God.

Verse 14, 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.

And so Jesus is referring to Numbers 21, that first passage that Lindy read out for us, where Israel, they have arrived at Mount Hor, they have been there before, about 40 years before in fact, their trip from Egypt to the promised land should have taken a couple of weeks, but the trip from slavery to freedom under God's rule had taken much longer.

[11 : 19] Israel had proven unworthy to enter the promised land because they did not believe in God's power, all God's promises, repeatedly they had been tried and found wanting, but now they are back.

They are back at the borders of the promised land, 40 years later. But it would appear from that passage that Lindy read out that little has changed.

They grumble, they whinge, they moan, they grumble about their lack of water, they grumble that there's too much food. They grumble against their leadership, they grumble against God because they reckon that he only rescued them so that he could lead them out in the desert so they would die.

40 years of God's provision hasn't changed the hearts of these people. They grumble, grumble, grumble, even about good things, they grumble.

people. And God responds by punishing the Israelites, by sending poisonous snakes to bite a number of them and many die as a consequence.

[12 : 32] The good thing is that the people work out for themselves that they've been pretty dumb and that they've been pretty much bad-mouthing God and Moses and so they ask Moses to pray so that they won't be punished by God anymore.

And Moses does pray and God responds in a very strange way. God says, make a snake and put it on a pole.

Anyone who is bitten can look to the snake on the pole and live. And so Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived.

That's a weird answer to prayer. So notice a few things here from Numbers 21. Notice that the snake on the pole did not prevent the people from being bitten.

It was for those who were bitten. Notice it was God who sent the snakes. God was angry with his people because of their ingratitude and their grumbling and their complaining and their whinging and their rebellion.

[13 : 44] Notice that the way God chooses to rescue the people from his own curse, God's own curse that he put on the people, is a picture of the curse itself.

And notice that all they had to do to be saved from God's anger was to look to God's provision. Hang it on a pole.

If someone was bitten by a snake, they looked to the bronze snake that Moses had put on the stick and they wouldn't die.

The solution to their punishment is to believe God's answer and to look at a bronze snake on a pole, a bronze snake being a symbol of their punishment and their judgment and then they would be saved from certain death.

So if an Israelite looked at a bronze snake which was their own judgment portrayed on a pole and they believed they would be rescued from certain death and in the very act of looking is a trust in God's provision.

[15 : 05] God provided a way for these sinful people to be saved and every time they looked then they would be reminded that their rebellion against God means death.

Especially notice then that having taken Nick to this shocking picture in Numbers 21 Jesus then follows that picture with the most famous Bible verse in the world.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only son referring to himself Jesus is here so that whoever believes in him would not perish but have eternal life.

Jesus is the one who was raised up like the snake. He will be the powerful portrayal of God's anger and judgment.

When we look to the crucifixion of Jesus which is what we are doing here this morning we are supposed to see the consequences of our sin.

[16:19] We are supposed to say to ourselves that should be me that is what I deserve. The crucifixion of Jesus doesn't hide our failures. They are uncovered in all their ugliness.

We are to be confronted with our sinfulness and our shame and our death and our complaining and our grumbling and our whinging. When we look we are to see our sin, our rebellion, our judgment. Jesus in the place of the snake is portrayed as sin, evil, rebellion, guilt as a curse. Another part of the Bible says this about Jesus' crucifixion.

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. In becoming like the snake, Jesus was the embodiment of our sin and becoming for and in becoming sin for us, he took our sins away as our substitute.

And so in what is apparently a fleeting reference to a strange event in the Old Testament, Jesus was telling Nicodemus that he, Jesus, would be the bearer of the judgment of God and that through his judgment we can find hope and rescue and salvation.

[17:49] salvation. That is why it's called Good Friday. Because the crucified one is a gift from God. It is because God so loved the world that he gave his only son.

Without this gift we would perish like the Israelites did in the wilderness. Our only hope is to look at the cross and believe that God has made a way back to himself through the death of his son.

As strange as it may be, to look to the cross is all that's required to believe in what Jesus has said and says, look to me. The wonderful news is that Jesus in the place of the snake is the source of healing, the source of rescue, the source, the rescue from the poison of sin and the anger of God. what he gives us for the cross is eternal life. When our sin and God's anger are taken away, it means that God is totally for us.

And if God is for us, we will never die but live forever with him. And so Jesus' call to Nick here and to us is to believe in what God has provided for our rescue.

[19:13] you see, the Israelites had an option in the wilderness. Believe in God's provision and look or say that's ridiculous and look for some other alternative for medicine.

Verse 14 says, just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the son of man must be lifted up, look to Jesus.

Nicodemus, if you want new birth and you must have new birth in order to get into the family of God, you must look to Jesus on the cross.

I think this conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus under the cover of darkness is so crucial for us to be listening in on. The expert still had some things to learn and Jesus encourages him here to move on from a shallow, superficial belief in Jesus.

Before this encounter, Nicodemus believed in Jesus, it says, at the end of chapter 2. And Jesus says here, your belief is not enough, it's a superficial belief.

[20:39] Move from it. After all, Satan believes in Jesus, but he doesn't look to him for salvation. The encouraging thing is that Nicodemus didn't give up when it got confusing.

He didn't give up. He was there at the end, at the crucifixion. He was there taking the body down off the cross.

And he prepared it for burial in a significant act of devotion to Jesus. He did look to Jesus in the end. No doubt we are gathered here this morning because we acknowledge some sort of belief in Jesus.

But is it a belief that recognizes who Jesus is as the heaven sent son of man, the expert on God? As with Nicodemus, religion is a common cover for not being born again.

Each of us churchgoers should examine ourselves to see if we are truly born again or is it just religion?

[22:01] Shallow belief that doesn't in the end look to Jesus. Does our belief in Jesus recognize he was crucified as our substitute to turn away God's anger from us and to deal with our sin?

Does our belief in Jesus recognize that he is the heaven sent son of man, the expert on God who calls us to follow him, to love him, to obey him?

Is it a belief in the promise that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life? look to Jesus.

If that's something that you want to do this morning as we found out a bit earlier, Laura did this time last year, I would invite you to come down and pray with me or some others at the front at the end of the service.

Let's pray. Father God, we thank you for the provision that you have made for us in the Lord Jesus. Jesus, thank you that we, as strange as it seems, all we need to do is to look to Christ, look to Jesus, to find our rescue and our hope.

[23 : 24] And we thank you for the gift of the Lord Jesus and the opportunity to be reminded of it again this morning and we ask it for your sake. Amen.