

# The Serpent and the Son of Man

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[0:00] John chapter 3, verses 14 through 15.

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

May God add a blessing to the reading of His Word. Would you please be seated? Don't you hate it when things in your house break?

There is never a good time for an appliance that you use daily, like a washer and a dryer or a refrigerator, a garbage disposal, toilets, etc., to suddenly stop working.

There's never a good time for that. And so last week, in our home, our washer stopped working, our toilet wouldn't stop running, and my car started squealing.

[1:23] As they say, bad things come in threes, don't they? And when that happens, it seems to me, it's almost as if you're the target of a conspiracy, isn't it?

Doesn't it feel that way? Like all your machines get together when you're gone, and they say, hey, they look too happy. Let's all break this week, or something like that. It's difficult when those kinds of things happen.

And now, for some of you, for many people, they have the ability to check under the hood or tear open an appliance, and automatically they have one of those minds that's able to see what's wrong, and they know how to fix it.

Unfortunately for my wife and my family, I'm not one of those kinds of people. But I have been given one powerful tool in my war against the machines of my home, and that powerful tool is YouTube. YouTube is, man, it is so helpful. Because I'm able to diagnose, you know, the problem, and then type it into the search bar, and click send, search, and instantly I'm inundated with all different kinds of videos that take you step by step through the process of fixing the problem yourself.

[2:50] And so, thankfully, we, and Danny is great at it as well, I've got to give her the credit. I don't want to take it all. She did fix the washer. I'm still working on the toilet. But anyhow, it's, but I know what's wrong, and I know how to fix it.

But isn't it great to be able to fix things on your own? There's something about it that just makes you feel good about yourself.

It gives you the sense of satisfaction that, you know what, I didn't have to pay anybody to come in and do this for me. I was able to do it myself. I know whenever I have fixed things, and Danny can attest, and I get very proud of myself when that happens, and I make sure to let everybody know what I've done because it feels good.

And, in fact, I believe that we live in a society that prides itself on its ability to fix things on their own. In fact, we've seen do-it-yourself projects become gaining in popularity over the years, haven't we? Actually, Home Depot has tapped into this sense that we have that we want to be able to fix things, that do-it-yourself mentality that has been a benefit in many ways to our nation.

[4:08] And they say, if you remember their old slogan, you can do it, and we can help. And that just taps into our pride, our ego, that, yeah, I can do it.

I may need a little bit of help, but ultimately, I can get the job done. And so I say those things because I think that perhaps that do-it-yourself mentality, that unwillingness that we have to sacrifice the glory that we could receive and the pride that we could have in ourselves for fixing our own problems has led many people towards organized religion.

We know that our world is broken. And if we're honest with ourselves and do some introspection, we realize that we're broken too.

Always feeling dissatisfied, never feeling like we have enough, always looking to improve ourselves in some way, realizing that we're not as we should be.

And so as a result of that, many people have turned to organized religion, which offers a diagnosis for the brokenness that we experience and says that it has a solution.

[5:27] Such is the case for all the religions of the world but one. I once heard a story about C.S. Lewis, how one day he was walking through the halls of Oxford University and he overheard a conversation taking place in a classroom amongst many of his colleagues.

And what they were doing is they were comparing the religions of the world and discussing what they had in common and what unique contributions they had made to the world. And so C.S. Lewis walked in and he asked them, what's the commotion about?

And they told him, well, we're trying to figure out what unique contribution Christianity has made to the world. And so C.S. Lewis said, that's easy. Grace.

And grace is what separates Christianity from every other religion in the world. That salvation is not contingent upon your works and your efforts but on the grace of God and only on the grace of God to save sinners like you and me.

The notion of God's love coming to us free of charge with no strings attached seems to go against every instinct of humanity. The Buddhist eightfold path, the Hindu doctrine of karma, the Jewish covenant, and the Muslim code of law, each of these offers a way to earn approval from God.

[7:00] Only Christianity dares to make God's love unconditional. The heart of the gospel message is not what you must do to be saved but what Christ has done to save you.

And so let's recap where we've been to this point in this conversation that Jesus is having with Nicodemus. If you remember, it begins in verses 1 through 5. Nicodemus comes to Jesus under the cover of darkness at night.

He is a Pharisee. He is a leader of the Jews. He acknowledges to Jesus that he understands that he is a teacher sent from God. And then Jesus interrupts what he's saying to tell him that in order to be saved, you must be born again.

And that the spirit is free to act in this way. That he is the one ultimately who accomplishes it. He explains that in verses 5 through 8. And then in verse 9, Jesus, or Nicodemus I should say, has heard this explanation that Jesus provides, but he still doesn't believe it.

He still doesn't believe in this new birth. And so he asks, how can these things be? In verses 10 and 12, Jesus marvels at the unbelief of Nicodemus because even though Nicodemus had received reliable testimony from both Jesus himself and others, he still refuses to believe their testimony.

[8:30] And so in verse 12, Jesus says, basically, I have taken you as far as I can by way of explanation, but a heart of unbelief, an unregenerate heart, can't ascend to the kinds of truth that I have to give to you unless you've been born again.

So then we come to verse 13, which is pivotal. What is Jesus going to do next? What is he going to say to Nicodemus now? What would you do?

You've explained the new birth. You've done your best to testify from your own personal experience, and yet, whom you are witnessing to, that person still refuses to believe.

Well, I think many of us would be tempted to end it there. Say, well, I don't have anything more to tell you. Come back to me whenever you've experienced a new birth, and we can proceed, right? Until then, this conversation is over. But Jesus doesn't do that. And that's very important for us to see this morning. It's important not just for those of us who have been born again, but for those of us, or those of you, who have not yet experienced the new birth.

[9:41] Verse 13 marks a shift in this conversation. Prior to this point, Jesus had been talking as a witness and as a teacher about the new birth, as any born-again person would do.

But in verse 13, and proceeding onward, he speaks not as a witness, nor as a teacher, but about himself, the Savior, the Son of Man, who has come to save sinners.

And so here's the main idea for this morning's sermon. Those who look to Christ and believe will be born again. Those who look to Christ and believe will be born again.

Again, salvation is not contingent upon what you've done, but believing and trusting in what Jesus has done for you. In verses 14 through 15, which we've read, Jesus tells Nicodemus that he will remove the wrath of God from sinners who, by the Spirit's enabling, look to him and trust in him, resulting in their being transformed, undergoing the new birth, giving them both spiritual and eternal life that lasts forever.

And so there are three observations about the new birth that I want us to understand in this passage this morning. And the first is this, that Jesus is the Son of Man who descended from

heaven.

[11:08] Verse 13, Jesus says to Nicodemus, no one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. Remember, Jesus has told Nicodemus in verse 12 that if I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I have tried to tell you heavenly things?

And so now he proceeds to reveal his true identity to Nicodemus, that he is more than a man, that he is the Son of Man.

And Nicodemus, being a student of the law, of Scripture, would have instantly understood what Jesus meant by referring to himself as the Son of Man.

This title comes from a prophecy in Daniel in the Old Testament, chapter 7, verses 13 and 14, of the Son of Man. And so Jesus is saying that he is the Son of Man who has descended from heaven, that he has taken on human flesh, and he's going to proceed to explain that no man can do what he has come to accomplish, that he was in heaven with the Father, and that now he has come down from heaven to do a very important thing for a very important reason, that he is the one who makes the new birth possible by his descending from heaven and becoming the God-man, truly God, and truly man at his incarnation.

Now this is a statement that contradicts all other religious systems of the world whose founders claim to have received some kind of special revelation from God.

[13:00] A popular and commonly held belief today is that there are many ways to God, that there are many paths, that there are many roads, that we're all eventually going to reach the same destination, and that God has just chosen to reveal himself to different people in different ways.

But essentially, all these ways, they say, lead to the same destination, that everyone goes to heaven except for the really bad people like Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin and people like that. I've once heard a story that David Platt told about a time when he visited Indonesia, and he was speaking with a Hindu leader and a Muslim leader, and they were having this conversation.

And so these two men told him, we have different paths that lead us to spiritual fulfillment and lead us to God. And then they added, we respect your path, you respect our path, and we all go different ways.

But together, we are one, and we'll end up in the same place. And so David Platt responded to them by saying, well, let me make sure I understand.

[14:20] You're saying basically that you picture God at the top of a mountain and that we're all at the bottom of the mountain. And I take my one path to get to God and you take another path up the mountain to get to God, but in the end, we'll eventually end at the top of the mountain in the same place.

And the men looked at him and they smiled and nodded in agreement that he had correctly assessed what they were saying. Then he proceeded to say to them, well, if that's the way it is, let me ask you one question.

What if the God at the top of the mountain decided he was going to make his way down the mountain to us and came then to bring us up the mountain himself?

And they said, well, that would be wonderful. And then David said, that's what the God of the Bible did. And let me tell you about who Jesus really is.

It's not about trying to find our way to God. Jesus has come and he has declared, I am the way. The only way. Jesus exclusively made that statement.

[15:34] I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through me. And other times he talked about there being two gates, two paths, two destinations.

One that leads to destruction and one that leads to eternal life. Now again, that is not a popular view in our inclusive times but that is what Jesus said, believed, and taught.

And he taught it boldly. Many suggest that this teaching is too narrow, it's too close-minded, and it's arrogant. Believing that such a statement is inconsistent with a God who they say is loving.

But, it's the love of God that made this way possible. John 3, 16 will be there eventually. For God so loved the world that he gave his only son.

That whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. Jesus is the only way because there is no other way. He is the only one able to rescue us from our sins.

[16:51] So this leads me to the second observation of the new birth. That Jesus is the sinner's only source of rescue. Verse 14. And Jesus refers to this event that happened in Numbers 21.

He says, And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the son of man whom he's identified himself as being be lifted up. And so, initially, in our culture, we think, well, being compared to a snake is not a good thing.

Somebody says, you know, you're a snake. that's usually meaning that you're crafty, you're wily, you're untruthful. So this comparison can seem as a shock to somebody who's reading it for the first time without knowing all the context behind it.

So let's go back to Numbers 21 and get the context for understanding of what Jesus is meaning here. This is back during the time of the Exodus. Moses has led the people out of Egypt.

And they're wandering in the wilderness. And as they often do, they complain. And so here it says, from Mount Hor, they set out by way of the Red Sea to go around the land of Edom.

[18:08] And the people became impatient on the way. 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.

We loathe this worthless food. Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people so that many of Israel died. 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 may 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 up on a pole and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.

So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole and if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

So there are several things here that I want us to point out, to see this morning about this passage. First, poison is coursing through the veins of these people who have been bitten because of their disobedience and without divine intervention, they will die.

[19:29] Second, the snakes in the camp are sent from the Lord. The wrath of God is on these people for their sins, for their ingratitude, and for their rebellious attitude.

Third, the means that God chooses to rescue his people from this curse is a picture of the curse itself.

The bronze serpent. Picturing the serpents that bit them, right? And then fourth, to be saved from God's wrath, all they must do, all they can do, is look at his provision, which is hanging on a pole that Moses has lifted up.

The Bible is truly one book, written truly by one author, and all of it points to Jesus Christ.

So what we have here is an event in the Old Testament that foreshadowed and what Jesus would do. to cure people of a much greater infection.

[20:56] Jesus draws Nicodemus' attention to this incident to once again express to him the futility of his religious efforts to rescue himself from the wrath of God for the sins that he has committed.

Nicodemus thought that obedience to the law would save him. He believed that entrance into the kingdom of God would be accessed by tipping the scales in the right direction, having his good deeds outweigh his bad deeds, and that that would make him then acceptable in God's sight.

Don't a lot of us have this thought God will save me if I'm good, that if most of my life shows that I've been better than I've been worse, right?

That there's these cosmic scales and as long as the good side of the scale is down in the right direction, I'm good with God, all is well. We have this thought that that's the way that we can do things and in doing good things we can make people in our debt.

I remember as a kid whenever I wanted something from my parents, I would do something very similar. My dad was the hardest one to win over, and he's the one who usually had the money.

[22:20] And so whatever good deed I was going to do to try to get whatever I wanted from him would typically be directed towards something that would benefit him. And so one of those things that I would do is I would mow our grass without being asked.

But I knew when my dad would come home every day and so I timed it out perfectly so that I would be just finishing the lawn as he pulled into the driveway.

And there I was, you know, hard-working son, loved my dad, trying to help him out. I know he works hard for us, right, dad? This is my effort to let you know that you're the man and I just love you.

And so I'd be mowing the lawn and all those things were true but you know what I'm saying. I'd be mowing the lawn and he'd pull in, he'd get out of his car, he'd have an appreciative smile and kind

of give me a wave and things had been set up perfectly where then I could go in and say, hey dad, could I have such and such for this?

Look, I did this really good thing for you and I wouldn't say this but in a way, you're kind of in my debt because you owe me. I did something for you without being asked.

[23 : 33] My dad was a smart man, he eventually caught on, right? But anyhow, I believe, I say that because I believe that that's the way that many people approach God today.

I'll be good so that God you'll give me what I want and ultimately I'll be good enough that you will allow me entrance into your eternal kingdom.

Nicodemus certainly believed that. I'll be good, God will like it, he'll give me what I want because in the end he sort of owes it to me because I've done things that will make him happy.

He believed that keeping the law equated to salvation but he failed to see that that wasn't the motivation behind God's giving the law in the first place. The law was not given to save anyone but to reveal to all of us the depths of our sinful condition and our desperate need to be saved.

Paul speaks to this in Romans chapter 7 verses 7 through 12. Let's look at that. What then shall we say that the law is sin by no means? Yet if it had not been for the law I would have not known sin for I would have not known what it is to covet if the law had said you shall not covet but sin seizing an opportunity through the commandments produced in me all kinds of covetousness for apart from the law sin lies dead.

[25 : 05] I was once alive apart from the law but then when the commandment came sin came alive and I died. The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me for sin seizing an opportunity through the commandment deceived me and through it killed me.

So the law is holy and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. So Paul says here that the law doesn't save us but condemns us.

This doesn't mean that the law is bad. Theoretically if somebody was able to keep all of it all the time all of their lives they would be saved but we know because of our sinful condition that that is impossible.

we sin daily. So the purpose of the law is to reveal to us that we don't measure up to God's perfect standard and that's bad news.

We've sinned against God who is perfectly holy and because of that he's perfectly just. In obedience to some of the law some of the time or most of the time is still incapable of removing God's wrath from us for the sins that we've committed against him.

[26 : 36] Now you might hear that and you think well that doesn't sound right but let's think about it in our own day and time. When I was in college at Mid-American Nazarene University we had this old cold case that was suddenly solved.

Back in the 80s the student body president had conspired with the secretary of the dean of students to murder her husband.

And so some new evidence came out and all of a sudden our school became an issue this was an issue that was on the national level.

CBS came out and did this huge story on it this thing that we'd never known about before. Now this had happened at the time 20 years in the past never was solved.

Both of these two individuals moved on to different lives. They both moved out of state. She married a dentist. She had children by all accounts. She was a productive member of society and a good mother.

[27 : 49] He went to New York City and became a successful businessman. Was worth millions of dollars. And also had done many good things in his life and was a productive member of society.

But they were called back because of what they had done. And they both pled guilty because the evidence was clear that they had done it.

Now say hypothetically that the judge presiding over the case says you know what everyone yeah they've done a bad thing but for the past 20 years they've been really good people.

And it seems to me like they're sorry. So you know what I'm going to do? Throw out the charges and set them free. What would happen?

Outrage. Because we know that justice must be done for this victim and for his family and for society. In the same way we understand that we have sinned against God and that we face his wrath for what we've done in committing our sins against him and that no good deed can remove that stain away.

[29:17] No good deed of our own. That God ultimately is right and he is just to punish the sins that we have committed against him and he is not in a position to owe us anything.

And if you think about it honestly the really scandalous thing about all of this is that God would even make a way at all.

That God would even make a way at all for us to be saved but he did. Jesus the eternal word of God descended from heaven and took on human flesh because he was fully God he could not sin and because he was fully human he was able to fulfill all that the law required with total and with absolute perfection.

We've all been poisoned. We've all been cursed by sin. Our sin the Bible says puts us under the wrath of God. If we are to be rescued the source of that rescue must come from outside of ourselves just as those who were bitten by the serpents could not rescue themselves unless divine intervention took place so we too are helpless against sin's poisonous effects.

If we are to be saved it must also be because of divine intervention and so Jesus in the place of the snake on the cross became our source of healing our source of rescue from the poison of sin and from the wrath of God for what we've done.

[31:00] Moses lifted up the snake but he was not the source of the people's rescue. The people weren't directed to look to Moses whom the law was given to but to the image that was on the pole.

Just as the snake was lifted up Jesus says so too he will be lifted up. In Numbers 21 the snake on the pole was a picture of God's curse upon the people for their sins against him foreshadowing the curse that Jesus would become for our sins as he was lifted up on another pole the cross.

Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:21 for our sake he God the father made him Jesus Christ to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God and then in Galatians 3:13 he says Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us for it is written cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.

On the cross Jesus became the embodiment of our sin. The embodiment of our curse and in so doing he took our sin and the curse away.

He lived the perfect life that the law required by being born under the law. Willingly shedding his blood and enduring the wrath of God for our sins by again becoming a curse and dying in our place.

[32:37] He is the spotless lamb of God who gave his life to atone for our sins. He suffered and he died so that we can experience the joy of everlasting life.

He was wounded to make us well. He was pierced and he was slaughtered that we may be whole. And he proved on the third day when he arose from the dead that he is the son of man.

That he is the son of God. That he has rescued us from our sins and its curse by attaining victory for us over our greatest foes.

Satan, sin, and death. We are more than conquerors because our mighty conqueror has descended from heaven. He has become our curse.

He has endured God's wrath and he has rescued us from sin's enslavement. If you know that Jesus has rescued you from your sins then you know that he has set you free and you are free indeed.

[33:52] And so we have seen two observations about the new birth. First of all Jesus is the son of man. Second that Jesus is the sinner's only source of rescue.

And now here that Jesus gives eternal life to those who look upon him and believe. What must you do? What can you do? Whoever believes in him, whoever looks to him in faith has eternal life.

When our sins and God's wrath are taken away from us God becomes totally for us. And if God is for us we will never die but live forever in complete, total, abundant, and everlasting joy.

This is what Jesus was saying to Nicodemus. And this is what believers continue to declare to unbelievers to this day. Don't look inward for answers to your brokenness.

Don't look to yourself for salvation but look to Jesus Christ who was crucified for you. Look to him. Look to the sinless son of God who bore the sinless son of God's wrath that we deserved, who became a curse for sin-stricken people like you and me.

[35:12] Look to him. Look to him and believe. Now you might be wondering well what does that mean? What does that involve to look on him and believe?

Well it means to look to him and see the grace, the love, and the mercy of God in choosing to sacrifice his own son in your place for your sins sins that you could have eternal life.

If you can explain what this entails better than Charles Spurgeon who is known as the Prince of Preachers, a great pastor and theologian of the 19th century, on January 6th, 1850, when Charles

Spurgeon was 15 years old, he came to faith in Jesus Christ.

And I want to share with you, I know I've done this before and I'll probably do it again because I kind of like this guy. I'm going to share with you his own conversion experience about what it means to look and believe.

He says, I sometimes think I might have been in darkness and despair until now had it not been for the goodness of God in sending a snowstorm one Sunday morning while I was going to a certain place of worship.

[36 : 44] When I could go no further, I turned down a side street and came to a primitive Methodist chapel. In that chapel, there may have been a dozen or 15 people.

The minister did not come that morning, he was snowed up, I suppose. At last, a very thin looking man, a shoemaker or tailor or something of that sort, went up into the pulpit to preach.

He was obliged to stick to his text for the simple reason that he had little else to say. The text was, look unto me and be ye saved all the ends of the earth.

Isaiah 45, 22. He did not even pronounce the words rightly, but that did not matter. There was, I thought, a glimpse of hope in that text for me. The preacher began thus.

My dear friends, this is a very simple text indeed. It says, look. Now, looking doesn't take a deal of pain. It isn't lifting your foot or your finger.

[37 : 46] It is just look. Well, a man needn't go to college to learn to look. You may be the biggest fool and yet you can look. A man needn't be worth a thousand a year to be able to look.

Anyone can look. Even a child can look. But then the text says, look unto me. Many of you are looking to yourselves, but it's no use looking there.

You will never find any comfort in yourselves. Some look to God the Father. No, look to him by and by. Jesus Christ says, look unto me.

Some of you say, we must wait for the Spirit's working. You have no business with that just now.

Look to Christ. The text says, look to me. The good man, Spurgeon says, followed up his text in this way.

Look unto me, I am sweating in great drops of blood. Look unto me, I am hanging on the cross.

Look unto me, I am dead and buried. Look unto me, I rise again.

[38 : 48] Look unto me, I ascend into heaven. Look unto me, I am sitting at the Father's right hand.

Oh, poor sinner, look unto me, look unto me. And Spurgeon says, when this man had gone about the length of his tether, and he had managed to spend about ten or so minutes teaching this text, he then looked to Charles Spurgeon and made eye contact with him.

And fixing his eyes upon him, he said, young man, you look very miserable. Well, I did, Spurgeon says, but I had not been accustomed to have remarks made from the pulpit on my personal appearance before.

However, it was a good blow struck right home. And he continued, you will always be miserable, miserable in life, and miserable in death if you don't obey my text.

If you obey now this moment, you will be saved. Then lifting up his hands, he shouted as only a primitive Methodist could do, young man, look to Jesus.

Look, look, look. You have nothing to do but look and live. And Spurgeon says, I saw at once the way of salvation. I know not what else he said, I did not take much notice of it.

[40 : 12] I was so possessed with that one thought, like as when the brazen serpent was lifted up. The people only looked, and they were healed, and so it was with me.

I had been waiting to do 50 things, but when I heard that word, look, what a charming word it seemed to me. Oh, I looked until I could have almost looked my eyes away. There and then the cloud was gone.

The darkness had rolled away, and that moment I saw the sun. I could have risen that instant and sung with the most enthusiastic of them, of the precious blood of Christ and the simple faith which looks alone to him.

And now I say, ever since my faith, I saw the stream, thy flowing wounds supply. Redeeming love has been my theme, and shall be till I die. Two applications.

What do we do with this text? First, always be looking to Jesus. You look to Jesus at the moment of your salvation, and every day afterwards, you keep looking to him.

[41 : 21] You keep reminding yourself by looking at him of the love of God for you, of his forgiveness, his kindness, his mercy, and his grace.

And you understand that your greatest problem that you'll ever face in this life, your problem of sin that separates you from God, has been taken care of now and forevermore.

When life is good, look to Jesus. When life is hard, look to Jesus. Every day of your life, look to him and remind yourself of what he's done to save you from your sins and give you eternal life.

And then second, encourage others to look to Jesus. Encourage your brothers and sisters in Christ to walk by faith and not by sight, to fight the good fight, to have faith, to continue to trust and know that God is near and that Jesus Christ has paid it all.

Encourage others to look to Christ who are unbelievers. Encourage them to look and believe, to see what God has done, to see sin and its curse that we are all under and the great love and mercy of God to send his son to set us free, to look to him, to not try to earn or work salvation, but to trust in him in faith that he is the son of God who has come to take away our sins.

[43:00] Always be looking to Jesus. Encourage others to do the same. God for God him. God him. be a man!

God will him. Thank you.