

## **“Snake on a Stick ”**

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Continuing a series on the Gospel of John

John 3.1-17

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Now there was a particular person, of the Pharisee party, named Nicodemus. He belonged to the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one can do the signs you are doing unless God is with him.”

Jesus replied, “This is very important. No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born once again from above.”

“How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”

Jesus answered, “Again, this is very important. No one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born from water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born once again from above.’ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

“How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

“You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? This is very important! We know what we are talking about, and we give evidence about what we have seen. But you do not accept our evidence. I have told you people about earthly things and you do not believe. How then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone up into heaven except the one who came down out of heaven. That is the Human Son.

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Human Son must be lifted up, so that every single person who is trusting this may, because of him, have deep, lasting life. For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that every single person who is simply entrusting themselves to him would never be destroyed, but would have a deep, lasting life. For God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but to rescue the world through the Son.

John 3.1-17

Adapted from the New International Version

We're continuing our look at this conversation Jesus had with Nicodemus. That means we're continuing to talk about the "birds and the bees." No, not those ones. This is much weirder, and more delightful and vital for life. This is a different sort of "birds and bees." It's a sign, a snake, a stick, and a son.

First, the sign.

[Hold up a "John 3:16" sign.]

Recognize it? There was a time when you'd watch sports on tv, and there would be this guy. He'd always have great seats! He'd be holding up this sign. "John 3:16." We just heard it, in the Scripture reading:

*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son,  
that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*

If you want the good news of Jesus in a nutshell, that's it. We'll definitely come back to it. But if we want to grasp it fully, we need first to talk about a snake.

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[Holding toy snake.]

Snakes are fascinating, wonderful creations of God.

I loath them. If this were real, I would not be near it. Snakes scare me.

Jesus mentions a snake that could save me.

Just before the John 3:16, "God so loved the world" part, Jesus gives us the "Moses lifting the snake" part. As if they are connected. Which they are.

As Nicodemus certainly knew, the episode is from the Book of Numbers.<sup>1</sup> It's a weird tale. God has given Moses to lead Israel. God has saved them from slavery in Egypt. God has brought them safely through the sea. At Mount Sinai, God has given them the Law for Life. God has sustained them in a dry, barren desert.

They grumble. They complain. *"This has all been a huge mistake! We can't trust God!"*

More than once, God "has it up to here" with them, because they are just like us, and you know how we get. This time, God sends "fiery serpents" among them. They bite. Some people die.

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<sup>1</sup> Numbers 21.4-9.

Everyone freaks out! (Me too!) They rush to Moses, pleading for help. Moses prays.

God tells Moses to do this. (It's a weird story.) Craft a bronze snake statue. Hoist it high on a pole. When someone is bitten, they can simply look at the bronze snake on a stick, and they will live. Moses does it. They do it. God saves them.

I said it was weird. Jesus thought it important! Why?

### III

Remember, we have "John 3:16." Now we have the snake on a stick. The snake points to the sign.

Trying to understand this, it helped me to put these verses side-by-side. We can see how they mirror each other, like parallel lines in a poem.

#### verse 14

- 1) **Moses**
- 2) **lifted up**
- 3) **the snake**
- 4) [so **those bitten**]
- 5) [could **see**]
- 6) [and **live**]

#### verses 14-15

- 3) [by whom?]
- 2) must be **lifted up**
- 1) **The Human Son**<sup>2</sup>
- 4) [so who?]
- 5) could **trust this**
- 6) and **have deep, lasting life.**

#### verse 16

- 1) **God**
- 2) **gave**
- 3) **God's only Son**
- 4) so **those perishing**
- 5) could **trust him**
- 6) and **have deep, lasting life.**

After I did this, I noticed how they match up.

- The rebels in the wilderness are snake-bit and dying. We who rebel against God are spiritually wounded and perishing.
- God acts through Moses. God acts in Jesus, who is God with us.<sup>3</sup>
- Moses lifts the snake. Jesus, the Human Son, lifts himself on the cross. (In the Gospel of John, Jesus' is clearly in control of his death. He is not a passive victim.)
- Those dying of snake bite can look at the snake. We who are perishing from sin's poison can entrust ourselves to Jesus.
- They received the antidote to the venom, and we are rescued for deep, lasting life.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> I find it difficult to know how to translate the Greek phrase *ho huios tou anthropou*. Traditionally it is translated as "Son of Man." However, *anthropos* is neutral term which refers to man/woman, or humanity/persons in general. Sometimes translators render it "Human One," which reflects the gender neutrality, as well as the common usage of the Hebrew phrase *ben adam* to refer to a generic person. I've chosen "Human Son" because *huios* means "son" and to maintain the linguistic echo with "God's Son."

<sup>3</sup> In the language of the Gospel's prologue, Jesus is the Word-who-is-God, made flesh (John 1:14).

<sup>4</sup> I'm following Dale Bruner's translation of *zōēn aiōnion*, often rendered "eternal life," as "deep, lasting life." It conveys better the reality that this life is more than "living forever," and something we can experience only in the future. See Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John, A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 194.

## IV

I wondered why Jesus is talking this way. Then, I realized he is getting us ready for what we will soon see. Jesus will be lifted on a cross. A man crucified. What does that mean? It will look like he is being made a spectacle, a public display of shame, defeat and humiliation. It will look like we're all seeing death's victory over him. If death can defeat him, the Human Son, our representative . . . we are all doomed.

Jesus wants us to see it differently, though. He wants us to see what is really going on. When you see Jesus on the Cross, remember the snake on the stick. For the weapon of death, will be the unlocking of life. Jesus' apparent defeat will be the seal of our deliverance. His shame will be our salvation. That display of death's power will be its undoing. That spectacle of his weakness will reveal his mighty strength. His humiliation will be his glorification.<sup>5</sup>

He will be raised up to his death, for our life.

Remember the "birds and the bees." That's about how our natural life begins.

The "snake on a stick," pointing to "the Son on the Cross" is how our fully-human, new life begins. Deep life, with all the fullness God gives. Lasting life, for death's power is broken. Sure, it still wins its battles, but it is finished.

Remember earlier in the conversation with Nicodemus. Jesus tells us what is needed to see and experience God's Kingdom. That's the presence and community of the royal, living God.<sup>6</sup> What do we need? New birth. We need to be born anew. We need to be birthed again, by God this time.

The Son on the Cross makes this new life possible.

## V

So what do we do?

Believe. Simply believe.

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<sup>5</sup> We've already heard hints of this in the Gospel of John:

- John the Baptist saw Jesus and exclaimed, "*Look! Here is God's lamb, who is taking away the world's sin!*" (1:29). "Lamb" suggests sacrifice for protection, and the result promised is rescue.
- Challenging the religious elite, Jesus said, "*Destroy this temple,*" — he was speaking about himself and his own body — "*and I will raise it up in three days.*" (2:10). He speaks of his violent death, and the result promised is resurrection to new life.
- To his very first followers, we heard Jesus say "*I assure you that you will see heaven open and God's angels going up to heaven and down to earth on the Human Son.*" (1:51) The promise is the revealing of the Chosen One of God, who represents us all.

So we have already heard about sacrifice for salvation, death then resurrection, and a climactic revealing of the One in whom God is changing everything.

<sup>6</sup> See the quote from Barnabas Lindars in Bruner, 200.

I wonder if “trust” might be a better word. “Belief” has a sense of being confident something is true. “Trust” has a fuller sense, of both being confident something is true and staking yourself on it. I can believe this is a strong chair, and stay standing. Trust is sitting on the chair.

What do we do, when we see Jesus lifted high?

Trust. Simply trust.

Entrust yourself to him. That’s it. Nothing more needs to be added. Nothing more needs to be done. Entrust yourself to this One who has done everything needed.

That’s faith: entrusting yourself to Jesus.

Entrust yourself to the new life he has made possible. Entrust yourself to the new birth he can give you. Entrust yourself to the healing, the hope, the salvation and the glory of him in whom the fullness of God abides.

Simple trust.

## VI

When you see Jesus, lifted high, behold God’s love for you. Not just you, but the whole world, the whole cosmos, which God so loves. Which God loves so much, that God gave Godself for it all, and for you.

We can speak of love. I can say “I love you.” Yet if I don’t act that love, if I don’t do that love, then it is nothing. Love that is just spoken isn’t really love. Love must be done.

When you see Jesus, lifted high, behold the love of God being done.

I desperately pray I’m never put to this test. I love my children, deeply beyond measure. Yet if — and I pray not — but if one of them disappoints me terribly, and betrays me viciously, and denies me cruelly, and tries to destroy me totally . . . will I still “do love” to them?

Love that is truly love, says Yes!

When you see Jesus, God the Son, lifted high on that stick, for you and your salvation . . . yes, even you . . . yes, even me . . . yes, the whole creation . . . when you see Jesus, lifted high to die so everything can live and flourish again . . . you see God’s love, saying Yes!