

Could it be that simple? Snakes had slithered into Israel’s camp. They were there because God’s people had sinned: God had been so gracious in providing food for them, but they weren’t content with what God gave. Grumbled and complained. So when God sent venomous snakes with a burning bite that left many of them perishing, Israel had no one to blame but themselves. Yet in love, God also provided a cure. Had Moses lift up a bronze snake on a pole of wood. Told them, “Look at it and live!” Really? Could it be that simple?

That was the question Nicodemus was struggling with. We might never have made the connection if Jesus hadn’t made it for us in a night-time conversation with a man named Nicodemus: **Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up...**

You see, a serpent had slithered into God’s perfect creation. He was there to get God’s people to sin. God had been so gracious in providing food for Adam and Eve, but he told them not to be content with what God gave. To eat the one fruit God forbade. And with a bite, that serpent bit us all. Our sin had left all of us perishing, with no one to blame but ourselves. Yet in love, God provided a cure. Lifted his Son up on a cross, tells us all, “Look and live!” Could it be that simple?

These are some of the most familiar bible verses – most of you have known them since you were this tall. In them is the “gospel in a nutshell” – a one verse summary of the good news of our Savior. But you need to hear them still. Not just because they’re some of the most beautiful in scripture – but because there’s an inner skeptic in us, just as there was in Nicodemus – that wonders whether this good news is too good to be true. So listen again as Jesus points you to the cross and says, “Look and live.”

¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶ “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. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. ¹⁹ This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. ²¹ But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.”

Jesus had already been turning Nicodemus world upside down. He was a Pharisee, and like most Pharisees, he assumed that being saved was all about being born a Jew and doing what the law required. And the first thing Jesus says to him is, “No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born again.” Wait a minute...if you need a rebirth to be saved, born a Jew means nothing. And being born isn’t something you do, it’s done to you...so your works mean nothing, either. You’re saved by the work of another

But Jesus is just getting started. He just said how the Son of Man *must* be lifted up as a cure for sins. Now Jesus explains to him why it was a must.

For God so loved the world. And I bet it shocked Nicodemus all over again. Sure, God loves Abraham's kids. Especially the ones that are good at keeping his laws. But *the world*? He loves Gentiles who worship other gods? He loves people who could care less about his laws – tax collectors and prostitutes?

We could share his shock. Just think about who's included in that word, "world." Dr. Larry Nassar is. He molested more than a hundred girls over a period of two decades. And God loves him? Nikolas Cruz is. He killed 17 and afterward laughed and said he wished he'd killed more. And God loves him? Kim Jong Un is a ruthless dictator who kills opposition and lives in luxury while his people die in poverty. And God loves him?

We might think of people like that when we hear Jesus' description of the world later in this lesson. People who **love the darkness** of sin. And we might ask with Nicodemus: How could God love people like that?

But the truth is, then we're believing the same deadly lie as Nicodemus. The lie is this: That God's love depends on us. Who we are. What we do. And that can lead us to two ugly places: First, the self-righteous pride of a Pharisee. You can hear it in the question: "How could God love people like that?" The flipside of that question is: "It's perfectly understandable that God would love someone like me."

But the other ugly place it can lead is despair. When we realize the truth of the matter: That I *am* the world Jesus describes here. That a part of me loves the darkness, too. That the sinful desires that sometimes pass through this heart make me as guilty in God's eyes as a Larry Nassar. The anger that so easily rises in me when I don't get my way earns me the same sentence as a murderer in God's court. That the way I sometimes see others – as pawns that I can use to get what I want or get in the way of what I want – makes me just as wicked as a Kim Jong Un.

Or, like Nicodemus, when I realize that the darkness I hold on to isn't my sins; it's my good works. When I realize the truth, that they aren't truly good, because they aren't perfect, which makes them as damning as any of my other sins. When I realize a part of me doesn't even want to step in the light, because it'll expose that. Then I might well wrestle with the question: How could God love someone like me?

God doesn't leave us in despair: **God so loved the world.** Clearly there was nothing about me to love! But that didn't stop God from loving me. Could it really be true? Well, if God loves the world, and I'm a part of the world, God most certainly loves me! That alone is news wonderful enough we could meditate on it for ages and not grow tired of it.

But it gets better. God's love isn't just a sentiment that sat idly in his heart. It saw our need, and it acted. **God so loved the world that he gave.** And what did he give? Not just trinkets and baubles. He gave his brightest and best. He gave his dearest treasure, his One and Only Son – true God with him from eternity. Think of it! When we were busy giving God our worst, he gives us his best!

And he didn't just give him by sending him to earth. That would already be far more than we deserved, but we needed more, so God did more. He gave him by sacrificing him on the cross. Gave him over to the death and eternal death that our sins deserved there, so that we could look to him and live. For a world that didn't even want a cure from sin, God at such a steep cost gives us one anyways.

Jesus emphasizes how undeserved this love is when he says: **For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.** You'd expect God to come into a world of rebels with the condemnation we deserve. But God in love did the opposite. God in love came into this world in order to suffer the condemnation we deserved. God came into this world to win us salvation. So that we might look to the cross and live!

Look to the cross, and never doubt it. No matter who you are or what you've done, God loves you. It's a love that doesn't depend on you! There's nothing you can do to make God love you more. There's nothing you can do to make God love you less. As far as news goes, that's certainly "too good." But it is not too good to be true! The cross proves it's so.

But when you do, you'll also find life. With that bronze snake in the desert, one look saved them from death. It sounds too easy, right? Almost foolish. I wonder if some of those Israelites refused to look and died because *they didn't believe God's promise.*

That really gets to the heart of the matter. It was faith in God's promise that saved them. Those who believed the promise looked to the snake and were healed; those who refused to believe didn't, and died.

Jesus makes it pretty clear to Nicodemus that it works the same way with him. He's already said it twice - "that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life" – now he says it again to make sure we get the picture. **Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.**

The eternal life that Christ won for the whole world on the cross is God's gift through faith. You and I and everyone else who believes God's promise look to the cross and receive the healing for our sins that Christ won there, a healing that leads to eternal life.

Seems too easy, doesn't it? Shouldn't we have to *do* something to get to heaven? That's what the jailer at Philippi thought. He asked Paul, "What must I do to be saved?" Paul set the record straight: "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved." No hoops to jump through. No 12 steps to eternal life. Just look and believe.

But we have to remember that what sounds so simple is impossible for us to do on our own. Jesus told Nicodemus: ¹⁹ **This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.** The light he's talking about here is himself. And the men who loved darkness – well, we've already seen that that's us. You heard it in the second lesson today, too: we're born dead in sin, God's enemies. We can't look to the cross in saving faith on our own.

But the message of the gospel that calls us to believe also has God's power to give us faith in it. Take Nicodemus as an example. We don't know if it was the gospel Jesus shared in this conversation, or if it was later. What we do know is that, after the death of Jesus, when the rest of his followers were nowhere to be found, Nicodemus is taking Jesus' body off the cross and preparing it for burial – at great risk to himself. God led him to look and live!

His love has done the same for us. For most, that happened in baptism. But whether there or through the word, the Holy Spirit brought you that new, spiritual life that Christ won for you on the cross, a life that begins here on earth and reaches its fullness in the eternity of heaven.

Have you ever heard of the Busy Bible? It's a bible for toddlers, made out of cloth. Every page is a story told with one picture, and there's always something for the child to do. That's why it's called the "Busy" Bible. For the story of Noah, you stuff little cloth animals into the ark. For

Joseph, you buckle his coat of many colors. Do you know what's on the last page? It's the bronze snake on a cross. The story for that page is: "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up..." It's the only page without any buttons to button, or belts to buckle. The parent gets to that page, and tells the child: "Jesus died for you, so there's nothing more for you to do. Just look and believe."

Yes, it really is that simple. In his incredible love, God made it that simple. He sent his Son to die for our sins. He brought us to faith, and gave us the eternal life Christ won for us. Salvation is God's gift, from first to last. And that's why we'll praise him here on earth, and forever in heaven. Amen.