

Message: The Best Life Ever
By Senior Pastor Tom Harrison
John 3:9-15
The Best Ever Sermon Series

“How can these things be?” Being “born again” was a hard concept for Nicodemus because the Pharisees believed salvation came by keeping the rules. As the quote goes, *“I get my religion the old-fashioned way—I earn it.”* The term for this is “works-righteousness.” Many believe God will judge us favorably if our good deeds outweigh our bad ones and that we don’t have to be the best, but we just need a passing grade and God will love us. We believe we must establish our own righteousness. Like the Pharisees, our problem is we often think we must save ourselves. It is easy for us to become self-righteous. If we cannot earn salvation, how is it possible? Jesus said what is impossible with people is not impossible with God (Mark 10:27).

Jesus reminded Nicodemus of Moses’ plan with the bronze serpent, Nehushtan, in the wilderness wanderings of the Israelites. Poisonous snakes began to bite the Israelites when they bitterly complained about their mistreatment. They had to look upon the bronze serpent to be healed (saved) of a snakebite. They dragged Nehushtan around for nearly 1,000 years and worshipped it as an idol. King Hezekiah finally destroyed it. Jesus explained to Nicodemus that He will be lifted up on the cross like Nehushtan. All who look upon Him (trust Him) will be saved. Like Nehushtan in the wilderness, Jesus will remove the sting of death from all who will look upon Him. He offers the best life ever—here, now and forever. APPLICATION: Salvation has two parts. First, we need a savior. We cannot save ourselves. Since all are bitten by sin, we die without intervention. Our good news is God acted. Jesus is our Savior. Second, we need to respond. Not everyone who hears the good news will look to the One who has been lifted up. The Savior has come. An offer is extended. We must respond. A gift is not a gift until it is received and used. Are you still trying to save yourself? Are you trying to win God’s favor? Today is the day to look to Him to do what is impossible for you.

The context of John 3 is two-fold: John 2:23-25 *Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he **knew all people** and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew **what was in man**.* The people in Jerusalem were watching Him. He didn’t trust them. He knew something was wrong with **all people**.

Last week, in John 3:1-8, we saw that Nic came at night – but in contrast to Jesus who was the light of the world, Nic was really in the dark. No wonder he was confused. Who wouldn't be? This is the Nic's 3rd question of Jesus: *"How can these things be?"*

John 3:9-15

Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰ *Jesus answered him, "Are you the **teacher of Israel** and yet you do not understand these things?"* ¹¹ *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.* ¹² *If I have told you **earthly** things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?* ¹³ *No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.* ¹⁴ *And as **Moses** lifted up the **serpent** in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,* ¹⁵ *that **whoever** believes in him may have eternal life.*

It was like Nic asked, *"I don't understand the new birth. I've never seen it. How is it possible?"* An honest skeptic with genuine questions will believe if their questions are answered. Other skeptics play a "gotcha game" & will never believe.

Nic's faith seemed to develop over time (he defended Jesus in John 7). I wonder what Nic thought when he saw Jesus lifted up at the cross. He helped Joseph take Jesus' body to the tomb (John 19). Salvation for Nic didn't come all at once. He had to think about it. This is important. Some have dramatic new birth experiences (mine). Others, like Dana, can't place a definite time or place when they first believed, but believe. The new birth may be an event but it is always a process. The important thing is not "when?" it happened, but that we trust in Jesus.

Jesus recalled the story after the Israelites exited Egypt. God's power was shown in numerous miracles. They literally walked across the Sea on dry ground. Moses sent 12 spies into the Promised Land about 18 months after their Exodus. They returned with good/bad news. *"It's wonderful. The land is flowing with milk & honey. It has wonderful fruit but there's a problem. The people who live there are strong."* 10/12 spies said, "We're defeated." Like a fish story, the Canaanites grew bigger each time the story was told. Joshua & Caleb said, *"We can do it!"* But the Israelites took their eyes off the Lord, saw their own limitations & embraced the negative. A spirit of grumbling, murmuring, & complaint followed. The next 40 years were spent wandering in the wilderness where they all died, except for Joshua & Caleb who entered the Land.

Use wisdom, but don't be afraid. 2020 has been the year of wandering. I'm very concerned that the same spirit of pessimism, depression, despair, anxiety, worry, & fear is prevailing in the hearts of believers. Rom 8:15 *For you did not receive*

the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!"

Living in fear has consequences. We see the results of a fear-based mindset in Numbers 21:4-9. *From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. 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, and we loathe this worthless food." Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people 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 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, 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.*

We've had serpent (not a camel, kangaroo, frog, or a sloth) problems since A&E were tempted in Gen. 3. In the wilderness, fiery serpents are afflicting people. The remedy? A bronze serpent lifted up on a pole. If they would exercise faith & look up at it, they could live. It didn't cost anything. They didn't have to develop a vaccine, have serpent-killing training & crusades, or make promises before God to reform their lives to not be so negative. If bitten, there was one way to be saved – look on the bronze serpent that was lifted up. Jesus used this Old Testament story to illustrate that HE will be lifted up on the cross. Looking on the serpent on the stick makes no sense. It makes no sense to many people to look to Jesus to save them either. As always, we have a choice. We can try to figure things out on our own & save ourselves by our own effort – & die as a result; or we can respond in faith to God's gift to redeem us from the curse of the serpent & look to Jesus who will save us.

A footnote. The Israelites ended up dragging that bronze serpent (called "Nehushtan" – 2 Kings 18:4) around for 800 years as they turned it into an idol they worshipped. King Hezekiah had it broken into pieces & destroyed.

Jesus uses the bronze serpent to illustrate 2 things:

1.) **The Bad News.** We're all snake bit. Sin has fallen on us like a virus & spread to everyone. We're all sinners. Just as the Israelites were powerless to save themselves from the fiery serpents, so we are powerless to save ourselves from the bite of the serpent in the garden. Sin entered the world & it spread to everyone. All are affected. We cannot save ourselves. We are terminal. We will not get better. There is no hope.

2.) **The Good News.** Jesus will be lifted up on the cross. There is only one remedy, cure, vaccine – it is from Jesus, who died for our sins. We are saved by only one thing: looking to Jesus. That is how we are born again. Our pride prevents this. We want to do something. There is nothing that can be done other than trust in Jesus.

Application: ¹⁵ *that **whoever believes in him may have eternal life.** “**Whoever believes in him**” – salvation is open to all.*

In John 3, Nic came to Jesus. He is the “upper crust” of society. This wealthy & respected ruler, & teacher of the Pharisees was a leading citizen. But Nic has a snake bite problem, too. In the next chapter (4), Jesus asks a social outcast from the lowest part of culture who is the polar opposite of Nic. She is a woman with a sexual history. She is not Jewish but a despised Samaritan. He is “righteous.” She is a sinner. She is like the prodigal son and Nic represents the older brother. As Paul wrote in Romans 1, she is the one who sins outwardly, while Nicodemus sins inwardly. Even the most degraded & miserable sinner who looks to Christ will be saved. Perfection is not required – but faith is.

How ‘bout you? This communion table is open to you. “**whoever believes in him may have eternal life.**” You can be a “whoever.” Acknowledge God’s great love for you revealed in Jesus Christ. Confess your sin and your need to God. *If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* (Romans 10:9-10)

We are about to make this confession right now. Maybe you’ve never had that conversion “experience.” Why not make it right now...today...at communion. Be at one with Christ...and one with His Body, the Church. Look up. Lift your eyes.