

**<sup>14</sup> Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. <sup>16</sup> “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. <sup>17</sup> For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. <sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup> Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. <sup>21</sup> 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.”**

Sometimes you hear a fellow Christian say, “I just don’t have enough faith.” But why do they say that? How do they measure their faith? And how do they plan on fixing that? I fear that many think it means that they just need to grit their teeth and stop being afraid and start being more cheerful. Is that how you get faith? Is that what faith is all about?

In 1 Corinthians chapter 13, Paul wrote, “**now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.**” Perhaps love is the greatest because it is God’s love that produces faith and hope; shows us who our God is; so that we are not afraid of Him; so that we hope in Him and believe in Him. Today’s text shows us how this loving God generates the faith that is needed to be saved.

The background of John chapter 3 has Jesus speaking with Nicodemus, a member of the Sanhedrin; a well renowned and powerful group of 70 men that ruled over the Jewish people. Nicodemus knew that Jesus was special; that He was from God. The Holy Spirit was working on him, but Nicodemus didn’t seem to have faith in Jesus yet. He wanted to personally talk with Jesus during a private time.

Jesus told Nicodemus that he needed to be born again. This scared Nicodemus, because he couldn’t figure out any way that he could climb back in his mother’s womb and start over. He didn’t get it; that his rebirth had to miraculously produced by the Holy Spirit. It wasn’t logical to him. (This shouldn’t surprise us, because faith isn’t logical. Nobody “gets it” with their mere intellect.) So Jesus spoke the Word of God in order to bring Nicodemus to life and give him new birth.

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Remember the story - the Israelites were on the way to the Promised Land. They had run out of water, so they accused God of purposely bringing them out into the desert to die. Just prior to this God had graciously provided them with water from a rock - in a miraculous way. But this time God was not so patient with them. They should have learned from His generosity not to make such accusations of God. So He sent snakes - poisonous snakes - to bite them and die - and many of them did. If they thought they were thirsty and miserable before, they had no idea of how miserable life would be until now. Poison only makes you more thirsty. Many of the Israelites died from those snake bites, and many more were dying. They became desperate. So they begged Moses to pray to the LORD for mercy - the same LORD they had just shook their fist at.

This little picture of Israelite history is a sad microcosm of what has to happen before people will ever look to God. They have to become desperate, otherwise they will usually be more than happy to ignore God and go on their merry way or just assume that He owes them food and water. Even those who are sick and dying will typically try anything but turn to God to save themselves. Call the medic. Apply a tourniquet. It is an even sadder fact that those who have faith often times lose their faith when things become too comfortable. Their sinful natures end up liking the comfort so much that they live for it. God has to shake things up. He has to make things desperate. Imminent death from a poisonous bite did the trick.

The Israelites wanted God to take away the snakes altogether. That was their prayer request. But God had a better idea: let the snakes keep coming and biting; but provide a remedy from the bite. What a strange remedy! Make a bronze snake and put it on a pole, then promise the Israelites that anyone who looks at it will live and not die from the snake bite. It was a simple and yet a profound remedy.

He put the snake up on a pole. Another name for that pole would be like a banner. Think of armies that rally behind a banner or how we place banners up in the front of the church. He didn't hide it in the ground or conceal it in a tent where only the richest could enter. He said anyone who looked to the snake would live - free of charge and without limit - so none would want to venture too far from the snake. The snake was made out of bronze so that it wouldn't deteriorate or melt in the heat. It would easily last through their journey in the desert. What a simple thing to do! They didn't have to do anything. Just look at the snake and God would fulfill His promise!

It was such an irrational thing to do. How would looking at something remove the poison from my veins? It didn't make sense. But God promised He would deliver them by simply looking at the snake. It was that foolish and yet powerful promise - attached to that snake on the pole - that generated faith for people to just look and believe and be saved! That is exactly how God worked.

Just as the Israelites suffered and died as a result of a snake bite, so we also suffer and die as a result of Satan - the snake in the Garden of Eden's bite. Paul says that we are born spiritually dead, and we are all on the pathway to physical death as a result of that bite; when Adam and Eve fell into sin and plunged our world into a world of unbelief.

God's remedy was not to eliminate death or to get rid of Satan and his demons; but to provide a remedy for death and weapon to fight against Satan with. Jesus told Nicodemus, "Just like the Israelites looked to the snake, I too will be lifted up from the earth for all to see and all to be saved."

Where in the world have they not seen the banner of God's salvation in the cross? Who does not know what happened on the cross? God's Word makes it clear. It says that this is where God in the flesh died; where Jesus was blamed for the sins of the world and took God's punishment on Himself. The Word says that Jesus paid for all sins of the entire world; from the worst pervert to the laziest bum; all of them at this one place. Reason would laugh at the idea of that dead and helpless man being our God. But God's Word says it clearly and quite reasonably within the confines of faith; this is where the scales of justice were met. The cross is where God was damned for us; where Jesus paid for our sins and satisfied God's wrath. This is the banner that God calls the world to stand behind and under for salvation.

This cross is given to us in such simple ways. God still uses physical things to find Christ in yet today - in the waters of baptism and the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. Here God promises incredibly miraculous things. Wash your infant in these waters and the infant will be bathed in Christ; put to death with Christ; set aside by God as His child; looked at as holy and blameless. Eat this bread and wine and receive the body and blood of the Lord; that which was shed on the cross for you. Why? For the forgiveness of your sins! How do we know this? The water doesn't change colors. The child doesn't behave any differently. The bread and wine doesn't taste any different! Believe what God says!

There is no other place to be saved. Jesus makes it clear **“that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.** <sup>16</sup> **“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.** <sup>17</sup> **For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.** Notice those two terms that focus all of our faith to one place - whoever believes IN HIM; to save the world THROUGH HIM. There is no other place. There is no other way.

Salvation is not about who sins less or who gives more. It's not about who has better intentions or who smiles the most. He promises that all who look to Christ will be saved; no matter how tall or short you are; how old or young you are; what kind of sins you've committed; whether your neighbor is more generous than you or friendly than you or not. **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.** It's not as if there was enough room for those who didn't believe. It's not as if there are certain sins that Jesus didn't die for. God so loved the WORLD. It's a big tent with room for all; so no one can claim that Jesus didn't want them. He paid for them - knowing that many wouldn't take His invitation. The only reason people are damned to hell is simply for the fact that many didn't want themselves or their children to stand behind that banner. They didn't trust it to save.

Why wouldn't anyone want to stand behind this banner if it's free and if it's for all?

**This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.** <sup>20</sup> **Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.** <sup>21</sup> **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.”**

It's because of fear! It's because of a sinful desire to cling to their sins. The story is told of the four year old boy whose hand was stuck in an expensive vase. His parents tried all they could to get it out; putting grease on his hand and pulling. But the boy just cried more. Finally they said, “Put your hand like this - stick your fingers straight out and flatten your hand as much as possible.” But the boys said, “But then I'd have to let go of the quarter!” He was willing to leave his hand in the vase all for a quarter; not realizing that if he let go he could have his hand free and save the vase from being shattered.

When Noah had too much to drink his one son wanted to poke fun of his father and expose his shameful nakedness to the world. The other two sons didn't find the humor in it. They backed into the tent with a blanket without looking to cover their father's nakedness. Satan wants you to think that exposing your sins to Christ will make Him hate you and make fun of you and expose you to the world.

The cross tells us a different story. Jesus wants to cover your sins. There is nothing to fear in the light of Christ. People are afraid to confess their sins because they think that Jesus is going to make fun of them or only say, "Be damned to hell." What they don't see in the cross and in Christ is a Savior who wants to wrap His arms around them with His mercy and forgiveness. This is the truth. What does Jesus tell you to let go of? Drugs? Adultery? Slander? What are those but empty promises when compared to holding Christ and His love and forgiveness? It is the love of Christ that calls on you to let go of your defenses and rest in His grace and mercy found at the cross.

What is faith? How does one get it? I think of a child named Stephen. He's only 14 years old. He's suffered his whole life with medical problems. His third transplant is not working and he is dying in his father's arms. The father is a pastor. He's told him of Jesus and what Jesus promised him. He tells his father he is ready to die. He's tired. He doesn't want any more transplants. His father - the pastor - says no - but Stephen says yes, and so does God.

I see Nicodemus. When Jesus died, he was no longer afraid to be associated with him. He brought 75 pounds of spices to bury Jesus in. Even though Jesus was dead, he still believed and wanted to honor Him as His Messiah.

Where does faith come from? The words of promise cry out to those who've been bitten by Satan's lies; on the brink of death; desperate for hope. It says to them, "Here is a place to find hope. Here is a place to find forgiveness for whatever you've done; wherever you've failed. It is here at the cross that you know you have a God who loves you and wants you in heaven." When you hear those words; when you see that sacrifice for YOU; it moves you to look to the cross and say, "Here is my life. Here is my salvation; the only place I can stand and live." It isn't a bland faith. It is a specific faith in a specific Person and Work of Jesus Christ. That's how faith is worked in the heart; through words and promises of God in Christ crucified for you. Amen.