



10 March 2024 | 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent

## *Jesus uses a shocking analogy to describe His mission*

### **Intro |**

If I was to ask you to call out all the symbols Jesus used to describe himself during his earthly ministry, I'm sure you'd come up with a few.

What about: A caring shepherd, a light, a vine, a bridegroom, a cornerstone, bread and water, etc.

However, I notice that none of you have suggested the symbol that Jesus used for himself during his conversation with Nicodemus.

Would you believe Jesus called himself a snake!

Now ... I absolutely hate snakes! And I know I'm not the only one. The other day a snake was sunning itself out on the front driveway near the boutique. Believing that a snake was not a good mascot for our beautiful boutique, Rosemary decided it had to go! With full gusto and courage, she was ready to take a shovel and strike its head – until she discovered it was already dead.

We all breathed a sigh of relief – the snake had been defeated, the threat removed, we could live in peace once again!

But, why on earth would Jesus liken himself to such an evil creature as a snake?

### **Point 1 | Jesus has an evangelistic conversation with someone who is trying to understand spiritual realities, with an earthly mind.**

Let's listen in on the conversation Jesus had with Nicodemus and hear why Jesus uses such a shockingly wonderful picture to describe his own death.

Nicodemus was a Jewish leader who found Jesus utterly intriguing, if not also completely baffling. He came to speak with Jesus under the cover of night, and admitted to Jesus that he recognised he was a teacher who had come from God (3:2).

Jesus didn't beat around the bush, but responded bluntly, "Unless you are born again you cannot see the kingdom of God." (v3)

Nicodemus finds Jesus' words completely baffling, wondering out aloud how it is possible for a person to re-enter their mother's womb. Jesus responded by explaining he is talking about a spiritual birth and that unless you experience it, you will never enter the kingdom of God — you will never be reconciled to God and forgiven and secured a place in God's heavenly kingdom.

Then he added that the Spirit of God is the one who causes the new birth, not humans. And the Spirit is as free as the wind in the way he does it. (verses 5-8)

Nicodemus is still at a loss, and asks, "How can these things be?" (v9)

Jesus then expresses his surprise, marvelling how it was possible for a teacher of God's laws not to understand such basic principles (v10).

Then Jesus revealed to Nicodemus that his problem was, even though he had heard a reliable testimony from Jesus and others, he had not yet "received" this testimony.

Nicodemus was not yet among those who had received Jesus, nor had he believed in his name. Therefore, Nicodemus – at this stage - had not been granted the right to become a child of God (see John 1:12)

Then Jesus says, [and I think I can hear some exasperation in his words], "But if you don't believe me when I tell you about earthly things, how can you possibly believe if I tell you about heavenly things?" (v12)

In effect Jesus is saying, "You keep pressing me for deeper and higher explanations of the new birth. But a heart of unbelief cannot discern the kinds of truth that I have to give you about the new birth experience."

Then, in verse 13, it is almost as though Jesus shifts gears.

## **Point 2 | To explain the spiritual mystery of the Gospel, Jesus uses a shocking analogy to explain God's reason for sending him into the world.**

It's like Jesus had to listen to the Spirit of God to know how to move Nicodemus so that he can gain the spiritual insight to understand what it is to be born again.

And don't you love that Jesus didn't just give up and say, "Oh well, since you don't get it, Nicodemus, I don't have any more to say to you? Come back after you have been born again, and I will give you the explanations you want."

No ... instead of giving up, Jesus used an analogy which Nicodemus would have been very familiar with – in an effort to explain a spiritual truth for those who desperately want to be born again.

Up to now, Jesus had been talking about the *process* of the new birth — it's spiritual, it happens by the work of the Spirit, it comes like the wind, and you can't explain it.

Now, however, Jesus begins to talk about the *basis* of the new birth; what He, the Son of Man, had come to do.

Through this analogy, Jesus tells Nicodemus *how* he may receive the Spirit's work of new birth. Jesus then launched into explaining *why* he is able to speak about heavenly mysteries with such authority and clarity.

It is as though Jesus was saying 'the reason I can give you heavenly explanations is that I have come down from heaven. No one else has gone into heaven and returned. I was in heaven with the Father, and I have come down. Now I am going to tell you what I came to do. This is the key to answer your question about how you can be born again and enter the kingdom of heaven (see verse 5).'

Jesus had to explain to Nicodemus that there was a greater obstacle blocking him from entering into the kingdom, than just trying to understand spiritual realities.

The biggest problem that stood between him and God – and it's the same problem that stands between any non-believer and God - is the wrath or judgement of God that stands against them.

Only when that judgement or punishment has been dealt with can God release the power of the Spirit to cause a person to be born again (see John 3:36).

That's what Jesus, Son of Man, came to do.

## **Point 3 | God sent Jesus to become the curse of sin, so that the punishment for our sin may be laid upon him.**

Then Jesus chose an analogy that Nicodemus would be familiar with, to explain what he came to do.

However, it is extremely shocking that Jesus would pick this particular one to describe his own work. Let's reread verses 14–15:

“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.”

Can you believe that – Jesus is comparing himself with a snake or a serpent!

Let's just recap, really briefly, what we read earlier (Numbers 21:4-9):

After God's people left Egypt, it didn't take long for them to grumble, complain, and express their desire to return to Egypt and even to slavery.

Again and again, Moses interceded on their behalf pleading with God to pardon their sins and forgive their hard-hearted rebellion. When they arrived at Mount Hor, they again became impatient, and again began to complain to Moses about God. “We are fed up with this manna and we're dying of thirst” (v5). In judgement against their rebellion, God sent poisonous snakes into the camp, biting them and killing some of them. When the people finally repented of their sin, God instructed Moses to make a bronze snake and place it upon a pole. God promised that when Moses lifted up this pole with its snake, anyone who looked at it would be healed and saved from death.

Let's notice a few things:

(1) The serpent on the pole was for those who had been bitten, those who had the poison of sin in them. Without God's intervention they would have died.

(2) In judgement, God sent snakes into the camp as punishment for their sin of ingratitude, murmuring and rebellion.

(3) So, the means God chose to rescue his people from *His own* curse is a picture of the curse itself.

(4) All they had to do to be saved from God's wrath is look at God's provision hanging on a pole. I'm sure you're seeing all the similarities.

As shocking as it is for Jesus to compare himself to a snake, he chose to, to help Nicodemus understand how to enter God's eternal kingdom of life. Jesus is saying he was going to be the picture of God's curse on the people.

That's exactly what Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians,

*“For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”* (2 Corinthians 5:2, also see Galatians 3:13)

In becoming like the snake, he was the embodiment of our sin, and the embodiment of our curse. By bearing our sin and death, he removed the poison of God's wrath from us, so that we may receive eternal life.

**Application | Let us fix our eyes on Jesus – who alone is our source of salvation and eternal life.**

So, what did Nicodemus need to do?

It is the same that we must do – not only to receive eternal life, but keep living the eternal life we've been granted every moment of every day.

We are to:

“Fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith” (Hebrews 12:1-2)

And as we behold him, the Spirit of God changes us from glory to glory until we reflect the light of Jesus Christ to others (2 Corinthians 3:18).