



The Anglican Parish of Whangaparaoa Peninsula
3 Stanmore Bay Road,
Whangaparaoa, Auckland, N.Z.
www.ststephenswgp.org.nz

Sermon

Saved by Grace

John 3:14-21; Ephesians 2:1-10

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We are moving through Lent towards Easter when we remember the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. These readings help us understand the significance of those great events.

Let's start with the gospel - it is still early in Jesus' ministry and this passage is part of the famous conversation with Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council and had the title "the teacher of Israel." He was a principal Jewish scholar of the day. He came to ask Jesus questions, not with ill-will but with humility, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no-one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."¹ We never learn what Nicodemus' questions were, because Jesus directed the conversation to the issue which was truly important for Nicodemus - entry into the Kingdom:

V2: "I tell you the truth, no-one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."²

Jesus was saying that as we are born in our natural state, we cannot see or enter the Kingdom of God. Something else has to happen, we must be "born again." In the following discussion, Jesus makes it clear that to enter God's kingdom the Holy Spirit must implant in one's heart life from heaven not just from earth. This is a spiritual event.

John refers to the same thing in Chapter 1 of his gospel:

... to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn-- not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God. - John 1:12-13 [NLT]

There is physical life but we need spiritual life. It is what is given to us when we are born again. It is a bit like this candle. As an unlit candle, it has physical matter. That is like natural life. If it is lit, then it has another very different existence. Now there is fire which represents spiritual life. But the candle cannot light itself. I have to apply the flame. Similarly, we cannot make spiritual life for ourselves it has to be given to us by the Holy Spirit.

That is the background to the Gospel passage. It starts with the "how" of the matter.

"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."³

¹ John 3:2

² John 3:3

³ John 3:14-15

Jesus said that he would be lifted up and all who believe in him would have eternal life. John consistently uses that expression “lifted up” to refer to the crucifixion. Believing in Jesus is to put your trust in him to save you. It is not mere intellectual agreement with a concept – it is life-saving trust. When we put our trust in Jesus crucified and risen as our saviour, we are born again and receive eternal life.

Jesus used the incident we heard about in the Old Testament reading as an illustration.

Snake in the Desert

The Hebrews were on their 40 year journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. They had been miraculously preserved through the plagues of Egypt, they had escaped from the Egyptian army through the Red Sea crossing. And here they were grumbling! Do you hear their disdain?

"Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!"⁴

That “miserable food” was manna – God’s miraculous daily provision for them, which Jesus called “bread from heaven.” So God sent punishment on them in the form of venomous snakes which were killing people. And their attitude changed- they said to Moses,

"We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us."⁵

The solution God gave Moses was to make a bronze snake and put it on a pole. When people were bitten, if they looked to the bronze snake they would be miraculously healed of the snake bite.

A type of Christ

This is an example of a Biblical type, where something occurs in the Old Testament which is a pattern for a New Testament principle. In this case, the problem which brought death was put on a pole and when they looked at it with faith, death was averted. With Jesus, he would be hung on the cross and spiritual death would be averted for us if we look to him with faith.

This is what Jesus compares himself to - a snake on a pole!

In both cases, death threatens people as a consequence of sin. In both cases, God in his sovereign grace provides a remedy. The remedy consists of looking with faith towards something or someone lifted up in public view. It does not require great wisdom or holiness just trusting obedience which is faith.

Jesus the Sin-bearer

And yet a serpent is an unpleasant association with God’s son! Yes it is, but when Jesus went to the cross he carried our sin. In fact, Paul makes an extraordinary statement about this in 1 Corinthians 5:21:

God made him who had no sin (that’s Jesus) to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

That’s why, Jesus applies such a strange image to himself. He would take our sin on himself and actually become sin on that cross. I think that’s why Gethsemane was so horrific for him - the eternally, pure, holy Son of God in perfect union with the Father and the Holy Spirit would endure the tearing apart of their unity in some way we cannot imagine. Some people say how could God be so cruel as to punish his Son like that? It’s not like that. Paul has just said in verse 19,

God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them.

If we think that is cruel of God, we have forgotten the Trinity. The Father is God and the Son is God and the Holy Spirit is God, three persons yet they are one. Each person of the Trinity is rescuing mankind. Each person is suffering. It is God the Trinity taking the punishment on himself to satisfy justice and let the guilty go free.

⁴ Numbers 21:5b

⁵ Numbers 21:7

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.⁶

God loved the world – that is the Father loved the world. The world is not the earth, not the animals but those able to put faith in him. He loved people - individual humans. He loved us so much that he gave his most precious one and only Son to be lifted up on the cross to die so that those who believe in Him, who trust his death and resurrection to be sufficient to save them, these ones shall not perish but have eternal life.

To perish here is to be condemned in the eternal judgement which is the opposite of eternal life.

The gospel continues by saying that the Christ who came down from heaven did not come to condemn the world but to save it. But this is not universalism where everyone is saved.

Faith Required

Consider the example of the bronze snake. It didn't work automatically. It was not that Moses made the snake and all bites were immediately healed. No, each person had to look at the bronze snake and trust God's promise. So too, it is not automatic with Jesus. He made the sacrifice but there is a condition:

V16 whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Just as with the snake, the promise and the provision became available with belief – through trust.

But the provision is eternal life. The entry into this eternal life is the new birth that he was speaking about earlier. It comes by putting your trust in what Jesus has done for us.

New Life by Grace

Turning then to the epistle reading from Ephesians, Paul is describing the same thing. Firstly, he writes that we are all dead in our sins in our natural state. Hear it again from the New Living Translation:

Once you were dead because of your disobedience and your many sins. You used to live in sin, just like the rest of the world, obeying the devil-- the commander of the powers in the unseen world. He is the spirit at work in the hearts of those who refuse to obey God. All of us used to live that way, following the passionate desires and inclinations of our sinful nature. By our very nature we were subject to God's anger, just like everyone else. [Eph 2:1-3 NLT]

That's the before condition. But then through the cross, God makes us alive with Christ. Do you see the parallel with what Jesus was saying to Nicodemus, you must be born of water and the spirit. You need the second, spiritual birth to give you spiritual (eternal) life. Otherwise you only have natural life. Paul continues to explain this as we read on:

But God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much, that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God's grace that you have been saved!) For he raised us from the dead along with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ Jesus. [Eph 2:4-6 NLT]

It is a free, undeserved gift. It is not about earning anything from God. Again in verse 8-9,

God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. [Eph 2:8-9 NLT]

By grace, through faith

Salvation is by grace, through faith. We are saved by God's grace but we make connection with it through our faith, trusting he means what he promises.

It is very common for people to think that they have to earn their place with God. If I just do enough good things, if I keep the rules, if I go to church ... But we never can earn eternal life. We cannot undo the wrong

⁶ John 3:16

we have done. We cannot make ourselves sinless. We cannot meet the standard necessary. It is not by our efforts; it is simply a gift to be received.

So we need to ask ourselves: Am I in the Kingdom? Do I know Jesus has saved me? Jesus says you don't have eternal life without the new spiritual life from God. And that comes from trusting that Jesus is God, he has died for your sins and has risen to life again.

It is a gift to receive not a target to achieve. Do you know you have received it? You need to ask for it and in my experience it needs to matter more than anything else – let's keep pressing in.

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