

LESSON 1

SNAKEBITES, SICKNESS, AND THE SAVIOR

John 3:1–15

Being sick can push us to the limits. I have a friend who's a U.S. Marine. He's a "man's man." Yet his wife rolls her eyes and calls him a baby when he gets sick.

1. Everybody gets sick from time to time. Describe the sickest you've ever been. How did that feel?
2. What's the craziest or most drastic thing you've ever done to heal from a sickness (e.g., cryotherapy, herbal remedies)?

The Bible recounts a story of sickness that captures the imagination. This sickness was not a contagious disease but instead a poisonous snakebite, sent from God Himself.

The Children of Israel spent four hundred grueling years as slaves in Egypt. God miraculously led them to freedom, accompanied by crippling plagues on the Egyptian people. Moses led them through the Red Sea on dry ground, and then the water swallowed up the Egyptian army as they attempted to pursue close behind. You can almost hear the people's shouts of freedom as they marched through the desert en route to the Promised Land.

Unfortunately for them, the excitement of the Exodus didn't sustain them over the next forty years. God promised to give them a new homeland, but they failed to trust His power, and He condemned them to wander for forty years while everybody over the age of twenty died—forty years of grumbling, complaining, and burying their friends and relatives.

3. How has God shown up in miraculous ways in your life?

4. God never fails His children, yet we fail to trust Him. Can you think of a time when you failed to trust Him even though deep down you knew He wouldn't fail you?

God is patient and longsuffering, but sometimes His patience hits a limit. Though the people were in the desert, God graciously supplied their needs. But instead of giving thanks, the people complained incessantly. God had had enough. Numbers 21 tells us that He sent snakes into the camp. That's terrifying. Snakes were everywhere—under their tents, around their feet, and under their clothing. Worse yet, the snakebites caused horrendous sickness and many people died.

This curse softened the people's hearts, and they finally confessed their sins and asked for help. God instructed Moses to fashion a bronze snake and place it on a pole. Those who looked in faith would be healed. The command was to look and live. Certainly some people refused the remedy and died in their skepticism. Parents, children, young and old alike, looked at the snake, believed, and were healed. Out of love, God provided a cure for His rebellious people.

5. As you think through this scene, what is most striking to you?

6. Why do you think that remedy was hard for people to accept?

We All Have Snakebites

The past one hundred years have ushered in expanding changes in quality of life. Average life spans have stretched, the fear of disease has been allayed through vaccines and other medical technology, and household tasks have been eased with modern technology. However, even with all the advances, science and engineering have not advanced in solving mankind's most pressing problem—a guilty verdict before a holy God.

Every person on this planet was born with a deadly “snakebite” called sin. We are sick, and we will die unless God's grace touches our infirmed souls. We all have deadly “snakebites,” and deep down we all know we are sick and dying. People attempt to deal with this sickness in different ways, but without Christ our efforts are doomed to fail. This is where we find Jesus in John 3.

7. What are some evidences that the human sin nature is present from a person's earliest days?

8. What are ways people attempt to salve the sickness of their souls?

How Good Is Good Enough?

John 3 is a famous chapter in the Bible and contains probably the most famous verse in all the Bible—John 3:16. Sometimes, however, we forget the context of this famous verse. It comes on the heels of an interaction between Jesus and a man named Nicodemus.

Nicodemus and endless debates

Jesus stirred considerable interest, even from the religious elite. Nicodemus was a Pharisee (John 3:1). He was also a member of the Sanhedrin, which was the seventy-member ruling body of the Jewish people. In John 3:10 Jesus referred to Nicodemus as a “master [teacher] of Israel,” indicating that he garnered great respect in his position. He sought out Jesus and set up a nighttime meeting to discuss issues of the law.

John 3 captures a snapshot of this conversation, focusing on the key points, but in reality the conversation was probably much longer. From this passage it appears that Nicodemus probably wanted to discuss the finer points of the law with Jesus. This is what the religious leaders did ad nauseam. The law required ceasing labor on the Sabbath day. The Pharisees spent all their time trying to figure out what constituted work and how they could keep that law perfectly. Their questions came down to this: how good is good enough to get to Heaven?

9. Take a moment to answer in your book the question, How good is good enough to get to Heaven? After you write your answer, and if you feel comfortable, share it with your study group.
10. Discuss some things you've heard about the abuses of the Pharisees and the religious leaders of Jesus' day.
11. How did the Pharisees miss the point of law by trying to keep the law perfectly?

Jesus cut to the point

Jesus wasn't about to mire Himself in useless debates about the law. How good is good enough to get to Heaven? Only perfection gives you a passing grade, and unless you can completely transform into a new person, you will fall short.

12. Read John 3:3. When was the first time you heard "born again" language?

13. When have you heard “born again” language in the broader culture?

Jesus got right to the heart of the matter and said in essence, “Friend, you don’t need more religion. You don’t need more sacrifice. You don’t need more good works. You don’t need to get it exactly right. Your whole paradigm is flawed. You don’t need to be a *better* person, you need to become a *new* person.”

Salvation has never been about trying as hard as possible and then working some more for good measure. Rather, salvation is about canceling everything and starting from scratch. How good is good enough to get to Heaven? The answer is this: only spiritually reborn people will live in God’s perfect Heaven. Your answer to that question reveals the way in which you are attempting to heal your “snakebite.” God must heal us by giving us new life.

14. Discuss with your group how this speaks to your own heart or how it is convicting to you.

Wouldn’t it have been fun to transport ourselves back to the first century and listen in on this conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus? Jesus was full of mystery, and Nicodemus was a brilliant but frustrated scholar of the Scriptures. As I read between the lines, I see three essential questions he is asking Jesus. Let’s ask and answer these three questions.

Who Makes Me a New Person?

15. Read John 3:4–6 and write down your observations. Then share your observations with your group.

16. Do you think Nicodemus was serious in verse 4? How do you interpret his question?

Poor Nicodemus. He was a brilliant man, but he was totally confused and thrown off his game. “How am I going to crawl back into my mother and reemerge?” Jesus patiently answered this question in verses 5 and 6, using language that was familiar to Nicodemus from the Old Testament prophets.

Jesus’ answer of “except a man be born of water and of the Spirit” (3:5) takes us back to Ezekiel 36, where the prophet describes a time when the Holy Spirit will make the Children of Israel new from the inside out.

17. Read Ezekiel 36:25–27. What stands out to you in these verses?

18. This passage was well known to the Jewish people, especially teachers of the law like Nicodemus. Given this background, how should he have interpreted Jesus’ words?

If the only people who make it to Heaven are those who are perfect before God, then we need to share in the divine nature and be born of God. Only God’s children share in His nature and will be granted entrance into Heaven.

If I want to plant an apple tree in my back yard, I should not plant cherry seeds. Even if I soak the cherry seeds in apple juice for six months, they will still only sprout cherry trees. Likewise, to become a child of God and share in His nature, you must be born of God. This is what Jesus taught and what Nicodemus missed.

Who Gives Us Spiritual Birth?

Who births us spiritually? How are we “born again”? Jesus answered this question in verses 7 and 8. Jesus equated the birthing ministry of the Holy Spirit with the wind. In the Greek language the word for “spirit” is the same word for “wind.” So Jesus here used a play on words to answer Nicodemus’s question.

19. Read verses 7 and 8. What thoughts stand out to you?

20. What do you think Jesus meant by comparing the birthing ministry of the Holy Spirit to the wind?

It is comforting to know that the Spirit of God gives life in salvation. Have you ever noticed that some people “get it” and others don’t? Why is that the case? Jesus chalks that up to the work of the Holy Spirit. When people hear the Word of God and the truth of Jesus, the Holy Spirit applies that message to their hearts.

21. Give examples of people you know who suddenly “got it” and were saved.

22. Why is the work of the Holy Spirit a comfort, not a frustration?

How Do I Become a New Person?

John 3:9 reaches a breaking point in Nicodemus’ frustration. In my mind’s eye I can imagine Nicodemus throwing up his hands saying, “How can this be? I’m abiding

by the law, but that's not good enough? How can I become a new person through the Holy Spirit?"

Earthly answers to spiritual questions

Nicodemus probably said more than what is recorded in verse 9, given Jesus' response. In verse 10 Jesus threw a verbal stinger and said, "Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?" Why didn't he understand? It's because Nicodemus—like all the Pharisees in that day—lived their spiritual lives in the power of their flesh. For them it was simple mathematics: do good things and I will be accepted by God and go to Heaven. That was physical, fleshly, and earthly.

Jesus offered a different way, yet Nicodemus refused to believe who Jesus was. Jesus' next statement in verse 13 is stunning. He in essence said, "You would be wise to believe what I have to say about heavenly things, because I have been to Heaven and I'm speaking on the basis of firsthand knowledge." This response is important for us to hear as well: Jesus is the only person who has been both to Heaven and earth, and He has the right to talk about it.

23. Why is it important to take Jesus' word (and His only) concerning the way to get to Heaven?

A spiritual cure applied by a spiritual act

John 3:14 and 15 are well known and often quoted, giving hope and encouragement to our hearts. Jesus pulled hard on Nicodemus to abandon his self-righteous works in favor of faith. He did this by using the illustration of the snakebites in the wilderness. Just as the Israelites were cured as they looked *by faith* at the snake on the pole, so also people today are saved when they look and believe in the work of Jesus on the cross.

At this point Nicodemus did not know what Jesus was referring to. He probably walked away still confused. However, I believe there is hope in these verses. A day came when Nicodemus *did* understand what Jesus said. Nicodemus may even have seen Jesus, the Son of God, crucified on a cross and remembered the bronze serpent on a pole in Numbers 21. If he did, I have to think that this conversation flooded back into his mind. What we do know is that Nicodemus believed what Jesus had said and later became a committed follower (John 19:38–42).

Nicodemus started his conversation with Jesus wondering how good is good enough to get to Heaven. Or we could put it a different way, What is the cure for this deadly snakebite? By the grace of God, he eventually found the answer he was looking for. By making us spiritually new, God gives us the perfection He demands. When we place our faith in Christ, our lives are forever changed. The saving love of God changes people!

24. If you have been saved, consider sharing with the group your testimony of salvation and how becoming a new person has changed you.

Scripture to memorize: John 3:14 and 15

Prayer: Thank You, Father, for not giving up on us even though we've sinned and rebelled against You. Thank You for making a way for us to be perfect in Your sight through the applied righteousness of Jesus. Thank You that the Holy Spirit births new life in us and makes us new people inside and out.

