

SINAI: FAITH IN THE WILD  
Eyes Up on the Bronze Snake  
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Caleb White

**MAIN POINT: LIFE IS GIVEN TO THOSE WHO TURN IN FAITH**

***\*\*What better reward is there?!***

**ME** [\*Find common ground with the audience] – ***Life is given to those who turn in faith***

Good morning, my name is Caleb White. I am the Middle School Director, and I have the privilege of bringing God's Word today.

Before coming to Christ Community, my wife and I spent 3 years in Northern MN as part-time youth pastors and part-time wilderness instructors. I didn't know it when I started, but I love the wilderness! In northern MN, there are trees and lakes and moose and wolves...and big skies with billions of stars and there is quiet... and Aurora Borealis...and no poison ivy. It is beautiful. It was our practice in ministry to use the wilderness as a classroom. There are boundless lessons to learn, because you cannot control all of the variables. You cannot control the weather; you cannot control overgrown trails, hidden rocks in lakes, or bears swiping your food. For many who go on wilderness trips, fear sets because they feel like the control has left their hands. But just because you can't control these things doesn't mean they aren't good for you. Being in the wild requires each person's full engagement – engagement of heart, mind, soul, and strength. One thing you can control...is where you turn when hard things happen.

The first trip I led as a wilderness instructor was a unique verbal emphasis group. We had one guy who would be a senior in high school, but had never really done a hard day's work before. There were 2 guys who would be high school freshmen in the coming school year – tall, skinny fellows who were rail thin, and weighed approximately 64 pounds soaking wet – combined. We were told our last member was an "8<sup>th</sup> grader." He was maybe 4 foot 6, and definitely weighed less than the Duluth packs we would carry on our 5-day Boundary Waters canoe trip. My co-leader was my best friend Matt, and we were giddy to be leading our first trip together. We had a very challenging route planned out and if nothing else, we were going to "lead this group to victory" – we were going to do hard things together!

All told, our trip would cover approximately 60 miles, we would paddle some big lakes, and the tripe would culminate in "The Grand Portage," an 8 ½-mile hike from historical Ft. Charlotte into the Grand Portage National Monument.

Have I mentioned yet that this was a very hard trip? We had three guys who could not carry canoes because it was physically impossible – the pads on the canoe yoke went down to their elbows rather than resting on their shoulders. Until about Day 3, Matt and I were carrying the heavier packs and a canoe during portages...oft wondering, "What did we get ourselves into?" We had some cool experiences – we lashed our canoes together, raised a makeshift sail, and coasted down Mountain Lake. Matt and I watched a group of young men wrestle and struggle and fight through some pain on adventure. We talked about faith and trusting Jesus when things are hard. We saw moose on the trail, sang God's praise under the stars, and experienced his life saving grace when we avoided disaster [story for a different time].

We also had some moments that were less than pleasant. 500 yards into our trip, we had a canoe – aptly named “Scarface” take on water. Campers misplaced their things. One night on Rose Lake, we were (almost) literally eaten alive by mosquitoes. Another evening during our end of the day cool-down swim, a camper came down to the water holding a 2-foot fireball because he left his shoe too close to the fire pit and it was now engulfed in flames. Even the last day – our day on The Grand Portage – hottest day of the summer, we ran out of water at 1030 in the morning and had to ditch our canoes around 5 pm with 2 miles to go because we simply could not carry them anymore.

But, God *provided* the strength we needed to complete the trip. He gave us the grace and mercy to ‘bear with’ the idiosyncrasies of others. Provided patience as we walked through learning together. The weather was awesome! The Spirit grafted in us a sense of community in which we had to work together to complete each day.

It was an incredible trip!

The next morning, we were hiking up the road to the church where we would have our celebration dinner having just completed an incredible adventure, with no complaining. And here’s what we heard the entire way, “I’m tired...I’m hungry...My feet hurt...I’m tired...I hope they have Mt. Dew...”

There was no turning and thanking Jesus; there was no celebrating how God provided the things we needed – no talk of what we had just accomplished(!)

**WE** [\*Broaden the tension]

*How could WE go through (what we just went through), seeing God’s provision, at every turn, and still miss the point?! Is there any way we could have done that on our own?*

*It struck me: how often do we live like this? We go through hard things, we see God provide the things we need when we need them, but our gaze gets misguided and what we want and long for gets misplaced.*

*How often does fear cloud our direction and where we put our hope?*

*How quickly can we go from living faithfully with a God who loves to be trusted, to planning for every worst-case scenario?*

*“Yeah, I’m with you God...but what if...God, did you think about...” →#Sideways Glance*

Our eyes start drifting because of fear or doubt that God can actually handle what we are going through.

## **GOD**

Start in **JOHN 3**

There’s a knock at the door. It’s late. It’s been a long day, but ever the gracious host, Jesus opens the door and allows this late-night guest. Under the cover of darkness, Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, comes to find Jesus because he has some questions he wants cleared up. “Rabbi/Teacher, we (the ruling class, the teachers of the Law) know

you have come from God, for no one can do the things you do unless God is with Him.” This greeting feels like that text you are not sure how to respond to: where someone sends you something like “It’s hot outside” or “I’m glad the Cubs are playing better” – *What am I supposed to do with that?* Yep. Eye roll emoji... #AirText I’m not a Cubs fan btw...

You get the sense that Nicodemus has come with a list of questions, things that he wants to “chat about” – Rabbinical-type things. He’s curious. But he’s taking a risk – he doesn’t want his people to know he went to see Jesus, which is why he came at night. When it’s dark. And nobody would see him. Jesus seems to say with his reply:

“Regardless of what your questions are, I know what you need...”

So when Nicodemus begins by basically saying, “Who ARE you? Where have you come from?” Jesus changes the subject. He gives Nicodemus the real reason why someone should come to Him, “Nicky, unless one is *born again* He cannot see the Kingdom of God.”

I picture Nicodemus sitting there, nodding his head, #HeadBob – “Kewl, Kewl” and he’s ready to ask his next question, not *really* paying attention, but...that last statement finally clicks! *Born again?? What the heck you talkin’ about Jesus?!*

Having been thrown completely sideways, Nicodemus says, “Wait a minute...how can someone enter a second time into his mother’s womb?!”

Nicodemus doesn’t understand this, but Jesus is foreshadowing the cross. He’s saying, I will deliver you into new life, and you will need to turn to me in faith to receive it.

### **LIFE IS GIVEN TO THOSE WHO TURN IN FAITH.**

Being born again requires FAITH, when eyes are turned to believe God is the Rescuer\*\*\*

Jesus, sensing Nicodemus’ confusion, asks: “Are you the teacher of Israel, and you do not understand this?” Then Jesus does what he does best, he meets Nicodemus, the Jewish leader, the Pharisee, right where he’s at and references a story that Nicodemus would know by heart.

### **READ JOHN 3.14-15**

Wait. What?

If you haven’t yet, open your Bible – there’s one under the seat in front of you, if you do not have one.

We’re picking up in **NUMBERS 21.4-9**

If you’ve been tracking with us the last several weeks, the Israelites have been rescued out of slavery in Egypt by a God who has called them His own people. He has promised them a land to call their own – a good and rich land, if they would only trust Him.

He has provided for them *every step of the way*, desiring that they trust in His provision. When they were hungry, He made it rain food. When they were thirsty, He brought water to satisfy them. When there were enemies, He defeated them. However, when the people doubted His provision, when they turned their back on their rescuer, they were disciplined. Even when they were on the doorstep of their new home, they became afraid, believing that whatever was across the border was too much for God to handle. So God sent them packing, back into the wild...for another 40 years – until a whole generation of faithless people died off. Chapter 21 happens somewhere around year 38-39 of the 40. It's the end of Moses' life, and the Israelites are on their way back to their promised land, most of the doubters having died off in the wilderness. Receiving the Promised Land is within reach...

*They set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom.* Edom was not going to let the Israelites pass through, so they had to go around. *On the way, the people became impatient...* I remember going on vacations as a kid, and we drove to all of our places. Not so much me, but my siblings – “Are we there yet? Are we there yet? When are we gonna be there?...” My parents would always respond, “5 more hours.” You kind of get the idea. “We have this promise...we know where we are going, why is it taking so long?!” We get the feeling the Israelites are straight up done. They are wiped out. Tired of travelling. Tired of burying loved ones on the way. They let Moses have it: *Why did you bring us out of Egypt (out of slavery) to die in the wilderness?! There is no food. There is no water, and we are tired of this worthless food.*

Never mind that every step of the way God has provided for them. First, they were slaves – oppressed and treated less than human. Then not only were they rescued from slavery, but on their way out, God delivers all of Egypt's wealth into their hands as a parting gift. When they were hungry God made it rain food. When they were thirsty, God provided water. When the Egyptians caught up, God wiped them out.

*Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many of the people of Israel died.*

Many of us, no doubt, are wondering why God would SEND snakes. This was a mechanism of God's justice – there is punishment for sin; there are consequences for turning their backs on His provision. **There are consequences for looking to someone or something else as a rescuer.** There is an interesting parallel here between the snakes God sends and what the Israelites experienced in Egypt – when God used plagues of various kinds to afflict Pharaoh and his people. This was a plague of snakes, and it was meant to draw the attention of the Israelites back to their God. In Exodus, God sends the plagues to Egypt and states His purpose over and over, “so that they may KNOW that I am the LORD.” So that you may know that I AM THE LORD. He's saying I love you – but I can't, I won't let you live in a way that turns you away from Me. In fact, He even tells them exactly this in Exodus 15:26.

#### **Exodus 15:26**

**If you will diligently listen to the voice of the Lord your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give ear to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord, your healer.**

It's been nearly forty years, most of the people who had seen the miracles of God in Egypt and into the Sinai have died because of their unfaithfulness, and the people still don't get it. In Numbers 21, we see the consequences for the Israelites who didn't follow God's call in Exodus 15:26.

As a result of their turned backs, "fiery serpents" likely refers to what it was like to be bitten by a snake. Doing some reading on the kinds of snakes that exist in the Red Sea wilderness (modern-day Saudi Arabia) – most are poisonous, one of the most prevalent, as well as the most dangerous is the Carpet Viper. So just imagine the ground, literally moving with snakes looking to bite.

When a viper bites a person...a number of things happen. Pain, redness, bruising initially. Followed by blistering at the bite site. As the venom courses through the blood stream there is a "fiery" sensation as the poison destroys vessels and tissue. If left untreated there are respiratory and circulation problems. Some snakebites affect the nervous system in paralysis.

*How about that?* God uses a form of discipline that affects a person that mimics/reflects what sin does in us.

Fear has this affect, right. Ever been so scared that you freeze – you literally can't move; you can't think; sometimes even breathing is difficult. So we focus on whatever is keeping our focus on the source of fear.

The Israelites are in a hot mess here! Their camp is crawling with snakes – people are being bit; people are dying. Imagine there is a great sense of FEAR surrounding the camp; fear that is crippling, paralyzing even. You imagine that every ounce of energy – of life – is going to not getting bit.

There is only one cure for a poisonous snakebite in the wilderness:

You must get to - in Wilderness First Aid, we call it definitive care – and get ANTIVENOM as quickly as possible.

*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.*

They recognize they are in trouble, and they need rescuing! We see here that death and pain are leading people to confession... "Moses, we have sinned...we've forgotten God's goodness and His provision...please ask Him to make it stop!"

\*Notice here, though, that what the people are asking for is '*respite, not reformation*'. They want God to take away the bad things, but are missing the fact that it is their inside that needs changing. This is us. This is us treating God like some sort of cosmic genie/wizard! We want God to take away the bad stuff and bring us the good stuff. But something in us has to die before it can be changed.

Taking away the snakes won't change their hearts or attitudes.

Perhaps a more accurate and necessary prayer would be: "Change our hearts! Change our attitudes that do not honor and glorify Your name, God!"

There is fear and death all around. They need HOPE. They need to know/be assured that LIFE is more than trying not to get bit by snakes.  
Moses goes to God, and brings the plea of the people before Him.

*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."*

Let's be honest here, this remedy to poisonous snake bites doesn't make sense! But God shares His HOPE, His way of saving dying people, and GIVES LIFE TO THOSE WHO TURN IN FAITH. To those who turn their eyes, and believe this is the only way to be healed, will in fact, receive healing.

God appoints this bronze snake to be the symbol of His healing. *Does the snake itself have power to heal?* NO! God is the One who does the healing!

God is reversing the curse by way of the curse. Notice, God does not simply take away the snakes, rather, He allows the people to choose whether they want to be healed. There is a cure available, but the snake-bitten person must turn to receive it.

To confront the serpent is to come face to face with one's own sin...and its result, which is death. Looking at the serpent on a stick would be the spiritual equivalent of looking in the mirror. Seeing where there has been a lack of faith, and rejecting God's kindness.

But HOPE and HEALING can be found when we choose to face and confess our sin.

Healing happens through faith, and HOPE is the cure for fear

*How does the fear piece relate to your main point? Hope is the cure for fear.*

*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.*

God offers provision for dying people – the snake on a pole is not a preventative measure, it doesn't promise people won't be bitten by snakes, but rather when someone gets bit, if they turn/lift their eyes and see the serpent, and believe they will be cured, IT WILL BE SO. If they do not turn in faith to God's provision – to the cure – people will continue dying.

The cure for snakebites in the Israelite camp was to look at the snake on a stick – to come face-to-face with the/a means of what was killing them; to look in the mirror at their own sin and lack of faith. Through the snake, God simultaneously holds up the mirror to show their sin, as well as His grace by providing the cure. The cure was to look at this image; not that the image itself would heal them, but believing in faith that God provided Life, is the only way. The Israelites were filled with FEAR, and still there was a way to be healed; there was still hope.

### **\*\*BACK TO JESUS & NICODEMUS\*\***

Jesus tells Nicodemus – "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so to must the Son of Man be lifted up...THAT WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM MAY HAVE ETERNAL LIFE."

Jesus is the source of life – and He gives LIFE TO THOSE WHO TURN IN FAITH.

As Moses lifted the bronze serpent, so too would Jesus be raised up – becoming the cure to fear and death. When Jesus went to the cross,

***What was the issue with what the Israelites did specifically? How does that relate to our attitudes?***

**While God remains faithful to His people and His promises, He will honor their choices – He will let them wander and live their lives in rebellion [and outside of the promise].** *He does the same for us – if we **TURN IN FAITH WE’LL RECEIVE LIFE**, but if our compass is off – if we turn our eyes aside to something other than the source, we are left to deal with the consequences...*

#Turn the eyes aside

**God is right to bring justice on this ungrateful, evil people, but His justice gets transformed into a source of life for those who would look to God for healing.** – *The Bible Project*

Two greek words “be born” (the verb, the thing that’s happening to you, the transformation)-> delivered, regenerate  
(delivered is a passive word – you don’t deliver you, someone has gone through the long, arduous, painful process, that someone who loves you goes through in order to bring you life)

and “again” (describing the transformation) -> from above, things which come from God, from the beginning

You are delivered into new life as if from the beginning (of creation)

**YOU**

**\*Repentance...**

I had a friend tell me once: *There are 2 kinds of people in this world: those who know Jesus, and those need to know Jesus.*”

I think that speaks to the assurance we can have when one time, you say to God, “I am a sinner, but I believe your Son Jesus died for me. And I believe He rose again, killing death. Thank you for making a way back to you.”

Once we experience salvation, the Holy Spirit invites us to live faithfully, trusting Him in every way.

I don’t know where you are at today. Perhaps this is kind of old hat – you know that Jesus is the only way to know and have and experience Life. Maybe your challenge today is thinking through: *Am I living a full Life? Do I trust God’s goodness and His promise of Life completely? Or, am I looking to control my environment, making sure I have everything in hand?*

**Some of you may be like Nicodemus...**

We call that Religious

Religious people get bogged down in Laws and Rules, and making sure that everything looks nice – on the outside anyway. I know, because I was religious once. My goal and purpose in life was to be good – to follow all the rules. Religious people often miss out on ABUNDANT LIFE because the focus is working hard and being good.

Religious people often settle: “I’m saved, I can do whatever I want...” or living like RIGHT NOW doesn’t matter – that every

Control often leads us away from faith.

We are often driven by fear.

### **The UNSAVED**

Some of you may be thinking, “Let’s be honest here, this remedy doesn’t make sense!...It’s too easy...Too good to be true. I mean, does God really know what I’ve done?! There’s no way that all I have to do is ‘believe’...”

Most of us, we get the discipline and judgment part – we get that there has to be a way to make wrong things right. But GRACE,

### **WE**

***What are some TANGIBLE ways to turn in faith in everyday life?***

- Pray without ceasing
- Sing a joyful noise...Dance
- Book of James – *How do we give sacrificially when we don’t feel like we’ve got anything to give?...How do you use your words? (With your family? Friends? Co-workers...)*

### **SAVED ALREADY**

**What could we be bringing the world, if we wrestled to turn in faith, to keep our eyes on Jesus, on a daily – on a moment by moment basis? How attractive could our life and life abundant here and now be to world desperately in need of hope – of life?**

We belong to a God who loves to be trusted. *What if we responded in kind?*

*Parents, what if WE modeled for our kids how to take every decision to Jesus in faith?*

Sometimes faith is a baby step, and sometimes it is a leap...

What if WE lived in a way that

### **QUESTIONS...**

- *What if I have faith, but God still doesn’t/Isn’t answering (my) prayer?*
  - o *What if I’m praying for healing, and it isn’t happening?*
    - Pray and ask the Holy Spirit to give you strength to have faith.
    - Look to the end – life right now is a blip; it can be hard, but He promises eternal life
    - How can I reflect God’s goodness in my pain/hurt...Imagine the testimony