

John 3:14 & 15

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Preacher: Iain MacRitchie

[0 : 00] And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

I think it's fair to say that many of us gathered in here this morning will be no strangers to the words of John 3.16.

These are perhaps the most famous, if you like, words in the entire Bible, the words that we have committed to memory perhaps since we were children, words that have followed us into adulthood. But as important as these words are, it's not these words that I'd like us to look at this morning, but rather the words that we had in verses 14 and 15.

[1 : 13] Words that are also very, very much at the heart of the plan of redemption. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

Now for us to be able to understand what these words mean, it's helpful for us to turn back to the chapter that we read in Numbers 21, so that we can see exactly what these words are that Jesus was saying to Nicodemus.

So if you could turn back to Numbers 21, I'd like us to look together at verses 4 to 9 of this chapter, and I'd like us to look at these words under three headings.

I'd first of all like us to look at the people who are spoken of here, the Israelites, as they journey. I'd like us then to think about the punishment that they bring on themselves after we see them complaining.

And then finally, which will be our main point, and hopefully shed light on the words that we have in John chapter 3, we'll look at the punishment, sorry, rather the provision that the Lord gives these people.

[2 : 39] The people, the punishment, and the provision. Let's look at this people then that we read off in Numbers 21.

And they journeyed from Mount Hor by the way of the Red Sea to compass the land of Edom, we read in verse 4. But these, of course, were none other than the children of Israel themselves.

And at this point in their history, we find them towards the end of their wilderness journey. We find them close to coming to that promised land under the leadership of Moses.

Moses. They're travelling, as we read, from Mount Hor near the Red Sea to the borders of a place called Edom. Now, they're not able to get through Edom itself, so Moses is forced to take them on a longer route around Edom.

Now, bearing in mind, this would have been some of the most inhospitable terrain in the world. A terrain that would have been unforgiving and difficult to walk.

[3 : 53] Yet as the children of Israel struggled, as they struggled to journey to this promised land, we can see that they had much to be thankful for.

We read at the beginning of the chapter that following an answer to prayer, seeking help from the Lord, that they had gone on to enjoy their first victory against the Canaanites.

He'd protected them. He'd helped them. And so now, although they have this difficult path to walk, they're nonetheless able to look forward to that future that is theirs.

They make their way to this place that is flowing with milk and honey. But you know there's a saying that goes, old habits die hard.

And so it was with the children of Israel. Because following this victory, following on from the Lord, having helped them and sustained them and protected them, what do we see?

[5 : 02] We see that as soon as the going gets tough, as soon as they find themselves in a spot of difficulty, what do we see them doing?

Well, in true children of Israel's style, we see what they've done so many times in the past. We see that they begin to moan, to complain, to grumble.

We read in verse 5, that the people spoke against God and against Moses. Wherefore have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?

For there is no bread, neither is there any water, and our soul loathes this light or worthless bread. Yes, it was a slog for the children of Israel.

Yes, no doubt, they were getting fed up of having to eat the same thing day in, day out. But you know, this was but a temporary arrangement.

[6 : 08] They'd forgotten that this wasn't going to last. They were unable to see past their immediate circumstances. They were unable to see that bigger picture, the fact that they were indeed on their way to that better place.

Friends, isn't that in many ways just like us? It's true to say that, and I include myself in this, we're all too happy to enjoy the many good things in life.

And we do enjoy many blessings here. About health or strength, that we're blessed with that. Our families, our jobs, our material possessions, all these things that we have that make our lives more comfortable.

It's true to say that often we're so willing to take, take, take. Willing to take without so much as a thank you to the giver of every good and perfect gift himself, the Lord Jesus.

But yet, as soon as difficulties arise in our lives, and life is difficult, as soon as these difficulties arise in our lives, what do we sometimes find ourselves doing?

[7 : 26] Perhaps even that is due this morning. You ask yourself, why me, Lord? Why is this happening to me? Why can't my life be that bit, that little bit easier?

Yes, life is hard, and oftentimes, if you'll excuse the expression, it feels like we're wading through treacle, that we're going nowhere fast.

We have so many things slowing us down and holding us back. But yet, it's true that the blessing and the relief doesn't come in us turning our backs upon God like the children of Israel here did.

The blessing and the relief to us comes, not that the troubles will be taken away, but rather that we'll be able to cope with them. That relief comes when we, as the prophet Isaiah said, when we put on the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.

You see that with Paul and Silas in Acts 16, having been stripped and beaten and cast into prison, their feet bound in stocks, what do we find them doing?

[8 : 43] Do we find them questioning God for the fact that all they were doing was standing up for their God and in response to them witnessing on his side, they've been cast into jail.

Were they found complaining? No. They put on the garments of praise for the spirit of heaviness. We read that they sing praises to God and as they sing praises to God, thanking him for all that is theirs, whether bitter or sweet, we see that immediately there's an earthquake, their bonds are unfastened and they're set free.

there's a lesson there for us. When we are reconciled to our providence, whatever it is, if we're reconciled in the knowledge that God ultimately, and I know it can be so hard to see it, but God ultimately does work all things together for the good of his own and we should pray that this is a challenge for me and for you, that we would enjoy just as much of a spirit of praise and worship in the days of adversity as we do in the days of prosperity.

we don't read of the children of Israel singing as they walked. Instead, they're consumed by this, what we read of grateful bitterness that leaves them far from being free in the will of God.

[10 : 17] Instead, they're in bondage time and time again. We read of the ungrateful attitude of these people, but you know there comes a time when enough is enough.

God is long-suffering, that is true to say, and we know that in our experience, but he is not all-suffering and it's as if for the children of Israel he said no more.

In verse 6 we read, the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people and much of Israel died, which brings us to our second point, punishment.

In response to the ungrateful complaining attitudes of these people that the Lord had blessed, we see that he sends fiery serpents in their midst.

They were called fiery serpents because of the bite that they gave to those who they bit. This was a red fiery bite, which would have left their whole body burning up as this deadly venom would have coashed through their veins.

[11 : 36] But yet this was a just reward for a people who had taken the eye of the Lord. A people who had ceased to be thankful for what they had. A people who had ceased to trust in the God who had taken them safely thus far.

There is nothing new under the sun, though. You remember in Genesis chapter 1 we see so clearly the consequences of ingratitude and disobedience to God in the Garden of Eden.

you remember that Adam and Eve had been given the whole garden to enjoy so many good things. Yet isn't it strange that the one tree that they were asked not to eat of, that is the very tree that they chose.

Even although that they'd been told the punishment that would be there should they eat of that tree, they carried on regardless, they thought that they knew better than God, they desired only to fill their immediate desires.

But you know that had the most catastrophic of consequences, not only for them, but for you and for us. Because like the children of Israel, their actions led them to be bitten by a serpent, they were stung by Satan as they chose to listen to his voice rather than the voice of the Lord.

[13 : 16] This would be a sting that would be felt by the rest of humanity for all time, because as I preach here this morning, we all have that one thing in common.

We all have that deadly venom of sin coursing through our very being, infecting our hearts and our minds, informing our thoughts, our words, our actions.

None of us are immune to this disease, perhaps we think we are. Left to ourselves, none of us are free from its curse. And you know, like the deadly bite of the serpents in the wilderness, our sin is left undealt with, it's true to say that it will cause us untold misery for all eternity in hell itself.

Friends, isn't that solemn? You know, the children of Israel soon began to realise the fate that was theirs, as they felt the effects of these bites taking hold of their bodies.

For some, it was simply too late. Just like it's been simply too late for some who have even sat in this very church. We read at the end of verse 6 that many people died.

[14 : 47] Those who remained, they knew that their time was short. They knew that they were dying and that they'd infected bodies, that they had to be dealt with, and so they came to Moses and they cried out, We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against thee.

Pray unto the Lord that he may take away the sentence from us. They were quite happy to put up this emergency prayer to the Lord, as we so often add.

They weren't willing to thank the Lord when he was so good to them, but yet when their lives are in danger, here they are crying out to their creator.

I wonder have you ever found yourself in such a position? Perhaps you are in a difficult spot in your life, something's going horribly wrong, and you find you've got nowhere else to turn but to the Lord himself.

You pray to the Lord and you feel that he even answers your prayer so graciously, so lovingly, and yet as soon as your life goes back on track, you turn your back on him once again.

[16 : 01] You don't need him. And you know, here we have a picture of what it is to come to know the Lord as our own personal saviour, because just as these people were made so aware of their need of being saved.

When we come to know that conviction of sin, we are brought to see the vileness of our own hearts. We are convicted of our sin, and we are brought to that place where all we can do is fall before the Lord in repentance.

That's what repentance is, a turning away from sin unto God. I wonder what is at you this morning. Are you aware that you are infected by this deadly poison of sin?

Are you aware that you need to be saved? Or do you just continue week after week after week, continue as it were, budding your head in the sand, living for the fleeting things of this world, things that are good in and of themselves, but have no lasting place in eternity?

And so when Moses prayed this prayer for the people, we see that the Lord answered. And you know, in the same way that he had so graciously answered their prayers to be delivered from the Canaanites here, he graciously answers their prayers to be delivered from these deadly bites of the serpents, which brings us on to our third and final point, the provision.

[17 : 53] We read in verses 8 and 9, Then the Lord said to Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent and set it upon a pole, and it shall come to pass that everyone that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live.

And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass that everyone that is bitten, was bitten, when he beheld the serpent, when he looked upon the serpent of brass, he lived.

And humanly speaking, we would think that the cure to such a deadly bite would be found in the hands of a physician or the hands of a doctor, that perhaps the Israelites here would have began to make lotions and potions that they would have applied to these bites and the hope that these bites would heal.

Or perhaps you may think that they would have clubbed together as a community and have sought to do all that they could to destroy these serpents, to get rid of them. But that's not what we read. Because when Moses prays to the Lord on their behalf and the Lord replies, he doesn't ask the people to follow some sort of path of self-reformation. At this point, they were to cease from human remedies.

[19 : 21] They were to cease from trying to heal themselves. And they were to turn to God. They were to submit to the fact that no matter what they tried, they couldn't save themselves.

And you know, there is such a lesson for us here. I believe there are many in this community who are good and upright, moral members of the community, people who are good neighbours, people who do charitable works, people who are so, so kind, people who come to one of the churches on the island every Lord's Day or to Talbot, and they have a desire to worship the Lord, but yet there is something missing.

They have that outward form of religion, but yet they don't know Christ. And you know, that's where the problem comes.

All these things are good and you're to be commended for them if you are such a person, but the problem comes, friends, when we start trying to apply the balm of our own good works to that deadly sting of sin, when we start looking to what we can do, what we appear to other people in order to carry favour as it were with the Lord, you can try putting that balm on these wounds, but the fact is, friends, that no matter how much you do that underneath it, there will always lie that deeper problem, that problem of the poison of sin that will be left undealt within our heart.

This is a heart problem and there is no human remedy for it. If there was a human remedy for this, what would happen?

[21 : 30] no doubt we would give glory to ourselves. We would say, aren't I a good person? I'm a Christian because I did this, this, this and this.

That is not giving glory to God. That is not giving him the place where he is high and lifted up. And you know, in the same way that there is no human remedy for us, there wasn't for the children of Israel.

We find that God asks Moses to make thee a fiery serpent, set it on a pole, and it shall come to pass that everyone that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live.

So here is to have a bronze serpent on a pole, and he's to hold it up. And when the people look at this bronze serpent, they shall live.

So you might think, well, yes, that makes sense. When this bronze serpent is held up, it will remind the children of Israel of the fact that they are in danger.

[22 : 40] But yet, I think we can see that they didn't need to be reminded that they were in danger. They knew that they were in danger. They were so aware that they were in danger. He says that everyone that looks that the bronze serpent shall live.

That's all they had to do. Look at it. You might be sitting here this morning thinking, well, this was the most ridiculous request, surely.

We know that there are no healing properties in a bronze serpent. And no doubt the children of Israel would have thought the same. what a strange request to look at this bronze serpent and we will live.

But it wasn't anything that was in the bronze serpent, friends. It was the fact that this was their chance to once again take God at his word.

That's what faith is. No matter how ridiculous the request may appear to us, that is what faith is. Taking God at his word.

[23 : 51] He had absolutely nothing to lose at this point and everything to gain. And you know, looking deeper at this request, we can only really understand what's truly happening here, friends.

If we look at it on the timeline of redemptive history, we can only really understand this request when we look at it in the light of the New Testament and in particular through the words of our text in John 3, 14 and 15.

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that whosoever believeth in him may not perish, but have eternal life.

God's And so all these many years before here in the book of Numbers, this holding up of this bronze serpent, this was foreshadowing something that we would see in Christ, foreshadowing that provision that would be found in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Christ, and he himself makes that direct link between himself, the Son of Man, and the bronze serpent. And it's interesting for us to look at the similarities.

[25 : 12] Firstly, we noticed that it wasn't a golden serpent that he was asked to hold up. It was a bronze serpent. If it was a golden serpent, it would have been something that may have been beautiful to look at, something that would have been of much value, something that would have been pleasing to the eye.

But that's not what he was asked to hold up. It was a bronze serpent. Nothing to look at. Dull in its appearance, perhaps.

And so we can see that this serpent, it was of no monetary value. There was nothing about it that was especially attractive. But yet, wasn't it the same with Christ?

We read when Isaiah prophesies about him that he had no form of comeliness, and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him.

You see, Christ wasn't a prince or a king, humanly speaking. In fact, he was despised and rejected of men. he was nothing to look at, and there was nothing of any real outward value or attraction in Christ.

[26 : 37] But yet, there was. And there was in the serpent. And we can see also that this is interesting, the very thing that was used to reverse the curse of the serpent bites, was in the form of a serpent itself.

Isn't that interesting? It was the serpents that bit the people, but yet it was a serpent that they were to look at in order for them to be healed.

And this in itself is so clearly foreshadowing the remedy for sin that is to be found in Christ. how? Well, wasn't it by man that sin entered this world?

It was through Adam that sin entered this world, and because of this, it had to be that, just in the same way that there had to be a serpent for the Israelites to look at, it had to be that the remedy for this sin would be found in Christ taking upon himself the form of man.

God had to become man, why? So that through him the curse of sin would be reversed. You see in Romans 18, for what the law could not do and that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteousness of the law may be fulfilled in us.

[28 : 23] And also in Galatians 3.13, Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us. He had to be made that curse for us.

And so in the same way that there was a provision made in this strong serpent for the curse of the serpent bite, there was also a provision made in the son of man for the curse of sin when he took upon himself, as we read there, the likeness of sinful flesh.

Perhaps the greatest connection between this bronze serpent and the son of man is the fact that they had to both be lifted up.

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the son of man be lifted up. that whosoever believeth in him may not perish, but have eternal life.

In order for the Israelites to live, the bronze serpent had to be lifted up. And in order for sinners such as you and such as me, for us to enjoy that eternal life, it's true to say that Christ himself had to be lifted up.

[29 : 43] he had to be lifted up on that cross on Calvary's hill. He had to be lifted up by those evil men who nailed into that cross, shouting out the words, crucify him, crucify him.

He had to be lifted up as he ascended on the third day, rising triumphant over the grave. He had to be lifted up as he ascended to be with the father himself.

Why? Well, we read in John 12, 32, Christ saying, and I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.

That brings us back to that famous verse we spoke of at the beginning, so that whosoever believes in him may have eternal life.

I wonder, are you part of that whosoever this morning? And if not, why not? What is it that's in your life that's more important?

[30 : 56] What is it that's in your life that you feel gives you all that you need for time and for eternity? Here we have the remedy to the poison of sin that is day by day bringing you and I, if you don't know Christ, closer to that lost eternity.

He died so that we may live. You know what a provision we have in Christ this morning, that he has removed the sting from death itself, so that we may have eternal life.

you know, the children of Israel had two options. They could either look at the bronze serpent and live, or they could turn their back and die.

Surely not a difficult choice. Yet perhaps there were those in the camp, it doesn't say this, but perhaps there were those in the camp who thought, well, I'm not aware of the effects of this deadly bite in my body, just yet I'll leave it for a while.

You might be sitting here thinking, I'm young, I've got a life to live. The Christian life is so dull, things you couldn't be further from the truth.

[32 : 23] You may think you have a life to live, but you're not truly living life to its full, and you live it in the freedom that is to be found in Christ.

Yes, people say Christians are narrow-minded, but how narrow-minded, friends, is it to think that this is it? You live, you die, nothing else.

That is the most depressing thought I think there is to man. Friends, there may have been those who turned their back thinking they had a little longer, but yet, they were so wrong.

And you know, you have a choice this morning. You have the choice of either turning your back on Christ, perhaps you've done so for many to hear.

You have the choice of turning your back on Christ, the only remedy for your sin. You can keep on going through life, leaving this place in five or ten minutes time, just forgetting all that you've heard.

[33 : 32] You've ticked that box, or you can turn to Christ. Remember, the remedy for these children of Israel was in there looking, that look of faith.

Won't you look to Christ? Won't you believe? Won't you come to that end of yourself? The knowledge that without Christ you have absolutely nothing in this world.

It doesn't matter how many times you've been bitten by the serpent of sin. It doesn't matter how riddled you feel you are by this deadly poison of death.

It doesn't matter how much it is spread in your hearts or mine. It doesn't matter how much baggage you have. It doesn't matter how many times you have broken God's law.

Because this morning if you look in faith to the crucified risen ascended Christ, friends I can guarantee you that if you look in faith a glorious provision will be made for you, not only for time but for eternity.

[34 : 48] What have you got to lose? You've got nothing to lose and everything to gain. Friends, look and live.

Amen. And we pray that the Lord will bless these few thoughts to us and to his name be all the glory. You can conclude now by singing to God's praise from Psalm 121.

Amen. Pardon Amor■