

John 3:14-21 – Judgment and Mercy

Introduction

One of the best known and best loved texts of Scripture is found in the verses that were read to us today. John 3:16 reads, "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." What a wonderful and precious verse.

But the opening word of this verse, "For", links it the verses that precede it. What has God's gift of his Son for our salvation got to do with a snake being lifted up in the wilderness?

Snakes in the wilderness

The incident referred to in verse 14, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness..." is recorded in the 21st chapter of the Book of Numbers.

The Israelites should have been enjoying the Promised Land by now. But when they had sent spies into the land to see what it was like they had come back with terrifying reports concerning the size and strength of its inhabitants. The people failed to trust in God's promise that he would give the land into their hands but were too afraid to attempt the conquest. So God condemned them to wander through the wilderness for 40 years.

Nevertheless God cared for them in the wilderness and provided them with all they needed for life. But, as we read of them in Numbers 21, they had got fed up of sand and rock! "They spoke against God and against Moses and said, 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!'" – this "miserable food" was the Manna, the bread from heaven that God provided for them.

God was angry with their complaints and ingratitude and so, "the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died." The people's rebellion led to God's judgment. As God had intended, this brought the Israelites to their senses and we read, "The people came to Moses and said, 'We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us.' So Moses prayed for the people." They repented; now they were looking towards God in hope rather than resentment.

And God had mercy on them. He commanded Moses to make a snake out of bronze and mount it on a wooden pole. God promised that, if anyone was bitten by a snake, they had only to look at the bronze snake on a pole and they would be healed and would live.

How does this apply to Jesus?

We too are rebels against God. God made us in his own image and made us for his glory. But "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way." We have wanted to live our own way and for our own glory and satisfaction. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We too have been bitten by the snake; we are sons of Adam and daughters of Eve.

And as a result we live in a wilderness world rather than Paradise, a world marked by disappointment, suffering and at last death. Bitten by the snake we are doomed to die. Is there any remedy to the plight of the human condition?

Contrary to what some may imagine, God does not delight in judgment, rather, he is full of compassion towards the world he has made. In love he sent his own beloved Son into the world so that we might find healing and eternal life through him. Jesus was lifted up on the cross to die a cruel and agonising death.

Just as Moses lifted up a snake on a pole – the symbol of God's judgment on his rebellious people – so Jesus was lifted up on the cross. But his lifting up is no mere *symbol* of God's judgment; here *is* God's judgment upon our sin – "the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." God's judgment fell there, not on us but on him, and he bore it to the full; "he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed."

All the venom of the snake and the judgment of God are focussed there at Calvary and are exhausted there. And as we look with the eye of faith at Jesus Christ hanging on the cross, trusting in his atoning work, we are healed and have life – we are forgiven, embraced by the love of our Father God and receive eternal life.

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

Now imagine for a moment one of the Israelites bitten by a snake. He is feeling the pain of death working its way through him when someone runs up to tell him that Moses has made a life-size bronze model of a snake

and hung it up on a pole. If he will only look at the bronze snake he will be healed and will live! Imagine the man saying, "That's just plain stupid. How can looking at a bronze snake heal me of this lethal snake bite? I'm not going to look at the very thing that has inflicted this terrible pain and is soon going to kill me." What would you say to such a man? You would surely plead with him to look and live.

As one old hymn quaintly expressed it, "There is life for a look at the crucified one."

Or, in the words of a more contemporary song:

Come and see, come and see
Come and see the King of love...

We worship at your feet
Where wrath and mercy meet
And a guilty world is washed
By love's pure stream
For us he was made sin
Oh, help me take it in
Deep wounds of love cry out 'Father, forgive'
I worship, I worship
The Lamb who was slain.

And this is God's appeal to each one of us. He gave his Son up to the cross for us that everyone who believes in him might have eternal life. "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. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned."

Look to him and live and stay to worship.

God gave his Son for the life of the world

It is wonderful for each of us to know that God loves us and has given us life through the Lord Jesus Christ. It is wonderful to be able to repeat with personal conviction the words of the Apostle Paul when, speaking about the Lord Jesus Christ he says, "He loved *me* and gave himself for *me*." It's wonderful to sing those words of Charles Wesley, "No condemnation now I dread, Jesus and all in him is mine." I've looked at the condemned one and now I am free from all condemnation.

But this passage from John's Gospel says more:

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.

God's appeal to "look and live" is not addressed to us alone but to the whole world. Isaiah appeals prophetically with the voice of God, "Turn to me and be saved, *all you ends of the earth*; for I am God, and there is no other." God loves the world he has made, loves it despite its rebellion against him. He loves this world so much that he sent his Son into the world to be its Saviour. And he calls upon all, from every corner of this world to turn to him and be saved.

We live in a world where men and women have been bitten by the snake and are dying. Yet here is the cure for their disease; the place "where wrath and mercy meet and a guilty world is washed by love's pure stream." There is life for a look at the crucified one. The cross of Christ displays the depth of God's love for us and provides hope for a dying world.

God calls us, his people, to be those who point others to the cure for their deepest disease and to the source of life and hope. We are not simply to rejoice that God loves us and has given his Son for us, we are to urge others to look to Jesus and live.

Peter Misselbrook,

11/3/18, Christ Church Downend