



## Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

# A picture of God's love held out to all

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14 July 2013

### Numbers 21:4–9

<sup>4</sup> They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; <sup>5</sup> 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!' <sup>6</sup> Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> The LORD said to Moses, 'Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.' <sup>9</sup> So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived."

### John 3:14–21

<sup>14</sup> Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.' 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. <sup>17</sup> For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. <sup>18</sup> Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. <sup>19</sup> This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup> Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. <sup>21</sup> But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God."

This evening I conclude a short series from the Old Testament by turning to a passage which has an obvious link to a gospel context. A powerful picture from Numbers provides the necessary background to understanding what Jesus is portraying in John 3.

### Numbers 21:4–9

We remind ourselves that the Israelites have just left behind a life of slavery in Egypt and yet they grumbled and complained about the hardship of their journey to the Promised Land:

- "The people grew impatient on the way." (v.4) They believed they deserved better than they were experiencing. The worst of situations arise when comparison becomes the order of the day. This is the cry of the psalmist and many throughout history. You have to distinguish between the hurt that comes from seeing bad people prosper and the sense of ingratitude for what God has done. The first is understandable; the latter is inexcusable!
- They saw their past through rose-coloured spectacles. They started to look back at their situation in slavery, where everything seemed stable. The sting of the snakes would wake them out of their self-destructive nostalgia. There is a word for all of us about the past ... which can often appear better than it really was.

- They asked that the snakes be taken away, requesting that Moses pray for their removal. God does not remove them, but orders Moses to fashion a bronze snake,
- which serves as an antidote for the snake venom. God does not always alter the situation, but gives us the power to face it or deal with it!

The deeper source of the people's sin was their unwillingness to trust God to deliver them and fulfil his commitment to bring them into the land. There is a clear link here to confession of sin and forgiveness. The serpent played such an important role in ancient history as a symbol of evil power and chaos. In the New Testament, it will take on a richer and fuller meaning in terms of "lifting up".

### **John 3:14–21**

The passage can be seen as a continuation of the account of Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus. The Lord relates the meaning of the new birth (v.14). This connects the New Testament with our Old Testament focus. As the bronze snake was lifted up as an antidote for the deadly bite, so Jesus would be lifted up (on the cross) that all who look on him in faith might have eternal life.

John 3:16 is often referred to as the gospel within the gospel. It shows us that our God is not a God of retribution, but a God of love and grace.

The 'lifting up' of Jesus would be used three times in John (also in 8:28 and 12:32) ... so the cross becomes the way God deals with the poison of death, as well as the life-giving power of God for us. The results of human sin and selfishness are seen in the way Jesus is rejected ... but also the love of God in his offering of himself.

The love of God is focused in the human life of Jesus. As Paul put it, "the fullness of God bodily dwells". This is the completeness of God's "Incarnation in Christ".

St Augustine of Hippo described the love of God in this way:

It has the hands to help others.

It has the feet to go to the poor and needy.

It has the eyes to see misery and want.

It has the ears to hear the sighs and sorrows of men.

That is what love looks like.

- Significant matters have been raised in the public setting of a small town wedding in Cana in Galilee. At a family wedding the disciples are afforded a teaching experience (John 2:1–11).
- Significant matters are raised in the very public setting of what is a national celebration. The imminent Passover is the setting for the cleansing of the temple. This becomes the beginning of opposition to him in John. It is found at the outset of his final week in the other gospels.
- Significant matters are now raised in a continuing, probing, personal encounter with Nicodemus and the reflection of John, the gospel writer.

All who study John with any degree of seriousness recognise the difficulty of being precise about where Jesus stops speaking and John starts reflecting. In the passage we have before us, John is certainly (as Ian Barclay says) 'ruminating in verse 16'. The text describes what God has done and is doing in the Person of Jesus.

Text: John 3:16

"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."

## **God's love has a long reach ... "God so loved the world"**

Familiarity with this text can mask the astonishing impact it has the first time you hear its message. From the Old Testament, they knew of God's love for all his people and that he loved sinners.

- The extent is summed up in the words 'the world'.
- This is the world in all its expressions:
  - The world of ideas
  - The world of culture
  - The world of education and science.
- Here is everything we need to know. The truth is standing out like a 'neon sign' on a dark road ... as though we were travelling on a long and lonely road in the bush and are alerted to a sign in the distance.

The light of the cross points out One to whom we can turn.

- For John, the cross is Christ's throne, revealing his glory and power.
- We really have no gospel if we have no cross.
- The God we know in Jesus claims the whole world as his own.

There is not a place or an area of life that the gospel cannot penetrate. The cross plumbs the depths ... Jesus Christ on the cross, with arms outstretched, became symbolic of his reach for all the world.

- God's entering into our humanity in Christ.
- God's journey into the depths of humanity ... "He who knew no sin ... became sin." (2 Corinthians 5:21)
- God's love is so strong to save and long to reach.

The 'reach' of God is summed up in the words of a Christian writer: "God was not changed, for he had always loved the world; nor was the world changed, for it continued in sinful rebellion against God. But by the death of Christ the relationship between God and the world has changed." God took away the wall between himself and humanity the day Christ died. Only he could do that!

## **God's love and the gift ... "that he gave"**

There is no more authentic mark of love than to give. The test of real friendship is that you give and give, but you never have to measure what the gift is. If a friend says, "Look what I have done for you" it is no longer friendship, but an arrangement. Love is by nature a gift.

- God did not hold anything back. Indeed a mark of an ineffectual and broken spirit is to hold back or be secretive in friendship. There is no greater friendship than to give ourselves to each other.
- In human relationships, hurt often leads people to refrain from self-giving. It starts out from our body language ... we become protective. We think of the contrast in Charles Wesley's description of God's love: "the arms of love that compass me"!
- The cross is the picture of God's giving ... "He gave his one and only Son." Such giving is costly and lies in direct contrast to many in our culture who have chosen material things rather than the spiritual. People do this with giving ... we look at what others do. However, we should only look to ourselves and what we are and what we do. We don't have to impress God!

- One commentator wrote, “John, more than any other ... characterises the Father as ‘the-having-sent-me-Father’.”
- From beginning to end, Jesus is on a mission.
- This culminates in the cross and resurrection.
- He offers an invitation to join him on the same mission.

We hold together twin truths in John 3. We find a deep insight into the beginning of the Christian life and the sustaining of discipleship. Those twin truths are the life-giving Spirit and the gift of Jesus Christ.

Down the years, God’s love has shone through misery, tears and sin like a shaft of sunlight on a dark day. I recall an occasion when our curtains were being cleaned ... we thought we wouldn’t miss them for a day or two. But the dawn woke us very early! The light of God pierces the darkness of our lives and jolts us into life. God’s gift of love becomes our way of life. An old hymn puts it this way:

Thy way, not mine, O Lord,  
 However dark it be;  
 Lead me by Thine own hand,  
 Choose out the path for me.

Not mine, not mine the choice  
 In things or great or small;  
 Be Thou my Guide, my Strength  
 My Wisdom, and my All.

### **God's purpose in the gift ... “eternal life”**

John gathers up the truth being communicated by stating that ‘God’s love’ focused on ‘the gift’ which in turn highlights the purpose (v.17). It is this which leads to the stark alternatives. We move from one to the other by believing. God’s grace gift in his Spirit is the power to do this. To refuse to believe is to stand condemned already (v.18).

- The world is quick to judge others. This has become the emotional fabric of life for many. They live with constant undermining of spirit. Never to be praised or honoured damages a person in a way that requires deep attention in order to correct. We frequently see this in our services ... with young people being nearly destroyed before they’ve barely begun life.
- God sent his Son to save us, not to condemn us. We need to be careful in our presentation, so that the weak and the broken ... ALL can find the acceptance of God in Christ.
- Since God shows us his grace, we should withhold our judgement of others. The truth must be seen in us. Religious people can be as negative as anyone else.
- When the venom of guilt strikes we can look to Jesus and find forgiveness ... “Look and Live”.

Our great privilege is to lift high the cross for others to see ... to know.

This is the pathway to eternal life. Alexander Maclaren wrote of the difficulty of definition and the certain reality of life given in Jesus Christ—“I know what Eternity is, though I cannot define the word to satisfy a metaphysician. The little child taught by some grandmother Lois, in a cottage, knows what she means when she tells him ‘you will live forever’, though both scholar and teacher would be puzzled to put it into other words.”

The Puritan writer, Thomas Watson, wrote: “Eternity to the godly is a day that has no sunset; eternity to the wicked is a night that has no sunrise.” Eternity is the grand climax of all history. It is the age to come when all will acknowledge Jesus as Lord. Eternity will bring to this world all God intended for us. Sin will have been judged and banished. Life will continue with new vitality, meaning and perfection. What an age that will be!

Eternal life is not life that goes on for ever, but life as it is in God ... as it was ... as it will be. It is a life that begins now and is part of our very existence as Christian people (John 5:24).

### **The acceptance of His gift ... “whoever believes”**

Too often people think of the beginning of the Christian life as a ‘leap of faith’—there is no biblical support for that position.

- Becoming a Christian starts with knowledge ... a response to the facts of the gospel ... a belief in God in Christ and a trust in his power.
- That gift needs to be received into our lives, not because of what we have done, but because it is a ‘free gift of grace’.
- The doing so changes our status, our standing and our outlook on the whole of life.

It is once to receive his gift of salvation, but constantly to receive his gift of love in each other. I sense many of us have things to learn in relation to love. Love is God’s gift to us and through us. We are not on a pinnacle—any of us. God’s grace enriches our lives through each other ... not just our friends and those who think like we do.

We return to the New Testament and put it into its Old Testament setting, recalling that the choice is ‘the sting of death’ or ‘the gift of life’. The choice is to be made by us ... we live by one or the other. There isn’t a day passes when I don’t think of the choice I have to offer others in relation to life ... which is to offer Jesus Christ. It is a decision made once ... but also constantly.

Walter P Chrysler: “The reason so many people never get anywhere in life is because, when opportunity knocks, they are out in the backyard looking for four-leaf clovers.”

That is the typical reflection of a businessman who uses the language of opportunity, but it falls short of the spiritual imagery of an offer. However, it is helpful in reminding us that it is possible to be so busy that we miss the moment of God’s grace.

- In a spiritual sense, all the blessing available begins in the gift of God ... in the Person of Christ.
- The cross is the offer he makes, which can be refused ... and often is!
- When received, it is like light which floods every room of the house of our lives, waking us from sleep.