

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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THE BRONZE SERPENT

John 3:14-15

If I were to ask you to quote John 3:16, I am pretty sure that most of you would be able to do it. *For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.* But if I ask you, ‘What are the two verses that come before John 3:16,’ I am not sure that the response will be as quick. Have you ever noticed the words that precede the well-known John 3:16? In other words, what is the context of John 3:16?

A reference to the OT

Today we want to study the meaning of the passage found in John 3:14-15 and by God's grace, I hope that it will become part of your understanding of John 3:16. In John 3:14-15, the words belong to that part of the Bible where Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus about being born again. And this is what He says.

*John 3:14. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up;
15 that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life.*

Now, how should we understand these precious words of our Lord Jesus? Here the Lord Jesus is saying, ‘In the same way that Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.’ What is the Lord Jesus talking about? What is this ‘lifting up the serpent’ referring to? As it happens very often when we study the NT, we need to go back to the OT in order to understand more clearly the text of the NT. And here, we need to go back to the book of Numbers, chapter 21, verses 4 to 9. This will give us the background of our passage in John. This is what we read in Numbers 21:4-9.

Numbers 21:4. "Then they set out from Mount Hor by the way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the people became impatient because of the journey.

5 And the people spoke against God and Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this miserable food."

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

7 So the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned, because we have spoken against the Lord and you; intercede with the Lord, that He may remove the serpents from us." And Moses interceded for the people.

8 Then the Lord said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a standard; and it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he shall live."

9 And Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on the standard; and it came about, that if a serpent bit any man, when he looked to the bronze serpent, he lived."

What we see here is that the Israelites, having come out of Egypt, were now in the wilderness. And there was no food in the wilderness. Imagine, you have two million people, living and walking together through the desert. How do you provide for two million people for their basic needs? And God did this amazing thing. God provided for them the manna on a daily basis. They were fed with the manna from heaven all through the forty years that they spent in the wilderness.

The Israelites complain

Now, we find there that although God had done so many things for the Israelites, they were speaking out against God. God gave them so many blessings, but that didn't make them more grateful. Without that food, they would have died of starvation in the wilderness. Yet, they were complaining about it. You remember what they said of that food? In verse 5, we read, *we loathe this miserable food*. In other words, they were saying, 'We hate this food. We are tired of that manna! Why did God bring us out into this wilderness?' The Israelites were only thinking of the delicious garlic that they had back in Egypt. But they had forgotten what they were in Egypt. They were a bunch of slaves, struggling for their existence. But that didn't matter to them. They were still asking, 'Why did God bring us out into the wilderness?'

This attitude of complaining and blaming God for something, do you know how the Bible calls it? Read verse 7. *So the people came to Moses and said, We have sinned, because we have spoken against the Lord and you...* The Israelites were complaining about their life in the wilderness, about the manna that they had to eat. They eventually realized that in blaming God for their troubles, they have actually sinned. ***We have sinned because we have spoken against God***. You see, that is the basic character of sin. Sin is an attitude of speaking out against God whether it is with our mouth, or in our heart, or in our behavior. Whenever we are blaming God for something, we have to be careful. There is a high chance that we will find ourselves committing a sin.

Denying the existence of God is a sin

So a Christian can sin in that way. For the non-Christian, the very fact that he doesn't believe in God is sin. Sin is not just about killing, lying, or cheating. To deny the existence of God is a definite attitude of opposition to God. It is an attitude of speaking out against the existence of God. And that again is sin.

One day, as I was working in the emergency room of a hospital, I had a female patient who came for a minor problem. At the end of the consultation, I said, 'Thank God that it is not as bad as you thought.' Then she said, 'Well, I don't believe in God. You know why? If God existed, the world wouldn't be like it is now. If God is good and loving, why would He let people suffer so much?' You have probably heard that kind of reasoning before.

Yes, I agree, the world is in a mess. There is suffering everywhere. But to conclude that God doesn't exist because of the suffering of the world is a reasoning that I don't agree with. We cannot say that suffering is the proof of the non-existence of God. In fact, I would say that suffering is the consequence of man's wrongdoing. Very often, there is suffering because of the sinful actions of man. The Bible teaches us that the fundamental problem of man is his sinfulness. And it is because of his own sins that the world is in a mess. That, it seems to me, is a reasoning that is closer to the truth.

Now, so long as man is not changed, the suffering of sin will keep on coming to us. If God exists, what is He doing about that? Well, God does exist and He is doing everything that He can about it. You see, to do away with sin and suffering, God has two choices. He can wipe out all the

sinner. Or, He can change the sinner. And let me tell you that God has chosen the second option. God wants a new world, with new people in that world. And He is changing people through His redeeming love. If God wants to wipe out the sinners, He doesn't require your permission. He can do that right away if He wants to. But if He wants to change you, He needs your cooperation. You have the freedom to accept to change because we cannot change anyone by force. And it is because of this freedom, that God allows man to continue to commit sin and to inflict suffering.

To die or to live

Let's go back to our OT passage in Numbers 21. So we find here that because the Israelites sinned, God's judgment came upon them. That judgment came in the form of serpents. God sent fiery serpents among them and many of the people died. 'Fiery serpents' here means 'poisonous snakes'. They are described as fiery serpents because of the effect of their bite. When a fiery snake bites you, its poison gives you a very burning effect which eventually kills you. So the Israelites were dying in the wilderness because of these poisonous snakes just as people are dying today from the poison of sin. Today sin is going through the world and destroying people. People are dying. Man is spiritually dead because sin prevents him from having access to the true source of life, namely God. Only God can give life to this dying world.

In the wilderness, the Israelites were perishing. They were falling down one by one. But God made provision for them to be healed from the poison. God said to Moses, 'Make a serpent of bronze and put it on a signal staff.' A signal staff was used for flying different flags which function was to give different signals to the people. Imagine, you have two million people marching in the wilderness. If you want to give instructions to the people as to what to do, it's no use shouting. What you need to do is to raise up a flag on a pole that everybody can see. That would give them the signal whether they should stop, or go on, or whatever message that needed to be mentioned to the people.

So God asked Moses to make a serpent of bronze and to put it on a signal staff. And God also said that whoever looks at that serpent of bronze, that person shall live. If a poisonous snake has bitten you, don't worry, you can be healed. Look at the serpent of bronze on the signal staff and you will be healed. That was God's way of salvation for those who were dying from the poison in the wilderness.

Thinking over God's way of salvation

Now, let me ask this question. What do you think of God's way of salvation? Is God's way of salvation wise or foolish? Think about it. A serpent has bitten you and you are dying from its poison. And I tell you that if you want to live, you have to look at the big bronze serpent on the pole. 'You mean, I look at the serpent and I will be healed? Well, first of all, a serpent just bit me and you want me to look at another serpent up there on the pole? You must be kidding. I'm already terrified enough by these snakes. And secondly, how can looking at a serpent save me? Since when can a bronze serpent heal my wounds? Surely a dead snake cannot save a dying man. This is ridiculous. This is pure superstition. This doesn't make sense at all.'

Again, I repeat my question. Is God's way of salvation wise or foolish? Today, people are dying in sin. And what does God do? God lifts up on a pole, on the cross, His Son Jesus. And the Bible tells us that if you look at the cross, you will be saved. 'You mean, I only have to look at this man hanging on the cross and I will be saved? No, no, you don't understand. Can't you see the problems in the world today. Can't you see my problems, my wounds, my hurt? These are real things. Don't tell me that a man who died 2000 years ago can help me today. You have to be more practical than that. You have to do something about my bite, my wound right now. You have to extract the poison.' And so we are preoccupied with our personal problems. Everyday, we try to extract the poison, we try to save ourselves by our own effort.

‘What else can I do anyway? Life must go on, right?’ Not quite. If you can see the wisdom of God in all this, you might change your way of thinking. And the wisdom of God can be appreciated only if you have spiritual eyes to see.

The identity of the bronze serpent

Look at this story in the wilderness again. First, notice this. God could have said to Moses, ‘Kill one of the snakes and put it up on a pole.’ That would have been a simpler thing to do than going through the whole trouble of making a bronze serpent. But God had a very specific intention behind that instruction to Moses to make a bronze serpent. This serpent on the pole represents the Lord Jesus. It is a dead serpent and it symbolizes the destruction of sin through the death of our Lord Jesus. By His death, He broke the power of evil. When God asked Moses to make a serpent and set it on a pole, God wanted to show to the world what His future redemption will be like. What is on the pole is by nature no snake at all. It looks like a snake but it is not a snake. In the same way, the Lord Jesus looked like any sinful human being but He was by nature no sinner at all. From the outside, He had the appearance of being a sinner, but He was by nature no sinner like us. That is why Paul tells us in Romans 8:3 that He was made *in the likeness of sinful flesh*, i.e. in the appearance of sinful flesh.

Notice this word ‘make’, ‘make a serpent.’ It is not just any serpent. That serpent by which God was to save had to be made. This word ‘make’ appears in the NT in the same context. Turn with me to 2Corinthians 5:21. And this is what we read.

*2Corinthians 5:21. For He (God) **made** Him (Jesus) who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.*

The Lord Jesus knew no sin. He had by nature no sin, but He was made sin for us. Do you begin to see the wisdom of God in all this?

Now, notice this next point. This incident with the fiery serpents was not a trivial incident. This story, way back in the wilderness, prophesied the way in which Jesus would die. You see, Moses is told not just to make a bronze serpent, but also to lift it up on a pole. And to ‘lift up’ is a word that belongs to the language of crucifixion in the NT time. When we say that someone is being lifted up, we mean that he is being crucified. In order to crucify a person, you first have to nail him on the cross while the cross is flat on the ground. Once the person is fixed on the cross, then you lift up the cross and drop it into the hole where it will stand in the ground. That is why crucifixion was described as the action of lifting up. Now we can understand John 3:14 when the Lord Jesus says, *And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up*. By being lifted up, Jesus was referring to the kind of death by which He was to die (John 12:33).

Look and believe

For what purpose did the Son of Man have to be lifted up? John 3:15: So *That whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life*. The Son of Man had to be lifted up in order that man can have eternal life, in order that he can be saved. But salvation doesn't come just to anyone. The way of salvation is through belief in God. *That whoever **believes** in Him*. But what is this believing? What does it involve? Here again, the passage in Numbers 21 will help us. And I'm going to go slowly here.

How were the people saved in Numbers 21? By looking at the bronze serpent. How are the people saved in John 3? By believing in the Lord Jesus. Faith is described in terms of looking in Numbers 21, whereas it is described in terms of believing in John 3. In other words, the faith that saved the people in Numbers 21 was a faith that motivated them to look at the bronze serpent. In the same way, the faith that saves you in John 3 is the faith that motivates you to believe in Jesus and to trust His words. We can paraphrase John 3:14-15 in this way: ‘As Moses lifted up the serpent in the

wilderness and those who looked at it were saved, so all those who believe and trust the Son of Man have eternal life.' You understand that?

Now I want that to be very clear. The people in the wilderness were not healed just by a glance at the serpent. The Hebrew word for 'looking' in Numbers 21 is a specific word for a very attentive, concentrated, looking. So that the requirement for healing was a very concentrated and careful looking at the serpent on the pole by the wounded person. The NT experience is no different. The Greek word for this kind of attentive looking is found in Hebrews 12:2. And there we read, **Looking** unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith... It is not just a glance at Jesus. The Greek word there is about fixing one's full attention on Jesus. From all this, you can see that God doesn't save us by a quick glance or a superficial belief. A saving faith is a faith that requires our full attention of heart and of mind. Nothing less. Bear that very carefully in mind.

The fundamental problem of mankind is the poison of sin. Today just like yesterday, the world is dying from this poison. If you are not a Christian, let me encourage you to look at the bronze serpent, to look attentively unto Jesus, with all your heart and all your mind. And one day, God will give you the faith that will lead you to eternal life. You will suddenly find that the poison of sin will cease to be active in your life and you will enter into a new freedom that you have never known before. If you are a Christian, I would like to encourage you to keep on looking unto Jesus because we know that in Him, the power of sin has been broken in our lives.

For God so loved the world (that is perishing from the poison of sin) that He gave His only begotten Son (that He made His Son to be sin for us), that whoever believes in Him (that whoever looks at the bronze serpent hanging on the pole) should not perish (from the poison) but have eternal life (that we might live forever in the presence of God).