

Look!

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Preacher: Debbie Gould

[0 : 00] Our Father and our Lord, we thank you for your word. We thank you that it is powerful and effective and it can change lives. And so we ask now that by your spirit, you'll open our hearts, our ears and our eyes to see the message that you would so desire for us to hear today.

In Jesus' name, amen. Well, many of you would know that I love ballroom dancing. It's a sport with a huge amount of skill needed.

It seems to me that once you get to a point of thinking that you've just learned something, then you get told that you sort of got a long way to go and you need to learn some more.

And I make many, many mistakes in my ballroom dancing. Some of them are very innocent mistakes. Most of them are because I didn't listen to my teacher.

And so when he tells me to do something, I am not listening or I think that just maybe I can do it in a better way.

[1 : 11] Well, the Israelites here also seem to be slow at doing what they are told as well. The difference is that it is almighty God and not a dancing teacher who is setting their path.

And we have seen constantly the Israelites questioning God. Here again in Numbers and once again, we see the familiar pattern for the people of God and an unexpected punishment and an unexpected cure or solution.

The setting in brief is this. It's the time of Israel's wanderings in the wilderness. The Israelites were originally under the control of Pharaoh in Egypt and through Moses, God moved Pharaoh's heart to let them go, but not without many plagues, as we know to convince him.

God was leading his people to a new land and all they had to do was to trust him and to obey his leading. God promised to be with them and to protect them.

All these wanderings took many years, not because God got them lost, because God wouldn't do that, but because of fear and disobedience.

[2 : 34] It wasn't just the people who were disobedient. We saw that there were a priest disobedient. We saw the priest's family disobedient. We've even seen Moses and Aaron disobedient and the punishment was that they would not enter the promised land.

And here in this passage that we've got to today, just beforehand, we see that Aaron has died and he has buried outside of the promised land as God had forewarned.

And still, our reading shows that God continues to give victory to these wayward people.

King Arad wanted to capture the Israelites along the road as they passed through the city, but this king didn't count on the Israelites calling out to their great God to help them.

In verse two, we see, then Israel made this vow to the Lord. If you will deliver these people into our hands, we will totally destroy their cities.

[3 : 43] So what is the Lord's response to these people? Because if I was God, which I know, you know, sort of long way from it, I think I'd be sick of these people by now. I would be saying, listen, I've actually helped you characters long enough, but that is not what God does.

We read in verse three, the Lord listened to Israel's plea and gave them the Canaanites over to them. They completely destroyed them and their towns, so the place was named Hormah, which means destruction.

Now, God had shown himself to the Israelites again in giving them victory, and yet straight after this encounter, we see Moses continuing on his chosen route and he's leading the people further east and up around Edom.

Now, I was trying to follow this on a map and it's a great exercise if you want to go home and do it, but, you know, it is in the opposite direction to where God is wanting to take the people.

It's down south and then over to the east and then up and around Edom. It's a long way out of where they should be heading.

[4 : 59] And I ask myself, why? Why would they be doing this? Why all this wandering in the desert? Well, because they refused to trust God's leading.

They had been led right to the border of the promised land, but they were afraid to enter. They were frightened of the size and the number of those already in the land and they did not believe that God would help them conquer the land and that he had chosen for them.

And so they went in another direction. And worse still, they started to complain. Now, does this scenario remind you of anyone?

Because it does mean I can easily complain about my lot in life after I have chosen to do things my way and not trust God.

And I'm sure that I am not alone. But here the Israelites picked the wrong person to criticise. In verse five, it says, they spoke against God and against Moses and said, why have you brought us out of Egypt to die in the desert?

[6 : 16] There is no bread, there is no water, and we detest this miserable food. The sin of the Israelites was to criticise God. Their spirits were not faithful to God.

They refused to trust God's love and care. They forgot the miracles that God had done for them. In short, they were so focused on themselves and what they thought was best that they began to grumble and speak words that weren't, words that were harsh.

It's bad enough to do this to another person. But these desert wanderers directed their words directly to God himself.

And the consequence of speaking to God in that fashion came upon them immediately. Verse six says, Now, isn't this strange?

They were just accusing God and Moses of bringing them there to die. And so it shouldn't surprise them that they were in fact dying from these snake bites.

[7 : 36] It's exactly what they had actually said would happen. So God was only giving them what they claimed would happen anyway. It sure seems clear that the Lord was trying to send a pretty big message to these people.

He wanted to show them that their rebellion was causing them to suffer. Many of them were going to go to their early graves because of their sin.

But God was also sending a message here that had to do with the snakes. Do you remember the way that sin entered into the world? It entered into the Garden of Eden.

The first sin was a sin of rebellion. A disobedience of God that was ushered in into the world by Satan in the form of a serpent.

And it brought death. And now the rebellious, God-criticising, desert-wandering people were again being sent to early graves through the work of some more serpents.

[8 : 49] And third, the message is greater because it will point them to a cure which we will look at shortly. And so the people in the middle of experiencing agony and near death recognised their sin.

They called to God and said, we sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us. Now, my first thought is very suspicious of their confession.

But that might have something to do with my heart more than the hearts of the people of God. But we see here that they had at least the presence of mind to know that they had first sinned against God.

Whenever we sin in any way, to whatever degree, we must understand that whoever else is involved and whatever the hurt we cause anyone else, we have sinned first against the Lord.

He is really the only one whose offence at sin is pure because he is perfectly holy. And if you ever find yourself in the position of having to go and seek another person's forgiveness for a wrong that you have done them, remember that you have first offended holiness and own it and confess it to almighty God.

[10 : 26] Now, this is what true repentance is. We can criticise them for their ungratefulness and their rejection of God's goodness, but let's be careful to stop and ask ourselves.

Whether any actions or attitudes of our own, even in recent days, have come out of unbelief or in ingratitude and forgetfulness of God and his goodness to us.

And God, in his mercy, heard the people and provided a way for them to be saved from death. Now, God's answer to the problem here was rather odd.

At least I think it was rather odd. At least on the surface, it was odd too. God told Moses to make a snake and put it up on a pole. Anyone who is bitten can look at it and then he would live.

And sure enough, verse nine tells us that Moses indeed made a bronze snake, put it on a pole, and then when anyone who was bitten by a snake looked at this bronze snake, lived.

[11:40] I find that totally amazing. Totally amazing. So, it's important for us to understand what is happening here because on the surface, I just think it's weird.

But let me give you five short points. Notice that God did not remove the snakes from the camp as they had requested.

The consequences of sin remained with the Israelites. They were still bitten. They still felt the pain and the poison. The snakes are a type of sin and when we became believers in Christ, sin didn't die completely.

Sin is very much alive. And we too experience the consequences of our own sin. Sure, we might seek forgiveness, but that might not mean that a particular relationship is restored automatically. It might not mean that you are treated any better at work. It might not be that you trust another person as easily as what you would have done before the sin was committed.

[12:59] If trust is broken, relationship needs to be built again. And so, there's always consequences. Even though there may be forgiveness that is given, we still have to work through consequences.

So, sin and consequences are alive and well. The second thing is that the snake on the pole is not preventative. It is for the bitten people.

Verse 8 tells us it's for anyone who has been bitten. The poison of sin is in them and without divine intervention, they will die.

What we need to do is acknowledge that sin is present in us. Only when we see the problem for what it is and accept the remedy, we will be healed.

Thirdly, the snakes in the camp are from the Lord. It's not by accident. He sent them there. The wrath of God is on this people for their sin of ingratitude and grumbling and rebellion.

[14:09] God's wrath is real and it is deadly. It was real and deadly back then in the Old Testament and it is real and deadly today.

And the means that God chooses to rescue people from his own curse is a picture of the curse itself.

That is, the snakes, which were the curse to the people, was what they had to look at on the pole.

And all they had to do in order to be saved from God's wrath is to look at his provision hanging on a pole.

Now, fast forward 1,500 years, about, Jesus applied this very well-known event to his own lifting up on the cross.

He said in the passage that we read in John 3, just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

[15:19] Now, if Jesus had not told this story to Nicodemus, I, for one, would not have thought Moses having a bronze snake on a pole was about Jesus.

I might be very slow, but I don't think that was an easy fit. But we're on the other side of Jesus and we have the full benefit of him explaining what this really meant.

So listen and take note because it should be easier for us. We know that Jesus read the Old Testament believing that it was pointing to him all along.

There were pointers and types and foreshadowings everywhere throughout the Old Testament. But we might expect him to skip this story and use another one of those pointers.

But Jesus goes out of his way to help Nicodemus by sharing with him the comparison of the Son of Man to a snake. Let me give you another five short things about Jesus here.

[16:35] Jesus identifies himself with the term Son of Man. In John chapter 9, verse 35, if you're interested, Jesus speaks to a man who has been healed from blindness.

And he asks him, do you believe in the Son of Man? Who is he, sir, the man asks. Tell me so that I may believe in him. And Jesus said, you have now seen him.

In fact, he is the one speaking with you. So when Jesus speaks of the Son of Man being lifted up, he is talking about himself and his own crucifixion.

Jesus also, in the place of the snake, is a source of healing. He is a source of rescue from sin and the wrath of God. He is a source of eternal life.

We are being told he was the source back then and it is still the same today. Jesus is the only one who can rescue any of us.

[17 : 47] And Jesus is portrayed as a curse as he takes the place of the snake. This is what is so shocking. The snakes were evil.

They were killing people. The snake on the pole is a picture of God's curse on the people. Why the need to be portrayed as a curse?

Well, 2 Corinthians 5.21 says, God made him who had no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Galatians 3.13 says, Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. For it is written, cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.

In becoming a sin and a curse for us, he took ours away. And Jesus gives eternal life from the cross.

[18 : 54] In our John passage with Nicodemus, we see that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. When our sin and God's wrath are taken away, God is totally for us.

And if God is for us, we will never die but live with him forever in joy. Jesus is the one we look to. We look and we believe. Verse 15 again, everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

Everyone.

Not some. Not a few. But everyone. So, what is it that we must do? We must look to the one who has been lifted up.

This is so exciting and you cannot pretend to look. Many try to pretend. They go through the motions. And yet, we will see it in each other if we truly have eternal life.

[20 : 08] Our lives will not be static. There is joy when we live for Jesus. There is joy when we see others turn to Jesus.

Life is not static and if you are feeling that your life is static in a spiritual sense, then you need to look afresh at Jesus today.

The passage in Numbers reminds the wandering Israelites of the profound depth of their depravity and of God's mercy and love.

The cross is there to do the same for us. We need to have the cross in our midst. It reminds us that through the cross, an instrument of execution, our saviour lived out his dying love for us by dying on it for our salvation.

Our sins were carried to the cross by Jesus, buried with him in the grave. And his resurrection victory assures us of our eternal destiny as God's children.

[21 : 23] We just need to look, not glance when it suits us, but have our eyes fixed on Jesus at all times, in all situations, individually and as a church.

We need to look. A great way to finish and illustrate this is for me to read a story of Charles Spurgeon's conversion and it's in his own words.

The day is January 6, 1850. Spurgeon is not quite 16 years of age. I sometimes think I might have been in darkness and despair until now, had it not been for the goodness of God in sending a snowstorm one Sunday morning while I was going to a certain place of worship.

When I could go no further, I turned down a side street and came to a primitive Methodist chapel. In that chapel, there may have been a dozen or 15 people.

The minister did not come that morning. He was snowed up, I suppose. At last, a very thin-looking man, a shoemaker or a tailor or something of that sort, went up to the pulpit to preach.

[22 : 51] He was obliged to stick to his text for the simple reason that he had little else to say. The text was, Look unto me and be ye saved all the ends of the earth from Isaiah 45, 22.

He did not even pronounce the words rightly, but that did not matter. There was, I thought, a glimpse of hope for me in that text. The preacher began thus, My dear friends, this is a very simple text indeed.

It is just look. Now looking, don't, I can't do this. Now looking, don't take a great deal of pain. It ain't lifting your foot or your finger.

It is just look. Well, a man needn't go to college to look. You may be the biggest fool and yet you can look.

A man needn't be worth a thousand a year to be able to look. Anyone can look, even a child can look. But then the text says, look unto me.

[24 : 04] Many of ye are looking to yourselves, but it's no use looking there. Ye will never find any comfort in yourselves.

Some look to God the Father. No, look to him by and by. Jesus Christ says, look unto me. Some of ye say, we must wait for the Spirit's working.

You have no business with that just now. Look to Christ. The text says, look unto me. Then the good man followed up his text in this way.

Look unto me. I'm sweating and great drops of blood. Look unto me. I am hanging on the cross. Look unto me.

I am dead and buried. Look unto me. I rise again. Look unto me. I ascend to heaven. Look unto me.

[25 : 03] I am sitting at the Father's right hand. Oh, poor sinner. Look unto me. Look unto me.

When he had gone to about that length and managed to spin out ten minutes or so, he was at the end of his tether.

Then he looked at me under the gallery and I dare say with so few present he knew me to be a stranger. Just fixing his eyes on me as if he knew all my heart, he said, young man, you look very miserable.

Well, I did, but I had not been accustomed to have remarks made from a pulpit on my personal appearance before. However, it was a good blow.

Struck right home. He continued, and you will always be miserable, miserable in life and miserable in death if you don't obey my text.

But if you obey now, this moment, you will be saved. Then lifting up his hands, he shouted, as only a primitive Methodist could do, young man, look to Jesus Christ.

[26 : 27] Look, look, look. You have nothing to do but to look and to live. I saw at once the way of salvation.

I know not what else he said. I did not take much notice of it. I was possessed with that one thought.

Like as when the brazen serpent was lifted up, the people only looked and they were healed.

So it was with me. I had been waiting to do 50 things, but when I heard that word look, what a charming word it was to me.

Oh, I looked until I could have almost looked my eyes away. There and then the cloud was gone.

The darkness had rolled away and at that moment I saw the sun and I could have risen that instant and sung with the most enthusiastic of them of the precious blood of Christ and the simple faith which looks alone to him.

[27 : 36] and now I can say, e'er since my faith I saw the stream, thy flowing wounds supply, redeeming love has been my theme and shall be till I die.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

weapon