

The link between John 3v16 and Numbers 21

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[0 : 00] And we will find it in Numbers, Numbers chapter 21, verses 7 to 9.

Sometimes, when we are translating the Bible orally into a San language, Chirichiri and Kaichwa, all at the same time, I'm involved in Bible exegesis.

And we just find that we find so many interesting and encouraging things for us as a translation team as we are studying the Bible. And people themselves are challenged.

As we discover things in the Word of God. And we learn a couple of things as we translate. Never assume you already know everything. And never skimp on studying properly.

And for this Mission Sunday, God put on my heart to take a couple of very well-known, the best-known Bible passages, and just look at maybe finding something new in them this morning.

[1 : 36] Numbers 21, verse 7 to 9. And the people came to Moses.

Sorry. We start in verse 4. Numbers 21, 4. From Mount Hor, they set out by the way to the Red Sea to go around the land of Edom.

And the people became impatient on the way. And the people spoke against God and against 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 worthless food. Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.

And the people came to Moses and said, We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord that he take away the serpents from us.

[2 : 35] So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.

So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live. Amen. We ask God to bless his word to us this morning.

I haven't read this passage particularly because we have snakes in Botswana, but I will tell you a snake story if you like a bit later. I read this story because it's a story of redemption in the word of God.

The people are sinning. They are despising God and his provision. And then God sends judgment in the form of snakes that come among them.

They were traveling through the desert. The snakes come among them and start biting the people, and some people died. When they repent, they ask God to take them away. And God doesn't take them away, but God sends a way for them, provides a way for them to live.

[3 : 53] It's salvation by faith, very non-interactive. And, you know, people see, and they say in religions that people do tremendous things of self-sacrifice and trying very hard to go through rituals and whatever.

And God said, no, people who will be saved, they will look so they know that it's the hand of the Lord. It's not just, it's not something they did.

They didn't even have to crawl to it or anything. They just had to look and trust in the Lord, and they would be, they would not die from the bite. Now, do you know where else in the Bible we find this story?

If you know, just put your hand up. But you don't have to. I know you can know it and not put your hand up. I'm not saying if you don't put your hand up, you don't know. Anybody?

Okay. This is the background story to John chapter 3, 16. This is the background story to John 3, 16. Did you know that?

[5 : 01] Let's read John 3, 16 and the surrounding verses to that if you turn with me. This is the well-known passage that I'm talking about today.

John, let's start at verse 9.

He's talking to Nicodemus. He tells him that he needs to be born again. And he explains to him how the Holy Spirit works.

He tells him about the wind. You can't see the wind, but you can see its power. You can experience its power. And Nicodemus said to him, how can these things be?

Chapter 3, verse 9. Jesus answered him, are you a teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony.

[6 : 07] If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. That's where we find the story again.

Let's imagine that it's a lovely sunny day and it's snowing and sleeting. At that point, you realize two things. One, you realize I'm in Scotland.

And two, you realize I don't need an umbrella because it can come at you sideways from underneath and from all sides.

[7 : 14] I love the bad weather that we have. It's just so refreshing that we get rain and snow and everything compared to the dry, hot climate, bland, you know, uneventful climate in Botswana most of the time.

And you're telling this to your friend who is not surprised but you're telling the story anyway. And you say, it's so rained that my clothes were drenched.

So that so means so much. It rained so much that my clothes were drenched. But imagine you say to him, it's so rained that only my heart and my chest were soaked but my back stayed dry.

That's when it really comes at you from the front. That so means means in such a manner or in such a way. It doesn't mean so much. So when God says, when Jesus says, God so loved the world, does it mean the first so or the second so?

From our example. And I think it will be interesting to find out. Jesus speaks to Nicodemus, as I said, about new birth.

[8 : 26] And Nicodemus asks, how can these things be? What are you talking about? I don't get it. I don't understand. And Jesus says, are you a teacher in Israel and you don't get it?

I am from above. I have come from above. I'm telling you things that take place here below and you don't believe. I am the one who came. No one ascended into heaven except the one who came down from heaven.

So then he says, here's something you do understand. And this is the second time in the Gospel of John that Jesus makes analogies from the Old Testament to reveal something about himself.

The first one is Jacob's ladder in chapter one. When he talks to Nathaniel and he says, from now on you will see the angel ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. That's an Old Testament reference.

And then it says, as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. And this is it.

[9 : 31] The word that is used here in Greek, I'm not an expert at Greek, but I like looking into it occasionally, is hutos.

Hutos, which means thus, in such manner, or in this way, God loved the world in that he gave his only Son.

You probably guessed because I wouldn't have asked because most people understand so to mean so much. But there is no debate. There are some things in the Word of God that you can look at, but this one is one that there's no debate.

In fact, if you have an ESV Bible, it has a footnote down at the bottom of the page relating to that and it says, for this is how God loved the world.

It's explaining what so means, what the translators of the King James Bible meant, and it carried on from there. So, are you surprised at that?

[10 : 35] In this way, God loved the world. And that word, hutos, is referring to what has just been said or what is just about to be said. So, what is he saying?

God provides a way out. Like it happened with Moses and the snakes.

People were lost. They were dying. They were unable to get away and escape the consequences. When they were bitten, it was game over.

That paints the picture of sin. In Botsana, we have what you could call a slow death snake. It's in fact a snake that looks very cute.

It's not very aggressive. It's small compared to others. Lives in trees. And it's called the boom slang, which sounds very grand.

[11 : 35] grand. But boom in Afrikaans means tree and slang means snake. So, it's just called a tree snake. It has fangs at the back of the mouth and it sort of bites and it has one of the most toxic venoms in snakes in southern Africa.

But they don't affect people immediately. It takes a long time to work and death occurs. If untreated death occurs for sure within 24 to 48 hours, we found three of them in our yard in Botswana.

Once you get bitten, you have to go and get treatment. If you get there too late in this case, if you get there after 24 hours, they have to change all your blood out as part of the treatment.

Sin is part of our lives and the Bible says, you know, sometimes I hear people, oh, he was an innocent person, he didn't deserve that. Whatever tragedy occurs, Jesus talks about this at some point as well.

But as far as sin is concerned, we deserve what we have. The worst of what sin brings is death. And by the grace of God, we don't receive everything that we deserve for our sin.

[12 : 56] we live under grace, under the grace of God. And then it talks about repentance. This is something that the Lord put on my heart.

You're a missionary and you start preaching the gospel to people maybe who haven't never heard it before and you think, what is the message of the gospel that's relevant, that you have to get across first of all.

And this is something that God drew my attention through study of the word and a book I read. What is the expected response to the gospel?

What does God expect of us when we hear the gospel, when we believe? What is the first step that God expects of us? And the only thing that God has asked us, asking us to do in response to the gospel, is repent.

Repent and believe. Repent and be baptized. There's commands, but it's repent. I often think we didn't find Jesus going around and asking people to allow him to come into their hearts, asking people to allow him to become their personal savior.

[14 : 14] The message that Jesus went out, the first thing that he asked the world to do and God asks of people who hear the gospel is repent. Matthew 3, to repent for the kingdom of God is at hand.

That was the message of Peter, Acts 2, 38. Peter said to them, when they asked, what must we do? Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

And I have here a list more than 20 verses, I'm not going to read them, you will be relieved to know. Acts 17, 30, the time of ignorance got overlooked but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.

People repented. When people repented, God made a way for them. We see God's grace and God's forgiveness, and we see salvation by faith alone.

They didn't have to do anything. Secondly, God provides the only way out. God makes a way, but God provides the only way out.

[15 : 28] It talks about the exclusivity of the gospel. It doesn't say God loved the world in many ways, and this is one of the ways that he thought to redeem the world.

No, he says God loved the world in this way that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

He deals with that impossible crossing over from perishing, the way of perishing to the way of eternal life. God provides the only way out.

Then he talks about God's amazing love, and this is what I don't have a problem. If people interpret John 3 16, that God loved the world so much because it's there, it's in the Bible.

There's so much that talks about God shows his love for us, and that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. In Ephesians 2, he says, because of his great love, when we are dead in our trespasses and sins, we are made alive together with Christ by grace, we have been saved.

[16 : 37] God gave his only begotten son. That speaks of love, incomprehensible. I think we've all seen a film once in which they catch the good guy, and they're trying to get him to give out information, and it doesn't matter what they do to him, he doesn't give them any information, and then they threaten one of his family, and then he tells them everything they want to know.

We may be willing to sacrifice ourselves sometimes in our culture, in the Western culture. We are willing to put ourselves first before we put our children on the line.

We will not accept to allow anybody to hurt our loved ones. God gives his only son. We can't even grasp the kind of love grace.

God shows us. God shows us his unrelenting grace, a grace that is available to all who believe that whoever comes to him may not perish but have eternal life.

If you hear God calling you to himself, no matter who you are and what you have done, his grace is big enough, the way he provided is able to save you from hell.

[18 : 12] Did you know I met a modern-day Nicodemus once? Maybe you've heard me say this before. I was hitchhiking and I was testifying to this guy and he knew a little bit and I told him about new birth and he asked me the exact same question.

How can a man be born again? And I understood. Then he sort of explained what he means. He says all the filth. You know, can God make you as though it never happened?

And the answer is yes, he can. The way he provided is able to hold you. And he is able to make you new.

When you come to him, you repent and you give a life to Christ. You haven't done that yet. Please don't leave here this morning before doing that. That's the most important thing you have to think about at this point.

He gave his only begotten son. We see God giving his son. And this is my last point this morning. Because my mind immediately went to that verse that I think very much ties in with the wonderful message of John 3 16.

[19 : 40] Jesus said to them again in John 20 verse 21, peace be with you as the father has sent me, even so do I send you. I thought that's interesting.

Jesus comes back after the resurrection and says as God has sent me so I send you. And what does this mean?

It doesn't mean in an identical way we are not sent out to live a perfect life and die for the sins of the world. But we are sent out by Jesus who accomplished all that work of salvation.

And he says I'm sending you in the same manner. The gospel message is proclaimed by his people. The most important plan that God had for the world includes you and me.

Jesus sent, God sent Jesus on his rescue mission and you and I are now sent on that rescue mission. He gave Christ and now Christ is giving you to the world.

[20 : 54] He's an ambassador. And many people see this interpret this as a passing on of the baton. I don't think that's the case. It's not saying I came, I did my job and now it's your turn.

Go. It's not saying that. It's saying and we will get into this a little bit tonight. We are going to look at Matthew 28, the great commission.

Maybe find something interesting in there as well. He is always with us. Jesus is still in charge of mission. I think it's pretty clear it refers to our union with him.

We are sent because he is sent and once we come to him, we become his people and we are sent with him. as the father has sent me for the world to be rescued, so I send you.

You now belong to me and now you are sent together with me. This is our purpose in the world, to save the world by proclaiming the message, to cause the world to be rescued.

[22 : 05] I love this about Setswana. I get excited about little things that many people find boring. In Setswana they have the end of the word, they put an isa at the end of a verb.

It means to cause to be saved. Just by adding a little thing, they communicate that meaning to cause to be saved.

I love that. How Jesus goes out. That is an example for us. I think that's another sermon. I won't go into that too much. He was required to let go of his glory, to live a selfless life.

He had much suffering in his life. He had complete surrender to the father. And he says, as the father sent me, so am I sending out you. Do you understand, if you belong to Jesus, this is what you are getting yourself into.

He's asking us to be witnesses, to proclaim that simple and powerful message to cause people to be saved, to come to himself.

[23 : 16] So we learn the background to the best known Bible verse in the world. And we learn how Jesus explained this in this way.

God loved the world. and then we learn we are sent in the same manner by the son, as the son was sent by the father. How we are fulfilling our commission in the world, I think that's a challenge to every one of us.

God is asking us to be witnesses at different times, in different places, in different ways. And I'll talk more about this tonight, looking at the great commission.

I'd like to end with a hymn that was one of the favorite hymns of a famous Scotsman, Eric Liddell.

It came to my attention recently that he loved this hymn. Did you know that Eric Liddell was not born in Scotland? More shocking discoveries this morning.

[24 : 28] He was born in China to missionary parents. He came to Scotland, he studied in Scotland, he lived in Scotland, he had a you've all seen chariots of fire, his brilliant athletic career and everything that he's done.

What is less known is that less than a year after he came back from Paris and he won the gold medal and all that, he decided to go back to China as a missionary.

He went to the same region where his parents were and continued mission work there. He had a very difficult missionary career. During the Second World War, Japan was invading China, ended up in the battle lines, had to move several times where he was working due to life-threatening danger.

his wife and children left for Canada. Soon after, he ended up in Waisian prison camp.

There, he had an amazing testimony. It was a shining example even among Christians. There was a lot of friction. There was not a lot of food.

[25 : 37] and Eric Little stood out from those people who were an example of Christ. He started teaching the children. There are children still alive today.

Elderly people still alive today were taught by Eric Little in a prison camp, in the war camp. He did amazing things. Then he died of brain tumor in Waisian camp, five months before liberation.

According to a fellow missionary, he says Eric Little was speaking in reference in answer to how he had given his life to God. His last words were its complete surrender.

I love that. Eric Little is an inspiration to me and an example and an encouragement to all of us, I think, how to serve God.

Before he left to China, some people were enraged for not continuing to run. People were angry.

[26 : 53] People just didn't understand. At the train station, Waverly station, he was asked to say something before the train left. he didn't say anything but he sang this song.

The Geddes have taken this song, they've written a little chorus for it, as they sometimes do, and we'll sing that together this morning. Amen.