

# John 3:1-21

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[ 0 : 00 ] Corinthians chapter 10 and verse 6. Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on the evil things as they did.

Do not be idolaters as some of them were. As it is written, the people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in pagan revelry.

We should not commit sexual immorality as some of them did and in one day 23,000 of them died.

We should not test the Lord as some of them did and were killed by snakes.

And do not grumble as some of them did and were killed by the destroying angel. These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come.

So if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall. No temptation has seized you except what is common to man.

[ 1 : 06 ] And God is faithful. He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus. And we'll take up the reading from verse 10 and read to verse 15.

You are Israel's teacher, said Jesus, and do you not understand these things? I tell you the truth.

We speak of what we know and we testify to what we have seen. But still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe.

How then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven, the Son of Man.

[ 2 : 08 ] 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.

Well, since I was last with you, I have officially entered the ranks of the elderly.

I've been made aware of this in two ways. The first one was when I went to get my regular prescription and I pulled out my medical exemption card that I always have to show or had to show to them.

And the pharmacist says, oh no, no, you don't need that anymore. And I said, oh, have they changed the system? They said, no, look at your birth date. You get your prescriptions free now anyway.

And then the second way was just a couple of weeks after that. We had our first senior citizens meal at the Weatherby Whaler. So now for the same price indeed, for 20p cheaper, we can have either soup before our fish and chips or mushy peas with our fish and chips for no extra cost.

[ 3 : 25 ] And I guess, you know, as we get older, perhaps the likelihood is, not the certainty, but the likelihood is that we use the NHS a little bit more and we become more aware, if you like, of the need for cures for certain things.

And I looked up and came across a few rather unusual cures. I have to mention this with a health warning. I take no responsibility for these whatsoever.

Should you try them? I've just read them. Up to you whether you use them or not. I don't know if any of you suffer now from calluses and corns. Any of you who got a little bit older? Well, I'm told that licorice is extremely good for it.

I'm not quite sure what you're meant to do with it, whether you're meant to eat it or wrap it around the calluses and corns. Hiccups. Never mind all the standing on your head or holding your breath. A teaspoon of sugar apparently is the answer for hiccups. If you have a wart, don't bother going to get them frozen off with heat. Duct tape manages the job just as well, apparently, wrapped around it.

[ 4 : 38 ] And if any of you are still playing sports and suffer at all from hamstring injuries, then an injection of goat's blood, I'm assured, is excellent for that.

Well, there may seem to be unusual cures. But the cure that we're looking at this morning and that was there in the passage that Richard read for us earlier is stranger in many ways than all of them. A cure for a venomous snake bite. A cure for a venomous snake bite.

They travelled from Mount Hor. And I suppose the first question we need to ask ourselves is, well, who are the they? Who is being spoken of here, the they?

Or a little bit later, the people. Well, the they are the sons and daughters and grandchildren of the people who had been originally brought out of Egypt by God.

[ 6 : 20 ] You remember that the people of Israel, the particular people of God, had been enslaved in Egypt for many generations. But God had heard their cry and he had miraculously brought them out of Egypt through Moses, their leader.

You remember when they came through the Red Sea and the Red Sea parted to allow them across and came down on the Egyptian chariots that were following them.

A miraculous escape. And yet, they didn't immediately enter into their own land, into their promised land.

Largely because of their rebellion against the God who had done so much for them. They ended up, for a period of 40 years, wandering about in this area, sometimes in the wilderness area, between Egypt and the promised land.

And in fact, virtually all of the original people, or the original adults, who had come out of Egypt, never made it into the promised land because of their rebellion.

[ 7 : 48 ] And in fact, the previous chapter, we would have read of the deaths of Moses' brother and sister, Aaron and Miriam. And Moses himself had just been told that even he wouldn't enter the promised land.

He would see it, but he wouldn't enter it. So, these are now the sons and daughters.

It's 40 years on. And they are the people who would eventually go into the promised land. And by and large, as a generation, they were more faithful to God than their parents had been.

And yet, as we shall see, even they had their failings and had their weaknesses. They were a massive group of people.

In fact, Janet and I, at the minute, in our morning readings, are reading through numbers. And we've just noticed, a few chapters on from this, they have this big census of the people who will eventually go into the promised land.

[ 8 : 59 ] And it numbered, the census was of fighting men, if you like, of men who would have been an age to fight, of 20 years old and over. And it numbered just over 600,000.

So, altogether, people estimated that this huge gathered people might have been in the region of 2 million people, if you included all the women, all the children as well.

And if you go back to the beginning of numbers, what is remarkable is it's almost exactly the number who came out of Egypt. A different group of people, the next generation, but God had been faithful to the nation.

Despite their rebellion, roughly the same number of people who came out of Egypt would enter into the promised land. So, this is the people that are being spoken about here.

What was their situation? Well, they were on the verge of entering their promised land. It is now the 40th year since they left Egypt.

[ 10 : 10 ] And soon, they were going to enter. But, there was a frustration. In verse 4, we read there, They travelled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea to go round Edom.

Now, it's very easy for us to read that and not see any significance in it. But, if you had a map in front of you, what you would see was that they were having to make a massive detour.

Have you ever been in that situation, you know, where you've seen the place that you want to go to, but it's so hard to get that final bit?

Our daughter was on holiday a couple of years ago in Portugal, and they drove into Lisbon one day, and they were going to stop one night in this hotel. And she said, you know, they saw this hotel about a hundred yards away.

But, there was this one-way system. She says it was about an hour later. Instead of being a hundred yards away, she was half a mile away from it. Eventually, they arrived.

[11:20] But, that last stretch seemed to take so long. Well, there was this frustration because they had asked the king of Edom for safe passage through their land.

But, he had refused it. And so, they couldn't go through Edom. They had to go round it. And they were frustrated at that situation.

And what was their response to that? That response to that setback. Well, we are told that the people grew impatient.

I wonder if you've ever heard that phrase, Patience is a virtue. Possess it if you can. It's seldom found in women, but never in a man.

Strangely enough, it was my mum who taught me that rather than my dad. Impatience. And grumbling. Moaning against both God and the leadership that God had given them against Moses as well.

[12:41] Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There's no bread. There's no water. We detest this miserable food. Looking back to their past with rose-tinted glasses, I might have mentioned to you once before of the fact that, not being a photographer, I once came across a film several years after the photographs had been taken and wondered what was on it.

And when we had it developed finally, we found there were the photographs of our honeymoon about seven years after. And it had gone all pink around the edges because the film had been left so long.

So our honeymoon is definitely rose-tinted. But we can definitely have a tendency, can't we, to look back with rose-tinted eyes. Oh, why couldn't you have left us in Egypt?

In another passage, it talks about where there were cucumbers, where there were marrows. Yes, there were, they remembered that, but they totally forgot that they were in slavery.

They were being beaten every day. They were having to do all the pharaohs' building work with very hard conditions, slave labor. Forgot all about that.

[14:01] Just remembered what they thought were the good bits. Why have you brought us out of here? There's no bread, there's no water. Well, of course, it wasn't true.

God had provided the manna. Miraculously. God had provided water out of the rock, miraculously. But they just grumbled and moaned about God.

It had become a bit of a pattern with them. Beginning of chapter 20 starts in the same way. They quarreled with Moses and said, If only we had died when our brothers fell dead.

Why did you bring us to the desert so our livestock should die here? I wonder what we think of when we think of sin.

Do we immediately think of such things as adultery, violence, theft? Well, of course, these are all sins.

[15:03] But it's interesting how often God brings up the sin of grumbling and moaning, particularly, of course, grumbling and moaning against him.

A lack of gratitude to him for all that he has done. And what about us? What about you and me? How do we respond to frustration? How do we respond when we have setbacks in our church life, in our individual life, in our family life?

Do we, too, have a tendency sometimes to turn to God and complain? Not just complain to him. Nothing wrong in bringing our concerns to him.

But in grumbling to him and moaning to him. Well, that's the people's response to their situation. But then we see God's response.

[16:10] The Lord sent venomous snakes among them. It's interesting, in Deuteronomy we read that during the time in the wilderness, God protected them from venomous snakes.

Snakes were always there, in a sense. They were always there in the area. But now, God sends them and allows them, if you like, to do their work amongst the people.

He takes away his protecting hand from them for a time. Now, I'm convinced that the main reason, the primary reason why God does that, is not so much punishment as chastisement, as a desire to draw his people back to himself.

And, of course, we see that that is actually what happens. In verse 7, there we're told then, there's a new response for the people.

They come to Moses, and they acknowledge their sin. We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you.

[ 17 : 38 ] They confess it, and they repent of it, and they plead with Moses to pray for them. They plead that the results of their sin might be taken away from them, and they mightn't all die out in the desert from these snake bites.

The writer to the Hebrews reminds us that God does sometimes chastise his people in order to draw us back.

In fact, he makes the comparison with a father who, out of love for his children, will sometimes chastise them in order to draw them back.

I remember when I was teaching, occasionally you'd get talking to somebody, and they might talk about, you know, what they'd been doing that weekend, of how they'd been out late, and, you know, getting into all sorts of bother, and so on.

You might just say to them, well, you know, I bet you got into trouble when you got home then, didn't you? And sometimes they would just say to you, no, they don't care. And in actual fact, underneath that, there was a sadness.

[ 19 : 08 ] Sometimes their friends might say, oh, you can get away with anything, I'm always in trouble. But these youngsters recognised themselves that the fact that they didn't get into trouble wasn't because of the love that their parents had for them, it was actually their lack of care for them.

And they would sometimes say it was sadness, actually underline it. No, they don't care. Well, God cares for us, and that's why sometimes he will chastise us to bring us back.

So the writer of the Hebrews said, and he was drawing on teaching from the Old Testament, my son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.

So if, as a Christian here this morning, you know there's a particular area of your life that the Holy Spirit's been perhaps pointing out to you, but you've been ignoring, that you know is displeasing to God, do what these people did.

repent of it, and turn back to your loving Father, who wants to woo you back into a way which is best for you.

[ 20 : 41 ] So they responded, they repented, and they pleaded that the results of their sins might be taken away. And God graciously answers them.

Again, it's in an unusual way. Often during this 40 year period, when the people had asked Moses to pray for them, God had actually taken away the problem.

Now do you notice here, God in a way doesn't take away the problem. He doesn't take away the snakes. He doesn't take away their bite.

But what he does do, he provides a cure for the bite. And he provides a method that they can do. It is possible for them to look to this bronze snake up there on a pole. They don't have to run 10 miles to it.

[ 21 : 51 ] They didn't have the strength to do it. It was suitable for them, but also, you know, it tested the sincerity of their faith.

They've got themselves into this situation by refusing to trust God and grumbling against him and testing him. Now God gives them a provision which tests their faith.

Will you simply do what I ask you to do, even if it seems a foolish thing? Will you just look to my provision?

Will you look to the snake? So we're told, Moses made this bronze snake and put it up on a pole and then anyone who was bitten by a snake, anyone could look at that bronze snake and he lived. So that is the incident, if you like, that took place. But is it just a history lesson for us? Is it just, well, that's interesting, but that happened all of those centuries ago.

[ 23 : 10 ] Is it there just as a history lesson? Well, far from it. We're told that the whole of the Bible points to the Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord Jesus said that himself on the road to Emmaus when he was talking to his disciples, we're told that he opened up the scriptures and showed what all of them taught about himself.

Now with some of those, it's not always easy to make the link, to make the jump, but with this passage, in many ways, it's very easy to do because the New Testament has done it for us.

So let's just have a look at those two passages from the New Testament that we read a little bit earlier.

First one was 1 Corinthians in chapter 10. Here Paul is writing to a church in Corinth. That would be in modern-day Greece.

And he was writing to a group of professing Christians to a church there in Corinth.

[ 24 : 21 ] A church which had its problems. A church where people were sometimes full of themselves and perhaps more proud of the gifts that they had than of the God who had given them the gifts.

And Paul sometimes has to give them some pretty harsh words. But nevertheless, they are a group of gathered believers. And in the whole of this, chapter 10, he is reminding them of some of the incidents that happened in the wilderness, including this incident.

And it's interesting, he is writing there to a church that is mainly made up of non-Jewish people, writing about an incident that had happened to the people of Israel. But he is saying that you are this, you are the new Israel.

You look back to that. And he says twice, these things occurred as examples to us.

So he was writing to a people around about 1,300 years after this incident took place. And what he says to them is, these were very real historical events.

[ 25 : 38 ] They were of tremendous significance to the original people to whom these events happened. But nevertheless, God caused them to be written down for use for you so that you could learn from them.

And of course, God has caused them to be written down and translated into English as well so that we, another 2,000 years on in Yorkshire, can and ought still to learn from them.

And he does remind us, doesn't he, that God is not mocked, that we, even as Christian believers, we are not to take him for granted.

We are not just to sin lightly, to go on sinning and think, well, it doesn't matter because we're believers anywhere. We're not to be complacent over our sin.

And certainly, we are not to be lacking in gratitude to God for all he has given us and all he has done for us.

[ 26 : 59 ] Or we too, like them, may fall. He doesn't mean that we would lose our salvation, but he does mean that we would lose the joy of our salvation.

We would lose the joy of that relationship that we have with our God. And so he warns them, if you think you're standing firm, be careful lest you fall.

Look at the examples of those, your forerunners in the wilderness all of those years ago. So there's something for those of us who are Christians here this morning to learn from this passage.

But then I want to look at the other passage and I particularly want to apply this, and for any of you who are here this morning who are not yet Christians, I want you to particularly take on board this.

Jesus looks back at this incident, probably the best known verse in the Bible is John 3, verse 16, isn't it? For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

[ 28 : 31 ] But these two verses just before it are just as crucial and wonderful verses for any of you who are not yet Christians to take notice of. Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus, a man who has obviously got an interest in Jesus but hasn't fully grasped spiritual truths yet.

And Jesus draws an example between what happened in the wilderness and what was going to happen to him very shortly. He says, just as, in the same way, just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man, that was the name Jesus used about himself more than any other, so the Son of Man must be lifted up that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

Now, whenever John uses the phrase lifted up in his gospel about Jesus, he refers to Jesus' crucifixion. That bronze snake was lifted up on the pole.

The reason, by the way, it was lifted up, you think of that massive crowd there out in the wilderness, it needed to be lifted up on high so that anybody could see it, even from a distance.

Well, Jesus was physically lifted up on that cross. And he says, you need to spot the link there.

What happened in the wilderness was a real event, but it was a type that pointed forward to me.

[ 30 : 20 ] those people needed to look in faith to that snake lifted up. You need to look in faith to me.

And there are a lot of similarities. If you're not a Christian here this morning, between the incident in the wilderness and your situation now, even though it's three and a half thousand years on, they were a rebellious people.

And if you're not yet a Christian here this morning, you're a rebellious person. You might not think of yourself like that. You might be quite charming and quite respectable, and nobody might think that of you.

But if you're just walking your own way, and you're refusing to accept the provision that God makes for you, then in your heart you're a rebel against God.

Somebody has said it's shaking your fist against God. And again, whether you think it or not, you're in desperate need.

[ 31 : 37 ] Those people were in desperate need, they had their bite, and they weren't going to just get over it. It wasn't a mild bite, these were venomous snakes, and that was, it was a deadly poison without a cure.

The Bible tells us that our sin is a deadly thing. And it isn't just things we do sin, it is primarily a hard attitude that goes our own way rather than God's way.

And they could do nothing for themselves. They couldn't cure themselves. And that's what God says to us, that we cannot just do a self-remedy, we cannot just pull ourselves up by our bootlaces and make ourselves right for him.

And that's very humbling, isn't it? It smacks against our pride. You know, if God were to say to us, you know, fast twice a week, give half your money to the poor, do lots of works of charity, and I'll accept you into heaven, a lot of people will say, yeah, well, I'll do that because I'll have deserved it, I'll have earned my way.

But God doesn't say that. He says, I have made provision for you, and there's nothing you can do to add to it.

[ 33 : 25 ] My son has died bearing the punishment punishment of all the sin of anyone who will put their trust in him.

And some people think, well, that seems foolish. How can that have an impact on me? It seemed foolish even in Jesus' day. We read earlier from the letter to the Corinthians, earlier in that letter, Paul said that the message he preaches about the cross of the Lord Jesus, he says that to the Jewish people it was a stumbling block, and to the non-Jews, the intellectual Greeks, they saw this foolishness.

Yet he said, it is God's wisdom, it is God's provision, and he calls on you to look to his provision, and not to seek to make a righteousness of your own, which you cannot make.

We need to reject all other cures, but to do simply what those people in the wilderness did, repent of what they've done, they accepted that they had rebelled against God, and they looked in belief to that bronze snake, and they were cured.

And that's what, if you're not yet a Christian this morning, that's what God calls on you to do.

Repent of your sin, confess it, say sorry to God for it, accept that you deserve his punishment, and look in belief and faith to his provision, the death of his son.

[ 35 : 24 ] Well, may the Lord help us all to learn, whether we're believers here this morning, to learn from the example there, if we're not Christians, to recognize the need to look to God's provision, and may the Lord bless us through his word.

Let's