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Sermon preached by Mr J K Popham
at Galeed Chapel Brighton
on Sunday evening 12 April 1925

JOHN 3 v 14

"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up"

Nicodemus, a master of Israel, had come to Christ, had received, or heard, Christ's instruction respecting the new birth, and was perplexed; wondered how it could be, and Christ initiates the most solemn truth in respect of that matter and the terrible consequences of being ignorant of it, of not possessing that blessing. "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God," cannot see that there is a kingdom of heaven; can only see and care for and follow after the things of this life. And further that "Except a man be born of water", the new water, the living water of life, "and of the Spirit, he cannot enter" experimentally "into the kingdom of God", must always be outside. Very solemn, solemn for you who are not born again. You cannot see that God has a kingdom; you cannot enter into that kingdom, must always be outside; be unbelievers and an unbeliever is condemned already. He does not believe the record that God has given of His only begotten Son, and he is therefore, as Christ says, in a state of condemnation. This master of Israel was every way, as far as the record goes, respectable, religious, as all proper Jews were, emphatically religious, but lacking that one thing, he lacked all, and you do, and I do, lack all if we are not born again. Sovereignty in the manner of the new birth is then set forth by Christ. "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit." The manner of the operations of the Holy Ghost is sovereignly disposed and ordered by God and this shows how impossible it is for us to set up a standard or to regulate, by any ideas or conclusions of our own, how the Holy Spirit shall begin and carry on His great work of grace. He will do it in His Own manner. He will do it in that measure that pleases Him. The measure of clearness, the measure in respect of the person's apprehension of things; the Spirit will do it just as it pleaseth

Him. How little grace a person may have to take him to heaven none can say. How mysterious the work is, we are told in the Scriptures - "The wind bloweth where it listeth". But there is a distinctness, a separation, between that which is born of the flesh and that which is born of the Spirit. They are not to be confounded and confused, and tried to mingle; you cannot mix them, cannot translate them, the one into the other; they are just absolutely distinct, and they will ever be. As long as there is a sinner with the grace of God in him, he will prove that that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that his flesh is not capable as it is depraved, of entering into divine things. "Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God." And that which is corrupt in us will always be found to be, as it were, outside.

And then the Lord graciously goes on to teach him, meeting his astonishment, says, - "If I have told you earthly things"; if I have expressed Myself respecting My kingdom by the figure that I have used and so seemed to have spoken of earthly things, how can you know or believe if I tell you of heavenly things. "No man hath ascended up to heaven, but He that came down from heaven, even the Son of Man which is in heaven." Up in heaven, down on earth; a mystery not to be entered into but by faith. The eternal Son of God, whose habitation is heaven, eternity, has come down and taken that body prepared for Him, and He, in His eternal Person, His eternal Deity, is still in heaven. He cannot divest Himself of eternity, cannot divest Himself of His eternal Deity and oneness with the Father and presence with the Father. And this Son of Man is therefore in heaven as to His divine Person, was there when speaking to Nicodemus; is there now in His sacred Manhood, His holy, complex Person. And still further, to illustrate His teaching, He utters the words of the text - "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up" "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth" says Christ, signifying the death He should die, "will draw all men unto Me." Sin, serpent like, has given us all a deadly bite and wound, whereof we cannot be healed by anything that belongs to us naturally and in the Covenant of Works. Poison, whose virulence we can never check, whose deadly effect must be felt, is felt by all who have true faith; poison that affects every faculty of the soul, and eventually brings the body into the grave, that poison is in us; that poison

will seal us eternally if we are outside and remain and die outside of this new birth. Sin receives its power to kill and hold and ruin us for ever from the law. "The strength of sin is the law". The law gave sin its power to keep us, ruin us, and hurl us into destruction, for the law cannot justify a sinner. It can teach him of his sinfulness; it can tell him that he is ruined; it can point out the threatenings of a faithful and terrible God; it can show the place which is designed and prepared for sinners, even hell. It can justify God; it can bring a person so low as that he is without hope in himself, without hope in the law. Sin in us derives its strength to ruin us this way. Sin in us provokes the justice of God. It is so contrary to the nature of God that He must punish it. Punishment of sin is necessary from the nature of God. We are very self-centred. The teaching of the Spirit brings us out of that self-centredness and fixes the mind on the perfections of Deity. We, under the teaching of the Spirit, perceive who God is, what His nature is, Holy, holy, holy, and that no sinner can stand in His sight. Here then is a terrible thing for us, terrible in itself, terrible for us to contemplate, that we possess in our nature, as it is fallen, that which God must punish. O sinner, may the Lord teach you to know this, believe this, that your nature in its present state provokes Him to anger; provokes Him so that He cannot be what He is and let your sin pass unpunished. O it were well if we had grace more deeply to look into and consider this perfection of God as it relates to ourselves. It could be no terror to us if we were not sinners, as it is no terror to elect holy angels, but as we are sinners this perfection of Deity must, whenever apprehended, be a terror to us. Like the terrible crystal its brightness dazzles, and our relationship to it is a terrible relationship. The holiness of God renders separation from Him of all sinners necessary. Have you considered it, do you feel it, that a holy God as such cannot permit you, as sinners, to come near to Him; that He is glorious in that attribute; that that attribute which is blackness and darkness and terribleness and hell to men, is, in God, a perfection.

Another thing that gives sin so awful a nature and aspect to all who feel it, is this, that it is not in the nature of God to pardon sin by an act of His will. Arbitrary pardon is not revealed in the Scripture. Pardon must be on a legal ground wherein is an atonement,

an atonement that every way satisfies the being, the perfections of our holy God.

Sin to pardon without blood
Never in God's nature stood

One of the most solemn experiences that you can ever have in this world is to realise that you, a sinner, have to do with a holy God, and that that holy God cannot, by an act of His will alone, put away your sins and bless you. This makes the bite of sin a very terrible thing; this makes our state in sin very terrible; makes our prospect as sinners as black as blackness can be; renders it, as we are in ourselves and under the law, utterly hopeless; puts us at the mercy of Him whom we have provoked, whose attributes forbid our approach to Him, as we are in ourselves sinners. And this again, felt, makes religion an unspeakably solemn thing. When you feel that you are full of sin, that your tendency is to sin, that sin is an irradicable thing in your nature, that sin is hateful to God whatever it is to you, that He must punish it. If anything will make a giddy person sober, will make a proud person come into the dust, will kill all fond hopes and imaginations about salvation, this is it; the experience of what we are. This sin may never have broken out into any immoral act in you, in myself. It may be hidden and people may regard us as being upright and thank God if it is so, but the evil is there and being blind to it is no cure of it; being ignorant of it is not a removal of it and being ignorant of God, against whom it is done, is no cure and it effects no escape. Here then we stand, here a little congregation of sinners, and, according to His promise to saints - and there are saints present - He Himself, of whom I have been speaking so little, is also present; He is present. So we have to do with God. I have to do with Him; you have to do with Him. We have provoked Him; we have provoked the eyes of His glory. Now there comes forth from Himself the astonishing manifestation of His grace wherein will consist His everlasting praise in the Church. It breaks forth in the Person of Jesus. It broke forth in Eden defiled in the promise that God made when He said that the Seed of the woman should bruise the serpent's head. It has broken forth from that day all through the Scriptures and it has been breaking forth in acts of mercy in the hearts of particular persons from Adam to this day, and the astonishing mercy is the provision

which God has made for the removal of this thing, sin, from some persons, and here let me just refer back to what I said; sin must be punished, but, thanks be to God, sinners may, some sinners shall, escape, escape by the intervention of a Surety, by the shedding of the Surety's blood; the removal of sin by the sacrifice of that Surety. By the offering of that, our great High Priest, sin is thus removed. The removal of sin from a person is that person's justification and sanctification. The two are not together in experience at the beginning, but they are together in the death of Christ. Justification, the removal of sin, is also the sanctification of the people. "Jesus, that He might sanctify the people with His Own blood, suffered without the gate." Let us look a little at this great mystery and mercy expressed in our text. "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have eternal life." The circumstances you know; you will recollect that Israel murmured in the wilderness and provoked the Lord, and He sent fiery serpents to bite them and many died of those bites, and the people went to Moses and confessed that they had sinned against the Lord and entreated him to pray for them. And Moses went before the Lord and entreated for the people and the Lord answered him and said that he was to make a serpent of brass like unto the serpents that were biting the people and lift it up on a pole, that whosoever was bitten and, being bitten and dying, should look on that brazen serpent, he should be healed, and it came to pass so that whosoever looked on that serpent was healed. And so Jesus Christ must be lifted up. He is, in the likeness of sinful flesh, without sin. This is a great point in our holy religion that He is like His brethren, without sin. "Made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law." The law, being full of curse for sinners, Jesus Christ became a curse for them. A sight of this Man, this God-Man, this holy child Jesus, made in the likeness of sinful flesh, in whose holy flesh sin was condemned, will attract the eyes of a wounded sinner. Think of Him - made sin and a curse for His brethren and being like unto them as bearing their very sins, of which they are convinced by the Spirit, He is able to sympathise with them. Being made under their law which they had broken, He was subject to its curse as the sins of His brethren were imputed to Him. "Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree". What a Christ He is. Everyone loves Him who sees Him by faith. Everyone

whose faith looks to Him feels a glow, a cleaving, and perceives how all the perfections of Deity harmonise with the salvation, the sanctification, and happiness of sinners. This is a great point in vital religion, that God reconciles sinners to Himself because all the enmity was destroyed and the handwriting of ordinances that was against them and contrary to them was taken out of the way, nailed to His cross. This holy Man, God-Man, was lifted up. "I, if I be lifted up from the earth" This spake He concerning the death which He should die. The death of Christ, therefore, is the life, the justification, the sanctification of His people. Think of sin being removed, sin in us. If we were with Him, if we were laid on Him, if we were in His heart, if our names were engraved upon His tender heart, then our sin was laid on Him, so that when He uttered those infinitely important and blessed words - "It is finished", our sin was made an end of, no longer existed in God's Book, no longer was capable of rising in judgement against us; no longer should be held in God's account as being against us. Christ was thus lifted up and thus He brought in everlasting righteousness. When the Holy Spirit, working according to, and in the Covenant of Grace, takes of this work of crucifixion, the crucifixion of the Saviour, then the healing comes. "That whosoever believeth in Him should not perish". The healing comes; it comes where the sickness is, where the wound is, where the poison rankles; it comes. Blessed coming it is indeed. Lifted up on the cross, a spectacle to God, men, angels, devils. They looked on Him. The Father looked on Him, O with what satisfaction and pleasure. The law looked on Him, O with what satisfaction and contentment. Holiness was there satisfied. Justice was there pleased. Devils looked on, men looked on, and injured and insulted Him. But believers come and look on Him and they love Him. He that believeth in this way hath the witness in himself. He knows; like the woman whose disease of so many years' standing was healed, and she felt it in herself the moment she touched the Lord, so the moment one looks with that blessed faith which has in it appropriating power given by the Spirit, that moment there is a sense of being healed. You may really look, look with true faith, and not have that sense of healing at the moment, but when in that faith there is put, infused, the appropriating power, then, like the bitten Israelite was healed as he saw the serpent of brass, so the soul is healed thus looking to the Lord Jesus.

Christ is to be lifted up in the ministry. This is another

lifting up when a sent minister is occupied with this great doctrine of Christ. It was Paul's centre, Paul's circumference as a minister. Nothing else would he know. He declared his intention to be an exclusive preacher; exclusive of all other subjects, he was determined to be and exercise himself. He would only have one theme and that theme was this, Christ and Him crucified. When a minister unfolds the malady he may sometimes do it to the disturbance of some of his hearers, but he does it with this intention, with this great aim, that he may speak - and God helping him he does speak - of the remedy. A sore boil needs a plaster, a disease needs a remedy, and the preacher has this one only remedy, Christ and Him crucified. Here he has to deal with the character of God, also with the character of men, and this brings him to his one only point, the lifting up of Christ; that is the substitutionary work of Christ, that He took the dying traitor's place and suffered in his stead. So Christ is lifted up in the first place for the justification of all whose sins were laid on Him. Everyone born again is concerned about this. Did the Saviour, when He died, die for this person. Did He die, says one, for me? The centre of religion to one who is born of the Spirit is this, can he be accepted of God? Can he be regarded by God as being without sin? Be regarded by God as being a just and holy person? If that be your centre, if that be your great, absorbing question, then there is an answer to it for you, and God will give you the answer, that is to say, the Spirit will reveal Jesus Christ, and when you see Him you look on Him and the sight is so attractive, it is so penetrating, so pervading, so persuading, that you are healed, and you know it. There is a contact between a healing Saviour and a wounded sinner; there is a contact that is felt. "Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, such as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot." And that is no doctrine, naked, dry doctrine; it is no theological question in the heart; it is a new life, a gracious power, a divine persuasion, an efficacious removal of sin from the conscience, and the sinner knows it, feels it, enjoys it. He looks on the Saviour; He looks on Him with wondering eyes, with real, deep, approbation. He looks on Him with faith that receives and embraces Him. He looks on Him as the only remedy for His disease, the only Advocate for his bad case, a case in which he himself is dumb. He

looks on Him as the Lord his righteousness, the Lord his sanctification, and that look brings the sweetest sensation of peace into his conscience. He is healed. "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up". The ministry lifts Him up, exalts Him, makes Him very high. There is none like Him, none to be compared with Him; He has no peer; none shall stand by His side.

The sinner looks on Him as his holiness. The river of water of life is here. He is born of water and of the Spirit. The cleansing water comes; the fountain is opened for sin and uncleanness, for all manner of causes of separation between the soul and God. Every reason you feel that God should be distant from you and keep you at a distance from Himself, you will find answered in and by that fountain. And when you believe in that fountain with this precious appropriating power, you will understand it. Every reason, the reason you have within, the wicked thoughts you have entertained, the dreadful abominations that are in your nature, and the afflictions which you may have come in by reason of your own folly and ways of sin; every reason of this sort and kind you will find answered by the fountain; an uplifted Saviour. He says - "All manner of sin and blasphemy against the Son of Man shall be forgiven."

You will see in Him also strength for the remaining part of your pilgrimage. These healed Israelites could take further movements toward Canaan; the wilderness shall not be their grave. They were to go forward and when one is healed it gives him new strength and he can go forward in his pilgrimage, hoping and believing that the wilderness will not be his grave. This means perseverance

Perseverance in our race
We draw from Jesus' blood

New strength comes from every new glimpse of Him. Every fresh sight of Him by faith puts new strength into the soul and, seeing the shining way to heaven in the Person and the work of Christ, the sinner says, His track I see and I'll pursue the narrow way; I will pursue until I reach the spot, the place for which I am bound. I am bound for this blessed inheritance and this view of Christ gives me new

strength. Seeing this Lord Jesus gives also this, a most beautiful view of the way of access to, and communion with, God the Father. - "For through Him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father". The blood that sprinkled the book also sprinkled the people, and as the sprinkled book came from God and the people were sprinkled by blood, it brought them into union with God and when you get this, a view of the Lord Jesus and an application to you of His atonement, that will bring the same sweet effect into your heart; you will have access. Men get access before they have this blessing; they get the Spirit of grace and of supplications from time to time and they pray, pray in the Holy Ghost, pray in faith, and they get answers, but the access that they get when they have that appropriating view of an uplifted Christ is more intimate. It is not different, only it is more intimate. Closer, sweeter, more familiar, more wonderful. "If I be lifted up". The Son of Man must be lifted up. God, the Father, sent Him to be lifted up. He voluntarily came to be lifted up. The law lifted Him up; justice lifted Him up; wicked men, according to the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, lifted Him up, and now He is lifted up faith looks up and sees Him and, seeing Him, the soul lives, is healed. Lift the serpent up, said the Lord; lift it up on a pole.

Rear it high (says Hart) that all might view it
Bid the bitten look unto it
Life attended every look

And that is the conclusion of the matter. Life does attend every believing look of a wounded, dying sinner. What think ye of Christ, of His crucifixion, of the justice of God in His crucifixion, of the love of God in His crucifixion. If you get a view of Him as crucified, your faith will go out to Him without the camp and you live in Him, and live on Him, and by Him and hope for eternal bliss through Him.

AMEN.