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"And 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."—John 3:14,15.



I would just mention for our visitors, whom we are very glad to welcome to this sanctuary, and to our worship this morning, that I have been speaking for several Lord's days upon those occasions in the journey of the children of Israel from Egypt to the promised land, which are referred to in the New Testament, and that are in the nature of a type. And so this morning we come to that occasion when the children of Israel, having provoked God by their rebellious and murmuring spirit, fell under the heavy chastening of the serpents, the fiery serpents, in the wilderness. I would just briefly recall to your mind the occasion. We read that the children of Israel spake against God and against Moses saying, "*Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?*" (Num. 21:5). It might perhaps be thought there was some excuse for their murmurings because the wilderness conditions were exceedingly distressing, but then it must be remembered that they had been a murmuring people ever since they were brought out of the land of Egypt. Time and time again you may read: "And the children of Israel murmured against the Lord," and their continual murmuring provoked the Lord to bring upon them this heavy judgment.

Also, it must be remembered, that as far as I can gather from the history, this occasion of the fiery serpents being sent amongst the children of Israel was after they had turned back from the land of Canaan because of their unbelief—that provoked God to sentence them to forty years' sojourn in the wilderness. It might be said that all that distress would never have come upon them but for their unbelief. Actually, it was not all that distant from the land of Egypt to the promised land of Canaan, and had they trusted God to have brought them into that land, they would never have spent all those long years wandering in the wilderness and under the conditions of it. In the account we have in the book of Numbers, it reads in that way: 'And the children of Israel spake against the Lord and against Moses,' and that after all that they had seen and experienced of the Lord's good hand upon them. He had delivered them from

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the oppression of Egypt; he had brought them in safety through the Red Sea that destroyed the Egyptians; he had provided daily food for them in the manna; he had supplied them with water from the rock—and after all that they still murmured against the Lord. In a reference to it in the first epistle to the Corinthians, you read this, "*Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents,*" (1 Cor.10:9). The expression there, '*tempt*' means 'provoke'. Temptation, (that is, 'satanic temptation') is intended to provoke us unto that which is evil. But their provoking ways provoked the Lord to bring upon them his judgments. I just make this observation, my friends. A murmuring spirit is very grievous in the sight of God,—very—especially considering his continual goodness and favour and mercy to us, especially if we are amongst the true children of God. To murmur against him and his ways is to tempt him, provoke him, and bring his chastening hand.

Well now, what was very much on my mind as this service has approached is that I might be helped to preach a very plain and very simple and very scriptural gospel sermon. I know it might be thought perhaps hardly necessary to a congregation acquainted with gospel truths, but I feel it is good even to those who know the truth to listen to it. And then, one would hope that in the congregation there are some who are seeking the knowledge of the truth. I remember the time when I would have been very glad and very much helped to have heard a plain simple gospel sermon, when I was in a state of concern about my state of salvation. I used to hear experience preached but that didn't seem to help me very much. But when I heard the plain, simple truth of the precious blood of Jesus Christ preached from that word, "*When I see the blood I will pass over you,*" that gave me just the direction that I felt to need. So I hope that a simple word may be helpful to some, and perhaps confirming to others. Well now, the subject opens up to my mind along these lines.

There is first of all, the uplifting of the Son of Man: "*As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up.*" There is, secondly, the painful, distressing, mortal condition of sin. And there is, thirdly, a plain direction with regard to it, with an assurance

"that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

Now a few simple words upon this very sacred and very precious gospel subject. The Son of Man must be lifted up—must be! He could not be a Saviour without being lifted up. It was to the Son of Man as "*lifted up*" that faith was directed. And we are at no loss to understand what Jesus meant by being "*lifted up*" because on two subsequent occasions when he spoke of himself in that same way about being lifted up, we read, "*this he spake signifying by what death he should die.*" So by his being lifted up we understand his being lifted up upon the cross to die. And that being lifted up in his crucifixion was very significant—there was a very deep meaning to it. For he could not die by any other means than by being lifted up on the cross to die. They attempted on one occasion to stone him, but that could not be. He was not to be stoned to death; he was to be lifted up to die. The solemn significance of it to us is this. Crucifixion, lifting up upon the cross, implied a curse. For it is written, "*Cursed is everyone that hangeth on a tree,*" (Gal. 3:13; Deut. 21:23). The Lord Jesus Christ was lifted up to signify that his death was of a curse-enduring nature. If his death had not been of a curse-enduring nature, it would have been to no purpose whatever for sin-cursed people to look to him. There he was lifted up on the cross to die, a curse-bearing Saviour. And just as serpents brought the curse of death upon the children of Israel, (and sin brings the curse of death upon all sinners), so Jesus Christ was made sin for us who knew no sin. He was lifted up because he was bearing a curse, and in bearing the curse he bore it entirely away.

This is the simple gospel, the very heart of the gospel, that the death of Jesus Christ had an atoning purpose, an atoning merit in this, that he bore away,—by his substitution and suffering and death—he bore away the curse. A serpent was the cause of all our sinfulness, and Jesus Christ is the cause of all our blessedness. A serpent brought death, and Jesus Christ, typified by the serpent that was lifted up, brings life. The bite of the serpent was death. A look at the cross is life. He must be lifted up to die that sinners might live by looking to him. Let me put it to you very simply. It is not to Jesus Christ only as the Son of God nor the Son of Man that we must look,—it is to Jesus Christ

on the cross of Calvary. Just as it was with those wounded, perishing Israelites. It was no use for them to look to anything else, nor anywhere else, except to that one objective; all eyes must turn to the serpent *lifted up*. All eyes of sinners conscious of the venom of sin in their nature must look to Jesus Christ *lifted up* on the cross. It's no use looking anywhere else, absolutely no use whatever. Nothing can stay the fatal progress of sin in our nature except looking to Jesus Christ as he was *lifted up*.

First then, it means his lifting up to die a curse-bearing and curse-removing death at Calvary. I hope you are under the teaching of the Holy Spirit. If you are under the teaching of the Holy Spirit, sooner or later you will find yourself looking to the cross of Jesus Christ—sooner or later, because the whole purpose of the convincing teaching of the Holy Spirit is to cause sinners to look to the cross of Jesus Christ. Now his example is wonderful. May we have grace to follow it. But don't look to his example for salvation, but to his cross. His miracles were wonderful; they all proclaimed his divinity. But don't look to his miracles for salvation; look to his bleeding wounds at Calvary for salvation. For there is salvation in none other and there would not have been salvation in Jesus Christ if he had not been lifted up. And there would have been no salvation in his being lifted up, if it had not been a sin-atoning death. Well, that is the heart of the gospel.

I feel in a secondary sense we may refer this lifting up of the Son of Man to the gospel ministry. The gospel ministry is appointed chiefly for this end, to preach Jesus Christ and to lift him up before poor sinners. Any ministry that fails here fails in everything. And it matters not very much how plainly and how simply a minister preaches so that he lifts Jesus Christ up, and sets him forth. If this is not stretching the similarity too far, we might say that the pole that God directed Moses to set up, or to use to set up the brazen serpent, might symbolize the preaching of the gospel. The pole did not save them and preaching of itself cannot save anyone; but if it lifts up Jesus Christ that sinners may look to him, then it serves the very chief end and purpose for which preaching is appointed at all. I have been preaching here as you know, many, many years. It has always been my desire to lift Jesus Christ up, but you would do me a favour if you would pray that the Lord will bless the lifting

up of Jesus Christ amongst us more than ever he has done. I am reminded of that word of the apostle—it reaches right to the point, "*But we preach Christ crucified*;" that is, we lift him up. And to the Jews it is a stumbling-block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are saved, they will prove that "*it is the power of God unto salvation*," for it is so to everyone that believeth (1 Cor. 1:23; Rom. 1:16). To lift up Jesus Christ is to preach him and his cross, his Person and his blood, his atonement, and his death, and all for sinners. This is the best way of lifting up Jesus Christ.

I do not think any good comes of lifting up a cross before people that they should look to that materially; I do not think lifting up a crucifix is any good at all. The holy scripture nowhere directs ministers to lift up a material cross or to set up a crucifix. For one thing, that has a direct tendency to idolatry; there is no question about it. To offer worship before any object inevitably tends to worship being directed to the object. Do you know what happened to the brazen serpent? Well now, I will tell you what happened to it. The children of Israel kept that brazen serpent for generations, right up to the time of King Hezekiah. Then at the time of King Hezekiah we read that Hezekiah brake the brazen serpent to pieces and called it "*Nehushtan*" (2 Kings 18:4). And why? Because they were burning incense to it! So it became an idol to them. And Hezekiah broke it up and called it "*Nehushtan*", that is "a piece of brass," for that is all it was. Now my friends, a crucifix is simply a piece of metal, that is all; and if incense is burnt to it, it is idolatrous. To lift up Jesus Christ in the preaching, to set forth who he is, the wonder of his Person, the purpose of his love and blood, to direct sinners to look not to any material object whatever, but to the dear Redeemer,—that is the purpose of the ministry. And if I could direct your hearts to Jesus Christ, I would be thankful, for you must look to him and be saved, or perish in your sins. There is absolutely no alternative. But what is so needful is that the Holy Spirit should operate in this,—that the Holy Spirit should direct the eye of faith to this precious Jesus.

I will come now quickly to the next consideration because I want to dwell upon this rather more fully. The purpose of the lifting up of the brazen serpent was that the bitten Israelites should look and live. They were dying; many of them had died already; many more were near to

dying; no doubt many more were just being bitten by the serpents. They were all in the process of dying, and they would all have died, if it had not been for that divine provision for their recovery. Now the point is this. There is a venom in our nature, a poison,—it is sin.

Sin is a simple word, only three letters, but it is a word of very deep and dreadful meaning. There is poison in human nature, there really is; and I can't see how it can possibly be denied. Whence comes all the evil in the world but from sin in human nature? If sin could be eliminated from human nature, evil would be eliminated from the world. All evil comes from sin, and it comes from sin in human nature. It is a poison, a fatal venom in our very nature. And how did it get into our nature? Did God create man with sin in his being? Never! never for a moment. God made man upright, pure, loving, tender, and without any evil at all, for God could never have been the cause of evil. Whence then comes the evil of sin, the fatal venom in our nature? The serpent has bitten us—the serpent has bitten us. And if you go right back to the account we have of the entrance of sin into the world, you get that as plain as possible. Satan, in the form of a serpent, tempted our first parents. They responded to the temptation. As they responded to the temptation, they were fatally bitten by sin. And it flows in the very blood of our nature. There is sin in us from that first sin—the poison entered.

And to use the apostle's word, so plain and to the point, "*Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin,*" (Rom. 5:12). Sin entered and death entered, and it is in us all. There is not one single person free of the poison and venom of sin. I am not using language one whit too strong or too emphatic. If I could use language still more emphatic, to set before you the dire evil of sin in its nature and consequences, I would use it, not only because I believe it is true, but because to belittle in any sense the fatal evil of sin is to belittle Jesus Christ and the remedy. Further, I think it was one of the good old Puritans said, "Whoever belittles the malady, belittles the Physician." Now I'm not going to belittle the malady of sin because I know it's true, but it would belittle the Physician, the Saviour. It would make salvation a little thing if I made sin out to be a little thing.

How is it then, it might be asked, if the venom of sin is in our nature, all do not look to Jesus Christ and be healed of it? The answer is only too plain,—they don't realize it. Now in this, of course, the similitude doesn't hold good. Those bitten Israelites realized they were bitten; the pain convinced them of it beyond any question whatever. But with regard to sin in human nature, it doesn't work like that. Men have to be made conscious of their condition. Sin doesn't give anyone a sense of its nature. Sin is a blinding, deadening, hardening, deceiving thing, and that is why it is that people in a sinful condition do not realize it. They are deceived by the deceitfulness of sin. Sin does not attack us in its nature with a sense of pain, but with a sense of stupor,—it sends people into a kind of unconsciousness; they are in a stupor about their condition and unless they are awakened out of it, they will perish in that condition. What we must have is a sense of our sinfulness. I know that is not preaching the gospel; sin is no gospel; sin is no salvation. A sense of sin is no salvation, but unless there is a sense of sin, no one will really look believingly to Jesus Christ,—that is the point.

Now I ask a question. What gives anyone a sense of sin in such a way that they are brought to look to Jesus Christ for salvation? It is essentially the initial work of the Holy Spirit in the heart. No words, nothing that I have said this morning will convince anyone of their sinfulness unless the Holy Spirit do the work in their souls. I believe every word I've said is true, but it won't convince you of sin unless the Holy Spirit work through the word in your hearts. O that he would!—O that he would! With what pleasure we ministers could preach the gospel if we had congregations of sinners convinced of their sin to listen to it. What gives anyone a sense of sin? How comes it that this stupor is overcome and they are awakened out of it, that sin does not continue to deceive them and to blind them? Well, there are different ways in which the Holy Spirit works this sense of sin, and one way is by the new birth. Now it is very significant that in this conversation with Nicodemus the Lord Jesus Christ put the new birth before faith. "*Ye must be born again,*" he said. He did not say straight away, "Ye must believe," but, "*Ye must be born again.*" Now no person will savingly believe unless they are first born again, because "*that which,*" Jesus said, "*is born of the flesh, is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.*" When a person is

born again they have a new nature which gives them a sense of the sinfulness of their condition. I believe that there are many who have first come to know their condition as being sinful, because they have been born again, and that has given them a consciousness of it. That's one way.

Another way in which the Holy Spirit gives people a consciousness of sin is by convincing them of the truth of it. I hope you have been convinced of sin. If not, I hope you will be. This matter is very serious,—very. Unless a person is convinced of sin they can laugh at the gospel. They won't if they are convinced of sin,—they certainly won't, any more than those who in the pain of that serpent-bite would laugh at the serpent. It makes them very serious. The Holy Spirit convinces of sin, and convicts of sin,—both. There is a difference between being convicted and being convinced. Now every person is convicted of sin by the word of God, without exception. God's law convicts everyone that is under it, of sin. But people are not convinced of it; they don't realize it. But when the Holy Spirit convinces of sin, then they are convinced that that conviction is perfectly true; they are exactly in that condition that the Word of God convicts them of being in; and they have to fall under it; they realize the poison is in their hearts.

Sometimes the Holy Spirit gives people a consciousness of sin by their falling into actual transgression—that brings conviction upon their conscience. Now I think it was so with regard to David in the 51st Psalm. No need for me to stay upon the sad transgression that David had fallen into; but it taught him something. God taught David from his youth, but he did not teach him everything from his youth; and that was the one thing apparently he did not teach David from his youth; that is, he was born in sin and shapen in iniquity. He was born with the poison. But when David was permitted to fall into that transgression, he said, "*Behold, I was shapen in iniquity,*"—he was born in it. This transgression is a bad symptom of the deep disease in my nature. Sometimes by the new birth, sometimes by being convinced of sin by the Holy Spirit; sometimes by having our conscience painfully wounded by some actual transgression that we have fallen into, we come to feel that we are in a sinful condition.

"And 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." No one will perish who believes in Jesus. No one,—no matter how deep his sinfulness, no matter how guilty his conscience, no matter how distressed his spirit,—he will never perish if he looks to Jesus Christ. No one in this congregation need perish if they look to Jesus Christ,—they will not perish. There is the Word of God for us so simply. It was a very strange way that God took to provide healing for these wounded people. It was God's way; no man would ever have thought of such a way as that. Man might have thought, surely God will destroy the serpents and end the mischief that way; or God will prescribe some kind of treatment and make it available, that it might give relief that way. But to be healed by *looking* is a very strange way; but it was God's way, and it was the best way. Now just think for a moment. What could those poor Israelites do except look? For some of them, they were almost at the point of death. What could they do except look? If they had to perform some kind of pilgrimage, or undergo some kind of penance, or fulfill some kind of good work, why, it was hopeless—they just could not do it! What else could they do but look? It was a most suitable way of salvation for them.

What else can a poor sin-wounded soul do but look? What can he do but look? He has no good works to plead. Religion, merely as religion, won't soothe his grief. It was a most suitable way, and it was suitable to everyone in that condition. Now if there had only been one person bitten by those serpents, he would have needed the same remedy. The brazen serpent must be lifted up, if there was only one Israelite to be healed—but there were probably thousands. But the same applied to thousands that looked, as applied to the one that looked. So my friends, there is no limit to this: "*whosoever believeth.*" However many there may be in that condition, Jesus Christ is able to save them to the uttermost.

And here is another point of the similitude, and that is, that if they turn their eyes to Jesus Christ, they would certainly be healed. Now it is not fanciful to imagine some things in this; some might have been a great way off from that brazen serpent; they might have had a very indistinct view. You will remember the children of Israel numbered very many thousands, so some must have been a good way

off, and perhaps they only viewed it and saw it in a very indistinct way; but still they saw that there was a brazen serpent. Well, some have very indistinct views about Jesus Christ, especially I mean, from a theological point of view. Some don't feel they can enter very much into deep and profound theological treatises and books; perhaps they just can't see into it all; it is too deep, too profound, too difficult, too complicated. Well, that may be so. Well then, look to Jesus Christ. It isn't needful that one should have a profound theological knowledge about all points of doctrine to look to Jesus Christ. One doesn't need to be able, we will say, to master Dr. Gill's massive *Body of Divinity*, or go through Dr. Owen's massive volumes and understand all his teaching, which is very, very good teaching indeed; but it isn't everyone can understand it,—that's not necessary. If your understanding in matters of theology is rather dim and indistinct, but still if you have eyes to look to Jesus Christ, that is the great thing. Look to Jesus Christ.

Perhaps some of you are not getting the blessing that you really seek because you are not looking to Jesus Christ enough. Perhaps you think if it is a good ministry, one day you will get a blessing in listening to it. But you know you are looking too much to the ministry; you are looking too much to the pole. Look to Jesus Christ. That scripture recurs to my mind: *"In the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink,"* (John 7:37)—to me, direct to me! So if any man is poisoned with a sting and feels it, let him look direct to Jesus Christ. With regard to other matters of spiritual doctrine and teaching, that will come in due course.

And it may well have been that some were so near the end that their sight was getting very dim. Can't you imagine perhaps their eyes were already hazing over with the haze of death? Well, they couldn't see very clearly. But still, if they turned their poor eyes to the serpent, they would certainly be healed. I wonder if I have anyone in my congregation this morning who is getting to despair about the whole thing. You may say, "I've listened to sermons for years, and still I don't seem to get anything." And perhaps you feel that you never will, that you will die without it. Well now, don't think like that. Remember that the bitten Israelites must have been almost ready to despair about it,

but still if they looked, they lived, just the same. O look to Jesus Christ, you who feel you haven't got what you want in religion. Look to Jesus Christ. He is the great Objective.

And finally remember this, it must be while you are alive. Now you know many Israelites died from that serpent-bite. The serpent brought no healing to them. How could it? When men die in unbelief, the gospel brings no salvation to them—none. None look to Jesus Christ from hell,—not one single lost soul does. O it is while life is with us,—it is now. It is before death closes the whole matter with us. We need to look to Jesus Christ. Then the Lord help you by his Spirit to turn your eyes to that Antetype of the serpent, to Jesus Christ. Remember, he died for sinners. His blood was shed for sinners and he still lives to make effectual, by the Holy Spirit, his death to sinners. Look and live—that is the word. Look and live. And may the Holy Spirit give you that look. Amen.

