

A Brazen Serpent in a Time of Emergency

Rev. A. Schot – John 3:14, 15

Sing: Psalter 216: 1-2

Reading: John 3:1-21

Sing: Psalter 12:1-4

Sing: Psalter 420: 5

Sing: Psalter 277:1-3

Congregation,

The words of our text for this morning can be found in the portion of Scripture which was read to you, John 3, verses 14 and 15, where we read God's word and the words of our text:

"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 everlasting life."

Congregation, the theme for this sermon is: A Brazen Serpent in a Time of Emergency

With the help of the Lord, we pay attention to three thoughts:

1. A gripping history
2. An incomprehensible comparison
3. A current application

Our first thought is: a gripping history. As we read at the beginning of verse 14, *"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness..."* It is the history of Numbers 21, the history of the brazen serpent.

Our second thought is: an incomprehensible comparison. When the Lord Jesus says, *"even so,"* He makes a comparison between the brazen serpent and Himself. *"...even so must the Son of man be lifted up."*

And our third thought is: a current application. What this portion says is not only for the people of Israel, it is not only for Nicodemus, but as it says in verse 15, "*....that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*"

1. A Gripping History

Congregation, the words of our text come from the history of Nicodemus, a Pharisee, who came to the Lord Jesus at night because of the fear of the Jews. Nicodemus had much knowledge but his doctrine was merely a matter of the mind. When he came to the Lord Jesus he began with the words, "*Rabbi we know...*" However, with one word the Lord Jesus placed him outside the Kingdom of heaven. The Lord Jesus' answer to Nicodemus was, "Nicodemus, you must be born again, a miracle must happen in your life."

The conversation that has been read to us from John 3 is primarily about the need to be born again. Congregation, that is also what it should be about in the sermon this morning: the necessity of truly being born again. "*Except a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God.*" Secondly, this conversation is about the necessity of faith. True saving faith cannot be missed either. This true faith is also related to being born again. It is planted at our regeneration but it must be brought into exercise; it must come to the knowledge of the only Savior Jesus Christ. That knowledge of faith was missing in the life of Nicodemus, because he merely called Him "a" rabbi sent from God. He didn't know Christ as "the" Rabbi sent from God.

In this conversation, the Lord will explain who He really is. Look at verse 13; there He says, "*And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but He that came down from heaven, even the Son of man, which is in heaven.*" The marginal note here says, "that is, no one has ascended, no one has penetrated with his understanding into the perfect knowledge of the things of heaven concerning the counsel of God regarding the salvation of men, to reveal them to men."

Christ came from heaven and with His divine nature He was still in heaven. Because He came from heaven, He can make known this heavenly wisdom, "But how will you believe, He says, when I tell you heavenly things, if you don't even believe earthly things?"

Congregation, when we consider these heavenly matters this morning in this time of crisis, may the Lord give an ear to hear and a heart to take notice. The Lord Jesus points back to the history of the brazen serpent. You can find this history in Numbers 21, *"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness..."* That was a very well-known history for Nicodemus. After all, he was a teacher in Israel. Boys and girls, you probably know this history as well.

The history of the brazen serpent is quite the moving history! It happened near the end of the desert journey. The people of Israel had roamed the desert for forty years. The journey to the Promised Land had almost come to an end. So very much had happened! An entire generation had died. All people of twenty years and older found their grave in the wilderness. Moses and Aaron, and Joshua and Caleb were the only ones left of the previous generation. At the time of this history they had almost arrived at the borders of the Promised Land, ready to enter.

But then there was a major setback. The Edomites had no intention of allowing the people of Israel to pass through their land. They would have to detour around the land of the Edomites. That meant there was another journey ahead of them. And then the people rebelled. This was already the seventh time that the children of Israel rebelled. They said rebelliously, *"Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no bread, neither is there any water, and our soul loatheth this light bread."* They despised all the dealings the Lord had with them.

Then the judgment was not held back. After that seventh rebellion, the Lord spoke in a moving manner. We read in Numbers 21, *"And the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people; and they bit the people; and much people of Israel"*

died." The LORD sent serpents. In reality it means the Lord let them go. The Lord released the serpents. It means that the serpents had been there already. They had been crawling there for forty years, hidden under the rocks. But suddenly the serpents emerge from their hiding places. Throughout the desert journey, God Himself had kept these serpents at bay. The Lord had cared so faithfully for His people but then He withdrew His hand for a moment. And, in that short moment when He pulled back His hand, all those serpents came out of their hiding places and crawled between the tents; they crawled among the people, biting men, women, and children. The consequences were terrible. The text speaks of 'fiery serpents' and probably that word 'fiery' has to do with the terrible effects of the snakebite. When people were bitten, they developed a fever which burned through their veins like fire; the poison spread throughout their bodies. The bite was fatal and there was no cure.

Congregation, here was a judgment of God. There is no question that the fiery serpents were a judgment of God. They most certainly were. There is no question that this coronavirus is a judgment of God. It most certainly is. All the consequences of sin are judgments of God because of sin. That should humble us. We too are bitten, we are affected by the venom of the old serpent in Paradise. We voluntarily let ourselves be bitten with all its consequences. We are all infected, young and old, by that deadly snake venom. We are all doomed to die. We are all bitten.

That poison has infected all of humanity. It is as if the Lord Jesus is saying here to Nicodemus, "Ah, Nicodemus, despite all your knowledge, you have been bitten by the old serpent. You must be born again." And that is also the message in all the callings which come to us today, congregation.

But what was the effect of this judgment on the children of Israel? We read in Numbers 21, *"Therefore the people came to Moses, and they said, We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against thee; pray unto the Lord that He take away these serpents from us. And Moses prayed for the people."* Deeply touching. We can see it happen. There are the snakes, crawling

everywhere. Screams can be heard all over. Here one has been bitten, there another one. Oh, in that tent too, in that family also! It is a general judgment that spreads everywhere. Here one dies, there another one. The consequences are terrible. But where does it bring them?

Thankfully, we also read that there are people who begin to own their guilt. They go to Moses and confess, *"We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against thee."* May I ask you, "Has the coronavirus already brought you to that point? The warnings that come to us and the sorrows we are witnessing these days, are they not dreadful? But congregation, where does it bring us? Have we already owned our guilt before God? Have we learned that it is all because of our sins?"

The children of Israel cried to Moses, "Ask the Lord to take away the serpents, pray that He will lift this judgment," and Moses approached unto the Lord on behalf of the people, amid threatening circumstances. In response, the Lord gave him a wonderful command, *"Make thee a fiery serpent and set it upon a pole; and it shall come to pass, that everyone that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live."* The Lord revealed a remedy to Moses, a remedy that did not exist before. Moses did not know that remedy nor was it known to the people. No one would have thought about it. It was made known by the Lord Himself. He, Who sent the judgment, also pointed out the remedy. And when did He do that? When the people had come to realize and own their guilt. Then that same God whose anger is so fierce, showed Himself also a merciful God as He sent and appointed a remedy to avert the judgment.

It is actually wonderful to notice that while the people had asked the serpents to be taken away, the Lord did not do that. The serpents stayed and they kept biting. The Lord did not take away the serpents, but provided a means by which a snakebite could be made non-venomous, so that the people were safe despite the permanent danger. This, congregation, is a very important lesson. This is still the way the Lord delivers people from the venom of the old snake from

Paradise. The Lord does not take away the consequences of sin, even though that's what we want so badly, and maybe that's also what we are praying for these days. We ask the Lord to remove the coronavirus. We ask the Lord to take away all the viruses and all the misery. However, though one disease might be gone, the next will follow after that. The consequences of sin are not taken away. In all this, the Lord points out a means of salvation to penitent sinners. A means of being delivered from danger, a means of being delivered from the cause of all hunger and grief, namely sin itself.

The brazen serpent doesn't exist anymore. For seven hundred years it was kept but it was destroyed when it was being used as an idol in the days of Hezekiah. Congregation, the history of the brazen serpent is also a picture of a remedy that is of significant meaning in the New Testament where Christ refers to it in an incomprehensible comparison. And that brings us to our second thought.

2. An Incomprehensible Comparison

When Jesus says, *"...even so must the Son of man be lifted up,"* He makes an incomprehensible comparison. The brazen serpent was raised and placed on a pole. It was raised up so that people could see it from afar. Now the Lord Jesus says, *"...even so must the Son of man be lifted up."* What does He mean by that? In which way would the Lord Jesus be lifted up? Someone might answer, "Oh, I think this is about His resurrection or His ascension. That was when He was lifted up." True, yet that's not what the Lord is referring to here. He must also be lifted up on a piece of wood, He must be raised up on the cross. We find the same meaning in John 8:28 where it says, *"When ye have lifted up the Son of man, then shall ye know that I am He, and that I do nothing of Myself."* And the same we find in John 12:32, *"And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Me."* John clarifies, *"And He said this, signifying what kind of death He should die."* The Jewish people and Nicodemus expected a Messiah who would be exalted and rule as king. But the Lord Jesus says, "Nicodemus, I must be lifted up, but in a different way than you think. I must be lifted up on the cross, just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert."

The Lord Jesus uses the word 'must', "*...even so must the Son of man be lifted up.*" That is essential. It will happen and it must happen. Why 'must'? Because it is connected with God's eternal counsel. Congregation, it is a must because of the Father, a must because of the Son, and a must because of the Holy Spirit. The Son of man must be lifted up on the cross. Why? Because the Father wills it. God will have His justice satisfied. The wages of sin is death. There can be no atonement without satisfaction. Christ must give Himself to be crucified to satisfy His Father's justice. That was a divine must. And, I say it respectfully, the Father has no other choice. He is a just God, He is a holy God.

It is a must from the side of the Lord Jesus Christ. Why? Because He is compelled in a twofold way. He is compelled to love His Father. He cannot tolerate His Father's virtues not being glorified. The price of sin must be paid. He wants to satisfy God's justice. And it is also a must because the love for His Church constrains Him. Because He has loved them with an everlasting love, He must be lifted up on the cursed cross. He must be lifted up for Simon Peter, for Thomas and, as we know, He must also be lifted up for Nicodemus, although this man was not aware of it when he was speaking with the Lord Jesus. The Son of man must be lifted up. And fortunately, Christ did not act upon the will of Nicodemus or His disciples. He did not allow Himself to be held back from fulfilling the counsel of God. He must be lifted up on the cursed cross, because otherwise there will be no benefits for the Holy Spirit to apply. If the Son of Man is not raised up, no bitten person can ever be saved. The lifted-up Christ is the only remedy. That is why He says, "*...even so must the Son of man be lifted up.*"

But congregation, young and old, it must also become a must in our hearts. "*Even so must the Son of man be lifted up.*" There is no other remedy, there is no other way to be reconciled with God. Self-righteousness is not a remedy, it is only patchwork. It can only make one more sick. Another righteousness is needed, a

righteousness that can stand before God, which satisfies God, the righteousness of the surety and blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is at this point in the Bible history that the Lord Jesus made an incomprehensible comparison when He used the words "even so." He said, *"...even so must the son of man be lifted up."* He wanted to say, "Just like it happened back then, in Numbers 21, so it will happen now, Nicodemus. Now, in the fullness of time, it will happen in the same manner." What a striking comparison!

Congregation, if the Lord Jesus Himself had not made this comparison, I would not have dared to make it this morning. Who would dare to compare Him to a serpent? What is a serpent? A serpent is the symbol of the devil. It makes us think, boys and girls, of the Fall in Paradise. It makes us think of sin. But, you might say, we may not connect this with the Lord Jesus, may we? Well, the Lord Jesus did make that connection. He said, *"...even so must the Son of man be lifted up."*

Moses had to make a serpent. A brazen serpent was not beautiful to look at. A snake is not a beautiful animal. It used to be beautiful, but it was robbed of its glory through the Fall. A serpent is no longer the same as it was when the Lord created it. Its glory has been taken away. And so, a brass serpent, however artfully crafted, has nothing glorious in itself.

Congregation, neither does the crucified Christ have any glory. It is sad that the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus is often made into a romanticized event. We should not go along with that! The crucifixion of Christ is a very solemn and serious event. He had to humble Himself so deeply that He became equal to His brethren in everything. The death on the cross was a shameful death, *"He was despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief."* The Lord laid down His glory and He hung naked on the cross. That is overwhelmingly grievous. As the serpent was lifted up without glory, so Christ was lifted up.

Moreover, the serpent is cursed. We read in Genesis 3 that the serpent is cursed above all the beasts of the field. The Lord Jesus took that place. He became a curse! Isn't this beyond all comprehension?! There is a difference though. The brazen serpent was different from the serpents that crawled on the ground. What was the difference? Although the brazen serpent resembled the serpents on the ground, the snakes on the ground were venomous snakes, they were full of poison and were therefore dangerous snakes. The Lord Jesus became a curse but He is without poison, He is without sin, He is without a snake bite. He indeed has humbled Himself: He has taken the place of sinners; He has taken the curse upon Himself but He Himself is, and remains, pure. He Himself is holy, He himself has remained free from the contamination of the venom of the old serpent. That is why there is healing only through Him. If the Lord Jesus had been carrier of the poison Himself, He could not have been a cure. The Lord Jesus had to be lifted up like the brazen serpent. As the Holy One and the Pure, He had to be raised up in the place of sinners.

A serpent! Ah, congregation, what a wonderful remedy! It would never have come up in my mind. It is even incomprehensible for our minds that of all things a brazen serpent would be a means of healing. Reason considers it a great foolishness.

The same is true regarding the preaching of the cross. We preach Christ the Crucified One this morning: a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks, but to us, says the Apostle, *"...the power of God unto salvation."* The brazen serpent of Numbers 21 truly is a symbol of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Moses probably used red brass; there was a lot of that in that area. When the brazen serpent hung there between heaven and earth, it was red in color. Red is the color of blood. What a preaching! Brass is also not destroyed by fire. Not everything is fireproof but brass is; it survives in fire. Congregation, this is how Christ has entered the fire of God's wrath. We could not stand in that fire, but Christ could. Finally, brass is resistant to contamination, just as in the past

doorknobs were made of brass. Brass does not transmit contamination. Likewise, the Son of man is raised up to ward off the contamination of sin. “*Even so*” means: in the same way. Such was the way of Christ, but that is also the way of the heart. Such was the way objectively, but that is also the way subjectively. Here is instruction for the experiential life.

How did that ancient history develop? Did it start with erecting the brazen serpent? Did Moses say to the people, "I am going to put up a serpent for you, and when I have done that, the snakes will come and they will bite you." No, it was not like that; the judgment came first. And when the judgment came, the people had to feel it. The Lord did not show a way of escape to the people when they were still hardened in their hearts. He did not even show it when the people began to die, but, congregation, the solution came when they began to own their guilt. Likewise, the Son of man must be lifted up and become precious for a people who have begun to own their guilt. “*They that are whole need not a physician, but they that are sick.*” Room must be made in the heart for the Lord Jesus, and this is often forgotten in this history. We also see this very clearly in the history of the serpent in the desert. The means of redemption was unknown. It had to be revealed.

Congregation, the same is true today. The means of redemption is unknown. Yes, we know it with our minds, but it must be revealed in our hearts. If we still have all kinds of means by which we try to get rid of the venom, we will not come to the point of owning our guilt and we will not feel a need for a remedy. I think the people in the desert also tried to solve it themselves first. They thought, “Let’s securely close our tent” or “the snakes will not come into our tent.” Then after they were bitten, they first tried to shake off the snakes. They might have checked if they had any medicinal herbs in the tent that might help. They tried to get the venom out of their bodies, they tried to bandage the wounds. Of course, they did everything they could. But when nothing helped anymore, then it really became a dire emergency.

Congregation, that is how it should become in our lives: a dire emergency. It is in that way the solution comes to us. All this is behind the words "even so." *"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up."* The Son of man was raised, symbolized by the old serpent, for a people who no longer had a solution themselves. A people who thirsted because of the snake venom and who no longer saw a way out. It was then that Moses was allowed to raise the serpent among them. For penitents. They didn't deserve that.

I recently saw a painting of the history of the brazen serpent. It showed Moses standing alone by the rod, all by himself under the brazen serpent. Similarly, in these days of the coronavirus, pastors are very lonely in empty churches. But the message can still go out. And so God's servants are allowed to do beautiful work today. They may point to the Lord Jesus Christ in this time of emergency. Moses was privileged to point the people to Him and we may still do the same today. Oh, what a privilege that the Lord still gives this to us. That He still sends His servants, as it were, between the living and the dead to preach the Gospel of the crucified Christ. There is no other foundation.

Congregation, the brass serpent not only had to be erected, the eyes of the people also had to be focused on it. When Moses set up the serpent, he couldn't say, "Well then, we'll leave it at that and it'll all work out. We'll preach a short sermon and say a prayer and then ..." No. No! The people's eyes had to be turned to see it. If someone did not look at the serpent, he still died and did not experience the power of the medicine. Congregation, without true faith it will not help us. That must be the need in our life.

Did Nicodemus understand all this right away? Of course not. One of the commentators says that Nicodemus heard so many things from the Lord that it must have taken his whole life to learn the full meaning, and I agree with that. But this was the core: regeneration and faith. This was the heart: death through the old serpent and the crucifixion of Christ. In a few strokes, Christ preached the

Gospel of the cross to this self-righteous Pharisee. Nicodemus was a poor man who tried to stay alive and be saved through his own works. He had to learn that nothing from him could count. I think Nicodemus must have remembered this sermon on Good Friday. *"As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up."*

An incomprehensible comparison. We go to our third thought, a current application. But before we say something about that, we sing Psalter 420: 5.

*Let God be praised with reverence deep;
He daily comes our lives to steep
In bounties freely given.
God cares for us, our God is He;
Who would not fear His majesty
In earth as well as heaven?
Our God upholds us in the strife;
To us He grants eternal life,
And saves from desolation.
He hears the needy when they cry,
He saves their souls when death draws nigh,
This God is our salvation.*

3. A Current Application

Our third thought, a current application.

Congregation, this history does not only apply to the people of Israel in the desert; neither does this history only have meaning for Nicodemus, who personally received this message from the Lord. This history is still highly applicable today. The Lord attaches a current application when He says, *"That whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life."*

"Whosoever," how much room is in this word! "Whosoever," what room there was for the people of Israel in the desert! "Whosoever," there were so many who were bitten, young and old. "Whosoever," that counts for Jew and Gentile, rich or

poor, whatever distinction there might be. How much room there is in that one word "whosoever"!

On the other hand, congregation, the Lord also defines a boundary when He says "*whosoever believeth in Him.*" The line is drawn by faith. Here on this earth, the dividing line between people is drawn by faith. In eternity the dividing line is drawn by God's sovereign good pleasure. And on this earth, the boundary is made through faith. Without regeneration, without faith, no one will enter the Kingdom of heaven. Looking on the brazen serpent is looking in faith. I have said it already, this history is often superficially colored; however, this history is not superficial.

Congregation, this is not about looking with natural eyes, instead this speaks of looking with the eyes of faith. Now it seems so easy to look unto Jesus, but experience teaches that it is the last thing a man wants and the last thing he does. Countless people of the Israelites died, even when that brazen serpent was already set up on the pole. Man considers other medicines better, man wants to follow his own mind.

Congregation, it's just like with the woman with the issue of blood. When did she come to Jesus? She came when she had nothing left, when she had spent all her money on the physicians. In the end, He became precious for her. And unfortunately, it is still like that in our lives. We need to lose everything, faith is needed! What kind of faith? A belief in the Crucified One, you say. I totally agree. But congregation, what precedes faith? Faith in the Crucified One is preceded by believing in the snake venom. If you do not believe that you have been bitten by the snake, you will not truly believe in the Crucified One. Do you know what precedes looking to Jesus? This: that we believe the bite is deadly. If you don't believe the bite is deadly, congregation, you will keep sustaining yourself. Just like the Israelites did. If we don't believe that death is imminent, it will not become a need. In order to truly look unto Jesus, it is necessary that all other medicines have failed us. Otherwise we will hold onto them, because that is what lives in

man. If you know yourself, you will agree with this. There is only one Cure and no other; the Cure thought out by God alone, a Cure which is foolishness to our mind.

Congregation, it is so necessary that we begin to understand the necessity of the humiliation of the Lord Jesus Christ. When faith is in exercise, the eye of a lost son of man is turned to Him. *"Whosoever believeth in Him."* In Him. Faith in Him is not equally strong among all believers. When it comes to faith, Scripture uses different words. It speaks of hungering, of thirsting, of beholding from afar, of embracing. You sense that the latter is a stronger faith than hungering and thirsting. I believe there are differences among the bitten. There is a seeing from afar or a seeing from nearby.

But now it is about the truth of seeing, congregation. Also at the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus (I think it is good to include this) there were the differences in seeing. How? There were people who saw what was happening. Were all those people saved? No, congregation, there were people who literally saw Jesus but they mocked Him, they didn't need Him! We read of the soldiers who mocked. Shocking! They did not understand any of it. How awful!

But there were also those who looked with emotion. There were those who cried. Oh, but they were saved, weren't they? Can one look to Jesus crying and still perish? Yes, think of the daughters of Jerusalem. The Lord Jesus said, *"Weep not for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children."* The daughters of Jerusalem did not look in faith. There may be an emotional looking to the Crucified One. Congregation, the crowd was moved when they witnessed the crucifixion. People smote their breast. Oh, that was certainly a blessing, right? No, it was not looking in faith.

Do you know what is so touching? That there are only a few examples in the Bible of people who have looked to the Crucified One with faith. Think of the murderer on the cross who also owned his guilt, *"We indeed justly, for we receive*

the due reward of our deeds: but this Man has done nothing amiss." *"Remember me."* That was not a looking of someone who claimed to have rights, that was the looking of a lost one. And that unworthy looking was a looking which brought healing! There was so much strength in that. Jesus said to him, *"Today shalt thou be with Me in Paradise."* I also think of the centurion, congregation. The centurion also looked. We don't read much of the centurion, but we do read what this looking did work out in his heart. It appears that he had looked with an eye of faith. He says, *"Surely this Man was the Son of God."* Finally, we read also of Jesus' acquaintances. They stood afar off. They looked through their tears. They probably couldn't see so clearly in those moments. But they were allowed to look by faith. And that looking brings salvation.

"That whosoever" - with all the differences there may be, also in the exercises of faith - *"that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish."*

The brazen serpent postponed temporal death. For the time being people did not have to die. If you are healed from the coronavirus, you can live for a while yet. But congregation, this is a Medicine that saves from eternal death. *"Should not perish,"* that is, "will not come into eternal destruction, but live." That is the eternal life that flows from Christ. Jesus Himself said of this, *"And this is life eternal, that they might know Thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, Whom Thou hast sent."*

Beloved congregation, we live in troublesome times. What I hear from the people who are infected with the coronavirus it troubles me deeply. When I hear how sick some are, it strikes me! When I have conversations with people who work in healthcare, it affects me deeply. And yet, let this not be our greatest need in these days. We have been bitten by the snake, we are perishing. But he who believes in Him will not perish but will have eternal life.

Through the preaching, the Banner of the Cross may still be erected today in many places. I hope it may become a need. I hope you may get a clear view of

it. Not as a person with rights, because that is not seeing with faith, but as a guilty, dying sinner, who may find life in this precious Christ.

Amen.

Closing song: Psalter 277: 1, 2, 3.

Verse 1

*O praise and bless the Lord, my soul,
His wondrous love proclaim;
Join heart and voice and all my pow'rs
To bless His holy Name.*

Verse 2

*O praise and bless the Lord, my soul,
And ever thankful be;
Forget not all the benefits
He has bestowed on thee.*

Verse 3

*He freely pardons all thy sins,
And He is strong to save;
He heals thy sickness, soothes thy pain,
And ransoms from the grave.*