

Beloved in the Lord Jesus Christ. In the Old Testament there are many pictures that are painted for us that bring our attention to, what we realise of course in the New Testament, the sufferings and death of our Lord Jesus Christ. All of the Old Testament images in regard to the temple and the worship there that Israel would do, pointed them to the shedding of blood and many other ways to our Lord Jesus Christ. And these analogies, or pictures, are very helpful for us.

Jesus Himself used, in many parts of His ministry and sermons, illustrations or pictures - word pictures – because, no matter what your language capability is, the simplicity of word pictures are helpful for us to understand deep truths. And so this morning, children, and all of us really, there is a message of the simplicity of the Gospel that is set before us.

You know that this history that was read from Numbers 21, reappears in the New Testament in the Gospel of John. On that occasion Jesus was speaking to one of the religious leaders; maybe you could say, one of the trained elders or pastors of the church at the time when Jesus was walking on the Earth. A man who should have known with great perception and clarity what the Old Testament was saying about the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the need that we all have to be born again. This message, however, was very confusing to Nicodemus. He asked Jesus, “What do you mean, I need to be born again? Enter into my mother's belly the second time?” That was just confusing to Nicodemus, and so Jesus used this very simple illustration from the Old Testament to describe what He meant when He said “you must be born again”.

As we enter these weeks as we move toward Good Friday, in which we will particularly consider the sufferings of the Lord Jesus Christ - why Jesus came into this world as a man who is God, and offered His life a sacrifice - this is a wonderful reminder to us of what it means for ourselves in relation to the Gospel.

So I want to turn to John 3. If you turn there a moment, I want to read these verses from John 3 that call to mind what we read this morning from numbers 21. I'll just read verses 14 and 15. Here's Jesus speaking: “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.” Christ lifted up.

What I hope to do this morning, is simply expound, and talk about, what Jesus said in these two verses. The same Jesus that was standing there before Nicodemus, is the same Jesus who is speaking these words to us. Just imagine for a moment, Nicodemus looking at Jesus, confused about what it means to be ‘born again’, and he hears Jesus say these words. Maybe you too have heard the Gospel much of your life. You know you need to be born again, but you're confused. You don't know what that means, you don't know what that looks like. Even for those who *have* looked to the Lord Jesus and lived, you still experience something of the bite of sin in your lives, and you're wondering what you need to do.

Well, this morning we're going to look at three thoughts about this theme of Christ lifted up.

-First we want to look at the **reason** - what's the reason why Jesus needed to be lifted up. We'll compare that primarily to what happened in Numbers 21.

-Then we want to look at the **manner** in which He was lifted up - how was that serpent in the Old Testament lifted up? What is Jesus really saying for us today, as a likeness?

-And then, number three, we want to look at the **results** of His being lifted up, or we could say, the result of our looking to Him who is lifted up.

1) Israel, in the passage we read this morning, cried out to the Lord in their trouble. Isn't it interesting that, often we don't cry to the Lord until we're in trouble. Our human tendency is to

carry on with life if things are going well: we don't need the Lord so much. Oh, we pray to Him, and we know He's everywhere present, and we know we need Him every day, but it's particularly in times of trouble and difficulty that we turn to Him. That's good. It's sad that we need these times of difficulty and trial to get our attention. And we aren't thankful for times of suffering and difficulty, are we? And yet, even in all of our difficulty, and all of our trial, we should recognise, as you read in the rest of the New Testament as well, God isn't doing this so that He can just afflict us for no purpose. The trials and the sufferings of our life are designed by God for our good.

So this difficulty the children of Israel were experiencing was for their good. They cried out to the Lord, and they made a vow that they would follow Him and serve Him, if only they would be allowed to overcome these Canaanites who had taken some of them prisoner. In return, the children of Israel said, 'If You help us do this, we will then destroy all the Canaanites in the land'.

For those of you who've been born again, and you've looked to the Lord Jesus Christ, isn't that something you can relate to in some way or other? When you came to faith the first time, and you looked to Christ, and you sensed His pardon and forgiveness, maybe you made a similar vow. Because sin, at those moments when you look to Jesus and you cry out to Him for relief and deliverance, sin became something you hated, you wanted to be done with. So maybe you've made vows: 'I'll never do this again, I'll never do that again'... and maybe for a while you didn't do this or that, because Jesus was so fresh, so real, and your thanksgiving was abounding. But, as believers, you realise those feelings don't always continue as they were. It doesn't change the reality, but the feelings may not be the same. Do you feel that bite of sin again?

Well, here the children of Israel have been let out of Egypt, they experience this difficulty, they now make this vow to the Lord. Yet, even after they had gotten the victory over this sin again, over the Canaanites, we read that the people of Israel spoke against God and Moses, "Why have you brought us up into this wilderness to die? Why have You allowed sin and the Canaanites to still surround us, and why can't we just go on living in the honey of the land of Canaan? Our soul loathes this manna from heaven." Notice what it says in Numbers: the people spoke against the Lord *and* Moses. That was an additional thing than what they would normally do. The people of Israel seemed normally to speak against Moses, and complain to Moses, but this time it was particularly affecting them to such a degree, from their very hearts they were saying "Lord God, why have You brought us into this wilderness? Just to let us die? This is difficult! This is painful! Why?"

And in response to this complaint God sent fiery serpents. These fiery serpents were so deadly that it seems anyone bitten would rather quickly be affected by the venom of these serpents and you would die. We read in Isaiah 14 and 30 that these particular serpents probably were serpents with wings. They were deadly serpents, dangerous, and they were sent of the Lord. We can only imagine what it must have been like. Children, if you were among all this people of Israel in the wilderness, you had just fought some enemies and overcome them, and now you heard your parents and grandparents complaining about the bread, the manna. You could see the pillar and the cloud of fire that went before you, you had you had tasted that bread, you had eaten some of the quails, and many other miracles you had seen. But you weren't in the promised land yet. These serpents had come among them, and began crawling or flying through the air, whatever it was, inflicting their deadly wounds. And in this great need, as they saw people dying, children no doubt, adults, grandparents, all dying. We read many people died, and in this great need Israel came to Moses and said, "We have sin. We have spoken against the Lord, and against you".

All around the camp people were dying. There was no difference made – young or old, rich or poor, being bitten you were going to die. It was said that when these serpents would bite you, it would cause a severe fever to rage through the body, you would feel like you're just burning up inside. I think we all understand the picture that's being painted here: the ravages of sin. We can't

see it; we can see sometimes the *effects* of sin in our lives, but generally when we're talking about this venom that was from the serpents, it would be something going on within the body that would lead to their dying. And the same is true with regard to the bite of sin. It's a spiritual poison. It's very clear throughout the Scriptures that sin itself is just like what was going on with these bites of the serpents. Sin has affected the whole entire human race - every one of us has been affected by this bite.

The image of serpent brings us way back to Genesis, in the garden, when the serpent spoke his lies, his deadly venom, into the heart of Eve: "Has God really said?" Believing this lie and questioning God led to this venom destroying Eve, destroying Adam, when they ate of this tree. All of us now through the generations, are experiencing this same venom that's flowing through our veins.

If you expand the illustration I suppose you could say, some people are bitten by many snakes, and you can just see what's happened in their lives: they're following and pursuing sin. Others seemingly have a little bite, and you can't hardly see it: they seem to be healthy still. The reality though, is that all of us have been bitten by this serpent, by sin. Some of you may have committed great sins, others not so much. But the picture presented here by Jesus, illustrating what's going on in the Old Testament, was the reality that *all* were affected by this sin. Nicodemus, who Jesus is speaking to, is affected by this bite of sin.

Now we can look around us and see the effects of sin. We probably see it in our own lives, to one degree or another. We can read it in the obituary, we can see it in the family that we belong to, the trouble that sin has brought in our lives. Scripture tells us the wages of sin is death, Romans 6. The bite of sin will be dying: we all stand guilty before God. These people of Israel there in Numbers 21 were a rebellious people: they were complaining to God, they were at enmity against God.

They had received much spiritual bread – manna. Some of you have been receiving this manna repeatedly. You have the Word of God, maybe you've had the Gospel from when you were a child growing up in the church. Maybe you're a teenager now, but you've never really looked to Jesus. You don't believe your bitten as much as what's being said. Maybe you're not affected by sin, you don't feel too guilty about your sins.

But when much people began dying in the camp of Israel and God's judgement was seen for what it was, people were dying all around them, then they cried out to God - "We have sinned!" Maybe they turned to doctors among the Israelites, I don't know. But there was no help, there was no remedy that could be found. And so today there are many sinners who are seeking out other kinds of remedies. They try to heal up their brokenness, they try to patch up their families and relationships, they try to patch up the consequences of sin that's been in their lives, and make their lives feel better. But it's in vain. It doesn't accomplish a true inner peace, a true relief, a true healing, a true living.

Maybe even some of you have come here to the House of God, and you've been under conviction. You've been convicted by the Word that you have sinned, and yet you never, at any point in your life, looked to Jesus. You know in your heart that every sin you commit before the face of God makes you guilty. It's not as if we've only sinned once. We've sinned repeatedly. We read the law this morning, and as we really lay our life next to it, there's not one here who escapes. Not one of us. We all have been bitten. You and me. God sees us as bitten. The effects of sin rage through our body.

Maybe you would even say, 'But I'm willing to be saved. I'm trying to look, whatever that means, but I haven't felt anything. I don't know what it means to be alive.' But dear friend, it would seem to me you're not as willing as you say you are, to look, if you haven't been healed, if you don't live.

Because it's clear from the passage in Numbers and it's clear from the passage that Jesus is setting before us, *whoever looked, lived!* There was no exceptions. And so the reality here that is set before us this morning is, the recognition that the reason Jesus had to be lifted up is because He took the place of sinners. He is the One who has taken the bite of sin, suffered and died, in the place of those who have been bitten. We are condemned sinners.

One can only imagine what these Israelites experienced - people dying all around them with no remedy and no hope, before God told Moses what to do. Many people in this world are in that same position. This whole world is bitten by this snake, by sin. But not the whole world is hearing the message that Jesus is lifted up. That's the privilege we have this morning. And we will see what we're called, therefore, to bring to others. You see, what happened with the Israelites is, they wanted to also provide their own remedy. They prayed to Moses and said, "Call out to God and pray to God to remove the serpents". That was their solution - it wasn't God's solution. You may have your solution of how you're going to get deliverance, what it's going to look like, what you imagine it means to be saved; but if it doesn't match God's way, it doesn't work.

2) Well, that brings us to the second thing that we need to consider: the manner in which He was lifted up. Moses indeed turned to the Lord, and he prayed to God, and God told Moses what he was to do. He said make this fiery serpent, the image of these things crawling around, or flying through the air, and make it in brass, a brazen serpent, and lift it up on a pole. And Moses did just the very thing God told him to do. Now, we don't know whether Moses walked through the camp, or whether he just stuck it up on a pole high enough on a hill, so that no matter where you were in the camp you could see it, but we would imagine that anyone in the camp who has been bitten would have access to this pole with the brazen serpent. We read, "And it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived."

And Jesus here now in John is telling us the same picture regarding Himself. He says in verse 14, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so (just like that) must the Son of man be lifted up". So we can make this comparison then between the lifting up of the serpent that Moses did, and Jesus being lifted up. Various commentators will tell you various understandings of what that lifting up would mean. Some would say it's the preaching of the Gospel to call people to look to Christ. Others would say that it's lifting up of Christ on the cross. Others have said it was the lifting up of Christ as He ascended to heaven as the risen Lord. But which of these is not so important as the central idea of it all that's being taught here. That just as the serpent was lifted up, so *He*. The focus is not *how* but *He, Jesus*, being lifted up. Whoever looks to him will live.

In John 8 verse 28 Jesus said to them, "When ye have lifted up the Son of man, then shall ye know that I am he, that I do nothing of myself; but as my Father hath taught me, I speak these things." And then in John 12:32 and 33 He says, "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me. This he said, signifying what death he should die." So obviously, when Jesus here in John 3, at the beginning of his ministry, is reflecting already that at the end of his ministry He will be lifted up, He will be hung on a cross, He will be set up on that hill with two other thieves, this is what He's talking about. Not just simply that lifting up on the cross but all that's happening in regard to Jesus being lifted up. It all means that He, who is the perfect sinless Lamb of God, has borne the sin of all those who trust in Him. There on the cross He bore that wrath as the substitute.

The Galatians hadn't been at the cross, they hadn't been at Jerusalem and seen it happen, but when Paul writes to them, he tells them, "You have seen this Jesus lifted up among you". What does Paul mean? Well, in the preaching of the Gospel, in the preaching of the cross, and the preaching of the substitutionary work of Jesus, was the lifting up of Jesus, as the serpent that He pointed to here in John 3. What was true physically in the Old Testament was an analogy, a picture, of what is true

spiritually. Jesus is lifted up in the Gospel; Jesus is held forth in the Gospel; Jesus is the Saviour to whom you must look because you're bitten. Whatever your or my conviction is today in regard to sin, no matter whether it's great or small, if you feel you have no right before God, and you are condemned because of your sin, and you hear Jesus is the only hope you have, and you look to Him, you trust in Him, you surrender to Him, this is what it means to look, and live.

You don't need to be bitten 5 or 10 times, or 1000 times, by the snake to experience the reality of this venom. It's not how many times you are bitten that qualifies you to look to the serpent. In other words, it's not how much you feel your conviction of sin that qualifies you to look to Jesus. It's the question of whether you're looking, whether you recognise you are worthy of death, that you are dying because of sin, and you need a Saviour. That's the point of the illustration here. There's no qualification to look to Him.

Of course, if you don't feel like you've been bitten, if you don't recognise you have this venom of sin flowing through your veins, and that it makes you worthy of death, why do you need Jesus? That's obvious. But children, if you realise "I know I sin. I don't listen to my mum and dad, and that grieves me. I'm wrong. God says I sinned." And you turn to Jesus, you pray to Jesus, you look to Jesus, then He saves. Jesus is presenting this story in all its simplicity for us to be able to grasp, whether we're 50 or 15 or 5, it makes really no difference.

Now, of course, there were those who were bitten by the snake in Moses' time before he had opportunity to raise the serpent, and they perished. As I said earlier, spiritually speaking this whole world is bitten, and many are dying without even knowing there's a brazen serpent, a Christ, a Saviour, who's been lifted up. Think of your privilege! And with that privilege, the responsibility, not only for yourselves, but for the calling that we have to make known to this world the remedy for their sin.

No doubt in Moses' time, the word spread quickly through the camp, "Whoever is bitten, and looks at the brazen serpent will live!" Imagine hearing that, if you had been bitten, and were suffering greatly. But there may have been some among Israel who thought this was ridiculous. 'Is it just that simple: you just look to the serpent, and you will be healed, when I see all these people dying around me. What is Moses doing? Is he playing with us?' Remember they had just complained, 'We don't like this bread' and they were rebelling against God. I imagine some of the people who would have heard the simplicity of this message would have thought 'this is absolutely ridiculous'. And so there are some people who hear the Gospel that show their heart thinks it is ridiculous by never looking, refusing to believe the simplicity of the Word of the Gospel. The fact is, whoever looked, lived.

And imagine, if you had been bitten and you looked, and you lived, would you say nothing? Would you be 'oh, that's great, that's wonderful, I'm alive, I don't have a raging fever, I'm not dying', and just keep that to yourself? I suspect not! I suspect if there was others around you who were bitten, you would say 'I looked, and I lived!'

This was God's remedy. This picture pointed to Jesus. Think of how low Jesus, who is God, comes, to say "I must, just like that serpent, be lifted up, that whoever looks to Me, whoever trusts My word, will actually live." Calvin says, "In order therefore, that they might perceive themselves to be rescued from death by the mere grace of God alone, a mode of preservation was chosen that was so out of whack with human reason, as to be almost a subject for laughter." And to perishing people, hardened sinners, unbelieving people, coming sitting here this morning, hearing a Word of the Gospel of our God, that you need to look to Jesus who was crucified so many years ago, who rose again from the dead, and paid for your sin, is almost a laughable matter. It's not: it's the Word

of the living God! But this was a test whether the people would believe Moses, and ultimately God. And this is also a test for you: will you believe the simplicity of Jesus words, or not?

“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.” God was teaching the children of Israel, “You need to believe me. You need to believe me, no matter how contrary to reason (your logic) it is.” There are people who hear the Gospel, and continue to raise reasons, excuses, why they don't look. Are you one of them? Raising reasons/excuses, whatever they are, of why you haven't looked, why you don't continue to look?

What is pictured here, at the root and core of it, is God's salvation. God has given His own Son to be lifted up, nailed to the cross for all to see, all to hear, in the proclamation of the Gospel, and has proclaimed throughout the world that Jesus alone is God's remedy for our bite of sin. And our thinking is, how can the death of one man, Christ, affect all this sin that I see in myself, or all the sin of those around me? How could His death result in life? Of course, not everything about the parable is similar. Jesus is a living person, not a dead, brazen serpent. He's God, and He's man, and He lived a life of righteousness. We are taught those things when God continues to teach us, but here at the entry in to the “you must be born again” is the utter foolishness of the simplicity of the Gospel.

Any Israelite bitten by the serpent, and looking, would be healed, would be saved. Christ, having been lifted up, will save each and everyone who looks to Him, who trusts His word, trusts His Gospel promise. Are you here this morning, recognising the need you have to look to Him because you know you are a sinner? Maybe you've looked at Him before, maybe it hasn't transformed you, maybe you've gone on in your way of life, you think it didn't work. But His Word doesn't change; His Word is true. Any who looked, even if their eye was clouded by the last bit of life in them, if they would look, they lived. Every believing soul, every soul here who hears the gospel about Jesus as the substitute for ourselves, and looks to Him, trusts Him, surrenders to Him, are saved!

This is humbling to our own reasoning, to the thinking of the Israelites. This is why Jesus, lifted up on the cross, is said to be a stumbling block to the Jews, and foolishness to the Greeks. If Jesus hadn't made this comparison, I suppose I'd be a little bit trembling to make it myself, just having read the Old Testament. But Jesus Himself is speaking to us this morning. The Redeemer is lifted up, for all to look and live.

Look, there's a man, just like yourself, hanging on a cross, a rugged wooden beam, nailed and bleeding, and two other men with Him. He has a crown of thorns, His back is ripped because of the stripes He received. And yet He is God. In His infinite power, by His hands, the world was formed; you were brought into existence; He upholds you till this day. It's the same one who walked upon the earth and took the little children in His arms and blessed them. It's the same one who touched that coffin coming out of the city with the young man, and he arose. It's the same one who took some spit and clay, and rubbed it in the eyes of the blind man, and he began to see. This one was lifted up. And when you look to Him, He is as faithful as He was to everyone in the Gospel you read about who came to Him. Not one was turned away!

Those blessed feet of our Lord walked the dusty roads of Jericho, and found a blind Bartimaeus, He's the one who walked upon the water, and now this One who washed others' feet, His feet are nailed to the tree. There He hangs, there the spear enters His body, and the life flows out. But He's alive, and He promises, if you look to Him, you will live. You will not die. Yes, we'll all die physically, but what He's speaking about here to Nicodemus is something spiritual, it's not a physical thing. Nicodemus says, ‘do I need to enter into my mother's womb again?’ Jesus says, No, I'm talking about the spiritual understanding. Jesus is saying to Nicodemus, I'm going to be lifted up. You

recognise its spiritual significance, and you turn to Me, you look to Me, you trust in Me, you have no hope in yourself, and you will live! He comes this morning to us in the same manner, and He calls us to look to Him. You who have looked to Him - isn't He true to this? When you looked, didn't you live? And when you lived, wasn't your heart overwhelmed within you? Didn't your heart burn within you when the Holy Spirit opened your eyes to the Gospel, and you saw Him for who He really is, what He really means when He says "Look to me, and you will live". Well if you found him to be so, are you telling your children? Are you telling your grandchildren? Are you telling the other people around you? Even if it's been some time ago, don't you need Him again and again and again - not to be saved, but to keep us daily?

3) We come to our third thought, briefly before we close: what is the *result* of His being lifted up? Everyone who looked was made whole, they lived! Could you imagine if there was anyone in the camp of Israel who, when the serpent had been lifted up, looked, and they died. That would have gone like wildfire through the camp. But everyone who looked, believing in some measure or other, if they did what they were told to do, and looked, and were healed, it ought to be spread through the camp with the same kind of wildfire. It ought to be spread through our community and through this world. If we have been able to taste and see of something of Jesus, the One lifted up, and live, cured of our deadly wound, we will want all of those around us to feel, to experience, to know. Not just simply to live, but to know Him who made us alive. We may come to Him time and again, friends.

You may have tasted of this forgiveness some time ago, but if you're still struggling with some of the guilt and burden of sin today, He wants us to come again and again and again. I suppose maybe among those in Israel who had been bitten, and healed by looking to the serpent, went about their business, maybe there were other snakes that bit them again, and they looked again and again and again. Are you looking? Are your eyes lifted up to Him who is able to do exceeding and abundantly above what you would ask or think? The Israelite was told not to look to Moses, but to look at obedience to what God had told Moses to do. And so in the Gospel: you're not to look to a minister who may have preached the gospel, or something you read about the preaching of the Gospel. You've bidden to look to Jesus. He is lifted up, He is the power of God unto salvation, He is exalted a Prince and a Saviour to both give repentance and remission of sin to everyone who looks!

The result of Jesus being lifted up, He said Himself, is to draw all men to Himself. This is the simplicity of the Gospel. Jesus lifted up to draw sinners – perishing, rebellious sinners - to Himself. To live eternal life, forever! To live and never die! That's true for everyone who looks.

You remember the parable Jesus told about the wedding feast. He sent forth His servants to call them that were bidden to the wedding, and they would not come. Again He sent forth other servants saying "Tell them that were bidden, behold, I prepared my dinner: my ox, my fatlings are killed, and all things are ready: come to the marriage!" But they made light of it.

The question for you this morning is: what are you going to do with what you heard today? Was it the same old, same old, same old to you? Were your thoughts in another place? Or was it, "Yes, I looked, and lived, praise the Lord!" Well these who heard of it went their way, one to his farm, and another to merchandise, and the remnant took his servants and treated them spitefully, and slew them. When the king heard thereof, he was wroth, and sent forth His armies and destroyed those murderers, and burnt up their city. And He said to the servants, "The wedding is ready, but they which were bidden were not worthy. Go therefore into the highways, and as many as you will find bid to the marriage." So those servants went to the highways and gathered all together as many as they found, both bad and good, and the wedding was furnished with guests. The wedding is being

prepared. We look around us in our world in a confusing time, and we know Jesus is coming. So the call we have, as Jesus parable is, go to the highways and the byways, of your family, of your relatives, of your friends, and bid them in Jesus' Name – Look, and you will live! Amen.