

THE SAVIOUR LIFTED UP, AND THE LOOK OF FAITH

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SERMONS ON GOSPEL THEMES, SERMON IV

"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 iii. 14, 15.

"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.)" -- John xii. 32, 33.

IN order to make this subject plain, I will read the passage referred to -- Num. xxi. 6-9. "And the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died. Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD, and against thee; pray unto the LORD, that He take away the serpents from us. And Moses prayed for the people. And the LORD said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it shall live. And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived."

This is the transaction to which Christ alluded in the text. The object in both cases was to save men from the bite of the serpent; its influence being unchecked, is the death of the body: the effects of sin, unpardoned and uncleansed from the heart, are the ruin of the soul. Christ is lifted up, to the end that sinners, believing in Him, may not perish, but may have eternal life. In such a connection, to perish cannot mean annihilation, for it must be the antithesis of eternal life, and this is plainly much more than eternal existence. It must be eternal happiness -- real life in the sense of exquisite enjoyment. The counterpart of this, eternal misery, is presented under the term "perish." It is common in the Scriptures to find a state of endless misery contrasted with one of endless happiness.

We may observe two points of analogy between the brazen serpent and Christ.

1. Christ must be *lifted UP* as the serpent was in the wilderness. From the passage quoted above out of John xii. it is plain that this refers to His being raised up from the earth upon His cross at His crucifixion.

2. Christ must be held up as a remedy for sin, even as the brazen serpent was as a remedy for a poison. It is not uncommon in the Bible to see sin represented as a malady. For this malady, Christ had healing power. He professed to be able to forgive sin and to cleanse the soul from its moral pollution. Continually did He claim to have this power and encourage men to rely upon Him and to resort to Him for its application. In all His personal instructions He was careful to hold up Himself as having this power, and as capable of affording a remedy for sin.

In this respect the serpent of brass was a type of Christ. Whoever looked upon this serpent was healed. So Christ heals not from punishment only, for to this the analogy of healing is less pertinent -- but especially from sinning -- from the *heart to sin*. He heals the soul and restores it to health. So it was said by the announcing angel, "Thou shalt call His name *Jesus*, for He shall save His people from their sins." His power avails to cleanse and purify the soul.

Both Christ and the serpent were held up each as a *remedy*, and let it be specially noted -- as a *full and adequate remedy*. The ancient Hebrews, bitten by fiery serpents, were not to mix up nostrums of their own devising to help out the cure: it was all-sufficient for them to look up to the remedy of God's own providing. God would have them understand that the healing was altogether His own work. The serpent on a pole was the only external object connected with their cure; to this they were to look, and in this most simple way -- only by an expecting look, indicative of simple faith, they received their cure.

Christ is to be lifted up as a *present* remedy. So was the serpent. The cure wrought then was present, immediate. It involved no delay.

This serpent was God's appointed remedy. So is Christ, a remedy appointed of God, sent down from heaven for this express purpose. It was indeed very wonderful that God should appoint a brazen serpent for such a purpose, such a remedy for such a malady; and not less wonderful is it that Christ should be lifted up in agony and blood, as a remedy for both the punishment and the heart-power of sin.

The brazen serpent was a *divinely-certified remedy*; not a nostrum gotten up as thousands are, under high-sounding names and flaming testimonials; but a remedy prepared and brought forth by God Himself, under His own certificate of its ample healing virtues.

So was Christ. The Father testifies to the perfect adequacy of Jesus Christ as a remedy for sin.

Jesus Christ must now be held up from the pulpit as one *crucified* for the sins of men. His great power to save lay in His atoning death.

He must not only be held up from the pulpit, but this exhibition of His person and work must be endorsed, and not contradicted by the experience of those who behold Him.

Suppose that in Moses' time many who looked were seen to be still dying; who could have believed the unqualified declaration of Moses, that "every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live?" So here in the Gospel and its subjects. Doubtless the Hebrews had before their eyes many living witnesses who had been bitten and yet bore the scars of those wounds; but who, by looking, had been healed. Every such case would go to confirm the faith of the people in God's word and in His own power to save. So Christ must be represented in His fullness, and this representation should be powerfully endorsed by the experience of His friends. Christ represents Himself as one ready and willing to save. This, therefore, is the thing to be shown. This must be sustained by the testimony of His living witnesses, as the first point of analogy is the *lifting up* of the object to be looked upon, the second is this very looking itself.

Men looked upon the serpent, expecting divine power to heal them. Even those ancient men, in that comparatively dark age, understood that the serpent was only a type, not the very cause in itself of salvation.

So is there something very remarkable in the relation of faith to healing. Take, for illustration, the case of the woman who had an issue of blood. She had heard something about Jesus, and somehow had caught the idea that if she could but touch the hem of His garment, she should be made whole. See her pressing her way along through the crowd, faint with weakness, pale, and trembling; if you had seen her you would perhaps have cried out, What would this poor dying invalid do?

She knew what she was trying to do. At last unnoticed of all, she reached the spot where the Holy One stood and put forth her feeble hand and touched His garment. Suddenly He turns Himself and asks, Who was it that touched me? Somebody touched me: who was it? The disciples, astonished at such a question, put under such circumstances, reply -- The multitude throng Thee on every side, and scores are touching Thee every hour; why then ask -- Who touched me?

The fact was, somebody had touched Him with faith to be healed thereby, and He knew that the healing virtue had gone forth from Himself to some believing heart. How beautiful an illustration this of simple faith! And how wonderful the connection between the faith and the healing!

Just so the Hebrews received that wonderful healing power by simply looking toward the brazen serpent. No doubt this was a great mystery to them, yet it was none the less a fact. Let them look; the looking brings the cure, although not one of them can tell *how* the healing virtue comes. So we are really to look to Christ, and in looking, to receive the healing power. It matters not how little we understand the *mode* in which the looking operates to give us the remedy for sin.

This looking to Jesus implies that we look away from ourselves. There is to be no mixing up of quack medicines along with the great remedy. Such a course is always sure to fail. Thousands fail in just this way, forever trying to be healed partly by their own stupid, self-willed works, as well as partly by Jesus Christ. There must be no looking to man or to any of man's doings or man's help. All dependence must be on Christ alone. As this is true in reference to pardon, so is it also in reference to sanctification. This is done by faith in Christ. It is only through and by faith that you get that divine influence which sanctifies the soul -- the Spirit of God; and this in some of its forms of action was the power that healed the Hebrews in the wilderness.

Looking to Christ implies looking away from ourselves in the sense of not relying at all on our own works for the cure desired, not even on works of faith. The looking is toward Christ alone as our all-prevalent, all-sufficient and present remedy.

There is a constant tendency in Christians to depend on their own doings, and not on simple faith in Christ. The woman of the blood-issue seems to have toiled many years to find relief before she came to Christ; had no doubt tried everybody's prescriptions, and taxed her own ingenuity besides to its utmost capacity, but all was of no avail. At last she heard of Jesus. He was said to do many wonderful works. She said within herself -- This must be the promised Messiah -- who was to "bear our sicknesses" and heal all the maladies of men. O let me rush to Him, for if I may but touch the hem of His garment, I shall be whole. She did not stop to philosophize upon the mode of the cure; she leaned on no man's philosophy, and had none of her own; she simply said -- I have heard of One who is mighty to save, and I flee to Him.

So of being healed of our sins. Despairing of all help in ourselves or in any other name than Christ's, and assured there is virtue in Him to work out the cure, we expect it of Him and *come* to Him to obtain it.

Several times within the last few years, when persons have come to me with the question, Can I anyhow be saved from my sins -- actually *saved*, so as not to fall again into the same sins, and under the same temptations? I have said -- Have you ever tried looking to Jesus? O yes. But have you expected that you should be actually saved from sin by looking to Jesus, and be filled with faith, love, and holiness? No; I did not expect that.

Now, suppose a man had looked at the brazen serpent for the purpose of speculation. He has no faith in what God says about being cured by looking, but he is inclined to try it. He will look a little and watch his feelings to see how it affects him. He does not believe God's word, yet since he does not absolutely *know* but it may be true, he will condescend to try it. This is no *looking* at all in the sense of our text. It would not have cured the bitten Israelite; it cannot heal the poor sinner. There is *no faith* in it.

Sinners must look to Christ with both desire and design to be saved. Salvation is the object for which they look.

Suppose one had looked towards the brazen serpent, but with no willingness or purpose to be cured. This could do him no good. Nor can it do sinners any good to think of Christ otherwise than as a *Saviour*, and a Saviour for their own sins.

Sinners must look to Christ as a remedy for all sin. To wish to make some exception, sparing some sins, but consenting to abandon others, indicates rank rebellion of heart, and can never impose on the All-seeing One. There cannot be honesty in the heart which proposes to itself to seek deliverance from sin only in part.

Sinners may look to Christ *at once* -- without the least delay. They need not wait till they are almost dead under their malady. For the bitten Israelite, it was of no use to wait and defer his looking to the serpent till he found himself in the jaws of death. He might have said -- I am wounded plainly enough, but I do not see as it swells much yet; I do not feel the poison spreading through my system; I cannot look yet, for my case is not yet desperate enough; I could not hope to excite the pity of the Lord in my present condition, and therefore I must wait. I say, there was no need of such delay then and no use of it. Nor is there any more need or use for it in the sinner's case now.

We must look to Christ for blessings promised, not to works, but to faith. It is curious to see how many mistakes are made on this point. Many will have it that there must be great mental agony, long fasting, many bitter tears and strong crying for mercy before deliverance can be looked for. They do not seem to think that all these manifestations of grief and distress are of not the least avail, because they are not simple faith, nor any part of faith, nor indeed any help toward faith: nor are they in anywise needed for the sake of acting on the sympathies of the Saviour. It is all as if under the serpent-plague of the wilderness, men had set their wits at work to get up quack remedies; fixing up plasters, and ointments, and plying the system with depletions, cathartics, and purifiers of the blood. All this treatment could avail nothing; there was but one effective cure, and if a man were only bitten and knew it, this would be the only preparatory step necessary to his *looking* as directed for his cure.

So in the case of the sinner. If he is a sinner and *knows* it, this constitutes his preparation and fitness for coming to Jesus. It is all of no avail that he should go about to get up quack prescriptions, and to mix up remedies of his own devising with the great Remedy which God has provided. Yet there is a constant tendency in religious efforts toward this very thing -- toward fixing up and relying upon an indefinite multitude and variety of spiritual quack remedies. See that sinner. How he toils and agonizes. He would compass heaven and earth to work out his own salvation, in his own way, to his own credit, by his own works. See how he worries himself in the multitude of his own devisings! Commonly before he arrives at simple faith, he finds himself in the deep mire of despair. Alas, he cries, There can be no hope for me! O! my soul is lost!

But at last the gleam of a thought breaks through the thick *darkness*, "*possibly* Jesus can help me! If He can, then I shall live, but not otherwise, for surely there is no help for me but in Him." There he is in his despair -- bowed in weariness of soul, and worn out with his vain endeavors to help himself in other ways. He now bethinks himself of help from above. "There is nothing else I can do but cast myself utterly in all my hopelessness upon Jesus Christ. Will He receive me? *Perhaps* He will; and that is enough for me to know." He thinks on a little further, "Perhaps, *yes, perhaps* He will; nay, more, I think He will, for they tell me He *has* done so for other sinners. I think He will -- yes, I know He will -- and here's my guilty heart! I will trust Him -- yea, though He slay me, I *will trust* in Him."

Have any of you experienced anything like that?

"*Perhaps* He will admit my plea. Perhaps will hear my prayer."

This is as far as the sinner can dare to go at first. But soon you hear him crying out -- He says He will; I must believe Him! Then faith gets hold and rests on promised faithfulness, and, ere he is aware, his "soul is like the chariots of Amminadab," and he finds his bosom full of peace and joy as one on the borders of heaven.

REMARKS.

1. When it is said in John xii., "If I be lifted up, I will draw all men unto Me," the language is indeed universal in form, but cannot be construed as strictly universal without being brought into conflict with Bible truth and known facts. It is indeed only a common mode of speaking to denote a great multitude. I will draw great numbers -- a vast "multitude that no man can number." There is nothing here in the context or in the subject to require the strictly universal interpretation.

2. This expedient of the brazen serpent was no doubt designed to try the faith of the Israelites. God often put their faith to the test, and often adapted His providences to *educate* their faith -- to draw it out and develop it. Many things did He do *to prove* them. So now. They had sinned. Fiery serpents came among them and many were poisoned and dying on every hand. God said, Make a brazen serpent and set it upon a pole, and raise it high before the eyes of all the people. Now let the sufferers look on this serpent and they shall live. This put their faith to the test.

3. It is conceivable that many perished through mere unbelief, although the provisions for their salvation were most abundant. *We*, look at a serpent of brass -- they might say scornfully -- as if there were not humbugs enough among the rabble, but Moses must give us yet another! Perhaps some set themselves to philosophizing on the matter. *We*, they say, will much sooner trust our tried physicians than these "old wives' fables." What philosophical connection can any man see between looking upon a piece of brass and being healed of a serpent's bite?

So, many now blow at the gospel. They wonder how any healing power can come of Gospel faith. True, they hear some say they are healed, and that they know the healing power has gone to their very soul, and they cry, "I looked to Jesus and I was healed and made whole from that very hour." But they count all this as mere fanatical delusion. They can see none of their philosophy in it.

But *is* this fanaticism? Is it any more strange than that a man bitten of poisonous serpents should be healed by looking at God's command on a brazen serpent?

4. Many are stumbled by the simplicity of the Gospel. They want something more intelligible! They want to see through it. They will not trust what they cannot explain. It is on this ground that many stumble at the doctrine of sanctification by faith in Christ. It is so simple their philosophy cannot see through it.

Yet the analogy afforded in our text is complete. Men are to look to Jesus that they may not perish, but may have *eternal life*. And who does not know that eternal life involves entire sanctification?

5. The natural man always seeks for some way of salvation that shall be altogether creditable to himself. He wants to work out some form of self-righteousness and does not know about trusting in Christ alone. It does not seem to him natural or philosophical.

6. There is a wonderful and most alarming state of things in many churches abroad: almost no *Christ* in their experience. It is most manifest that He holds an exceedingly small space in their hearts. So far from knowing what salvation is as a thing to be attained by simply believing in Christ, they can only give you an experience of this sort. How did you become a Christian? I just made up my mind to serve the Lord. Is that all? That's all. Do you know what it is to receive eternal life by simply looking to Jesus? Don't know as I understand that. Then you are not a Christian. Christianity, from beginning to end, is received from Christ by simple faith. Thus, and only thus, does the pardon of sin come to the soul, and thus only can come that peace of God, passing all understanding, which lives in the soul with faith and love. Thus sanctification comes through faith in Christ.

What, then, shall we think of that religion which leaves Christ out of view?

Many are looking for some wonderful sign or token, not understanding that it is by faith they are to be brought completely into sympathy with Christ and into participation with His own life. By faith Christ unites them to Himself. Faith working by love, draws them into living union with His own moral being. All this is done by the mind's simply looking to Christ in faith.

When the serpent was up, no doubt many perished because they would not accept and act upon so simple a plan of remedy. Many perished because they did not and would not realize their danger. If they saw men cured, they would say -- We don't believe it was done by the brazen serpent on the pole. Those men were not much poisoned -- would not have died anyhow. They assume that those who ascribe their cure to the power of God are mistaken.

Many perished also from delay. They waited to see whether they were in danger of dying. And still they waited -- till they were so bedizened and crazed, they could only lie down and die.

So now in regard to the Gospel. Some are occupied with other matters more important just now, and of course they must delay. Many are influenced by others' opinions. They hear many stories. Such a man looked and yet lost his life. Another man did not look and yet was saved. So men have different opinions about their professedly Christian neighbors, and this stumbles many. They hear that some set out strong for religion, but seem to fail. They looked as they thought, but all in vain. Perhaps it was so; for they might have looked without real faith. Some will philosophize till they make themselves believe it is all a delusion to look. They think they see many pretend to look and appear to look, who yet find no healing. Who can believe where there are so many stumbling-blocks?

These discouraging appearances drove some into despair in the wilderness, we may suppose; and certainly we see that the same causes produce these effects here in the case of sinners. Some think they have committed the unpardonable sin. They class themselves among those who "having been once enlightened," "there remains for them no more sacrifice for sins, but a certain looking for of vengeance and fiery indignation." Some are sure it is too late for them now. Their heart is hard as the nether mill-stone. All is dark and desolate as the grave. See him; his very look is that of a lost soul! Ah, some of you are perhaps reasoning and disbelieving in this very way!

Many neglected because they thought they were getting better. They saw some change of symptoms, as they supposed. So with sinners; they *feel* better for going to meeting, and indeed there is so much improvement, they take it they are undoubtedly doing well.

Many of the ancient Hebrews may have refused to look because they had no good hope; because, indeed, they were full of doubts. If you had been there you would have found a great variety of conflicting views, often even between brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers, parents and children. Some ridicule; some are mad; some won't believe anyhow. And must I say it -- some sinners who ought to be seeking Christ are deterred by reasons fully as frivolous and foolish as these.

It is easy for us all to see the analogy between the manner of looking and the reasons for not looking at the brazen serpent and to Christ the Saviour. I need not push the analogy into its minute particulars any further. But the question for you all now is: Do you really believe that as "Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so is the Son of man lifted up, that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish, but shall have eternal life." Do you understand the simple remedy of faith? Perhaps you ask -- What were they to believe? This, that if they really looked at the brazen serpent on the pole, they should certainly experience the needed healing. It was God's certified remedy, and they were so to regard it. And what are you now to believe? That Christ is the great antitype of that serpent lifted up in the wilderness, and that you are to receive from Him by simple faith all the blessings of a full and free salvation. By *simple faith*, I say, and do you understand this? Do I hear you say to these things -- What, may I, a sinner, just fix my eye in simple faith on Jesus? Who -- who may do this? Is it I? How can it be that I should have this privilege?

I see here today the faces of some whom I saw last fall in the meetings for inquiry. What have you been doing? Have you been trying to work yourselves into some certain state of mind? Are you wishing intensely that you could only feel so and so -- according to some ideal you have in your mind? Do you understand that you are really to look by faith, and let this look of faith be to you as the touch of the poor woman with an issue of blood was to her dying body, believing that if you look in simple trust He surely will receive you, and give you His divine love and peace and life and light, and really make them pulsate through your whole moral being? Do you believe it? Nay, don't you see that you do *not* believe it? Oh, but you say, "It is a great mystery!" I am not going to explain it, nor shall I presume that I can do so, any more than I can explain *how* that woman was healed by touching the hem of the Saviour's garment. The touch in this case and the looking in that, are only the means, the media, by which the power is to be received. The *manner* in which God operates is a thing of small consequence to *us*; let us be satisfied that we know what we must do to secure the operations of His divine Spirit in all things that pertain to life and godliness.

You have doubtless had confused notions of the way of salvation, perhaps contriving and speculating, and working upon your own feelings. Now you pray, and having prayed, you say, Now let me watch and see if this prayer has given me salvation! This course is much as if the Hebrew people when bitten by serpents and commanded to look to the serpent of brass, had gone about to apply here a plaster, there a blister, and then a probe, all the time losing sight of just that *one* thing which God told them would infallibly cure. Oh! why should men forget, and why not understand that all good needed by us comes from God to simple faith? When we see any want, there is Christ, to be received by faith alone; and His promises leave no want unprovided for.

Now, if this is the way of salvation, how wonderful that sinners should look every other way but toward Christ, and should put forth all other sorts of effort except the effort to look at once in simple faith to their Saviour! How often do we see them discouraged and confounded, toiling so hard and so utterly in vain. No wonder they should be so greatly misled. Go round among the churches and ask, Did you ever *expect* to be saved from sin in this world? No; but you expect to be saved at death. Inasmuch as He has been quite unsuccessful in His efforts to sanctify your soul during your life, you think He will send death on in season to help the work through!

Can you believe this?

While Christians disown the glorious doctrine of sanctification by faith in Christ, present, and according to each man's faith so done to him, it cannot be expected that they will teach sinners with intelligible clearness how to look to Christ in simple faith for pardon. Knowing so little of the power of faith in their own experience, how can they teach others effectively, or even truthfully? Thus blind leading blind, it is no wonder that both are found together where the Bible proverb represents both the leaders and the led as terminating their mutual relations.

There seems to be no remedy for such a finality except for professing Christians to become the light of the world; and for this end, to learn the meaning and know the experience of simple faith. Faith once learned, they will experience its transforming power, and be able to teach others the way of life.