

The Lifting Up of the Brass Serpent

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Bible Text: Numbers 21:4-9
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For our Scripture reading this morning, let us turn to both Old and New Testament. First we read from Numbers 21:4-9, and after that we will read from the Gospel according to John 3:1-15. First we want to read Numbers 21:4-9 and this portion will also be the text of the sermon. There we read God's holy word,

4 And they journeyed from mount Hor by the way of the Red sea, to compass the land of Edom: and the soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way. 5 And the people spake against God, and against Moses, 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. 6 And the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died. 7 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. 8 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. 9 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.

Now we will turn to John 3.

1 There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: 2 The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him. 3 Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. 4 Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born? 5 Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye

must be born again. 8 The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit. 9 Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be? 10 Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things? 11 Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness. 12 If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things? 13 And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven. 14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: 15 That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

So far the reading of the word of God.

And we write about the sermon, "The Lifting Up of the Brass Serpent," first of all points to our deadly plague; secondly, points to the only way of salvation; and thirdly, points to the necessity of faith. The lifting up of the brass serpent points to our deadly plague, points to the only way of salvation, points to the necessity of faith.

Numbers 21 tells us about the people of Israel wandering in the wilderness for almost 40 years. They have come to the border of the Promised Land. The end of the long journey is in sight and yet the last part of the journey has its difficulties. The previous chapter narrates about the king of Canaan, King Arad who tried to expel the people of Israel from the border. A long time ago, Israel had already arrived at the border of the Promised Land and at that time some Israelites tried to invade the Promised Land in opposition to the commandment of God and many were slaughtered by the Canaanites and now King Arad has heard that the people of Israel will try to invade the land again, and in response to this, King Arad seeks to weaken the Israelites by attacking them in the wilderness. However, the Lord is with his people. Arad's army has to retreat. They suffer a humiliating defeat and you will understand that the people of Israel took new courage from this victory.

It won't take long before they will enter the Promised Land and yet after this, they have to process a setback. They have to travel in the opposite direction, namely into the direction of the Red Sea, into the wilderness. They have to make a detour. Why? Is there no other way? Yes, there is, namely through the land of the Edomites who are the offspring of Esau. However, the Edomites refuse the people of Israel a passage and with all kinds of excuses, they stop Israel. Moses tries to persuade the Edomites. He makes all kinds of promises. He says that the people will not damage the country since they promised to stay on the highway, and they will pay for the water and compensate them for the food they use during the journey through their country. And yet the Edomites persist in their refusal and the people of Israel seek revenge and want to attack the Edomites, however, the Lord does not give them permission since the Edomites are their brothers, and there is no other way but to travel around the land of the Edomites, through the wilderness, to the Red Sea,

and enter the Promised Land from the east, and the people are not able to process this setback.

We read in verse 4, "and the soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way." They were not merely discouraged, the Hebrew word used here points to their inner aversion. Their patience has run out. They are bitter. They are offended. They have wandered through the wilderness for almost 40 years and when they think they have at last reached the border of the Promised Land, they are sent back into the wilderness for a detour and now they have to follow the pillar of cloud again. But they want rest. They want to enjoy the fruit of the Promised Land and not depend on the Lord for food and drink anymore. Every day they have to wait on the Lord, wait until he gives them manna from heaven. They're bound to live in dependence on the Lord and that is not what they want.

After 40 years, they are done with it and the people distrust the Lord. At first, they keep it to themselves but now they express their irritation. Listen to what they say in verse 5, "the people spake against God, and against Moses." The Hebrew language employed here reflects their irritation. Their speaking is an act of rebellion. They speak against the Lord and against Moses, his servant, and they continue, "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 say, "Look, this is what has come from God's promises. We have been delivered out of Egypt not for our salvation but for our condemnation. Moses, look around. There is nothing but wilderness. Here is no life. The only thing we do is wander around in the wilderness. There is a shorter route to the Promised Land and this route leads us farther from the Promised Land. And what about this bread we eat every day? It's meager, worthless, light bread."

Boys and girls, do you think the bread was really that bad? In Numbers 11, we read about the manna which the Lord rained from heaven. The people made cakes or bread from it and how did the bread taste? And we read in Numbers 11, "and the taste of it was as the taste of fresh oil." This means that the taste of this bread surpassed all their expectations. Receiving bread from heaven, they cannot expect that the best of the best. The Lord displayed his faithfulness towards them by providing them daily manna and by doing so, the Lord assured his people of all the good which they would receive in the Promised Land. Every day the people could notice the Lord's care for them. There was no need to doubt his promises.

The Lord took good care of them. Moses testified of this at the end of his life when the people stood at the border of Canaan and there he said to the people, "in the wilderness, where thou hast seen how that the LORD thy God bare thee, as a man doth bear his son, in all the way that ye went, until ye came into this place," Deuteronomy 1:31. The Lord has carried his people for 40 years as a father carries his son. This is a beautiful picture of God's fatherly care and the people, they don't notice the Lord's faithfulness and goodness. They don't notice it and behave as if the Lord owes them. They rebel against God. How abominable! Instead of being obedient to the Lord, they stand up against God. They break

the covenant with the Lord by their rebellion. They don't want to live any longer in accordance to the covenant. They rebel against God's grace and against God's love.

What lessons can we glean from this? Well, the Lord does not choose easy paths for his people. The Lord does not choose easy paths for his people. Usually the Lord goes different ways with us than we want. When we plan to visit friends or family, we usually choose the fastest route. From this story we learn that the Lord chooses detours in our lives' path. Why? To test us. To test whether we will cling to God and his covenant promises. The Lord wants us to exercise obedience and a life in dependence so that we learn to have no expectation but from the Lord alone, and by doing so the Lord displays his divine love, love which comes from his father heart.

He knows best what is good for his people. He knows how to purify them. The Israelites have to travel around Edom instead of through Edom. This was exactly the opposite of the people's will and this is what we all need to learn: God's ways are the best though we don't understand them. We are inclined to distrust the Lord. Our disposition is to think we know better. We don't want the ways of the Lord. By nature our heart is full of rebellion. We fail to notice all God's goodness which he displays in the blessings he gives.

We do so, for instance, by taking his blessings for granted. The people of Israel rebel against the Lord and then the Lord responds. To the question whether they were brought up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness, the Lord answers in the affirmative. Indeed, those who do not believe in him shall die. The God who is merciful and gracious and plenteous in mercy is also the God who is holy and angry with sin. God deals very seriously with the sins of the people. He strikes the people by sending fiery serpents to them, meant are deadly snakes, and in no time there are snakes amidst the people. For almost 40 years the Lord has kept the people from serpent's bites but now the Lord withholds his hand and many snakes attack the people. One after the other is bitten. Deadly snakes are everywhere and many of the people perish from the poisonous venom.

This is the result of their murmuring. This is what they can expect if they live apart from God. By nature we all rebel against the Lord. Why? Because we want to be on the throne. We want to rule our own lives and this is because of the poison of rebellion which flows through our veins. The venom of the serpent dwells in our blood. We all have been bitten by the serpent. The poison spreads easily and affects all aspects of our life and consequently we are good for nothing, good only for death.

This also corresponds to the Lord Jesus' teaching. He says, "For from within out of the heart of men proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders," and so on. Have you discovered this as well? Do you know this abominable truth from the heart? When the Holy Spirit opens your eyes for this reality, you discover the seriousness of your misery and you will admit, "I am bitten by the serpent as well. Poison flows through my veins as well." And it becomes an awful reality to you.

And we all need to know something of this. We are inclined to run away from this reality. We are apt to neglect the seriousness of our state. Nowadays many live without

meditating about life and the purpose of life, and this world keeps us busy and the devil doesn't want you to consider these serious matters. And many flee from life's difficulties by keeping themselves busy. Unconsciously we can be too busy to be focused on the matters of our soul. Some people live more in a virtual world than in the real world. It's a threat especially for our young, for our youth.

The serious picture shown to us in this story is not virtual but real. The Lord confronts us with the seriousness of our state before God. We are ready to die since all of us have been poisoned by the bite of the serpent. Do you sense that you have been bitten? Did you already see that you cannot stand before your Maker and live? The Lord accuses you of your guilt before him and he seeks to convict you of your guilt so that you will call upon the name of the Lord, so that you will cry out for mercy.

We read in verse 6, "and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died." There's no escape anymore. Young and old are bitten by this severe punishment. Maybe more than 100 persons per day were bitten by the fiery serpents. Thousands of people died in the wilderness. Many felt poison flowing through their veins and they become deathly ill. They are in desperate need of deliverance. What can they do? Who can help? They call for help. Who? All those who are convicted of their guilt before God and confess their foolishness, they admit, "We have put ourselves in this hopeless situation. We are in deep trouble."

And the people cry for help. They call for Moses and they confess their guilt. What do they ask for? For the Lord to take away the serpents. They come to Moses, since they acknowledge him as their intercessor, and what is Moses' response? As the most meek of all men, he does not send the people away but makes intercession for them and, congregation, then the miracle happens. What? That the serpents leave the people? No. No. A great miracle paves the way. What then is the miracle? That the Lord answers. Don't overlook the few words of verse 8, "And the LORD said unto Moses." The Lord answers and his answer is for the well-being of his people. Isn't that a miracle? The Lord wouldn't have been unjust if he had responded with silence and let the people of Israel die in the wilderness, and yet the Lord answers since he is great in mercy and kindness and slow to wrath. Yes, the Lord is angry with the people but in his wrath he remembers his people in compassion. The people cannot be delivered but by God's intervention and that happens. God is able to sent all serpents away by just one word. God is able to heal all the bitten people in a split second. And yet this is not according to his counsel. God shows a way of deliverance by which the people have to die to self and learn to have no expectation but of God alone.

So we have come to our second thought, that the lifting up of the brass serpent points to the only way of salvation. The Lord gives Moses an instruction, "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." Moses has to make a serpent of brass. Some commentators point to the fact that much suitable materials could be found in the mountains of Edom and out of that Moses made a fiery serpent. Brass has a fiery color if the sun shines on it. This points to the poisonous snakes which bit the

people of Israel. And Moses put it on a pole and lifted up the serpent on high. It's like a banner above the Israelites which could be seen by everyone, and his lifting up of the serpent of brass points to the lifting up of the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross, says the Apostle John. When the Lord Jesus has a conversation with Nicodemus, the Lord Jesus refers to this story when he says, "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up."

The Lord Jesus points to this account when he prophesies of his upcoming suffering and death. He being lifted up means, first of all, that the Son of Man will be crucified. It sounds a bit odd. Is the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus also part of his exaltation? Don't we teach that the crucifixion and condescending to hell belong to his deepest humiliation? Yes, you're right. The Lord Jesus saying that the Son of Man needs to be lifted up has several meanings. First of all, we should understand this expression literally. As the serpent of brass was lifted up on a pole, so the Lord Jesus was lifted up on the cross on Golgotha. And at the same time, the Lord Jesus points to a mystery. The brass serpent refers to the poisonous snakes which had bitten the Israelites and every Israelite who looked at the brass serpent was reminded of the cause of his misery, mainly his disobedience to God.

The poison in his blood was caused by his own folly and what do we see when we look in faith to the Lord Jesus lifted up on the cross? Our own misery. Our own folly. Yes, we see God's wrath poured out upon the Son of Man who took with him to the cross all the sins of his people. That is why he was nailed on the cross, because Scripture says, "Cursed is everyone that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them. And cursed is everyone that hangeth on a tree." He became one of us. He was made in the likeness of men. He was made sin which is displayed by his being nailed on the cross. He was seen by God as if he was the worst criminal that has ever lived. He made himself of no reputation.

The cross of Golgotha displays who we are by nature, cursed. Condemnation is what we deserve. The cross is a scandal which should lead us to humility. Christ has paid the penalty due to his people on the cross. He bore the wrath of God and made atonement for his entire church. He has satisfied God's just wrath when he said, "It is finished!" And when he finished the work which God had given him to do, his exaltation commenced. When he died on the cross, the Lord Jesus believed that the Father would exalt his work. He believed that he would be lifted up, that he would be exalted by the Father. His suffering and death opened up a perspective of his imminent exaltation. He was exalted in the way of his crucifixion since he purchased salvation for his people on the cross. He has suffered on the cross but he also entered into glory.

The Son of Man is lifted up in the way of the cross. His crucifixion includes the guarantee of his exaltation. He being lifted up must be seen in the perspective of the salvation which he has purchased by his blood. And after his death, he arose from the dead and ascended into heaven. He sits at the right hand of the Father. And in the light of the New Testament, the entire work of redemption is revealed in the lifted up Lord Jesus on the cross.

If the Old Testament Israelite looked at the serpent of brass, he would live. In the New Testament, this can be said of the Lord Jesus. "Whosoever," do we read in John 3:15, "Whosoever looks to the lifted up Jesus in faith shall live." The Lord Jesus did not only die but he's risen from the dead as well. He has paid the penalty in the stead of his people and he has conquered Satan and sin. He sits at the right hand of the Father in order to distribute the blessings of salvation which he has merited. Do you notice the great love which the Lord reveals in this story? The Lord does not only give a sign but he sacrificed his only begotten Son to save sinners from death. God reveals his willingness to save lost sinners since he offered a most precious and costly sacrifice, namely his Son. With the Lord is power to be saved since the Lord Jesus has broken the power of sin and death when lifted up on the cross. He has conquered death and bruised the old serpent's head. Sin has no dominion anymore.

Moses put the brass serpent on a pole, he lifted up the serpent so that every bitten Israelite could see, and what do you think Moses did after this? It's not written specifically in Scripture but without making up a story, I believe that he has pointed to the brass serpent and has told the people that if they behold the serpent, they would be healed from the bite. He has undoubtedly pointed to the only way of salvation and what Moses did in the wilderness is what I may do this morning. You are pointed to the only way of salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ. The preaching of the cross is the power of God unto salvation and there is forgiveness of sin because of the cross. Only in and through the Lord Jesus Christ there is salvation from eternal destruction.

Do you confess your sin and guilt before God? Do you confess, "Against thee, thee only have I sinned and done this evil in thy sight"? Have your sins been exposed and your evil inclinations? And does it break your heart, that you feel ashamed that you rebel against a good-doing God? That you are apt to run away from God, turning your back to him and you mourn about your stubbornness and unwillingness to bow under God's government? And if you know something of this, then you also know of love to the Lord in this service. In principle you hate sin and desire to do the will of God.

That is what the Holy Spirit works in the heart. These are humbling lessons, yes, painful for the flesh and yet the Holy Spirit works in addition to this. When the Lord shows you your misery, he does not stop working but continues by directing your attention away from your misery to the salvation in Jesus Christ. That is the Spirit's purpose of his uncovering work. He opens your eyes for the lifted up Lord Jesus and what do you perceive when you get the sight of him? You see the righteous one who suffered for unrighteous people. Then you see in the lifted up Christ all your sins nailed on the cross. You perceive God's wrath over sin when you get the sight of the lifted up Jesus who suffered and died instead of you. He is the perfect surety and mediator. And you also notice God's gracious compassion offered to such a sinner like you though you have forfeited it all, and then you find redemption, redemption in the lifted up Christ.

When the Lord Jesus had a conversation with Nicodemus, he emphasized that no man can see the kingdom of God except he is born again. In order to see, we need spiritual

eyesight which is given from above. We need an eye of faith worked by the Holy Spirit. And for this reason the Lord Jesus says that the Son of Man must be lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, "That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life." So we will pay attention to our third thought, namely the necessity of faith. The necessity of faith, and maybe someone says, "How do I receive eyes of faith? How can I look to the Lord Jesus in faith if this is a gift from above? It's a gift out of free grace and I cannot do anything to merit it."

Is this your response? Why is this your response? Is this really a burden to you that you cannot merit faith? If so, then you cannot sit down passively with folded arms, you will rather storm the throne of grace since faith is a gift from God. And there is no reason to remain in unbelief. If you are waiting until the Lord will do something in your life without expecting the Lord, then you basically close your heart to the power of God's word and you will hide behind your inability to believe, and then you silence God's well-meant invitation to look to him. You actually say that these calls are not addressed to you. Don't be such a fool because reasoning thus about faith is unbelief.

Maybe someone else says, "I sense that the sin of unbelief dwells in my heart." And then you sense that you cannot serve the Lord according to his will since you experience so much indwelling sin which strives against the will of the new man. You sigh under your unbelief and you wonder, "How will this ever change?" The devil whispers in your ears that you have fooled yourself and that you lack a genuine repentance. It feels as if you lost your faith in God and you feel hopeless and the story we are listening to points us to the only way of salvation. The Lord Jesus Christ has not only purchased salvation for his people, but what a blessing, he also distributes it. He distributes salvation in the way of faith. The Son of Man is such a precious Savior because not only, he not only distributes salvation in the way of faith but he also provides the instrument unto salvation, that is faith.

Isn't this a rich Gospel? The one who has purchased salvation also takes care for the application of salvation. Oh, this is the rich Gospel and the glorious salvation revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ. He is lifted up as the perfect Savior. The cross of Golgotha reveals to us a Savior who perfectly fits with a sinner like you. Peter testified of him when he stood in front of the blood-thirsty Sanhedrin, the same Sanhedrin which has condemned the Lord Jesus. We read in Acts 5:31 where Peter testified, "Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins."

Do you sense his willingness to grant salvation? He has power to deliver you from the power of sin and Satan. He covers all your sins with his blood. Pay attention to what happened on the day of Pentecost, the poured out Spirit changed more than 3,000 people under one sermon. The Spirit has the same willingness and ability as the lifted up Son of Man. He is able and willing to give you a sight of Christ for the first time and again.

Did you already look to the lifted up Christ who is able and willing to save lost sinners? Are you in need of him? He is lifted up on the cross for those who cannot redeem

themselves from their guilt and the power of sin. He is lifted up for those who are bitten by the old serpent, the devil. He is lifted up in the preaching of the Gospel. He is lifted up so that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. He is the perfect Savior to whosoever believes in him. Whosoever. There's no discrimination. No discrimination in the offer of grace. There are no conditions to look to the Lord Jesus since he has paid the penalty for every sin.

But maybe you say, "Yeah, but the dainties of the world are so appealing." Look to the lifted up Christ since he is able and willing to deliver you from the enticement of the world. "Yes, but I'm so sinful and my heart is so depraved." Look to the Lord Jesus since he has paid the penalty for every sin.

He has redemption and his redemption is secure and he that believes not, says the Lord Jesus, shall be damned and the wrath of God abides on him. This horrific distinction will soon be clearly displayed on the day of final judgment. This is a serious warning which confronts us in the story of the people of Israel in the wilderness and the Lord Jesus continues to warn the people for the consequences of unbelief. He shall come to judge the living and the dead, and whosoever has not believed in the Son of Man will end up in eternal perdition.

Look to the Lord Jesus and you shall live. With him you find all you need to live and to die in true comfort. To look to him does not mean that you know him in full. All we know of him is in part. What matters is whether we look to him in true faith and true faith, congregation, is always under attack by God's enemies. In this lifetime, we are tested and purified by the Lord. He wants us to look to him and to have expectation of him alone. He teaches us to look to him and not at our circumstances or difficulties, sorrow or pain. But in the midst of many trials, the Lord calls you to look to him. Though the devil seeks to tempt you, though the world seeks to entice you, hope in the Lord since he is lifted up.

Do you know who of the bitten Israelites entered the Promised Land? Only those who beheld the serpent of brass and those who put their trust in the Lord were brought into the Promised Land. Likewise it will be with the heavenly Canaan, the New Jerusalem. All who have learned to look to Christ in this lifetime will enter in. You know, this will affect life's hopes and perspectives. A better life is at hand since the Son of Man has been lifted up on the cross, and under the preaching of the Gospel he is still being lifted up. Look to him who ascended into heaven to prepare a place for all his own.

Does this perspective govern your considerations, plans and decisions? Does this hope affect your lifestyle? If you still live impenitently, then humble yourself before the Lord, confess your sin and guilt. We learn from this story that when Israel confessed their sin before the Lord, grace was his answer and God is still the same. Because the Lord Jesus was lifted up on the cross and he still draws all his own unto himself, and when he draws you, you will begin to die to self and being to live in him in principle. He is the only suitable way of salvation. The lifted up Christ does not only point to your curse due to your sin, but he's also the only remedy against your sin since he has borne the wrath of

God over all sin. He has shed his blood which is a fountain of salvation. His blood cleanses from all sin.

Oh, don't trust your own strength, don't trust your own insight but look to him who is the perfect Savior. For everyone who believes with him there is divine power to overcome sin and death. Look to the Lord Jesus and your soul shall live. Amen.