

THE HEART OF GOD'S SAVING PLAN

(God's Remedy for Sin Had to Be Lifted Up on Calvary's Cross)

John 3:14-15 – Pastor Richard P. Carlson

George W. Truett was born on May 6, 1867, on a farm in Hayesville, in Clay County in remote Western North Carolina, the seventh child of Appalachian pioneers. At age 19, he was born again at a camp meeting revival. He was called to preach and pastor. Pastor Truett pastored the First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas, one of the largest Baptist Churches in the world, from 1897 until 1944, (for 47 years,) and he served as the President of the Southern Baptist Convention from 1927 to 1929. He said, "To know the will of God is the greatest knowledge! To do the will of God is the greatest achievement. There is no failure in God's will, and no success outside of God's will." One day George W. Truett was seated on the platform with the pastor of a large church, where he had been called to preach. As he and the pastor were waiting for the service to begin, in walked a well-known citizen of that city. The pastor whispered to Pastor Truett, "For twelve years I have tried to win that man to Christ, and he comes faithfully to church." Pastor Truett asked the pastor, "How many times have you gone to him alone and lovingly said to him, "I want you to become a Christian,"? The pastor replied, "I confess I have never spoken to him personally about his salvation." So, Pastor Truett replied, "Then a loving personal appeal to him may be all the Lord needs from you to be His means of drawing this man to Jesus." For the first time in 12 years, at the end of that service, this pastor spoke to that prominent citizen in his city. The following evening that man gave his heart to the Lord Jesus. God used that pastor when he got to the heart of the matter of salvation; when he invited that man to be saved.

In witnessing for Jesus, the sooner we get to the heart of God's plan of salvation, the sooner we speak from God's heart through our heart to the heart of those God is drawing to Himself, the sooner folk often come to faith in Jesus. In Jesus' night discussion with Nicodemus, He moved quickly to the very heart of His plan of salvation. In John 3:14-15, Jesus introduced His plan of salvation by reminding this teacher in Israel of the fiery serpents that bit the children of Israel on the Exodus when they spoke against both God and Moses. Nicodemus was on board, as all the Jewish leaders were familiar with the days of their forefathers when the Israelites were journeying from bondage in Egypt to the Promised Land. Nicodemus remembered well that Miriam had died, and after one more outbreak of grumbling against Moses because the people had no water to drink or for their livestock, God told Moses to speak to the rock. In anger, Moses, the meekest of men, was pushed beyond his limit, and he called God's people rebels and smote the rock twice, and water gushed out to quench the thirst of all Israel and all their livestock. After those waters of Meribah, meaning waters of quarreling, Moses sought passage through the land of Edom/Esau en route to Canaan. The Edomites said no, and Israel now travelled to Mt. Hor, where Aaron died. Moses now had lost his older sister and older brother, and God had told him that even he would not be able to lead the children of Israel into the Promised Land. Then in Numbers 21:4-11, once more, the children of Israel travelled back south and east toward the Red Sea near the Gulf of Aqabah, and then went back north around Edom into Moab. The people once more spoke against God and against Moses, saying, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food, (speaking of the manna)." We read, "The Lord send fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people so that many people of Israel died." The people repented saying to Moses, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord, that He take away the serpents from us." Moses prayed for the people and the

Lord told him, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” Moses obeyed the Lord, made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. When people were bitten, all they had to do was look at the bronze serpent, and they lived. This may not seem like Jesus was getting to the heart of His plan of salvation, but He was. When God sent these fiery serpents, did He create fiery serpents on the spot, or did He gather up thousands of these serpents from all over the Middle East and rain them down at Mt. Hor? We aren’t told how He did it, but Numbers 21:6 says, “Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people.” Biologists think these fiery serpents at Mt. Hor, were **saw-scaled vipers**, one of the most-deadly venomous snakes in the world. In India last year, out of most of the 50,000 people who died of snake bites, almost all of them were by killed by saw-scaled vipers. Anti-venom seldom works because if the anti-venom isn’t from snakes near where you are bitten, the anti-venom won’t often work.

I had a chance to talk to Dan McCarron who knows about these serpents. He told me, “In Israel, the Negev, the Arabah, the Sinai peninsula, the Jordan Valley, and the Judean desert, there are 22 snake species, but only 7-8 are venomous. The desert sand is so hot during the day you can fry an egg on it, but in the mornings, evenings, and at night, is when these soft-scaled vipers come out. These fiery serpents kill more people in Israel, Africa, India, and the Middle East than all the other vipers and serpents combined including rattlesnakes, adders, vipers, cobras, and all the other venomous snakes.” There is no more human killing serpent in the world than this fiery, aggressive, soft-scaled viper—called in Israel, the painted carpet viper. This snake’s soft scales as it slithers makes a loud saw-like sound of warning and its skin changes to match the color of the sand, rock, or land it is lying on. I saw pictures of the cliffs of Mt. Hor. The land is bright red like the cliffs of Flaming Gorge. These fiery serpents on red rock and land are fiery red. The anti-venom for soft-scaled vipers usually doesn’t work because the anti-venom has to change from location to location, even in areas less than 100 miles. Each bite contains 70 mg. of venom, but only 5 mg. of venom is all it takes to be fatal. These serpents go after people on sight, just like the old serpent, the devil, who goes out, like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.

Surely, this is an interesting story Jesus brought up with Nicodemus, but was this getting at the heart of God’s salvation plan? Yes, yes, yes, it was! Jesus was drawing an analogy of God’s physical remedy from death by a fatal bite by these fiery serpents. Jesus was saying, “Nicodemus, just as God made provision to save the Israelites from impending death, so there is a way that you can be saved from spiritual death, eternal death, by being born-again. Jesus was drawing a comparison of lifting up the bronze serpent as a type of Him being lifted up to die on the cross—the anti-type. Webster defines an anti-type as “that which is prefigured or represented by a type.” The lifting up of the bronze serpent in the wilderness is the type—bitten victims could look and live. Jesus being lifted up on a cross to die is the anti-type. Let’s look at four biblical points of resemblance that must have arrested Nicodemus as Jesus taught him four basic truths which comprise the heart of God’s plan of salvation. Let’s look carefully at these four points of resemblance and the truths God wants to seal to our hearts, our minds, our souls, and spirits today.

IN BOTH CASES, DEATH IS THE IMPENDING THREAT AS PUNISHMENT FOR SIN.

(I.) In Numbers 21:6, we read that God sent these fiery serpents that bit the people and many died. In Numbers 21:7, we read, “And the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord, and against you.” Jesus was saying to Nicodemus, “You’re going to die spiritually in your sins, just as your forefathers died of the bites of those fiery serpents, unless there is a remedy. Something

must be done in your life.” Do you suppose Jesus had Nicodemus’ attention? You can be certain of it. Jesus wasn’t afraid or bashful about bringing up death, the consequence of sin. Death, eternal life, heaven, and hell are at the heart of God’s message of salvation. Like our Lord Jesus, we dare not omit the heart of the plan of salvation in our witnessing. Now be certain Jesus could have used some other part of the Old Testament that Nicodemus knew to explain being born again. He could have used Deuteronomy 30:6—to explain being born again. “And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live.” It wasn’t where Jesus took Nicodemus. Jesus could have taken Nicodemus to Jeremiah 31:33, saying, “I will put My law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be My people.” Jesus didn’t go there. Jesus could have taken Nicodemus to Ezekiel 11:19-20. “And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in My statutes and keep my rules and obey them.” Jesus didn’t go there. Jesus wanted to talk about death and its remedy.

The brazen serpent lifted up on the pole was not preventative medicine. It was and still is today a picture of Jesus, the remedy for bitten, sinful, poisoned people like you and me and Nicodemus, sinful people living under the wrath of God upon us because of our sin of blasphemy, speaking against God, against Moses, and against God’s blessings and provision sent from heaven. The Israelites said about God’s manna, “We hate; we loathe this worthless food.” The snakes, the fiery serpents with their venomous poison were sent from God (Numbers 21:6) as His judgment on sin. When the people of Israel were bitten, the wrath of God was upon them, just as God’s wrath is upon us as we were all born in sin. The people were dying and without divine intervention, and a reversal of God’s curse of death, they would all die, as we all will face the wages of our sin apart from God’s remedy. The wrath of God is still on sinners today for the sins of unbelief, ingratitude, murmuring and rebellion against Him. Romans 3: 23 tells us, “For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God, and Romans 6:23, tells us, “The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ, our Lord.” Secondly,

IN BOTH CASES, GOD HIMSELF IN HIS SOVEREIGN GRACE, PROVIDES THE ONLY REMEDY. (II.)

In Numbers 21:8, we read, “And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” Nicodemus now knew Jesus was talking to him about an answer to his own sin problem. Jesus took Nicodemus to Numbers 21:4-9, and out of the blue as it were, Jesus shifted His witness to Nicodemus. In John 3:1-12, Jesus had spoken about the deadness of the human heart and Nicodemus didn’t get it. “How can these things be?” Jesus was saying, “You need a Savior.” Jesus knew in the spiritual deadness of Nicodemus’ heart, Nicodemus knew he was exposed with his need to be born again. Now the time had come for a history lesson and Jesus chose to use something Nicodemus knew in history, the story of the brazen serpent. To introduce the story, Jesus first had to tell Nicodemus who He was. Jesus in John 3:13 shifted His witness from “You need a Savior,” to “I am equipped to be your Savior. I am the Son of Man, Messiah, I am your Savior.” Jesus wasn’t going to give up on Nicodemus because he was spiritually dull and not responding to Jesus’ imagery of the new birth. Jesus had said to him in John 3: 11, “If I tell you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?” Then Jesus jumped into Nicodemus’ life telling him who He was in John 3:13, saying, “No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.” Now Nicodemus was going to hear about the Son of Man from

the Son of Man Himself, who was going to compare Himself, not to being the Lamb of God now, or the Lion of the tribe of Judah. No, Jesus was going to compare Himself in some strange way to the brazen serpent.

How? Jesus was letting Nicodemus know and us know who He is—He is the Son of Man. Do you remember the man Jesus healed of blindness on the Sabbath in John 9:35-39? The Pharisees threw him out of the synagogue. Jesus found this man He healed and asked him, “Do you believe in the Son of Man? He answered, “And who is He, sir, that I may believe in Him?” Jesus said to him, “You have seen Him, and it is He who is speaking to you.” He said, “Lord, I believe, and he worshipped Him.” In John 8: 28, Jesus told the Pharisees, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He, and that I do nothing on My own authority, but speak just as the Father taught Me.” Moses lifted up the serpent. Jesus spoke of Himself not lifting himself up but of being lifted up—speaking of the cross. Jesus, like the brazen serpent is our only remedy for sin, our only rescue. Jesus, like the brazen serpent is our only source of healing from the poison of sin and from the wrath of God on sin. Jesus became sin for us. Paul wrote in II Cor. 5: 21, “He became sin, who knew no sin, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” Jesus, even had to become cursed as the old serpent was in the Garden of Eden. We read in Galatians 3: 13, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree, so that in Christ Jesus, the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.”

Think of it. Jesus became the embodiment of the curse on those grumbling Israelites. What happened? Moses interceded, God relented, and God removed His wrath by providing His own remedy. The Israelites were healed, and we receive eternal life in Jesus. The poison of death in Christ is taken away. Our destiny in hell forever is taken away. Our future joy with Jesus forever, is given to us from the cross. Jesus became sin and a curse for us before we were ever conceived or born. God is our Savior through Jesus as God was the Israelites Savior through the bronze serpent. God used the brazen snake to bring no more death and God used Jesus to bring us no more hell. By now, Nicodemus must have begun to understand that the very one speaking to him was the remedy for his impending spiritual death. Thirdly,

IN BOTH CASES, THE REMEDY CONSISTS OF SOMETHING OR SOMEONE

WHO MUST BE LIFTED UP TO BE SEEN IN PUBLIC VIEW. (III.) Notice John 3:14, “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” The bronze serpent was made by divine order in the likeness of the fiery serpents and lifted up in the sight of all the people. (Numbers 21:9). In a similar way, Jesus, was in His virgin birth, made in the likeness of sinful flesh. Philippians 2:7, states Jesus “made Himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.” Thus, Jesus became a curse for us, though He never sinned. Yet Jesus was lifted up on a Roman cross, as a sinful criminal in the view of all Jerusalem. There on the cross, Jesus made a public display by taking our sins upon Himself, and by dying in our place. Colossians 2:14-15 states “Having forgiven us all our trespasses, blotted out the charges, by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This He set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in Him.” Jesus took away Satan’s power to accuse us of our past sins, and Jesus openly displayed to the whole world Christ’s triumph at the cross where our sins were taken away. After Jesus triumphal entry to Jerusalem, when His hour to be lifted up on a cross came, He said to the crowd, in John 12:32-34, “And I, when I

am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to Myself.” He said this to show by what kind of death He was going to die.” The crowd said, “How can You say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?” The once blind man knew. By now I believe Nicodemus was beginning to know. Do you know? 4thly,

IN BOTH CASES, THOSE WITH A BELIEVING HEART, LOOK TO THAT WHICH IS LIFTED UP, AND ARE HEALED AND LIVE. (IV.) We read in

Numbers 21:8, “Everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” To look was to live. Jesus said to Nicodemus in John 3 15, “That whoever believes in Him may have eternal life.” In ministry over the past 55+ years, I have heard many say, “I have tried to believe and it doesn’t work. What does it mean? How do you do it? Let’s look back at the bitten Israelites. We read, in Numbers 21:8, “And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” How do we come to believe. John told us how he believed in John 1:14,16. We read, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. And from His fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.” John the Baptist said in John 1:29, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” How can I explain “look and live” is what believing is?

On January 6, 1850, a snowstorm crippled the city of Colchester, England. A teenage young man couldn’t make it to his own church, so he turned down a street and came to a little Primitive Methodist Church. Only a dozen to fifteen people were there. Even the pastor couldn’t make it. A thin looking man, a shoemaker and a tailor decided he would get up and preach and he chose for his text, Isaiah 45: 22 that says, “Look unto Me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth.” This teenager’s father and grandpa were preachers, but Charles was not born again, nor did he have assurance of salvation. The lay preacher didn’t spend long saying, “A man need not go to college to learn to look. Anyone, even a child can look. Looking doesn’t take a lot of pain. It isn’t even lifting your finger. It’s just “look.” You may be the biggest fool and yet even a fool can look. A man needn’t be worth a thousand pounds a year to be able to look. Anyone can look. Many of you are looking to yourselves. It’s no use looking there.” Then the preacher pointed everyone to Jesus, who says, “Look unto Me; I am sweatin’ great drops of blood. Look unto Me; I am hangin’ on the cross. Look unto Me; I am dead and buried. Look unto Me; I rise again. Look unto Me; I ascend to heaven. Look unto Me; I am sittin’ at the Father’s right hand. O poor sinner, look unto Me! Look unto Me!” Then the preacher looked at Charles and said, “Young man, you look miserable, and you’ll always be miserable, miserable in life, miserable in death, if you don’t obey my text; but if you obey now, this moment, you will be saved.” Then he shouted, “Young man, look to Jesus Christ. Look, Look, Look.” That day Charles Haddon Spurgeon looked. and He was born again. I close with William A. Ogden’s hymn, and composed the music, “Look and Live!” written in 1887.

“I’ve a message from the Lord, hallelujah! This message unto you I’ll give, It’s recorded in His word, hallelujah! It is only that you “look and live.” Chorus: “Look and live,” my brother, live, Look to Jesus now, and live; It’s recorded in His word, hallelujah! It is only that you “look and live.” (2) I’ve a message full of love, hallelujah! A message, O my friend, for you, It’s a message from above, hallelujah! Jesus said it, and I know it’s true. (3) Life is offered unto you, hallelujah! Eternal life your soul shall have, If you’ll only look to Him, hallelujah! Look to Jesus who alone can save. (4) I will tell you how I came, hallelujah! To Jesus when He made me whole—’Twas believing on His name, hallelujah! I trusted, and He saved my soul.” If you’re lost like Nicodemus was, look and live today.