



## ETERNAL LIFE FOR A LOOK

“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” John 3:14-15

Our text takes us to a time when the children of Israel were wandering through the wilderness in unbelief. God had miraculously delivered them from Egyptian bondage, but they were dissatisfied with the food (manna) He had provided. “This is the bread which the LORD hath given you to eat” (Ex 16:15). “And the people spake against God, and against Moses...our soul loatheth this light bread” (Num 21:5). Time and again God had proved His faithfulness – but still they murmured against Him. Such base ingratitude is the result of a deeper failing – unbelief, which results in disobedience. It was the case in Eden where God provided “every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food;” it was also the case in the wilderness in regard to the “corn of heaven.” God came down in judgment against Adam in Eden and also against the Israelites in the wilderness. When God moves in judgment, it is after a time of longsuffering and then it is to teach us a lesson. In Eden, judgment was executed by man being driven out of the Garden. He was kept away from the tree of life by Cherubims and a “flaming sword which turned every way.” On this occasion in the wilderness, God’s judgment took the form of “fiery serpents.” “And the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died” (v 6). The judgment brought the people to realize their sin. “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” (v 7).

There is a solemn lesson here for us all. To reject a gracious provision from God is to sin against Him. This is because every provision from God commands our obedience in regard to it and calls forth our worship of Him. This was the lesson the children of Israel had to learn. How do we measure up in the light of God’s gracious provisions? The very breath that we take; the cycle of seasons and their fruits are all from God (man’s inequitable collection and distribution of them is another matter). God’s greatest provision in grace however is salvation from sin. “For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men” (Tit 2:11). This salvation is not the mere temporal physical salvation from the venom of the viper, but salvation from the eternal sting of death. We have all been fatally stung by death – physically and spiritually through the sin of Adam – our federal head. “Wherefore, as by one man [Adam] sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned” (Rom 5:12). It was Adam’s original ingratitude and disobedience in regard to God’s provision that brought divine judgment upon all men. “For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners” (Rom 5:19).

But let us return to the wilderness experience to gain a further insight into the ways of God in regard to salvation from sin. The Israelites wanted God to simply get rid of the serpents – which, as far as they were concerned, was the source of their problem. But God chose not to do so. Instead, He told Moses to place a serpent of brass on a pole so that all could see it. Then, if any person was bitten, they had to look upon the brazen serpent in order to live. The source of their plight was not the serpents – that was God’s judgment. The root of their plight was their sin of unbelief and disobedience. This had to be addressed according to God’s will and ways. A “life for a look” at the brazen serpent illustrates God’s ways in salvation from sin.

- First, God’s **righteousness** had to be met. This meant that the peoples’ sin had to be dealt with. It was not simply a case of removing the serpents. Many ask, “Why does God not simply remove sin from the world?” Sin came into the world because of man’s unrighteousness. A righteous God must judge man in his sin. However, through that same righteousness God has “put away sin” by the sacrifice of His Son. His holiness having been vindicated, God can thus invite all to look and live.
- Second, the provision of the brazen serpent is a powerful expression of **God’s grace**. It illustrates the truth noted above, that the “grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men” (Tit 2:11). The brazen serpent offered salvation for each and every Israelite – irrespective of their part in the sin of unbelief.
- Third, though God provided the way of salvation, it had to be appropriated. Here **man’s responsibility** comes in. Those who were bitten “had to look” for life. Under judgment, they were constrained to look and live.
- Fourth, this required an act of **repentance** – a complete “about-face.” They had previously rejected God and His provision. They were *now* required to accept what God in grace had provided. Repentance is a large principle in the gospel of God’s salvation for man. God “now commandeth all men everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30). It is repentant faith that is required – which is also obedient faith!

- Fifth, to be saved, the Israelites had to simply “look and live.” It was their **faith** in what God had *provided* that secured their salvation. And, it was not the strength of their faith that secured it. Their salvation was secured on the strength of God’s intractable word. He said all they had to do if bitten was to look and they shall live.

We see now why the Lord used this OT incident to illustrate the good news of salvation from sin. “Christ, the Son of man, is God’s gracious provision for our salvation – the very Bread from Heaven. All of us in Adam have been stung with the penalty of sin. We inherited our guilt and sinful nature through him. The Israelites were utterly helpless to save themselves from God’s judgment - the sting of the serpent. We too, are utterly helpless to save ourselves from divine judgment - the sting of death due to sin. Salvation must come from God. “Salvation is of the LORD” (Jon 2:9). He requires repentant faith from us. The Spirit of God inspired Paul to declare the blessed position of the Christian – all those who have by faith have looked to Christ for salvation.

**“O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 15:55-57).**

This is too simple you say. How can salvation from the penalty of sin and eternal life be mine by a mere act of repentant faith in Christ? May I ask – “Why do you doubt God’s word?” The Israelites had to take God at His word to be saved from the serpents. We too, must take God at His word to be saved from judgment due to our sin. There it is! Nothing of my good works or understanding will avail. God’s unchanging principle for salvation is to “look and live.” His Son said so in our text (Jn 3:15). Do you and I need to go to any other for the truth on such a vital matter? What did Peter confess? “Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God” (Jn 6:68-69). We have the Lord’s way of salvation again in John 3:16. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” God gave His Son to die; to shed His blood in payment for sin. This was His provision in grace and love. Your responsibility and mine is to accept that provision in faith; to look to Christ as our personal Saviour. The consequence of failing to do so is dire – eternal judgment. This, too, the Lord spoke of. “He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God” (Jn 3:18).

Some say, “the sins I have committed are too great.” But we saw that God did not consider the degree of unbelief in each Israelite. Some, no doubt, were more culpable than others – but all had to simply look and live. Take the case of Paul centuries later. He was guilty of murdering the saints of God and persecuting the Church. He regarded himself as the chief among sinners (1 Tim 1:15). Yet, he was saved through faith. Undoubtedly, because of this experience he was chosen by the Spirit of God to write those words of assurance. “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God” (Eph 2:8). Still, you may be unconvinced because you doubt that you have sufficient faith. You are not alone in this, for many have entertained this same doubt. Again, it was not the degree of faith that saved the Israelite but upon what their faith rested – God’s sure word. Faith is acting on what God has said – taking Him at His word. Many, to their eternal loss place their faith in anything but God’s word. They set it upon the Church and its creed; upon good works and even patron saints so called. But in all such things, their faith finds no divine resting place. “Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher; all is vanity” (Ecc 12:8).

Finally, many stumble at the very threshold of salvation through pride. We all have it and we can all testify to some failing because of it. The afflicted Israelites had no option but to dismiss their pride and in humble obedient faith accept God’s gracious provision for salvation. “God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble” (Jas 4:6). It is better to accept Christ as Saviour now in humble faith, rather than to stand before Him as your Judge and hear His dire and very personal eternal judgment, “I never knew you: depart from me” (Matt 7:23). What joy and peace is available to all by obeying the God of all grace – who loved us and gave His Son for us. “Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else” (Isa 45:22).

“There is life for a look at the Crucified One,  
There is life at this moment for thee;  
Then look, sinner, look unto Him and be saved,  
Unto Him who was nailed to the tree” (A M Hull)