

QUANTOCK MINISTRIES

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*A Bible teaching and preaching ministry
for the Christian community*

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THE UPLIFTED SAVIOUR

John 3 v 14 – 18, Numbers 21 v 4 – 9. Part of the joy of having any deep relationship in life is a sharing of our thoughts and minds. Often that is what draws us close to someone else – they seem to think like us – and we become unsettled in that relationship whenever we do not know what the other person is thinking. This is certainly how it should be in our relationship with Jesus. As we walk with Him and talk with Him, we should have a great desire to understand how He is thinking (e.g., John 15 v 15, 16 v 14, 1 Corinthians 2 v 16). In His conversation with Nicodemus the Lord suddenly brings in a reference to an incident in the life of Moses (v14). Why? What was Jesus thinking about? In this study we are trying to get into His mind and heart and discover what deeper insights he was conveying to this experienced Jewish teacher.

1. The experience in the wilderness happened to the people of God.

The Israelites' wilderness journey is a wonderful illustration of the Christian's spiritual journey. The raised snake illustrates the raised Saviour as well and should certainly speak to the Christian's experience. The Israelites grumbled about the way, having to detour around Edom and the length of the journey from Egypt as a whole. While they were at it they also grumbled about the word, God's provision of sustenance, the heavenly manna, which speaks to us of the Bible. Whether we complain openly or not, we do sometimes grumble about God's way for our life (circumstances, etc) and His Word (which we are to believe, obey and defend). On the Christian way we find it so easy to forget the great truth of Romans 8 v 28. Also many Christians would rather explain away great areas of the Bible when confronted by the philosophy of the age, instead of accepting and believing the truth of the Word by faith: e.g., a six-day creation a few thousand years ago; the universal flood; God's permanent covenant with the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; the necessity for the new birth; the Rapture of the Church and the reality of the forthcoming reign of Jesus on earth in Jerusalem on David's throne; the eternal destiny of the human spirit in Heaven or hell; the uniqueness and necessity of the Christian Gospel; etc.

2. Jesus was also thinking of the entire human condition.

Jesus upped the symbolism of the raised snake from the Old Testament people of God in particular to the whole world in general. In verse 16, which we rush to reach when we read this passage, we clearly read that the work of the uplifted Saviour is applicable for all – available to all and effective for those who believe. The sad truth is that unregenerate mankind shows no inclination to follow God's way or believe His Word. It's not a question of people not believing in God but not wanting to believe in God. Alternatively, people are happy to believe in anything rather than in the one true God revealed in the Bible.

3. The reality of the bite of Satan.

The bite of the snakes was the cause of the people's distress. The symbolism in the mind of Jesus was clear; we all suffer from the bite of Satan. While basically this means we are all subject to original sin, we all go on to be affected by satanic attack as he places the schemes of false belief into people's minds and cause them to be under the influences of his evil spirits and demonic powers (Ephesians 6 v 11 – 12). These "bites" then go on to destroy human lives and societies. As the Lord's thought also includes the effect on God's people, He is pointing out that Christians are not immune from satanic attack and oppression. I do not believe Christians can be possessed by evil spirits, but I

certainly accept that we can be oppressed by them, especially if we neglect the work of the Holy Spirit within us, thereby losing our moral and spiritual discipline.

4. The parallel symbolism of the uplifted snake

In the Old Testament story God used the very cause of the peoples' distress, the snakes, as a symbol of their deliverance. It would have been very understandable for God to have removed the snakes in the same way he allowed them to arrive – just by His command. However, as part of their deliverance they had to look clearly at the symbolic cause of their distress. On the cross Jesus became the very embodiment of our lost condition by being “made sin for us”, bearing our sin visibly and vicariously. When we look at the crucified Saviour, we have to look very forcefully at the punishment we deserve for our sin being borne by another, and it is not a pretty sight. By the eyes of faith, we can see the total love that has placed Jesus in that position (John 15 v 13).

5. Both the snake and Jesus were lifted up between earth and heaven, for all to see.

- a) While the snake was a reminder of the peoples' pain, Jesus' extreme agony upon the cross very visibly shows us the fullness of agony that (our) sin causes. Just in case we are ever inclined to forget this important aspect of the uplifted Saviour, He gently asked us to remember that visible agony by taking bread and wine when we meet together, in memory of His broken body and poured-out blood, the price He paid for our salvation.
- b) Both the wilderness snake and the Lord on the cross were the provision of a gracious God, raised for all to see that a remedy has been provided. “For God so loved the world!” In 2 Corinthians 5 v 19 we are reminded that it was the Father, in Christ, who planned a reconciliation, which means anyone may look and live. This is a glorious reality that no other faith or philosophy can provide.
- c) The exaltation of Jesus continued after His death and resurrection. The cross was the first stage in the uplifting of Jesus and Ephesians 1 v 19b – 21 tells us that that uplifting continued through His resurrection and ascension to the highest place, where He remains forever. One day everyone will see Him there and will bow and acknowledge His total Lordship – Philippians 2 v 9 – 11.

6. In both instances the essential response is faith.

Once the people of God, travelling through the wilderness and grumbling as they went, were bitten in punishment they could only avoid death and be healed by an act of faith demonstrated by looking at the bronze snake on the pole. That act of faith was necessary as it showed that repentance was real. If God had just miraculously removed the snakes, there would have been no proof of any personal change of heart at all. Similarly, humans throughout the Church age must show by faith that they want to be cured of sin and its effects and have a full relationship with God. They can do this by believing in the uplifted Lord Jesus and thereby demonstrating their true repentance. For the Christian who may have lost the sense of closeness with the Lord by their grumbling unbelief this may mean coming again to the foot of the cross in repentance and supplication. They will not have lost their salvation but through repentance they will receive a sense of restoration, reassurance, and renewal of the blessings of their salvation.

7. The snake on the pole, and the Saviour on the cross, bring forgiveness.

For those on the wilderness journey the healing brought forgiveness but it could never remove the memory of their unbelief. The fuller reality of Jesus on the cross, however, brings complete atonement – we can have eternal peace with God. We call Him Father and are fully His children. This involves all the blessings of being in His family - forgiveness, justification, redemption, adoption, the indwelling Holy Spirit for sanctification and gifting, eternal life. What is more, God promises that he will remember our sins no more, so we can forget them too, and certainly forget the sins of fellow Christians (Romans 8 v 1).