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## THE SNAKE ON THE POLE

Please open your Bibles to John 3:14-15: **And as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, even so the Son of man must be lifted up that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life.**

In this passage the Lord Jesus Christ was speaking to Nicodemus. Prior to this he had said to Nicodemus, "You must be born again," and Nicodemus said, "... but how can one be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother's womb?" And Jesus said, "Unless you are born of the water and of the spirit you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven." And then as Jesus went on discussing this new birth with Nicodemus, he came to the words of our text. "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, even so the Son of man must be lifted up." Here is one of the greatest comparisons to be found anywhere in the Word of God.

There used to be a great aeronautical factory near Tulsa, Oklahoma, called Douglas Aircraft. During World War II, airplanes were manufactured at Douglas Aircraft, and they literally went all over the world fighting for freedom. Because of the critical importance of this airplane factory there were three letters that were used each day as a daily reminder to each worker in this great plane building plant. These letters were stamped on the walls and placed in conspicuous places throughout that great plane building manufacturing plant. The letters were "NVO" - and they meant, No Verbal Orders. Each worker had to have on his person written instructions from headquarters before beginning the day's work. Espionage was serious in those days, and because they were afraid of giving away a military secret to the enemy it was constantly emphasized that there were to be no verbal orders.

### **The Bible Contains our Written Orders for Salvation**

What a glorious day it would be if all people everywhere were to look to Almighty God through his holy word, the Bible, for our instructions for salvation. Our headquarters are still located in heaven. God tells us in written form, so that there can be no misunderstanding what we must do in order to get to heaven. Back in the Old Testament, in Numbers, Chapter 21, the passage to which Jesus referred when he made this comparison in John, Chapter 3, we read how Moses made a serpent of brass as God directed. He hung this serpent of brass on a pole in the center of the camp and then announced to the people that if they had been bitten by the fiery serpent they could come and look up to the brazen serpent and find healing from their snakebites. Jesus used that story from Numbers 21, to illustrate his own vicarious death on the cross of Calvary, in order that our sins might be forgiven. As so Christ spoke the words of our text, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of man must be lifted up."

The verbal orders of some men are to only believe. The verbal orders of others are to kneel in front of your TV and touch the set and you'll be saved. We're familiar with these verbal orders of men that are so confusing throughout the denominational world. **But the clear, written words of Jesus Christ, found recorded right here in the Word of God, state clearly that we must hear the Word of God, believe with all of our hearts, repent of our sins, publicly confess Jesus' name, obey Him in Christian baptism, and live the Christian life.** There can be no misunderstanding of what God expects us to do.

Tonight as we examine this very important passage of scripture spoken by our Lord Jesus Christ, I want us to make four observations.

**I. Observation #1: The brazen serpent in the wilderness was lifted up on the pole because men and women were in mortal peril.**

I'm sure that you remember how this all happened. The children of Israel were slaves in Egypt because they knew Pharaoh had arisen who did not remember Joseph and his brothers. This new Pharaoh made the life of the Israelites very terrible. They had to toil hard, living the life of slavery - making bricks out of mud. And because their life was so terrible, the children of Israel prayed to God for deliverance. In time God answered their prayers and sent Moses who stood before mighty Pharaoh and pleaded, "Let my people go." Pharaoh would not - he hardened his heart. You remember that God sent 10 miraculous plagues upon the Egyptians in order to bring about their deliverance. First he turned all the water into blood. This was a terrible plague because the Egyptians had no water to drink. But when the plague was removed, Pharaoh hardened his heart. So one after another these plagues came upon the Egyptians. There was the plague of frogs, the plague of locusts, the plague of flies, the plague of lice, the plague when all of the cattle died, the plague of rain, hail, thunder, fire and darkness - and finally the most terrible plague of all and that was the death of the first born. Every family in Egypt lost their first-born child. Only then did Pharaoh summon Moses and say, "Take the people and leave immediately." And so the children left Egypt, very conscious of the fact that God had delivered them miraculously.

As they started on their journey to the promised land they were aware of God's presence by day and by night. There was a pillar of cloud in the sky by day leading them, and a pillar of fire in the sky by night making them aware of God's presence constantly. They came to the waters of the Red Sea and there was no way to cross. When they looked back, here came Pharaoh with the Egyptian army and they started crying, "Oh, why did we ever leave Egypt to perish here by the waters of the Red Sea?" But Moses stretched out his rod and said, "See the salvation of the Lord." And God miraculously divided the waters of the sea and they walked across on dry land. When Pharaoh and his army attempted to follow God released those walls of water and the entire Egyptian army perished in the sea. It was wonderful what God did for them. But as they journeyed on toward the promised land, they became thirsty and they complained again. But God gave them water out of a rock. Then they were hungry but God miraculously fed them with angels' food from heaven, called "manna."

After all of these mighty miracles; after God had delivered them and led them, fed them and given them water to drink, you would have thought that the people would have trusted God. But they did not. They continued to complain, argue, and backslide. So the Lord decided to test their faith. He sent fiery snakes into their camp. These fiery snakes crawled about the people. The bite of the fiery snake was deadly poison. Once again, they came to Moses, crying, "Oh, Moses, pray for us, pray for us." So Moses prayed for the people and God answered the prayer of Moses by saying, "Make a serpent of brass; hang it on a pole in the center of the camp and announce to the people that anyone who has been bitten by a fiery serpent may come and look up to the brazen serpent and be healed" - just like that. So the salvation that God provided these people came in an hour of mortal peril when they were dying from the poisonous snake bites.

Times have not changed very much, have they? Today, in 2006, we are living in an hour of mortal peril. I do not have enough words to describe how critical and serious these days are in which we are living. The devil is roaming about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Did you realize that here in the U.S., we have thousands upon thousands of murders that are being committed each year. We are plagued with more than 20,000 suicides here in the U.S. There are more than 100 serious, physical assaults occurring for every 100,000 of our population.

General Omar Bradley has written, "All humanity is in danger of being trapped in this world by its hellish moral adolescence. Our knowledge of science has already clearly outstripped our capacity to control it. We have far too many men of science and too few men of God. Man is stumbling blindly through black spiritual darkness while toying with the precarious balance of life and death. The world has achieved brilliance without real wisdom, without conscience. We know more about war than we do about peace. We know more about killing than we do about living. Our ears and eyes are flooded with violence by way of the movie screen, the TV, the radio, the slick magazines and the news press. This is our 20th century claim to distinction and to progress. "

But dear friends, in this hour of mortal peril, I have good news for you. And the good news is that God sent his son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to die upon the cross of Calvary to save us from our sins; and we can freely come to Jesus and look up to Him for our salvation. Thank God for that!

#### A Poisonous Snake Bite

In St. Louis, Missouri, there is located one of the world's greatest zoological gardens. I'm sure that many of you at one time or another have visited the St. Louis Zoo. There was a keeper of the reptiles at the St. Louis Zoological Garden, who used to go out and drink on his night off. One night he really got into serious trouble. He was downtown in St. Louis, going from bar to bar, and on this particular night in his drunken stupor he got to thinking about the snakes in the reptile pit and how he took care of them there at the zoo. He began to brag to drinking companions. In his twisted alcoholic brain, he was remembering a snake charmer who had visited St. Louis a few days before, and this snake charmer had performed many wonderful tricks with the reptiles. Now in his drunken state he imagined himself capable of handling the snakes. So he started bragging to his drinking companions that he was going to go out to the zoo and handle the snakes, and he invited them to come and witness it. His drinking buddies were just as bad off as he was, but they did have enough sense left to try to talk him out of it. They said, "Man, you're drunk; you don't know what you're saying - you're going to kill yourself."

But Mr. Gerling would pay no attention to his drinking buddies. He called for a taxi and a couple of the fellows went along with him to try to stop him. He directed the taxi right out to the zoo. And because he was the keeper of the reptile pit, he had the key to get in. So they went inside and he unlocked the door leading directly to the snake pit. His friends continued to plead with him not to do it. But he walked right in fearlessly among the reptiles and reached down on the floor and got hold of the big Morocco snake, which he immediately wrapped around his neck like it was a rope. He walked around bragging, "You see, I'm not afraid; I can handle the snakes like that man who was here last week." And then, to show more bravery, he grabbed that big Morocco snake by the tail and he whirled it around his head like you would a lasso and threw it down on the floor. Now he reached down and picked up another snake, not noticing that this one was a deadly Cobra. He unbuttoned his shirt and he stuffed that Cobra inside his shirt where it nestled against the warmth of his body.

All of the snakes were cold and stiff in the chilly, damp night air that prevailed that night in St. Louis. But as this cobra snake nestled against his body, it began to warm up and revive, while Gerling was parading around, bragging about how brave he was. After awhile he reached inside his shirt to get hold of the cobra, intending to whirl it around his head as he had done the Morocco snake, but when he pulled the cobra out, it had revived enough that it immediately struck him in the side of the head, right next to his temple. A tiny little trickle of blood started down the side of his face. Gerling had been sobered now by that accident, and he started crying now to his friends, "Call an ambulance; get me to the hospital, quickly!"

Perhaps you remember that the Barnes Memorial Hospital is directly across the street from the St. Louis Zoo. So his friends were able to summon an ambulance which came and took him immediately to emergency where the doctors started trying to save his life. But in just a little while the poison spread and he became blinded by the effects of the poison. The doctors

continued to work on him trying to save his life, but the poison spread to his ears and he became deaf. Still they tried to save him, but the poison spread to his throat and began to choke off the air. So he was gasping and frantically trying to breathe. They say that within one hour and a half - that's all it took - Gerling was a dead man.

#### The Devil Bites like a Snake

That's exactly the way the devil works. As the devil bites us with sin, something happens to the unsaved sinner's eyes. He does not have his eyes focused upon Jesus. He does not see the vision of eternal life - the home in heaven. He is spiritually blind by the effects of the bite of sin. As the devil continues to bite mankind with sin, something happens to the unsaved sinner's ears and he will not listen to gospel preaching; he will not hear the Word of God; he will not heed his Christian neighbors or loving friends who speak to him. He is spiritually deaf. As the devil continues to bite with sin, something happens to the unsaved sinner's voice. It will be heard swearing and taking God's name in vain, and repeating filthy, vulgar, vile stories. And the end result of the devil's bite of sin is death in hell. Do you wonder, then, that I stand before you this evening and say, "Thank God that Jesus has been lifted up on the cross of Calvary" because this is truly an hour of mortal peril.

#### II. The Second Observations is that God set no limit to the stage of poisoning.

And thus, a man just bitten by the fiery serpent could run to the center of the camp and look up at the brazen serpent and be healed immediately. Here was a man bitten by a fiery serpent; he had delayed; the poison had spread through his body. He was gasping for air and could only crawl. But if he had enough strength left to crawl to the center of the camp he could look up and he, too, could be saved instantly, for there was life in a look. And thus it came to pass that old men and young men, old women and young women, children, boys and girls of all ages, were saved when they believed God's word and looked up at the serpent of brass. Thank God, the same thing is still true today. God has not set any limit to the stage of poisoning.

There are some whose sins are as scarlet, but they can be as white as snow. Jesus Christ has promised that him that cometh unto me, I will in no wise cast out. And again Jesus has promised that he that believeth and is baptized shall be saved. Murderers can be saved; liars can be saved; thieves can be saved. Every kind of sin that you can name can be forgiven if people will believe and obey the Word of God.

But there is a statement in that story in Numbers, Chapter 21, that intrigues me. The statement is made: "**Much people of Israel died.**" I have pondered that nearly all of my life. Much people of Israel died. I keep asking myself, "Why did so many people die when it was so easy to be saved?" The Bible doesn't tell us why much people of Israel died, so we are left to use our own imagination. Now I imagine that they died for the very same reasons that people today will die outside of Christ and go to hell. I imagine that many people among the Israelites died because of unbelief. When Moses erected this brazen serpent at God's command, and he began to preach to the people, "Look up at the serpent of brass and you will live; this is what God said." I can imagine that there were Israelites who said, "I don't believe it; that's silly. I'm not going to do it; it's not necessary." And if there were those who did not believe, they died. There was NO other way to be saved from the snake bite except to believe the word of God; and that holds true today.

When the word of God is faithfully proclaimed directly out of the Bible there are always people who say, "Well, I don't believe it; no, it's not necessary to do that. I'm not going to do that at all." And if we don't believe, we are going to be lost.

The Bible says in Hebrews 11:6 Without faith it is impossible to please Him for he that cometh to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him. There is absolutely no way to be saved without faith. In John 3:18, Jesus said, He that believeth on his 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. We absolutely cannot be saved if we refuse to believe.



**I imagine there were other Israelites who died because they did not trust God's plan for salvation.** God's plan for salvation for these Israelites was in the form of a serpent of brass that hung on a pole in the center of the camp. And when God had Moses put that serpent of brass there on the pole and preach to the people, "Look up and be healed," I can imagine there were many who said, "Why, that's silly; I'm not going to do it. It's not necessary at all. Grandpa taught me how to doctor snake bites 50 years ago. Why, anybody knows that when the snake bites you, you've got to take a sharp stone and cut an "x" mark on the spot where the snake has bitten and suck the poison out and spit it on the ground. That's Grandpa's remedy; I will follow Grandpa's remedy and be saved." And what happened? Grandpa's remedy did not work on these snake bites. Only God's remedy would save the people. And so those who refused God's remedy - the brazen serpent - and tried Grandpa's remedy - they died. The same thing happens today when the Word of God is declared - God's simple plan of salvation found right here in the scriptures.

There are always people who say, "Why, you don't have to do that; Grandpa was a good man. If anybody ever went to heaven it was Grandpa. And Grandpa was never baptized. Grandpa wasn't a member of the church, and I know that Grandpa was saved. So I'm going to just be good like Grandpa was; I'm going to follow Grandpa's way and I'll get to heaven like Grandpa did. Well, my friends, if that's what you want to do, you are a free moral agent; you can make your own decision. You can follow Grandpa if you want to. But it's going to be mighty shocking on the judgment day because Grandpa can't take anybody to heaven. There's only one who can take us to heaven and that's the Lord Jesus Christ. And Christ has ONE plan of salvation and man's plan of salvation is not going to get the job done.

**I imagine that there were other Israelites who died because they were procrastinators.** I can imagine how some were bitten by a fiery serpent and they heard Moses preach God's plan for salvation, "Go and look up at the brazen serpent," but they were busy. They said, "I'll do it one of these days, when I get time - when I get around to it - when I make up my mind, well I will go and look. But they postponed it and the poison spread, and suddenly it was too late. They died even while they were planning to be saved. I think that pretty well describes most people in America today. You hardly ever find anybody here in the U.S. who professes to be an atheist.

Most everyone we meet claims to believe in God and to believe in the Bible, and to believe that Jesus is the Son of God, but they WILL NOT make a commitment. They say that one of these days they will, sometime, when they feel like it, when they get around to it. Preacher, I'm going to surprise you, one of these days and you will see me coming down the aisle. But death comes and catches them unprepared, so they die and lose their soul in hell. Much people of Israel died.

That's what the Bible says. How tragic! They died when it was so easy to be saved. They died unnecessarily. Today the same thing is happening - men and women, boys and girls dying without Christ, losing their souls when it not necessary at all. Oh how we should thank God that his invitation includes everyone - whosoever will may come.

### **III. Now the third observation that I want to make is simply this: God offered one remedy to the Israelites.**

There was one brazen serpent hanging on one pole in the center of the camp. Everybody had to come to that one. If God had wanted to do so, he could have appointed the priests, and he could have said, "Moses, make 500 brazen serpents and give them to the priests and let them walk throughout the came and announce to the people that one serpent is just as good as another; take your choice - just look at anyone you choose, it's OK." God could have done it that way, but he didn't. God appointed Moses to make ONE brazen serpent. And what does that remind you of? It reminds me of what Jesus said in John 3:16 God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. There is one Savior - Jesus Christ - just like there was one brazen serpent. It also reminds me of the fact that Jesus established one church there in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. And the one church that Jesus established is the only one that I'm interested in. I'm not interested in joining some denomination; I'm not interested in following Buddha and being a Buddhist. I'm not interested in following Confucius; I'm not interested in following Mohammad - these men are dead and we can

even point to their graves. I'm interested in following the one who lives - Jesus Christ the Son of God. We can also visit his grave, but there's one big difference. The body of Jesus is not there. Jesus conquered death. He lives and because He lives we can also live forever.

Jesus said, upon this rock I will build my church. I want to belong to the church that Jesus built. His own body, because the scriptures tell me that when Jesus comes back again He is coming for his church. That's why I'm not interested in joining any manmade denomination. This is the thing that attracted me to the Church of Christ back when I was a member of a denomination. I found the Church of Christ that was not claiming to belong to any denomination; that was not a denominational name - the church that wore the name of Christ - the church that looked to Jesus as the head and the foundation. It was the church that looked to the words of Jesus for our instructions that we might find life eternal. And so I left denominationalism and I have been glad to simply be an undenominational member of Christ's church and this is the church that I'm working for and this is the church that I try to call people's attention to because it is not man made.

**We come to this question: How could looking at a twisted piece of brass hanging on a pole save anybody?** That's a good question. Well, did it save anybody? Of course not. God saved the people. Who did God save? He saved those who believed and obeyed Him. The brazen serpent that hung on the pole was the test of faith. If the people really had faith in God then they were willing to do what God commanded, which was to look up at the brazen serpent. But that doesn't mean the brazen serpent saved them - No. God saved them. The power of God took away the poison of the snakebite.

Apply that same question. It's always asked the same way today. How can being baptized wash your sins away? You mean to tell me that the water washes your sins away? Well of course not! The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from our sin, so says the scriptures. But how do we contact the blood of Christ? You see it is not the water of baptism that washes away our sins. The blood of Jesus washes away our sins. Baptism is the test of faith. If you really believe God and his holy word, the Bible, then you will be baptized because Jesus commanded it. And it is a command with a promise. Jesus commanded and promised, in Mark 16:16 He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved. Now that doesn't mean the water saves you. Jesus saves you, because you have obeyed his word. In Acts 2:38, the scriptures say Repent and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

**We are promised that our sins will be washed away when we are baptized. That doesn't mean the water washes away our sins; it means we have contacted the blood of Jesus Christ who cleanses us from all unrighteousness. And we contact the blood when we are baptized in the water. Now if there is any doubt at all about this, I want you to read 1st John, Chapter 5, beginning with verse 5. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God. This is the one who came by water and blood. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the spirit who testifies because the spirit is the truth. So there are three that testify: the spirit, the water, and the blood. And these three are in agreement. So you see, dear friends, Jesus has commanded us in Matthew 28:19 to be baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. These three are one. We are baptized in the water in order that we might contact the blood and receive the Holy Spirit. And these three are one. It's so beautiful when we just follow what's written in the Bible. And then we can know that we are saved.**

**IV. The fourth and final observation that I made this evening is this: A personal application was required.**

Nothing that anybody else could do for the individual would suffice. God said, It shall come to pass that when one has been bitten by a fiery serpent, if he looks up at the serpent of brass he shall live. I can imagine a little 12 year-old boy, having been bitten by a fiery serpent. I see his

mother leading him by the hand to the center of the camp and as they walk along I hear the mother urgently telling her son, "Oh my son, it's terrible that you've been bitten by this horrible serpent. You are going to die my son unless you believe the word of God. My son, God has instructed Moses, our earthly leader, to make a serpent of brass and he has hung it on a pole in the center of the camp. When we get there my son, I plead with you to obey the word of God and look up and live. I'm sure that every parent taught their children and led their children, and tried to persuade their children to obey, but the fact remains that each child had his own mind. When they reached the center of the camp that boy could look up and live or he could refuse to look and die. Not even a mother's prayer would save him. Each individual had to act upon their own faith, and the same thing is true today. The Bible says save yourselves from this untoward generation.

It is up to you to make your own decision. As badly as we would like to see every husband and every wife in the church together, the husband cannot decide for the wife and the wife cannot decide for the husband. And the parents cannot decide for the children and the children cannot decide for the parents. It is a personal decision.

I have often had the privilege of going to India to preach the Gospel of Christ. The vast majority of the people in India are Hindus, which means they are idol worshippers. They worship as many as 33 million different gods. I was in the village of Tirupathi, in South India, preaching. When I first entered the village the preacher of the church in that village, whose name is Robert Babedoss, introduced me to a handsome little boy who stood there by the roadside and the little boy stood there ... just like a cobra snake all flared out ready to strike. This is the most serious danger that there is in India on a daily basis - that of being bitten by a cobra. When you're bitten by a cobra snake you have 30 minutes to live. Consequently most people don't make it because it takes longer than that to get to the hospital, so most people die. This little boy stood there and Brother Davedoss said, "**Reggie, I want you to meet the little cobra boy.**" Well, I was fascinated to see this little boy standing there like that, so I went over to him and shook hands. Then I noticed that his hand was frozen in this position, and I realized that he was a cripple.

I said to the little cobra boy, "What happened to you?" He said, "Oh, I was bitten by a cobra snake." Then Robert Davedoss explained to me what had happened. The cobra bit the little boy in two places (on the back of his hand and arm) and the poison drew his arm back. Where he was bitten the flesh joined to the muscle, and in the second place he was bitten the flesh joined to his shoulder. His arm was literally and completely frozen and locked in this position, so that he looked just like a cobra snake ready to bite you. So he was called, "the little cobra boy."

My heart went out to this handsome little boy and I said to him, "Son, would you like to go to the Christian Hospital at Madrapakkum? We have a Christian doctor there; his hospital is sponsored by the Church of Christ, and I could take you there and the doctor would cut your arm and with therapy it could be restored and you could be normal again. Would you be willing to go there and have the surgery?" Oh, the little boy smiled, and he was so excited. "Yes, yes" he said. "I'm willing, I want to go." So I made the trip to Madrapakkum and I spoke with the surgeon and explained the predicament of the little cobra boy, asking him if it was possible for him to perform the surgery. He said, "Yes." I asked him, "Would you do it?" He said, "certainly." I asked him what the charges would be and he said there was of course no charge because his hospital is sponsored by the Church of Christ. He said bring the little boy and he would be glad to do it.

I was SO happy and I proceeded back to the village and told the preacher, Brother Davedoss, and together we went around looking for this little cobra boy. When we found him, his head was hanging down. When he saw us coming his eyes filled with tears. I said, "Little cobra boy, I have good news for you. The doctor at Madrapakkum says that he can perform the surgery and he can restore your arm."

The little cobra boy explained that his parents were Hindus and that they had forbidden him to have the surgery. I asked the boy to show us his home. So we followed him to the place where he lived. I introduced myself to the mother and father and explained to them carefully what we were willing to do for their child. The father became abusive and insulting, and ordered me off the

property as he said, "We are Hindus; we worship the cobra. The cobra is our god. Our god bit our son and put him in that position and he is not going to have any surgery." So the little boy is condemned by his idol-worshipping parents to the life of being a cripple because of their foolish belief. I'm sure that all of you agree with me that it is very, very foolish to worship the cobra snake.

But my friends, as sad and foolish as that is, I can tell you something equally sad and equally foolish, or even more sad and foolish than that. And that's for people who believe the Bible is true; who believe in God and that Jesus is the Son of God, and then foolishly refuse to obey and be saved. That is the most foolish thing of all. And therefore we are inviting you tonight to show wisdom. We're inviting you tonight to do the right thing and that is to come to Christ. Believe upon Him; accept Him as your personal Savior. Obey Him by publicly confessing his name. The water is prepared; obey Him in baptism right now and Jesus will forgive all of your sins and He will give you life eternal.

Shall we pray:

Our Father in Heaven, how we thank you for your love and for the gift of your Son, Jesus, whom to know is life eternal. Dear God, we pray for every man, woman, boy or girl in this congregation who is not a Christian and we pray that right now they will make up their minds and show great wisdom by deciding to come right now to do what Jesus has asked each one of us to do, so that they might be saved. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen

(Invitation hymn - Just As I Am)