"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.

WE are told that all languages are based upon figures, that the speech of men who are uncivilized is mainly composed of figures; and that the language became civilized, to a natural foundation, based upon a set of metaphors perceived by the mind, and then used in language.

In spiritual language as it is in natural speech Nicodemus was a novice: when Jesus Christ would speak to him concerning things of the kingdom, he did not talk to him in heavenly words, but he gave him metaphorical words whereby he might understand the essence of the thing better than by giving him a mere abstract term.

John 3:3 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.

Joh 3:4 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?

He did not talk anything to him about the great change of the heart; but he said, "Except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Joh 3:5 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.

When he talked to Nicodemus, he did not say anything about sanctification; but he said,

"Except a man be born of water."

John 3:6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

John 3:7 Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again.

He would not tell him much about the Spirit when he began, but he said "The wind bloweth where it listeth."

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.

And when he wanted to teach him faith he did not begin by saying, "By faith we are allied to Christ, and derive salvation from our living head;" but he said--;"Like as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness." And so the first religious talk of converted men must always be in figures. Not the epistles of Paul, which are mostly doctrinal, but the words of Jesus, must first be applied to the sinner, before he is enlightened by the Holy Spirit, and understands the mysteries of the kingdom. And I believe I have hit upon the reason why our Master used this figure, and talked to Nicodemus with metaphor after metaphor, and figure after figure, because the root of all language must be in figures.

John 3:14 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.  


The simple subject of faith in the Lord Jesus, whereby men are saved.

Instead of addressing them in a doctrinal manner, I shall adopt the parable the text, and try to make faith plain.

1. The people in the wilderness*—*Representatives of men who are sinners

MEN IN THE ESTATE OF SIN

1. The brazen serpent*—*the type of Jesus Christ crucified.
   1. What was to be *done with the brazen serpent*—it was to be lifted up; and so was Christ to be lifted up.
   2. what was to be *done by the people who were bitten*—they were to look at the serpent; and so sinners must believe in Christ.
2. Our first figure represents MEN IN THE ESTATE OF SIN; and the figure is borrowed from the children of Israel in the wilderness, when they were bit by fiery serpents

Moses had taught them the use of the bow, as it is written in the book of Jasher, but these were a thing, which the arrow could not prevail. They had endured weariness, and thirst and hunger; the sun had sometimes smitten them by day, and the frost by night, and but for God's preservation, the hardships of the wilderness would have cut them off. All these things they endured and were tested by them; but these fiery serpents were terrorizing; and all new terrors are terrible from their unknown.

Their terror spread like wildfire through the camp, and the rumour had spread the serpents were devouring them?

The condition of the mass of men today is just like the condition of the children of Israel when they were bitten by the serpents.  
II. And now comes THE REMEDY. The remedy of the bitten Israelites was a brazen serpent; and the remedy for sinners is Christ crucified.

But some will have it that the preaching of the cross not only cannot save, but will increase the evil. Old physicians tell us that brass was the most likely thing in the world to make people die the quicker; the sight of anything that is bright would have the effect of making the poison yet more strong in its effects, so that it would be death at once to look upon brass. And yet strange to say, to look at the brazen serpent saved them. "Now," says the infidel, "I cannot see how men are to be saved from sin by the preaching of Christ." "Truly, sir," he says, "you go and tell men that though they have sinned never so much, if they do but believe, their sins shall all be washed away! Why they will take advantage of that, and they will be more wicked than ever they were. You tell men that their good works are of no avail whatever, that they must rest on Christ alone!" "Why," says the sceptic, "my dear fellow, it will be the destruction of all morality; instead of a cure, it will be a death. Why preach it?" Ah, the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us who are saved, it is Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God. I cannot, myself, but admit, that at first sight the brazen serpent seems to be the most absurd invention, in itself, for curing those who were bitten, that ever mind of man could have invented; and yet I see in the brazen serpent, when I come to study it, the highest wisdom that even God himself could develop. I grant you that the cross of Christ also does in its outward appearance seem to be the simplicity of simplicities; something which any one might have thought of, but which would have been beneath their thought. But when you come to study and understand the marvellous scheme of God's justice vindicated, and man pardoned through the atoning blood of the cross, I say, that not even the mighty intellect of God could have conceived a wiser plan, than the wisdom of God displayed in Christ Jesus crucified.  
But remember, that much as those who heard of the brazen serpent might have despised it, yet there was no other means of cure. And, now hear me for one moment, while I tell the whole story of salvation. Men, brethren, and fathers, we are born of a sinful generation, and we have ourselves increased our guilt, for us there is no hope; do what we may, we cannot save ourselves.

III. And now WHAT WAS TO BE DONE WITH THE BRAZEN SERPENT? The text says, "Moses lifted it up;" and we read he was to lift it up upon a pole.

Christ Jesus must be lifted up. He has been lifted up; wicked men lifted him up, when, with nails on an accursed tree, they crucified him!

God the Father hath lifted him up; for he hath highly exalted him, far above principalities and powers.

But the minister's business is to lift him up. There are some ministers who forget that their task in the world is to lift up Christ.

Suppose Moses, when God told him to lift up the brazen serpent, had said in himself, "It is becoming In me, before I lift it up, that I should give some explanatory remarks. And instead of lifting it up before the vulgar crowd, I will initiate a proved few, so that they may understand about it. I will arrange around this serpent a few golden cloths, I will garnish it with silver tapestry, so that it may not be looked upon by vulgar eyes, and I will endeavour to explain it to them." Now this is what many priestly persons in this age and in ages past have tried to do.

The gospel! oh, that must not be preached to the poor!

"The Bible," says the Church of Rome, "must not be read by the vulgar crowd!

How can they understand it? It is a thing too sacred for the common people to see! No,

Wrap up the brazen serpent; wrap it up in a cloth, do not let it be exhibited."

"No," say our Protestant ministers, many of them, "the Bible must he given, but we must alter the translation of it!" There are some passages in the present translation that are so dark, that no man can understand them without an explanation.

"But no," say the divines of this age, "we will not have the Bible translated properly, the people must always put up with a faulty translation. The brazen serpent must be wrapped up, because it would unsettle matters, Oh if we could have a new translation they say"

"No," say others, "we will have a new translation, some parts of the truth that ought not to be preached!" I am not now misrepresenting brethren in the ministry. I know they hold that some doctrines of God's Word ought not to be preached—every day at least. They say Election according to God’s Eternal Purpose is true; but they never mention it. They say Predestination according to God’s foreknowledge without interfering with man’s will is no doubt godly doctrine, but it ought to be kept from the people. It must be in their creed, or else they would not be sound; but in the pulpit it must not be mentioned at all.

"No," says the Church of Rome, "if we have a brazen serpent, we will put it in the shrine, where it cannot be always easily seen, and we will have the smoke of incense before it, so that it shall not be plainly discerned; the pomp, and ceremony, and trappings of formality, shall shield it from the vulgar gaze of the people; we will have it girded all round with a thousand ceremonies, which will abstract the gospel, and leave the people to be content with the ceremonies!"

Instead of preaching the simple gospel, give us only figures.

"Oh," they say, "what an elevating thing is a Gothic church; how it lifts the soul to heaven to sit in a place where there is a forest of Gothic pillars! oh, what a sweet influence a well played organ has on the mind!" They tell us there is a kind of heavenly influence poured forth from vestments when well worn; and that to see the priest discharge his functions in a holy and reverent manner, is a most excellent way of impressing souls. They will have us believe that holly at Christmas time is a most heavenly and spiritual thing. They teach us that our passions will be carried to heaven by these little sprigs of green; that putting out flowers now and then, has a most extraordinary influence in carrying away our souls to paradise; that burning candles in the daylight is just the most splendid way in all the world of showing forth the sun of righteousness!

Now, we do not fall in with their views.

We never can see how a man—who was a man—could ever sit down to such things. There is nothing in it but pure nonsense, and none of the gospel can be seen.

It is as if Aaron had filled his censer full of incense and waved it before the brazen serpent, and made a great smoke, so that the people could not see; and then poor little bent over Moses tarried behind and tried to look, but none of the poor souls could see because there was the smoke before them.

No, the only thing we have to do with Christ Jesus crucified is, just to lift him up and preach him.

Let each of us who are called to the solemn work of the ministry remember, that we are not called to lift up doctrines to the world until salvation through the cross is received, neither church governments, nor particular denominations; our business is to lift up Christ Jesus and to preach him fully. There may be times when church government is to be discussed, and peculiar doctrines are to be vindicated. God forbid that we should silence any part of truth: but the main work of the ministry—is its every day task, every day work—is just preaching Christ. and crying out to sinners, "Believe, believe, believe on him who is the Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world."  
IV. And now, dear friends, I have almost concluded; but I have come to that part of the discourse which needs most of power. WHAT WERE ISRAEL TO DO? What are convinced sinners to do? The Israelites were to look; the convinced sinner must believe. Do you picture Moses with his reverend head standing erect, and boldly crying out with all his might—" Look, look, look!" Do you see him, as with his right hand he grasps the pole, and lifts it up, and marches with it through the camp like a great standard-bearer, pointing with his finger, and speaking with hand, and eye, and lip, and foot, and every part of the body, as he passionately bids poor bitten Israel to look? You can, perhaps, conceive the scene as men roll over one another, and the dying and almost dead behold the brazen serpent. and begin to live. Now note, there may be some in the camp who would not look; they obstinately shut their eyes, and when the pole was brought near them they would not look. Perhaps it was through unbelief; they said, "What was the use of it? it could do them no good!" There is the wretch, the pole is before him, and yet he will not look. Well what will become of him? Oh, the death-pangs are upon him; see how death is twitching him! How his flesh seems to writhe in agony! He has shut his eyes with all the force and passion he can command, lest they should be opened on that brazen serpent, and he should live I Ah! my hearer, and I have such an one here to-day. I have many here who will not come to Christ that they may be saved—men, who when the gospel is preached to them resist it, despise it, and reject it. Though the reception of the gospel be all of grace, yet the rejection of it is all of man. And I have some here who have often been touched in their con science; they have often been moved to believe, but they have been desperately set on mischief, and they would not come to Christ. Ah, sinner, thou little knowest how direful thy doom shall be. Thou mayest this day tell me thou dost not believe on the Saviour; thou mayest turn away thine ear from the warning, and say, "What need to make so great a noise about it? I would rather die than believe; for I do not think that Christ can save! What good is there in it?" Ah, sir, you may reject me; but remember there is a greater preacher than I am coming to you soon. He with a skeleton arm, and bony finger, and cold speech, he will freeze, and yet convince! It is one called Death! Look me in the face to-day; and tell me I preach you a lie—you can do that easily! Look death in the face to-morrow, and tell him that, and you will find it harder work. Ay, and if you have the fool-hardiness to do that, you will not look at the face of the Great Judge, when he shall sit upon the throne, and tell him that his gospel was not true; for affrighted and alarmed, you shall rush hither and thither to hide yourselves from the face of him that sitteth upon the throne. Perhaps there were some in the camp who said they would look by-and-by. "Oh," said they, "there is no need to look now; the venom has not yet worked its effects: we are not yet dead; a little longer!" And ere they uttered the last word they were stiff and clay-cold! How many do the same? They will not be religious yet; another day, another hour. They believe they can be pious when they like, which is a fallacy; and therefore they will postpone the matter as long as they may. How many have postponed the day of salvation, until the day of damnation has come, before they had repented! Oh, how' many have said, "A little sleep, a little folding of the hands!" and they have been like men on shipboard, when the ship was foundering, who would not escape while they might, but still tarried on deck; at last a sea swallowed them, and they went down alive into the depths. Take heed of procrastination; delays are dangerous, and some delays are damnable! Look hither, look hither to Christ bleeding on cross. Look now, for the Spirit saith, *"to-day:* if ye will hear his voice harden not your hearts as in the day of provocation."  
I doubt not, there were some there who tried physicians: "Look at the brazen serpent?" said they, "not we. Doctor, come hither, bring your balsam; can you not take the caustic and burn out this poison from my arm, and then pour in some cordial that will save me? Physician, have you no antidote that might cool my blood? Ah. I laugh at that brazen serpent; I will not look at it; I trust to your skill. O learned physician!" And how many now do the same? They say, "I will not believe in Christ; I will try and do better; I will reform myself, I will attend to all the ceremonies of the church. Can I not help myself, and so improve myself that I shall have no need of Jesus?" Ah, ye may try; ye may lay that flattering unction to your souls, and film the ulcerous wound, but all the while dark corruption shall sleep within, and shall at last break out in sore flames upon thee; when thou shalt have no time to attempt a cure, but shalt be swept away—not to the hospital of mercy, but like the leper, without the city, thou shalt be cast away from hope of blessedness.  
It may be there were some who were so busy looking at their sores, that they did not think of looking at the serpent. Poor creatures, they lay in their misery, and kept looking first at that wound on the foot, and then at that one on the hand; and crying over their sores, and never looked at the serpent. Scores and hundreds perish in that way. ' Oh," says the sinner, "I have been so sinful!" Man, what has that to do with it? Christ is all meritorious, look at him. "No, no," says another, "I cannot look at Christ. Oh, sir, you do not know what crimes I have committed; I have been a drunkard, I have been a swearer, I have been a whore-monger, or what not; how can I be saved!" My dear man, your wounds have nothing to do with it: it is just Christ on the cross. If any poor creature, bitten by the serpent, had said to me—" Now it is no good my looking there; see how often I have been bitten; there is a huge serpent twisting round my loins, there is another devouring my hand, how can I live?" I should say to him, "My dear fellow, do not take any notice whether you have got one serpent or fifty serpents, one bite or fifty bites; all you have to do is to look. You have nothing to do with these bites, except that you have to feel them, and perish by them unless you look. But just look straight to Christ." And now thou chief of sinners, believe in the Lord Jesus; and be thy sins never so many, he is able to save unto the uttermost, them that come unto God by him. And yet how many perish through those divers delusions, with the gospel before their very eyes, lifted up on the pole so plainly that we wonder they do not see it.  
And now I must tell you one or two sweet things for the encouragement of the poor sinner. Oh, you that are guilty this morning, and know that you are so, let me say to you, "Look to Christ." For remember the brazen serpent was lifted up, that every one in the camp who was bitten might live; and now Christ is lifted up to you, that "whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life." Sinner, the devil says you are shut out; tell him that "whosoever" shuts out none. Oh that precious word, "whosoever." Poor soul, I see thee clutch at it and say, "Then, Sir, if I believe, he will not cast me away." I see the harlot in all her guilt bemoaning her iniquity; she says it is impossible that Christ should save. But she hears it said, "Whosoever," and she looks and lives! Remember, it mattered not how old they were, nor how much bitten they were, nor whereabouts in the camp they lived; they did but look and live. And now ye that have grown grey in iniquity, whose hairs might rather be black than white, if they showed forth your character, for it has been blackened by years of vice. Remember there is the same Christ for big sinners as for little sinners; the same Christ for grey heads as for babes; the same Christ for poor as for rich; the same Christ for chimney sweeps as for monarchs; the same Christ for prostitutes as for saints: "Whosoever." I use broad words that I may take a broad range, and sweep the whole universe of sinners through—whosoever looketh to Christ shall live. And remember it does not say that if they looked but little they should not live. Perhaps there was some of them so bitten that their eyelids were swollen and they could scarcely see. Old Christopher Ness says, "There may have been some of them that had so little sight that they could but squint from one eye." Says he, in his strange language, "If they did but dart a little glance at the brazen serpent, they lived." And you who say you cannot believe; if God gives you only half a grain of faith, that will carry you to heaven. If you can only say, "O Lord, I would believe, help thou mine unbelief;" if you can but put out your hand with Simon Peter, and say, "Lord save, or I perish," it is enough. If you can only pray that poor publican's prayer—" God be merciful to me a sinner," that will do. And if you cannot sing with some of the old experienced saints—

"My name from the palms of his hands,  
Eternity cannot erase;

remember it is quite enough, if you can only sing—

"I can but perish if I go,  
I am resolved to try;  
For if I stay away, I know  
I must for ever die."

And now poor soul I have almost done. But I cannot let thee go. I see thee with the tear in thine eye; I hear thee confessing thy guilt, and bemoaning thy sin; I bid thee look to my Master and live. Be not afraid to try my Lord and Master. I know what thy bashfulness is; I have felt the same, and thought he never would save me. Come soul, thou art in secret now with thyself; for though there be thou sands around thee, thou thinkest I am speaking alone to thee. And so I am. My brother, my sister, you are weeping to-day on account of sin—look to Jesus. And for your encouragement note these three things. Note first that Jesus Christ was put on the cross on purpose for you to look at. The only reason why he died, was that poor sinners might look at him and be saved. Now, my dear brethren, if that was Christ's purpose in being hung on the tree, you need not think you may not do it. If God sends a river, and sends it for us to drink of, will you disappoint him in not drinking? No, rather you will say. "Did he design me to drink it? Then will I drink it." Now, Jesus hung on the cross on purpose to be looked at. Look at him, look at him, and live. Remember again for your encouragement, he asks you to look; he invites you to believe; he has sent his minister this day, even to command you to do it; he has said to me, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature; he that believeth and is baptized, shall be saved." Now I need not simply say that my Master's door is wide open for you; I will say something more: he has told me to ask you to come in. Wisdom crieth aloud, she uttereth her voice in the streets, she inviteth you; she saith, "My oxen and my fatlings are killed, all things are ready, come ye to the supper." Yea, my Master has given instructions to his Holy Spirit that if men will not come of themselves, he should compel them to come in that his house may be filled. Then, poor sinner, you must be welcome, he will have enough sinners to fill his table; and if he has made you feel your sinnership—come and welcome, sinner, come. And my last encouragement is this: Come to my Master and try him, because he promises to save you. The promises of Jesus Christ are all of them as good as oaths; they never fail. He says—"Whosoever believeth in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life." Now, if I had here a man who declared himself to be the vilest wretch on earth, I would say to him—Young man, I am very fond of proving the truthfulness of God's promises; now God says, if you believe you shall not perish. My dear friend, when a common sinner tries, and it does not fail, it is some proof of its truthful ness: but you are an extraordinary sinner. Now, thou extraordinary sinner, venture thyself on this promise; he says thou shalt not perish; come and try him. And remember, God must undeify himself, and cease to be true, before he can ever damn a sinner who has believed in Christ. Come risk it, thou who art so laden with sin that thou staggerest under thy burden; fall down on the simple promise, "He is able to save to the uttermost." Just cast thyself wholly on Christ, and if thou art not saved, God's book is a lie, and God himself has broken his truth. But that cannot be. Come thou and try it. "Whosoever believeth in Christ shall not perish, but have everlasting life."