

The brazen serpent

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[0 : 0 0] The book of Numbers and chapter 21. Numbers chapter 21. And reading from verse 4. Numbers 21 and reading from verse 4.

And they journeyed from Mount Hor, the Israelites, by the way of the Red Sea to compass the land of Eden. And the soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way.

And the people spoke against God and against Moses. Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no bread, neither is there any water, and thou sown loatheth this light bread.

And the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, and much people of Israel died. 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. And Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole.

[1 : 1 6] And it shall come to pass that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon, shall live. And in these words, Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole.

And it came to pass that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived. Numbers 21 and verse 9, Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it on a pole.

And it came to pass that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived. Now Jesus was obviously familiar with the book of Numbers.

It was part of his Bible. And his reference to it in John chapter 3, which we read together, his reference to this book of Numbers, was in response to the question of Nicodemus.

Where Nicodemus says, How can these things be? How can a man be saved? How can a man be born again? Can he go back into his mother's womb and be born? And so Jesus taught this doctor of the law by a figure of the law.

[2 : 3 0] He provided him with an object lesson from his own Bible, and out of the viper-ridden wilderness, through which the Israelites traveled in order to teach Nicodemus the way of salvation.

In effect, Jesus said to Nicodemus, Cast your mind back to what happened to your forefathers on their way to Canaan. When they were bitten by serpents in the wilderness, as your Bible tells you, what did they do?

Well, they looked on the brass serpent that Moses had lifted up on the pole at the command of God, and as many of them as looked, were healed.

As Moses, as Moses, even so, must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

Let us then look at this Old Testament incident, as it is interpreted for us in the New Testament, and by the Lord Jesus himself. For in it we see Jesus, and that's why we come to the house of God, that we would see no man save Jesus only.

[3 : 43] And here in this incident of the brazen serpent, we see Jesus. As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so, must the Son of Man be lifted up.

So the first thing to notice is this, the people in the wilderness. Let us notice the people in the wilderness. Well, the Israelites had been in the wilderness for a long time.

The years were passing, and at this point in time, they were getting very near the promised land. That was pretty obvious, that they hadn't learned very much from their journeys, or from their experiences.

As this incident shows, for the first thing we notice is this, that they were a guilty people. For the people in the wilderness, they were a guilty people. They were guilty of a particular sin, as this chapter indicates, and associated with their guilt, was their misery.

They were a miserable people. They were a dejected people. They were complaining. They were tired of the journey. They were sorry for themselves, and they were sorry at times that they had ever left Egypt.

[4 : 56] Now, one would have thought that they would have been the happiest people on earth. They were getting near the borders of the promised land. Well, certainly when they set out from the promised land, they were a happy people.

They were singing songs of expectation, marching to the promised land. They were singing the song of Moses at the Red Sea, which was followed by Miriam's song, when all the Hebrew women went after her, with the timbrels and with dances.

It was a time of great excitement, and great rejoicing and gladness. The land of Canaan was before them. But the years passed, and so did the timbrels, and the dances, and the rejoicing, and in came the mourning, and the criticism.

Criticism not only of Moses, that was bad enough, but also of the Lord himself. Why did you bring us out of Egypt? We don't get enough food and water, and our soul loathes this light breath.

Now, this was their sin. In this particular chapter, this was their sin. It wasn't just that they complained, and that they were miserable, and dejected, and sorry for themselves.

[6 : 13] That was bad enough, in view of all that God had done for them. But their sin was this, that they despised God's gift of manna.

Our soul loathes this light breath. They called the gift of manna light.

That is unsubstantial. Unsatisfying. Well, have they a right to? Of course not. They had no right to call it light.

Why not? Because, for example, in Psalm 78 and verse 25, we are told that the men in the wilderness, the people of the wilderness, eat angels' food.

Manna was angels' food. Why was it angels' food? Well, either because it was food fit for angels themselves, although angels didn't need it, or, and probably this is the, this is the main reason, that it was food that was sent by God with the angels.

[7 : 18] It was part of the angels' ministry to the Israelite people in the wilderness that they brought to them this food. But yet, they despised the gift of God, and they were critical of what God had given in his generosity.

They despised angels' food, this divine gift. And because of that, they were indeed guilty in the eyes of God. Well, now, doesn't history repeat itself?

How many people loathe today, in a sense, the manner of God's word? The wise, the wise people of this world, the super intelligent of this world, they see the manner, they see it as light, as unsubstantial, airy fairy, beneath contempt, and they tell us that if you accept this book, then you are committing intellectual suicide.

They want something other than the divine, and they want something more substantial than a divine revelation. That's on the one side.

And then, on the other, there are those who despise the word of God because it's too deep. It can't be understood, and therefore, they dismiss it as irrelevant because they can't understand it.

[8 : 44] Well, of course, it's deep. It has come to us from God, God, but it's deep only in parts, and there are many areas of the word of God that are as clear as they are nourishing to the soul of those who truly seek.

The internal evidence that the Bible is manna to the hungry soul is substantial. The whole of Psalm 119 is an example, an instance of this, internal evidence that shows the nourishment, the manna-like quality of the word of God.

And this internal evidence is supported by external evidence, the testimony of so many people down through so many ages who bear testimony that the word of God is sweeter than honey to the mouth.

Well, what a foolish thing it is to despise the word of God, for then we are despising its author, we are despising God himself. Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 4.8, He that despiseth, despiseth not man, but God.

And again, Paul says there in Romans 2, Do you then despise the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering? Are you critical of God's patience and of God's provision and gift?

[10 : 10] Well, that's what the people of the wilderness were guilty of. They were a guilty people. May we not follow on their footsteps. And because of that, the second thing is this, that they were a suffering people.

They were a suffering people. We are told here that verse 6, the Lord sent fiery or venomous serpents among the people and they bit the people and many people of Israel died.

Death by snakebite for despising God and his generosity. Now, we needn't go into the details, the physical details of death by snakebite, but we do need to make this point that it was a disaster for Israel at that particular time.

It wasn't just a death or two in the camp. Many died of snakebite. And the trouble is that there was, the trouble was that there was no human antidote available.

And even if it had been available, it would have been of no avail in this particular instance. For the people there in the wilderness were shut up to one antidote and to one only which was not human, but divine.

[11 : 34] So can't you picture the people there in the camp with their snakebite and with death all around them? Can't you see that their mourning, that their murmuring was turned into mourning?

That their criticism of God and his gift was turned into crying and their despising was turned into tears. And this was not due to an angel of death as in the case as in Egypt, but to many fiery serpents there in the wilderness.

And doesn't the Bible make it very clear to all of us who read it that the wages of sin is death. The sting and the bite of sin produces death, spiritual and if not dealt with, eternal.

James says that sin there's the serpent's bite sin when it is finished brings forth death.

And what took place in a physical way there in the wilderness outside of Canaan is taking place all the time in this wilderness of the world to so many to so many who are bitten and stung and brought down to spiritual death by the sting of death which is sin.

[13 : 00] well that's the first thing, the people in the wilderness. Now the second thing is to notice the provision in the wilderness. The provision in the wilderness.

If this incident before us tells us anything it tells us this that God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked. that God does not punish willingly.

And this great Bible truth is seen so vividly here in this Old Testament incident. Seen in the provision made.

Seen in the antidote prescribed. And there are two things I want to say about this provision and the first is that it was divinely ordered.

It was divinely ordered. The Lord said to Moses, verse 8, Make the fiery serpent and set it on a pole and it shall come to pass that every one that is bitten when he looketh upon it shall live.

[14 : 04] Make the fiery serpent, the venomous serpent, and set it on a pole. Now not even Moses could cope with the critical situation in the camp of Israel at that time.

He was out of his death. He didn't know what to do. And so the people confessed their sins and Moses took the whole matter to the Lord in prayer.

Moses, we are told, prayed to God. Well that's what we are to do when we're out of our debt, when we can't cope.

because prayer is our admission of helplessness. Prayer is a sign of our felt need. It's our spoken admission of our inability to cope.

And we are wise if we follow Moses. When we're out of our debt, when our world is crashing in upon us, when we have this problem and the other problem and so on, we take it to the Lord in prayer.

[15 : 10] We don't pray simply or only because we have difficulties and problems, but certainly that is a time for us to express our helplessness before God and to call in his divine aid.

And to such a prayer as an admission of helplessness, God comes with the answer as he came in the case of the Israelites before us here. Here God's answer was make a fiery serpent of brass.

A twisted piece of brass was divinely ordered. Brass twisted into the shape of a serpent was divinely prescribed.

It was ordained of God. Now what, when God ordains the remedy, he gives it potently.

when God ordains the remedy, that guarantees its efficacy. And because the remedy for our sin and death is from him and of him and by him, it cannot fail.

[16 : 26] The remedy for sin and death is guaranteed by its source, guaranteed by its point of origin. And my dear friends, God never orders a failure.

God never prescribes a mockery. God will never mock us with something that is ineffective and that cannot cope with our sin and death.

whatever God prescribes is bound to succeed. And for our sin and death, God has ordered and prescribed grace and truth.

And grace and truth come by Jesus Christ. And neither is there salvation in any other. Amen. So that's the first thing we notice then about the provision made in the wilderness.

It was divinely ordered, divinely prescribed. And the second thing is this, that it is exceedingly instructive. It is exceedingly instructive. Now we can be sure that the Israelites there in the wilderness did not fully understand the meaning of the serpent of brass on the pole.

[17 : 46] And yet they were not concerned with being instructed they had but one thing in their mind and that was to be healed of the deadly snake. And all that men and women in the bondage of sin and death had the same concern, to be delivered and to be healed.

And we all ought to have this concern because God has instructed us how we can be healed. as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness even so must the Son of Man be lifted up.

There is the place of our healing. There is God's method, the lifting up of the Son of Man on the cross of shame. Notice how instructive this Old Testament remedy is interpreted in the light of the New Testament.

You see the remedy was in the shape of a serpent, not a lamb, not a sheep ready for the slaughter. On the pole was a serpent.

In other words, the remedy was a replica of one of the very reptiles that caused all the trouble and that brought so much pain and death into the camp of Israel.

[19 : 09] The cure was in the form of that which brought the curse into the camp of Israel. And we are told in the New Testament that the Lord Jesus was made in the likeness of sinful flesh.

Just as the serpent on the pole was in the likeness of the serpent on the ground, Jesus was made in the likeness of sinful flesh. And more than that, Jesus there on the cross was made sin for us.

he who knew no sin. And he was made a curse for us, for cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree in order that we might be delivered from the sting and the curse of sin which brought death to us.

And as the serpents on the ground, as the serpents on the ground brought death to the people, so Jesus, the brazen serpent on the pole, by his death, has abolished death, and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

For as Moses lifted up the serpent of the wilderness, even so must the son of man be lifted up. Well, he has been lifted up. And the marvel of Jesus condescension is that he should be symbolized by a serpent.

[20 : 36] and that by his death, he would bruise the serpent's head. Jesus is the provision in the wilderness for us.

He is the healer, and only he has the remedy for the bondage of sin and death, the provision in the wilderness.

Now we come to the last thing and notice the promise in the wilderness. The promise in the wilderness. The promise is quite clear in verse 8.

It shall come to pass that everyone that is bitten when he looketh upon the serpent shall live. It shall come to pass.

This is a divine promise. The people had God word on it. And God's word is immutable and unauthorable and invariable.

[21 : 41] For all the promises of God are yes and amen in Christ Jesus. Now notice two things here regarding this promise in the wilderness. The first is this, that something had to be done by them, by those people bitten by the serpent.

Something had to be done by them. In other words, the promise was conditional. they had to look. Everyone who looked says the promise and who has been bitten shall live.

Something had to be done by them. They had to look. Now notice this, that Moses did not take the brazen serpent round the tent of Israel so that the people could kiss it or touch it or kneel before it.

This is done by millions to millions of factory made crosses all over the world. But no such superstition was encouraged in the tent of Israel.

There was one pole, one brazen serpent and the people were not required to touch it or to kiss it or to bow before it or to genuflect or anything like that.

[22 : 55] they were too ill for that kind of thing. All they were asked to do was to look. When he looks upon it he shall live.

And when we look to the one who became sin for us and bore our sin in his own body to the tree, it is that look that gives us deliverance from the bondage of sin and death.

But the question is what kind of look must this be that's going to bring healing? Is it for example a critical look?

You see there are those who look to the things of God but what they look for is proofs of God's existence, proofs of Christ's deity, proofs of his resurrection and so on, that kind of thing.

Well of course God can turn such critical looks into a saving look and indeed he has done so for not a few. But that is not the look that is required, not a critical look.

[23 : 58] We're not looking for proofs of God's existence or for Christ's deity, not that kind of thing. And then when we look, is it the spectator's look?

The look of the observer, the onlooker observing from the sidelines, really not particularly implicit but having a look from the sidelines. Well that kind of look may give information but never salvation or healing to the soul.

Of course the look that is required for healing is the look of faith. And the look of faith simply means this, it means the abandonment of self-help. It means also the abandonment of all other human health.

And it means a steady looking for divine health. in that church in Colchester, C.H.

Spurgeon says, I looked and looked till I thought I looked my very eyes away and at that moment I saw the sun.

[25 : 06] So that the look of faith is really the apostolic command. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.

Thou shalt be saved. And this is what we have to do. It is not a critical look or the look of the observer from the sidelines, it is the look of faith, believing in Jesus and his guaranteed promises that we shall be saved.

And remember that God never mocks us when he says that by looking to the cross will save us, then that remedy is full of potency and efficacy and he will not mock us by asking us to look at an ineffective enemy.

That's the first thing, something was done by them and the last point of all is this, that something was then done in them. Something was done in them. They were healed, they lived, everyone that shall look shall live and that's precisely what took place there in the wilderness.

Well so it is with us, 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, to him who died on the tree.

[26 : 25] And the life that is offered to us by looking to Jesus is abundant life, it's eternal life, it's everlasting life. And Jesus says to us, I give unto them, to all who look to me, eternal life, and they shall never perish.

You see, our concern, my dear friends, our concern should not be with the decree of election, but with the Redeemer of God's elect.

The one is hidden, the other is revealed gloriously in the gospel. God. And the only way of knowing the one that we are of the elect of God is by looking to the other and receiving from his vicarious death the healing and the life that we need.

Well, somebody may say this, well, I've done this many years ago. I look to the Lord, I'm a Christian believer. Where do I go from here? What do I do now?

Well, of course, if we are believers, we go on looking to Jesus. All our life we go on looking to Jesus and coming to the cross and looking to him. We go on trusting him. We go on heeding upon him.

[27 : 48] But also this, we are to be like Moses, who lifted up the brazen serpent before the people.

And if we are Christian believers, we are to lift up Christ before other. I wonder if there are some of us here, and we've been perhaps 20, 30, 40 years Christian believers, and we are not conscious on any occasion of lifting up Jesus before our fellows.

If that's the case, then the question comes home to us, what are you doing with Jesus, who is called Christ? Now, there's something for us to do.

whether we are able bodied or not, there is something for us to do for him. And certainly, we must have the obedience of Moses.

He did precisely what the Lord said, and the Lord requires us to lift up Jesus and to confess him before men. May he give us that obedience as Christian people.

[28 : 53] and if there are those here this morning and you cannot say that you are a Christian person, then the answer for you is here. Look unto him. Look unto me, all ye ends of the earth, and be ye saved.

For I am God, and beside me there is none else. That's the remedy. It was given to the Israelites in the Old Testament.

It's interpreted for us in the news. For even as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish, or die of that deadly sting of sin, the sting of death which is sin, but shall have everlasting life.

Believest thou this? May we say, Lord, I believe, help my unbelief. Let us pray.

O Lord, our God, we thank thee for thy gracious dealings with the sinful sons of men. We thank thee for the provision thou hast made for the ungodly, for those who are critical of thee, who are enemies of God in our minds by wicked ones, who have no thought of thee, no desire for thee, and such were we all at one time, that God who is rich in mercy, for his great love for which he loved us, even when we were dead, in sin, has quickened us together with Christ, for by grace we are saved.

[30 : 51] And we thank thee for this evidence of grace in the Old Testament, this evidence of grace in the words of Jesus in the New Testament. And we pray, O Lord, that we would receive the grace of God and not receive it in vain, the grace that would bring us from the bonds of sin and death into the healing of the gospel and into patient waiting for the Lord Jesus Christ, when he shall change the body of our humiliation and passion it like unto the body of his glory.

We ask, O Lord, that thou will take each one of us into thy care today and help us to think on these things and give to all of us that look of faith, that abandonment of self-help and human health and of turning to thee constantly, for in thee our help and our hope lie.

Bless our worship, we humbly pray thee. Prepare us for meeting with thee again in the evening. Help us to remember that the whole of this day is the Lord's day and we will be found in the house of the Lord seeking again thy face and hearing again from thy word.

And this we ask in Jesus name and for his sake. Amen. Amen.