

The Serpent upon a Pole

“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 21:9

THE VERSES PRECEDING

our opening Scripture provide the background for this lesson. They state: “The people spake 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 our soul 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: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live.”—Num. 21:5-8

This experience occurred during the forty years of the Israelites' wandering in the wilderness. They had been camped at Kadesh—about halfway between the Red Sea and the promised land of Canaan. It was a relatively short journey to Canaan if they followed the northern route through Edom. However, because that land was occupied by their enemies, the descendents of Esau, they made the decision to avoid it. Instead, they went south to the headwaters of the Red Sea, then east around a range of mountains. From this point, they went north into the hot desert wilderness, where there was neither food nor water.

As a result of this weary journey, the people became very disheartened and discouraged. They had forgotten the miraculous parting of the sea, the destruction of the Egyptian forces as the waters covered the army which followed them. They failed to recall the provision of their need for water by not only the sweetening of bitter waters, but also, on another occasion, the gushing of water out of the struck rock. More than these one-time miracles, they had a daily reminder of God's providences on their behalf as they gathered the manna. Undoubtedly it was a wonderful, nourishing food, yet they grew tired of it, and they sorely murmured.

God rightly considered that their murmurings were directed against him. Thus he allowed poisonous snakes to enter the nation, and soon thousands were dying from their bites. If nothing had been done, they all would have perhaps died. Finally, the people understood why they were having this experience, and they appealed as a body to Moses that he should pray to God on their behalf. They realized

that it was only after they had lost their trust in him that this terrible trouble had come to them. As stated by the psalmist, “Before I was afflicted I went astray.”—Ps. 119:67

LESSONS FOR US

The Apostle Paul referred to this lesson given to the Israelites in one of his letters. He wrote, “Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents. . . . Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world [age] are come.”—I Cor. 10:9,11

What “admonition” should we be taking from this? First, we should daily remind ourselves of God’s providences on our behalf. Let us not think of our present “wilderness journey” as too severe, and secretly wish for some direct, non-stop march to our spiritual land of promise. We may not know it, but our deliverance according to the path provided by our Heavenly Father may indeed be much closer than we realize.

Another lesson we can find is that trials and testings along our wilderness journey are used by God to prove our steadfast courage and faith. It is only through patient endurance of all life’s experiences that our character is developed and our progress demonstrated. As difficult as these sufferings may be, they are really necessary to our victory as followers of Christ.

Yet another lesson may be that these adversities and afflictions are instruments God employs to keep us in a condition of humility, and maintain

our reliance only upon him. We, like sheep, can go astray. When we do, it may take some hard experiences to bring us to our “good shepherd.” How reassuring it is to know that our Heavenly Father, just as the father in our Lord’s parable of the prodigal son, is always there with open arms to welcome us back into his abode.—Luke 15:20

THE POISON AND ITS ANTIDOTE

This experience of the Israelites contains additional important lessons which are brought to our attention in the New Testament. The serpents which bit the people may have been called “fiery” because of their sting, or perhaps because of their shiny copper color. We understand that in the Bible the serpent is used as a symbol of sin. Satan, the great adversary of God, is depicted as a serpent both in Genesis 3:1-4 and in Revelation 12:9, and as the Apostle Paul states, “The sting of death is sin.”—I Cor. 15:56

The Israelites had no hope of saving themselves from these serpents. They were either already dead or would soon surely die. Their salvation came through a miracle performed by God, but only by means of an unusual method outlined by the Lord. They were instructed that a replica of a serpent should be made of copper and nailed high upon a pole. (Num. 21:9) The Hebrew word translated “brass” in this verse means “copper,” and is so rendered in Ezra 8:27. It was promised that any who looked upon this copper serpent would recover. Those who refused to look upon it would die.

It perhaps seems strange that they were told to look at a replica of what had just bitten them in

order to be healed. It must have sounded unbelievable, and would certainly require a great deal of faith, to believe that such an act could do any good. However, they had no other choice than to try it, and in their perilous situation there was nothing for anyone to lose. As those who did look up to the copper serpent became whole, the faith of others would grow stronger. Soon all would, in faith, gaze upon the wooden pole with the serpent hanging upon it, where rescue could be found.

The world is in much the same condition today. It has been "bitten" by the serpent of sin, and all mankind is either dead, or dying. There is no other hope of salvation. Life is possible only by looking to the one who was nailed to a "pole." That was Jesus, who was nailed to the cross.

Jesus referred to this circumstance, showing that he was illustrated by the copper serpent. As recorded in John 3:14-16, Jesus spoke with Nicodemus, saying, "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. 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."

When Jesus spoke of himself as being "lifted up," he was referring to his crucifixion, his death upon the cross. He used a similar expression when talking with the Pharisees: "Then said Jesus unto them, When ye have lifted up the Son of man. . ." (John 8:28) Although it was actually the Roman government who carried out the crucifixion of Jesus, God held the Pharisees and leaders of Israel

responsible for this atrocity. They were the ones who exerted pressure on the Romans to carry out the terrible deed, saying, “His blood be on us, and on our children.”—Matt. 27:25

The symbol of the serpent upon the pole as a picture of Jesus on the cross was clearly explained by no less an authority than Jesus himself. Nevertheless, some have difficulty accepting the idea of Jesus being pictured by a serpent, since this symbol had been used early in the Bible to illustrate Satan, who manifested himself in that form in the Garden of Eden. Although claiming to be a friend of Adam and Eve, he infected them with the deadly poison of sin. Jesus, on the other hand, appeared to mankind as a shining example of human perfection, and carried with him the antidote for Satan’s fatal poison.

Note the apostle’s words: God “hath made him [Jesus Christ] to be sin for us, who [Jesus] knew no sin.” (II Cor. 5:21) The *Emphatic Diaglott* translates the words “made him to be sin” as “made him a sin-offering,” pointing to Hosea 4:8 as proof that the word “sin” is sometimes better translated as “sin-offering.” Paul also wrote, “God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin [a sin-offering], condemned sin in the flesh.”—Rom. 8:3

Jesus came as the gift of God to die on the cross so that all mankind could be healed from the painful sting of sin and death. (John 3:16) What must one do to be healed? They must accept that sacrifice, they must “look” on him. As a means of being healed, this sounds as unbelievable a solution to mankind as Moses’ instruction sounded to the

Israelites. How can such a simple action accomplish salvation? Here again, mankind has no other choice. Peter said during his great witness on the Day of Pentecost, nearly two thousand years ago, concerning Jesus: "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved."—Acts 4:12

Jesus said, "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me. This he said, signifying what death he should die." (John 12:32,33) How thankful we are that our Lord Jesus, who was lifted up at Calvary, lowered into the tomb, to be afterward resurrected to the highest form of life in the universe, will soon be manifested to all.

"He shewed me a pure river of water of life, . . . and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life: . . . and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. And there shall be no more curse: . . . And they shall see his face; and his name shall be in their foreheads. . . . And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely."—Rev. 22:1-4,17 ■