

NOTES
ON
THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

by

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"Things new and old."

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by

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Numbers 21

This chapter brings prominently before us the familiar and beautiful ordinance of the brazen Serpent - that great evangelical type.

"And they journeyed from mount Hor by the way of the Red sea, to compass the land of Edom: and the soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way. And 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" (Verses 4, 5).

Alas! alas! it is the same sad story, over and over again - "The murmurs of the wilderness."

It was all well enough to escape out of Egypt, when the terrific judgments of GOD were falling upon it in rapid succession. At such a moment, there was but little attraction in the flesh pots, the leaks, the onions, and the garlic, when they stood connected with the heavy plagues sent forth from the hand of an offended GOD. But now the plagues are forgotten, and the flesh pots alone remembered. **"Would to God we had died at the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh pots, and when we did eat bread to the full."**

What language! man would rather sit by the flesh pots, in a land of death and darkness, than walk with GOD through the wilderness, and eat bread from Heaven. The Lord Himself had brought His glory down into connection with the very sand of the desert, because His redeemed

were there. He had come down to bear withal their provocation - to "**suffer their manners in the wilderness.**" All this grace and exceeding condescension might well have called forth in them a spirit of grateful and humble subjection. But no; the very earliest appearance of trial was sufficient to elicit from them the cry, "**Would to God we had died in the land of Egypt!**"

However, they were very speedily made to taste the bitter fruits of their murmuring spirit. "**The Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died**" (Ver. 6).

The serpent was the source of their discontent; and their condition, when bitten of the serpents, was well calculated to reveal to them the true character of their discontent. If the Lord's people will not walk happily and contentedly with Him, they must taste the power of the serpent - alas! a terrible power, in whatever way it may be experienced.

The serpents' bite brought Israel to a sense of their sin.

"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" (Verse 7).

Here, then, was the moment for divine grace to display itself. Man's need has ever been the occasion for the display of GOD's grace and mercy. The moment Israel could say, "**We have sinned,**" there was no further hindrance. GOD could act, and this was enough.

- when Israel murmured, the serpents' bite was the answer.
- when Israel confessed, GOD's grace was the answer.

In the one case, the serpent was the instrument of their wretchedness; in the other, it was the instrument of their restoration and blessing.

"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" (Ver. 8).

The very image of that which had done the mischief was set up to be the channel through which divine grace might flow down, in rich abundance, to poor wounded sinners. Striking and beautiful type of CHRIST on the Cross!

It is a very common error to view the Lord JESUS rather as the averter of GOD's wrath, than as the channel of His love. That He endured the wrath of GOD against sin is most precious true. But there is more than this. He has come down into this wretched world to die upon the cursed tree, in order that, by dying, He might open up the everlasting springs of the love of GOD to the heart of poor rebellious man. This makes a vast difference in the presentation of GOD's nature and character to the sinner, which is of the very last importance. Nothing can ever bring a sinner back to a state of true happiness and holiness, but his being fully established in the faith and enjoyment of the love of GOD. The very first effort of the serpent, when, in the garden of Eden, he assailed the creature, was to shake his confidence in the kindness and love of GOD, and thus produce discontent with the place in which GOD had set him. Man's fall was the result - the

immediate result of his doubting the love of GOD. Man's recovery must flow from his belief of that love; and it is the Son of GOD himself who says, **"God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him Should not perish, but have everlasting life"** (John 3:16).

Now, it is in close connection with the foregoing statement that our Lord expressly teaches that He was the antitype of the brazen serpent.

As the Son of GOD sent forth from the Father, He was, most assuredly, the gift and expression of GOD's love to a perishing world. But He was also to be lifted up upon the Cross in atonement for sin, for only thus could divine love meet the necessities of the dying sinner.

"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."

The whole human family have felt the serpent's deadly sting; but the GOD of all grace has found a remedy in the One who was lifted up on the cursed tree; and now, by the Holy Ghost sent down from Heaven, He calls on all those who feel themselves bitten, to look to JESUS for life and peace. CHRIST is GOD's great ordinance, and through Him a full, free, present, and eternal salvation is proclaimed to the sinner - a salvation so complete, so well based, so consistent with all the attributes of the divine character and all the claims of the throne of GOD, that Satan cannot raise a single question about it. Resurrection is the divine vindication of the work of the Cross, and the glory of Him who died thereon, so that the believer may enjoy the most profound repose in reference to sin. GOD is well pleased in JESUS; and, inasmuch as He views all believers in Him, He is well pleased in them also.

And, be it noted, faith is the instrument whereby the sinner lays hold of CHRIST's salvation. The wounded Israelite had simply to look and live - look, not at Himself - not at his wounds - not at others around him, but, directly and exclusively, to GOD's remedy. If he refused or neglected to look to that, there was nothing for him but death. He was called to fix his earnest gaze upon GOD's remedy, which was so placed that all might see it. There was no possible use in looking anywhere else, for the word was, **"Every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it shall live."** The bitten Israelite was shut up to the brazen serpent; for the brazen serpent was GOD's exclusive remedy for the bitten Israelite. To look anywhere else was to get nothing; to look at GOD's provision was to get life.

Thus it is now. The sinner is called simply to look to JESUS. He is not told to look to ordinances - to look to churches - to look to men or angels. There is no help in any of these, and therefore he is not called to look to them, but exclusively to JESUS, whose death and resurrection form the eternal foundation of the believer's peace and hope. GOD assures him that **"Whosoever believeth in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life."**

This should fully satisfy the heart and conscience. GOD is satisfied, and so ought we to be. To raise doubt is to deny the record of GOD.

If an Israelite had said, "How do I know that looking to that serpent of brass will restore me?" or if he had begun to dwell upon the greatness and hopeless nature of his malady, and to reason

upon the apparent uselessness of looking up to GOD's ordinance; in short, if anything, no matter what, had prevented his looking to the brazen serpent, it would have involved a positive rejection of GOD, and death would have been the inevitable result.

Thus, in the case of the sinner, the moment he is enabled to cast a look of faith to JESUS, his sins vanish. The Blood of JESUS, like a mighty cleansing stream, flows over his conscience, washes away every stain, and leaves him without spot or wrinkle, or any such thing; and all this, too, in the very light of the holiness of GOD, where not one speck of sin can be tolerated.

But, ere closing our meditation on the brazen serpent, it may be well just to observe what we may call the intense individuality which marked the bitten Israelite's look at the serpent. Each one had to look for himself. No one could look for another. It was a personal question. No one could be saved by proxy. There was life in a look; but the look must be given. There needed to be a personal link - direct individual contact with GOD's remedy.

Thus it was then, and thus it is now. We must have to do with JESUS for ourselves. The Church cannot save us - no order of priests or ministers can save us. There must be the personal link with the Saviour, else there is no life. **"It came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass lived."** This was GOD's order then; and this is His order now, for **"As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up."**

Let us remember the two little words **"as"** and **"so,"** for they apply to every particular in the type and the antitype. Faith is an individual thing; repentance is an individual thing; salvation is an individual thing. Let us never forget this. True, there is, in Christianity, union and communion; but we must have to do with CHRIST for ourselves, and we must walk with GOD for we can neither get life nor live by the faith of another. There is, we repeat with emphasis, an intense individuality in every stage of the Christian's life and practical career.

We shall not dwell further upon the familiar type of **"the serpent of brass;"** but we pray GOD to enable the reader to meditate upon it for himself, and to make a direct personal application of the precious truth unfolded in one of the most striking figures of Old Testament times. May he be led to gaze, with a more profound and soul-subduing faith, upon the Cross, and to drink into his inmost soul the precious mystery there presented. May he not be satisfied with merely getting life by a look at that cross, but seek to enter, more and more, into its deep and marvellous meaning, and thus be more devotedly knit to Him who, when there was no other way of escape possible, did voluntarily surrender Himself to be bruised on that cursed tree for us and for our salvation.

We shall close our remarks on Numbers 21 by calling the reader's attention to verses 16-18.

"And from thence they went to Beer: that is the well whereof the Lord spake unto Moses, Gather the people together and I will give them water. Then Israel sang this song, Spring up, O well; sing ye unto it. The princes digged the well, the nobles of the people digged it, by the direction of the lawgiver, with their staves."

This is a remarkable passage coming in at such a moment and in such a connection. The

murmurings are hushed - the people are nearing the borders of the promised land - the effects of the serpents' bite have passed away, and now, without any rod, without any smiting, the people are supplied with refreshment. What though the Amorites, Moabites, and Ammonites are about them; What though the power of Sihon stands in the way; GOD can open a well for His people and give them a song in spite of all. Oh! what a GOD is our GOD! How blessed it is to trace His actings and ways with His people in all these wilderness scenes! May we learn to trust Him more implicitly, and to walk with Him, from day to day, in holy and happy subjection! This is the true path of peace and blessing.

~ end of chapter 21 ~

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