

Food for thought from the Gospel of John

3 – 5 The Brass Serpent

John 3:14-16

In John 3:12, Jesus said, *“If I have told you earthly things, and you believe not, how shall you believe if I tell you of heavenly things?”* The earthly things had a connection with things that were already revealed in the Scriptures, which teachers like Nicodemus should have already been familiar with. The subject of the new birth had gone over Nicodemus’ head. Now Jesus would take a Bible story from Numbers 21:4-9 and explain the need for a Savior to die for the sins of His people. His people would be saved from the penalty of their sins by a faithful look at their Savior.

The Background Story: The people of Israel were walking through the wilderness, preparing for their conquest of Canaan. There were many hardships on this journey. The book of Numbers has sometimes been called “The Book of Murmurs.” The people of Israel would often complain about their situations with much ungratefulness to God. At a particular low point, where Israel was complaining to God and to Moses, God sent fiery serpents to bite the people and cause them to die. The people went to Moses and confessed their sin, asking for God to remove the snakes. God did not immediately remove the snakes. God instructed Moses to make a brass representation of a serpent and mount it on a pole. The people were instructed to simply look at the snake, when they were bitten, and they would be healed. Defying normal logic and medical knowledge, this was a great test of faith.

The brass serpent represented the penalty of the people’s sins. Jesus became a curse for us. When our sins were laid on Him, Jesus became sin for us and was punished instead of us (Galatians 3:13; II Corinthians 5:21; Romans 8:3; I Peter 3:18). Jesus must be “lifted up” like that brass serpent. “Lifting up” is a reference to being crucified (John 12:32-33).

Let’s consider the “look” of faith. As we stated before, this requirement was a challenge to people’s faith. It seemed illogical, unscientific, and unprecedented. A person might feel foolish looking, staring at a brass snake, hoping to be healed. But if a person was desperate enough and trusted Moses’ words, they just might do it. If they obeyed the instructions, they would be healed. Such is the teaching of salvation by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9; Titus 3:5; I Corinthians 1:18-24).

Note: Christ is our “propitiation” – a way of obtaining mercy, where God’s wrath is turned away / God’s wrath is satisfied. See Romans 3:25; I John 2:2; 4:10.

The people that were already bitten by the snake were in a situation like all of us today. We are already condemned. If we die in our sins, we will perish. We need the look of faith – a look that beholds Jesus Christ as the one provided to deliver us from God’s wrath. He hung on the cross to take away our sins. We cannot not do anything that will reverse the situation, except to believe and trust Christ to satisfy God’s judgment against our sins (John 3:16-18; 6:40; 8:23-24).

Learn, again, from Numbers 21

In Numbers 21:4 we read, “And they journeyed from mount Hor by the way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom: and the soul of the people was very discouraged on the way.” The journey was not easy. They forgot to keep counting their blessings. They lost sight of the promises God had given them (Psalm 106:13-14,21). By this, they allowed difficulties and discouragement to make them bitter, complaining, and unfaithful.

To you who have looked to Jesus for salvation, **Keep Looking!** Do not get side-tracked by religion, philosophy, politics, economics, pleasures, or sufferings, etc. See Hebrews 9:27-28; 12:1-3 cp. Colossians 2:6-10.

The drifting look

Years later, the brass serpent had to be destroyed. In II Kings 18:4, King Hezekiah broke it in pieces because people had started to make an idol out of it. They burned incense to it. After Hezekiah destroyed the serpent, it was called “Nehushtan” (i.e. “a piece of brass”). Don’t put your faith in religious icons, pictures, statues, or other artifacts.