

Brazen Serpent: Answer to Prayer 37/46 December 6, 2020

Dear Friends,

Apologies for not getting last week's Gleanings to you on time. I'll send this week's Gleanings the first of the week. I have it written and ready, but I'll allow a couple days between the two mailings.

There is archaeological evidence that a serpent wrapped around a vertical pole was a frequent ancient symbol of the medical profession, same as it is the accepted icon of that profession today. When God sent healing by Moses to His complaining people in [Nu 21](#), He chose a common and easily understood symbol by which to communicate His healing. No one in Israel could question that the fiery serpents were sent from the Lord in righteous judgment against His own people for their complaining discontent with God and with Moses.

Occasionally through the last nine months people have occasionally asked me, "Joe, do you think COVID-19 is a judgment from the Lord?" And I have tried to softly answer each question, "No, I don't. When the Lord sends judgment, it takes on a form that leaves no doubt that it was sent by Him." If COVID-19 had been sent by the Lord, those dear folks wouldn't be asking me or anyone else. We'd all know it came from Him.

Consider the obvious and simple truths in the setting of this lesson.

1. Only Israelites sinned.
2. The judgment of fiery serpents was sent only upon Israelites who had so sinned.
3. Israel pleaded with Moses to pray for them, for the Lord to send relief.
4. Moses prayed for Israel, for the Lord's merciful healing.
5. The Lord gave Moses a remedy for His own sin-sick, suffering-from-their-own-complaining-spirits people.
6. Some Israelites had already died. [Nu 21](#) doesn't say a word to indicate that a single dead Israelite was resurrected.
7. Based on God's instruction to Moses, any bitten, still living Israelite who looked upon the brass serpent that Moses lifted up on the pole would be immediately healed of the venom.

All of these points urge us to view this lesson as a rich example of the Lord's healing and help for us in our present lives, not a remedy for our eternal salvation. What was Israel's sin that provoked this judgment from the Lord? A complaining spirit. During the last nine months of COVID-19 isolation and disruption, have you complained? If so, are we not susceptible to a similar judgment from the Lord for our own complaints against the Lord?

Thank the Lord, He gave Moses the solution, and it is a solution that you and I need daily to neutralize the poison of the fiery serpents of our own complaining spirits. When you wake up tomorrow morning, remind yourself of this lesson. Instead of complaining against the Lord, or fault-finding your brothers and sisters who do not agree with you, pray for the Lord to send you the healing balm of a 20-20 faith-look at Jesus, a sure way to flood our minds with loving gratitude that drives away any thought of complaining. Every time you practice this habit, you will experience similar deliverance to Israel in this lesson.

Love in Jesus,

Joe Holder

Brazen Serpent: Answer to Prayer

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. 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. And 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. ([Nu 21:4-9](#) KJV 1900)

Although the lesson is largely ignored, Jesus used this passage in [Joh 3](#). In fact, this lesson serves as His foundation illustration for verses 15 and 16. If Bible teachers studied this lesson, they would not make the populist out-of-context interpretation we hear for those verses. Most of the Bible contains specific instructions for believers in God to know how to live a God-honoring life. Paul affirms that this is, in fact, Scripture's primary objective, "...that the **man of God** may be..." ([2Ti 3:16-17](#)) When Bible students and teachers think of the Bible as God's roadmap for lost sinners to find their own salvation, they ignore context and interpret almost every passage in the Bible through that preconception. As a result, they can see almost no Bible teaching to instruct them in their pursuit of godliness. The Bible indeed teaches us fully regarding God's loving and saving grace. However, if we follow Scripture, it will lead us to understand much regarding how to live life so as to honor our God in the here and now. This passage will serve as a powerful example.

The setting of the lesson deals with God's people, not lost sinners. At the moment, they were living with the consequences of their unbelief. Can a child of God fall into unbelief? Ask the eleven apostles that question regarding their initial reaction to news that Jesus had risen from death, that He was alive. Mark tells us that Jesus "...upbraided them **with their unbelief and hardness of heart.**" ([Mr 16:14](#)) In the case of Israel in our study passage, the people complained because of the difficulty of their journey. Moses gives us an insightful point. The people were discouraged in their journey. I suspect that, quite often, a complaining spirit in believers grows in the soil of discouragement, fertile soil for complaining.

The next point we learn is that the people focused their complaints against Moses and against God. We must not overlook; they were in this wilderness because of their own unbelief, not because of either Moses or the Lord. Our broken and sin-inclined humanity far prefers to blame someone else than to look in the mirror of conscience and place the responsibility for our predicaments rightly on our own shoulders.

And the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died. The Lord was not at all pleased with this sinful, complaining, blame God and Moses game. God sent His righteous judgment against those who had so sinned. Take careful note of the lesson. Surrounding Gentile tribes had not complained or blamed God. Israel committed this sin. God didn't send the fiery serpents against any of the nearby Gentile people, only against His own erring people. The point is obvious. The Lord visited His fire of judgment on the specific people who had sinned. God's people sinned; God's people received the fire. This was not a minor or symbolic "Fire" of judgment. If the serpent bit someone, he died. Commentaries vary. Some teach that Israel experienced both a literal fire and literal serpents. That would be frightening. Others teach that the venom of the serpent bite felt like fire in the body parts affected by the venom. Regardless, the people fully understood that the serpents and subsequent death of those bitten was a judgment from the Lord for their complaints.

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. The people were as specific in their confession as in their sin. That is the right kind of confession. Given that God knows everything about us, it makes no sense whatever to commit Sin “A” and try to make your case right with the Lord by confessing to a lesser Sin “B.” That action might well bring on an even greater judgment for the dishonesty, willfully committed in the false or partial confession. Remember Ananias and Sapphira. ([Ac 5:1-11](#)) In [1Jo 1:9](#), when John wrote, “*If we confess our sins...*” the Greek word translated “*confess*” is a compound word that literally means to “Say the same thing.” The only real confession that the Lord accepts is when, in our confession to Him of our sins, we “Say the same thing” that He says about the sin we confess.

The people had traveled this path many times before. Sin, suffer the Lord’s righteous judgment, go to Moses and ask him to intervene with the Lord and pray for them, and the Lord always forgave. They had good reason to hope for the Lord’s forgiveness based on past experience. Is it not the same with us? How many times have we sinned, confessed, and the Lord did exactly what He promised to do; He forgave 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. And 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. Moses immediately prayed for the people. Do we as readily pray for the people we know who repeatedly fail in their faith, but try to return when they realize their sin? And keep on praying again and again for them, as Moses prayed for Israel during their wilderness journey? Just as immediately the Lord directed Moses to the cure for the deadly serpent venom. To this day, the image of a serpent wrapped around a pole is the iconic symbol of the medical profession. Do you find it interesting that God directed Moses to create a brass image of a serpent, even though it was a serpent that He sent in judgment against them for their sins? ***Given His ultimate remedy for our sins, we should expect it.*** Man violated God’s first righteous law in the Garden of Eden, and God sent His remedy for the sins of His people in the same likeness. Jesus came, God Incarnate, to take away the toxic poison of our sins from us, both our sins’ temporal and eternal consequences.

The Lord relieved the temporal consequences of Israel’s sin of complaining and blaming God for their own sins. Given the specific form of the remedy, looking on the brass serpent, I believe the lesson addresses the temporal consequences of our sins. Although many Israelites died from the venom of judgment, those who were bitten and yet lived could now look upon the brass serpent, and the toxic impact of the venom was immediately neutralized. In the New Testament’s teaching regarding the eternal effect of our salvation, the inspired text frequently compares our spiritual condition before salvation as not sick and dying, but “...***dead in trespasses and sins.***” ([Eph 2:1](#)) Already dead Israelites could not look at the brass serpent, ***only sick living Israelites.***

If we honestly examine ourselves, not a one of us is free from some sin or another. John reminds us of that reality. ([1Jo 1:8-10](#)) In fact, in Verse 9, John teaches us the same lesson that we learn from Moses and the serpents in [Nu 21](#). When we confess our sins to the Lord, and sincerely work to repent of them, the Lord forgives. He sends us that message of hope, Jesus lifted up, crucified, for our healing and recovery from our sins now, as well as for our eternal salvation.

We must study this lesson in [Nu 21](#) thoroughly if we hope to discover the rich truth Jesus makes of it in [Joh 3](#). Sadly, most Bible teachers, gloss over this lesson and focus their teaching on [Joh 3:15-16](#), making those verses all—and only—about eternal salvation, thus wholly ignoring [Nu 21](#) and wrongly interpreting verses 15-16. To be supremely blessed, despite your obvious sins, to look to God’s remedy

and find healing and forgiveness, gives us hope and encouragement right now for living our lives. Shall we fail? Absolutely! Does God show us the solution to guide us in overcoming that failure? Absolutely! How complicated is His solution? Not at all. We look to Jesus in faith, confess our sins to Him, and He forgives and cleanses us of the temporal impact of judgment for those sins.

When Jesus introduced this lesson in [Joh 3:14](#), He made the point clearly.

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up. ([Joh 3:14](#))

In the context of [Joh 3](#), Jesus has already taught the lesson of eternal salvation by His analogy of the new birth to Nicodemus. Contextually, He is still teaching Nicodemus when He begins this lesson. After the new birth, what next? And the lesson of the brass serpent is the lesson that “***Sin sick***” ***born again*** sinners need to learn to find relief and restoration today.

In our present study of prayer, specifically of answered prayers in the Bible, [Nu 21](#) stands out as one of God’s most encouraging and instructive lessons. Did Israel, God’s people, already delivered from slavery by the applied covering of the blood of a lamb, deserve this answered prayer? No! They were living out the consequences of their own sins, a personal offense against the involved and loving character of their God. But God remained faithful to His loving grace, heard Moses’ pray, gave Moses the remedy that Israel needed, and sent the healing they needed. He gives us this lesson to remind us—to keep fresh in our minds—that answered prayer is a Bible fact, and that God doesn’t always answer only “Deserving” prayers. If that were the case, no prayer would be answered. Look to Him for your healing, even from your own self-inflicted sins and judgments. He is yet the “Good Physician.” An as you look to Him, look to yourself; do you also need to consider repentance? Be faithful.

Elder Joe Holder