

Peace for the Anxious; Or, the Serpent of Brass

Streams of Refreshing · Numbers 21; John 3

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Peace for the Anxious; Or, the Serpent of Brass 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 (Num. 21:8, 9).

The only way of salvation is most plainly set before us in various parts of the Old Testament Scriptures. Let us look at some of them. We are told that Abel obtained witness that he was righteous, by coming before God with the sacrifice of a lamb; while Cain, with all his efforts to bring the fruit of his own toil, was rejected. Noah and his family were saved by being inside the ark which God had commanded to be built, while every person outside the ark perished. Lot's mocking sons-in-law died under God's fiery judgment of Sodom, because they remained in the place which God had said he would destroy, and refused to escape for their lives. The Israelites in Egypt were saved from the vengeance of the destroying angel, because they took shelter in God's only remedy -- the blood of the lamb. The manslayer escaped the forfeit of his life by fleeing to the city of refuge. The loathsome leper was at once cleansed by being sprinkled with blood. Rahab was saved in the destruction of Jericho, because the scarlet line was in her window. The serpent of brass set upon a pole was another testimony to the simple way of eternal salvation, which God provided for sinful men. Many true-hearted souls have not peace with God, because they do not see the simplicity of the gospel. They do not allow their thoughts to be regulated by the written word of God, as the only standard of truth, or regard the Holy Spirit as the only Teacher and Revealer of the things of Christ; consequently there is no fixedness of thought, and no solid rest for their troubled minds. Unless the conscience be thoroughly convicted of the total ruin and depravity of the natural man, it is not prepared to receive the full testimony of God's abounding grace; and unless the mind be freed from human opinions, it will not perceive the beautiful simplicity of the gospel of God! Hence it is that so many sincere souls, who have been quickened by the Holy Ghost, go doubting and fearing nearly all their days. They either look within for certain feelings, attainments, evidences, and the like, instead of looking wholly to Christ; or, if they look to Christ, they think that something else is required, instead of receiving simply what God says in His word concerning the finished work of His beloved Son, and the safety and security of all those who come unto God by Him. Let no burdened sinner expect peace with God but by looking wholly to Christ crucified and risen, and believing God's record of the value of His finished work on the cross. The story of the serpent of brass is calculated, by the Spirit's teaching, to give peace to anxious souls, because it so plainly sets forth the way of God in grace with men as ruined sinners. Our blessed Lord expounded it to Nicodemus, so that we have not only the inspired narrative, but also the Divine comment upon it, as

teaching us the only way of eternal salvation. The testimony of Moses, by the Spirit in the Old Testament, and the explanation of

Christ Himself in the New, stamp the subject with the deepest interest and importance. Little, perhaps, did the ancient lawgiver feel, when lifting up the brazen serpent in order that the dying Israelite might behold it and live, that he was shadowing forth that unequalled event, when Christ, in unparalleled love, was willingly lifted up upon the cross for the salvation of lost sinners. But so it was, as the Lord Himself touchingly testified, when He said, 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 (John 3:14, 15).

There are three points in this narrative which demand our solemn consideration. 1. The condition of the people. 2. The remedy God provided. 3. The effects. 1. THE CONDITION OF THE PEOPLE. The people had sinned. They had murmured against God, and justly brought His judgment and wrath upon them. They were, therefore, under sentence of death; for sin and death are connected together. The wages of sin always has been, and always will be, death. Much people of Israel had died, and many more were dying; they were under the influence of the serpent's bite, and it was mortal. Nothing, therefore, could be more hopeless than their state; they might not have believed it, but so it was. They might have tried human remedies, because man always contrives to better his present distress if he can; but we may be sure that these remedies all failed. They were made to feel that the serpent's bite was beyond their power of healing; therefore they asked Moses to take away the serpents from them: but this was not God's way of meeting the case. The people, then, had sinned, were mortally wounded, without any power of ameliorating their condition, and without any human hope of deliverance. And such, too, is man's real condition before God now. The bitten, dying Israelites present to us a touching picture of tens of thousands, yea, millions, around us now. Man has sinned. He is a sinner in a threefold sense. He is a sinner by birth, as a descendant of fallen parents; a sinner by practice, as having actually transgressed God's holy commands; and a sinner in heart, as having sin dwelling in him, so that he is inwardly desperately wicked. But more than this, for most persons have added to all these the crowning sin of not believing in the only-begotten Son of God -- not receiving that Savior whom God hath sent. The Holy Spirit has come to convict men that they are sinners, to show them that they are dead in trespasses and sins, and exposed to eternal death and condemnation. Surely nothing can be more hopeless than man's condition as under sin and death; nothing can be more

helpless, because, with all his inventions to better his circumstances, he has never yet devised a remedy for death. He diligently projects moral schemes for lopping off the widespreading branches of outward infamy, but the stump still remains the stock of a corrupt tree. Man cannot devise a cure for death. He tries to smooth the dying pillow with the tear of sympathy, and refreshing cordials; he may embellish the corpse with the costliest ornaments, and the sweetest spices; he can make the most attractive display at the grave; he can garnish the sepulcher with skilful adornments; but he cannot cure the serpent's bite, he cannot triumph over death. He sees death all around him, and feels dying himself, and he is without strength and without hope in the world. Men little think what an admission they make

when they say, "We are sinners." It really means, we have death working in us because we have sinned -- we are dead in trespasses and sins, and on the way to eternal death. Such is really the meaning of the common expression, "I know that I'm a sinner." Oh that the Holy Spirit would tear away the veil of ignorance and unbelief from men's minds, and so convict multitudes everywhere, that, like the prophet of old, they may cry out, Woe is me! for I am undone {Isa. 6:5}.

Our condition, then, naturally, is similar to that of the bitten Israelites. They had sinned, so have we. They were guilty before God, so are we. They were justly condemned, so are we. They were dying because of their sin, so are we. They were unable to save themselves, so are we. Neither they nor ourselves had any hope whatever, till God, in free, boundless mercy, provided a remedy. Let us now consider -2. THE REMEDY GOD PROVIDED. Why should God provide a remedy? Did the people deserve it? No. They had sinned, and merited God's righteous indignation. But their need, their helpless state, moved God's compassion and mercy, and He brought life and salvation to the dying and needy. The thought of the people was merely to have the serpents taken away from them -- they only thought of some improvement in their present circumstances; but God's thoughts of love and pity are far higher than this. His way is to give life to dying souls -- to abolish death; He therefore provided such a remedy, that whoever LOOKED upon it LIVED. This is a remedy worthy of the God of resurrection. It never entered into man's heart to conceive a remedy so perfect, so suitable; so glorious, so abundant in mercy. 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. 21:8}.

The remedy was simple, and the cure immediate. It was not a question of their doings, experiences, or evidences; it was look and live. They were commanded to look outside themselves, straight to the object set before them, and, though at the point of death, they immediately lived. Those who felt the mortal wound inflicted by the fiery serpent had simply to behold the serpent of brass set upon the pole, and death in them gave place to life. The remedy then was one, only one. It was lifted up between earth and heaven. It was wholly of God's providing. The benefit was conferred by simply looking. It was perfect and instantaneous in its cure. It needed nothing to be added to it. It was free to every

bitten man, without money and without price. No one tried it in vain. Those who did not behold it died. Such is God's remedy for dying souls now. It is Jesus only. He has been lifted up between earth and heaven. He died for sinners -- for those who are dead in trespasses and sins. This only remedy is entirely of God's providing. His compassion and free grace sent forth the Savior; for God commendeth His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us {Rom. 5:8}.

It is sin that is the plague of our hearts, and in Jesus crucified we see sin condemned, and removed for ever from us; for there God hath made Christ to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him {2 Cor. 5:21}.

On the cross it was that Christ was lifted up, that He might bring us to God. The benefits, too, of God's salvation are realized by simply looking. It is, Look unto me, and be ye saved {Isa. 45:22}. Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world {John 1:29}. Believe on the Lord

Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved {Acts 16:31}. By Him; all that believe are justified from all things {Acts 13:39}. Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out {John 6:37}.

It is free to every one who desires it. He that believeth on Me hath everlasting life {John 6:47} By me if any man enter in, he shall be saved {John 10:9}. Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest {Matt. 11:28}. Whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely {Rev. 22:17}.

God also gives an immediate and perfect cure. He that believeth on me,
said Jesus, hath everlasting life {John 6:47}.

He that believeth is justified by His blood, shall not come into condemnation, but is passed from death unto life; for by one offering He hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified. He hath obtained eternal redemption for us. The Israelites, by looking to the serpent of brass, only had temporal life; but, by looking unto the Lord Jesus, we have eternal life. This is the mercy of the gospel, as our Lord declared, 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 {John 3:14, 15}.

It is not, then, ordinances, duties, self-denial, outward zeal, however proper these things may be in their place, but Christ and Him crucified that meets the sinner's need. He alone has triumphed over death. He only is the life, the truth, the way to the Father. He is the only Mediator between God and men. His blood the only fountain for sin and uncleanness. His death alone satisfied

Divine justice. On Jesus, on the cross, God's fierce wrath was poured out, and His infinite holiness and truth vindicated. It is the death of Jesus on the cross that fully manifests man's ungodliness, and fully reveals God's abounding grace. Nowhere is sin's foul blackness so seen as in the cross, and nowhere else is sin condemned and put away. Without the death of the cross, Jesus taught there could be no salvation; and it was to the cross alone that He directed Nicodemus for eternal life. The apostles preached Christ crucified {1 Cor. 1:23};

and Paul said, God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world {Gal. 6:14}. "The cross, its burthen -- oh, how great! No strength but His could bear its weight; No love but His would undertake To bear it for the sinner's sake."

The testimony of Jesus Himself, the records of the Old and New Testaments, the witness of prophets and apostles, all concur in directing the serpent-bitten, sin-sick soul to the Lord Jesus who was crucified, and to Him alone, for everlasting life; and blessed indeed are those, who, by faith in Him, escape eternal death so fully deserved, and receive eternal life so wholly undeserved, but freely given. He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him (John 3:36).

3. THE EFFECTS. It came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived {Num. 21:9}.

His despairing, languishing heart revived. As soon as he was conscious that he lived, the fear of death departed, and peace took possession of his mind. Health and vigour returned for service and conflict, he overcame the enemies of the Lord, and went onward to the promised land. But further; having proved how effectual simply beholding the serpent of brass was, he, doubtless, was anxious that others perishing around him should enjoy the same blessing. Applying this instruction to ourselves, by the light of our Lord's exposition of it, it is clear that whoever believes in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was lifted up on the cross, has eternal life. He has a new life in him. He is a new creation. He is born again. It is a fact, that by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ we have life. He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life {1 John 5:12}.

It is not merely a change of views, but life -- eternal life -- that the believer in Christ receives. The present possession of eternal life is connected with a remarkable change both in experience and action. Conversion is really a transition from death unto life. Those who had previously prided themselves on their good qualities, now see themselves to be vile and worthless; and that blessed Savior, whom they had so long despised and rejected, now becomes incomparably precious and lovely. That God, once so dreaded, is worshipped and adored

as the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort. His word and ways honored, and His people, once slighted if not persecuted, are now beloved objects of interest and affection. These are some of the workings of Divine life in the soul. But all who have life have not peace; they have eternal life, but do not know it. Such a sense of their own evil hearts and ways presses upon them; they cannot suppose it possible that such vile persons can have eternal life; yet they look to Christ, and cannot give Him up; they little think that the self-humbling experience they have is the effect of their having life. There are many such now, and there were also in the apostles' days; hence John wrote, These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life (1 John 5:13);

and he assured them that they might know that they had passed from death unto life, because they loved the brethren (1 John 3:14). I have said that when the Israelite who had looked to the serpent of brass knew that he lived, fear of death left him, and peace took possession of his mind. So now, when the believer knows that he is pardoned, justified, and accepted, by simply looking to Christ in glory, who was crucified, peace flows into his heart. We have joy and peace in believing {Rom. 15:13}; being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ {Rom. 5:1}.

Fear of death is removed when the soul looks only and simply to the Lord Jesus, and believes that He has died in his stead, and suffered for his sins on the cross. The believer thus knows, that whatever changes may take place, his life is hid with Christ in God, and though he may sleep in Jesus, yet he shall never see death. This fills the languishing spirit with consolation and peace, as well as strength for the service of God, and running the heavenly race. Oh the blessedness of having eternal life by simply looking to the Lord Jesus who was lifted up! Because we have life, we more or less act according to the mind of God. We learn our vileness in the flesh, and hide in Christ our righteousness; we know the flesh has been condemned and crucified, but know Christ is our life. We experience infirmity and

weakness, but know that Christ is our strength. We grieve that we are sometimes the subjects of folly and error, but know that Christ is our wisdom. We are painfully sensible of sinning, but are assured that Christ is our Advocate with the Father. We are tempted by Satan to the unbelieving thought; “we shall one day perish”; but are comforted by that Promise of the Almighty Savior, They shall never perish {John 10:28};

and when well-nigh overwhelmed by fightings without and fears within {see 2 Cor. 7:5},

we rely on Him who is able to save to the uttermost all them that come unto God by Him. Thus Christ is all to the Christian: and though when looking at self he may cry, O wretched man that I am! {Rom. 7:24}

when looking to the Savior who was crucified he can say,

The Lord is my light and my salvation {Psa. 27:1}. “So great, so vast a sacrifice, May well my hope revive; If God’s own Son thus bleeds and dies, The sinner sure must live.”

FELLOW CHRISTIANS! we have life -- spiritual, eternal life; let us, then, walk and act in the Spirit. Let us show that we belong to Jesus, that we have died, as regards the flesh, in Him, and that we have life by and in a risen, glorified Savior. We must abide in Christ, live upon Christ, feed on Christ, draw from Christ, if we would walk like Christ. This new life must be nourished, the spiritual energies used, the new-born affections exercised, if we would be strong and flourishing as servants of Christ. We need not, could not, work for life, because we have life. We could not be Christians if we had not looked to the Son of man lifted up, and had life. The word of Christ informs and strengthens the new life; the flesh and blood of Christ nourish the new life; the way of faith is the acting out of the new life; the Lord’s return from heaven is that for which the new life waits. Seeing that we have eternal life by beholding the Lamb of God, let us seek to bring others to taste and enjoy the same blessings. Oh, how earnestly must the healed Israelite have ran far and near to bring his bitten friends to behold the serpent of brass! How quickly might he be seen throwing back the curtain of his neighbour’s tent, that the dying, gasping ones might take one look and live! What a reality God’s remedy was to them! And is it less so to us? Oh no, my brethren! let it then be our daily, fervent, untiring labour to present Christ to all around us. But some of my readers cannot say that they have life. The Son of man has been lifted up to give life to sin-sick, dying souls, but they refuse to look and live. How sad is your portion! How awfully dark is your prospect! God’s love is despised by you. His pity and compassion are not welcomed. His gospel is not received. The sufferings and death of the Lord Jesus are despised, and you are still in your sins, daily sinking under the serpent’s bite, dying under its influence, and rapidly hastening to the bar of God’s judgment, to receive your final sentence, and eternal doom. But it may be that some may say, “I know I am a sinner. I am sure I have broken God’s laws. I have merited His displeasure. My heart trembles at death. I shudder at the thought of judgment. Can I be saved? Is there hope for me? Is there any possibility that I can have eternal life?” Yes! yes! dear soul; Jesus died for such as you. He was nailed to the cross for the ungodly. Every sin-convicted soul that looks to Him He saves. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved {Acts 16:31}. “A dying, risen Jesus,

Seen by the eye of faith, At once from anguish frees us, And saves the soul from death. How gracious
this Physician! His grace He'll freely give; He makes no hard condition, 'Tis only look and live."