

The Serpent in the Wilderness

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[0 : 0 0] chapter. As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. I want to spend a little bit of time, first of all, looking at the passage that we read in Numbers, in Numbers 21, and what is referred to there as the bronze serpent. And then try and connect it up from there, 700 years later, until Hezekiah destroys it, and then 700 years approximately later, when our Lord mentions it to Nicodemus, as he is speaking to him about being born again, and how to come to faith. And we must assume, of course, that Nicodemus, as the teacher, as it's put here, or a teacher in Israel, one of the Sanhedrin, one of the 70 who ruled over

Israel, that Nicodemus would be very familiar with the Old Testament, and would know exactly what our Lord is referring to what our Lord is referring to with the Moses lifting up the brazen serpent. But whether at this particular point he understood the full significance of what that actually meant, that's another matter altogether. He did, of course, come to understand, because we find him later, of course, involved not only in the burial of Christ, but among those who are of the apostles and those who are with him. So what had happened approximately 1,500 years before that in the desert? If we sort of go back in time to the original incident, there are various interesting things that we need to put in place here to see exactly what had happened.

First of all, we have to bear in mind that those who are now standing at the entrance to the promised land are not those who came out of Egypt, with only two exceptions, and perhaps Moses would be the third. The only two exceptions are Caleb and Joshua. And you will remember, of course, that that had come about because of the report of the spies quite some time previously, approximately 38 years before, when the people had refused to believe the good report that two of the spies, Caleb and Joshua gave, and preferred to believe the other ten who had said that there were giants in the land and they would never be able to conquer them, etc., etc., etc., etc. And because of that, because of their unbelief, God had then in his justice, but also in his mercy, sentenced the children of Israel to wander in the desert for 40 years, approximately 40 years, until that generation had died out. And it is a new generation, in a sense, that we are seeing here in Numbers 21. That is why in the next book in

Deuteronomy, Moses goes over everything that has already been gone over in Exodus and Leviticus and the book of Numbers. And really, you should remember that the proper name in Hebrew of the book of Numbers means in the wilderness. That's what the story is about in the book of Numbers. And it is there that this story comes up here. Now, they are at the entrance to the promised land, about to enter. And in the previous chapter, we see that Edom, the children, the king of Edom, the children of Edom, you remember the descendants of Esau, who were related to them, in a sense, had refused to grant them passage through their land directly to Canaan. And that meant that they had to reverse down towards the Gulf of Aqaba, the Red Sea, the port of Eliat, where the port of Eliat is now, and turn around again and go round that land on a long journey to enter Canaan in a different way. And again, if you look at a biblical map, it's very easy to see that. And also, at that same time, as you'll see in the previous chapter, Aaron had died. Now, this, of course, was something that would have caused great mourning. You see, at the end, the last verse of chapter 20, when all the congregation saw that Aaron had perished, all the house of Israel wept for Aaron for 30 days.

[5 : 0 6] And there was a great sense of mourning in that their high priest, the one who had been elected to the office of high priest, was not going to be permitted to enter into the promised land with them.

Later on, of course, the same thing will happen to Moses. And you remember that it was just a few chapters back at the waters of Meribah, where Moses, instead of speaking to the rock along with

Aaron, had hit the rock with his rod in a fit of anger, that God had then said to him, because you have sinned, you will be allowed to see the promised land, but you will not enter into it.

And later on, we see that that is fulfilled in the death of Moses on top of Mount Pisgah, as he looks over the promised land. And then at the beginning of chapter 21, we see this negative event taking place, that Arad, or the king of Arad, or sometimes simply Arad himself, who lived in the Negev, the Negev desert, fought against Israel and took some of them captive.

And Israel vowed a vow to the Lord and said, if you will give this people to my hand, then I will devote their cities to destruction. And very often in the history of the Old Testament years, particularly in the wanderings of the children of Israel, a lot of people express their complete distaste, if I can put it that way, for the amount of slaughter that goes on between the children of Israel and those tribes round about.

Why was there such destruction and death? Well, again, the people who bring that point up have clearly not read what is in the text along with that.

[6 : 53] And you see from the very beginning that God commands that these people are to be destroyed because of their idol worship, so that none of their customs will taint the worship of the God of Israel.

Now, that's a long point that could be developed in many, many ways, but I'm not going to go into that in detail just now. But here we see that God, at the beginning of this process of entering into the Promised Land, we see in verse 3 that the Lord heeded, listened to the voice of Israel, listened to their prayers, and gave over the Canaanites.

There's no mention of those who have been made captive, but the majority of commentators think that they were released when the Canaanites were beaten here. And so their cities, etc., are destroyed.

They would later form part of some of the inheritance of the children of Reuben and so on. And then they have to go back down. From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea to go round the land of Edom, and the people became impatient on the way.

Now, that's, in a sense, not surprising. If you think of it, they've been wandering around now for 38 years, etc., and so on. They're at the brink of entering into the Promised Land, and now, all of a sudden, there is this big reverse in Edom, refusing passage through his land, so they have to again turn round and go down this desert.

[8 : 33] And it's a pretty serious desert that they have to cross here, back up round Mount Serre before entering round by the way of Moor.

And so they become very, very disheartened. Not surprising, really. But what happens then, of course, as they become disheartened, the people speak against God and against Moses.

Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? How many times have we heard that before? If you go back over the history of Israel coming out of Egypt, we've come across that several times.

several times. We saw it in Numbers 11, when they complained about having no meat. We saw it in various other places.

And each time, the Lord provides for them in a different way. But here now, and we have to remember that we're dealing with a different generation here, here is the same complaint again.

[9 : 40] There is no food, no water, and we loathe this worthless food. Now what food were they talking about? They were, of course, talking about the manna.

The food that God miraculously provided for them. Every day, double portion, remember? On the day before the Sabbath, so they didn't have to collect it on the Sabbath.

God provided it for them. And in the same way, God miraculously had provided provision, water, and sustenance for their animals. Now, we often tend to think of the children of Israel as a people coming out of Egypt, a rabble coming out of Egypt.

And forget that by this time, we are dealing with a people who have now been shown the covenant mercies of God. They've been given the law at Sinai. They've been given the tabernacle and all the rituals and everything else with it.

They've been given all the ordinances of God. But also, they have increased enormously, not only as a nation, but in terms of their possessions.

[10 : 54] What possessions did they have? Well, they had sheep and cattle and goats and animals. And we see that a little later on, particularly stressed for us, when Reuben and the tribe of Gad come to Gilead and say that they want to stay there because that land is good for cattle.

And the scriptures tell us that they had much cattle. And that, of course, was where the animals for sacrifice throughout the 30 years of the journey in the wilderness had come.

And it must have been without any question also where much some, or at least some of their own food, as well as the manna, would have also come.

God has provided for them in all that time. God has provided for them. God has provided you with all sorts of comforts that so many other people don't have.

God has provided you with all sorts of fish. You are here this evening, well-housed, well-fed, probably economically comfortable, maybe not rich, but comfortably off.

[12:06] And yet you still grumble. and you and I are no different from the children of Israel in that way. We grumble about our situation and sometimes when things don't work out the way we want them who do we grumble against?

We very often grumble against God. We grumble against God's providence and that's exactly how the children of Israel here reflect human nature and human nature, because of its contamination with sin hasn't changed over the thousands and thousands of years of human history nor will it ever change.

Have you complained about the weather this week? I'm sure you have. So did I, especially when the water started coming in under the door on the porch because the wind was driving it in.

It's natural, isn't it? It's part of our human nature to complain. But think how many thousands of people in other parts of the world would have been so grateful for even a quarter of the rain that we've had even just today.

Even just today. And yet it is in our nature to complain. There are times, of course, when the Lord's people go through difficult providences.

[13:35] And sometimes it is very difficult for us to understand the purpose of these providences. It may be, as we saw only a few weeks ago, a very sudden death that affects someone.

Or a family known to us. I'm thinking of, perhaps not many of you were familiar with them. The death of Ivor Martin's son-in-law, who died so suddenly on a visit here from Peru and died very suddenly of a heart attack.

A young man, 45 years old, with a wife and two very young children. I wonder, you know, how you and I would react in those circumstances.

But, of course, again, the outpouring of generosity that was seen. It doesn't make it any easier, of course, to deal sometimes with these things that providence may bring us.

But sometimes we cannot understand God's purpose in many of these things. And the children of Israel are exactly the same here. They love to complain, just like all of us.

[14:47] But you notice how God deals with them. And you see this again and again and again throughout the Old Testament. That God's dealing with his people, particularly in the wilderness, is through his justice.

We saw that not very long ago when we were dealing with the man who had sworn, taken the Lord's name in vain. And the one who was gathering sticks on the Sabbath.

God's justice is shown throughout, particularly in the Old Testament. But when we move into the New Testament, and as we'll see with Nicodemus and Jesus, it is God's mercy that is shown.

What's the link between the two? Well, we'll see that in a moment. Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people. And they bit the people so that many people of Israel died.

Now, this does not mean, of course, that the serpents were on fire. It's the effect of the venom, of the poison. When the snake bites, that it feels as if fire is spreading through the body.

[16:00] But notice the first reaction of the people here. Strange, isn't it, that at this point you think, did the Lord deliberately send serpents that weren't there before, and they suddenly appear and attack the people?

Or was it that the serpents were always there? And God's protection had been on the people up until this point.

And when this protection is removed, then the serpents attack. They bit the people so that many people of Israel died.

What's their first reaction? Then the people come to Moses and said, we have sinned. We have sinned.

And sometimes in your circumstances and my circumstances, it's our first reaction to come, not to Moses, but to come to God, to come to an intercessor.

[17:07] Because, excuse me, that's exactly what Moses is. Remember that Moses' role throughout the time of leaving Egypt until his death, is as an intercessor, a mediator between God and the people.

He is the one who stands there on many occasions. And you remember that God had even said to him at one point to stand aside, that he would destroy this people and make of Moses a great nation.

And how Moses had pleaded with him, that that would not be the case. And of course, God relents. Now, it's not that God changes his mind. Again, that takes us into another area altogether.

But that God knew exactly the process that would be gone through so that the intercession would be seen. We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you.

Pray to the Lord that he take away the serpents from us. But God doesn't do that. So Moses prayed for the people.

[18:19] But the answer is not that the serpents are taken away. What's the answer? It's the most unusual answer. It's not the answer we would have expected.

And the Lord said to Moses, make a serpent, make a fiery serpent. In other words, an image of it. Set it on a pole and everyone who has bitten, when he sees it, shall live.

So Moses made a bronze or a brass serpent, depending on how that's interpreted, something that's made of copper, and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

Now that is a most unusual remedy. It's not what you would have expected. Because there is a sense in which it seems even to contradict the second commandment.

thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image. But the image is made at God's own command.

[19:29] Why was it an image of a serpent? That's another interesting question. Why would it be an image of a serpent? Well, perhaps in the first place, the obvious answer would be that that is where the problem is coming from.

So therefore, it is an image of the problem. The problem is encapsulated in the image. But perhaps there's two other reasons that go with it.

those who had come out of Egypt would have undoubtedly spoken to their children about what Egypt was like.

And particularly, the worship that went on in Egypt. And if you can know anything about the history of Egypt, particularly during the time of the Pharaohs, you will know that snake worship, the worship of snakes, was a particularly prevalent cult in Egypt.

And that it was supposed to be a healing cult. A cult that healed from sickness. That may be one reason.

[20:37] But I think there's a better reason than that. You remember, when you go back to the book of Genesis and Adam and Eve, Eve is deceived by what?

By Satan, of course. But in what form? In the form of a serpent. Even we find that referred to in the book of Revelation.

That Jesus says in the book of Revelation that this is the old serpent, the dragon, the devil. And that sets it together and connects it for us.

And we see how from the beginning to the very end of Scripture there is this link, this theme running through it all the time. Everyone who is bitten when he sees it shall live.

when you saw it, was it a reminder of the fall? Probably not for the majority who had been bitten initially.

[21:50] But then we saw something else that was very curious. It's quite obvious from the passage that we read about Hezekiah that the children of Israel had kept the image of the serpent and the pole for the next 700 years.

It had accompanied them right through their journeys into the conquest of the land of Canaan and it had been put first of all in the tabernacle, maybe not in the Holy of Holies but probably in the holy place.

And then again it is brought into the temple. And it's there in the temple until the time of Hezekiah. Now it's never mentioned again in scripture.

There's no thought of it being worshipped or anything like that but it's certainly there because what has happened in the time of Hezekiah? Well you remember he calls it Nehushion which simply means the brass serpent.

He broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made for until these days the people of Israel had made offerings to it or as it says in the King James Version had burnt incense to it. [23 : 05] It had become an object of idolatry an object of worship and Hezekiah destroys it has it ground to powder. And there's no mention again of the serpent or anything to do with it until 700 years later more or less when we come to the conversation between our Lord and Nicodemus.

And it's here that we need to start looking at the parallels between the two. Just just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness so must the Son of Man be lifted up so that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life.

and as you start to look at the two passages you begin to see the similarity between them. First of all what had happened with the bronze serpent the people confessed their sin.

They came to Moses and confessed their sin. And isn't that exactly what Nicodemus is about to do with the Lord Jesus Christ?

He is to come to confess his sin. In the same way that you and I as we come to a knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ the first thing that we realise is that we are sinners in need of salvation.

[24 : 38] Now it's easy to say of course that sinners is just another word for human beings. But there is a difference between realising that you are human and realising that you are a sinner.

They are two different things all together. One is simply the quality of life that exists the other is realising that you have transgressed God's law that you are far from God's holiness and that you deserve nothing but the justice and the wrath of God.

And that brings you like it did the people to look for a mediator. That's what the people did when they came to Moses. They looked for an intercessor someone who would stand between them and God's wrath.

And that's what Moses does. Moses prays for them. Isn't that what the Lord Jesus Christ has done on the cross of Calvary? He has offered himself and has become the mediator between God and man.

And even now is on the right hand of the Father interceding for his people. Have you ever wondered about that? That Jesus seated on the right hand of the Father is praying for you and I at this time.

[26 : 11] Praying for his people and praying for those who will become his people through faith. You see it is by faith that the Israelites who had been bitten looked at the serpent on the pole.

Remember the size of the camp? There's something like two million people here. It must have been a huge camp. And the serpent, the image of the serpent that's on the pole doesn't seem to have been that big.

Could everyone see it from there where they were? Some commentators suggest that the snakes only attacked in a certain part of the camp and that that was where the image was put.

But scripture doesn't actually tell us that. But the key thing is whoever looked upon the image was healed.

Now you notice God doesn't take the serpents away. They're still there. And for a period of time it would seem that they went on biting the people.

[27 : 23] But there is a remedy. And the remedy has been raised up on the pole so that whoever looked on it was healed. Now if it was you that had been bitten there would you have believed that simply by looking at a piece of brass in the form of a serpent stuck in a pole somewhere maybe in the distance but you might see the sunlight reflecting of it.

Would you have believed that that could have healed you? But scripture tells us so clearly. that that's exactly what happened. That any who looked at the serpent were healed.

Well the poison was still in their blood stream. But it no longer affected them. And isn't that the way it is with sin?

The poison of sin is still in your blood stream. It will ultimately cause your death. That is how death came into the world.

The wages of sin is death. And the fact that the Israelites were healed did not mean that the poison was taken away.

[28 : 43] And did not mean of course that the sting of death would be taken away. But they were healed at that period of time. sin. You see the serpents weren't removed.

And in the same way sin is not removed by the cross. But the efficacy of the cross overcomes the effect of sin.

And you notice that it's not a human remedy. It's a divine remedy. It is God who provides the solution for the plague of the fiery serpents.

It is God who sent it but God who also provides the solution. God's justice is being shown. And God's justice still needs to be shown.

How is it carried out? It is carried out of course what took place on the cross. that the Lord Jesus Christ, this is a foreshadowing of what Christ will do.

[29 : 51] That's why Jesus discusses it with Nicodemus. Because Nicodemus probably doesn't understand the significance of the serpent.

Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness so must the Son of Man be lifted up that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

Whoever looked at the serpent in faith was healed. It's exactly the same isn't it with the cross.

Whoever believes in the sacrifice that is made, the atonement that is made on the cross will have eternal life.

That's the promise that Jesus gives. it seems that Nicodemus at this point didn't really understand that fully. In fact some think he didn't understand it until Calvary actually took place.

That it was after that that he was converted. But that may be one way or the other people argue that one backwards and forwards. Because many think that he was one of the 70 that was sent out.

[31 : 05] But that's another argument. I'm not going to go into that just now. So here you see a situation that parallels exactly what would take place on the cross.

What had God said through the prophet Isaiah? He had said in Isaiah 45 he had said, Look unto me all ye ends of the earth.

And the word look there, the original Hebrew means to actually have to turn round and look. There was a deliberate act of faith involved in turning round and look.

And it may well have been that in looking at the brazen serpent that for many of the people they actually had to turn from where they were to look at where the serpent was.

How many of us turn to look at the cross and to look and see what has taken place on the cross?

We're all familiar with the story of course but very often we pass by on the other side.

[32 : 16] We do not look to see what is going on on the cross. And it is there that we see God's justice as we see it in the Old Testament.

God's justice so often shown without mercy that this time his justice is poured out on his beloved son.

It's quite amazing that when you think about it. You see the prefigure of this in the Old Testament of course with Abraham sacrificing or about to sacrifice Isaac.

Take your son your only beloved son and offer him as a want offering. and yet here is a greater sacrifice.

The son of God the only beloved son in whom I am well pleased to remember the words spoken at the baptism of Jesus.

[33 : 16] And here you see God's wrath being poured out on his beloved son. Why? So that you and I would find mercy.

so that you and I would come in faith to look at the cross, to look at the atonement, to see what is being done there, and to realise and understand that we cannot come into God's presence without a mediator.

The people of Israel came first of all to Moses. You see that pattern so often in the Old Testament. They wouldn't come directly to God.

In fact, earlier on, they had been so frightened of coming close to Mount Sinai when the law was given that they pleaded with Moses to speak for them. And here he is again, pleading with God, interceding with God.

God's God's God's God's grace can be filled with God. And you see how the serpent, how Nehushtan, foreshadows, shows forth what is to happen on the cross of Calvary.

[34 : 28] That there is an intercessor, one who has satisfied God's justice. And because God's justice is satisfied, God's mercy and God's grace can be poured out.

And that's exactly what happens a little bit later on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit is poured out in fullness. You see, the brazen serpent has a lot to teach us.

Like so many other shadows, prefigurations that are shown in the Old Testament of what is to come in the New. And it's not surprising in a sense that this is the figure that Jesus uses with Nicodemus

because Nicodemus would have been familiar with that figure.

And many people are familiar with Nehushtan nowadays. Or even know the name. Or even if you mention the brazen serpent to him.

Have any idea what it means? Even among the people of God. You see, the book of Numbers and so many of the things there are things that we don't often go back to. We find it boring, difficult to read.

[35 : 49] And yet so often they are prefigures of what is to come. That's what the writer to the Hebrews does. He goes back and shows us how the Old Testament ordinances showed what was to come.

Especially in the work of the high priest. and how Jesus himself would become the high priest for us. You see, the brazen serpent on the pole was like a shadow of the cross.

But the substance of the cross was not there. It prefigured, it showed what was to come. In the same way as the sacrifices on the day of atonement, how the sprinkling of the blood and the shedding of the blood prefigured what was to come.

They were shadows, they were types. But the real substance was to come. A thousand four hundred years later, after the tabernacle was actually created, approximately by the time our Lord comes.

And this is what Jesus reminds Nicodemus of. In verse 16, For God so loved the world, and there's probably one of the most famous verses that it is, that you see signs with it everywhere, even at sporting events and so on.

[37 : 14] John 3, 16. And yet I wonder how many people know it. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

And you notice how Jesus goes on to explain, For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Whoever believes in him is not condemned. Isn't that exactly the same as it was with the serpent? Whoever had faith to look at the image of the serpent was healed.

But whoever does not believe, is condemned already. Same as it was with the serpent. If you didn't bother to look at the serpent thinking that it was a useless object that wouldn't help you in any way, there was no healing.

Why is he condemned already? Because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. Jesus couldn't explain it perhaps any clearer to Nicodemus than he does there.

[38 : 31] It's one of the clearest explanations of everything that would take place in the atonement at Calvary. And Nicodemus must have gone away wondering, wondering about so many of these things.

things. But God brings him to faith. He comes to faith eventually. And perhaps you are here this evening and you're wondering about these things as well.

You can see the links from the Old Testament to the New. But it raises more questions for you than it does answers. And so often that's what happens when we're avoiding the challenge of believing. We look for alternative questions. Why did it have to be that way? So many people come up with that question.

Why did it have to be that way? And the answer is very simple but it's not an answer that most people will accept because there was no other way.

[39 : 40] There was no one else who could satisfy God's perfect justice. It required a perfect victim and perfect obedience and perfect holiness to satisfy God's perfect justice.

No one else could do that. And this is the four type that we see in the serpent leading us through to this conversation between our Lord and Nicodemus.

Perhaps you're asking the same questions yourself this season. Perhaps you're struggling to come to an understanding of the conversation that Nicodemus has with our Lord.

You must be born again. How can you be born again? by faith. It's as simple as that. By faith.

And yet even although we say it's simple, it's not simple at all. It's extremely difficult for us to have faith. But it is the gift of God.

[40 : 56] And if you ask, like the people asked for an intercessor, to plead for them, if you ask in exactly the same way, the promise is that you will come to faith.

There was no restriction on who looked at the serpent. No restriction at all. anyone who had been bitten could look at the serpent.

Anyone. If they chose to do so or not, that was up to them. But anyone could look at the bronze serpent who had been bitten. In the same way, anyone who has the poison of sin in their veins till, and that is all of us, you and I, all of us, may look in faith on the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. And, may come and pray through the intercession that is made for you, to a saving knowledge of him as your Lord and Savior.

May the Lord grant that these thoughts would be blessed to him. Let us pray. our Father in heaven, we thank you for your word. We thank you how we can see how the Old Testament and the new dovetail together.

[42 : 17] But we thank you more than anything else for the gift of the Lord Jesus Christ, for the blood that was shed and the atonement that was made, that sinners may come to a saving knowledge through the love that was behind it.

For you so loved the world that you sent your only son. And we give you thanks for that. We pray oh Lord that any who are struggling here with their faith this evening would be strengthened, would come to a saving knowledge.

And we pray that you would pardon our sin through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. Let us conclude then by singing the final verses in Psalm 106.

Take us through again some of the things that happened to the children of Israel. Page 382 Verse 43 He many times delivered them, but with their counsel so they him provoked that for their sin they were brought very low.

Yet their affliction he beheld when he did hear their cry, and he for them as covenant did call to memory after his mercy's multitude he did repent, and made them to be pitied of all those who did them captively.

[43 : 36] O Lord our God does save and gather the heathen from above, that we thy holy name may praise in a triumphant song. Blessed be Jehovah Israel's God to all eternity, let all the people say Amen, praise to the Lord give thee.

Let us sing these messages then in conclusion. He many times delivered them a wizard counsel so They have thrown the torn ashes They were brought very low Yet there of which shall be be and he did hear their cry And he for them his covenant that called to memory after his mercy his multitude he did repent and faith than to be paid in all those who did them captively

O Lord our God does save and gather the heath and from among that we thy holy name may praise in a triumphant song Let's be the whole of Israel God to all eternity let all the people say Amen

Praise to the

Lord give ye Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all now and forever Amen