

## The Bitten Israelite.

Numbers 21

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Article 22 of 47 **Short Meditations**

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Very happy it is to be discovering the glories of Scripture; specially in days when the infidel insolence of men is challenging it. Amalek, of old, dared to come out, and withstand the camp of Israel, though at that moment the Cloud which carried the Glory was resting on the camp — and, by-and-by, the great infidel confederacy of the last days will rise so high in pride and daring as to face the army of the white-horsed Rider descending from heaven. (Ex. 17, Rev. 19)

In like spirit is the heart of man now challenging the Book which carries the precious and mysterious glories of the Wisdom of God. It is therefore good service to draw forth these glories, and let the oracles of God speak, in their own excellency, for the confusion of this iniquity. And one of these glories, a part of this excellency, is this, that it is found to be one breath that animates, one light that shines, one voice that is heard, in all the regions of this one Divine volume. For, in a manner, Moses may be said to reappear in Paul, Isaiah in Peter, David in John, and the like. The light of the morning is the light of noonday and of evening, though, it is true, in different measures and conditions.

In turning now to the narrative which this scripture gives us, we shall see this illustrated. We find, in the first instance, that the Lord refuses to cancel the judgment He had pronounced. The Camp had sinned, and fiery serpents, messengers of death, were sent among them — and though Moses may pray and the people cry out in anguish of heart, the Lord will not remove those executioners of His righteous judgment. And this is His way in the Gospel. The sentence of death pronounced at the beginning on sin is not reversed. That could not be. That would be the acknowledging of some mistake or infirmity — and that could not be. But God has His provisions in the face of the sentenced death. This is His way. Wonderful to tell it, He provides the sinner with an answer to His own demands in righteousness! At the beginning this was so, and so has it been again and again; so is it in the Gospel, and so is it in this narrative.

God brought the bruised Seed of the Woman into the death-stricken garden of Eden, and Adam, the self-ruined sinner, is provided for. Noah got from God the Ark in the day of the Flood, and Israel the sprinkled lintel in the day of the judgment of Egypt. David was told to raise an altar in the despised threshing-floor of an uncircumcised Jebusite; and that altar there had virtue to quiet the sword of the Angel of death that was travelling on high over the doomed city. As the blood of Calvary had virtue to rend the veil from top to bottom, and open the high heavens to the captives of sin and death.

This is one of the beautiful unities in the revealed way of God.

It is not God cancelling His judgments, but providing the sinner with an answer to them. This little narrative finely and vividly exhibits this. Israel had sinned, as we have seen, and fiery serpents were sent into the midst of them. They prayed that the serpents might be taken away; but no such prayer could prevail. The executioners of righteousness must remain in the camp — death must follow sin, for God had said at the beginning, "In the day thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die." But the Lord commands Moses to make a Serpent of brass and set it on a pole, and then proclaim, as in the hearing of the whole camp, that every bitten Israelite who looked to that uplifted Serpent, should be

healed and live.

This was life confronting death — a secret spring of life and healing in the midst of the powers of death — it was as the revelation of the bruised Seed of the Woman in the freshly death-stricken garden of Eden. But this was not the withdrawing of the fiery serpents, as the camp had craved — it was not the cancelling of the sentence which had been passed upon their sin; it was another, a different, and a higher thing; it was enabling the Israelite in the wilderness to triumph over that miserable estate in which he had involved himself. This is what it was. It was not simply an escape from it, but a triumph over it — for an Israelite bitten by a fiery serpent, if he but looked at the brazen Serpent, might then smile at the fiery serpents though still abroad in the camp — just as Noah long before, on the vantage-ground where grace and salvation had put him, might have smiled at the waters as they were rising around him — or as the Israelite in Egypt, under the sprinkled lintel, might have smiled at the sword of the destroying Angel as he was passing through the land.

How excellent all this is! And this is still the Gospel — so consistent with itself is the way of God, and shadowed in like beauty in the story of Noah in the Flood, or of the Israelite in Egypt, or of the bitten man of the camp in the wilderness who had looked at the Serpent of brass. Such an one could not be bitten a second time; the sin against the Lord of the camp, which had quickened these ministers of death, had been met by the provisions of that same Lord of the camp Himself, and this was his security and his triumph. He was now in a better state than had he never been bitten. His state was then vulnerable, now it is impregnable — then he might have been wounded by the messenger of death, now he could not. As Adam clothed of God is beyond Adam in the nakedness of innocency; Adam the pardoned and accepted sinner, beyond Adam the upright creature.

God's riddle — "Out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came forth sweetness" — is expounded again and again. We have seen it before, and we see it here again. And in connection with all this, giving another look at Adam, I may say, that when his lips were opened over the Woman the second time, they uttered a happier word than they had uttered the first time. "She shall be called Woman" did not express a joy equal to that which he tasted when, as we further read, "he called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living." To celebrate life from God in the face of self-wrought death, is a far higher occupation for the heart, than to celebrate even the closing, crowning gift of God in creation or in providence.

Now all this which we have here traced in this little narrative in Numbers 21, is, again I say, the Gospel. This is as the salvation of God. Nothing that was threatened has been cancelled. All by the process of ruin and redemption, is met and answered and satisfied. The blood of the everlasting covenant has given "the God of peace" to raise from the dead, Jesus, as "the Shepherd of the sheep." God Himself is righteously, gloriously justified, and the sinner victoriously brought into a condition of certainty and impregnableness, and of holy thankful defiance of all the enmity and the attempts and the resources of the old Destroyer.

But there is this further feature of the Gospel impressed on this little narrative. The life or healing was to be *individual* - the bitten Israelite must look himself to the uplifted Serpent. "Every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it shall live," said the Lord to Moses — and then the history tells us, "If a serpent had bitten any man, when *he* beheld the Serpent of brass, *he* lived." (verses 8, 9.) So is it now as between us and God personally and individually in the Gospeland we may deeply bless Him that it is so. He individualizes and separates us to Himself, to talk to us about our sins, and settle the question of eternity with us. He sits with us alone at the Well of Sychar, or sees us, our own very selves, under the fig-tree, or feels our own touch in the midst of the busy crowd, or looks up to the sycamore tree to

catch our eye, or meets us alone outside the camp, or on the floor of the Temple. His word in John 3 is like His word in Numbers 21. — "Except a *man* be born again, *he* cannot see the kingdom of God." A look will do it, but the look must be a personal, individual act. Faith is the act of the soul in immediate dealing with God. Another cannot believe for me, nor can ordinances or human religious provisions take God's place in relation to me. I must look, and Christ must be lifted up. Blessed to tell it, He and I are to have to do with one another.

Thus is it, as reflected in this little narrative, and thus is it in the world-spread Gospel. And surely these are wondrous witnesses of the way the grace and salvation of God have taken with us. God did not prevent sin. Nor has He cancelled the judgment which He attached to it. Nor has He simply made things again as once they were. He gets out of the ruin something better than that which had been ruined — and He has accomplished this in a way of unsullied righteousness, and of infinite display of His own name and glory. It is redemption and resurrection, life in victory, life won by Himself from the power of death.

But I must more particularly meditate on the Lord Jesus in the Gospel by St. John, as in connection with this.

The moment recorded in our narrative was no time for anything but a look, and that too, a look at the uplifted Serpent. It would not have done for a bitten Israelite to occupy himself with any other object. Death was before him, if he did not look there. And it would have been the gracious service of any brother Israelite to have recalled him to that object, if he saw that his eye, or feared that his thoughts, were disposed to take up with any other.

It is such a part as this, which the Lord Himself acts with Nicodemus in John 3. Nicodemus had come to Him as to a Teacher. The Lord at once turns him into another direction, and lets him know that he must come to Him as a Saviour or Life-giver. Nicodemus was seeking instruction. The Lord tells him that he needed *life*. And then, He so orders His speech with him as to withdraw him from every thought and every object but the Serpent of brass lifted on the pole in the wilderness. He lets him know, that he and all men, like bitten Israelites, were on their way to death, but that the brazen Serpent, the Healer or Life-giver, God's salvation, was in the camp again, and that the look must again be given, must interpose again as between the bite and death, or the kingdom would be lost, and the sinner would perish.

Indeed it is according to this, or in the spirit of One who was withdrawing the eye of every one who comes to Him from every object but the uplifted Serpent, that the Lord Jesus conducts His ministry all through that Gospel by St. John. For He refuses to act in any character but that of a Saviour. Men may come to Him in other relationships and for other ends, but He will not receive them. One may appeal to Him as a Doer of Wonders, another may flatter Him as a King, another may be for seating Him on a throne of judgment, another, like Nicodemus, may come to Him as a Revealer of the deep, mysterious lessons of heaven; but He has no welcome for such; He does not entertain approaches and appeals like these. He does not commit Himself to any or either of these. But when a convicted sinner comes to Him or stands before Him, when, in that way, a bitten Israelite looks to Him as the uplifted Serpent, the God-appointed Healer or Quickener of man, then He answers at once, and life and salvation are imparted.

What consolation! What grace in Him, what deliverance and blessing for us! What joy to meet God in such a character, and to see Him thus, as the Jesus of St. John's Gospel, so jealously holding Himself before us in that character, refusing to be received in any other. His loved Nicodemus was under long and patient training, ere he gave Him the look of a bitten Israelite. But he did at the end, and

then did it \*blessedly and vigorously. (See John 19)

Precious truth indeed, and precious Saviour who has provided us sinners with it! The look that was preached so long ago, in the midst of the camp of Israel in the wilderness, in the day of this twenty-first of Numbers, the Lord Jesus, the Jehovah of Israel and the true Serpent of Brass, preaches it still and again, and with all fervency and earnestness, in the Gospel by St. John.

But again. — The Lord lets us further know in that same Gospel, how He welcomes that look when it is given Him, and how immediately He answers it with the healing and salvation of God. Mark this in the case of Andrew and his companion, and of Nathanael in the first chapter. See this welcome finely and heartily expressed in His most gracious dealings with the Samaritan in the fourth chapter; and again read it in His words to the woman in the eighth chapter; and listen to it in His words to Peter, in the sixth, when He turns to him, upon the multitude refusing to give Him that look. And we have another witness of the same in John 12: 32, when He speaks of Himself again as the uplifted Brazen Serpent, and exults in the thought of gathering all men to Himself in that character.

Now these are characteristics in the true ordinance which we could not have gotten in the typical ordinance of Numbers 21. We do not there find an Israelite, in the sweet affection of the Jesus of St. John, earnestly and carefully guiding the eye of his bitten brother to the uplifted Serpent. That was an affectionate exercise of heart that was reserved for the Saviour Himself to practise and exhibit. Nor do we (for we could not) find the uplifted Serpent there welcoming and encouraging the eye that turned to it. But this also was reserved for the true, the living, the Divine Healer of sinners ruined by the old fiery serpent of death. In Him we get these things. And thus, in a great sense, the half is not told us by the type — the original exceeds the fame that we had heard of it. Happy those poor sinners, who stand before the Brazen Serpent who is now lifted up before their eyes in St. John's Gospel. They get the healing of God there, and a hearty welcome likewise.

We have, however, something more. We have this same earnestness and affection in the Holy Ghost as we have seen to be in the Son. We find it in the Epistle to the Galatians. How zealously is St. Paul there, in the Spirit, occupied in either keeping the eye of the Galatians on Christ crucified, or turning them back to that object! He would alarm them by the fear of some witchery. He would challenge and rebuke them, and that sharply. He would yearn over them, and fain consent to travail in birth with them again. He would, in deepest affection, remind them of past days of blessedness, and solemnly contrast them with the present. He reasons with them also. And he tells them his own story, and the purpose of his heart touching this great object, the crucified Christ of God, the true uplifted Serpent of Brass, how he had looked at it, and meant still to gaze, to live by the faith of it, and glory only in it.

All this is surely excellent. The Spirit in the Apostle is in company with the Son of the Evangelist — and the shadow is outdone by the substance. Affections are exercised in the Divine originals, which could never have been expressed in the typical ordinances.

Do we still discover a further secret, I may yet ask, when we compare this chapter in Numbers with St. John? Yes — the light that shines there, though the same light, is still brighter here. We discover this again in John 3.

There the Lord connects this look at the uplifted Serpent with the new birth. This had not been done in Numbers 21 — though it might have been derived from it. The new, eternal life might have been discovered in the Israelite who had looked at that Serpent, because he was then breathing resurrection-life, which is eternal life. He was enjoying a life which had been provided for him by One who had met, in his behalf, the wounding of the old serpent, the serpent who had the power of death.

When he looked, he lived; and that life was a life won from death, a victorious life. In principle it was eternal life, such as the healing power of God, the salvation of God, the risen, victorious Son breathes into the elect. I say not, that every Israelite who looked was introduced to this eternal life. It is not necessary to say that; but it is the expression of it — and this, in its substance and reality we get in John 3, and are instructed by the Lord Himself to know that faith's look at the true Brazen Serpent carries eternal life with it. "And 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."

And this truth is taught distinctly in 1 Peter 1. "Being born again," says the inspired Apostle, "not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God which liveth and abideth for ever." And then he further teaches us where this word is to be found, where this seed of eternal life is to be picked up — "and this is the word which *by the Gospel* is preached unto you" — the Gospel being, as we know, the publication of the virtue of the true Serpent of Brass, the Lamb of God, the Healer of sinners destroyed by the lie of the old serpent of death.