

THE FIRST SETTING UP OF THE BRAZEN SERPENT

NO. 1722

A SERMON
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AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON.

“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 spoke against God, and against Moses, Wherefore have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? for there is no bread, neither is there any water; and our soul loathes this light bread. And the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many people of Israel died. Therefore the people came to Moses and said, We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD, and against you; 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 you a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that everyone that is bitten, when he looks 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.”
Numbers 21:4-9.

I HAVE frequently expounded to you the type of the brazen serpent as our Lord interprets it in the third of John. I thought it meet tonight to take that type in its connection and look at the original circumstances which led to the setting of it up. For while the general doctrine of looking for salvation to Christ as the brazen serpent is always to be preached, and is most usefully set forth in the midst of the unconverted, yet I take it that its original institution teaches us much which ought not to be overlooked.

It is very clear that this type has its first voice to the people of God, for it was amongst Israel—amongst the nominal people of God—that this brazen serpent was first needed and first set up. And while the instruction which it gives is wide as the universe, for whosoever looks shall live, nevertheless it has an inner circle to which it first of all addresses itself, and these are the professed members of the church of God.

The Book of Numbers might be called, without any impropriety, “Moses’ Pilgrim’s Progress.” It contains a full account of the progress of the pilgrims through the wilderness until they came to the promised land. And like Bunyan’s “Pilgrim’s Progress,” it is not only a history of any one person or nation, but it is the picture of the life of all God’s people. Probably no one amongst us will pass through all the troubles of the Israelites, so as to become in one person an epitome of all wilderness experience, and yet even this may be, for so it was with David, and so it has been with others by whom the Lord would instruct His church. This, however, is exceptional.

But take the whole of us together as the church of God, and you will find that our lives are mirrored, pictured, and foreseen in the travels of God’s chosen people from the land of Egypt to Canaan. I am afraid that many of us can see ourselves even in the passage before us. Ay, not only those of us who are young and raw in spiritual things, but certain of us who have been for many years following in the divine track, and are hoping by-and-by to enjoy our portion in the better country. If even Moses and Aaron erred on the road, I fear there are very few of us who can read the story without crying, “I remember my faults this day.”

The passage before us occurred almost at the end of Israel’s wanderings. They had been now for forty years in the wilderness, and they had come within sight of the promised land. They had only to cross the mountains of Edom, and to get through the passes of Seir, and they would have been at once in the land which flows with milk and honey. But the Edomites would not permit them the privilege of passing along the highway, and so, as Israel must not fight his brother Esau, they were called upon to go

around his border and to come down to an arm of the Red Sea by a long and weary march, when they seemed to be on the border of their covenanted inheritance. If this happened at the end of their marches, let none of us presume upon our experience and knowledge. May the Holy Spirit help us while we learn caution from this inspired history, for these things happened to them for our instruction.

I. I call your attention, first of all, to their DISCOURAGEMENT, *“The soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way.”*

Assuredly there are times when God’s servants become discouraged. To their shame, let us say it. To *our* shame let us confess it. It is by faith that we live, but as discouragement is the opposite of faith, it does not help our life. It is generally the fruit of unbelief, and so by discouragement we cease to live a healthy and vigorous life, and we begin to faint. Yet even those of God’s children who have had much experience in the divine way at times give way to discouragement.

The reason may be found in various things. Occasionally it springs out of *disappointment*. It was a serious disappointment to the Israelites to see the land over there within a day’s march, or less, and yet for Edom to say, “I will come out against you with the sword. You shall not pass through my border.” It seemed like having the cup at the lip and being denied a draught. It was a grievous trial, after all those years, to have come so close, and then to be forced to march back to the Red Sea. How tantalizing to see the land, as through a wall of crystal, and yet to be unable to put foot upon it!

It was a bitter disappointment and there may be like trials in store for us. Possibly some of my Master’s servants have entertained the notion that they have made amazing progress in the divine life, and just then an event has occurred which showed them their weakness, and they have been forced to weep in secret places and upbraid themselves, saying, “After all this, am I no better than to be cast down about a trifle? Have I suffered so much, and yet is my progress so small?”

*“I thought that in some favored hour,
My Lord would answer my request,
And by His love’s subduing power
Would slay my sins and give me rest.*

*“Instead of this, He made me feel
The hidden evils of my heart,
And let the angry powers of hell
Assault my soul in every part.”*

We ask to have our waters purified, and lo! we are stirred till all the mud which was quiet in the bottom of our soul is made visible, and pollution appears everywhere. Yet may not this be the nearest and surest way to purity? this making us see the secret depravity of our hearts? Yet what a disappointment! I thought I was something, and now I perceive that I am nothing. I had half hoped that I was perfect, and now I see my secret imperfections and lusts more clearly than ever.

*“The truth is easy to repeat;
But when my faith is sharply tried
I find myself a learner yet,
Unstable, weak, and apt to slide.”*

We thought that we were climbing into full assurance, and lo, we descend into the valley of humiliation. Yes, we did taste of the honey of bold confidence, and we said, “I know whom I have believed, and I am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed to him against that day.” And now we hardly know whether we are the people of God at all. We have with trembling to repeat our first step, and turn our eye to the bleeding Savior, hoping as poor sinners to find salvation in Him.

This want of progress is a dreadful thing, and yet it has happened to many till they have dropped all idea of boasting, and have said with the apostle, “Not as though I had already attained.” They have felt like men beginning a race, although they have been running that race for many a patient year. Such disappointment often costs the child of God much discouragement because of the way.

It was not, however, merely disappointment, it was much else. It was the *unfriendliness of those who ought to have been most brotherly*. Surely Edom ought to have granted his brother Israel the small privilege of passing through the country, seeing it was the nearest way to Canaan. It would not have cost Esau anything. Israel promised to pay if they even drank of the water of his wells. But no, they must submit to this unkindness.

I have known people of God much discouraged by the unfriendliness of those whom they thought to be their brethren and sisters in Christ. They went to them for sympathy and they received rebuffs. They looked to them for help in the time of depression and it was denied them. They said, “Surely, my brethren will comfort me,” but they cried in the end, like Job, “Miserable comforters are you all.”

Then have they sighed, “It was not an enemy, then I could have borne it, but it was one who was my equal, my acquaintance. We went to the house of God in company.” You know the story of David’s desertion by his friend and of our Lord’s betrayal by Judas. And you are well aware how often heartbreak has come to the best of men through the unfriendliness of those whom they looked upon as sure to render them kindness.

The people were much discouraged because of the way, for it was blocked up by an unbrotherly brother. May the Lord’s people learn great tenderness to one another, for sometimes we may say thoughtlessly that which will inflict a ragged wound. Let us be loving, and tender as a nurse with a child, remembering the gentleness of the Father, and the tenderness of Jesus, and the compassion of the Holy Spirit. Alas, that it should be often true that the souls of the people of God may be much discouraged because of the absence of Christian love! Resolve that it shall not be *your* fault.

Undoubtedly however, the soul of the people was much discouraged because of *the length of the way*. The nation had been forty years on the march. They had stopped for considerable periods at different encampments, but still they never knew how long they would be in one spot. They were like swallows, always on the wing. It is true their life was full of mercy, but at the time mentioned in our text they were not in the humor to notice mercy, they were more inclined to notice discomfort, and to complain that the way was so long that they were downright weary of it. They had hoped years before to have reached the goodly land, and now they must change their direction, and go all round the Edomite country. This was tiresome and tried their patience till it quite failed.

To certain of God’s people old age has brought much of heaviness by reason of its infirmities and afflictions. They often sigh, “Why are his chariots so long in coming?” They are willing in the spirit to abide the Master’s will, but the flesh is weak, and they wonder whether the Lord has quite forgotten them. Why has He not taken them home? Why does He keep them lingering in this banishment, so far off from the dear Father’s house? Do you not hear them mournfully sing—

*“O when shall we at once go up,
Nor this side Jordan longer stop,
But the good land possess?
When shall we end our lingering years,
Our sorrows, sins, and doubts, and fears—
A howling wilderness”?*

Oh, my dear brother, if your length of years has become a burden, God grant that you may not be discouraged. May you be “such a one as Paul the aged,” and bear up under all the growing weaknesses of your years, bringing forth fruit in your old age. Be not cast down, for the Master will come, and will not tarry. He has not forgotten His servants. He will give them their penny at sundown. The ripe sheaf shall not be left in the field too long. Your Lord will come and receive you unto Himself, that where He

is you may also be. Quietly hope, and patiently wait for the salvation of God. And yet, no doubt, the length of the way has discouraged full many a true pilgrim.

Then, there was the *fatigue of the way*, for journeying through that wilderness was by no means an easy business, especially along the shore of the gulf. Very rugged to this day is the pathway there. The road is full of hills and valleys, and rugged ravines and sharp stones, and weary sands. Traveling there is as bad as traveling well can be. To some of God's own children life is no parade upon a level lawn, but rough marching and deep wading. They have to take the bleak side of the hill, the wind blows upon them, and the sleet is driven in their eyes, and their home is but a cold harbor to them. Even their bed seems to have a stone for its pillow. We know certain of God's people who, what with poverty and ill-health, with ungenerous relations, with persecution, with hard labor, and with short commons, find from day to day that the pathway to heaven lies through briars and thorns, over dark mountains and through black forests. Do you marvel much that their souls are discouraged because of the way?

I think I hear somebody saying, "Well, now, I don't like all this. *I* do not get discouraged, and *I* do not find the road to be rough." Dear brother, be thankful that you do not, but let me warn you not to judge others. If you are like great bullocks, full of strength, do not get to pushing with horn and shoulder those who happen to be the weak cattle, for the Lord takes note of haughty looks and proud words. When any of His saints grow so strong and stomach-full that they despise the tried ones, they are likely themselves to smart for it. The rule of our God and King is this—"He has filled the hungry with good things, but the rich he has sent away empty." This I do know both by observation and experience—that there are many true pilgrims who will enter the King's country triumphantly at the last, who, nevertheless, are occasionally much discouraged because of the way.

And yet, brethren, I am not going to make any excuse for discouragement in myself, nor would I try to make it for you. You do not want to have any excuse made for you, do you? After all, these Israelites were a highly favored people. What if they were driven to wind around the land of Edom? Yet the Lord went before them and is not that man happy who marches where JEHOVAH leads? Tell us that God has chosen the way and we do not want to know more about it. "He led them forth by a right way." Depend upon that. There could be no mistake where infinite wisdom led the van.

Now, brother, you are discouraged, you say, because of the way, but whose way is it? Have you chosen your own way and willfully run against your duty and against the providence of God? Well, then, I say nothing about the consequences of such conduct, for they must be terrible. But if you have endeavored to follow the Lord fully, and if you have tried to keep the path of His statutes, then it must be well with you. Why are you discouraged? Judge not by the sight of the eyes, nor by the hearing of the ears, let faith sit on the judgment seat, and I am sure she will give forth this verdict—"If the Lord wills it, it is well. If JEHOVAH leads the way, the road must be right."

Besides that, not only did God lead them, but God carried them. He says Himself that He bore them on eagle's wings, for though the way was often rough, yet it is wonderful to remember that their feet did not swell, neither did their garments wax old upon them, all those forty years. Though it was a wilderness, yet their bread was daily given them, and though it was a land of drought, yet the smitten rock with its waters followed them, and they knew nothing of drought. How could they be better off than to have heaven for their granary, the rocks for their wine cellars, and God Himself for their Provider?

They were gentlemen commoners upon the bounty of JEHOVAH. They were honorable pensioners of the King of kings. What could they desire which He had not supplied? What city was lit up at night with a pillar of fire, as their great canvas city was enlightened? With what other people did God dwell? Where else did He walk in the midst of their abodes and manifest Himself as He did to Israel? Instead of being discouraged, they had every cause to be doubly grateful and glad. Led of God, fed of God, taught of God, and guarded of God—what better lot could they imagine?

Besides, dear friends, though they were so very long in getting to Canaan, yet they would get there if they would only believe their God. God would surely bring them in. To every faithful one He would say, "You shall stand in your lot in the end of the days." Though the unbelievers among them perished, and

their carcasses fell in the wilderness, yet even to such of them as repented there was this sweet thought, that though nothing more than God's work might appear unto His servants, yet His glory would be seen by their children, and the next generation should surely enter into the land.

Come, let us be of good comfort then, for the same reasons. We also shall reach our Father's house in due time. We shall get home and our homecoming shall not be too late for the marriage supper of the Lamb. The Lord knows the way of the righteous. He is steering us from day to day by infallible wisdom, and despite these stormy seas, we shall yet cast anchor in the fair havens whither our Lord has gone. "So shall we be for ever with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words."

The Lord is doing us no hurt. The Lord is denying us no good. He is making even evil things to work together for good, for our good, and we have no proper ground for discouragement. Apparent ground for fear there is in plenty, but real ground there is none.

*"Your harps, you trembling saints,
Down from the willows take.
Loud to the praise of love divine,
Bid every string awake."*

II. In the case of the Israelites this discouragement came to a great head, for it led to COMPLAINT, and that is our second point.

"And the people spoke against God, and against Moses, Wherefore have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? for there is no bread, nor any water; and our soul loathes this light bread." This was a bitter and wicked complaint.

We are in a sad case, dear brethren, when our discouragements at last reach such a point that we begin to complain of our God. For the complaints that come at these times are such as God is not likely to bear with. When God's people are in real trouble, He is longsuffering and tender towards His afflicted, but with the forward He shows Himself forward. When the people complained of thirst, the Lord sweetened the waters of Marah for them. When they were hungry, He gave them bread from heaven. But when, having nothing justly to complain of, they merely grumbled because they were discouraged, He dealt with them severely, and sent the fiery serpents among them which bit many of them, so that much people of Israel died. Beware of a murmuring spirit. God will pity our needs, but He will punish our whims.

Some of us need to be cautioned against letting the spirit of discouragement hurry us on to quarrelling with God and questioning His love. It is ill for a saint to strive with His Savior. When these people made their first complaint, it was a singular one. It was a complaint about having been brought out of Egypt. "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?"

Well, but first of all, they ought not to complain of being brought up out of Egypt, for that was a land of bondage where their male children had to perish in the river and where they themselves longed to die, for life had become intolerable. And yet, you see, they are complaining that they were brought up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness, as they said.

Is it not possible that our rebellious hearts may even complain of God's mercy? For want of something to murmur about, discouraged ones will pick holes in the goodness of God. What a pity that it should be so! Brothers, if we are believers in Christ, we have been redeemed from bondage. We have been brought into a separated condition and made to be the people of God. Shall we ever complain of *that*? Suppose it brings upon us derision, loneliness, unkindness? Suppose it entails upon us loss and self-denial? Suppose it involves us in many difficulties, are we going to flinch because of these? God forbid!

Did we not count the cost when first we started out from Egypt? And having counted the cost, will we now draw back from the fight? Nay, but in the name of God we will struggle until we have won the

victory, and it shall never be a complaint against God that He brought us up out of Egypt. He will not let us die in the wilderness. We cannot believe it and we will not let our soul say so.

*“Determined to save, He watched o’er my path
When, Satan’s blind slave, I sported with death.
And can He have taught me to trust in His name,
And thus far have brought me to put me to shame?”*

I cannot believe it. Lie down, O dog of doubt! Lie down, O cur of unbelief! If you have no better bark than this, be quiet. Oh, for God’s grace to stop complaining at once. Our God never forgave a soul to let that soul fall from grace. Christ never bought a soul with His blood, to make it one of His, and then to let it slip through His fingers into perdition. The Lord has never led us through so many trials and temptations to suffer us, after all, to be shipwrecked and cast away. If He had meant to destroy us, He would not have showed us such things as these. Let us not become as peevish as to talk about dying in the wilderness, when the fact is the Lord is making signs and wonders of us by causing us to live in the wilderness.

Next, look at their complaint of having no food—“There is no bread, neither is there any water.” It was a great falsehood. There was bread, they had to admit that fact in the next breath, but then they did not call the manna “bread.” They called it by an ugly name in the Hebrew. The water, too, was not muddy and thick like the water of the Nile. It was bright, clear, pure water from the rock, and therefore they would not call it water. They wanted water with substance in it which would leave grit between their teeth and as the stream which leaped from the flinty rock was pure crystal they would not call it water.

Have you not known people to whom God has given great mercy and yet they have talked as if they were quite deserted? Unbelief is blind, just as surely as faith is far-seeing. Unbelief enjoys nothing, just as faith rejoices in everything. He that believes finds sweetness in the manna, “the taste thereof was as wafers made with honey.” But he that has no faith finds nothing pleasant even in “the corn of heaven,” but says, “There is no bread.”

Only think of anybody saying, “Our soul loathes this light bread”! It was a diet that was very easy to digest and kept them in good health, and yet they pined for heavy, lumpy food. They began to wish for leeks, and garlic, and onions—something rank and strong, and less refined than “angels’ food.” They sighed for the meat that they ate in Egypt. They hankered after a coarse and dangerous diet. God knew that it was not proper food for them in the blazing desert, and He gave them instead the best possible nourishment.

And now they cry, “Oh, there is nothing substantial in it. It does not make you feel as if you were full.” They found fault with that which they ought to have commended. Men really need that which is sufficient, that which will sustain the frame, that which will enable them to continue in health and strength, but these murmurers remembered the rough stuff they used to eat among the brick kilns, and they wished to feel full and overblown as they had now and then felt in Egypt. Thus they fell to complaining against God without excuse.

Are there any here in that state? Are you so discouraged that you do not want to live by faith any longer—it seems too unsubstantial? Are you tired of praying, “Give us day by day our daily bread”? You would like a nice lump sum in the bank instead, and plenty of the cares and snares of wealth. And is it so that you are no longer content with the old Gospel? It is so easy of digestion that you pine for a hard morsel—a piece of cast-iron philosophy to lie on your mind for years to come. You want a bit of indigestible modern thought that will remain within you like the cucumbers of Egypt, which were not so soon gone as the manna of heaven.

You crave for leeks, and garlic, and onions—something sensational, remarkable, though by no means comfortable to the pure taste of those who are born of the Spirit. Is it not strange how men who

call themselves Christians run after that kind of meat? And of the real good Gospel, which is able to save the soul, and to build it up, they begin to say, “It is worn out. We have heard this one thing so often. You see it is just the same old-fashioned manna. We want more variety. We demand that which is novel, which will commend itself to our advanced intellectual condition by its metaphysical subtlety.”

That is the style. I see the spirit everywhere, and it comes across us all in some form or other—complaining of what God provides in providence, complaining of what God provides in the Bible, complaining of what the Holy Ghost provides in His divine operations. We look out, like the Athenians, for some new thing, we do not know what we want.

When the grumbling humor is on us, we complain of anything and everything, as did these Israelites. They complained of God, they complained of Moses, they complained of the manna. They would have been ready to complain of Aaron, but, fortunately for him, he had been dead a month or so, and so they poured the more gall upon Moses.

To men in this state, nothing is right, nothing can be right. The whole world is turned upside down, and if it were again turned the other way it would be just as wrong—perhaps more wrong than ever. You smile, I see, at this. Well, you may smile if you like, brethren, but it is a thing to weep over, for I remember a text that says, “The Lord heard their murmuring.” That is the solemn point in the matter. We are pleased that God should hear our prayers, it is that which we long for. But is it not terrible that God should hear our murmurings?

There are two things that God always hears. Mark this! The first is the voice of faith, and the second is the voice of unbelief. For, as much as God loves faith, so much God loathes unbelief. When we are strong in faith the Lord can do anything with us and for us, and He can make us equal to all difficulties, so that we can say with the apostle, “I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me.” But when we give way to unbelief Christ Himself can do nothing with us, as it is written—“He could not do many mighty works there because of their unbelief.”

Do you not feel sorry, then, that you ever murmured and complained, since your God heard it all? What is more, as the Lord usually answers the prayers of faith, so He often answers the prayers of incredulity. I have heard a brother cry out because of his small and bearable trouble, and I have known the Lord answer his impatience with great trials. If children cry for nothing, they ought to have something to cry for. And if we get discouraged when there really is no reason for it, we shall probably be answered with astonishing tribulations. If we begin complaining when we ought to be singing, it is likely enough that we shall have grave cause for crying out, for is it not written concerning the Lord, “With the froward you will show yourself froward”?

When we walk tenderly, submissively, and quietly, and when we say with David, “My soul is even as a weaned child,” then the Lord walks very gently and comfortably toward us, and our path is smoothed by His love. But the Lord has said, “If you walk contrary to me, I will walk contrary to you.” Wherefore, brethren, if we are discouraged in any way, let us pray that we may not venture further in that ill way, nor begin to rail against the Lord and His providence. May we go back to confidence and joy and faith, but not go on till we fall into the ditch of murmuring, and lie waiting there for yet worse things.

III. The Lord ere long sends upon murmurers PUNISHMENT.

This is our third head. We read that as soon as the people found fault with Moses, and with God, and with the manna, “The Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, and much people of Israel died.” Fiery serpents were ready at the divine call. The Lord never lacks means of chastisement. There was no interval between the sin and the suffering, for the fault was wanton and inexcusable.

Will God send fiery serpents among His own people? These were the tribes that ate of the manna, and the people that “drank of the rock that followed them, which rock was Christ.” These were the Lord’s visible church in the wilderness, and though not all spiritually His children, yet they were types of His chosen, representatives of the whole believing family.

Well, brethren, the Lord, in fatherly anger may send fiery serpents among a doubting and quarrelsome people, and so those who bite with fault-finding may find themselves bitten.

These fiery serpents come in different forms. Sometimes they may be *new trials*. The Israelites, as far as I know, had never seen these seraphs, or burning ones, before. They seemed to fly up out of the sand and bite them or ever they were aware, and then the venom entered into their blood, and made it scald them till they seemed to be a mass of fire from head to foot, burning with fierce pain, and ready to die. It was dreadful to be marching through the midst of fiery flying serpents.

The Lord deliver us from that. But He may send to us, if we grow peevish, a fresh and novel affliction, a crooked trial which will twist and wriggle about us—a sudden grief which will poison the fountain of our life. And this may hastily fly at us, as a chastisement for not having believed in God under much happier circumstances.

In some Christians these fiery serpents may be *the uprisings of their own corruptions*. I have known the corruptions of a child of God to be quiet and still for a long period. They have been there, but they have been forced to hide away like thieves that dare not come out in daylight, and the child of God has hence enjoyed rest. But the good man has been discouraged, and has fallen to complaining, and then these inward corruptions have broken forth upon him and compassed him about like bees, innumerable, and quick to sting. Some of us know what this means. We have been put to a dead stand with our lively inbred sins which we thought were dead, suddenly they have revived within us, and we had to fight against them for dear life.

Or it may be that God will let *Satan* loose upon us if we disbelieve. Truly we cannot want any worse fiery serpents than the suggestions and insinuations of the devil. Oh, brother, if you have ever met Satan and fought him foot to foot, you know by your scars what a terrible adversary he is. Why, he will insinuate thoughts into our breasts which never came from our own minds and never would have come—blasphemous thoughts of an infernal kind, and these he would have us accept as our own. He will throw his bombs into our souls, and then tell us that these are of our own making.

He will make us doubt the existence of God, the inspiration of Scripture, the deity of Christ, the truth of the Gospel, the fact of the resurrection—in fact, he will make us doubt doctrines for which we would lay down our lives. These are his impieties and not our own thoughts at all, but like serpents of fire, their sting is terrible. All the while our enemy will beat the great hell drum concerning our past sins, and try if he can to drown the voice of mercy and of that precious blood which “speaks better things than that of Abel.” Thus he would drive us to despair.

Ah, these fiery serpents! Brethren, it is much better to be tried with poverty and pain than to be molested by the infernal thoughts that come from Satan. It were better for us to lie down crushed like the very dust beneath our feet and every particle a pain, than to be filled with the desperate thoughts that Satan is able to inject into the mind. Beware, I pray you, of complaining, you that are getting to be at all discouraged. Return to your childlike faith. “Cast not away your confidence which has great recompense of reward,” lest you slide by your unbelief down into complaining, and then by your complaining hatch fiery serpents out of the ground on which you tread.

IV. But now, fourthly, here comes the REMEDY. What is to be done when Israel is bitten with fiery serpents?

Well, the first thing is *confession*. They went to Moses and cried, “We have sinned.” Oh, that is a sweet art—that art of confession. It empties the bosom of most perilous stuff! Nothing seems to me to be more hideous than to confess your sins to a man like yourselves. I should think that to sit down at a priest’s ear, and to pour into it all the filth of your soul, and answer every question that he may care to propound to you, must be one of the most fearful ordeals through which a human mind can pass. I know that Satan is very ingenious as to the means by which to deprave men, and rob them of the last particle of modesty, so as to make them capable of every crime. But I should think that the papist confession is his last and darkest invention for depraving the soul beyond all common defilement. It must be the most fearful process of saturating with evil through which the mind can pass.

But to confess sin into the ear of Christ is quite another thing. To get alone with Him, and to tell Him all our transgressions and temptations—this is as great a blessing as the other is a curse. There is no fear that we can pollute *Him*, and every blessing comes of emptying out ourselves before Him who is able to take away all sin by reason of His precious blood. Our first business is to hasten away to our great High Priest and tell Him that we have sinned.

The second help was that *Moses prayed* for the people. So our great cure against fiery serpents, horrible thoughts, and temptations, is intercession. “If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.” If we have grown downhearted and discouraged, and have sinned by unbelieving utterances, let us go with our poor, little, trembling faith, and ask the blessed go-between, the Divine Interposer, to stand before God on our behalf, and pray for us that our transgressions may be blotted out. Oh, what a sweet thing it is to have this Advocate! Come, you that are the Lord’s people and yet are transgressors, come and rejoice in this—that He makes intercession for transgressors, and that He is therefore able to save unto the uttermost.

But now comes the great remedy. After their confession and the prayer of their mediator, the Lord bade Moses make *a brazen serpent*, and lift it up, that they might look upon it and live. Beloved, when I first came to Christ as a poor sinner, and looked to Him, I thought Him the most precious object my eyes had ever lit upon. But this night I have been looking to Him while I have been preaching to you, in remembrance of my own discouragements, and my own complainings, and I find my Lord Jesus dearer than ever.

I have been seriously ill, and sadly depressed, and I fear I have rebelled, and therefore I look anew to Him, and I tell you that He is fairer in my eyes tonight than He was at first. It is a delightful thing that there should be a fountain open for sinners to wash in, but I will tell you something that is more charming still—there is a fountain for the house of David and for the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and uncleanness. That fountain is not for outcasts only, but for the saints, for the citizens of Jerusalem, for the house of David. “If we walk in the light as God is in the light, and have fellowship one with another,” do we sin still? Yes, that we do, even then, but “the blood of Jesus Christ, his Son, cleanses us from all sin.”

In our lowest condition this is our cleansing. In our highest condition this is still our cleansing. The first time a poor sinner comes up out of the ditch, with his own clothes abhorring him, he is made white through Christ’s blood the moment he believes in Jesus. And mark this, when he enters heaven and stands before the blaze of the supernal glory, it shall still be said of him and of his fellows, “They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” The brazen serpent healed me when I first saw the Lord, and the brazen serpent heals me tonight, and shall do so till I die. “Look and live” is for saints as well as for sinners. For you, you ungodly ones,

“There is life for a look at the Crucified One.”

But equally true is this for you who belong to Jesus, but have grieved His Holy Spirit. You that have gone aside from your faith, and have begun disputing with your God, and complaining of providence, there is life for you, too, in the Savior lifted up. There are not two ways of salvation—one for sinners and another for saints. There are not two grounds on which we stand—the ground of the sinner saved and the ground of the saint saved. No, the same basis is under each foot. We each sing—

***“Rock of ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee!”***

This is the language of the man who has served his God for half a century, and preached the Gospel like a Luther or a Calvin, just as certainly as it must be the language of the trembling sinner, guilty and condemned before the living God.

Do you not see where the brazen serpent fitly comes in according to Scripture? At the end of the pilgrimage, just before they are going to cross the Jordan, then Israel sees the serpent of brass. Then the people sin, and then is there revealed to them in all its splendor that blessed type of Christ—“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.” “Should not perish!” As if even a believer had about him that which would make him perish if he did not still look to the appointed cure.

Jesus is lifted up that saints might not perish, but might persevere in grace unto everlasting life. How is our spiritual life rendered everlasting, but by the continuance of that look? We are to be looking still to Jesus as long as we live. “Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.” Ever looking, ever looking. God keep us looking if we have looked, and bring us to look to Jesus if we have never looked, and to His name be praise forever and ever. Amen.

PORTION OF SCRIPTURE READ BEFORE SERMON—NUMBERS 20:14, 21:9.

Taken from The C. H. Spurgeon Collection, Version 1.0, Ages Software. Only necessary changes have been made, such as correcting spelling errors, some punctuation usage, capitalization of deity pronouns, and minimal updating of a few archaic words. The content is unabridged. Additional Bible-based resources are available at www.spurgeongems.org.