

TWO WILDERNESS INCIDENTS

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“And when king Arad the Canaanite, which dwelt in the south, heard tell that Israel came by the way of the spies; then he fought against Israel, and took some of them prisoners. And Israel vowed a vow unto the LORD, and said, If thou wilt indeed deliver this people into my hand, then I will utterly destroy their cities. And the LORD hearkened to the voice of Israel, and delivered up the Canaanites; and they utterly destroyed them and their cities: and he called the name of the place Hormah. And they journeyed from mount Hor by the way of the Red sea, to compass the land of Edom: and the soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way. And the people spake against God, and against Moses, Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? for there is no bread, neither is there any water; and our soul loatheth this light bread. And the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died.”

Numbers 21:1-6

OUR text is a long one, but we must have it all in order to get the sense of the passage, so as to contrast the two wilderness incidents which are here mentioned, and to learn how we may use them to our own spiritual profit.

I. So, in the first place, LET US CONTRAST THESE TWO WILDERNESS INCIDENTS.

First of all, let us examine the details of the first incident. We learn, from this part of the narrative, that *the children of Israel were in real danger*. They were attacked by a ferocious foe who, being probably aware that he was doomed to destruction, determined to anticipate the contest by fighting against the Israelites while they were unprepared, and so injuring them as much as he could.

Arad appears to have been a king of some considerable power, and his skill in warfare is proved by the fact that he was at least partially successful against the Israelites, for he “took some of them prisoners.” So that the people were in real danger, and have you not noticed, dear friends, that God’s people often behave best when they are in their worst case? Usually, when they are in imminent peril, they cry to their God to deliver them, and so they soon obtain relief, but when they make trouble for themselves by a willful fretfulness of spirit, then it is that they lose their confidence in God, and instead of playing the man, they play the fool.

You must have noticed how often accidents happen to people when they are engaged in play rather than when they are at work. I always warn our friends to be especially careful when they are going for a holiday, for I have observed how frequently they come back with signs of having suffered injuries of one kind or another, though they have been perfectly well while occupied with their usual avocations.

It is very much the same in spiritual things. While we are hard at work for the Lord, watching against temptation, striving against sin, or bravely enduring trial, we behave ourselves well, but full often, when we are engaged in what ought to be mere child’s play, getting rid of self-invented and unreasonable fears, we stumble and fall, and bring disgrace upon ourselves and upon our Christian profession.

I think that if a Christian is to grow to the full stature of a man in Christ, he must be subjected to the strong winds of trial and temptation. The dross must be separated from the gold by the fierce heat of the

furnace. I have heard such a remark as this many a time, "I never knew what a Christian So-and-so was until he lost his property, or his wife, or his children, or until he was stretched upon the bed of sickness and death." There is something in the keen wintry air that braces us, and strengthens us for work, but the soft summer zephyrs make us feel faint and languid, and unfit for vigorous exertion. So, in a spiritual sense, the summer zephyr of ease often weakens us, while the sharp, stern trials of our seasons of adversity make us strong to endure in the time of testing.

*"Often the clouds of deepest woe
So sweet a message bear,
Dark though they seem, 'twere hard to find
A frown of anger there.*

*It needs our hearts be wean'd from earth,
It needs that we be driven,
By loss of every earthly stay,
To seek our joys in heaven."*

It was, therefore, for good rather than for evil that the Israelites were allowed by the Lord to be placed in circumstances of real danger, for notice what they did, *they resorted to their God by simple faith*. They did not depend upon their own prowess in war. God had enabled them to rout the Amalekites, and to defeat many other adversaries, but when this new foe appeared, they did not rely upon their own swords, or spears, or bows, but they went at once to the Lord, and spread their case before Him. In humble, earnest prayer, they sought His aid, and then *they registered their solemn vow* that if God would give them the victory over these Canaanites, they would execute His judgments upon them, and utterly destroy their cities.

This is the right way for the believer still to go to God in times of real peril and trial, and this is the way in which he does go when the Spirit of God guides him. He comes to God, no longer resting in any carnal confidence, or depending upon his own wit or strength, but realizing that "blessed is the man that trusteth in the LORD, and whose hope the LORD is." Like Hezekiah, when he spread Sennacherib's letter before the Lord, the believer pleads with God, for His name's sake, for His Son's sake, for His promise's sake, to deliver him out of all his troubles. And it may be that he is moved to add a solemn vow unto the Lord, for although vows are never to be made wantonly or wickedly, there are times when a vow may be incumbent upon us.

Many an important step which I have taken, and which God has blessed, has been taken because of a vow that I have made to Him when my soul was in trouble, and I sometimes think that trouble is, in my own case, always a preparation for entering upon some new path of duty, or beginning some new enterprise for my dear Lord and Master.

Should it not be so with all of us who are indeed children of God by faith in Jesus Christ? Let us each one say, "Lord, if Thou wilt deliver me out of this trial, then, whatever service I may have rendered to Thee in the past, I will add something more to it in the future. I will seek to add a few more acres to the fields which I have hitherto attempted to plough, and sow, and reap for Thee, or if I cannot increase my sphere of service, I will try to serve Thee better in it than I have ever done before."

You are not to make such vows as these as though they were a sort of bribe to the Most High, for you know that your best resolutions are only empty words unless His grace enables you to follow them with corresponding deeds, yet still, if you do it in humble dependence upon Him, and in sincere gratitude for anticipated favors which your faith causes to be present to you, you may make such vows, and expect God's blessing upon them.

So you see, dear friends, that the Israelites were in real peril, but they took their case to the Lord, and therefore *He gave them speedy and complete deliverance*, "The LORD hearkened to the voice of Israel,

and delivered up the Canaanites.” They seem to have marched straight out to meet their foes, and to have routed them at once.

So, beloved, put your case in the hands of God, and your difficulties will soon be over, or if the trial is not removed, you will receive grace and strength to bear it. The word “impossibility” seems to block your road, but there are no impossibilities with God, with Him, all things are possible. A man left to himself would break his back under the crushing burden that rests upon him, but that would not have happened to him if he had cast his burden upon the Lord. Many have lost their reason because they tried to carry their cares themselves instead of casting all their care upon Him who could easily have carried them and their cares too.

Brother, is it night with you? Then wait God’s time to make the sun to rise again upon you. Is it ebb tide with you? Wait a little while, and God will again bring the silver streams up from the sea till the mud and filth are covered by the rising waters. What is there that He cannot do? If there is anything that you can do, work as if everything depended upon you, and then trust in God remembering that everything really depends upon Him.

The action of the Israelites, in appealing to the Lord, not only brought them prompt deliverance, but *it also advanced them in the path of duty*. They were brought out of Egypt on purpose to smite and exterminate these Canaanites—a race upon which God’s long-suffering could no longer be exercised, and the Israelites, as the Lord’s executioners, “utterly destroyed them and their cities.”

Ah, my dear friends, our troubles will help us to advance in the path of duty if we will but take those troubles to God. There is much to be learned in the furnace of affliction, there are some of God’s writings that can only be read by furnace light. God has been pleased to write some of His promises in sympathetic ink, which can only become visible as it is held close to the fire. You can see the stars in the daytime if you go to the bottom of a deep well, and you can see many a starry promise shining brightly when you are at the bottom of the well of trouble. The Lord sends trials to bring us to Himself, as Joseph sent the rumbling wagons to bring Jacob and all that he had to him in Egypt, and if we only know how to use them aright, we shall find that—

*“Trials make the promise sweet,
Trials give new life to prayer;
Trials bring us to God’s feet,
Lay us low, and keep us there.”*

This, then, is the first of the two wilderness incidents, now, turning to the second, I want you to note that *there was no real cause for distress whatsoever*. “The soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way,” but there was nothing that need have discouraged them if they had looked upon the way with the eye of faith.

It is true that God had led them a long way roundabout, but then that was because of their unbelief, and it is also true that God had “led them forth by the right way, that they might go to a city of habitation.” It is true that the sun was hot, but then the cloudy pillar always shielded them in the daytime. It is true that they had to wander in the wilderness, but then God gave them bread from heaven to eat, and water out of the rock to quench their thirst. It is true that they had no means of buying new clothes and new shoes, but then Moses was able to say to the whole nation ere he left them, “Thy raiment waxed not old upon thee, neither did thy foot swell, these forty years.”

It is true that many trials befell them in the wilderness, mostly through their own sin, yet were they the most highly favored people upon the face of the earth. As Balaam “saw Israel abiding in his tents, he took up his parable, and said, How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, and thy tabernacles, O Israel! As the valleys are they spread forth, as gardens by the river’s side, as the trees of lign aloes which the LORD hath planted, and as cedar trees beside the waters.” Yet, with all these privileges, “the soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way.”

It is true, dear friends, that there are many troubles in the world, but probably the worst are those that we make for ourselves, or that we only imagine when there really are none. Last week I saw my dear old grandfather, who is about eighty-seven years of age, and I said to him, "I suppose, grandfather, you have had many troubles in your long life," and he replied "Well, I have had none too many, except those that I have made for myself," and I expect that is true of the most of us.

We have a little (or big) trouble factory somewhere in our home, or we carry it about with us wherever we go, and the suits we make there last as long as a suit in Chancery, they seem as if they would never wear out. And those home-made suits fit us very badly, and are most uncomfortable, but if we would only leave ourselves in God's hands, we would be much more free from anxiety and trouble.

*"Eternal God! we look to Thee,
To Thee for help we fly;
Thine eye alone our wants can see,
Thy hand alone supply."*

When the Israelites became discouraged because of the way, did they take their trouble to God as they had done with the former one? Oh, no! it would have been a far happier thing for them if they had done so, but *they* "spake against God, and against Moses," saying, "Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? for there is no bread, neither is there any water; and our soul loatheth this light bread."

Often, when professors of religion fancy they are in trouble, they begin to rail at God, and at what they imagine to be the second causes of their troubles, as the Israelites "spake against God, and against Moses." They say, "If my father had been a more prudent man," or "if So-and-so had given me wiser advice," or "if my husband were not such a spendthrift, I should not have been in such trouble."

These Israelites sinned doubly in speaking against God, and against Moses, for the Lord had delivered them with a high hand and with a stretched-out arm, and Moses also had done them real service. He had taken the iron yoke from their necks, and led them out of the house of bondage, yet they talked as if he had been their enemy, or had deceived them. They said, "We remember the fish, which we did eat in Egypt freely; the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlick: but now our soul is dried away: there is nothing at all, beside this manna, before our eyes."

Thus do men often murmur against their best friends, and frequently the murmuring against man is only a covert way of murmuring against God. Some grumble at the minister when they really mean that they do not like the Gospel that he preaches, talking against Moses, it was not surprising that the Israelites also "spake against God."

Further, these people were in such a sad state that *they ignored the mercies they were then enjoying*. They said, "There is no bread, neither is there any water; and our soul loatheth this light bread." So there was bread, after all, that bread of which the psalmist afterwards wrote, "Man did eat angels' food," the best possible food for them in the wilderness, and there was water continually gushing out from the rock that followed them.

We too meet with many who can talk glibly enough of their miseries, but who are silent concerning their mercies. I daresay some of you know old Mrs. Complaint. If you ever go to see her, the moment you sit down she begins to tell you how she has been tormented all the week with rheumatics, and then she says troubles never come alone, for that son of hers gives her constant anxiety, and her neighbors are continually slandering her, and so on, and so on. You give her some relief, and others give her relief, but she is never satisfied.

When I have visited such a person, I have usually thought it well to say to her, "Well, sister, you have told me about your troubles, now let us hear about your mercies, surely you have some mercies for which you desire to praise the Lord." If you will talk thus to those who complain to you, it may be that after a little while, the conversation will take a more profitable turn.

There are other grumblers beside that miserable old woman. There are other friends, in business, who try to persuade us that they are always losing money, yet they appear to live in considerable comfort, and we should like to have for the Lord's work some of the money that they spend upon luxuries of various kinds. So, when they complain of the hard times, and the keen competition in business, and the losses they are continually making, we are not greatly impressed by the sad story with which we are now fairly familiar.

Then there are our farming friends, who are far too often found in the ranks of the grumblers. If they do not actually speak against God, they frequently complain of the weather that He sends, it is either too wet or too dry, too hot or too cold, when crops are plentiful, prices are low, there is generally something or other which gives them an excuse for complaining, and so they sin against the Most High as the Israelites did in the wilderness.

What did those people get as the result of their murmuring? Did the way become any shorter because their soul was much discouraged? Did the sharp stones become any smoother? Did the thorns and thistles of the wilderness become changed into vines and olive trees? Did their adversaries all sheathe their swords, and flee from them in terror? No, the way was just as long as ever, the stones just as sharp, and the brambles just as plentiful, their enemies just as fierce, and each day was just as wearying as all those that had gone before, and now, in addition to all their previous troubles, "the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, and many people of Israel died."

They complained when they had no reason for complaining, and now they had good ground for complaint, or something to make them truly sorrowful. Their discontent, like a fire which never has sufficient fuel, was as a burning fever within them, so now fiery serpents set their veins aflame with their deadly poison.

They were, indeed, rightly punished, they would not be content with the mercies which the Lord showered so abundantly upon them, so they were made to smart for their ingratitude, and our experience will be similar to theirs if we act as they did. We shall not be delivered from our troubles as the result of our complaining, but the Lord will chastise us with His rod of correction until He brings us humbly to confess our sin, and to seek for the future to walk in His ways.

So you see, dear friends, the contrast between these two wilderness incidents. In the first case, real trouble, carried to God in prayer, was turned into an advantage, and in the second case, foolish and wicked discontent, for which there was no reason, was allowed to spend itself in murmuring against the Most High, and so brought down upon the people fiery serpents which bit them until many of them died.

II. Now, secondly, LET US LEARN HOW WE MAY USE THESE TWO INCIDENTS TO OUR OWN SPIRITUAL PROFIT.

Fellow believer in Christ, you may do one or other of these two things, you may either cast your burden upon the Lord, and He will sustain you, or you may be like the bullock that is unaccustomed to the yoke, and that kicks against the sharp goad, and so angers his master and injures himself. Remember that *true faith is a holy thing, but murmuring is sin*. Do not think that it is a light thing to murmur against God, or to complain of His providential dealings with you. Nay, it is really setting up your fallible judgment or your self-will against the infinite wisdom of the Most High. It is high treason against the King of kings to seek to—

***"Snatch from His hands the balance and the rod,
Rejudge His judgments, be the god of God."***

Are you, poor feeble mortal, able to drive the chariot of the sun? Can you control the whirlwind, and put a bit into the mouth of the storm when it is raging in all its fury? You know that it is God alone who can say to the mighty ocean, "Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further: and here shall thy proud waves be stayed." How dare you, then, set up your feebleness against His omnipotence, and your ignorance against His omniscience, and your folly against His consummate wisdom? Bow down in the dust before Him, lest your murmuring should bring upon you His righteous wrath, and He should send upon you, if

not fiery serpents, some other punishment that shall make you wring your hands in agony for many a day to come.

Further, *to trust in the Lord is both helpful and pleasant*. It is said that if a man would lie quite still in the water, he would float, but that it is his kicking and struggling that cause him to be drowned. Whether it is so literally, I cannot tell, but I know that it is most delightful and most blessed—

***“To lie passive in God’s hands
And know no will but His.”***

It is the kicking and struggling against the will of God that bring us trouble and increased suffering. God would use the knife very gently upon us, but we dash ourselves against the sharp instrument, and then there is a great gash which need never have been made if it had not been for our own folly.

Who are the happiest men in the whole world? Are they not those who tell the Lord all their troubles, and cast all their cares upon Him, knowing that He cares for them? And who are the most miserable people in the world? Are they not those who are constantly complaining of their miseries, and who never seem to realize how many mercies they have received?

If you need to make yourself miserable, you will not have much difficulty in doing so. He who is looking for sorrow will probably not have to look far before he finds it, but it is a great pity that he is not rather looking for signs and tokens of God’s providential care and of His forgiving mercy. Happy is he who can sing with Faber—

***“I bow me to Thy will, O God,
And all Thy ways adore;
And every day I live I’ll seek
To please Thee more and more.***

***I have no cares, O blessed Lord,
For all my cares are Thine;
I live in triumph, too, for Thou
Hast made Thy triumphs mine.”***

Again, dear friends, I think you can easily make a wise choice if I remind you that *to trust in the Lord honors Him*. For a child of God to repose in Him in full confidence must be well pleasing in His sight, but for any child of His to be fretting, worrying, complaining, questioning, must be dishonoring to Him.

How would you feel if it were the case of one of your own children? If you heard him complaining that he did not know whether he would have any breakfast tomorrow morning, or where he would get any new clothes when his were worn out, you would say, “Trust me, my child, and I will provide for you.” But when your child says, “I know that my father will provide for me, no care about that matter ever crosses my mind,” he is honoring you by his confidence, and it is the Christian who trusts God most who honors Him most.

Remember, also, that *it is to your own honor to trust in the Lord*. This was the Master’s own words to His disciples, “Take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.”

Any worldling can fret and fume about food, and drink, and clothing, but will you, a child of God, thus misbehave yourself? Wherefore should you be groveling in the dust, with the children of this world, when you should be soaring upward, like the eagle, far above the mists and clouds of earth? Rise, believer, to the dignity of your newborn nature, and cast all your care upon your God, who cares for you.

Besides that, *believing in Jesus will be likely to make you more useful*. We are hardly likely to bring sinners to Christ if we carry about with us a long and careworn countenance, that will not be the way to recommend the Gospel to others. There are some professors who seem to think that the more wretched they can be, the more communion will they have with Christ, but they are greatly mistaken if they do think so. They appear to aim at being altogether unbearable in society, and to be utterly miserable in retirement, if they imagine that in leading such a life as that, they are reflecting credit upon their Master, nothing could be more erroneous.

You would not like your servant—I will go further than that and say—you would not like your horse or dog to be so lean that you could count his bones, it would be no credit to you to have such a servant, or horse, or dog, people who saw them would think they must have a sorry kind of master. The God of love no more wishes to have miserable servants and followers than we do. Many of His true servants have good reasons for being sad, but no true servant of God, who is in his right senses, thinks it is his duty to make himself sad.

Paul was inspired when he wrote to the Philippians, “Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice,” and I believe it is the cheerful Christian, and especially the Christian who can be happy in sickness, and patient under adversity, and joyous even in the hour of death, who will win fresh adherents for the Lord Jesus Christ.

For all these reasons, then, I would have you follow the example of the children of Israel in the first of the two wilderness incidents we have been considering, and not in the second.

But beloved, suppose—and alas, we need not put it as a supposition, for it is only too true—some of us have been murmuring, and God has sent a fiery serpent to bite us, we were discontented because of some fancied trouble, and now we have a real trouble, what then?

You remember how the narrative continues, “Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD, and against thee; pray unto the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us. And Moses prayed for the people. And the LORD said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole; and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live.”

So, when they sincerely repented of their sin in murmuring against the Lord, and prayed to him through Moses as their representative and mediator, He revealed the remedy by which they could be healed.

You remember when you first looked to Him of whom that brazen serpent was a type, and how you were immediately healed, and you must again look unto Him, and He will cure the suffering which you have brought upon yourself by your murmuring. God loves you too well to let you perish, despite your ingratitude and unbelief, He abides faithful, and before our eyes He holds up once again His well-beloved and only begotten Son, and bids you look unto Him even as you did at the first. Happy is the Christian who is always “looking unto Jesus.”

Believer, if you have lost your evidences, if through your murmuring against God you have been so sorely chastened that you cry out in agony, and if you are now walking in darkness, and can see no light, remember that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever, and still look to Him. Say to Him, “Just as I am, as once I came to Thee, O Jesus my Lord and Savior, I come to Thee again! Though stained once more with my own wanton wickedness in murmuring against Thee when Thy many mercies ought to have comforted me, and made me rejoice, I still come to Thee, and I believe that Thou can pardon, and relieve, and succor, and save, and sanctify me now even as Thou did at the first.”

*“Just as thou art, without one trace
Of love, or joy, or inward grace,
Or meetness for the heavenly place,
O guilty sinner, come!”*

*‘The Spirit and the Bride say, Come;’
Rejoicing saints re-echo, Come;
Who faints, who thirsts, who will, may come:
Thy Savior bids you come.’*

If any of you have never come to Jesus, come now. If you have never looked to Him who hung upon the cross, sin-bitten sinner, look to Him now, and you shall be saved at once. If you have looked to Him before, look again now, and never take your eyes off Him until they are closed in death, and even then, the eyes of your soul shall still continue looking unto Jesus, only they shall look upon Jesus sitting upon the throne as now, by faith, you look upon Him hanging on the cross.

May the Lord add His blessing, for Jesus Christ’s sake! Amen.

EXPOSITION BY C. H. SPURGEON

NUMBERS 21:1-9, JOHN 3:1-15

Numbers Chapter 21. Verses 1-4. *And when king Arad the Canaanite, which dwelt in the south, heard tell that Israel came by the way of the spies; then he fought against Israel, and took some of them prisoners. And Israel vowed a vow unto the LORD, and said, If thou wilt indeed deliver this people into my hand, then I will utterly destroy their cities. And the LORD hearkened to the voice of Israel, and delivered up the Canaanites; and they utterly destroyed them and their cities: and he called the name of the place Hormah. 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.*

They were not allowed to go through the land of Edom, they had, therefore to turn round, and go right away from the land where they one day hoped to dwell, and the road was a particularly trying one, over hot and burning sand, “and the soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way.”

Sometimes, God’s own people, when they find that they are not so far advanced in the divine life as they thought they were, when they find old sins reviving, and when troubles multiply upon them, get “discouraged because of the way.” If this is our experience, let us not fall into the sin into which these Israelites fell, but even in our discouragement let us turn to our God.

5. *And the people spake against God, and against Moses, Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? for there is no bread, neither is there any water; and our soul loatheth this light bread.*

One gets tired, in reading of the wanderings of Israel in the wilderness, of this parrot cry, “Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt?” For nearly forty years, this was their cry whenever they met with any sort of difficulty. How weary God must have been of their cry, and of them too! And now it was raised because they had been fed with “angels’ food” which they called “light bread.” It was easy of digestion, healthful, and the very best kind of food for them in the wilderness, but they wanted something more substantial, something that had a coarser flavor about it, more of earth and less of heaven. There is no satisfying an unregenerate heart. If we had all the blessings of this life, we should still be crying for more.

6-7. *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 thee; pray unto the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us. And Moses prayed for the people.*

Like a true mediator, he was always ready—even when they had most insulted him, and grieved his meek and quiet spirit—still to bow the knee, and intercede with the Lord on their behalf. The people implored him to ask that the serpents might be taken away from them, but apparently, they still continued to trouble them. However, if God does not answer prayer in one way, He does in another. The

fervent prayer of a righteous man may not prevail in the particular direction in which it is offered, but it “availeth much” in some direction or other. Just as when the mists ascend, they may not fall upon the very spot from which they rose, but they fall somewhere, and true prayer is never lost, it comes back in blessing, if not according to our mind, yet according to another mind that is kinder and wiser than our own.

8-9. *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.* [See sermons #285, Man’s Ruin and God’s Remedy, and #1500, NUMBER 1500—OR “Lifting Up the Brazen Serpent”].

John Chapter 3. Verses 1-3. *There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: the same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him. Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.* [See sermon #130, Regeneration].

There must be a new birth because a new nature is absolutely necessary for the discernment of spiritual things. The natural man cannot comprehend spiritual things, they must be spiritually discerned. The new birth is therefore necessary that we may have a spirit within us which can see or understand the kingdom of God, but until a man is born again, “he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

4-5. *Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born? Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.*

We understand the passage to mean, “Water, that is, the Spirit,” but it may refer to the purifying influence of the Word as symbolized by water. I do not think that baptism is referred to here at all.

6. *That which is born of the flesh is flesh;*

Parents may be the most devout people who ever lived, but that which is born of them is only flesh.

6. *And that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.*

It is only then, as we are born of the Spirit of God that there is any spiritual life in us whatever.

7-8. *Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.* [See sermon #1356, The Heavenly Wind].

He undergoes a mysterious change, he becomes a new man, he enters into a new life which others cannot comprehend, though they hear the sound of it, they cannot tell whence this man’s new life comes, or whither it goes. He has become a spiritual person, not comprehended of natural men.

9-10. *Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be? Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?*

“So learned in the law of God, are you ignorant of the Spirit of God? Have you read the law so many times, and yet not found out that natural births and outward washings are of no avail in spiritual things?”

11-12. *Verily, verily I say unto thee, We speak what we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness. If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?*

“If, at the very entrance to the kingdom of heaven, you say, ‘How can these things be?’ what will you say if I take you into the central metropolis of truth, and introduce you to the great King Himself?”

13-15. *And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven. 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.* [See sermon #153, The Mysteries of the Brazen Serpent].

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