

## **"The Brazen Serpent"**

by

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The Brazen Serpent is one of the most striking, as well as one of the most familiar, types of Christ given to us in the Scriptures. The very form of it is unique. It is different from any of the other types of our Lord. In fact, if He had not used it as a type of Himself, it is not likely that any reverent soul would have thought of doing so, because the serpent in Scripture is associated with Satan. It was in that form that he made his first appearance in the garden of Eden, and it is as "that old serpent" that he is referred to in the book of Revelation. But when our Lord said, "*As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up,*" He gave us His own warrant for using it as a type of Himself in His death upon the cross.

And yet there is nothing in the type itself that even suggests blood-shedding or expiation. The usual type of Christ was a clean animal, without spot or blemish, whose life was taken instead of the life of the sinner. But in the case of the Brazen Serpent there is not even a hint of substitution. In this respect it is decidedly different from any other type of our Lord in His death upon the cross.

Again, it is one of the last, if not the very last, of all the types of Christ which we find in the Pentateuch. It is introduced near the close of the wilderness journey of the Israelites, just three stops before the brook Zered, which Moses referred to (Deut. 2:13,14) as one of the most important points in that journey. The brook Zered marked the point where all the men of war, who had rebelled at Kadesh-barnea, were finally consumed from among the host. It is entirely possible that the Lord used the fiery serpents for that very purpose. When they rebelled at Kadesh they said, "*Would God that we had died in the land of Egypt! or would God we had died in this wilderness!*" (Num. 14:2). And they got what they desired.

The apostasy of Korah and his company cost a good many lives besides the 14,700 that died of the plague at that same time. But the final blow seems to have fallen at this time when they "*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 loathes this light bread*" (Num. 21:5). Now we are told in 1 Corinthians 10:9 that when they did this they "*did tempt Christ . . . and were destroyed of serpents.*" The seriousness of their offense is indicated by the kind of punishment inflicted. But severe as it was, apparently some escaped. According to 1 Corinthians 10:9 it was "some of them" who tempted, and they "were destroyed of serpents." The expression, "*If a serpent had bitten any man,*" also implies that there were some who were not bitten. That suggests the possibility of three groups: first, those who were bitten and died; second, those who were bitten and lived, because they beheld the serpent of brass; and lastly, those who were not bitten at all. No doubt there were some who did not murmur and therefore were not guilty of *tempting Christ*. Again, there may have been others who were merely misled by willful leaders. For these our gracious God made provision when He ordered Moses to make a serpent of brass and put it upon a pole.

Had there been a sacrifice already provided by the law for such an offense, we may be sure that they would have been told to avail themselves of it. Evidently there was nothing at all in the law of Moses that could meet this particular case. The people wanted Moses to pray that the Lord might take away the serpents from them. But the Scripture says, "*Moses prayed for the people.*"

If the Lord had merely removed the serpents, there would have been no remedy for those who were bitten. So, in His divine wisdom and goodness, He does better than they ask: *"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 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"* (Num. 21:8,9). Note how broad the provision here: "every one" and "any man." And how simple the condition: "when he looks." But each stricken one must look for himself; no one else could do that for him. Thus we see how the Lord called individual faith into exercise. And the look of faith secured the blessing. In Egypt it was, *"When I see the blood, I will pass over you."* But here it is, *"When **he looks** [he] shall live."*

From this contrast we gather that in the Passover Lamb we have one aspect of the death of Christ, and in the Brazen Serpent quite another. Of all the types of Himself to which the Lord Jesus might have referred in His notable conversation with Nicodemus, it was the latter that He chose. In the case of the leper whom He cleansed, He said, *"Offer the gift that Moses commanded, for a testimony unto them."* But Nicodemus was no leper. He was a master in Israel whose life, so far as we know, was blameless. At least the Lord did not make him uncover his past life as He did in the case of the Samaritan woman, with whom He dealt so soon afterward. In the case of Nicodemus He went back to beginnings and said, *"That which is born of the flesh is flesh."* He went right to the root of the matter. And that, I believe, gives us the key to the meaning and significance of the type of the Brazen Serpent. As we have already seen, there is nothing in this type that suggests expiation or substitution. The Brazen Serpent did not suffer instead of the stricken Israelite. There is no hint of that blood-shedding without which there is no remission. Therefore this must present some phase of our Lord's death upon the cross that has to do with sin in its nature.

Some have thought that the interpretation of this type is found in 2 Corinthians 5:21, where we read that *"He hath made Him [Christ] to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him."* Others have suggested that we get the real meaning in Galatians 3:13, where we read, *"Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangs on a tree."* Now it is true that there is a very definite connection between the serpent and the curse. But that curse had nothing to do with being hanged on a tree. It was not "the curse of the law." And since the Israelites were not breaking any special commandment of the law when they "loathed" the manna, it could hardly be said that the fiery serpents sent among them at that time represented "the curse of the law."

However, there is a text which seems to give us exactly what I believe is the special lesson to be learned from the Brazen Serpent. It is found in Romans 8:3, where we read, *"What the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh."* No doubt the fiery serpents which the Lord sent among the Israelites were intended to give them an idea of what their sin looked like in His sight. And the Brazen Serpent is the likeness of that. In itself it was harmless, even though it was a likeness of that which was deadly. In this sense it may be said to be a type of the One who knew no sin, and yet was made sin for us.

In view of all this we can see how fitting it was that the Lord Jesus should refer to the Brazen Serpent in His conversation with Nicodemus. Nicodemus needed to learn that, however upright and blameless his life might be outwardly, he had an evil nature which nothing could remedy or

reform. He must be born again. In other words, he needed something more than a sacrifice that would atone for the past. The law with all of its many sacrifices provided nothing that would deal with the cause of sin. This was something the law could not do, because it was weak through the flesh. But what the law could not do God does, by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, not to reform or to remedy but to condemn sin in the flesh. When the Israelites looked at the Brazen Serpent upon the pole, he had before him a perfect illustration of this. His own law said, *"Cursed is every one that hangs on a tree."* That Brazen Serpent hanging on that pole, or tree, would therefore be to him something cursed and condemned. And to the one who looked at it by faith, it would teach lessons about the nature of sin that none of the other types would teach.

*"If a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived."* But he had to be alive to look. How then can it be said that "he lived" as a result of looking? The answer is found, I believe, in Romans 8:6: *"To be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace."* And again in verse 13 of the same chapter: *"If ye live after [or, according to] the flesh, ye shall die,"* or, more literally, ye are about to die: *"but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live."* It should be plain that the apostle is not speaking here of the beginning of eternal life, but rather of the progress of it. God not only sent His Son to be the Savior of the world, but He also sent Him in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, in order that He might condemn sin in the flesh; and also in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in those who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

In pointing out this special teaching of the Brazen Serpent, one has no thought of denying its universal application. The Scripture says, *"Even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life."* But it must be remembered that having eternal life is not limited to the initial reception of it. Proof of having it is found in the kind of life that one lives. And so the verse we have just quoted may very well include more than we usually claim for it. And since these words were spoken to "a master of Israel," we are inclined to believe that they have a still wider application.

Jehovah will yet *"pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplications,"* and they shall look on Him whom they pierced and they shall mourn for Him (Zech. 12:10). *"They shall look (v'hibitu) with no ordinary or mere passing look, but 'with trustful hope and longing,' as one has paraphrased it. Among the other meanings which this particular verb has is that of 'to regard,' 'to consider,' 'to contemplate,' 'to look upon with pleasure.' It is used, for instance, in that remarkable story of the brazen serpent in Numbers 21:9, which, as it seems to me, was in the mind of Zechariah when he uttered this prophecy . . . With this same eager look of faith and hope shall Israel in that day behold and contemplate Him, who is the great antitype of the brazen serpent, and who was 'lifted up' for us on the Cross, that whosoever believes on Him should not perish but have everlasting life."*<sup>[1]</sup>

It is worthy of remark that on two other occasions our Lord referred to the lifting up of Himself. In speaking to His enemies He said, *"When ye have lifted up the Son of Man, then ye shall know that I am, and that I do nothing of myself; but as my Father has taught me, I speak these things. And He that sent me is with me: the Father has not left me alone; for I do always those things that please Him"* (John 8:28,29). Here we have the One who knew no sin and did no sin about to be lifted up. *"And as He spake these words, many believed on Him."*

Again the Lord Jesus said, *"And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all unto me. This He*

said, signifying what death He should die" (John 12:32,33). The verb "draw" is really ambiguous. It may mean to draw in grace, and it may mean to draw in judgment (cf. Acts 16:19). It was of judgment that our Lord was speaking at this time. *"Now is the judgment of this world; now shall the prince of this world be cast out."* Thus we see how the casting out of Satan is connected with the "lifting up" of the Son of Man. And since the nations of Canaan are types of the principalities over which Satan reigns, it is rather suggestive that just before the conquest of Canaan the Lord should give His people this extraordinary type of Christ. Looked at in this way, we believe that we may say that the Brazen Serpent is the symbol of victory. That it is the symbol of victory over "sin in the flesh" is clear from Romans 8:3. But it is even more than that; it is the pledge of victory over Satan and all his hosts. Because He was "lifted up" He will draw all to Him, infernal beings included: *"For it is written, As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God."*

Man lifted up (ὑψώω) the Son of man, but God has highly exalted (ὑπερυψώω) Him, and given Him a name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of heavenly and earthly and infernal beings, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to God the Father's glory.

[1] David Baron, *Visions and Prophecies of Zechariah*, p. 446.

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