

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The New is in the Old concealed: Moses made a serpent of brass...

Not every creator of art is the best articulator of what he creates. Many a songwriter has a terrible voice and her creations are only brought to life by gifted singers. Hearing an author read his own work is often disappointing. A skilled actor will lift the reading to a whole new level. This can never be true of God! Whatever God creates, He creates perfectly, and articulates perfectly. This is why it is always fascinating to see how Jesus quotes and expounds the Old Testament. Of course, all New Testament use of the Old Testament is inspired by the Holy Spirit, but we can expect the insights and applications of the Lord Himself to be particularly authoritative and perceptive.

Today we will look at how Jesus refers to the incident of the bronze serpent, narrated in Numbers 21. The reference to it by Jesus is very brief, occupying only John 3:14. The exposition is also brief, just verse 15. Nevertheless, the teaching is important and profound. First, let's read the passage. "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life." These verses come at the end of John's account of the night when Nicodemus came to meet Jesus. Nicodemus, an expert in the Old Testament scriptures, and a man with a high level of respect and authority in the nation of Israel, has been confounded and bemused by the remarks of Jesus, the young teacher from Galilee.

Nicodemus arrived with a certain respect for Jesus, addressing Him as Rabbi (or teacher) and confessing that He was "a teacher come from God". Nevertheless, Nicodemus has some pretensions to understanding and insight that allow him, and his fellow members of the Sanhedrin, to make authoritative, spiritual judgements. "We know..." he begins. "For no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him," he concludes. He appears to suggest that he, and some other honourable men among the Pharisees, have considered Jesus' teachings and miracles carefully. Using their deep understanding of the scriptures, and their finely honed powers of insight into the things of God, they have reached the considered opinion that they can see the hand of God at work. Nicodemus has now come to inquire a little more closely, so that he can be assured he is judging this new rabbi correctly. It is this pretension of seeing the ways of God and judging matters wisely, that Jesus addresses with His famous reply, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus thought he was a teacher and guide of the kingdom. He was convinced that he could see clearly, and judge wisely. Jesus tells him that unless he experiences new birth, he can't see anything at all. In response to Nicodemus' obvious incomprehension, Jesus says, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." Jesus is evidently referring to a passage in Ezekiel 36, where God, through the prophet, says, "Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgements and do them." You and I would not expect to pick up on the reference without the help of notes in the margin of our Bible, or a helpful commentary; but Nicodemus was "the teacher of Israel" (verse 10) and ought to have known these things. To him this section in Ezekiel was not an obscure passage, buried in a difficult book, but a well known section dealing with the new covenant that God had promised to His people.

Having chided Nicodemus for his ignorance of these things, Jesus goes on, in verse 11, to contrast His own insight and testimony, with that of Nicodemus and his fellows. "Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness." Notice how this is the third time that Jesus has used this emphatic expression, "Most assuredly", or "Verily, verily" in the Authorised Version. Literally it means "amen, amen", and is used to emphasise the importance and trustworthiness of what follows. Used three times in quick succession, we are meant to be struck with the importance of what is being said. Nicodemus started the interview by talking about what he *thought* he and his fellow rabbis knew and saw. Jesus has pointed out that, even in relation to things already revealed on earth, their knowledge and vision were fatally flawed. Jesus, on the contrary, had perfect knowledge of earthly things, and also heavenly things. He is a resident of heaven and therefore knows it firsthand. None of the prophets in the past went up to heaven to gather information that they could bring back. They were given a message from the God of heaven, and passed that on to men. In contrast, Jesus came out from heaven, as one leaving His own home, and brought knowledge to this world of what He had seen there. His testimony may not have been believed and received, but this did not make it any less reliable.

It is at this point, that Jesus makes reference to the serpent in the wilderness. I have taken some time to 'set the

scene' because it is important to see the context, if we are to understand the use Jesus is making of the quotation. Now we need to take a few moments to remind ourselves of the context of the scripture Jesus quotes from Numbers 21. Israel have been wandering in the desert for the greater part of forty years. They have been doing so, because of their unbelief in God's ability to bring them in to the promised land. They have finally stopped travelling round the desert, and are moving towards the land of Israel. However, they are being forced to make an arduous detour to avoid the land of Edom and, not for the first time, they have become very discouraged. While their weariness may be excusable, their accusations are not.

They forget that the whole forty year toil is a direct result of their own disobedience, and they discount the miraculous provisions of God in their deliverance from Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea, the provision of manna and many other things. In Numbers 21:5 we read, "The people spoke against God and against Moses." The consequence was that in verse 6, "The LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died." The people confessed their sin in speaking against God, and asked Moses to pray that God would take away the serpents. Moses prays, but God chooses to answer the prayer in a different way. God will not take away the serpents; rather Moses must make a model of a serpent in bronze and place it on a pole. If those who are bitten will look at this bronze serpent, they will live. Moses obeys God's instructions and, although the lethal serpents continue to bite the people of Israel, those who are bitten can now look at the bronze serpent and be saved from certain death.

Nicodemus would have learned the stories of Israel's history as a small child, and would be instantly familiar with the reference to the bronze serpent, and its historical background. He was meant to see the following parallels:

- God's people were in rebellion against Himself
- God was acting in judgement
- The judgement was deserved, and could not be simply reversed
- God Himself had provided an alternative to certain death
- Faith was necessary to obtain the reprieve God offered

We will now look at each of these in turn.

God's people were in rebellion against Himself

Just as in Moses' day, rebellion was at the root of sin in the days of Nicodemus. It is the same today. In some people that rebellion may express itself in a determination to live as they please, defying God's commandments. Nicodemus no doubt thought he was far above people who behaved in that way. What he needed to see was that he was characterised by a different sort of rebellion. His very determination to approach God on the basis of his personal holiness and law keeping, demonstrated that he had missed the clear message of the Old Testament. Human sinfulness undermines every effort to approach God on the basis of earned righteousness. Passages like the one we have mentioned in Ezekiel, spell out the need for a new start, a new heart, and a new life, that God Himself will supply. Now that God has sent His own Son to bring that new life, Nicodemus is attempting to stand in judgement of the Son's work and message. He is a rebel with an outstanding moral code, but still a rebel. The world today is full of people just like him.

God was acting in judgement

God sent serpents as a judgement. Not because He was simply annoyed with the people or because His pride was hurt, but because rebellion against God is a horrible crime against both the glory of God and the best interests of the person himself. Later in this chapter, John will show that the world already stands condemned under the judgement of God. It was true in Moses' day. It was true in Nicodemus' day. It is true today.

The judgement was deserved, and could not be simply reversed

God's judgement of sin is not disproportionate or cruel. It is deserved and necessary. God cannot overlook sin and remain a moral God. God refused to remove the serpents, not because He was stubborn, but because the sin of rebellion demanded judgement. In Nicodemus' day, the Jews were under Roman rule as a direct consequence of centuries of rebellion against God. More urgent still, their personal sins brought them under God's personal judgement. Neither could be simply removed just because the consequences to the sufferers were unpleasant. God Himself had provided an alternative to certain death

This is a regularly repeated feature of how God deals with the consequences of sin. When Adam and Eve sinned, God did not remove the consequences, and put them back in the Garden of Eden. He let judgement fall, but provided animal skins for a covering, and a promise of a redeemer to come. In the days of Noah, God's judgement on evil fell on the whole world, but God provided an ark to shelter some from that judgement. At the time of the Passover, God's judgement went out over *all* the houses in the land of Egypt, but God sheltered His people by providing a lamb for a

sacrifice. So, in Moses' day, the serpents still remain. They still bite and the venom is as lethal as ever - but now God has provided a way that the people can be bitten and yet still live.

Jesus is declaring to Nicodemus that He, the Son of Man, is to be God's way of saving people from the inevitable judgement of sin. We will see in a moment how His death on a cross was necessary for this salvation to be made available.

Faith was necessary to obtain the reprieve God offered

The bronze serpent did not save automatically. If an Israelite was bitten, he had to make a positive decision to look towards the bronze serpent on the pole. He may not have had much time to make that decision; the snake bites were rapidly lethal. He had a stark choice to make between faith in God's way of salvation or rapid death. By implication, Nicodemus will face the same choice – faith in the Christ who stands before him, or the certain judgement of God. Everybody in the world today faces the same stark choice!

Lifted Up

“Even so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” The phrase is a little enigmatic, and calls for some explanation. Clearly the statement is emphatic. The Son of man *must* be lifted up. It is imperative; it has to happen. If the serpent had not been made and lifted up, there would have been no remedy for the snake bites. If the Son of Man is not lifted up, there will be no remedy for sin. But what does “lifted up” actually mean? We have two things that help us understand the expression. One is John's two further reports of Jesus using this phrase, in John 8 and John 12. The other is the preceding verse, John 3:13.

Further Uses

In John 8:28 Jesus says, “When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He.” In John 12:32 Jesus says, “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth will draw all peoples to Myself.” John then provides an explanation. “This He said, signifying by what death He would die.” It is clear then that “lifted up” refers to Jesus' crucifixion. Crucifixion involved a physical elevation and being stared at by onlookers, as an object of scorn.

Immediate Context

However, “Lifted up” means more than these things. In John 3:13 Jesus refers to Himself as having come down from heaven. Many references are made later in John's Gospel to Jesus' returning to the place He came from. Jesus also speaks of His being glorified at His Father's right hand. Thus He is returning to heaven and ascending to glory. This is actually achieved by His being “lifted up” on the cross. It is clear from the context of John 8:28, which we read a moment ago, that it is when He is “lifted up” that people will clearly see His greatness.

“Lifted up” then has a deliberate double meaning. It indicates both the shame of His crucifixion and the glory of His return to the Father. Nicodemus, of course, had no possible way of understanding all this, since the cross still lay three years or so in the future. Even the disciples failed to see the significance of some much more explicit things Jesus said about the cross, just days before it took place. This is true of many of the things Jesus said in His ministry. These sayings were not meant to be fully understood at the time, they were to be remembered and fully interpreted after Jesus' death and resurrection, and after the giving of the Holy Spirit. I have no doubt that it was only years later that Nicodemus understood the full scope of what he had been told. But we, who live centuries after the cross, are meant to understand it and believe it today.

Contrasts

If we saw five parallels between the bronze serpent and Jesus being lifted up, there are also at least three contrasts.

- The quality of life restored
- The scope of the blessing
- The intrinsic value of the object of faith

The quality of life restored

When an Israelite was saved by the bronze serpent, it was an ordinary human life that was restored. Eventually that person would die of some other cause. You might say, he would not perish but have an extended life. In verse fifteen Jesus says that whoever believes in Him will “not perish but have eternal life.” The life given is of a completely different order.

The scope of the blessing

The bronze serpent was only for the benefit of Israel. It was not offered to any of the tribes or nations round about them. In verse 16, John makes clear that God's love extends to the whole world, and that 'whoever' is to be taken to have the widest possible meaning.

The intrinsic value of the object of faith

The bronze serpent was just a piece of bronze; it had no power or value of its own. The power came from God. Nicodemus would know the Old Testament sequel to this story. 2 Kings 18:4 records how Hezekiah smashed the bronze serpent in pieces because the people had been burning incense to it. They had begun to worship the symbol, rather than the God who saved them. But Jesus *did* have power and value in Himself. Jesus is a proper object of faith, not just a symbol of God's salvation.

Conclusion

In just two short verses, Jesus picks up an incident in Jewish history and shows how it was a picture, or type, of His work on the cross. He does this, not to show that the Old Testament can provide a few useful illustrations for preachers, but to demonstrate how God has been planning the sending of His Son from before the start of history. As part of the preparation for the coming of the Son, God filled the whole of the Old Testament with pictures and hints of what He would be like, and what He would do.

Whenever you read your New Testament, look out for references and allusions to the Old Testament. Whenever you read the Old Testament, and you really must, look out for pictures of what Jesus would do in the New.

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