

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: [truthfortoday@aol.com](mailto:truthfortoday@aol.com)

**Broadcast Date:** 13 June 1999

**No.** T0062

**Speaker:** Mr. George Stevens

## The Bible and Miracles: Moses and the Brazen Serpent

### Introduction.

The Old Testament Scriptures contain no more direct and unmistakable shadows of the Lord Jesus Christ and His sin-offering work than our passage in Numbers 21. The meaning behind the events recorded here is explained in the following parts of the New Testament: Hebrews 2, John chapters 3 and 6 and Romans 8. The most striking of these relates to the brazen serpent which is directly referred to by Christ in John 3 as He instructs Nicodemus. Linking both, we find that there is life for a look at the crucified One - the Lord Jesus Christ.

We will examine the passage under seven headings:

- The Discouragement;
- The Distress;
- The Discipline;
- The Danger;
- The Despair;
- The Direction; and,
- The Deliverance.

### The Discouragement.

For nearly forty years, the children of Israel had been wandering through the wilderness. Now *"The soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way."* There were two recent reasons for this. Firstly, they had been refused passage through Edom, and a long fresh journey along the King's Highway was required to reach the Promised Land. Secondly, they had just fought a battle with King Arad.

Let us consider Edom's resistance. Edom is a word which means "red earth". It reminds us of Adam (which means "of the earth") and his sin - so speaking of our *fallen* human nature. It is a nature that resists the things of God. It lives only for itself desiring self-satisfaction and self-glory. Christians are ordered to avoid these things as 2 Timothy 2:22 states: *Flee also youthful lusts: but follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart.*

All the mercy that Israel had known in the wilderness seemed small in view of their weary state. They seemed to fail so easily because of their basic unbelief. Hebrews 10:35 and 36 remind us that both faith and patience are needed for the endurance to overcome the problems of life.

Following the resistance of Edom, King Arad, the Canaanite, fought against Israel at Mount Hor. He had taken some of the Israelites prisoner. The children of Israel did the right thing for once. They consulted with their God over the matter. The result was that He gave them a resounding victory. This little section gives us a picture of Christ defeating the devil and delivering those who were under his bondage. Arad means "fugitive" or "dragon" and reminds us of that great dragon, the devil. Revelation 12:9 describes him thus: *"And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him."* Verse 13 goes on to say: *"And when the dragon saw that he was cast unto the earth, he persecuted the woman which brought forth the man child."*

The name "Israel" means a "prince with God" reminding us of the glorified Christ who is both the Prince of peace and the Saviour. "Hor" means "elevated" showing us that God has given His people a place of safety and rest in the exalted Christ. The name of the place was then changed to "Hormah" which means "utter destruction". So we see a picture of Satan being utterly defeated by Christ at the cross of Calvary. Hebrews 2:14 puts it this way: *"Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage."*

### The Distress.

Frequent discouragement leads to a state of distress. The distress of the Israelites led to unbelief. This, in turn, resulted in murmurings and reproaches against Moses and against God. The people sinned. Every morning had brought them bread from heaven, and water had flowed from the smitten rock. They had been preserved, and protected and provided for by God, yet they said to Moses, *"You've brought us up to die."* This was blind unbelief and vile slander. As if this wasn't bad enough, they looked upon the manna and said, *"Our soul loatheth this light bread."* When we remember that this manna was another one of God's foreshadows of His own Christ, the Bread of Life, we see the dreadfulness of their words. In John 6 we read: *"Jesus answered them and said, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Ye seek me, not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves, and were filled. Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give unto you: for him hath God the Father sealed. Then said they unto him, What shall we do, that we might work the works of God? Jesus answered and said unto them, This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent. They said therefore unto him, What sign shewest thou then, that we may see, and believe thee? What dost thou work? Our fathers did eat manna in the desert; as it is written, He gave them bread from heaven to eat. Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Moses gave you not that bread from heaven; but my Father giveth you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world. Then said they unto him, Lord, evermore give us this bread. And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst. But I said unto you, That ye also have seen me, and believe not... I am that bread of life."*

The manna (meaning: "What is it?") was one of the many signs of Christ given in the Old Testament. It was food from heaven. It was small and round like hoar-frost. It was white in colour and had the taste of honey.

The smallness reminds us of the humility of Christ. Read Philippians 2 and see the wonder of this. The roundness tells us that He had no beginning and has no end. He is the First and the Last. He is the Same. The colour white suggests His purity. There was no sin in Him. He knew no sin. He did no sin. The taste of honey reminds us of the knowledge of wisdom (Proverbs 24:13-14). Christ is the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24).

### The Discipline.

The people's sin led to the discipline of God. *"The LORD sent fiery serpents"* among the people. The word "fiery" literally means "burning". The word suggests that they were poisonous and that the bite would result in an agonising death.

Many of the people died. This reminds us of God's declaration concerning the results of disobedience to the head of the human race, Adam: *"But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil thou shalt not eat of it, for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die."*

The result of Adam's fall was horrifying. Romans 5:12 states: *"Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned."*

God has also declared: *"The wages of sin is death"* (Romans 6:23). This is not only physical death, but a living death in the torments of the lake of fire that burns with brimstone. A burning indeed! The Lord Jesus spoke of hell-fire in this way in Mark 9:48: *"Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched."* Imagine a worm in a ring of fire. The fire is hot enough to cause torment, but does not slay or annihilate the worm. Such is the agony that is the destiny of every unrepentant sinner.

What is that I hear? A God of love would never allow such a thing. Don't forget, that this God of love is also light. As the Judge of all the earth, He must do that which is right. Sin is obnoxious to Him. It has to be judged. That's why He sent His own Son to be a sacrifice for sin. Now all who accept His way of salvation are saved from hell. In fact, this is the whole point of the passage before us.

Here God's judgement against Israel's unbelief came in the form of the serpents. All who were bitten were worthy of, and under the sentence of, death (Galatians 3:22; Romans 5:12). Romans 6:23 says: *"For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."*

### The Danger.

The story is often told of an eagle who spotted a floating carcass of a sheep floating down the river towards Niagara Falls. It fell upon its feast and was soon completely focused upon eating. Both eagle and carcass moved closer and closer to the Falls. As they were about to be carried over the lip of the waterfall, the eagle raised its wings and attempted to take off. However, it couldn't. The eagle plunged to its death carried by the dead sheep. You see, it

was winter. The eagle had been too busy eating to notice that its talons had become frozen to the carcass. People are just like that. In spite of warning after warning concerning their souls' salvation, they are still reluctant to respond. Why? Because they are not fully conscious of the imminence of the danger that they are in. It was like this for the children of Israel. They were too busy in their own affairs and too occupied in grumbling to realise the danger they were in. The Lord Jesus spoke of some of the excuses that people make in Luke 14. Responding to the comment, "*Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God*", Jesus spoke of a man who invited certain people to a great supper. He outlines the excuses they made for refusing the invitation:

1. "I have bought a piece of ground, and I must go and see it." The excuse of Possessions. Who would buy a piece of land without first seeing it? Who would go to see it that late in the day?
2. "I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to test them." The excuse of Business. Yet, what kind of business man would buy oxen he'd never proved? It would be like a farmer of today buying a second hand tractor without first seeing how it performed.
3. "I have married a wife, and therefore, I cannot come." The excuse of Relationships. Friends and family are often barriers to a person gaining salvation.

We could add more excuses. For example, "I live a morally upright life. I'm not like these others who are promiscuous, hooked on drugs or alcohol or use foul language." The excuse of Morality. Another might be: "I can fight the sin in my life and overcome it. Surely God would allow for that - after all, I'm doing my best." The excuse of Religion. Another may be: "I will intelligently argue my case before God. After all, He supposedly made me as I am." The excuse of Philosophy.

Did the Israelite who concerned himself with possessions escape the bite of the snake? No! Did the businessman, the new husband, the religious person and the philosopher? No! The snakes didn't reason with them. They bit them. The people died!

### **The Despair.**

"*We have sinned*"; this is the first step towards the remedy (see Job 33:27; 1 Samuel 12:19; Luke 15:21). Romans 3:23 states: "*For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.*" In Psalm 32:5 we read: "*I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin. Selah.*"

The Israelites' sense of guilt and need led them to Moses, God's interceding man, and through him to God. Today, we know that there is "*one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus*" (1 Timothy 2:5).

### **The Direction.**

As a result of Moses' prayer, he was given the remedy by God. The image of a serpent made from brass (or, better, copper) and lifted up on a pole was ordained of God to be the way of salvation and life. The Cross stands out plainly as a parallel here. In John 3:14 we read words of the Lord Jesus Himself: "*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.*"

In the same way as the serpent had been lifted up, the Lord Jesus (the Son of man) had to be lifted up. The serpent was the image of God's judgement placed upon a pole. Now we look to the cross of Christ and see the judgement of God being poured out on His own Son. In Romans 8:3 we read: "*For 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 a sacrifice for sin, condemned sin in the flesh.*"

There at Golgotha's tree, we see Him "*who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness.*" It is by His stripes we are healed (1 Peter 2:24).

It is interesting to note that the metals of Scripture usually have a symbolic meaning. For example, pure gold speaks of the *glory of holiness* and, therefore, often of deity itself. The headplate of the Jewish high priest was made of pure gold. "*Holiness to the LORD*" was written upon it. In Revelation 21:18, we read of the heavenly city being of pure gold. It is called the "*holy city*". In the same way, we can trace silver. It speaks of the *glory of redemption*. While, brass (or copper) is representative of the *glory of God's righteousness* usually under some form of testing.

This is worthy of note because the judgement of God was exhausted by Christ in whom there was no sin. Yet, He was made sin by God in order that we, who believe in Him, could be clothed in the righteousness of God.

**The Deliverance.**

The command of God was that the dying people should look at the serpent upon the pole and live. Look and live! *“Every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live.”* Isaiah 45:22 shows us that the way of salvation is by a look. This is the simplest of operations. *“Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else.”*

But this look is one of faith! What makes me say that? Well, the people had to believe what was commanded first of all. They had to accept the directive as being from God. They had to receive it as the word of God. Those who obeyed that word looked and lived. Those who disobeyed died.

So it is today. We are privileged to have the Bible - God's Word to mankind. The command to us is: *“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.”* So we have to ask ourselves two questions:

1. Do I believe that this simple, direct message is from God?
2. Will I obey its command?

Just as there was life to be found by looking in faith to the serpent upon the pole, so there is life, yes, eternal life, to be found by looking in faith to Christ on the cross. In the allegory, *“Pilgrim's Progress”* by John Bunyan, Pilgrim looked up at Christ on the cross, and the burden he carried, symbolic of the guilt of sin, was loosed. It bounced down a hill to be forever lost in a tomb. In like manner, we can be free of sin and its guilt by trusting in the Christ who took the judgement of God against sin on the cross.

In John 5:24 we read: *“Most assuredly I say unto you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgement, but has passed from death into life.”* Here we see that life is guaranteed through faith. And we find the permanence of that life and salvation in the words of the Son of God Himself in John 10:27-30: *“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of My hand. My Father which gave them Me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of My Father's hand. I and My Father are one.”* Believers in the Son of the living God know that they have been eternal life (1 John 5:13) and also have the assurance that they can never be lost. Praise the Lord!

---

**Please Note:**

We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1. Large Print copies of this document are also available upon request.