

The Serpent in the Wilderness:

Read Numbers 21:4-9 and Matthew 26:51-56.

The setting for the Matthew statement was the arrest of Jesus hours before His crucifixion. Notice is that twice Jesus declared that what was about to happen to Him was written about by the Old Testament prophets. A great number of the events associated with Jesus' death on a Cross and resurrection after 3 days were declared first by the prophets and pictured so we could understand the whole account of the provision for our sins better.

Read John 3:14, 15. Most Christians know that the incident Jesus was referring to is found in the Old Testament. It is ultimately a picture of Jesus on the Cross but there is much more to it and in digging deeper we discover a truth about the crucifixion of Jesus that is important to remember.

The Israelites were in the wilderness because they were unwilling to trust God to go with them into the land He had promised to them. It was a 40 year period of wandering and in all honesty a difficult time for them. They grumbled a lot and for the most part God ignored it. This time apparently their grumbling went too far. Generally God has no problem with our being honest about how we feel. Many of the Psalms and the book of Lamentations are largely grumbling of one kind or another. This incident, however, occurred near the end of their wilderness wanderings as they were being prepared to enter the land. They needed greater confidence in God at that junction in their lives.

God chose to deal with their grumbling by sending serpents or snakes into their encampment. The use of serpents is an interesting choice by God to discipline them. The people grumbled about leaving Egypt. Evidently they forgot what life was really like there. Serpents were key symbols in Egypt. The Pharaoh's crown had a cobra on it and a cobra on a pole was a symbol of a deity's power.

More important is the association of serpents with Satan. The Bible begins and ends with references to the serpent who is Satan. In the Garden of Eden it was Satan in the form of a serpent who tempted Adam and Eve to sin and in Revelation 12 we read that the dragon, which is the ancient serpent, was hurled down out of heaven. Sending serpents to bite them was logical. When we grumble against God we are playing into Satan's hand so sending a symbol of him to punish the Israelites for sin is logical.

The Israelites realized they had sinned and that only God could forgive them. They went to Moses and asked him to intervene for them. God always responds to honest cries for forgiveness and help. Read God's response in Numbers 21:8-9.

The question is this. Why would God ask them to put on a pole a symbol of Satan and tell them all they had to do was look on it and they would live? And why would Jesus equate Himself with that serpent in the provision He would make for us on the Cross? First look at the promise given to Moses and think about some of the possible reactions to it.

Notice that God did not make the snakes disappear nor did He automatically remove the death sentence that came with a snake bite. If God had simply removed the serpents, those already bitten would still have died. If He had automatically removed the death sentence from being bitten no act of faith or commitment to God would have been necessary and they would have

gotten away with their sins. God did not drive the snakes away but instead provided a cure for everyone who was bitten. In a similar manner sin is still with us but God made a provision on the Cross for us all, since we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

Anyone bitten could look and be cured. Read what Jesus said to Nicodemus in John 3:16.

Note that all the Israelites had to do was look. They did not have to bring a sacrifice or offering to the pole before they would be healed. The healing was a grace gift from God. Receiving it was simple but involved a necessary step of commitment or faith.

Contemplate the possible responses to what God offered. Some undoubtedly thought it would never work even when they saw it working for others. Some undoubtedly felt they were too close to death to work for them, they were already too sick. And some believed it was worth giving it a shot and looked half believing and half doubting and when they did they were cured. It did not take a huge amount of faith, just a faith the size of a mustard seed. That is all God has ever required. Whoever looked at that serpent believing that God was going to heal them, even if it did not make any sense, lived. Everyone who was bitten and chose not to look for any reason at all, died. The strength of their arguments on why it would not work or the sincerity of their belief that it couldn't work did not matter. They died.

Read the follow-up to this story in II Kings 18:3-5. We tend to make that which God intends for a symbol into a fetish we worship. Some Christians have done that with the Cross, wearing one as a "good luck" piece of jewelry instead of a symbol of their faith and of the incredible price Jesus paid for our redemption.

That takes us to the passage in John. The way in which Jesus applied this incident helps inform us during this Lenten season of the deeper meaning of His provision for us on that Cross. To begin with the serpent is not in any way a simple symbol of Jesus and His death for us on the Cross. That serpent did not suffer in any way nor did it shed any blood without which there is no remission for sin. It was not Satan on that Cross it was the only begotten Son of God. But in Numbers it was the snake that bit them that was represented on that pole.

We find elsewhere in the New Testament an explanation of the symbolism Jesus was making of the serpent on the pole. Read Romans 8:3-4; II Corinthians 5:21 and Galatians 3:13.

Just as the serpent on that pole represented the sin that caused them death, so Jesus on the Cross took our sin upon Himself and bore it in our place. When Jesus was nailed to that Cross our sin was nailed there with Him. That is why on the Cross Jesus cried, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" When He took our sin upon Himself He suffered the separation sin that causes.

The Cross represented unbelievable physical suffering and we must not minimize the agony of those hours or the love that took Him there. At the same time we must never think that the cost Jesus paid to secure our redemption was just a few hours of pain on a Cross. The battle was not for our physical lives but for our souls and the price of that included bearing our sins and the separation from God that resulted in that. He loved us enough to pay the full price and all He asks of us in return is that we accept His offer of forgiveness, that we take unto ourselves the

redemption purchased at so great a price and then that we live as those whose citizenship is not long on earth where men thirst but in heaven where we will never thirst for anything.

When the Israelites were told in the Old Testament to look at the serpent on a pole they were being asked to look at the sin that was causing them to die. Jesus asks us to look to Him as He bears our sin, as He suffered not only the physical agony of the Cross but the spiritual agony that was evident when He called out "My God, why have you forsaken me."

To see our salvation secured simply by His painful death is to minimize the true ugliness of sin, to minimize the judgment that God placed on sin. Sin is not some minor infraction of God's Law that resulted in a time out punishment of Jesus on the Cross but a separating event that prohibits us from ever having fellowship with a holy God. But praise Him, Jesus took our sins, our serpent, upon Himself and paid in full the price of our rebellion against God. But we have to respond to that provision even as the Israelites did under Moses. They had to look up. We have to look to the Cross. Faith is our commitment to Him and all He provided. It is our request for the redemption purchased at such a great price.

Contemplate the cost of our redemption in terms of the physical suffering of Jesus and the spiritual suffering He experienced when He took our sins literally upon Himself.