**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**NUMBERS-011. THE POISON AND THE ANTIDOTE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"4.* *And they journeyed from mount Hor by the way of the Red Sea, to compare the land of Edom: and the soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way. 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. 6. And the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died. 7. 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. 8. 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. 9. 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."*

*Numbers 21:4-9*

The mutinous discontent of the Israelites had some excuse when they had to wheel round once more and go southwards in consequence of the refusal of passage through Edom. The valley which stretches from the Dead Sea to the head of the eastern arm of the Red Sea, down which they had to plod in order to turn the southern end of the mountains on its east side, and then resume their northern march outside the territory of Edom, is described as a horrible desert. Certainly it yielded neither bread nor water. So the faithless pilgrims broke into their only too familiar murmurings, utterly ignoring their thirty-eight years of preservation. There is no bread. No; but the manna had fallen day by day. Our soul loatheth this light bread. Yes; but it was bread all the same. Thus coarse tastes prefer garlic and onions to Heaven's food, and complain of being starved while it is provided. There is no water. No; but the rock that followed them gushed out abundance, and there was no thirst.

Murmuring brought punishment, which was meant for amendment. The Lord sent fiery serpents. That statement does not necessarily imply a miracle. Scripture traces natural phenomena directly to God's will, and often overleaps intervening material links between the cause which is God and the effect which is a physical fact. The neighbourhood of Elath at the head of the gulf is still infested with venomous serpents, marked with fiery red spots, from which, or possibly from the inflammation caused by their poison, they are here called fiery. God made the serpents, though they were hatched by eggs laid by mothers; He brought Israel to the place; He willed the poisonous stings. If we would bring ordinary events into immediate connection with the Divine hand, and would see in all calamities fatherly chastisement for our profit, we should understand life better than we often do.

The swift stroke had fallen without warning or voice to interpret it, but the people knew in their hearts whence and why it had come. Their quick recognition of its source and purpose, and their swift repentance, are to be put to their credit. It is well for us when we interpret for ourselves God's judgments, and need no Moses to urge us to humble ourselves before Him. Conscious guilt is conscious of unworthiness to approach God, though it dares to speak to offended men. The request for Moses intercession witnesses to the instinct of conscience, requiring a mediator,--an instinct which has led to much superstition and been terribly misguided, but which is deeply true, and is met once for all in Jesus Christ, our Advocate before the throne. The request shows that the petitioners were sure of Moses forgiveness for their distrust of him, and thus it witnesses to his meekness. His pardon was a kind of pledge of God's. Was the servant likely to be more gracious than the Master? A good man's readiness to forgive helps bad men to believe in a pardoning God. It reflects some beam of Heaven's mercy.

Moses had often prayed for the people when they had sinned, and before they had repented. It was not likely that he would be slow to do so when they asked him, for the asking was accompanied with ample confession. The serpents had done their work, and the prayer that the chastisement should cease would be based on the fact that the sin had been forsaken. But the narrative seems to anticipate that, after the prayer had been offered and answered, Israelites would still be bitten. If they were, that confirms the presumption that the sending of the serpents was not miraculous. It also brings the whole facts into line with the standing methods of Providence, for the outward consequences of sin remain to be reaped after the sin has been forsaken; but they change their character and are no longer destructive, but only disciplinary. Serpents still bite if we have broken down hedges, but there is an antidote.

The command to make a brazen or copper serpent, and set it on some conspicuous place, that to look on it might stay the effect of the poison, is remarkable, not only as sanctioning the forming of an image, but as associating healing power with a material object. Two questions must be considered separately,--What did the method of cure say to the men who turned their bloodshot, languid eyes to it? and What does it mean for us, who see it by the light of our Lord's great words about it? As to the former question, we have not to take into account the Old Testament symbolism which makes the serpent the emblem of Satan or of sin. Serpents had bitten the wounded. Here was one like them, but without poison, hanging harmless on the pole. Surely that would declare that God had rendered innocuous the else fatal creatures. The elevation of the serpent was simply intended to make it visible from afar; but it could not have been set so high as to be seen from all parts of the camp, and we must suppose that the wounded were in many cases carried from the distant parts of the wide-spreading encampment to places whence they could catch a glimpse of it glittering in the sunshine. We are not told that trust in God was an essential part of the look, but that is taken for granted. Why else should a half-dead man lift his heavy eyelids to look? Such a one knew that God had commanded the image to be made, and had promised healing for a look. His gaze was fixed on it, in obedience to the command involved in the promise, and was, in some measure, a manifestation of faith. No doubt the faith was very imperfect, and the desire was only for physical healing; but none the less it had in it the essence of faith. It would have been too hard a requirement for men through whose veins the swift poison was burning its way, and who, at the best, were so little capable of rising above sense, to have asked from them, as the condition of their cure, a trust which had no external symbol to help it. The singularity of the method adopted witnesses to the graciousness of God, who gave their feebleness a thing that they could look at, to aid them in grasping the unseen power which really effected the cure. He that turned himself to it, says the Book of Wisdom, was not saved by the thing which he saw, but by Thee, that art the Saviour of all.

Our Lord has given us the deepest meaning of the brazen serpent. Taught by Him, we are to see in it a type of Himself, the significance of which could not be apprehended till Calvary had given the key. Three distinct points of parallel are suggested by His use of the incident in His conversation with Nicodemus. First, He takes the serpent as an emblem of Himself. Now it is clear that it is so, not in regard to the saving power that dwells in Him, but in regard to His sinless manhood, which was made in the likeness of sinful flesh, yet without sin. The symbolism which takes the serpent as the material type of sin comes into view now, and is essential to the full comprehension of the typical significance of the incident.

Secondly, Jesus laid stress on the lifting up of the serpent. That lifting up has two meanings. It primarily refers to the Crucifixion, wherein, just as the death-dealing power was manifestly triumphed over in the elevation of the brazen serpent, the power of sin is exhibited as defeated, as Paul says, triumphing over them in it (Col. 2:14-15). But that lifting up on the Cross draws after it the elevation to the throne, and to that, or, rather, to both considered as inseparably united, our Lord refers when He says, I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Me.

Thirdly, the condition of healing is paralleled. When he looked unto the serpent of brass, he lived. That whosoever believeth may in Him have eternal life. From the serpent no healing power flowed; but our eternal life is in Him, and from Him it flows into our poisoned, dying nature. The sole condition of receiving into ourselves that new life which is free from all taint of sin, and is mighty enough to arrest the venom that is diffused through every drop of blood, is faith in Jesus lifted on the Cross to slay the sin that is slaying mankind, and raised to the throne to bestow His own immortal and perfect life on all who look to Him. The bitten Israelite might be all but dead. The poison wrought swiftly; but if he from afar lifted his glazing eyeballs to the serpent on the pole, a swifter healing overtook the death that was all but conqueror, and cast it out, and he who was borne half unconscious to the foot of the standard went away a sound man, walking, and leaping, and praising God. So it may be with any man, however deeply tainted with sin, if he will trust himself to Jesus, and from the ends of the earth look unto Him and be saved, His power knows no hopeless cases. He can cure all. He will cure our most ingrained sin, and calm the hottest fever of our poisoned blood, if we will let Him. The only thing that we have to do is to gaze, with our hearts in our eyes and faith in our hearts, on Him, as He is lifted on the Cross and the throne. But we must so gaze, or we die, for none but He can cast out the coursing venom. None but He can arrest the swift-footed death that is intertwined with our very natures.