

Brazen Serpents

by Lewis Williams

The sermon warns against idolizing God's gifts and emphasizes the importance of focusing on the Giver, Jesus Christ, for salvation.

Scripture: Numbers 21:8, 1 Corinthians 10:14, 1 Corinthians 12:4, 1 Corinthians 13:1, Ephesians 2:8, Colossians 2:8, Hebrews 12:2, James 1:17, 1 John 5:21

Topics: "Idolatry", "Christ Alone"

Description

Lewis Williams delivers a powerful sermon warning against burning incense to brazen serpents, emphasizing the danger of focusing more on God's gifts than on God Himself. He highlights how the children of Israel fell into idolatry by worshiping the brazen serpent instead of the Giver, a trap that many still fall into today by prioritizing church membership, baptism, communion, and spiritual gifts over a personal relationship with Christ. Williams urges believers to turn their eyes from the gifts to the Giver, emphasizing that salvation, healing, and spiritual growth come from Christ alone.

Transcript

To the children of Israel that brazen serpent was a means of grace; through it they were healed. It had no healing power, but was simply the medium through which God worked to their good. When Hezekiah came to the throne, the record says they were burning incense to the brazen serpent. Instead of burning their incense to God, who gave it to them, they were burning their incense to what God had given them; to the gift instead of the Giver.

Previously we have made the statement that the devil did not care how many of God's gifts you worshipped. He is a sly old devil, and if he can get the eyes of the people of God off on to some of the gifts of God, that is as good as he wants. The children of Israel had gotten their eyes off of God and onto His gift, and, once so, it is not long until the incense will begin to rise and the very rankest idolatry set in. Satan did not stop at that sort of thing with the children of Israel; he has been at the same nefarious, God-dishonoring business ever since, and today the burning of incense to brazen serpents is going on at a frightful speed. We unhesitatingly make the assertion that there are millions of people today who are burning incense to brazen serpents; that is, they are thinking and making more of God's gifts than of God Himself, putting more stress on what was given as a means of grace than upon the Christ who actually died to redeem them from all sin.

Let us look at a few illustrations of this. The Church is of divine origin, and was a gift of God to men. All down through the ages God has had His people organized for war against Satan's kingdom. Organized by the Holy Spirit through the agency of holy men, the fight has been on these thousands of years. Every soul that is born of the Spirit is born into God's family and becomes a member of the invisible Church. God does not save men for them to sit down in idleness, but that they may become saviors of others and fight in the war against sin. To have the co-operation of the invisible Church -- those born of the Spirit -- they must be organized, and that brings the visible Church into view. To this visible Church was given, "Some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ." All this was done to make the Church the greatest force among men for their salvation. Every preacher, evangelist, pastor and teacher was given to the Church for that sole purpose. Every member of the invisible body has been born from above, "born again," and has the witness of the Holy Spirit to his regeneration; and every member of the visible Church should have such an experience, and has no right to be taken in and made a member of that body until his life gives evidence that such is the case. That is the only reason that they should be taken into the Church, for they will be of no use to God in the salvation of men until such is the case. That is why the invisible Church was organized into the visible Church; but that which was given has taken the place of the Giver. Jesus gave us the Church, but not that we should become a lot of Church worshipers and have a churchanity instead of Christianity; and yet that is just what has largely taken place, and there are millions of people today who make more of their church membership than they do of the blood of Christ, which alone can save them from all sin.

Thousands have joined church for almost every cause under the sun; some for one thing, and some for another, and thousands, if not millions, have joined church, who have never known the saving power of Christ, until we have fallen upon the day when it is popular to belong to some organization known as a church. Many preachers are more concerned about getting folks to join their particular church than they are to get them saved from sin. What a soul-deluding farce! Untold numbers are banking their salvation upon the mere fact that they belong to church, which is but burning incense to the brazen serpent; making more of the gift than of the Giver. Like the mustard seed planted in the earth, which grew to be a great tree, spreading forth its branches making place for every unclean bird to lodge, just so has the mania for church membership gone on, and the Church has become more worldly, until it has become the home of every foul and unclean bird. While it is the hoe of God's people and God's saints are among the number, yet liars, whoremongers, bank-robbers, Sabbath desecrators, God despisers and holiness rejecters are found within the pale of the visible churches of today. Many of the preachers are bowing down to altars in secret lodge rooms and taking oaths that might well cause a heathen to blush with shame. The world has crept in until their power as soul-saving institutions has departed from many of our so-called churches, and they are but little more than ecclesiastical club houses, lecture bureaus and fashionable centers. That may be strong language, but the proof is also to be seen up and down the land. Go into the vast majority of the churches of today and before a real, genuine work of grace can take place, the eyes and minds of the people must be turned from the church and church membership to Christ. Their eyes must be turned from the gift to the Giver; there must be a serpent smashing take place.

Again, we read in the Bible of persons being baptized with water. Now, we have no objections to your being baptized with water, and we will be more charitable than many; we will be pleased for you to have it in any way you desire, sprinkling, pouring or immersion, so long as you do not attach any saving power to it. It was not given to save men from sin; was not thus intended; never did, and never can save men from sin; yet there are a large number of people who are laying great stress upon it, in fact, banking the

salvation of their soul upon the fact that they have been baptized with water. Such persons are water idolaters, and as such are burning incense to the brazen serpent. Unless their eyes can be turned away from the water to the blood of Jesus, which alone can save and cleanse them, they will be lost. They must turn from the gift to the Giver.

Again, we believe in the Holy Sacrament as it was instituted by the Lord; and never have we knelt at the communion table, but that visions of the suffering Christ have passed before our mind, and we seemed to hear His say, "As oft as ye do this, do it in remembrance of Me." It was not given to save men from sin, and was never so intended; yet, there are many who think that if they belong to some church, and, having been baptized, manage to get out to divine service on communion morning, that is sufficient and their hopes are secure.

They were doing that sort of thing even in Paul's day. Turn to his first letter to the church at Corinth, and read his severe condemnation of those who, in the church, were eating at the Lord's table unworthily: "For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, That the Lord Jesus the same night in which He was betrayed took bread: And when He had given thanks, He brake it, and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of Me. After the same manner also He took the cup, when He had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament of My blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of Me: For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till He come. Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body." (1 Cor. 11:23-2) How many are there, among the great numbers who go to the sacramental table, who go there unworthily? They who do so only add to their damnation. We read that "there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord and satan came also among them." (Job 1:6)

Friends, the devil could do all these things, and yet be the same old arch enemy of souls that he is. These are but gifts and, like the brazen serpent, are used as a means of grace, but were not given for us to depend upon for our salvation. We must turn from those things to the Blood, which alone can bring pardon, peace and purity, and fit us for a home in the sky. The gift cannot save us, but the Giver can.

In his letter to the church at Corinth, Paul devotes considerable space to gifts of the Spirit. Beginning with the most important, he names them in order, but gives us to understand that no one need expect to receive all those gifts, or be in possession of all of them at one time; but he does say to covet earnestly the best of them. Then, as if he knew some would spend most of their valuable time seeking after them, he said, "I show unto you a more excellent way," and gives us a picture of that greatest of all gifts, perfect love -- the "more excellent way" -- the "way of holiness." But in spite of his plain admonition, we have the spectacle of some of God's children making more of the very least of the gifts than the more excellent way.

We believe in divine healing. We have seen a number of people wonderfully and instantly healed; we have anointed and prayed for some folks and have seen them healed immediately; we have anointed and prayed with others and they were healed afterwards; we have anointed and prayed for others who were not healed. We have prayed for some and did not anoint them and they were healed; while we have prayed for others that were not healed. We have been wonderfully healed a number of times; sometimes oil was used and sometimes it was not. We have been anointed and not healed until we had applied certain remedies. We believe folks get healed with and without means. When we have been unable to get

hold of or exercise faith for our healing, we have employed other means, and asked God to bless the means employed. We have no contention with those who believe or with those who do not believe in employing means; but we do see serious danger in anyone getting his eyes on the gift more than on the Giver.

We know of those who have made the subject of healing detrimental to the work of getting souls saved and sanctified, and when that is done, it is wrong. We have met with those who made more of the gift of healing the body than they did of getting the soul healed of its awful disease of sin. Such persons are "burning incense to the brazen serpent," making more of the gift than of the Giver, and we warn them that there is danger ahead.

In the past few years much attention has been called in certain localities and among certain classes to "speaking in tongues;" and some have devoted their entire time to the seeking of the gift of speaking in an unknown tongue. The word "unknown" is not found in the Scriptures in connection with the word "tongues" except in italics. It was placed thus so that all may know that it was or is a word that was supplied by the translators of the King James version. Speaking in "tongues" is the very least of the gifts. The three times it was given in the Acts it was given as a sign to the Jews. After it filled its purpose, it ceased. Paul said it would cease. (1 Cor. 13:8) We suppose that in his day Paul could probably speak more different languages than anyone else in the Church, but he said, "I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I might teach others, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue."

As we have gone up and down this land, our observation has been that, wherever the people turned to seeking after "tongues," the work of soul-saving largely stopped, and it was not long until discord, disaster, defeat and destruction were seen. A number have come to the altar in our meetings who have been wrecked on that error. It is a brazen serpent, and the sooner you so see it, the safer you will be. Anything that takes your eyes and mind off of Jesus and the Blood, no matter how much or how little it may have been used of God in days gone by, the moment you begin to make more of it than the Blood, that moment you are off the track.

Don't burn incense to a brazen serpent.

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