

The Serpent, the Curse: Jesus Lifted Up

by T. Austin-Sparks

Jesus Christ is the curse for us, bearing the judgment of our rebellious hearts, and providing deliverance from the curse and judgment through faith in Him.

Scripture: Numbers 21:5-9, Deuteronomy 21:23, John 3:14-16, John 4:14, John 6:33-35, John 7:37-39, 2 Corinthians 3:6

Topics: "Faith in Christ", "Deliverance from Self"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the connection between the serpent lifted by Moses in the wilderness and Jesus being lifted up on the cross, illustrating how Christ bore the curse and judgment for humanity's sins. He explains that just as the Israelites looked to the serpent for healing, believers must look to Jesus for eternal life, as God demonstrated His love by sacrificing His Son. The sermon highlights the transition from the Old Testament's judgment to the New Testament's promise of salvation, underscoring the importance of faith in Christ for deliverance from self-centeredness and spiritual impotence. Ultimately, the message calls for believers to proclaim their faith, allowing the rivers of living water to flow from them as a testament to God's grace.

Transcript

(6) The Serpent, the Curse: Jesus Lifted Up

"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth may in him have eternal life" (John 3:14,15).

Here is the Old Testament background, which we have in the twenty-first chapter of the Book of Numbers. There the incident begins in this way: "The people spake against God, and against Moses... our soul loatheth this vile bread" (Numbers 21:5 - R.V. margin). They used very strong words about the manna, the food from heaven. They spoke against God and Moses and said: 'We hate the thing God has provided.'

Do remember that God, in all that He did, always had His Son in view, and this was so when He gave the children of Israel the manna from heaven (as we shall see when we come to John 6). The manna was a type of Christ, who said: "The bread of God is that which cometh down out of heaven, and giveth life unto the world... I am the bread of life" (John 6:33,35). The people of Israel said: 'We loathe this vile bread'... and you can hear the Jews in Christ's day speaking like that: 'We hate this man!' That was their spirit.

God saw the spirit of these people in the wilderness. How antagonistic it was to Him and to what He gave! Therefore "the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died" (Numbers 21:6). "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up."

Oh, there are deep and terrible things here! From the beginning to the end of the Bible the serpent is ever and always the symbol of a curse, of the judgment of God. You know that from the very first mention of the serpent in the Bible. This serpent lifted up in the wilderness was the symbol of the judgment of God. The judgment and curse of God which rested upon the rebellious people were transferred to that serpent. It was transfixed to the cross, carrying the curse and the judgment of God upon itself for the people, and whosoever looked to the serpent was saved.

In using that bit of the Old Testament, the Lord Jesus was only saying: 'I am going to be made a curse for you. When I am lifted up I shall bear YOUR judgment upon Myself. I shall carry YOUR sins in My body on the tree.' There is deliverance in Christ crucified from the curse and from the judgment, and whosoever will look shall live. And here comes in the greatest Scripture that we know! "For" (I like the conjunction. Conjunctions are always significant things in the New Testament. When you get a 'for', 'wherefore' or 'therefore', always look all round) "God so loved the world."

We so often quote John 3:16 without the context. Ah, what a tremendous thing this is! God has laid on His only-begotten Son the iniquity of us all, allowing Him, His well-beloved Son, to be made a curse for us. Why? "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life." You have to lift that out and put it right into Numbers 21, or take Numbers 21 and put it right into John 3:16.

Here is the background and here is the foreground, the transition from the old to the new. The new heavenly Israel is built upon this ground: "Whosoever believeth may in him have eternal life."

What a lot more we could say about that! But we must pass on.

(7) The Opened Way to the Springing Well

(Here is another unfortunate dividing of chapters. For spiritual purposes it is a great pity that John 3 and John 4 are divided.)

Reading: John 4:1-42

The heart of the whole talk between the Master and the woman of Samaria is in verse 14:

"Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall become in him a well of water springing up unto eternal life."

I have just said that there ought to be no division of chapters here, because the twenty-first chapter of the Book of Numbers is not divided. Immediately after the incident of the serpent being lifted up there comes the incident of the springing well: "Then sang Israel this song: Spring up, O well:" (Numbers 21:17). When the Cross has done its work, when Christ has borne the judgment and the curse resting upon us, then the Holy Spirit is released and springs up as the well of eternal life.

There, then, in chapter four is the background of Numbers 21 - the springing well following immediately upon the serpent being lifted up. In John 3 and 4 you have these two things: Jesus lifted up, being made a curse for us (for it is written: "He that is hanged is accursed of God" (Deuteronomy 21:23)), and bearing the judgment of our rebellious hearts. Then, when He has done that, He has made a way for the springing well of eternal life.

The Holy Spirit makes a wonderful connection in the Bible, does He not? How He brings things together! We would, perhaps, have never thought of finding the third and fourth chapters of John in the twenty-first chapter of Numbers, but there they are.

(8) The Word of Life and the Law of Death

Reading: John 4:46-54

Here we have the incident of the nobleman and his dying son. He has come all the way from Capernaum to find Jesus and to persuade Him to go home with him and heal his son. Jesus tested his faith, and, finding that it was quite genuine, said: "Go thy way. Thy son liveth." The man believed Him, went home and discovered that it was just at the very moment that Jesus said: "Thy son liveth" that the boy began to get better.

What is at the heart of this incident? Why did Jesus not go to Capernaum with that man? He went there on another occasion and healed a lot of people. Why did He not say: 'Well, I have to return to Capernaum at some time and do a lot of works there. I may as well go now. Here is the opportunity. It is an invitation and I suppose I ought to take all invitations'?

Jesus did not do that. He stayed where He was and sent the man home all those miles. It took from twelve noon until the close of that day, and then on into the next day, for the man to get home. Why was it that Jesus adopted this method on this particular occasion?

We have a Jewish background. What is it? It is the background of the law: "The letter killeth" (II Corinthians 3:6). Jesus said: "The words that I have spoken unto you are spirit, and are life" (John 6:63). It does not matter how far away the case may be, if He speaks His word is spirit and life.

The Old Testament speaking of the law brought death. "The letter killeth" (that is, the letter of the law). "The spirit giveth life" (II Corinthians 3:6) and "the words that I have spoken unto you are spirit, and are life." Jesus had only to speak and He reversed the effect of the law. The law could never have done this. You may bring all the scribes and Pharisees down from Jerusalem to this boy and they can recite all the law of Moses, and nothing will happen. He will die right enough, and probably all the quicker because of their reading of the law! Jesus had only to open His mouth and speak a word, and the boy many miles away began to get better from that moment.

Yes, Jesus is saying that the law of His mouth is life. The transition is so clear - from death unto life in the Word.

(9) The Release from the Bondage to Self

Reading: John 5:1-9

In this story of the impotent man the heart of the matter is in verse five: "And a certain man was there, which had been thirty and eight years in his infirmity."

What is the Jewish background? There is very little doubt that it was Israel's journey in the wilderness, the thirty-eight years of their wanderings. What cripples they were! They could have made the journey from Egypt to Canaan in eleven days, but it took them thirty-eight years and during that time they were really making no progress at all. They were in bondage to their own self-life. They were impotent, helpless cripples because the self-life was in the place of mastery. You have no need for me to tell you how that self-life governed them in the wilderness. They never looked at anything in the light of how it served God and how far it satisfied His interests. They looked at everything in the light of how it affected them. All their murmuring and rebellion was because THEY were not getting what THEY wanted. It was never what God wanted. They were just a self-centered people, and the self-life was their bed, and they were cripples lying on that bed. They were never really able to get up and march straight forward into God's purpose.

Well, that is the Jewish background, and Jesus takes up an illustration of that right in the presence of the Jews when He puts this man on his feet.

The members of the new heavenly Israel are people who have been delivered from self-interest into God's interest, who have been put on their spiritual feet by Jesus Christ and are walking in strength in the way of the Lord.

Do you not think it is a very significant thing that the first miracle after the Day of Pentecost was the raising of an impotent man at the gate of the temple in Jerusalem? These are not just pretty stories put together to make an interesting book. God knows what He is doing, and when He makes the first miracle of the Christian era the raising of an impotent cripple, He is saying that the people of this new Israel are people who have been delivered from this impotence and put on their feet spiritually.

There are a lot of Christian cripples about! They cannot get on their own feet, nor can other people put them there. You try to pick them up! They may take a step or two, and then down they go again. There are many like that, and you can spend your life trying to get them up on their feet. What is it that is eating the very life out of them? What is it that is making them such helpless cripples that they cannot walk? It is self-centeredness. Make no mistake about it, it is self in some form. It is self that wants to be taken notice of. It is self in the form of pride. This poor man was delivered because he knew his own helplessness and he believed what Jesus said. He believed on to Jesus Christ, which means that he believed out of himself. Yes, that is the secret - that we shall turn from our miserable selves and cease to be occupied with them, saying once and for all: 'I am done with you, wretched self. I throw myself on to Jesus Christ. I take the one great step of committal.' Jesus never lets such a person down.

(10) The Miracle and Mystery of Heavenly Sustenance

Reading: John 6

We have already said something about this. The Jewish background comes in verse thirty-two: "It was not Moses that gave you the bread out of heaven; but my Father".

Right in the presence of the Jews, Jesus is saying: "The bread of God is that which cometh down out of heaven, and giveth life unto the world... I am the bread of life".

With John's extensive context of the manna in the wilderness covering seventy-one verses there is one issue which plainly arises. It is the issue of divine sustenance in humanly impossible conditions. That this matter is taken out of the natural into the super-natural realm is clear. Nicodemus - that representative of Israel - had confronted a demand made by Christ with a mighty 'How?' "How can a man be born when he is old?" That question postulated the miracle of the beginning of the Christian life. In the chapter now before us the Jews raised another question: "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" (verse 52). This question - with the context of the feeding of the multitude in the wilderness - postulates the miracle of the continuance and support of the Christian life in naturally impossible conditions. That Christ Himself as "The Bread of Life" maintains the life of God's people when there is nothing but spiritual desolation all around is, firstly, a miracle; secondly, a fact; and thirdly, a test of the reality of union with Him. This miracle and fact are attested by a long history of the stamina and persistence of so many who have had no EARTHLY means of spiritual support. If our life is centered in Christ Himself, and not merely in religious things, it will be a miracle how we go on.

Perhaps this is one of the ways in which the manifold wisdom of God is made known, by the Church, unto principalities and powers, and we are 'unto the glory of His grace'.

(11) All Sacrifices and Offerings fulfilled

Reading: John 7:1,2,14,37-39

We are here in the presence of the feast of tabernacles and that goes back to the twenty-ninth chapter of the Book of Numbers. If you look there you will see what led up to this great day of the feast. All the different kinds of offerings had been presented to the Lord (I need not enumerate them - they are all mentioned in the chapter), and then came the last great day of the feast. It is called the 'feast of tabernacles', but it is also called 'the feast of trumpets'. On the last great day the priests brought out great vessels of water and poured it out on the top of the steps of the temple in Jerusalem so that it flowed down in great volume.

Jesus stepped forward at that time. In Him all the offerings are presented to God. He in person is the embodiment of all the sacrifices and all the offerings and He, as the completeness of all God's requirements, presents Himself to the Lord. Then He comes to this day of the feast of tabernacles. In Numbers it says: "It is a day of blowing of trumpets unto you". Jesus, so to speak, took the trumpet and 'cried with a loud voice'. Here, in figure, is the trumpet of the feast of tabernacles. In Him all the offerings are perfected. God is fully satisfied and, therefore, He can pour out His Spirit in fullness. Jesus cried like a trumpet: "He that believeth on me... out of him shall flow rivers of living water."

This is the heritage of all who are of the new Israel. It is your inheritance. If the Word of God is true, if what Christ has said is true (and He wanted it to be known that it was true by crying with a loud voice), and if you and I will accept Jesus Christ as God's full satisfaction on our behalf, as the One who has brought every offering that God has stipulated to God Himself, who has answered to every sacrifice and every offering, then His great cry is true for us. Rivers of living water can flow out of us and others can receive His life through us, who are His channels. That is how it ought to be with every true believer, and Jesus has made it possible by satisfying God completely on our behalf.

So people of the new Israel ought to be people with a river flowing out of them. Believe, proclaim your faith, do not be silent, take the trumpet and let people hear, and you will be surprised that, when you begin to testify to the Lord Jesus, other people will receive life. Something will happen to them. If you keep your

mouth closed and refuse to testify to the Lord Jesus in your home, in your village and in your work, then you are holding up the river of the Spirit. You are checking the flow of the river that ought to be flowing out from you.

Now, if you have never done it, you try it! I want to tell you that the first soul who comes to the Lord Jesus through your testimony will release something in you, so that you will never want to keep your mouth closed again. There are a lot of miserable Christians who will keep their mouths closed. I know there are those who talk too much, but there are quite a lot who do not talk enough and so they are spoiling their own Christian life. Take the trumpet of the Lord Jesus and cry with a loud voice and the rivers will begin to flow.

We - the new Israel - must keep the feast of tabernacles by proclaiming the all-sufficiency of Jesus, to God for us; from God to us!

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