

THE BRAZEN SERPENT

THE salvation of God that would come to all repentant sinners through Jesus Christ as of grace was, since the days of Moses the prophet, typified by a very significant incident when a serpent of brass was set up for the Israelites.

The children of Israel were a stubborn people. Because of their faithlessness, despite the wonders of the Almighty God they saw in Egypt, they continued to sin. On several occasions, while they were journeying to Canaan they provoked God because of their abominable deeds, and they were justly punished. But when they repented and turned to God they received mercy.

One such occasion was after the death of Aaron when they journeyed from Mount Hor by way of the Red Sea to the land of Edom. And because they grew impatient over the route they began to open their mouths wide against Heaven. As a result of this God sent dreadful serpents to assail the camp of Israel and many people were bitten to death.

Here is the Bible record:

“And they (the Israelites) journeyed from Mount Hor by the way of the Red Sea, to compass the land of Edom: and the soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way. 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. And the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died.”- Numbers 21: 4-6.

Following this plague, the Israelites came to their senses and realised their faults. They went to Moses their leader to confess that they had sinned for speaking against God and against him (Moses). They pleaded with him to pray to the Most High to take away the serpents from them.

Moses who was well known for his godly disposition and kind-heartedness and humility, acceded to their request and he interceded on their behalf.

God heard the prayer of Moses. It was an easy thing for Him to remove the venomous snakes all at once but He did not. Rather, He commanded Moses, saying, “Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that everyone that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live.” – Numbers 21: 8.

In obedience to the Lord’s instruction, Moses made a serpent of brass and erected it on 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: 9.

Significance

All diligent students of the Bible do agree that the whole event which culminated in the erection of the brazen serpent was of great spiritual significance. There is quite a lot to learn from the experience of the Israelites and what God did to relieve them of their pains and to save them from death. Yes, it was Saint Paul who stated: *“For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.”* – Romans 15: 4.

Now, let us ask ourselves this question: why was Israel plagued with fiery serpents by the very God of their fathers who had done so much to aid them at the time of their distress and adversity? It is clear from the Bible account that it was because they sinned against God. They were guilty of blasphemy – a very serious offence!

Today there are people who behave like the faithless Israelites. For every misfortune that befalls

them, they blame the cause on God.

When they find themselves in any unfavourable situation they turn round to accuse God-notwithstanding the fact that such a situation is of their own making. There is also the class of those, especially among the intellectuals of the world, who take pride in talking glibly and irreverently about God.

Men must learn to know that God is not the one responsible for their ills or troubles. The evils or tribulations that often come upon us are either due to our own sins of the devil, taking advantage of our "infirmities being human and especially because of our sensualism, brings them upon us.

The temptation of Job is a striking example of how the devil can trouble even the man of God to make the person curse God and so fallout of His favour. Under such circumstances, the true worshippers of God are required to maintain their integrity in faith as Job himself did, and then cry to God in prayer for help and deliverance. – Job 2: 3; 27: 4, 6; Proverbs 11: 3; James 5: 10,11.

Salvation

Speaking in the first person through Isaiah the prophet, God declared: "Look unto me and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else." – Isaiah 45: 22.

In order to fulfil His purpose of saving His people, God had to send His beloved Son, Jesus Christ, to the world not only to serve as a propitiation for the sins of mankind but also to be the Mediator through whom eternal life would be obtained in His glorious Kingdom. – 1 Timothy 2: 4-6; 1 John 2: 1, 2.

Thus the brazen serpent, which God caused Moses to set up for snake-bitten Jews to look to and which served as a remedy for the plague of poisonous serpents, foreshadowed Jesus Christ who would in due time be sent to the world God for all mankind to look to for the healing of their wounds and for their salvation.

With this understanding at the back of his mind regarding his mission on earth, Jesus Christ told Nicodemus concerning 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." - John 3: 14, 15.

Jesus Christ further explained the reason why the Heavenly Father has made such a grand arrangement for the benefit of sinful mankind when he said: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." – John 3: 16.

We must guard ourselves, by the grace of God, against sin. If the Israelites had not sinned they would not have been plagued. Therefore, sin, which is the transgressing of God's commandment, is a great danger. "For the wages of sin," said Saint Paul, "is death: but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." - Romans 6: 23.

Antitypical

It could be recalled that when the brazen serpent was erected on a pole in the days of Moses, the rule was that anyone who was bitten by a serpent would live only on the condition that he looked at the serpent of brass.

We do know that since the setting up of the brazen serpent was typical, the looking at it was also literal – that is, it was the use of ordinary sight by way of turning the eyes, in the direction of the serpent of brass, of course, with the belief that by so doing they were carrying out God's instruction or command. But in the case of Jesus Christ being antitypical, we are not expected to see him with our human eyes because he is now invisible being a spirit personality who has been

glorified in heaven.

Then, how do we look to Jesus Christ to draw a parallel between the typical and antitypical? Christ himself answered when he said, "That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life." (John 3: 15) The key word in this text is BELIEVETH. In other words, what is required is belief or faith in Jesus Christ.

As a matter of fact, Jesus Christ told Thomas one of his apostles: "Ye believe because you have seen me. Blessed be those who believe though they have never seen me." (John 20: 29 – Moffatt) What is more, St. Paul stated: "For we walk by "faith, not by sight." – 2 Corinthians 5: 7.

So today, the benefits of Christ's redemption and his salvation are obtainable only on the condition that we BELIEVE in him. "He that believeth on the Son (Jesus) hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life: but the wrath of God abideth on him." John 3: 36.

However, we must not deceive ourselves into thinking that our mere belief in Jesus Christ while we wallow in sins, indulging in sinful lusts of the eyes and flesh, or when we worship him loosely, will save us. IT WILL NOT. It is when we have IMPLICIT FAITH in and LOVE for Him, which will make us keep His commandments unhesitatingly, accept His true doctrines and abide in the Church organization which preaches His TRUTH unadulteratedly, that we are qualified to claim to have looked to or accepted Christ. – Matthew 7: 21; Luke 6: 46-49; John 14: 15, 21-25; 8: 31-32, 36.

Exalted Jesus

The position of Jesus Christ among the creation of God is a unique position of honour, glory and pre-eminence. We must therefore accept him as our Saviour and exercise implicit faith in him as such.

Peter the apostle, addressing the council of the Jews, spoke of the greatness of Jesus Christ when he quoted the Hebrew Scriptures which today is called the Old Testament, to wit: "This is the stone which was set at nought of you builders, which is become the head of the corner." And he added: "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved."- Acts 4: 10-12.

Concerning the exaltation of Jesus Christ, St. Paul also wrote: "Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him (Jesus), and given him a name which is above every name: that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."- Philippians 2: 9-11.

Furthermore, St. Paul gave an exhortation to the Hebrew Christians, which, in fact, is directed to every true disciple of Jesus Christ throughout the Christian era. He warned that in running the race of life, we as Christians must put away sin and divest ourselves of the burdens of the world that would impede our spiritual progress. He then admonished, "And let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God." – Hebrews 12: 1,2.

In the light of the Scripture texts clearly explained in this sermon, we are not left in doubt that our salvation is in our hands. Therefore, "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." – Philippians 2: 12.