

The Compassion of God and the Nation of Israel

III. - The Serpent of Brass

“The Lord said unto Moses, 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. 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 21:8,9).

The children of Israel had sinned, again and again. Each time, when they sought forgiveness, they received it from God, but often paid a considerable price. From the beginning of man to the coming of Jesus, the evidence was irrefutable that human flesh was not able to save itself. Even after Jesus had come, the Pharisees remained unconvinced and went into oblivion in the hardness of their hearts. But throughout the ages of Israel's history, God had always been open to them whenever they repented. What caused God to turn away from them was not their sins, but their idolatry—their rejection of Him for other gods.

Here was a classic case of retribution and compassion. The cup of Israel's bitterness against God and against Moses was full to overflowing. God had put up with their murmuring and complaining all across the wilderness, and finally decided that a penalty was in order. Whereupon He brought them into an area inhabited by hosts of venomous vipers. Many perished in this disaster until finally Israel cried out for forgiveness. Moses appealed to God for help for His people. God then told Moses to erect a serpent of brass on a pole and to inform the people that as many as would merely look upon this serpent would be healed. It was not, of course, a matter of worshipping the serpent, but rather of obeying God's remedy. The serpent merely reminded them of the nature of their sin. There was nothing else that they could do. There was not even a sacrifice to be offered. David, in the midst of his lament about his own heinous sins, cried out, *“You did not desire sacrifice, else would I give it”* (Psalm 51:16). In other words, David felt there was no sacrifice adequate to handle the nature of his sin. He said further that God did not delight in burnt offerings. It is the kind of insight that made the shepherd-king, a forerunner of the true King, Jesus Christ, realize that sacrifices were only an inadequate substitute. Their necessity had to do more with an object lesson to the offerer than any efficacy in the blood itself.

In modern theology, the use of so-called formulae for acquiring salvation, confuses the true issue of grace and puts much emphasis on the activity of the seeker. It is what we might call “step ladder salvation”—“If you were to take all of the steps and stand on the top, you might find God reaching down to touch your hand.” In what is probably the most succinct statement about the essence of salvation in the New Testament, Paul says to Titus, *“After that the kindness and love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, by the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost; which He shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior”* (Titus 3:4-6). John makes an even simpler statement in his gospel—*“As many as received Him, to them gave He the power [authority] to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name”* (John 1:12). And Jesus, Himself, uses the incident of the serpent of brass to illustrate the process of salvation—*“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).

As far as the “step ladder of salvation” is concerned, humans do not have the strength to get on the first rung. Even the recognition of our sin must come through the Holy Spirit, because apart from the Spirit of God, we would not even understand the meaning of sin. It is the identity with Christ and not the cataloging of sins that gives us the power to be saved. The very act of turning to Christ is the admission of need and is itself an indication of the touch of the Spirit of God upon us. To think that we can accomplish this through any kind of human effort misunderstands totally the meaning of Spirit. Jesus never questioned the ability of the Pharisees to keep the letter of the law. He indicated through the Sermon on the Mount, however, that there was a standard the human flesh could not meet. The compassion of God does not come as a reward for diligence, but as a recognition of the total inadequacy of humans to rise above the level of the flesh. It took only a look to bring complete restoration. No sacrifices or vows or commitments were adequate to accomplish this.

By the same token, the effort to change one’s life either before or after salvation does not affect the spirit. There is no way that we can shape the spirit by activities in the flesh, however religious and well meaning they may be. For this reason, a person’s life may be in shambles and still be accepted by Christ as one of His children. People often do not get their lives straightened out even after salvation. That does not exclude them from being children of God, although it has many negative effects on their life on the earth. It is not that it is unimportant to straighten one’s life out, but often the tangles are such that they never really get them untangled. If one stays away from Christ because of an unworthy life, how will one ever get help? It is comforting to know that one can be accepted by Christ even during the process of trying to make appropriate changes. The question, “How can one do such a thing and be a Christian?” is inappropriate. It is tantamount to the question, for example, “How can one be a Smith or Jones, and do such a thing?” One is a member of a given family by birth and not by performance. By the same token, one is a member of the family of God by birth and not by performance. It is certainly important to look to one’s life and does have implications for one’s testimony or well being. And one may cause others to stumble, and be displeasing to Christ, but that does not put one out of the family. Of course, there can also be serious consequences for careless living on the earth, but again, one is a member of the family by new birth, not by flawless performance.

The coming of the Holy Spirit affects one’s attitude toward one’s life in the flesh and gives one the desire to put one’s life in order, but the desire to do so is not always accompanied by the capacity to do so. Actually the struggle itself that one goes through in terms of this life is itself an indication of the work of the Spirit. In one way or another humans continually struggle on the earth, but the struggle is itself the reality and the reality is the struggle. The children of God will never really be comfortable on the earth because it is, in effect, a hostile environment. It is like the underwater environment. One will never stay for long in that environment without equipment.

The Holy Spirit helps us to get through this life, although things may never be smooth or resolved. Jesus said to the disciples, *“These things I have spoken unto*

you, that in Me you might have peace. In the world you shall have tribulation [pressure], but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). The hull of the submarine is constructed to withstand this pressure. The pressure within is equal to the pressure without. Otherwise, it would be crushed like an eggshell. The presence of the Holy Spirit within us provides this protection against the hostile environment around us. Such protection cannot be afforded by any efforts in the flesh. Human inadequacy is a constant in our lives. Paul made this abundantly clear in regard to himself—“I know that in me (that is in my flesh) dwelleth no good thing; for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. The good that I would I do not: but the evil [unsoundness] which I would not, that I do. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: but I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members” (Romans 7:18-23). One may conclude that Paul was therefore not yet saved. But if he did not have the Spirit in him, he would not have delighted after the law of God in his inner man. In his later writings (Philippians 3) he states that he has “no confidence in the flesh.”

So the essence of our salvation is the presence of the Holy Spirit within us. We must distinguish between the spirit and the flesh or the natural man. A spirit, occupied by the Holy Spirit, is the garrison that carries us through this life as children of God. We may not always be good children, but we are nevertheless children, and are always welcome to come to Christ for help. If we back away from Christ in our moments of weakness and failure, how will we get help? The brain is a very complex thing and is evolved out of genes and the data of myriads of experiences. People will have weaknesses and problems in various areas of their minds. What is a great problem to some may be no problem at all to others. It is impossible thus to judge between one member of the family and another. There is an old Indian saying—“Never judge a man until you have walked a mile in his moccasins.” We have no way to know the things that are going on in another’s mind. If we had their problems, we might have also their struggles. The evidence that Christ is with us is the desire to have Him with us and not our flawless performance. The desire for Christ is the “sprig of green” that indicates that we are alive. As Christ was lifted up on the cross, there is life for a look at the cross.

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July – August 1995
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