

Title: **THE MYSTERIES OF**
 THE BRAZEN SERPENT

Text: John 3:14-15
Subject: *The Brazen Serpent a Type of Christ*
Date: Sunday Morning — August 17, 2008
Tape: John #19
Reading: *Psalms 78*
Introduction:

“Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?” (Ezekiel 33:11). — Did you hear that? **The Lord God himself declares that he has no pleasure in the death of the wicked, and asks, “Why will ye die?”** It is true God will punish sin. He must do so. His law, his justice, and his righteousness demand it. But God’s law, justice, and righteousness can never find pleasure, or satisfaction in the everlasting torments of the damned in hell. Indeed, if all the human race were to suffer the endless fires of hell, God’s righteous justice could never find pleasure and satisfaction. Man, who is but a finite creature, can never satisfy the claims of infinite justice. If that were possible the death of Christ must be needless. If that were possible, the fires of hell must some day burn out. But infinite justice demands an infinite satisfaction. Hell must, therefore, be eternal! God’s justice can never be satisfied in the death of the wicked. He has no pleasure in the death of him that dieth.

But God does have pleasure in the death of the sinner’s substitute, Jesus Christ. Being the infinite God, our Lord Jesus Christ was able to satisfy, and has fully satisfied, all the claims of infinite justice. Being the sinless man, he was able to stand in our room and bear the fulness of God’s wrath for us. In his incarnation, his birth, his life and his death, the Lord God beholds Christ as the Substitute of his people, and says, *“This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.”* In the death of the God-man, God’s law, justice, and righteousness have pleasure and satisfaction. Therefore, there is no possibility of one soul for whom Christ died perishing in hell. The law has no claim against a believing sinner!

It is God’s pleasure, for Christ’s sake, to be merciful He gives life to perishing sinners, and forgives all our sins for Christ’s sake. So, then, why will ye die? Turn now and seek the Lord, cry out for his mercy, and

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trust his Son. Only in Christ does God have any pleasure. Lay hold of God's Beloved now. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall never die. Knowing the terror of the Lord, I have come here once more to persuade you to be reconciled to God, to persuade you to believe on the Son of God. To that end, I want you to turn with me to John 3:14-15. I ask you to listen carefully as I show you **THE MYSTERIES OF THE BRAZEN SERPENT**.

As you know, I love to study and preach from the types of Christ in Scripture. And there is no better type and picture of our blessed Redeemer in all the Old Testament than the brazen serpent. There is no Old Testament type that gives us a clearer, more instructive picture of the way God saves sinners than the one set before us by our Savior himself in John 3:14-15. Would you know the way of mercy and life? Then follow this story prayerfully and carefully.

(John 3:14-15) "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: (15) That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life."

Our Lord Jesus here refers to an event that is recorded in Numbers 21.

(Numbers 21:4-9) "And they 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. (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."

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A DEADLY POISON

The first thing I see in this picture is a humbling fact about our race. — **We are all infected with the deadly poison of sin and under the judgment of God.** This is a fact we prefer not to think about or acknowledge, but it is a fact nonetheless. The sooner we learn it, the better. We are all radically depraved, diseased at heart, corrupted with sin. This is the natural condition of all mankind. And until a man is made to know that from the soul of his foot to the crown of his head there is no soundness in him, but wounds, and bruises, and putrefying sores, I say, until a man learns that, he will never seek mercy by the merits of Christ. This is clearly represented by the condition of the children of Israel. We are told, — *“And the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much of Israel died”* (Numbers 21:6).

Can you imagine the horror and confusion of the camp of Israel? One day they were invaded by an army of fiery flying snakes! The bite of the snakes was deadly. Their poison caused the body to burn with fever. There was pain throughout the whole body, as though fire was in the veins. Such, my friends, is the destructive nature of sin. Those who were bitten of the serpents had death in their veins. And such is the deadly nature of sin.

Sin, like a venomous disease,
Infects our vital blood;
The only balm is sovereign grace,
And the Physician God.

Our beauty and our strength are fled,
And we draw near to death;
But Christ, the Lord, recalls the dead,
With His almighty breath.

Madness, by nature, reigns within;
The passions burn and rage;
‘Til God’s own Son, with skill divine,
The inward fire assuage.

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The picture that is set before us is a black one indeed. The Israelites were bitten, they burned with fever, then they died. And so it is with the fallen sons and daughters of Adam. We were all bitten by the old serpent and poisoned with sin in the garden.

Sin is not a social disease which comes by contact with other men. It is an inbred family disease. It comes to us by nature from our father Adam. — *“Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world...For by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners”* (Romans 5:12, 19). — David cried, *“Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin died my mother conceive me”* (Psalm 51:5). — *“The wicked are estranged from the womb: they go astray as soon as they are born, speaking lies”* (Psalm 58:3).

- All men are in bondage to iniquity.
- All men are taken captive by Satan at his will.
- All the works of the flesh are evil.

“The works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like” (Galatians 5:19-21). — These are the thoughts of man’s heart and the works of his will by nature.

By nature, man is such an evil creature and so corrupted by evil that everything he does is tainted with sin. Even the sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord. His very righteousnesses are filthy rags in the eyes of God. Mark it down, my friend, man by nature is a sinner.

Look over the catalogue of sin against God. We have all broken God’s holy law in every point from our youth up. We break it continually. Even those of us who have been washed in the Savior’s blood and regenerated by his grace constantly sin against him.

After the Israelites were bitten by the serpents, they began to burn within. — Sin does not instantly produce pain and misery. But give it a little time, and you will find that, like the old serpent himself, no matter how alluring and charming, sin is a painful poison to your soul. It will produce miseries more extreme than the fiery serpents caused Israel. — *“At the last it biteth like a serpent and stingeth like an adder”* (Proverbs 23:32).

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- The young man casts his restraints to the wind, living riotously, but soon he will find that strong drink is a mocker.
- The young woman seeks pleasure, popularity, and promiscuity, but soon she will find that the way of the transgressor is hard.
- Others, because they are restrained by society, by parents, by religion, or by self-esteem, do not indulge in the vices of the day, but within them is still a heart that burns with the lusts of sin.

But the picture gets darker. — Those who were bitten, after much suffering, at last, died. And so it is written, “*Sin when it is finished bringeth forth death.*” What a horrible death those people must have died! — They cried, they convulsed, they begged, and they died. Soon, you, too, must die. You have the poison of the serpent in you. Soon, you must die. Soon, unless God intervenes, you will be in hell!

- Sometimes death comes without warning.
- Sometimes men are so hardened and calloused that they go to the grave without fear.
- But often, when they come to die, the wicked, have such awakened senses that their souls are terrified. — Like Esau, they seek a place of repentance with tears, but find it not.
- And after death, Hell! All the wicked go down into hell. There the burnings of conscience, the fires of the mind and the torments of the soul are the everlasting results of sin.

These fiery serpents were the judgment of God upon Israel. Matthew Henry wrote, “God’s wrath against us for sin is as those fiery serpents which God sent among the people, to punish them for their murmurings. The curses of the law are as fiery serpents, so are all the tokens of divine wrath.” Israel had sinned against the Lord; therefore his judgment came upon them.

It seems to me that the bite of the fiery serpents was a fit representation of God’s law, when it is applied to the heart of the sinner, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

(Romans 7:9) “For I was alive without the law once: but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died.”

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- The law shows man the exceeding sinfulness of his sin in the light of God's holiness.
- The law threatens the sinner with divine punishment. Hear what the law says, *"The soul that sinneth, it shall die."* *"The wages of sin is death."* — *"God will by no means clear the guilty."*
- The law of God shuts man up to Christ alone. — *"What things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God."*
- When the law of God is applied to the heart of the sinner, then sin becomes a bitterness in his soul, a fire in his conscience and a hell in his heart.

This is the work of God the Holy Spirit in conviction. The poor sinner is made to feel death in his members. His pride and self-righteousness are destroyed. His naked sinfulness is laid in open view. Then, and only then, will a sinner cry out for mercy. Until a man feels his sin, he will not seek mercy. Until he feels his need of Christ, he will not seek Christ.

It was a serpent, that stung the Israelites. And it was that old serpent, the devil, that poisoned our nature in the Adam-fall. All his temptations, assaults and poisons, are fiery. And when the dreadful effects of sin are felt in the awakened conscience, how they burn with terrors in the soul!

The Israelites who were bitten of the fiery serpents could do nothing to help themselves. Even so, those who are dead in sin can do nothing of themselves to change their condition. And when a man feels that his malady is beyond his own power, he will seek the help of Another.

What could the dying Israelite do to heal himself of those venomous bites? Nothing! What medicine could cure his wounds? None! There was no remedy within the power of man. The serpent's poison baffled all science, medicine, skill and ability. It resisted every attempt of healing. That is sin. No prayers, no tears, no endeavors, no repentance can wash away sin. If the sinner is restored, it must be by the interposition and mercy of God alone!

GOD'S CURE

But now comes the remedy. The second thing set before us in the type of the brazen serpent is God's cure for our curse, God's remedy for our ruin.

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— **The only means by which man can be redeemed from the malady of sin and the burning wrath of God's law is by the sacrifice of the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ.** This is precisely what our Lord was teaching Nicodemus in our text. **The only way that a man can be justified with God is this** – *“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up.”* I want you to see several things about the brazen serpent which set forth the substitutionary work of Christ in the place of sinners.

1. **It was God himself who, in his sovereign grace and free love, provided the remedy.** In providing the brazen serpent, God pointed Israel to his own Son, who in the fullness of time would come to make an end of sin. Many must have thought that the brazen serpent was a foolish remedy. After all, it was a serpent that caused the mischief. And many think that it is foolishness to talk of salvation by Christ. But Christ alone is God's appointed Substitute.

2. **The brazen serpent was provided for the Israelites because of God's love and pity.** And Jesus Christ was provided for the healing of perishing sinners because of God's love. *“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.”*

3. **The serpent was made of brass.** As brass is a base and common metal, it properly represents our Lord's humiliation, who took upon himself the form of a servant.
 1. Brass is a bright and shining metal, and so it expresses the glory of Christ, who is the brightness of the Father's glory and the express image of his person.
 2. And brass is a durable metal, expressing the strength and power of Christ, who is *“able to save to the uttermost them that come unto God by him.”* And it is representative of the immutability of Christ, who is *“the same yesterday, and today, and forever.”*
 3. But a serpent made of brass, shining brightly in the desert sun, was the most unlikely thing in the world to cure the people. — A bright light shining in the eyes of one who has a malady in his head is likely to cause him to be taken with convulsions and seizures.

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4. **The brazen serpent had the form of a serpent; but there was no poison in it.** Even so, our Lord Jesus Christ was man in the likeness of sinful flesh, and was found in fashion as a man, yet, he is without sin, holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners.

5. **And there was but one brazen serpent by which the Israelites could be cured.** Even so, there is but one Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus. There is one name given under heaven among men whereby ye must be saved – Jesus Christ the Lord.

6. **As the brazen serpent had to be lifted up on a pole so that all who were bitten could see; even so, the Lord Jesus Christ had to be lifted up on the cross, so that sinners everywhere might look to (believe on) him and live.** Specifically, our text is talking about the crucifixion of Christ in the place of sinners. — *“Even so must the Son of man be lifted up.”* The expression, “Son of man,” was, no doubt, intended to remind Nicodemus of Daniel’s prophecy of the Messiah who must be cut off. **The death of Jesus Christ was an absolute necessity.**
 - It was necessary because of God’s decrees and purposes.
 - It was necessary because of God’s promises and prophecies.
 - It was necessary because of the types and figures of the Old Testament.
 - It was necessary because of Christ’s agreements as our Surety in the covenant of grace.
 - It was necessary because without it no sinner could ever be accepted of God. — God’s law had to be fulfilled. — God’s justice had to be satisfied. — The only way a holy God can be merciful and gracious to sinners is if a suitable Substitute suffers and dies in their place. — The very love and mercy of God for his people made the sacrifice of his Son necessary!

7. **As the serpent was cursed creature, the Lord Jesus Christ was made a curse for us when he hung upon the tree.** — *“Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us, for it is written, cursed is everyone that hangeth on a tree.”* — *“He hath made him to be sin for us who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.”* — *“He, his own self, bare our sins in his own body, on the tree.”* — The brazen serpent Moses lifted up was a fiery serpent; and our Lord Jesus was made to endure the fiery wrath of

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God as our Substitute. — His very soul was made to burn with the fires of hell for us, when he was made sin for us!

“*Even so must the Son of man be lifted up.*” — These words do definitely speak of the Savior’s crucifixion. As **William Hendriksen** says, “The lifting up of the Son of man is a ‘must.’ It is not ‘a’ remedy; it is the only possible remedy for sin, for in this way only can the demands of God’s holiness and righteousness, and love, be met.”

8. Yet, there is more in the text. **The Son of man must also be lifted up in his exaltation.** It is only as the exalted Christ that he can be seen by all who are infected with sin. It is only the risen and exalted Savior, who has the power to give unto men eternal life. It is only the exalted Redeemer who is “*able to save unto the uttermost them that come unto God by him.*” Still there is more.

9. **And the Son of man must be lifted up in the preaching of the gospel.** Preachers are like the pole to which the brazen serpent was fastened. We are useful only as long as we lift up and exalt the Son of God before the eyes of perishing men. It is the preacher’s one and only business to preach Christ and him crucified.
 - Christ alone can save sinners.
 - Christ alone can justify.
 - Christ alone can pardon.
 - Christ alone can reconcile.
 - Christ alone can sanctify.

Christ alone is our message. We can never heal the sinner’s disease; but we can tell you who heals. We cannot bring men to Christ; but we can point you to Christ.

LOOK TO CHRIST

Here is the third thing I want you to see. — **Every perishing sinner who believes on Christ shall be saved.** In the gospel Christ is lifted up before all; but all are not saved. Yet, this I know, I have the Savior’s own word for it, — “*Whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life.*” **What were the Israelites told to do?**

- They were not told to produce some healing medicine.

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- They were not told to help one another.
- They were not told to fight the serpents.
- They were not told to make an offering to the serpent.
- They were not told to pray to the serpent.
- They were not told to obey Moses.
- They were not told to look at their wounds.
- They were told to Look – Any who looked up to the serpent, no matter how grievous their wounds, no matter how weak their eyes, if they did but look they were healed.

If you would be saved, you must look to Christ. — Looking to Christ is an expression of faith in him. You desperately need to look to Christ. God himself commands you to look (1 John 3:23); and the Lord Jesus bids you look. — *“Look unto me and be ye saved all the ends of the earth, for I am God, and beside me there is none else.”* May God the Holy Spirit now enable you to look to Christ.

- Look to his glorious Person.
- Look to his redeeming blood.
- Look to his unfailing love.
- Look to his saving power.
- Look to his fullness of Christ.

What is the result of this look? – Eternal life! Not only does the look bring healing to your soul, but you are given eternal life! I can say no more – Look to Christ.

- Salvation begins in a look.
- Salvation continues in a look.
- Salvation ends in a look.

Amen.