

The Bronze Serpent

Numbers 21:4-9

Surprise

Sometimes a little kid will come along and say, “I want you to close your eyes and don’t look ‘til I tell you.” And we play along. Promise not to peek. Eyes closed, we hear some in the next room some hurried preparations, the rustling of paper, maybe a little whispering, and a snicker or two then the kid says, “OK, you can open your eyes now. . . “ And when we do, they surprise us with a picture or a costume, or some other delightful performance, and we’re glad we took a moment to play along.

Why do children play this little game with us? Isn’t it because they know how hard it is to *really* get our attention. We busy grown-ups rush from one task to another often without time to even catch their breathe. Getting a moment of undivided attention from most of us is much like trying to thread the needle of a sewing machine --while it’s running! We are so preoccupied with our lives, that we can miss the most marvellous things. The most crucial things, unless *God* can somehow take us by *surprise*. The strange story of the bronze serpent in Number 21 is one that contains a surprise. So let’s

Sneak a peek

From the dawn of time, from the Garden of Eden on, our spiritual vision has always been at best blurry. Something’s not right with human nature. *Something*, unseen is going on all around us. Something marvellous. But it’s something we just can’t *quite* apprehend. O, we may *believe* in God and the existence of those unseen realities of the Spirit, “as it is in heaven” but unless we can personally experience them, we remain unable to grasp the mystery of God presence with us *on earth*. If only we could sneak a peek – get a glimpse of what lies beyond.

In the front door of my family home were three panels of frosted, rippled glass. When I was small, whenever someone knocked on our front door, I could look through the bottommost window through the ripples frosted glass and see that yes, *someone* was at the door, but unless it was someone I knew really well, I had no idea who it was. Unless through the rippled glass I could make out the familiar colours of my best friend’s toque stretched into long bars of colour, or an familiar eyeball or a nose pushed right up close to the glass, I couldn’t know who was there. As I grew a little taller, I could look through the middle window. But see no more clearly. When the knock on the door came, I knew *someone* was there. But who? I could only really guess.

And so it is with our ability to grasp the things of God. Who *is* the God who knocks on the door of our hearts?

Well, he give us *hints* – *clues* as to what we will actually see on the day when our eyes are finally open. The Bible says that one day we will rise from the dead. There will be a new heaven and a new earth, a renewal of all creation. The city of God will appear on earth and God’s dwelling will be among us forever. But in the meantime, in the words of the apostle says “ we see through a glass darkly.” So who is this God who wants us to know him? Who is knocking at our door?

And is there way we can see him just a little more clearly? Hear his voice just a little more loudly? Yes. But how?

On that big green front door of my childhood home, there was a top window I could never quite reach as a small child. But it was only the *bottom* two panels that had the frosted rippled glass. *I knew the top pane was clear*. Because if an *adult* went up just a little bit on tip toes, they could look through the clear top pane to *see* who was at the door before opening it. But I couldn’t until I learned a little trick. I had to master the art of hooking my toes in the lowest window frame of the door while at the same time digging my fingernails in to the middle window frame and by hoisting myself up by my fingernails and toes so that for *one moment* I could peek through the top clear pane

of glass.

Only then could I be totally sure of who was knocking at the door.

Consider the “big picture: One day, God said to this human race, “Close your eyes and don’t look til I tell you.” And he slipped unseen into his creation. He came and lived among us, *hidden*. During those years, in an obscure Galilean village, his presence and purpose were only vague rumours and rustling. Jesus, God’s Son was so misunderstood by this world. He spoken to us in *parables* for he knew we weren’t quite ready. But then, one day, God finally said, “OK, *you can open your eyes now. . . .*” And when we did, we saw THE CROSS.

And this brings us to our Gospel text in **John 3: 14-16**

Some Context

The man to whom Jesus spoke these words, Nicodemus, would, one day, just before sunset, have the onerous task of claiming the dead body of Jesus from the Romans after the crucifixion. He, along with another man named Joseph of Aramethea would take the body of Jesus, and they would carefully wrap it in strips of cloth, pouring in fragrant spices between the layers of cloth. And then, the *Bible* says,

“[near] the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid . . . and since the tomb was nearby, they would lay Jesus there.”

That was a day grief and shock and a sense of deep loss. How could the friends and followers of Jesus make sense of this? *Why did this happen? Why had Jesus died on the cross?*

And it would begin to dawn on them. He had given them clues. *Before* any of this happened, Jesus had said some curious things to Nicodemus that, at the time, he had found very hard to understand. The meaning of these saying had been hidden from his eyes. But now his eyes are open to the stark reality. Now he could *look*. They had seen Jesus on the cross.

The body that Nicodemus and Joseph now carry to the tomb is not that of a close relative or even a close personal friend. He was, in fact, a condemned criminal, reduced to the lowest place of shame and disgrace. If the truth be know, they had acted more out of a sense of public propriety than any sense that the death of Jesus was anything more than a cruel and tragic act. Yet Jesus had told Nicodemus that this was going to happen. Told him he would be . . .

“Lifted up”

He said, “Just as *Moses* lifted up a *snake in the wilderness* so must the Son of Man be lifted up “ And now Nicodemus and Joseph are carefully placing the Crucified Lord into the tomb. They are rolling a huge stone to seal it there. And, yes, he had *indeed* been **lifted up**. Lifted up on a *cross* like “a snake in the wilderness”. But what exactly had these words meant? What possible significance might these words now have now that Jesus has died?

Well, for these Jewish men, the meaning of Jesus words was lurking in the shadow of an ancient but well-known story. *They* knew this story – the story of the bronze serpent.

Israel was being led by Moses through the wilderness. *God* was truly with them. But now, they begin to complain. They’re impatient with God. He is is not working according to *their* timetable. They resent the burdens of their wilderness life despite the clear signs of God’s presence with them. So God sends upon them a chastening – plague of *poisonous snakes*. But because they *confess their sin*, God tells Moses to erect a bronze serpent on a tall pole and by simply *looking* at that bronze serpent, they could be healed. The venom would lose it’s power and they would *live*.

So what was the underlying lesson for the men who were burying Jesus? For these men feeling

the sting of death? How does looking at Jesus give them *relief*? Cause them to live? .

You and I, we too can grow impatient with God. And we too get bit. I bet, if you thought about it, there was a time in the last week when you felt the venom of sin draining the life right out of you. Felt the poison. The hurt.

But God says to us “Look and live!” Begin to see *in* your circumstance the power of cross: God’s solution. God’s healing for your life. You and I know that Jesus rose from the dead on the third day. So it shouldn’t surprise us that a snake on the pole is a symbol of *healing*. We wander in the desert, and we get *bit*. Sometimes it’s not our fault. But we get *bit*. And what should we do? Look and live! In this strange ancient story there is a . .

Fresh promise

Unlike Nicodemus and Joseph we can no longer look upon the crucified Jesus. But we can hear the witness in the Scripture. The apostle Paul wrote **2 Cor 5: 20**.

It is the duty and privilege of Christians to bring the Good News – to be ambassadors – spokespersons for God. Call upon one and all to open their eyes and look at the cross! And the Good News there is that God longs for every one of us to draw close to him. No one is excluded. He longs for us to know the fulness of his love.

Know today that it is *not* God that has to be reconciled to *us*. Nothing has ever changed in the heart of God. The change was within us. We felt the venom of sin, we left the path not God. But at the Cross, he acts in a miraculous way to render the venom harmless. God *re-focuses our attention* onto himself. The bronze serpent provided Israel a visual way understand what it means to be *reconciled* to God. If they refused to look at the bronze snake and receive their healing, they would die. But that would be their choice and not the will of God. The offer was there for one and all: even though they had sinned, they could look and live.

In the Gospel of Christ is all it’s mystery and power of God: God did far more than simply remove the venom that was poisoning our relationship with him. He created a whole new relationship with us. The lifting up of Jesus on the cross is God’s act of amazing grace and love and healing from sin. “Look and Live!” Look to Jesus and be saved from the deadly venom of sin. That’s what the promise IS, now all that’s left is a little. . .

How to?

How can this reconciliation become apart of our present day experience? In our Gospel text Jesus goes on to say **John 3:16**

This must, again, be understood from within in the context of the story of the Bronze Serpent. This was far more than simply an unusual event in Israel’s past. The Bronze Serpent is our connection with ancient Israel. *We are* those people and Jesus was lifted up on the cross to save us. We who will never physically Jesus on the cross or risen from the tomb and *hear* the story and **believe**. Just as surely as the Israelite was healed from his snakebite by looking at the bronze serpent, we here today are *saved from our sins by looking to the cross of Jesus Christ*. For he is not willing that *any* should perish. We don’t have to see because. . .

Faith comes through hearing

In the story of Nu 21:9, “. . .when anyone was bitten by a snake and *looked* at the bronze snake, *he lived*.” Not by running for the snake bit kit, nor by drinking a herbal potion, or praying to some pagan snake god. No. The point of the story is that anyone who chooses to reject God’s one remedy for sin will perish. For it is not by our *own works* that we can be saved, but only through *faith* in Jesus Christ. **Whoever believes. . . shall not perish but have eternal life** What happens when we believe? Jesus, speaking to Nicodemus told him you must be “born again.”

Despite all of his religious upbringing and sincere attempts to live a righteous life, Nicodemus still had the venom of sin coursing through his veins, still stared mystified through the frosted rippled glass. Could not “see “ the kingdom of God coming in Jesus unless he was *born again*. Unless that happened, sin’s poison would take its’ effect, and he would eventually be lost in discouragement and despair. He needed to *hear* from God.

When Steve Henning of Huntley, Illinois, was only two years old, he contracted meningitis. It was the winter of 1943, and because of World War II, doctors had a shortage of penicillin and could not provide Steve the treatment he needed. And sadly, the little boy completely lost his hearing.

For 57 years, Steve couldn’t hear any music or laughter, or human speech. Sure, he lived a full life, but he still longed to hear the voices of those he loved.

Then in 2001, he learned of a surgical procedure that would allow sound waves to bypass the non-functioning part of his ear and travel directly to the auditory nerve. He was operated on. But because the implanted device could not be activated until the swelling in the ear decreased, neither the doctors nor Steve knew if the operation was successful for six long weeks.

Then the day of reckoning came on a blustery spring day. Steve nervously wondered if the procedure had been in vain. As the audiologist programmed the cochlear implant, he invited Steve's wife to say something. She leaned forward to her husband and gently said, "I love you."

(Naperville, Illinois; Daily Herald 9-29-01)

After six decades, those were the first words he heard.

When we *believe* in Jesus, the first thing we hear God say is I LOVE YOU. He’s been saying it every day of our lives, but the venom of sin affected our ears and blurred our eyes.

And LOVE – love that went to the cross – was the only antidote for the poison.

In v 19, Jesus gives . . .

A Diagnosis for the World

This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light. . .

In unbelief, people will say, “ What kind of a god would send poison snakes to bite his own followers? I don’t believe that a magic charm of brass actually cured snake-bites! And how can we love a God who would choose one favourite people and certain individuals and leave others to perish? One of the symptoms of sin’s venom is when people choose simple error over complex truth. God created us to search for truth. Seek the light. We may be wrong about many things, but what validates us as true followers of God is that we continue to seek. Love the light.

Discouragement is piece of mental junk we can’t afford to play around with. Discouragement can be fatal because behind discouragement, are powerful unseen forces beyond our control. Once upon a time it was announced that the devil was going out of business and would sell all his equipment to those who were willing to pay the price. On the big day of the sale, all his tools were attractively displayed. There were Envy, Jealousy, Hatred, Malice, Deceit, Sensuality, Pride, Idolatry, and other implements of evil display. Each of the tools was Marked with its own price tag. Over in the corner by itself was a harmless looking, wedge-shaped tool very much worn, but still it bore a higher price than any of the others.

Someone asked the devil what it was, and he answered, "That is Discouragement." The next question came quickly, "And why is it priced so high even though it is plain to see that it is worn more than these others?"

Because replied the devil, "It is more useful to me than all these others. I can pry open and get into a

man's heart with that when I cannot get near him with any other too Once I get inside, I can use him in whatever way suits me best. It is worn well because I use it on everybody I can, and few people even know it belongs to me."

This tool was priced so high that no one could buy it, and to this day it has never been sold. It still belongs to the devil, and he still uses it on us

So to conclude, I want to ask are you ready for the remedy? Here it is:

Look and Live.

²¹ . . . whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God."

Do you realize that the brazen serpent is probably the most widely recognized biblical symbol after the cross? There are probably a few people here who are wearing the bronze serpent on their medic-alert bracelets. The bracelet that shows that it's wearer needs special care. If a person's unconscious the medic-alert bracelet can save a life. On most medic-alert bracelets, is the snake on the pole from Numbers 21. It the universal symbol for medical treatment. And *we* know it speaks of a spiritual reality beyond medical care: the *cross* where God heals our sin.

On the backside of a medic-alert bracelet, is written the person's condition and the treatment they need. Our problem is *sin*, the treatment is the death and resurrection of Jesus.

A medic alert-bracelet will also give a name and number of who to contact in case of emergency. We need to contact God the Father through Jesus the Son.

We don't need to wear bracelets or tags to show we're Christians. Some people may wear a cross on a chain -- that's perfectly fine, but not *necessary*. Because God is the healer, and he already knows that we love and trust him. He has the record on file of every life.