

MOSES ... who supplied Christ with a sermon illustration
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(NUMBERS 21: 5-9)

During the month of October, 1852, a tragedy occurred at the Zoological Gardens in London. A man named Gurling, one of the keepers of the reptile house, was bitten by a cobra, and died within an hour. He had been to the farewell party of a man leaving for Australia, and had drunk too much gin. Some months previously he had been fascinated by a snake charmer's exhibition, and the scene was still before his confused mind when he returned to his snakes at the Zoo. First he took a Moroccan snake, and whirled it around his head. When his assistant cried, "For God's sake, put it back," he replied, "I'm inspired." He thereupon lifted a cobra, and in order to revive it from a stupor, put it inside his clothing. Later, when he held it in front of his face, he was immediately struck. As the blood trickled down his cheek, he sobered and cried for help. The assistant fled for his life. When others reached the dying man, they discovered that he had placed the snake back in its case, and was calmly sitting down. He said, "I am dead already." Gurling was rushed to hospital, where within an hour he paid the supreme price for his folly. His statement, "I am dead already," reminds us of a Bible story.

How Serious the Rebuke

The camp of Israel was filled with unrest. Faces were clouded, and the discussions among the people were most animated. The way to Canaan lay through difficult terrain, where serpents abounded. The barrenness of the surroundings matched the bleakness of their spirits. "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." Their biting criticisms of the great leader were unfair and sinful, and as these increased in intensity, God was very displeased. Until that moment, providential care had maintained a constant watch over the lurking serpents; now suddenly the undergrowth was filled with menace. "And the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died." The disaster was devastating in every respect, and as Gurling might have said, the men were dead even before they died.

How Simple the Remedy

"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 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." As quickly as possible Moses obeyed, and ultimately the brazen serpent could be set high above the heads of the people. Dying men were urged to look and live; and those who had been healed became messengers of good tidings, and helped other unfortunates. Within the scope of God's written word, profundity is wedded to simplicity. This is evident in the following details. (i) Israel urgently needed salvation. (ii) They could not save themselves. (iii) God provided a way of salvation, but He could not save Israel without the co-operation of the men in need. And as it was, so it is now.

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How Sublime the Result

" Look and live; look and live." The cry reverberated throughout the camp. Men who chased the serpents paused to listen ; despondent sufferers raised their heads ; relatives who understood the importance of the great message, struggled to lift their loved ones to a viewpoint, and despair gave place to a new hope. The distant scene begins to fade, and instead we see a neat little sittingroom where the Lord interviewed Nicodemus. The preliminary conversation produced a theological question. The Savior asserted that God the Father desired to transmit eternal life to men and women ; but apparently this teaching could not be substantiated from the writings of the Fathers. " Master, how can these things be?" Christ replied, " 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). It is clear that men in every age need God ; that without His aid, they must die. Did any Israelite reject the invitation to look and live, preferring to rely upon his own ability to kill serpents? No! Such absurdities were left for people of later generations.

Look and live, my brother, live . . .
Look to Jesus, now, and live.

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