

# Concordia Theological Monthly



F E B R U A R Y • 1 9 5 1

## HOMILETICS

### EISENACH OLD TESTAMENT SELECTIONS

March 4	Laetare	Is. 52:7-10	The Glad Supply of God's Grace
March 11	Judica	Num. 21:4-9	Life Through Christ
March 18	Palm Sunday	Zech. 9:9-13	The Humble and Powerful Savior
March 22	Maundy Th.	Psalm 111	Forgiveness of Sins in Communion
March 23	Good Friday	Ps. 22:1-19	Christ Died for Us
March 25	Easter	Ps. 118:14-24	Our Resurrection in Christ's

### *Sermon Study on Numbers 21:4-9 for Judica*

This passage takes us to the close of the wanderings of the Children of Israel from Egypt to the Promised Land. The Promised Land lay almost within sight. Only the narrow strip of country occupied by the Edomites lay between them and the approach to the Jordan. The Edomites were a warlike people, and their mountainous country favored its defense. They were historically enemies of Israel, and now that Israel was at their borders, there was no inclination to let them through. Israel indeed promised: "We will not pass through the fields or through thy vineyards, neither will we drink of the water of the wells. We will go by the king's highway. We will not turn to the right hand nor to the left, until we have passed thy borders." But the answer came back: "Thou shalt not pass by me lest I come out against thee with the sword." And to show that this was no empty threat the army of Edom was massed at the border and poised for battle. This was deeply discouraging to Israel, for it meant retracing their steps all the way to the head of the gulf of Akaba and then going east into the desert to circle the land of Edom. And when, in their turning back to the south, Arad, the Canaanite, attacked them and took some of them prisoners, then, though with the Lord's help the Canaanites were completely wiped out, the prospect of now setting forth to "compass the land of Edom," caused their discouragement to mount to rebellion, and they cried out 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." The punishment was immediate. God sent fiery serpents among the people. The little serpents were perhaps the serpentlike lizards, that are still to be seen in that region, according to travelers. They were fiery, possibly because of their brilliant coloring, but more likely, because of the intense burning caused by the bite and the raging fever which resulted from it. Death followed in short order, and so on all sides the people were perishing in the agony of convulsions. The fearful sight brought the people to their senses and to a recognition of the magnitude of their guilt. We say the magnitude of their guilt because for the first time it is distinctly said that the people murmured *against God* and against Moses, even as the contemptuous reference to the manna as "this light bread" was a direct slap at God, their Benefactor. The people begged Moses, as they had always done before, to be their intercessor, and he did not fail them in spite of all their provocation. Nor did the Lord fail them when He saw the sincerity of their repentance, but commanded Moses to make a fiery serpent of brass, an enlarged image of the little serpents that bit them, and promised: "It shall come to pass that everyone that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live." Moses did so and raised the serpent of brass on a high pole so that it could be seen in all areas of the camp, "and it came to pass that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived."

The story follows the pattern with which we have become so familiar in the journey of Israel to the Promised Land: rebellion — repentance and forgiveness. But this incident stands out as particularly instructive to us New Testament Christians, by the use which our Lord made of it when He took it as a pattern for the efficacy of His Cross, saying in John 3:14-15: "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." It is from this comparison that some very comforting truths emerge for us, the children of God under the new covenant.

For one thing, when we consider that this serpent of brass was one of the last of a long series of deliverances, it is a type of the inexhaustible mercy of God, who never fails His people, no matter

how often they rebel, if they return to Him in sincere repentance; even as Moses makes this unflinching compassion of God the basis for all his intercessory pleas: "Pardon, I beseech Thee, the iniquity of this people, according unto the greatness of Thy mercy and as Thou hast forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now" (ch. 14:19). When we review the history of their rebellions, we are overwhelmed with the boundless depth of God's forgiving love. Hardly has ceased the tremendous exhibition of His power in the great plagues of Egypt when, standing at the shores of the Red Sea, the people are discouraged. Hardly has He shown the might of His arm in the parting of the waters of the Red Sea and the drowning of the armies of Pharaoh when the people murmur at the bitter waters of Marah. Hardly has He sweetened the waters of Marah when the people cry for food. Hardly has He fed them with manna from heaven when the people are ready to make a golden calf and worship it as the God of Israel. And so it goes. At Taberah, at Hazeroth, upon the return of the spies, the people are bitter and complaining. What endless patience and long-suffering! Truly the Lord is right when He says: "The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering and abundant in goodness and truth." And now the serpent of brass, coming at the close of their long series of deliverances, can stand as a permanent symbol, graven in imperishable brass, of the unchanging mercy of God.

And having this symbol, in the words of Jesus, as a type of His Cross, we can see in the Cross the same assurance of the inexhaustible nature of God's mercy, even as we have in rebellions of Israel a type of the rebellion of God's children in all times and climes. We have no reason either as a Church or as individual Christians, either as a nation, or as individual citizens, to point with scorn to the incurable tendency of Israel to murmur and complain. Our history is full of it. All sin in its final analysis is rebellion against God, dissatisfaction with His government of the world and our individual lives, disagreement with His definition of true happiness, disobedience to the heavenly vision. But, like the serpent, the Cross stands there as symbol of the inexhaustible mercy of God, which, whenever man returns, in sincere repentance, from his first or his tenth rebellion, will bring him forgiveness and healing.

The bite of the fiery serpents with its inevitably fatal effect, so

sudden and so sure, that the victim, as soon as he was bitten, knew that he was doomed, is a perfect symbol of the fatal character of sin. Unfortunately, sin works much more insidiously, and its poison is such that its ultimate death-producing character is not so quickly felt and discerned. But the end is just as inevitable and even more fatal, for the consequences are not limited to time, but extend to eternity. If men could see the fatal end of sin as clearly as they can see the fatal end of cancer or of heart disease, or as the Israelite realized the fatal end of the serpent's bite, perhaps the return to repentance would come more quickly and more sincerely. But whatever the fatal character of sin and its awful doom, the Cross stands there, like the serpent of brass, the sure promise of perfect healing. In the serpent's bite and the serpent of brass, in sin and the Cross, we have a beautiful picture of the Apostle's word: "Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound." Let the child of God write this deeply upon his soul, to remember it in every situation and period of life, in youth and in age: "Thou art never beyond hope." Sin is terrible and, unchecked, inevitably fatal, but the Cross is its unailing and omnipotent master.

2. We speak much of the salvation of the Cross being by grace through faith. What we mean is that the salvation is entirely God's work and in no way prepared for or merited by man. All that man can do is to accept what God gives. "By grace are ye saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is a gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast." How clearly this fact is apparent as we look at the serpent of brass, a type of the Cross. What could the Israelite do to merit the healing? His contribution in the whole transaction was only this, that by his rebellion he brought about his punishment, the poison of death in his veins. He stood powerless in the face of the disease. He could do nothing to heal it. The healing was entirely apart from him and came through the serpent of brass. In other words, it was entirely prepared by God, placed in the serpent by His power and promise. And that which God gave, and was in no way prepared or merited by the Israelite, was taken by the Israelite simply by looking. How foolish to think, as some Israelite may have felt, that from a serpent of brass, which he could not even touch, healing could come for a deadly poison, but so it was. It was the cure, simply because God said that it would be

and because He was faithful to His promise. Can anything more strikingly illustrate the all-sufficiency of grace and the all-sufficiency of faith? In comparing the Cross to the serpent of brass, Jesus is crying to the world, in the words of Isaiah (45:22): "Look unto Me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth."

3. And the comparison with the serpent of brass further emphasizes the mystery of the Cross. And though the mystery of the Cross is dwelt on by the Apostles, especially the Apostles Paul and John, in a way that could and should afford opportunity for the intensest study to the end of time, the efficacy of the Cross does not depend upon the measure of that study or the degree of progress in it, but remains complete and perfect, though only little progress has been made in its understanding, as in children. There it is, the Cross, the Savior uplifted like the serpent of brass, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. "The Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom, but we preach Christ Crucified . . . the power of God and the wisdom of God." The Israelite was not saved by understanding *how* the Serpent of brass could heal him, but by believing that it could heal him.

4. And we have here a fine setting forth of objective and subjective justification. The serpent of brass hanging there was the proclamation of God to *all* Israel that their sin was forgiven. Anyone, which means *everyone*, who looked at it was healed. It was God's objective declaration that the sin of His people was forgiven. But the healing was received only by him who believed and looked. He that did not believe and look died of the poison of the fiery serpent. Not that there was not power in the serpent of brass to heal him, but he did not believe and look.

5. And is it not likewise, as another emphasis of the comparison, a symbol which shouts to the world: "Neither is there salvation in any other, for there is none other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved"? Was there any healing for the Israelite outside the serpent of brass? Would any Israelite come to Moses, saying he had been bitten and he was dying but could not see how the serpent of brass could heal him and that there must be another way? No Israelite could have done that, for he would have been dead by the time he got to Moses. The notion was too foolish

to entertain. Unfortunately, the poison of sin works much more slowly, and men do think there is another way to heaven besides the Cross, but in reality the thought is just as absurd and foolish and fatal as it would have been in the case of a stricken Israelite. "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no man cometh unto the Father but by Me."

6. And finally the comparison of the Cross with the serpent of brass makes clear the relation between justification and sanctification. The Israelite could not fail to see whence his health had come, his capacity to live and walk once more. It had come from the serpent. Nor could he fail to see what the healing was which the serpent of brass gave him. It was just this capacity to live and walk once more. That living body with all of its capacities was the gift of the serpent. He could by no possible stretch of imagination have said: The fever is still there, my muscles are paralyzed, I am burning up, but I have looked to the serpent of brass, and I have been healed.

And so it is with the healing of the Cross. The child of God who has been healed by looking upon the Cross knows what that healing involves. The poison of sin had affected his will, so that it was turned against God. It had vitiated his attitude so that where there should have been reverence and love, there was fear and hate, both toward God and toward men; it darkened his understanding so that he knew not God in His holiness and love nor understood his proper relation to his fellow men. The healing of the Cross has changed all this if it was a healing at all. It set the will in the direction of God's commandments; it set his heart to love of God and man; it enlightened the mind to the knowledge of the living God and the beauty of holiness. How, then, can anyone say he is healed if the evidences of the healing are not apparent in his life? We are saved by grace, to be sure, entirely by grace, but that salvation is a living and a vital thing. It is the healing of the living soul, and a living soul that is healed must live a healthy life. The man whose understanding is still altogether darkened, whose heart is still completely dominated by fear and hatred of God, or indifference to Him, whose will still tends toward evil unchecked, cries in vain that he has looked to the Cross, in other words, that he is a Christian. He has not looked to the Cross, for if He had, healing

would have come, and it would have evidenced itself in a changed life. Justification and sanctification stand in as close a relation as the vitality of the renewed body of the Israelite stood to the look of faith on the serpent of brass, which brought that vitality.

“Almighty and most merciful God, who hast given Thy Son to die for our sins and to obtain forgiveness and redemption for us through His own blood, let the merit of this spotless sacrifice, we beseech Thee, purge our consciences from dead works, that we may serve Thee, the living God, and receive the promise of eternal inheritance in Christ Jesus, our Lord, to whom, with Thee and the Holy Ghost, be honor and glory, world without end. Amen.”

#### SUGGESTED OUTLINE

*Introduction:* Since Jesus selects the serpent of brass as a type of the Cross in a statement (John 3:14-15) which makes the Cross the way of life, the details of the story of the serpent of brass will furnish instructive and comforting truths on the theme “Life Through Christ.”

*Theme:* Life Through Christ

1. Through Him by grace  
As the serpent of brass was God’s work and only His.
2. Through Him by faith  
As the Israelite was healed by looking to the serpent and only by looking.
3. Through Him alone  
There was no recourse for the Israelite but the serpent of brass.
4. Through Him always  
The serpent, as the Cross, represents the inexhaustible mercy of God, always available.
5. But *Life* through Him  
As the healing of the Israelite meant a living, active body, so the healing of the Cross means a living and active soul.