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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Lectionary 638: 09-14-2025



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for 9-14-2014. This week, we open with an interesting reading from the Book of Numbers in which we see the incident of the fiery serpents inflicting the Israelites during their forty-year wanderings. Then we move on to the second reading from Saint Paul's Letter to the Philippians, where we study the theological term known as the "kenosis," which means "emptying." Then we conclude with the Gospel lesson from John in which we see Jesus draw an analogy between the lifting up of Moses' bronze serpent in the wilderness and His crucifixion on the cross.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Numbers and deals with a time when the Israelites were angry with God. The context of the message today is between two military victories of the Israelites. In the first one, they trusted God and asked Him for a significant military victory over the Canaanites. God had granted them this victory, and the destruction was to such great extent that they named the

place with the Hebrew word translated "Hormah," which means "destruction" (Numbers 21:1-3). Their second military victory was over the Amorites, who came after King Sihon of that region refused to allow the Israelites passage through his territory. This was another of the significant battles that occurred along their many campsites, just before their encounter with the infamous false prophet Balaam, beginning in chapter 22. You may remember that Balaam was the one whom God corrected through a talking donkey.
Note: We began the reading at verse 4 to provide some context.

First Reading:

> Numbers 21:4-9 Then they set out from Mount Hor by the way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the people became impatient because of the journey. 5 The people spoke against God and Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this miserable food." 6 The LORD sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. 7 So the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned, because we have spoken against the LORD and you; intercede with the LORD, that He may remove the serpents from us." And Moses interceded for the people. 8 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a standard; and it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he will live." 9 And Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on the standard; and it came about, that if a serpent bit any man, when he looked to the bronze serpent, he lived.

On the heels of their victory over the Amorites, the Israelites went "around the land of Edom" (v. 4) instead of through it, because the Edomites forbade them to pass through their land (Exodus 20:14-21). The people were angry towards both their leader in heaven and their earthly, visible leader, Moses (v. 5). Their five-count indictment against them is given in verse 5: 1. They shouldn't have led them out of Egypt, 2. God didn't provide them with water 3. They were led to the wilderness to die, 4. God didn't provide them with enough food, and 5. They hated the food they were given, literally "light bread" in the original language. God responded to their accusations with a summary judgment which He then executed by sending "fiery serpents" among them which bit them resulting in many deaths (v. 6). These animals were likely called "fiery" because of their color, the effect they had in causing a burning sensation after they bit someone, or even perhaps as a description of some characteristic of the animal itself either in temperament or some physical characteristic. Regardless of the nature of the beasts, they were sent to execute God's judgment upon the people and draw them to repentance, something that we see happened in verse 7. "So the people came to Moses and said, 'We have sinned, because we have spoken against the LORD and you; intercede with the LORD, that He may remove the serpents from us.'" Moses, a type of Christ, was the one the people turned to intercede for them. Evidently, Moses spoke to God and then

instructed Moses to construct a model of the fiery serpent, place it on a pole, and then put it before those afflicted by the reptile it represented. When the people looked at the bronze serpent, they were healed (v. 9). God gave the people an antidote that required faith in the object and showed that God possessed power over the fiery serpent represented by the object. The object they looked at was very similar to the image of the snake on a pole that can be seen today in many medical establishments, including hospitals and ambulances. God didn't take away the serpents; instead, He required the people to turn to Him in faith for healing once the cursed creation had deeply inflicted them.

Have you ever found yourself angry with God for no other reason than you knew in your conscience that it was His fault? I remember once when I was a child, out playing in the sandy field behind my house, that something happened with something I was building, and I became extremely angry. I don't remember if it was some earthen tunnel I had dug that had collapsed, or whether some imaginary structure couldn't be completed. However, it is only now, some fifty-plus years later, that I can confess that at that moment I cursed God. Deep down, I knew that cursing God was the very worst thing that I could do. Even many years later, I remember there was power in it! Even though I was an altar boy and went to mass every Sunday and holy day, I knew it was God's fault. A few minutes later, I knew I had done something terribly wrong and begged God for forgiveness.

There was more to the people's sin than may be obvious in a temporal reading of the text. Their sin was tantamount to rejecting God, their Savior, which is the only unpardonable sin in the Bible. The theological principle from the reading was that when the people believed that God had the power to heal them by viewing the bronze serpent, they were healed. In the same way our sins are forgiven when we turn in faith to God through our one mediator Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 2:5). Paul said in Romans "that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9).

As a side note, was what was going on with Moses with the construction of the serpent a violation of the Second Commandment as given in Exodus 20:4? God had told them, "You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth" (Exodus 20:4). No, it was not, for two reasons. First, it was God who forbade the people from making the sign. In this case, God commanded Moses to create the bronze serpent. Second, the serpent didn't represent something in heaven. One can wonder about Moses' reaction to God's command to build the graven image of the serpent. Did Moses have any misconceptions about building the bronze serpent because he anticipated what would happen to the image after the Israelites passed through the wilderness?

You may wonder what became of the bronze serpent? Just as it may be anticipated, it became the object of worship. This is recorded in 2 Kings 18 as follows:

> 1 Now it came about in the third year of Hoshea, the son of Elah king of Israel, that Hezekiah the son of Ahaz king of Judah became king. 2 He was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned twenty-nine years in Jerusalem; and his mother's name was Abi the daughter of Zechariah. 3 He did right in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his father David had done. 4 He removed the high places and broke down the sacred pillars and cut down the Asherah. He also broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the sons of Israel burned incense to it; and it was called Nehushtan. (2 Kings 18:1-4, emphasis added.)

There was nothing new under the sun in those days in Israel. We need to be careful not to trust in a physical object, as if it has the power to heal, save, or provide for us. Only God is worthy of our hearts' deep trust and worship.

Introduction to the Second Reading

The second reading is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Philippians. This Book is one of the Prison Epistles written by Paul during his imprisonment in Rome and addressed to the believers in the city of Philippi, the first town in Macedonia where Paul established a church. The Book's central theme is Paul's expression of the ideal for believers to achieve Christlikeness. This is evident in the verses leading up to the reading in which Paul said, "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others" (Philippians 2:3-4).

Second Reading:

> Phil 2:6-11 5 Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, 6 who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. 8 Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. 9 For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed

> on Him the name which is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Paul said that Christ willingly emptied Himself of the independent use of His divine attributes during His earthly ministry. This is known by the theological term "kenosis," which comes from the Greek word for "emptiness." The "kenosis" is a very difficult theological principle to understand. How could Jesus do miracles yet at the same time have emptied Himself of his divine attributes? Jesus was (and is) always God, but when He came to earth, he willingly submitted Himself to His Father's plan, including not using His divine power **independently** of the Father's will. Jesus emptied Himself and took the form of a servant and was obedient to God the Father to the point of death, even death by the most outrageous form possible, the cross (v. 8). Paul affirmed that there is no other Name higher than the Lord Jesus (v. 9) and that everyone, including nonbelievers, will one day confess that Jesus is Lord (v. 11). People who seek Jesus and believe in Jesus through faith are saved in a similar way that the Israelites looked at God's symbolic serpent that Moses lifted up in the wilderness. As we move to the Gospel lesson, we will see how Jesus referred to that incident.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from the Gospel of John and contains the famous verse often held up on signs at sporting events, John 3:16. The context of reading is that it deals with a conversation between Jesus and the Pharisee Nicodemus, who was also a member of the Jewish ruling council known as the Sanhedrin (John 3:1). Nicodemus met with Jesus as night (Nick at Night) likely because he was concerned about the reactions of his colleagues. During the dialogue, Jesus cut to the chase and told him, "You must be born again to enter the kingdom of heaven" (v. 3). Jesus then explained the necessity for a person to be invisibly and supernaturally born spiritually after their obvious natural birth in order for them to become a citizen of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus used the analogy of the wind, which in the Greek is the same word as "spirit" (pneuma). He said, "The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit" (v. 8). Unlike the natural birth, which is evident to all, a person's spiritual birth is a mystery that comes about through faith in the only object capable of saving anyone, Jesus Christ. Saving faith must have an object, and that object is Jesus Christ.

As you read, take note of the ups and downs you encounter in the text.

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Gospel Reading:

> *John 3: 13-17 13 No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man. 14 As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; 15 so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life. 16 For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.*

Jesus said that He was the only Man that ever came from heaven (v. 13). Though as we saw in the second reading that Jesus allowed Himself to be lifted up on the cross in humiliation, He was triumphant in winning salvation for anyone who looks to Him in faith for eternal life (vv. 14-15). God didn't provide Jesus' sacrifice because of our goodness or merit, but because of His great love for us (v. 16, Ephesians 2:8-9). God sent His Holy Spirit to be the judge of sin in the world, but sent His Son so that through His death, those who believe may be saved through faith in Him (v. 17). The way that Moses lifted up the bronze serpent is similar to those who hold signs containing Bible verses at sporting events. Though some may chide the people who lift up signs reading John 3:16, salvation through faith in Jesus Christ is critical.

Just how important is all of this theological discussion in our lives? Let me provide an illustration to show how it can be a life-or-death matter. I used to frequent a particular restaurant for breakfast on my way to work in the morning. One day, I sat down at one of the stools on the lunch counter next to a man whom I had never seen there before. I felt a certain nudging in my heart, so I conversed with the man. We began talking, and I learned a bit about his life and how his wife had recently passed away. As we continued to talk, we began to build a friendship and agreed to meet again the following day. I met with him over the next several weeks and discussed God and the Bible. One afternoon, after we had met, he reached the point where he knelt down and expressed his faith in the Lord Jesus. As the tears began to flow from his eyes, I looked up and he told me something that shook me to the core of my being. He asked me if I remembered the morning that we met. I said yes, and he continued. He told me that this was the morning on which he had planned to end his life. He had written a note and was driving to where he would carry out his plan, but had decided to stop for one last meal. After we met that morning, he told me that he knew that God had spoken to him and that he had changed his mind. Belief in Jesus Christ can be a life-or-death matter.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. We noted that one of Paul's driving motivations in the Book of Philippians was to urge believers to become Christlike in their behavior. In the introduction to the Gospel lesson, we mentioned how believers were born spiritually through God's invisible hand in their lives. In light of these concepts, how does one know that they have been born in the spiritual sense? What are some attributes that you should expect to see in a person who has been born in a spiritual sense?

2. In the second reading, we discussed the concept of the kenosis and how Jesus emptied Himself of His independent use of His divine attributes. Can you recount a time in which you were in a position of authority, but instead of using this authority, acted humbly and chose a different plan of action, even though you would have been rightfully justified in exercising your power? How does this relate to how Jesus "held back" during His earthly ministry?