

THE SERPENT OF BRASS
The Dangers and Benefits of Our Sensory Experience

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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One of the best known stories in the Old Testament is that of how the serpent “beguiled” the woman in the garden of Eden, causing the fall of the whole human race from paradise. That serpent, we read, “was more subtle than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made.”

Still, in the New Testament when the Lord was sending His disciples out into the world He told them to “be wise (or prudent) as serpents.” So He showed that the snake isn’t *all* bad. Nor is it always harmful: in the gospel of Mark, right at the end where the Lord spoke of the signs that would follow those who believe in Him, He said, “In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; *they will take up serpents*; and if they drink anything deadly it will by no means hurt them....” And even in Exodus, when Moses threw down his rod before Pharaoh and it became a serpent, “and Moses fled from it,” the Lord told him to “Reach out your hand, *and take it by the tail*,” which he did, and it became a rod again in his hand (Ex. 4:2-4).

Our lesson today covers both the dangers and the benefits represented by serpents in the Word. It is drawn from the story of Israel wandering in the wilderness, where we read that when the people got discouraged and complained the Lord sent fiery serpents among them so that many of them died. But then, when they acknowledged their sin and prayed for help, He told them to look up to a serpent of brass and that then they would recover.

What the Serpent Represents

It’s not hard to see that a snake in the Word represents something low, sneaky, and dangerous, perhaps involving clever reasoning. As a matter of interest, the “dragon” of the New Testament is the same as the “serpent” of the Old Testament (Rev. 12:9), and in general we know that this represents something false.

But the specific correspondence of the serpent is revealed only in the Writings, where we read that it is “the sensuous and corporeal man” or “the sensory and bodily level of a person’s mind – separated from the internal” (AC 6949). THIS is what is so subtle and dangerous to our spiritual lives, and yet this, exactly, is what the Lord came into the world to address so that we could be HEALED of the poisonous deceptions that arise from the world and actually enjoy our sensory experience. Remember, the Lord specifically *identified Himself* with the serpent of brass, saying in John “...as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in **HIM** should not perish but have eternal life” (3:14-15).

The situation is described in the Arcana Caelestia #195 where we read,

“The most ancient people did not *compare* all things in a human being to beasts and birds *but actually called them such*. This was their manner of speaking, which also remained even in the Ancient Church after the flood, and was preserved among the prophets. The sensory powers in the human they called serpents, for just as serpents live next to the earth, so the sensory powers are next

to the body. Consequently reasonings based on sensory evidence concerning mysteries of faith they called the poisons of a serpent, and those who reasoned in that way they *called* serpents. And it is because they base reasonings so much on sensory evidence – that is, on visual things, things that are earthly, bodily, worldly and natural – that it is said, ‘the serpent was more subtle than any wild animal (or beast) of the field.’”

This teaching is developed with a number of other examples from the Word and then the following summary is added with even more bad news:

“In ancient times people who relied on sensory evidence rather than matters of revelation were called serpents. But the position is even worse at this day, for not only are there people who believe nothing unless they can see it with their eyes and apprehend it with their senses, there are also those who confirm themselves in that attitude by means of things unknown to the ancients, and who in so doing blind themselves very much more” (AC 196).

Of course what we know today does not refute any of the truths of faith, but it can create a compelling *impression* that draws attention away from the deeper realities of our lives.

For example, it is a truth of faith that the Lord is constantly providing for our eternal life no matter what evils we may have done or how we may have been victimized by others, “no matter what the appearance of the means” (AC 8478). Yet there *is* an appearance that can rise up from our perception of things that the Lord is really *not* looking after us. In fact, the burdens of this world can seem so heavy that they lead us to doubt the very existence of the Lord, the laws of His providence, or the spiritual world.

These doubts are inspired by sinister, even predatory spirits. They can also be aggravated by the reasonings of those around us who try to persuade us that something wrong is right, or something bad is good. For example, it is easy enough in certain situations to justify a false statement or the theft of something that may seem insignificant. It is also easy for the serpent part of us to reason away and justify a variety of disorders, most often involving some sort of self-indulgence, whether mental or physical. And it can be such a persuasive force in our lives that we not only come to crave the delights and pleasures of the world for their own sakes, we come to believe that they are the very source of our happiness, and that without them we would be miserable. This in turn leads to bitterness and jealousy, since we can never get enough, and then addictions, crimes and hopelessness are not far away.

Let’s be frank. The serpent with its poison is like a drug, and its effect on us is as they say in the 12 Step programs, “cunning and baffling.” It sneaks up on us quietly, while we are unaware. Its influence is all around us, and, as just mentioned, often finds support in modern learning. “If it feels good, do it” is no longer just a catchy slogan; it has become a way of life. (You can think of your own examples – but the *propaganda* we see daily on TV should give you some clues.)

What Can we Do about This?

When the serpent misled the first man and woman in the Garden of Eden the Lord cursed it and

condemned it to live low on the ground. Then He issued the first recorded prophecy of His coming into the world, saying, "...I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel" (Gen. 3:15).

The woman here is what we call "the proprium," a Latin word meaning one's sense of self, the feeling that life – which really is the Lord's – is our own. This feeling is *good*, it is delightful, and it is a gift from the Lord! But the prophecy of enmity (animosity or ill-will) between this and the sensory level of consciousness gives us fair warning: we are never really going to be able fully to trust our outward perception of things to bring us the truth, certainly not the whole truth, especially not in spiritual matters. (And if you think it through, this will be obvious, since we all have limited perspectives, and even scientific studies are limited by the instruments and methods that are used. Besides, we all have a natural tendency to see what we *want* to see, and miss or disregard or discount the value of other things.)

So the seed of the *serpent* is all the falsity that originates in the illusions of the senses, but the Seed of the *woman* is the Lord, the son of Mary, the Divine Truth itself in Human form coming into the world to redeem and save everyone who will receive Him. That HE would bruise the serpent's head means that this Divine Truth would overcome all the falsities and illusions that arise from the natural appearances of things. But that the serpent would bruise the Lord's heel means that those in merely sensory perceptions would hurt the lowest natural plane of His life – which of course they did at the crucifixion and still do when they abuse His Word.

Which brings us back to the serpent of brass in the wilderness. What ARE we to do when we wake up one morning and find that we have been betrayed by the fallacies or by the powerful delights of the senses? Where can we turn when the light comes on in our heads and we realize that we have been completely misled by our sense impressions, the popular media, or the baser inclinations of our own nature? What does the brass serpent represent?

We know it represents the Lord, but what else, or what about Him, and why a *serpent*, of all things, to represent the Divine *Human*? Well, if a serpent in general is our own sensory life, then this serpent also represents the sensory level of the Lord's life. And brass, as we read throughout the Writings, represents the good qualities of natural life, including the good deeds and the affections that rest in them. So this serpent, in contrast to the poisonous ones that bit the Israelites, represents the *Divine* good on the sensory level of the Lord's Human life. In summary it represents all the goodness that the Lord offers us in the work of His natural life. So it represents the goodness of His Word – NOT just a book, or a list of miracles or heavenly teachings, or a chronology of events, but the profound message of His *Divinely Human love and mercy* revealed in flesh and blood in the depths of mankind's darkest hour.

Just as the serpents on the ground in the wilderness represented the evils of falsity corresponding to the resentments and bitterness of the Israelites at that time, so the serpent of brass that was raised up represented the goodness of truth that the Lord would reveal in His extraordinary life among the poor and simple people of a later time. But now we see that both revelations, both stories, are for ALL time, and especially for THIS time, OUR time, our hour of need. For the Writings reveal that the CURE for the bite and poison of all such evil is that we look to the Lord in His Divine Humanity. In fact it is remarkable that like the Jews in the wilderness all we have to do is LOOK. But looking in our case means, first of all, having "a just idea of God, because

by it there is conjunction, and by conjunction light, wisdom and eternal life” (AR 469:e; see also DLW 13). Besides, wherever the head turns the body follows, and so when we look to the Lord and really see the power of His Word we are *affected* by it, and it moves us to a better state.

For example, if we are struggling with the appearance that the whole world has gone to hell in a handbasket, or that we ourselves are so damaged spiritually that we can't be saved or do anything useful or good, all we have to do is think about the Lord, the things He did, the things He said and the things He suffered. There we will see how He turned His own humiliation into victory in the resurrection, how He raised the dead, restored sight to the blind, gave freedom to the paralyzed, and normal health to the lame, the leprous and the demon possessed. And if these stories do not seem to apply to us all we have to do is dig a little deeper to see the spiritual sense, for there the Lord most certainly provides the personal insight and encouragement we need to get our act together. There He will show us that material failure is not real failure, and that *generally speaking* things are not what they seem. But if we are willing to give up our own lives – our own presumptions, our own affections, in effect the mere outward appearance of things – for His sake, He will give us new life and an appreciation of a deeper reality that is full of hope and blessings.

But of course this takes a lot of courage, trust and commitment. The Lord never said it would be easy to deny ourselves, take up our cross or follow Him, but He did say that if we try to save our own life we will lose it, and that if we lose our life for His sake we will find it (Matt 16:24-25). The point is, we really do not know, of or from ourselves, what is good for us. We need the Lord's instruction and guidance. But once we have that, to the extent we are able to apply it we are given almost limitless potential to enjoy our experience of this world.

Like the people of Israel who lost faith in the Lord and complained, when we find ourselves disillusioned or discouraged, even dying inwardly from the poison of the serpent, we can turn to the serpent of brass, the Lord in the good of His Divine natural Humanity, to regain a healthy perspective and enjoy the blessings of this life. And like the disciples of the New Testament, if we believe in Him we will be empowered all the more to “*take up serpents,*” enjoying the delights of the senses without any harm to ourselves or others.

What Does This Look Like?

Well, think of the pleasures of a fine concert, or a fine wine, or the intimacies of a loving marriage. In their proper contexts they can be superb experiences of the Lord's own love, wisdom and power. It's only when we focus on them apart from what they represent, or when we indulge in these pleasures at the expense of other uses that they hurt us.

The Lord has given us this wonderful world to bless us and provide experiences that will ground us in a living, tangible appreciation of His presence. We are *meant* to enjoy the pleasures of the senses, whether sight, hearing, taste, smell or touch! We are *created* to receive and process all this input with as much joy and appreciation as possible. After all, as we read so often in the books of the Writings, the whole natural world is a theater representative of the heavenly kingdom. All that is required of us is to keep our natural appetites and cravings *under control* so that they serve the uses intended for them – a healthy body in a healthy mind, fully receptive of the influence of heaven, which is to say, the love and wisdom of the Lord.

Remember the story of creation, where we read concerning the sixth day, "And God made the beast of the earth according to its kind, cattle according to its kind, *and everything that creeps on the earth according to its kind*. And God saw that it was **good**" (Gen. 1:25). So even the serpent has its place in the order of things, and serves an important use. We can *and should* enjoy the vivid colors, textures, tastes, aromas and harmonies that play on our senses every day, we can and should feel good about ourselves for what we can contribute to the world, but always with care for the eternal values and uses they represent, and with an understanding of easily we can be misled, so that we are always looking upward, remembering the goodness of the Lord, the serpent of brass that has the power to heal us of our sins and preserve our lives going forward.

- Amen.

Lessons: *Leviticus* 21:1-9
 Children's talk on the serpent of brass (the Doctor's insignia?)

Exodus 4:1-5 and *Mark* 16:14-18
Arcana Caelestia #196 - 197: selections

The third lesson:

In ancient times those were called "serpents" who had more confidence in sensuous things than in revealed ones. But it is still worse at the present day, for now there are persons who not only disbelieve everything they cannot see and feel, but who also confirm themselves in such incredulity by knowledges [scientific] unknown to the ancients, and thus occasion in themselves a far greater degree of blindness. In order that it may be known how those blind themselves, so as afterwards to see and hear nothing, who form their conclusions concerning heavenly matters from the things of sense, of memory-knowledge, and of philosophy, and who are not only "deaf serpents" but also the "flying serpents" frequently spoken of in the Word, which are much more pernicious, we will take as an example what they believe about the spirit. [2] The sensuous man, or he who only believes on the evidence of his senses, denies the existence of the spirit because he cannot see it, saying, "It is nothing because I do not feel it: that which I see and touch I know exists." The man of memory-knowledge [scientificus], or he who forms his conclusions from memory-knowledges [scientiae], says, What is the spirit, except perhaps vapor or heat, or some other entity of his science, that presently vanishes into thin air? Have not the animals also a body, senses, and something analogous to reason? and yet it is asserted that these will die, while the spirit of man will live. Thus they deny the existence of the spirit.

Among the most ancient people, who were celestial men, by the "serpent" was signified circumspection, and also the sensuous part through which they exercised circumspection so as to be secure from injury. This signification of a "serpent" is evident from the Lord's words to His disciples: Behold, I send you forth as sheep into the midst of wolves; be ye therefore prudent as serpents, and simple as doves (*Matt.* 10:16). And also from the "brazen serpent" that was set up in the wilderness, by which was signified the sensuous part in the Lord, who alone is the celestial man, and alone takes care of and provides for all; wherefore all who looked upon it were preserved.

(~ From the old translation; see also the Elliott translation, in more contemporary English.)