

A. B. Simpson and the Serpents in the Wilderness

*“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. And **the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people**, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died.”* (Numbers 21:5-6)

Did God, using His divine power, actively place and irresistible influence upon these poisonous serpents to harm His people? Many believe that He did and some even believe that it is justified. This is an understandable conclusion from the text but it certainly does not give us the best picture of the God who commanded us to love our enemies as He loves His (Matt. 5:44-46).

The Bible is the divinely inspired and inerrant Word of God so the passage itself is not in dispute. However, our interpretation of such passages are always subject to scrutiny. A better interpretation of Numbers 21:5-6 which is more in sync with our Lord Jesus’ revelation of the Father-heart of God can be determined how the word “sent” is correctly translated.

“Sent” is from the Hebrew word “shâlach” which, according to Joseph Rotherham, “It often takes the modifications expressed by *permit, to declare or hold and, to help.*”¹ When the people spake against Moses and God they literally moved themselves out of the realm in which God could legally protect them. He had no other choice but to permit Satan to have his way and influence these snakes to attack God’s people (see 1 Cor. 10:8-10).

I have dealt with this subject in several of my books but recently while browsing through one of my favorite Bible commentaries by one of my favorite classic preachers, Albert Benjamin Simpson (1843-1919), I found these fascinating comments on Numbers 21:6:

The venomous snakes, which were permitted to torment them on account of their murmurings, represent the Satanic visitations of spiritual or physical evil which come as the result of disobedience and unbelief. “The LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died” (Numbers 21:6).

There is such a thing as temptation befalling the spirit through the divine permission on account of sin. The Scriptures speak of persons being delivered over to a reprobate mind (Romans 1:28), and souls that have been delivered unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, “and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord” (1 Corinthians 5:5).

No path is so beset with temptation as the path of cowardice and disobedience. And no souls walk in such a victory over the power of the enemy as those who dare to go forward in full obedience to all the law of God and trample on the

¹ Rotherham, Joseph **The Emphasized Bible**, Bradbury, Agnew & Co., ©1902, p. 919

power of serpents and scorpions. The only place where we can have power over Satan, is beneath our feet. Our attitude must be constant victory and defiance, or it will be constant harassment and torment.

This terrible visitation, however, led ultimately to a more glorious manifestation of the grace of God. And so, often, the temptations of life can be overruled for spiritual discipline and final victory. So Christ refers especially to the temptations in the wilderness, as the result of sin (1 Corinthians 10:9-10), and uses their example for our warning against all evil. But at the same time He encourages us with the most gracious promises of deliverance and protection, if we abide in humble, vigilant faith and obedience (10:12-13).²

Simpson taught that this serpent attack was not instituted by God but permitted by Him when the people removed themselves from under God's protection. He compares this to how Christians today sin and then open the door for the devil in their lives. God delivers people over to the master they choose to follow if they insist upon rejecting Christ and following another.

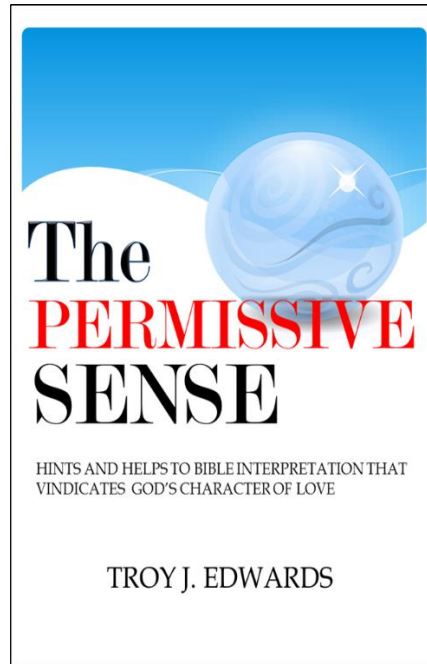
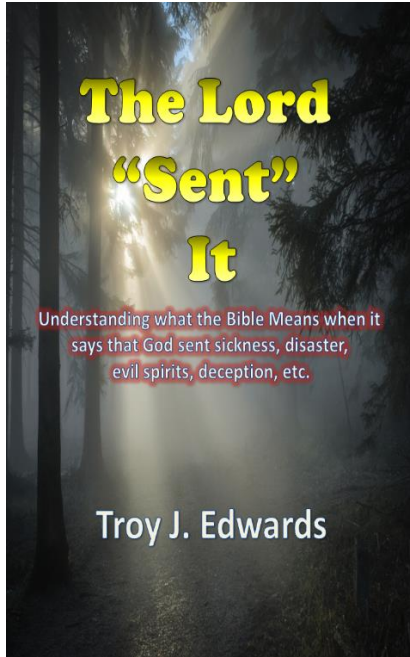
When we submit to God, Simpson points out that these things can be overruled by God for the purposes victory in our lives. God neither instigates or desires these things to come upon us but when we open ourselves up to them, and repent after seeing the error of our ways, God can then teach us from them.

Finally, Simpson emphasizes the truth that we can walk in constant victory over Satan and his attacks if we will remain obedient to God's Word. We can then exercise our authority over evil forces. Excellent teaching from one of God's great servants of bygone days.

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Having difficulty understanding Bible passages that make God appear to vindictive and cruel? We highly recommend the following books:

² Simpson, Albert B. **The Christ in the Bible Commentary, Volume One** (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1992), p. 278



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