

<p>The Bible's Most Amazing Stories: The Bronze Serpent</p>
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**Scripture**

Numbers 21:4-9

They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!"

Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed for the people.

The LORD said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived.

2 Kings 18:1-4

In the third year of Hoshea son of Elah king of Israel, Hezekiah son of Ahaz king of Judah began to reign. He was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem twenty-nine years. His mother's name was Abijah daughter of Zechariah. He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, just as his father David had done. He removed the high places, smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles. He broke into pieces the bronze snake Moses had made, for up to that time the Israelites had been burning incense to it.

John 3:14-15

Jesus said, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."

**The Israelites' Sin**

The people complained that it would have been better for them if they had been left in slavery in Egypt. They did not deny the miracles that God had done for them, but they disparaged their deliverance from Egypt. Again they complained about the lack of food and water. But then they went beyond their fathers and mothers who had complained. They not only spoke of the monotony of manna, but they described it as "miserable bread." In saying that the "bread of heaven" (see Psa. 78:23-24) was something vile and despicable, the people were actually showing contempt for the Lord its giver.

The venom of the people's anger led them to blaspheme the Lord (v.5), to reject his servant Moses, and to show contempt for the bread of heaven. This is the most scathing of their several attacks on the manna. The contempt of the people for the heavenly bread was more serious than one might think. The Lord Jesus speaks of the manna as a type of himself,

that he is the true Bread from heaven (John 6:32-35; 48-51; 58). A rejection of the heavenly manna is tantamount to one spurning the grace of God in the Savior (Ronald B. Allen, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Numbers*, Zondervan, 875-876).

The people received a sting from God instead of a blessing. They find themselves dying instead of being preserved alive by “that miserable bread.” There is something very human about the people in their complaints about their diet. The timing of their renewed complaint is understandable, given the fact that they were backtracking into the wide waste of the desert in order not to provoke Edom. But understandable or not, human or no, they were engaging in outrageous rebellion again, coupled to an almost visceral hatred of God's gift to them in the manna.

There is a pattern to complaining; it is habit forming. The tendency among people is to go beyond where one left off the last time, to become ever more egregious, ever more outspoken. Rarely does a complaining person become milder in his complaints. Finally, complaining becomes self-destructive (Allen, 876).

### **The Bronze Serpent**

God's command to Moses was quite unusual in the ancient Jewish culture. Israel was prohibited from making images of animals or other life forms because they could so often be used for idolatry. Not only were snakes disliked by people back then (as they still are by many people today), but snakes were often associated with evil in the Bible, particularly the evil one himself (Gen. 3). Satan first appeared as a serpent, and later he is called the dragon (Rev. 20:2). There is a sense in biblical thought that snakes are not only detestable in themselves, but they may even be symbolic of the prince of darkness himself.

With all these factors in view, now we can think about the enormity of what Moses was asked to do, of the taboos, he was asked to break. The people had called the bread of heaven detestable. Moses is commanded of God to make an image of something truly detestable in their culture and to hold that high on a pole as their only means of deliverance from disease. Only those who looked at the image of the snake would survive the venom that coursed through their bodies. This is an extraordinary act of cultural shock, an exceptionally daring use of potent symbols. As the people had transformed in their own thinking the gracious bread of heaven into detestable food, so the Lord transforms a symbol of death into a source of life and deliverance. The rejection of God's grace brings a symbol of death. The intervention of God's grace brings a source of life. Here we see a symbol of hope that is disgusting in nature, but has healing properties that are most surprising. Here we find an amazing sense of God's presence in the most unlikely of places, the symbol of evil- a snake (Allen, 877-878).

### **Archeology and the Bronze Snake**

The Hebrew wording in this passage actually refers to the snake being made of copper. However, bronze, an alloy of copper and tin, was smelted in the Timnah region where this event occurred, and thus the translation “bronze” has a physical backing. Excavations in that area have unearthed an Egyptian temple to the god Hathor. During the period of the Judges this temple was adopted by Midianites in the area, who made it into a shrine draped with curtains. In the inner chamber of this shrine was found a five-inch long copper image of a snake. It was

common in the ancient Near East to believe that the image of something could protect against the thing itself. As a result Egyptians (living as well as dead) sometimes wore snake-shaped amulets to protect them from serpents. Finally it is of interest that a well-known bronze bowl from Nineveh with Hebrew names on it depicts a winged snake on a pole of some sort (John H. Walton, Mark Chavalas, Victor Matthews, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary*, Intervarsity, 157-158).

### **The Geography of the Land**

The Israelites found themselves at the plain of Arabah. It was here that they again complained about the lack of food and water and their dislike of manna. The low-lying plain of the Arabah, which runs between steep mountain walls from the Dead Sea to the Red Sea, would be most likely to furnish the Israelites with very little food, except the manna which God gave them; for although it is not altogether destitute of vegetation, especially at the mouths of the wadis and winter torrents from the hills, yet on the whole it is a horrible desert, with a loose sandy soil, and drifts of granite and other stones, where terrible sandstorms sometimes arise from the neighborhood of the Red Sea; and the lack of food might very frequently be accompanied by the absence of drinkable water (Carl Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, Baker, 138-139).

### **Jesus and the Bronze Serpent**

Jesus uses the incident of the bronze snake being lifted up to bring healing to the Israelites who had been bitten by snakes to illustrate the meaning of his Passion, his death on the cross. To the lifting up of the snake on a pole that all may live corresponds the lifting up of the Son of Man on a cross that all may have eternal life. The words "lifted up" are full of meaning. Normally in the Bible, we would think about being lifted up to mean being glorified, honored by all. And indeed Jesus will be glorified by all. But the means to receiving this glory is through facing the cross. This is how he will be lifted up. So, once again God is using an instrument, the cross, that would have been a symbol of evil and God's judgment to be a source of life and hope. This is similar to the way the bronze snake was used. In itself it would have been a symbol of terror and even evil. But God uses it for his gracious purposes (George Beasley-Murray, *Word Biblical Commentary: John*, Thomas Nelson, 50-51).

### **The Bronze Serpent and Idolatry**

Hezekiah's destruction of the bronze serpent in 2 Kings during his reign reminds us of the evil of the human heart. The bronze serpent should have been a treasured symbol of God's salvation. It could have been a tangible reminder of the way God provides healing and forgiveness for our sins. Parents could have pointed to the statute and told their children about what God had done for his people. How he had not let them taste death, but provided a means of saving. Instead, the Israelites turned the figure into an idol. They did not embrace it as a memorial to God's actions for them, but worshiped it as a god or as a symbol of God. What should have been an object that led them to praise God became an object that led to greater sin and idolatry.

### **Home Group Questions**

1. Why did Israel have such a difficult time appreciating God's miraculous care for them? What does this teach us about people?
2. What does the attitude of Israel in this story teach us about complaining?
3. How can constant complaining harden us against God?
4. What made the bronze serpent such an unusual means of salvation?
5. Why did Hezekiah destroy the bronze serpent? What do you think led Israel to burn incense to the serpent?
6. Do we see this kind of magical belief in objects in our culture? Where?
7. What parallels are there between the bronze serpent and Jesus?

### **Questions for the Family**

8. Why did God bring such a harsh punishment against Israel? What did their constant complaining say about their love for God?

### **Questions for Personal Application**

9. What kind of attitude do you have toward God? Are you thankful for what he has done for you? Or do you feel like God owes you more than he is giving you?