

The Bronze Serpent

Numbers 21:4-9 Romans 5:6-11 John 3:1-16

March 5, 2023
Pastor Dave Bolte



Moses had his hands full with the Israelites in the wilderness. Moses is known as a great leader and prophet of God who delivered the Israelites during the Exodus; but the last third of his life must have been extremely stressful dealing with the rebellious Israelites¹. Repeatedly in Scripture we hear that the Israelites were complaining, whining, and grumbling about something. They were impatient and rebellious. They were upset with God and they despised Moses. They ignored the great miracles God provided for them -- like Manna *every single day* for them to eat, and the majestic pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night *in the middle* of their camp! Instead, of thanking God for His love and care, they focused on their suffering and hardships, and they blamed God and took it out on Moses!

Their complaining was not only sinful and disruptive, but it was contagious. That is the nature of discontent. It spreads and grows.

God still loved the Israelites, and so He sent poisonous snakes into their camp! *You might be thinking how can poisonous snakes be a sign of God's love?* God sent those snakes to lead the Israelites to repentance; and repentance is *the kindness of God* to us. The Lord did not want the Israelites to continue hardening their heart in their rebellion and discontent. The poisonous snakes were meant to warn them of the danger of their sin so that they might turn from it. The poisonous snakes were the **LAW OF GOD** to the Israelites. Those snakes brought the Israelites face to face with death, the consequence of their sin.

¹ Consider this in light that Moses was 80 years old when the Exodus started! he would go on to live another 40 years, and even then, died with full strength in his body! Deuteronomy 34:7: "Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were not weak nor his strength gone."

That's what the Law of God does for you as well². God does not send poisonous snakes to your house to warn you, but rather He works through His Word and the circumstances of life to expose your sin and lead you to repentance. The Commandments of God show us where we disobey and rebel against God; they reveal immorality and disobedience. They expose your contempt of God and lack of love for your neighbor. The Law shows us that we are no better than the Israelites in the wilderness.

The circumstances of our lives are meant to work the same way. The brokenness of the world, the problems that we face, the pain and suffering all show our need for God, His love, care, and power in our lives.

That day in the Wilderness, the Lord judged the peoples' sins by sending snakes into their camp. The day of grace was over for many people that day ... for those who would **not** repent. But the faithful did repent, they confessed their sins, and called out to God for help. God, in His grace, heard their prayer and He provided a way for them to live. For those who looked at the bronze snake, and believed God's promise that they would live, the poisonous snake bites were harmless. *God provided a way of salvation for His People. By believing God's promise of life in the snake on the pole, the people lived.*

That bronze snake on a pole was a **type** of Christ: it **foreshadowed** what Jesus would do for us³!

Jesus is the way of salvation that God has provided for us! We don't look to a bronze snake lifted up on a pole, but rather we look to the Son of God lifted up on the cross. That's where your salvation is found!

² You don't need a doctor unless you know you're sick; in the same way, you don't go to a Savior unless you realize that you are sinful. The Law of God shows your desperate situation in sin and that you will die both physically and eternally. It shows your dire need for Jesus, the Savior God sent for you, Who forgives your sins and gives you eternal life. That is the Gospel!

³ Ironically, this is the only place in Scripture where Jesus is compared to a snake! Usually, Satan is associated with a snake (Gen 3, Rev 12), but here it is a visual image of Jesus, who like that snake on a pole, was lifted up on a cross for all people to see and be healed from sin! This use of an Old Testament story that points to Jesus is called a "type"; Jesus is the "antitype" (= "in the place of" the "type"). It is a foreshadow of Christ --> Jesus replaces the OT "type" and is greater than the "type", since He is God and His "lifting up" has eternal significance.

Jesus uses the story of the bronze snake in the Old Testament to teach us about Himself and His work of salvation for us.

[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. For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. John 3:14-16

The comparison is with the **“lifting up”**. God places the means of salvation, the way of life, right in the midst of the people. God placed His Son in human flesh, born in Bethlehem, so that He could suffer and then be lifted up on a cross for all people. Jesus is lifted up between earth and heaven for all to see. The Gospel is preached in the midst of all nations so that they know and understand what the cross means, and that everyone can look to the Son and live.

God provided a way of salvation for you in His Son Jesus Christ. God Himself rescues you from the poison of sin. Jesus was lifted up on a cross so that your sins would be forgiven, and that you would be spared death because of your sins. Because Jesus was “lifted up” on a cross, God promises to forgive you, heal you, and give you eternal life! You will not die in your sins! You have life in Christ!

Did you notice in the story of the Israelites that God attached a promise to something earthly? The snake on the pole by itself is just a snake on a pole⁴. It has no power whatsoever to heal someone bitten by poisonous snakes. But God attached His promise to it, that whoever looked at the snake on the pole would live. The poison in their body would not harm them. You could say that that day in the wilderness, the snake on the pole was a **sacrament** for the Israelites.

⁴ UNFORTUNATELY, this bronze snake on a pole turns up again in the Old Testament... this time as an idol! It seems that some of the Israelites kept this bronze snake on a pole as a relic, and worshipped it. Read the dreadful story in 2 Kings 18:1-4.

A Sacrament⁵ is when God attaches His promise of salvation to earthly elements. He does that for us in Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. By themselves, they are simple water, and bread and wine, they have no spiritual power whatsoever. But when God attaches the promise of eternal salvation to them, they become extremely powerful Means of Grace. Baptism and Communion is like the snake on the pole for us.

- ⇒ God has attached the promise of forgiveness of sins and eternal life to Holy Baptism, and so we are baptized and we baptize our children as He commands. It is no longer simple water, but it's Living Water.
- ⇒ God has attached the promise of forgiveness of sins and eternal life to Holy Communion, and so we come and “take and eat” and “take and drink” the bread and the wine believing that Christ’s body and blood is really present to forgive us our sins. It is no longer simple bread and wine, but also the body and blood of the crucified and risen Savior *given and shed for us* for the forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

The snake on the pole was a life giving miracle in the midst of the Israelites; Baptism and Communion are life giving miracles in the midst of the Christian Church. God chose to work through a bronze snake on pole that day in the wilderness; God has also chosen to work through water, bread and wine in our day and age.

The Israelites needed to look to the snake and believe God's promises in order to live; so too, look to Christ and believe His promises and you too will live. He Himself took your sins to a cross, and He was lifted between heaven and earth for all to look to and live. He has attached His promise of salvation to earthly things -- water, bread, wine -- for you to look to and believe.

Like the Israelites, we all have the poison of sin running through us;
Like the Israelites, God in His kindness caused us to repent of our sin, and to look to the one He *lifted up* for us: His Son Jesus Christ. Amen!

⁵ What is a sacrament? The Lutheran Church has defined a sacrament as a sacred act instituted by God; in which God Himself has joined His Word of promise to the visible element; and by which He offers, gives and seals the forgiveness of sins earned by Christ.

God the Father,
we thank you for your great love for us
that you sent your Son to be our Savior,
knowing that He would be lifted up on a
cross and crucified for us and our
salvation.

Send us the Holy Spirit so that we may
look to Christ in faith and believe.

Deepen our conviction and confidence so
that we can live with assurance and peace
throughout our lives.

Grant us faith in the Means of Grace that
you have provided for us. We ask this in
the Name of Jesus who is lifted up for us,
Amen .

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; 5 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!" 6 Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. 7 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. 8 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." 9 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.

Romans 5:6-11

6 You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. 7 Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. 8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. 9 Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! 10 For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! 11 Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

John 3:1-16

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. 2 He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." 3 In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." 4 "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" 5 Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. 6 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. 7 You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' 8 The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." 9 "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. 10 "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? 11 I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. 12 I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? 13 No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven--the Son of Man. 14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. 16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.