

The Bronze Serpent Lifted Up on a Pole in the Wilderness

Numbers 21:1-9

Numbers 21:1-9 - *"The king of Arad, the Canaanite, who dwelt in the South, heard that Israel was coming on the road to Atharim. Then he fought against Israel and took some of them prisoners. ² So Israel made a vow to the LORD, and said, 'If You will indeed deliver this people into my hand, then I will utterly destroy their cities.' ³ And the LORD listened to the voice of Israel and delivered up the Canaanites, and they utterly destroyed them and their cities. So the name of that place was called Hormah.*

⁴ Then they journeyed from Mount Hor by the Way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the soul of the people became very discouraged on the way. ⁵ And the people spoke against God and against Moses: 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread.' ⁶ So the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died.

⁷ Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, 'We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD that He take away the serpents from us.' So Moses prayed for the people.

⁸ Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live.' ⁹ So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived."

Background Notes

The time period of the events in Numbers 20 and 21 comes near the end of the Israelites' forty-year-long journey in the wilderness. In Numbers 20, the nation of Edom refused to allow Israel to pass through her territory in order on the ancient King's Highway, which would have made traveling a lot easier. Also in Numbers 20, Aaron died at Mount Hor. Mount Hor was near the border of the land of Edom: *"And the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron in Mount Hor by the border of the land of Edom..." (20:23)*. Israel mourned Aaron's death for thirty days: *"Now when all the congregation saw that Aaron was dead, all the house of Israel mourned for Aaron thirty days" (20:29)*

In Numbers 21, the king of Arad heard that Israel was moving in his direction. Arad is in the Negev, in the southern part of the land of Canaan, and the king probably thought that Israel was about to make its move into the land of Canaan from the south. So the king of Arad brought his forces out against Israel and attacked them, and took some of the people captive.

Thirty-eight years before this time, Israel had been defeated in this very area by the Amalekites and Canaanites, when they wrongly tried to enter into the land in their own strength. *"Then the Amalekites and the Canaanites who dwelt in that mountain came down and attacked them, and drove them back as far as Hormah" (Numbers 14:45)*. So the king of Arad

undoubtedly knew about this prior defeat of Israel, and was hoping for a repeat victory. In Numbers 21, however, Israel spoke to the Lord about the situation, and the Lord heard their prayer. *“And the LORD listened to the voice of Israel and delivered up the Canaanites, and they utterly destroyed them and their cities...” (v3).*

After the battle, instead of moving His people immediately into the hill country of Canaan where they would face more fighting, the Lord directed His people to go southeast all the way around the land of Edom. The people were still led by the pillar of cloud by day, and the pillar of fire by night, so it's clear that the Lord was taking them in that direction.

Doctrinal Points

1. “Lifting up the bronze serpent” is a picture of substitution.

Because they had to travel the long way around Edom, the Israelites became discouraged and complained once again. Verse 5: *“And the people spoke against God and against Moses: ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread.’* Remember, the people complaining in Numbers 21 were primarily the people of the new generation of Israel. Back in Numbers 11, the complainers were the former generation, but almost 40 years had gone by, and that generation had died in the wilderness. So these complainers were from the new, younger generation - but “like father, like son.” The new generation was still complaining.

The Lord sent poisonous snakes among the people, as discipline for their discontent and complaining. The snakes were probably called “fiery serpents” because of the burning sensation caused by the poisonous venom. And at least this new generation realized they had sinned! They confessed their sin and asked Moses to intercede for them: *“...the people came to Moses, and said, ‘We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD that He take away the serpents from us’ (v7).*

The Lord told Moses to do a most unusual thing. Moses was to make a fiery serpent out of bronze and lift it up on a pole. Everyone who was dying of the poisonous snakebites would live if and when they looked at the bronze serpent that was raised up above the camp of Israel. The caduceus (the symbol of the medical profession, entwined snakes on a staff) may trace back to this event. Although secular sources say that the caduceus originates from the symbol used by the Greeks for healing, it's quite likely that the roots of the Greek healing symbol go back to this event in Numbers 21.

Why would God choose this method – looking at a bronze snake raised on a pole – as a method for healing the people? The Lord Jesus Himself gave us the answer in John 3:14-15 - *“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.”* So the bronze serpent lifted up is a spiritual picture of Jesus Christ, who was lifted up on the cross to provide healing from the deadly effects of our sin. But why would God use a *serpent* as the symbol? Wouldn't the spiritual picture be “better” if He had asked Moses to use a bronze lamb to represent the Lamb of God? Why a serpent? Answer: when Jesus Christ died on

the cross, He took the curse of sin upon Himself -- for us! God judged Him for our sins. He died as our representative. He died as our substitute.

As the people then were dying because of the poisonous snakebites, so people are dying today because of the poison of sin - **and we've all been bitten!** Romans 3:23 says that **all of us** have sinned, and that **all of us** fall short of God's perfect standard. We're all spiritually dead as a result of that "bite" of sin. But the Lord Jesus died as the sin-bearer, bearing our sins when He died on the cross. *"For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him"* (2 Corinthians 5:21). The Lord Jesus became a curse for us when He died on the cross. Galatians 3:13 says, *"Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us..."* The Lord Jesus was lifted up on the cross as our substitute.

Notice that Moses didn't put one of the fiery serpents on the pole. No, he used a bronze serpent made in the **likeness** of a fiery serpent. It's important to note this point. When the Lord Jesus died on the cross for our sins, He didn't become a sinner, nor did He Himself become sin intrinsically. **No!** 1 Peter 2:24 says, *"He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed."* Lifting up the bronze serpent is a picture of **substitution**.

2. Looking at the bronze serpent is a picture of salvation.

There are a number of points about the biblical doctrine of salvation that are brought out in this spiritual picture.

a. **It was the only way to be healed.** The snake bites were deadly. If the people tried their own method for healing, such as sucking out the poison, or applying a poultice, they died. There was only **one way** to be healed - **God's way!** And there is only **one way of salvation** today - **God's way** - only through personal faith in Jesus Christ. *"Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved"* (Acts 4:12).

b. **Looking at the bronze serpent did not involve human good works.** All a dying person had to do was look. In the same way, salvation from sin comes by simply by looking to Christ in faith. People can't "earn" their own salvation. *"It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast"* (Ephesians 2:8-9). Salvation does not come about by works, but by simply trusting in Jesus Christ.

c. **God's way of healing in the wilderness was available to everyone, but it was only effective for the individuals who looked.** Although the serpent on the pole was available to every Israeli, there was no "universal" healing there. Only those who looked were healed.

In the same way, salvation from sin is not universal. It is available to everyone, but it's only effective for those individuals who believe that Jesus Christ accomplished their salvation on the cross. Romans 10:13 - *"For 'whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.'"*

Looking at the bronze serpent is a picture of salvation.

Practical Application

Look -- and live!

Have you looked to the Lord Jesus Christ as your only way of salvation? To “look to the Lord Jesus Christ” means to look to Him **in faith** - that is, to believe and trust in Jesus Christ alone for salvation, because He died on the cross for your sins.

You don't become a Christian by being born into a Christian family - it's an individual decision. You must look yourself. You must look in faith, and you will live! Salvation from sin doesn't come by “looking to” a certain church, or “looking to” an ordinance like baptism, or “looking to” some priest or minister. Salvation from sin comes by looking in faith to **Christ** and trusting in Him alone! And salvation doesn't come by acknowledging Christ as the greatest Person who ever lived. It comes only by looking by faith to Jesus Christ, who was lifted up on the cross to die for your sins.

That's what it means to trust in Jesus Christ as your personal Savior. Have you looked by faith to the Lord Jesus Christ, who was lifted up on the cross and died as your Substitute? Have you looked, and then put your trust in Him?

Look - and live!