



**Numbers 21:4 9-**  
**John 3:14 16**

## **The Bronze Serpent**

In John chapter three Jesus used a historical illustration to teach Nicodemus about the importance of believing in His coming death. Jesus said, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life" (John 3:14-15).

God commanded Moses to make a bronze serpent and put it on a pole as a cure for a punishment after the people sinned (cf. Num. 21:4-9). Jesus used the same imagery to teach that He will be lifted up on a cross as a cure for people's sin. Faith in Him alone gives eternal life to those who are doomed to die because of their sin.

The historical situation was the last of a number of "apostasies" in the wilderness wanderings. Four things characterize those events: the people of Israel complained against God, He sent judgment upon them, they repented of their sin and He forgave them and delivered them.

The people of Israel became impatient in their journey in the wilderness. They griped about the "miserable food" God provided for them (Numbers 21:4-5). The people "spoke against God and Moses." God takes our mouthing and complaining about Him seriously! "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?" they asked. "For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this miserable food." God was keeping two million people from starving to death in a wilderness and they were grumbling at Him. The "miserable food" they were eating was the manna God was providing for them daily. True, it wasn't stake and ale, but it kept them alive and healthy.

God sent poisonous snakes as a judgment because the people were grumbling against God and Moses. "The Lord sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died" (Numbers 21:6). "The wages of sin is death." That fact is still true. "The soul that sins will surely die." That truth won't go away. It is a law of life.

The people seeing the seriousness of their sin urged Moses to intercede on their behalf (v. 7). "We have sinned, because we have spoken against the LORD and you." They confessed to God their evil attitude and behavior. Then Moses prayed that the LORD would remove the serpents from them.

The LORD then instructed Moses to, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a standard; and it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he shall live" (v. 8). This "look" involved a look of faith in God to save

at it, he shall live" (v. 8). This "look" involved a look of faith in God to save them.

"And Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on the standard; and it came about, that if a serpent bit any man, when he looked to the bronze serpent, he lived" (v. 9).

The stress in this passage is not on some magical healing, but on a bronze serpent as a *symbol* of salvation that God offered to all who would look to Him and live.

Jesus borrowed the object lesson from history. He said, just like Moses raised the serpent up in the wilderness, He, too, must be lifted up so that whoever believes on Him may have eternal life.

This "lifting up" of the Son of Man is a definite statement of Jesus' coming death on the cross. He was telling Nicodemus that in His death God would provide salvation. There is a divine imperative in the death of Jesus. The Son of Man "must" be lifted up. Peter preached the necessity of His death saying, "this Man, was delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. And God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death; since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power" (Acts 2:23-24). It was God's deliberate choice and purpose to crucify Jesus. It was no accident, or the martyrdom of a good religious teacher. He died as an act of God. His death was necessary for our salvation.

The death of Jesus is exalted in New Testament preaching. The preaching of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved it is the power of God (1 Corinthians 1:18). There is something about the message of the cross that throbs, it acts, it produces results. We glory in the uplifted cross of Jesus because it is the power of God to bring healing to our sin sick souls. "We preach Christ crucified" was the theme of apostolic preaching in the New Testament (1:23). Without that cross, we die an eternal death.

Why is the uplifted cross so important? The apostle Paul wrote, "God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). In fact, Christ died just at the right time for us while we were helpless sinners (5:6). He "died for us;" He "died for the ungodly." He died "on our behalf," or "instead of us." The atoning death of Jesus Christ on the cross is the foundation for the kingdom of God. There is simply no other way to be saved. "The wages of sin is death," the apostle Paul wrote. Then he went on to say, "but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). A look of faith gives eternal life to those doomed to die.

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

The emphasis Jesus is making is that salvation comes through believing. "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8 9).

Salvation doesn't come through some magical formula. It comes by simple faith, looking up to the cross of Jesus and believing that He died in your place on the cross. There is no other way of salvation. "There is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). There is no other name that you can call upon to be saved. No other person anywhere in this world will give you a right relationship with God. Be careful what name for God someone whispers in your ear. Any other name or person will send you to hell.

Salvation comes by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone. How tragic, but in the history of Israel the bronze serpent became an idolatrous object of worship (2 Kings 18:4) and had to be destroyed in King Hezekiah's reforms. Salvation came not through the serpent on the pole, but through God's sovereign provision. They were not saved by what they saw, but by the Savior.

We live in a day in which men take sacred objects and icons and turn them into idolatrous objects of worship and belief. The object of our faith must always be the Lord Jesus Christ.

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