

The Bronze Serpent

THEOLOGICAL THEME: Christ became sin to conquer sin.

At some point during my childhood, I was given a worry stone. I don't quite remember who gave it to me or why. But there it was in my junk drawer. It was a green, flat, teardrop-shaped stone that fit in the palm of my hand. In the center of its shape was an indentation where the holder of the stone could rub his thumb against it. I didn't carry it often. But I do remember the sensation of moving my thumb back and forth across its smooth surface when I was nervous. It was the closest thing I had to a rabbit's foot or a four-leaf clover.

Throughout history, humans have demonstrated a tendency to collect trinkets we think will bring about good in our lives. It is the inherent need we have to stave off bad circumstances. We know that life is not in our control, and we hope to find a way to convince the powers of the universe to be kind to us. As Christians, we don't believe in "luck," but we do believe in God's providence. By His power, He declares what is right, judges what is sin, and draws the rebellious back under His sovereignty. This was a lesson the Israelites needed often—as do we.



Voices from Church History

"Whoever has been bitten by the snakes of sin need only gaze on Christ and have healing for the forgiveness of sins."¹

—Augustine (354–430)



What are some items or activities people turn to for comfort?

In this session, we see how during their time of wandering, the Israelites became ungrateful and impatient. As a consequence, God sent poisonous snakes into their camp. In response to their pleas for mercy, God commanded Moses to lift a bronze serpent on a staff. Whenever someone looked at the serpent, they were healed. Jesus later claimed this story pointed forward to His being lifted high on the cross. By trusting in His identification with sinners, we are given eternal life and are called to be His ambassadors.

1. The bronze serpent points to punishment for sin (Num. 21:4-9).

⁴ From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient 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 we loathe this worthless food.”

⁶ Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. ⁷ And 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 And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” ⁹ So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.



The people’s rebellion in this instance shows up in a very simple word: *impatient*. The group of people who had been miraculously delivered, fed, and clothed by God now turned on Him. In essence, they threw a preschooler-like fit before God because they didn’t like the food He provided.

The people went far beyond doubt. They accused God and Moses of treachery. They imagined God had intentionally led them out of Egypt for the express purpose of killing them in the desert. It was a rebellion of epic proportions. By stating such a claim, the people showed they doubted God's character and His word.

 When have you allowed impatience with God's work in your life to cause you to grumble about what He has done?

 What are some gifts we quickly take for granted?

In response to their rebellion, God acted quickly. He punished them. It was the type of punishment that would strike fear into the heart of any person. Suddenly, poisonous snakes were in the camp. Biting. Infecting. Killing. The break in their trust of God was a serious offense. The Lord did not take it lightly. When they spoke out against their circumstances, they were speaking directly against God's character.

As the rebellious people began to die, they cried to Moses for help. The man whom they accused of being in league with a God who had deceived them would once again become their advocate, and Moses was willing to plead the case of the guilty before the Lord.

Once God heard the people's penitent cry, He provided a way of restoration through their faith. In an act of divine irony, God instructed Moses to make a serpent of bronze and place it on a pole. If those bitten by the snakes on the ground would look to the snake that had been lifted up, they would be healed. God chose the symbol of their punishment for sin as the instrument of His mercy.



Voices from Church History

"[The serpent] saved those that looked upon it, not because they believed it to live but because it was killed, and killed with it were the powers that were subject to it, being destroyed as it deserved. And what is the fitting epitaph for us?...You are overthrown by the cross. You are slain by him who is the giver of life."²

—Gregory of Nazianus
(circa 325–389)



What is the significance of God's command to the people to gaze at the snake?



What truths were the people to consider?

2. The bronze serpent points to Christ's rescue from sin (John 3:14-15).

The story of the Israelites' lack of faith, punishment, and recovery is not one that stands on its own in biblical history. Jesus Himself referenced this story. In John 3, we read of Jesus' nighttime meeting with Nicodemus, a Pharisee and ruler of the Jews during the Roman Empire's occupation of Israel.

Jesus told Nicodemus that a person must be born again in order to enter the kingdom of God. Nicodemus was perplexed. What does being "born again" mean? Is it physical? Is it spiritual? What will it mean to a man who relies on his Jewish heritage? In answer to Nicodemus' question, Jesus pointed back through the annals of history to Numbers 21 and explained how the Son of Man (a reference to Jesus Himself) must be lifted up just like the bronze serpent.

¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

Packed into these two verses are several important ideas. First, we see how the original story is a foreshadowing of what Jesus would accomplish more than a thousand years later. When Moses lifted up the bronze serpent for the people to see, he was providing a remedy for all who would look at it. Now, Jesus is going to be lifted up for a much broader-reaching recovery. The work done through the bronze serpent was temporary. Jesus' work would be permanent.

Second, the word that is used in the Greek language for “lifted up” is not the pedestrian idea of simply holding something up to view. Rather, the Gospel writer employed a word that meant to exalt something. Not long after this encounter with Nicodemus, Jesus would be hanging on the cross. While there, He would fulfill the Old Testament prophecies of the divine Son of God, who is also fully human, serving as the payment for our sins. Christ would be exalted before the nations, and all who look to Him can live.

Voices from the Church

“Jesus became what was killing us—sin itself—when he was lifted up on the cross and thereby became the remedy for sin.”³

—Nancy Guthrie



When you think about Jesus being lifted up on the cross, do you think of this primarily as humiliation or exaltation? Why?



How can it be both humiliation and exaltation at once?

Jesus’ words to Nicodemus emphasized the centrality of His sacrifice. Unfortunately, the human tendency is to look to idols, not to the Savior.

Several centuries after the Numbers 21 episode, Hezekiah became king over Israel. He was a righteous king who destroyed the objects of idolatry in the kingdom. One item was the bronze serpent that Moses used in the desert. For all these years, the Israelites had kept it. At the time of Hezekiah taking the throne, “the people of Israel had made offerings to it” (2 Kings 18:4). The item that God used in one generation as His instrument of deliverance had become an object of worship in another generation. The people had forgotten God as the true deliverer and, as we are common to do, substituted an idol in His place.

Jesus, as He planned to go to the cross, would not become just one more “thing” for the history books. His body hanging upon the cross is not a relic for us to drag around or consider lightly. The bronze serpent offered temporary recovery. Everyone who was healed from the poison of the serpents still died eventually. Jesus was interested in a greater goal. Verse 15 tells us that everyone who believes in Jesus will gain eternal life.

“Whoever” is a powerful word (v. 15). With it, there are no exceptions. Every single person who believes in Jesus is included in the promise that follows. There are no other requirements. Morality, vocation, economics, and influence hold no importance. Rather, every person who will believe will be given eternal life. It was probably a shocking thought to Nicodemus. In the cool of that night, he was confronted with the idea that eternal life could be granted to the faithful Jewish priest and the pagan Roman ruler. Jesus was offering salvation to everyone, and that was revolutionary for Nicodemus.

It is likely revolutionary for all of us too. Many believe their sins are not to a level to exclude them from forgiveness. But that guy down the road who yells at his kids? Probably not him. Those people on the other side of town who are so different from “us”? Maybe them, if they’ll conform to our way of life. The people on the other side of the world? Not much hope for them. Or so we think. Jesus declared that everyone—without exception—who believes in Him will be granted eternal life.

There is another perspective that we sometimes hold. It is about ourselves. We’ve met us. I get up in the morning and look in the mirror. What I see does not seem redeemable. It is not recoverable. After what I’ve done, is it possible that Jesus could include me in the “whoever”? The answer is a resounding yes. No matter your sin, your doubt, or your pain, God will grant you eternal life if you will look to the exalted Christ and believe.

The last phrase of this statement is that the believer in the exalted Son of Man will be granted “eternal life.” In His high priestly prayer, Jesus defined eternal life this way: “And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3). As Christians, we are given an eternal relationship with the God who provides the payment for sin Himself—Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The God who wants to save us and be known by us is the One who sent His willing Son to be hung like a snake upon a pole.



What sinful behavior might cause you to question God’s wisdom in giving eternal life to “everyone” who believes in Jesus?



How can we fight against this tendency toward favoritism?

3. The bronze serpent points to the foundation for mission (2 Cor. 5:20-21).

²⁰ Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

An ambassador’s role is straightforward. You represent a powerful ruler. The ambassador does not speak his own message but that of his king. He does not act on his own power but acts in the power of the kingdom where he is a citizen. Christians are called to this same work. We represent the King of glory, speak His message, and act on behalf of His kingdom. It is a right, a privilege, and a wonderful blessing.



What is the relationship between Christ’s becoming sin for us (v. 21) and our mission to plead with others to be reconciled to God (v. 20)?

99 Essential Christian Doctrines

36. Sin as Transgression

The word *transgression* means “to cross over” or “to pass by” and is often used in reference to transgressing God’s explicit commands. When God gives a specific command, as He did with Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, and when that command is disobeyed, transgression has taken place (Rom. 5:14; 1 Tim. 2:14). In this sense, sin is law-breaking.

Paul taught that the One who is completely perfect—our Savior Jesus—became sin on our behalf. In order to pay for our sin, Jesus allowed Himself to be overtaken by the weight and judgment of sin. He did this seemingly impossible work so that you and I can be reconciled to God. By His work, an exchange is made. Jesus exchanged His goodness for our wretchedness. By our faith in Him, we exchange our sin for His righteousness. Neither party deserves what they receive, but we benefit by God’s great work for us.

Whenever a Christian says to a friend or enemy, “Be reconciled to God,” it is so much more than what they could imagine. We are inviting the lost to be found. The dying to be saved. The sinner to be made righteous by the very character of God.



What does Christ’s becoming sin for us communicate about His character and love?

Conclusion

Jesus took on the weight of sin so that those of us who are nothing but sin could take on the glory of righteousness. The work that sin brings in our lives is a burden that requires God’s eternal punishment. But Jesus has taken it all for us. His death in our place on the cross shows a love that is more than mere sentimentality. It is the decision to bear shame, undergo judgment, and pay all the penalty.

With that thought, we are compelled by the love of Christ to work in His mission. He has done everything necessary for sinners to be cleansed. From the worst human being in history to the one we think the most moral—all need the salvation offered by Christ. As His people, we can and must declare it, live it, and converse about it at every turn.

CHRIST CONNECTION: Just as the Israelites looked upon the bronze serpent lifted high on the pole and were healed, so also we look with faith upon Jesus Christ lifted high on the cross and are saved from the punishment of our sin.

HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: Because Christ has become sin for us, God calls us to plead with others to look upon the cross and receive spiritual healing.

1. How should we respond to the disastrous consequences of sin that we find in ourselves? In our community? In our world?

2. How should our evangelistic efforts be impacted by the truth that everyone who believes in Jesus will be saved?

3. What are some opportunities in which you can plead with others to “be reconciled to God” through Jesus Christ?

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