

The Bronze Serpent

Scripture Reading:

Genesis 3:14,15 (NIV)

¹⁵... he will crush your head,
and you will strike his heel.”

John 3:13-15 (ESV)

¹⁴ ...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.

As Moses lifted up the serpent..., so must the Son of Man be lifted up

Introduction

Jim mentioned in one of his sermons a while back that there was a connection between the bronze serpent that God, in the Old Testament, told Moses to make and hang on a tree and Jesus on the cross, in the New Testament. He identified it as a "type, anti-type" or as I like to say, a "shadow, substance/reality" relationship using Paul's words from

Colossians 2:17 (ESV) — *talking about things from the old testament, he says:*

¹⁷ These are **a shadow** of the things to come, but **the substance** belongs to Christ.

You might be surprised to learn that that wasn't Jim's idea or Paul's, for that matter. The person in the Bible who makes the connection between the bronze serpent and the Son of Man is none other than Jesus Himself.

The Lesson

Let's begin by looking at the Historical Background of the Fiery Serpent

In the last year of Israel's 40 years of wilderness wanderings, Miriam & then Aaron will die. After a month of mourning for Aaron, the Israelites set out on a series of military victories. This will bring them out of the wilderness and into the territory of Moab...

It won't be long before they begin to prepare for the conquest of the promised land. It is during these military victories and before the conquest begins that the account of the bronze serpent occurs. The account picks up just after the Israelites have defeated The king of Arad, a Canaanite.

From the account

Numbers 21:4-6 (ESV)

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.

Why were the people being bitten by fiery serpents?

Was it their impatience? Perhaps their impatience set them up to sin.

Was it because they spoke against God (and Moses)? Perhaps God doesn't like murmuring!

God sent fiery serpents (i.e. poisonous) to kill those who sinned... and "*MANY PEOPLE OF ISRAEL DIED.*"

CONTINUING in Numbers 21:7-9 (ESV)

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, at least the people recognized they sinned!

What is their solution to their sin? Ask Moses to intercede.

So Moses prayed for the people.

What is God's solution?

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.

God's solution is: A (i.e. one) fiery serpent on a pole.

Is This What You Expected?

A fiery serpent on a pole to look at?

Wouldn't one of the sacrifices in the law of Moses be sufficient for the forgiveness of their sins?

They confessed their sin to Moses & God. Certainly they show that they're willing to repent of their sin.

Notice: God doesn't use the law of Moses to save them! Why? Why does God implement something outside the law of Moses, the law which He gave them to deal with their sin, why does He implement something... else to save them?

Before we look more into this, I'd like to ask the question: So What?

Why is this story in the Bible? Why is it even significant?

It MUST be significant because Jesus Himself makes the connection! He says in:

John 3:13-15 — in a conversation with Nicodemus

¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 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.

There are so many lessons here...

- Jesus says He (the Son of Man being lifted up (on the cross)), is like Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness — we could look at that comparison, there **is** a comparison to make, Jesus said so.
- We could look at the statement: "*whoever believes in him **may** have eternal life.*" — If we were a denomination, we might make that argument and conclude, incorrectly, believing *only* or believing *alone* is all that is needed to be saved. No where in the Bible does it ever say *faith only*, **NO WHERE**, except in Bible commentary supplements! Commentary is **NOT** the Bible. There is **only** one place in the Bible where the words *faith* and *alone* occur together... And that is in the book of James, it's the **ONLY** place and it reads in:

James 2:24 (ESV)

²⁴ You see that a person is justified by works and **not** by faith alone.

The only place that talks about *faith alone* says we are **not** justified by *faith alone*.

But also notice the word "**may**" back here in John 3:15, where it says, "*whoever believes **may** have eternal life.*" The word "**may**" is defined as **expressing a possibility, (ie not a certainty)** or **expressing permission, (that you have permission to enter, is not entering, it's an allowance to enter)** or the word "**may**" can also mean **expressing a wish or hope (these are terms of less probability than expressing a possibility)**. In other words, "*whoever believes, possibly, has permission to, maybe, enter the kingdom.*" But believing **isn't** entering the kingdom, believing is **necessary to be permitted** to enter the kingdom. You **must be born** into the kingdom. Under Moses they had to look upon the serpent. What if they couldn't see it. Moses made one serpent, by the way, there were over a million Israelites, do you think it may have been difficult (not impossible, but difficult) to have the opportunity in a crowd of over a million frantic people worried about being saved to look upon the one serpent? The Israelites asked Moses to pray for them which he did, but the answer from God wasn't "*pray the serpent into your heart!*" It was:

Numbers 21:8,9

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. It required faith to **do the action** of the command "*look at the bronze serpent and live.*"

- We could look at the context of Jesus statement and see that just before this statement in John 3, he said in verse 3: *"unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."* — we could look at what it means to be *"born again."* Isn't it interesting that to become an israelite you had to be born into this world by Israelite parents... you had to be born into Israel. And Jesus says that to enter His kingdom you have to be born again, we must be born into his kingdom... Interesting.
- We could look at the association of those who were saved from their sins by *"looking"* on the serpent and those saved from their sins who *"believes in him..."* — in fact, if we were doing a typical church of Christ sermon we would make the case for baptism here (it's definitely here).

But we're not going to do that today. My Question Is:

Why did God use a serpent hung on a tree to represent Christ on the cross?

Why a serpent?

Learning, from Jesus, that there is a correlation between the serpent on the pole and Christ on the cross, we have to ask... why a serpent?

We can understand a lamb... Jesus, the lamb of God, who takes away sin. That's the sacrifice, it's in the law... but what about a serpent? **It** isn't in the law to offer a serpent. And yet, the comparison made between Moses' bronze serpent & Christ is a pole & a cross. That is, the killing of the serpent hung on a pole, Christ put to death on a cross.

As a side note, just speculation here, when God told Moses to make a serpent, He *didn't* say: *"Make a bronze serpent"*. He said make a *"fiery serpent."* And Moses made a **bronze** serpent. Let me suggest something here... if you're around my age, you may remember from your childhood that people used to take their children's baby shoes and have them bronzed. They didn't cast shoes out of bronze, they took already existing baby shoes and dipped them in bronze to preserve them. What if, when Moses was told to make a fiery serpent, he took an actual fiery serpent, killed it and bronzed it. And hung that bronzed serpent on a pole. So possibly you have this actual bronzed serpent hung on a pole. Just a thought.

So the question again is: Why a serpent? What is significant about a serpent, what does it represent?

If you looked this topic up on the internet, which I did, you would find that other people also wondered why God had Moses make a serpent and hang it on a pole. One person suggested that the serpent wasn't in any way associated with the serpent in the garden that tempted Eve, but that the serpent was a direct representation of their sin.

This somewhat works in the comparison of the serpent on a pole and Jesus on the cross. With Jesus crucifixion, our sin is nailed to the cross. Paul says in,

Colossians 2:11-15 (ESV)

¹¹ *In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, ¹² **having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith** in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. ¹³ And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses,*

By the way, this is a description, right here, of being born again. Being **raised with him, in baptism, through faith...** (That's **the FAITH** that saves! In baptism) **God made [you] alive together with Jesus, having forgiven us all our [sins]** When? Verse 12, having been buried with him in baptism, forgiving us our sins!

¹⁴ *by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.* ¹⁵ *He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.*

When Jesus is crucified, God nailed *the law* to the cross. He **killed** the law, which means the law is dead, it no longer exists. And as Paul tells us in Romans 4:15 & 5:13, "... *where there is no law there is no transgression.*" There is no sin. With no law, sin is dead. In other words: If you kill the law (by nailing it to the cross), you have also killed sin.

This makes sense of these passages

Galatians 3:13,14 (ESV)

¹³ *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"—* ¹⁴ *so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.*

And Romans 8:1-4 (ESV)

¹ There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ² For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. ³ For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the **likeness of sinful flesh and for sin**, he **condemned sin** in the flesh, ⁴ in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

He condemned sin! The definition of condemn is to punish, *usually* by death. To condemn sin is to kill sin, it's dead.

So the serpent on the pole & Christ on the cross show the condemnation of sin, i.e. how sin is killed, put to death.

That's one idea, I like it. But, there is also another interesting idea here. We'll look at it and then close our lesson.

What else can the serpent represent?

We should not dismiss the correlation of the serpent to Satan. Moses' serpent obviously wasn't the serpent from the garden. But the serpent in the garden wasn't just a serpent, but Satan speaking through the serpent. That Satan is referred to as, not just **A** serpent, but **THAT** serpent is seen in:

Revelation 12:7-9 (NIV) — it reads

⁷ *Then war broke out in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back.* ⁸ *But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven.* ⁹ *The great dragon was hurled down—**that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray.** He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.*

Revelation 20:1-3 (NIV)

¹ And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. ² He seized **the** dragon, **that ancient serpent**, who is **the devil**, or **Satan**, and bound him for a thousand years.

If the serpent on the pole is also a representation of Satan then we are getting a foreshadowing of the destruction or vanquishing of Satan.

In Genesis we are told:

Genesis 3:14,15 (NIV)

¹⁴ So the LORD God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this,
“Cursed are you above all livestock
and all wild animals!
You will crawl on your belly
and you will eat dust
all the days of your life.

¹⁵ And I will put enmity
between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
he will crush your head,
and you will strike his heel.”

God prophesies here that in the battle between the seed of the serpent and the seed of woman, the seed of woman will be injured, but the seed of the serpent will receive a **fatal** wound.

That Satan studies the scripture to see how this might occur is seen when he tempts Jesus in the wilderness.

Matthew 4:5-7 (NIV)

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. ⁶ “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down. For it is written:
“He will command his angels concerning you,
and they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.”

⁷ Jesus answered him, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

Satan quotes scripture from Psalm 91 to Jesus. Keep in mind that Satan is a complex being, one metaphor is not enough to describe him. Peter tells us in:

1 Peter 5:8 (NIV)

⁸ Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy **the devil** prowls around like **a roaring lion** looking for someone to devour.

Satan is seen as a serpent and a lion. Now let’s look at the passage Satan excerpted to use to tempt Jesus and see what he left out.

Psalms 91:11,12 (NIV)

¹¹ *For he will command his angels concerning you*

to guard you in all your ways;

¹² *they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.*

That's what he quoted to Jesus... but look at **the very next verse in Psalm 91! It says in verse 13...**

¹³ *You will **tread** on the lion and the cobra;*

*you will **trample** the great lion and the serpent.*

This verse is a prophecy of how Satan will be vanquished... So how will Satan be vanquished? If we combine Psalm 91:13 with Genesis 3:15 "... *he shall crush your head and you shall bruise his heel*" we get the seed bruises his heel **stomping** and **crushing** the head of the serpent.

When does that occur?... on the cross, Jesus is bruised but rises from the dead and destroys Satan as the Hebrew writer tells us:

Hebrews 2:14,15 (ESV)

¹⁴ *Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that **through death** he might **destroy the one** who [had*] the power of death, that is, **the devil**,¹⁵ and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.*

* had: ASV, NASB, KJV, NKJV, WEB; has: ESV; holds: NIV

The serpent on the pole **foreshadows**,

- the law, nailed to the cross,
- our sins, nailed to the cross,
- Satan, destroyed, nailed to the cross, **THAT** serpent hung on a pole!

Jesus' death on the cross ACHIEVES all this! Isn't that amazing! Our God is awesome!

Conclusion

And this action, Christ's death on the cross, shows us how we are born into the kingdom.

By obeying the type doctrine presented in Romans 6,

- Being baptized into Jesus' death, we are crucified with him, anyone who has died is freed from sin, that sin is nailed to the cross.
- And believing that through baptism we participate in his resurrection, being born into his kingdom, being born again of water and of spirit we may receive eternal life.

Invitation

We are extending the invitation, now, to anyone who is subject to it. Come,... while we stand and sing.