

September 30th SNAKE ON A POLE PART 1

"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. 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.'" Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. 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. 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.'" 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." (Numbers 21:4–9, ESV)

NUMBERS 21:4-9

"Snakes, why does it have to be snakes?" So says the fictional Indiana Jones as he falls into a pit that is covered with snakes. You may have the same attitude towards snakes. I don't particularly like them either. It's not just our culture that has a negative view of snakes though. It also appears in the Hebrews' generation. In fact, the sin of Adam and Eve in the garden has "the serpent" playing a central role in Satan's plan to trick his children. Here in Numbers 21, we have six verses that bring another serpent. You may recognize that Jesus uses this event as a preview of what will happen to Him on the cross. We will discuss that shortly. But first, we must look deeper into why a snake was used in the first place. What is God doing here in this encounter with his grumbling people?

Ronald B. Allen, in his commentary on Numbers, makes strong comments to understand the odd use of a snake on a pole here. First, he reminds us that God has specifically told the people not to make images. They may not have used the image as a help for worship in Numbers 21, but Allen rightly points to King Hezekiah dashing the bronze serpent to pieces in I Kings 18 because God's people have begun giving offerings to the bronze snake. Second, snakes are "feared and detested by most people in a wide variety of cultures. To put something that you fear and detest on a pole is a very strange thing to do." Thirdly, "snakes are frequently associated with Satan in Biblical literature." Allen compares this taboo action of Moses and the snake with what God called Peter to do in Acts 10. Cornelius was a Gentile man that was seeking God out. God tells Peter to kill and eat animals that had been forbidden to eat because of their uncleanness. Yet, God is the one that declares something clean. Well, we haven't really answered the question yet of why God chooses a snake on a pole. There's an answer in the text that helps us.

Remember that snakes are feared and seen as despicable and wretched creatures. Well, the text shows us that this is exactly what they call the food that they received in the wilderness. Go back to the text again and see what they said: "For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this *worthless* food." That word worthless is the same concept of the ugly and worthless snake. Allen points out that looking at the detestable snake on a pole is the only way to save them from their judgment of condemning the "worthless" food that God has provided. Allen calls it "an extraordinary act of cultural shock." Only after we discover this truth can we walk to the story of the God Man who was lifted on a pole. Compare these two events like Jesus does. "Just as the serpent was lifted up in the wilderness must the Son of Man be lifted up." James Boice accurately sums up the absurd idea of the snake and the cross: "how can the crucifixion of one man two thousand years ago possibly be God's means of saving the world? To an unsaved person, this sounds ridiculous...". This is Paul's exact point in Corinthians 1 that the cross is foolishness to the dying, but those who are saved see it as the power of God.

Men, what is the point that God is driving at here? God saves! He saves in whatever way that He wants and uses His method of the snake/cross as a way to point away from our own cures to save. Think about it. As the people were bitten by the "fiery serpents" (most likely a play on words to what the poisonous venom did to their bloodstream) they would have tried whatever cures to help the

problem. But only God saves. Man's methods only bring more death. But God. God gives the shock of the serpent to point to another shocking event that would also save. All people had to do was look at the serpent. There wasn't a pray given. They simply looked to the serpent to believe God's Word that they would be saved if they did. In the same way, a prayer doesn't save someone. God can use a prayer to help someone verbalize what's going on in the heart, but the belief and trust is what saves. God brings what is detestable to shame human methods. He brings the focus on His ways, and His Son. Our God saves!

Spend some time thanking God for His plan to save His people. Ask Him for more of His grace to appreciate His saving work for you today.

For Further Reading: John 3:1-21