

# Like the serpent on the bronze pole

Numbers 21:1-9, John 3:1-17

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**Introduction:** Let's set the first scene for today's message: the Israelites have just turned their backs on their Egyptian slavery! They've been delivered, set free ... what a feeling of relief, rejoicing, triumph, at last! But now they face this huge daunting wilderness: a geographic area mentioned in the Hebrew Bible as lying between Elim and Mt. Sinai. The disappointments they would face in that wilderness would be enough to make them want to go back to their slavery: excruciating thirst, gnawing hunger, discomforts, moral failures, lack of faith, dashed expectations, the whole gamut of emotional stress and anxiety. One episode was rather like a classic case of bipolar syndrome: one day their fears overwhelm them as they're attacked by a Canaanite king, some are captured, these losses sink them in despair; they cry to the Lord, He gives them a dramatic victory, they feel like king of the mountain; then the going gets tough again as they trudge through the desert; discouraged, they begin to complain, and they suffer a frightening attack from serpents.

A lot of people are enamored of the new series about the life of Jesus called *The Chosen*. Its very human presentation of Jesus and His disciples, with its creative script, has a lot to recommend it. One episode from the first season focused on the story of Nicodemus (Jn. 3), but its opening scene was about Moses at the moment when he was making the bronze serpent to be placed on a pole. Its purpose was so that any Israelite bitten by one of the desert serpents could be healed and not die; but Moses' assistant Joshua is presented as a skeptic because he doesn't understand or see the reasoning behind what Moses is doing. That scene really piqued my curiosity ...

In the second scene the episode introduces Nicodemus, filling in the portrait with imaginative details, as the series does with many of the characters so that they won't seem like mere "stick figures." So Nicodemus is presented as a Pharisee advanced in age, a teacher of the law, but incapable of exorcizing the demons from Mary Magdalene when challenged to do so (an imagined addition to the Gospel accounts). Discovering himself to possess no true spiritual authority, Nicodemus recognizes what a failure he is. Yet when Jesus appears on the scene, at first very quietly and without calling attention to Himself, He also has an encounter with Mary that results in her amazing liberation, and when other miracles later take place that have no easy explanation, Nicodemus becomes eager to meet this young rabbi who has no official credentials. When he manages to get an interview (at night, hidden away from the multitudes), Nicodemus hears those now famous words about his **need to be born again**, and he struggles to understand how he can possibly start over and make such a new beginning when he has accumulated so many years and "baggage" and finds himself trapped in a traditional system that binds and determines his steps. What caught my attention about that well-known conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus was the comparison Jesus made, according to Jn. 3, between that serpent being lifted up by Moses on a pole and **Jesus' own being "lifted up"** on a cross.

So I began my investigation in Num. 21 (back to Scene 1), which begins with the capture of some of the Israelites by a Canaanite king and their desperate plea for deliverance, which God quickly provides by enabling them to win a great victory. But after this comes more trudging through the desert, where the Israelites begin to complain against God and criticize Moses, and this brings on the attack of the **“venomous serpents”** (v. 6; Heb., *nəhashim seraphim* = “fiery or deadly serpents”). Yahweh is pointed to as the one who “sent” the snakes, though I would call this the Hebrew linguistic pattern in which God is invoked as the ultimate cause of everything, but in fact Scripture often takes note of other moral agents at work in the world who oppose His will, and to whom we make ourselves vulnerable when we refuse to follow His lead. So it’s not like **God desired** these serpents for His people, but rather their rebellion carried them out from under His protective hand, where they fell into one of the many dangers abounding in the world. It’s the **law of sowing and reaping** at work here. But the point is, the people are desperate for a solution, and what Moses offers, following the Lord’s orders, seems really strange indeed. In **The Chosen** series, Joshua is shown as despairing more over the “solution” than over the problem: what sense did this make? No logic to it.

In Num. 21:8, God told Moses to make a serpent (Hebrew, “*saraph*”) and put it up on a pole. In similar fashion, the **medical profession lifts its rod of Asclepius** with an entwined serpent (or a caduceus, the staff of Hermes, with two intertwined serpents); both originate in Greek mythology, and in both cases the snakes appear to be alive. Since time immemorial, humans have had a strange fascination with snakes, since they seem to acquire a new existence as they shed their skin. Thus, humanity has related them with wisdom, rejuvenation, fertility, prosperity and health. The custom of venerating the serpent dates at least from the year 3000 B.C., when the star *Alpha Draconis*, of the Draco constellation (dragon = serpent with wings) was the North Star, and was believed to help determine human destiny. Around 1600 B.C., **Cretans** were worshiping the goddess Serpent attributing to it curative properties; the **Egyptians** also had their goddess Hator (reptiles were a symbol of wisdom, protection, and immortality for them; the Pharaohs used a representation of the royal cobra on their foreheads); **Buddhists** paid tribute to the cobra, **Babylonians** to the python, and even indigenous peoples of the Americas feared and honored different serpents. So this strange relationship of fascination and fear has existed in many cultures all down through history, which points to an ancient human experience common in our collective memory, certainly reinforced by the account in Gen. 3.

So the Israelites who were attacked by these desert serpents were instructed to **gaze at the snake on the pole** and they would be rescued from death. How did that work? Psychologist John Powell, in *Why Am I Afraid to Tell You Who I Am?*, writes of “the imprisoning fears and self-doubt” that cripple most of us and keep us from moving forward toward maturity and true love. He adds: “The fears we experience and the risk of honest self-communication seem so intense to us that we hide behind our roles and masks as a natural reflex, whereas when we stare into our fears we find the courage to overcome them.”

So (back to scene 2) Jesus used this story as suggesting something important about His mission of giving life: **“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up”** (Jn. 3:14; Greek, *hupsóo* = lift up or exalt). The same verb is used again in Jn. 8:28: **“When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know who I am, and that I do nothing on my own...”**; and in Jn. 12:32: **“Now the prince of this world will be driven out. And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.’ He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.”** In that context it was clear that everyone understood this word to be a reference to His death. To be “lifted up” back in the time of the Roman Empire meant to be “raised on a pole,” in other words, on a Roman cross.

When I made these connections, something occurred to me that I had never seen before, nor had I ever heard it preached, but it made so much sense deep in my soul: if Jesus was referring to His death with this comparison, then we should not understand Moses’ serpent on the pole to be like

those medical symbols – my visual reference point up to that time! As a child, I enjoyed hunting snakes with my neighborhood friends, and any snake we happened to catch and kill, we would parade it around in this same way: holding it up on a stick, because we had defeated the enemy – it was dead! So now what the Israelites did suddenly made sense: they fixed their eyes on a *dead* serpent, *defeated*; they contemplated that which brought them such fear and dread, but now they saw it as no longer powerful to destroy them, and *that* was what prompted them to faith for the needed healing and restoration. And of course, now **the parallelism with Jesus' death was obvious**: when we look with faith to the Crucified One, we see the awful truth of our sin, its enslaving and deadly effect on our lives, but now we also recognize its **impotence to destroy us because of Jesus' forgiveness**; we find ourselves rescued from the “deadly bite” of the ancient “Serpent” (because we have *all* received that bite and we are dying until we look with faith upon Jesus Christ). So this is a huge *contrast* with the snake on the rod of Asclepius, which is represented as alive (as are the two snakes on Hermes' staff). It's *not at all the same* symbolism!

Because there's another parallelism here that should not go unnoticed: it's precisely when Jesus is lifted up *there on the cross* that He gives the *coup de grâce* to the enemy that inflicted us with his poison; *and it's there* where the Serpent (the one who tripped us up in Eden) loses the definitive battle! Under those most favorable conditions for him, he was totally incapable of inflicting Jesus with the fatal bite, powerless to subject His soul to the kingdom of darkness. We often pass too lightly over what was happening in those hours when Jesus hung on the cross, so we don't recognize the enormous battle He was fighting there on our behalf: by refusing to submit to those principalities and powers of darkness, by spurning all their temptations (such as stooping to bitterness, resentment, self-pity, or vengeance), He was busy **slaying the Dragon**, destroying that old Serpent with the Breath of His mouth, so that when Jesus' body became incapable of supporting life, He could then enter the enemy's own lair, the empire of death (Heb. 2:14-15), but as not as just another defeated revolutionary, but as nothing less than the reigning victorious Champion! And there He spent the Sabbath shedding His light in that dark underworld, declaring His victory over our last enemy, awaiting Sunday morning to reveal the true dimensions of His triumph, because Jesus is no longer in that grave, nor is He on that cross: there's nothing there but a dead snake!

How I hope and pray you can understand the implications of this for your life, for our world! The deepest, darkest secrets of your soul no longer have the power to defeat you – in Jesus' name! The worst failure, the greatest sorrow, the fiercest agony – none of these has any reason to enslave you in depression or fear – in Jesus' name! Whatever way the enemy may try to trip you up – in your thinking, your circumstances, or relationships, He has no ammunition with which to accuse you any more; it has all been forgiven, in Jesus' name! Your enemy has nothing but lies and deceitfulness – so do not believe him! Look to the cross, and learn what it means to *lift Jesus up* in your heart and mind – over your family, your heartaches, trials, struggles, and circumstances, ... and discover the healing He can bring to your life!