

Numbers 21:9

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived.

Analysis

Moses' obedience to God's command creates one of the Old Testament's most powerful types of Christ's atoning work. The bronze serpent (Hebrew: 'nachash nechoshet', נָחַשׁ נְחֹשֶׁת) represents sin itself—the very thing killing the people—fashioned in bronze (a metal suggesting judgment) and lifted up for all to see. The simplicity of the cure is striking: 'when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived.' The verb 'beheld' (Hebrew: 'nabat', נָבַט) means more than casual glancing—it suggests intentional, faith-filled looking. Those bitten by serpents had to look in faith to God's appointed means of salvation; the bronze serpent possessed no magical properties but represented God's promise. The healing was immediate and complete—'he lived'—demonstrating salvation by grace through faith alone. Jesus explicitly connects this event to His crucifixion: 'And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life' (John 3:14-15). The bronze serpent beautifully illustrates:

1. sin's deadly nature
2. God's provision of a substitute
3. the simplicity of faith,
4. immediate salvation through looking to God's appointed means.

Historical Context

This miracle occurred during Israel's final approach to Canaan as they journeyed from Mount Hor around Edom's territory (Numbers 21:4). The people's impatient complaining against God and Moses (21:5) provoked judgment through 'fiery serpents' (21:6)—likely venomous snakes whose bites caused burning inflammation. The Hebrew 'seraphim' (שָׁרָפִים) can mean 'burning ones,' the same word used for angelic beings in Isaiah 6:2. Many died before the people confessed sin and asked Moses to intercede (21:7). God's prescribed cure—looking at a bronze serpent lifted on a pole—must have seemed strange, but obedience brought healing. Centuries later, this bronze serpent became an idol that King Hezekiah had to destroy (2 Kings 18:4), showing how easily God's gifts become idols when we worship the means rather than the Giver. The bronze serpent incident became a central type of Christ's atonement throughout Christian history.

Related Passages

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Psalm 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Study Questions

1. How does the requirement to 'look and live' illustrate salvation by faith alone without works?
2. What does it mean that Christ became 'sin for us' (2 Corinthians 5:21) like the serpent representing sin?
3. Why is it significant that healing required looking at the very image of what was killing them?
4. How does the simplicity of the cure challenge our tendency to complicate the gospel?

5. In what ways might we be tempted to make an idol of the bronze serpent—valuing religious means over God Himself?

Interlinear Text

בְּ ס	עַל	וַיִּשְׂמַח הָוּ	הַבְּחִנָּת	בְּנֵי שָׂעֵר	מִשְׁאָה	וְיַעֲשֵׂה
made	And Moses	a serpent	of brass	and put	H5921	it upon a pole
H6213	H4872	H5175	H5178	H7760		H5251

אֵל וְהַבִּיט אֲשֶׁר אָתָּה נִמְשָׁךְ גַּם שְׁנִית הַמִּשְׁנֶה אֲמִת הַמִּשְׁנֶה וְיִפְנֵי הַמִּשְׁנֶה H1961 H518 **had bitten** a serpent H853 any man when he beheld H413 H5391 H5175 H376 H5027

בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל נָבָת שְׁמַנְיָה a serpent of brass he lived H5175 H5178 H2425

Additional Cross-References

Hebrews 12:2 (Parallel theme): Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.

John 6:40 (Parallel theme): And this is the will of him that sent me, that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day.

2 Kings 18:4 (Creation): He removed the high places, and brake the images, and cut down the groves, and brake in pieces the brasen serpent that Moses had made: for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it: and he called it Nehushtan.

John 12:32 (Parallel theme): And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me.

Isaiah 45:22 (Parallel theme): Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else.

Romans 8:3 (Parallel theme): For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh:

Romans 1:17 (Parallel theme): For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.

2 Corinthians 5:21 (Creation): For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.

Zechariah 12:10 (Parallel theme): And I will pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the spirit of grace and of supplications: and they shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son, and shall be in bitterness for him, as one that is in bitterness for his firstborn.

1 John 3:8 (Parallel theme): He that committeth sin is of the devil; for the devil sinneth from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil.

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