

THE BRONZE SNAKE: A PICTURE OF UNBELIEF AND OF CHRIST THE SAVIOUR NUMBERS 21:04–09

Introduction

When facing a desperate crisis, people often make vows. They promise to do certain things if God will only deliver them through the crisis. The crisis may be created by...

- war
- accident
- unfaithfulness
- unwanted pregnancy
- abuse
- mismanagement by self or others
- financial problems
- drugs
- disease
- unemployment
- alcohol

Crises are serious matters to God. God expects us to fulfil the vows and promises we make during crises. But making vows is only one picture seen in the events of this Scripture. There are two others:

=> the picture of Christ the Saviour

=> the picture of God's protection and victory against the enemies that attack His dear people as they march to the promised land

This is a passage that speaks to the deepest needs of man, a passage that needs to be heeded by us all. This is: *The First Military Victories and the Bronze Snake: A Picture of Desperate Vows and of Christ the Saviour*, Numbers 21:1-9.

I. The first military victory: a picture of making and fulfilling vows (vv. 1-3).

II. The bronze snake: a picture of unbelief and of Christ the Saviour (vv. 4-9).

Numbers 21:04–09 The Bronze Snake: A Picture of Unbelief and of Christ the Saviour

The bronze snake is a picture of unbelief and of Christ the Saviour. Marching out in the wilderness was hard and difficult. At the end of each day, the people were bound to be tired, exhausted and bone-weary. This passage shows how fatigue and exhaustion got to the people, how they had become so bone-weary that they lapsed back into their grumbling and unbelief. They began once again to attack God and His dear servant. The Scripture and outline clearly paint the picture:

1. Note the tragic situation: the people had to bypass or detour around Edom. This was a long distance out of the way (vv. 4-5). Remember, Moses had sent two diplomatic letters to the king of Edom asking permission to pass through their land. The king had rejected the appeal and had even gone so far as to threaten attack against the Israelites. Therefore, Moses had to lead the people on a detour around the land of Edom. As stated, this was a long distance out of the way for the people to travel.
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Fatigue and exhaustion set in, and they grew impatient. They began to grumble and murmur against God and against Moses:

- => They asked why they had been led out of Egypt into the desert wilderness to die: there was no bread and no water in the desert wilderness.
- => They stated that they detested the “worthless manna.” Remember that the manna was the bread from heaven, the bread that God Himself had provided to feed the people through their wilderness wanderings. The word the people used to describe the “manna” was *ballehem haqqeloqel*. This means “contemptible, worthless bread”; it means miserable, wretched, despicable, cheap bread. It even has the idea of cursing the heavenly bread, the bread that had been provided by God Himself. (*The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*. Frank E. Gaebelin. Editor, p. 879). The people had constantly grumbled about God’s gracious provision during their 40 year wilderness wandering, but this time it was different. They actually stated that they detested the *manna*, and they cursed it. It was despicable, worthless, at best *junk food*. This time, the people had gone too far. God had no choice but to judge and chastise them and to do so severely.
- 2. Note the judgment, the chastisement of the Lord: He sent snakes among them, and many of them died (v. 6). They were “fiery serpents,” that is, *poisonous snakes*. The poison was obviously strong, very potent — the kind of venom that causes a horrible, agonizing death. This is indicated by the fact that many of the people subsequently died.
- 3. Note the confession and repentance of the people: they confessed their sin and asked Moses to pray for them, asking God to take away the snakes (v. 7). This Moses did. He was the servant of God, so he once again forgave them for their attacks against him and the Lord. As their minister, he loved them, so he again became their intercessor and mediator before God. No doubt, he begged God to forgive the sin of the people and to have mercy upon them.
- 4. Note the surprising answer of the Lord (v. 8): the Lord told Moses to make a replica of a snake and hang it on a high pole. Then God spelled out a condition for deliverance and healing: a person had to look at the snake hanging upon the pole. If he looked, he would be healed and would live.

This is one of the great symbols of Jesus Christ in the Scripture — His being hung upon the cross for the sins of the world. This is exactly what Christ Himself said:

John 3:14-16 “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up. That everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

5. Now, note the obedience of Moses: he hung a bronze snake on a pole just as instructed by God (v. 9).
6. The people were delivered, but only some. Only those who looked at the snake and believed the promise of God lived (v. 9). Keep in mind, this is a picture of deliverance by looking at (believing in) the cross of Jesus Christ (Jn. 3:14-15).

Thought 1. There are three significant lessons in this point for us.

- (1) Jesus Christ is the manna, the bread from heaven. God has given Jesus Christ to feed the souls of people. People hunger and crave for the food of purpose, meaning and significance in life. Christ and Christ alone can meet the hunger of the human soul. Jesus Christ is the Bread of Life.

Mat 6:33 *But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*

John 6:32-35 *Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it was my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." "Sir," they said, "from now on give us this bread." Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.*

John 6:48-51 *"I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life. I am the bread of life. Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."*

John 6:58 *This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your ancestors ate manna and died, but whoever feeds on this bread will live forever."*

Rev 2:7 *Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.*

Isa 55:2 *Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labour on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare.*

- (2) The Israelites cursed the bread of God which was a symbol of Jesus Christ. Any person who curses Jesus Christ will be judged by God, severely judged. Any person who looks upon Jesus Christ as contemptible, worthless, wretched — as being useless — is going to face the wrath of God, a judgment beyond comprehension.

John 3:36 *"Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him."*

Rom 1:18 *The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness.*

Rom 2:8 *But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger.*

Eph 5:1-6 *Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children. And live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person — such a man is an idolater — has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient.*

2 Th 1:7-8 *And give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.*

2 Pet 2:9 *If this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment, while continuing their punishment.*

2 Pet 3:7 *By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.*

Jude 1:14-15 *"See, the Lord is coming with thousands upon thousands of his holy ones to judge everyone, and to convict all the ungodly of all the ungodly acts they have done in the ungodly way, and of all the harsh words ungodly sinners have spoken against him."*

Rev 1:7 *Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen.*

Psa 2:12 *Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way, for his wrath can flare up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.*

(3) Jesus Christ has been lifted up as the Saviour of the world. God lifted up Christ just as the serpent was lifted up, as a symbol of deliverance. Any person who looks upon Christ and believes in Him will be delivered, that is, saved.

John 3:14-16 *"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up. That everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."*

John 5:24 *“Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life”*

John 11:25 *Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies.”*

John 12:46 *“I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness.”*

John 20:31 *But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*

Rom 10:9-10 *That if you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. ■*