

FIERY SERPENTS, BRONZE SERPENTS

Presented by

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Throughout the Bible, one of the most valuable lessons to be learned is the importance of obeying God. In the Old Testament, there is an interesting story about how God used snakes to punish people who stubbornly refused to do what He told them to do.

You probably remember the story of how Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, where they had been slaves for a long time. After leaving Egypt, the Israelites eventually came to a land known as Edom. They asked the king of Edom if they could pass through his country on their long journey, but he would not let them. So the Israelites went around the land of Edom instead of going through it. This made their journey somewhat longer than they had expected, and they began to complain to Moses about how he and God had treated them. They said: “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread” (Numbers 21:5). After everything the Lord had done for them, all they could do was gripe and complain.

When God heard the ugly things that the people had said to Moses, He decided to punish them. The Bible says: “So the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died” (Numbers 21:6). With snakes all around them, and thousands of Israelites dead, the people soon came to realize the terrible mistake they had made. They said to Moses: “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” (21:7). So Moses prayed for the people, and the Lord heard his prayer on their behalf. God then said to Moses: “Make a bronze serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live” (21:8). So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole in the midst of the camp. If people had been bitten by a fiery serpent and did not want to die, they were commanded to look at the bronze serpent high atop the pole in order to be healed.

Can you imagine how horrible it would have been to see all those deadly snakes as they slithered through the camp and began to bite everyone? (When the Bible calls them “fiery” serpents, it probably is talking about the burning effect of the poisonous venom as it worked its way through a person’s skin.) Can you imagine how terrible it would have been to see members of your family, or your friends, die from snake-bites? Let me ask you this: If you had been one of the Israelites who had been bitten by fiery serpents, and God told you that you could be saved from certain death by simply looking upon a bronze serpent sitting on top of a pole, wouldn’t you have rushed to the middle of the camp to gaze upon the serpent and be healed? Of course you would have!

Fortunately, God allowed the people to be saved by looking upon the bronze serpent Moses had made. But did simply **looking** at a metal snake on a pole actually heal the people? Of course not! The people were healed not by merely looking at the bronze statue, but also by their faith in God. As they once more began to believe in God and His Word, He saved them from physical death. But how do we know this?

In the New Testament, Jesus talked about this very story, and used it as a comparison to His own death by crucifixion to teach people how to be saved from spiritual death. In John 3:14-16, He said: “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” Did merely **looking** at Jesus on the cross save men from spiritual death? No, it did not. Those people were saved by their faith—faith that caused them to love God and His Son, but also to obey them as well. In Romans 16:26, Paul spoke of Christians who had shown “obedience to the faith.” In other words, they did not just **believe** in God; they also **obeyed** Him!

The Old Testament story about these two kinds of serpents—fiery and bronze—can teach us a lot. First, unlike the Israelites, we should not spend our brief time on this Earth griping and complaining. Instead, we should take time to realize how good God has been to us and, be thankful to Him for all the blessings He sends our way. Second, unlike the Israelites, we should not let our faith in God grow weak. Instead, we should study His Word daily, and pray to Him often, so that our faith will remain strong. Third, unlike the Israelites, we should not disobey God. Instead, we should spend every day obeying Him so that through our love we can exhibit what Paul called “the obedience of the faith.”

If we count our blessings, keep our faith strong, and obey God, then we—like the Israelites—can be saved from a terrible fate. By looking upon the bronze serpent and by having faith in God, the Israelites could be saved from **physical** death. Today, as we gaze upon the cross of Christ and have faith in Him, we can be saved from **spiritual** death. As we read about what happened to the Israelites, each one of us can say, “There, but for the grace of God, go I.” Let us therefore be grateful to our heavenly Father for the lessons we can learn from the Old Testament, and for the grace that God has extended to us as His children. Surely, without His mercy we would all be lost eternally.