The Bronze Serpent

Bible Stories Anthology — Numbers 21:4-9

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> **Romans 15:4** *For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.*

Why These Stories Were Written — Romans 15:4

Paul had just quoted a thousand-year-old psalm and applied it to Christ (Romans 15:3, quoting Psalm 69:9), and then he explained why he could: *whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning*. **Written aforetime** — the scriptures that already stood before this present age of grace opened at Pentecost: the record God gave through Moses, the prophets and the writings, along with the Gospel accounts of Christ's earthly ministry, which belong to that same time before Pentecost. (When Paul wrote these words, the scriptures he had in hand were the Hebrew scriptures; the Gospels had not yet been written down.) **Written for our learning** — "learning" is the Greek word for *teaching*, the very word rendered "doctrine" in 2 Timothy 3:16. These are not quaint tales; they are doctrine in narrative form. Adam, Ruth and David never knew us, but God did, and He had their lives recorded with us in mind — written *for* us, though not all of it written *to* us, which is why we read Israel's history as our instruction and not as our marching orders. **Through patience and comfort of the scriptures** — "patience" is literally *remaining under*, the staying power we gain from watching men and women stay under a load; "comfort" is a *calling alongside*, the strength God brings when He meets them there, which is why Paul calls Him "the God of patience and consolation" in the very next verse. **That we might have hope** — not a wish, but confident expectation: the return of Jesus Christ and everlasting life with Him. That is why these accounts exist, and it is how they should be read.

Look and Live

It is one of the shortest stories in the Bible — six verses — and one of the strangest.

Israel was nearly home. Forty years of wandering were almost over. Then, on one more long detour through the desert, the people lost heart and turned on God and Moses one more time. Poisonous snakes came into the camp. People were bitten, and people died.

When they begged Moses to pray, God did not take the snakes away. Instead He told Moses to do something no one would have guessed: make a snake of bronze and put it up on a pole. Anyone who was bitten could look at it and live.

No medicine. No ritual. No sacrifice to offer, no price to pay, no distance to walk. Just look.

Fifteen centuries later, a respected teacher named Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, and Jesus reached back to this story to tell him the heart of the gospel:

> **John 3:14** *And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up:*
> **John 3:15** *That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.*

The very next words are the best-known verse in the Bible: **"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son"** (John 3:16). Jesus chose this strange little story to explain why He had come.

The Setting

When. The fortieth year after the Exodus. Aaron had just died on Mount Hor **"in the fortieth year after the children of Israel were come out of the land of Egypt, in the first day of the fifth month"** (Numbers 33:38). The generation that had refused to enter Canaan at Kadesh had nearly all died in the wilderness. This was mostly their children — a new generation, about to cross the Jordan.

A hard year. Numbers 20 records a string of losses in quick succession:

- **Miriam died** at Kadesh (20:1) — the sister who had watched over the basket in the reeds and led the song at the sea.
- **Moses struck the rock** in anger instead of speaking to it, and God told him he would not lead Israel into the land (20:12).
- **Edom refused them passage.** Moses sent word, **"Thus saith thy brother Israel"** (20:14) — the Edomites were Esau's descendants, Jacob's twin. Israel promised to stay on the king's highway and pay for any water. Edom answered with an army (20:18-20). The old rivalry of Jacob and Esau was still alive.
- **Aaron died** on Mount Hor, and all Israel mourned him thirty days (20:28-29).
- **A Canaanite king attacked** from Arad and took prisoners; Israel fought back and won at Hormah (21:1-3).

Where. Because Edom would not let them through, Israel had to go **"by the way of the Red sea, to compass the land of Edom"** (21:4) — south down the Arabah, the long, hot rift valley that runs from the Dead Sea to the Gulf of Aqaba, then around the southern end of Edom's mountains and back north on the eastern side. After forty years, they were being sent the long way around once more, in some of the harshest country in the region.

The administration. The **Mosaic Law** administration. Israel had received the Law at Sinai nearly forty years earlier. They had the tabernacle, the priesthood, and the sacrifices. And yet the remedy God gave for the serpents' bite was none of these.

The Story, Told Faithfully

Discouraged by the Way

> **Numbers 21:4** *And they journeyed from mount Hor by the way of the Red sea, to compass the land of Edom: and the soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way.*

"The soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way." The Hebrew is literally *the soul of the people was short*: impatient, worn down, at the end of their endurance. It was not only that the road was hard. It was that they could see the promised land and were being led away from it.

Discouragement is not sin in itself. Every one of us has felt it. But discouragement that is not brought to God has a way of turning into something worse.

Speaking Against God

> **Numbers 21:5** *And the people spake against God, and against Moses, Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? for there is no bread, neither is there any water; and our soul loatheth this light bread.*

“The people spake against God, and against Moses.” This time the complaint went higher than before. At the sea, at Marah, and in the wilderness of Sin, they had grumbled against Moses and Aaron. Now they spoke directly against God.

“Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?” Forty years after the Exodus, the same accusation their parents had made at the Red Sea (Exodus 14:11). A new generation, the same old complaint.

“There is no bread, neither is there any water.” An exaggeration: God had fed them with manna every single morning for forty years. Stating things beyond the facts in anger is **hyperbole** — here the hyperbole of ingratitude.

“And our soul loatheth this light bread.” Here is the heart of it. “Light bread” is the Hebrew *qeloqel*, a contemptuous word meaning *worthless, miserable — this rubbish food*. They were speaking of the manna, the **“bread from heaven,”** the **“angels’ food”** (Psalm 78:24-25) that God had given them every morning of their lives. A generation earlier, their parents had said the same: **“there is nothing at all, beside this manna, before our eyes”** (Numbers 11:6). The gift had become a grievance.

As the previous story showed, the manna was a picture of Jesus Christ, **“the true bread from heaven”** (John 6:32). As this series understands it, despising the manna was despising what God gave from heaven to keep them alive.

The Fiery Serpents

> **Numbers 21:6** *And the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died.*

“The LORD sent fiery serpents among the people.” How should we read this?

The Arabah and the Sinai deserts are home to some of the most venomous snakes in the Middle East, including vipers whose bite causes burning pain, swelling and death. Moses later reminded Israel that God had led them **“through that great and terrible wilderness, wherein were fiery serpents, and scorpions, and drought”** (Deuteronomy 8:15). The serpents were part of that wilderness, and God had been protecting Israel from them for forty years.

The library’s study *God: Deliverer, Not Destroyer* notes that Hebrew often says God “sends” or “does” what He allows, the idiom of permission. It lists this very verse beside Paul’s own account of these events: **“Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents. Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer”** (1 Corinthians 10:9-10). Where Numbers says *the LORD sent*, Paul names *the destroyer*. As this series understands it, when Israel spoke against the God who protected them, He withdrew His hedge of protection, and the serpents of the wilderness came in.

“Fiery” is the Hebrew *saraph*, “burning” — probably describing the burning pain and inflammation of the bite. It is the same word as the **“seraphims”** Isaiah saw around God’s throne (Isaiah 6:2), the “burning ones.” Isaiah also speaks of **“the viper and fiery flying serpent”** of the southern desert (Isaiah 30:6), probably describing a snake that strikes like lightning.

“They bit the people; and much people of Israel died.” This was not a warning. People died.

“We Have Sinned”

> **Numbers 21:7** *Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD, and against thee; pray unto the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us. And Moses prayed for the people.*

“We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD, and against thee.” For the first time in this story the people told the truth about themselves. No excuse, no blame. Confession is agreeing with God about what we have done.

“Pray unto the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us. And Moses prayed for the people.” The same people who had just spoken against Moses now begged him to pray for them — and he did, without a word of reproach. Moses had spent forty years standing between God and this people as an intercessor.

The Remedy

> **Numbers 21:8** *And the LORD said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live.*
>
> **Numbers 21:9** *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.*

Notice what God did not do. The people asked God to take away the serpents. God did not. The snakes stayed; the bites kept coming. Instead, God provided a way for the bitten to live.

“Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole.” God told Moses to make a *saraph* — an image of the very thing that was killing them.

“Upon a pole.” The Hebrew *nes* is a standard, a banner, a signal pole — something raised high so that the whole camp could see it. The same word appears in Moses’ name for the altar after the victory over Amalek, **“Jehovah-nissi”** (Exodus 17:15), “the LORD my banner”, and in Isaiah’s prophecy of the Messiah as **“an ensign of the people”** to whom the Gentiles would seek (Isaiah 11:10).

“Every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live.” *Every one*. No one was excluded: not the loudest complainer, not the one who had spoken most bitterly against God. Any bitten person who looked would live.

“Moses made a serpent of brass.” “Brass” in the KJV means copper or bronze. The Hebrew has a sound-play here: *nachash*, serpent, and *nechosheth*, bronze — a *nachash nechosheth*, a bronze serpent. That is the figure **paronomasia**. The Arabah is copper country; ancient copper mines were worked at Timna, north of the Gulf of Aqaba, near Israel’s route. Archaeologists working at a shrine there in 1969 found a small copper snake — not Moses’ serpent, but evidence that copper serpents were a known object in that very region.

“When he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived.” “Beheld” is *nabat*, to look intently, to fix one’s gaze. The bitten man did not need to understand how it worked. He did not need to be strong enough to walk to it, or good enough to deserve it. He needed only to look, trusting God’s word that looking would save him.

Why would anyone refuse to look? Scripture does not say that some refused, but it is easy to imagine: pride; despair; the thought that it was foolish to expect a metal snake on a stick to heal a mortal wound; the attempt to treat the bite some other way. God's remedy is often too simple for human pride.

Was the bronze serpent magic? No. An ancient Jewish writing, the Wisdom of Solomon (not part of the Hebrew scriptures), put it well: the one who turned toward it "was not saved by the thing that he saw, but by thee, that art the Saviour of all" — Wisdom 16:7, speaking to God. The Mishnah, an early rabbinic collection, asks, *Could a serpent kill, or could a serpent give life?* — and answers that when Israel looked upward and set their hearts on their Father in heaven, they were healed (Rosh Hashanah 3:8). The power was God's; the look was faith in His word.

(The familiar medical symbol of a snake wound around a staff comes from the Greek god Asclepius, not from Moses. The two are sometimes confused.)

Why a Serpent?

It is surprising that God would tell Moses to make an image of a serpent at all. The serpent had been the deceiver in Eden, and God had cursed it: **"upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat"** (Genesis 3:14). And yet here the serpent is lifted up on a pole, and the sight of it brings life.

As this series understands it, the bronze serpent was the image of the very thing that was killing them, lifted up and made powerless — a serpent that could not bite. The curse itself was held up high on a pole for all to see, and looking at it in faith brought healing. That is exactly how Jesus used the story.

Seven Centuries Later: Nehushtan

The story of the bronze serpent has a sad ending.

> **2 Kings 18:4** *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.*

Israel kept the bronze serpent. For about seven hundred years it was preserved, probably as a memorial of God's mercy in the wilderness. But by the time of King Hezekiah, the people were burning incense to it. The thing God had used to save them had become an idol.

"He called it Nehushtan." The name means something like *a bronze thing*, *a piece of bronze*. Hezekiah was saying: *it is only a lump of metal.* And he broke it to pieces.

The lesson is plain. God's gifts are to point us to God, not to take His place. The bronze serpent never healed anyone by its own power; it was the look of faith toward God's promise that healed. When the people began to worship the object, it had to go. As this series understands it, the same danger remains wherever sacred objects — images, relics, even crosses — are treated as if they had power in themselves.

Where the Story Leads

To the Messiah

"Even so must the Son of man be lifted up." Jesus said it plainly to Nicodemus, a **"master of Israel"** (John 3:10) who knew the story of the bronze serpent well.

> **John 3:14** *And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up:*
>
> **John 3:15** *That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.*
>
> **John 3:16** *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*
>
> **John 3:17** *For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.*

The parallels are deliberate.

- **The people were dying from a bite they could not cure.** All mankind is under sin and death; **"The sting of death is sin"** (1 Corinthians 15:56).
- **God provided the remedy.** The people did not invent it. **"God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son."**
- **The remedy was lifted up on a pole.** Jesus was lifted up on the cross.
- **The remedy took the form of the curse.** The bronze serpent looked like what was killing them, yet had no venom. Jesus, who **"knew no sin,"** was **"made … to be sin for us"** (2 Corinthians 5:21). **"Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree"** (Galatians 3:13, quoting Deuteronomy 21:23).
- **Whoever looked lived. "Whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life."**
- **Every one.** No one bitten was turned away. **"Whosoever."**
- **The remedy did not remove the serpents; it overcame their bite.** Jesus did not take believers out of a world of sin and death; He conquered death itself.

"Lifted up" — the cross, the resurrection, and the ascension. The Greek word Jesus used, *hupsoō*, has a double meaning: *to lift up* and *to exalt*. In John's Gospel Jesus used it for His crucifixion: **"And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me. This he said, signifying what death he should die"** (John 12:32-33). But the apostles used the same word for His exaltation after the resurrection: **"This Jesus hath God raised up … Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted"** (Acts 2:32-33); **"Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour"** (Acts 5:31). Jesus was lifted up on the cross, raised from the dead, and lifted up to God's right hand. **"He humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him"** (Philippians 2:8-9).

"Must." Jesus said the Son of man *must* be lifted up. There was no other remedy. Just as God gave Israel one bronze serpent and no other cure, **"there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved"** (Acts 4:12).

The serpent's head. The very first promise of the Messiah said the woman's seed would **"bruise"** the serpent's head (Genesis 3:15). The old serpent is **"called the Devil, and Satan"** (Revelation 12:9). At the cross Jesus Christ did what Genesis promised: **"that through death he might destroy him that had the**

power of death, that is, the devil" (Hebrews 2:14). As this series understands it, the bronze serpent on the pole — a serpent defeated, lifted up, and harmless — was a picture of that victory.

To the Grace Administration

Salvation by looking — by grace through faith. The bitten Israelite contributed nothing to his cure but a look. **"For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast"** (Ephesians 2:8-9). **"If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved"** (Romans 10:9). The prophet's invitation still stands: **"Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth"** (Isaiah 45:22).

No condemnation. Every bitten person who looked lived — not most, not the deserving ones, all. **"There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus"** (Romans 8:1).

Death's sting removed. "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:55-57). The serpents still bit; but those who looked lived. Believers still die; but they will be raised.

Keep looking. The story began with people discouraged by the way. The answer for the discouraged is the same as the answer for the bitten: **"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. For consider him … lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds"** (Hebrews 12:2-3).

Written for our admonition. Paul used this very story as a warning to believers:

> **1 Corinthians 10:9** *Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents.*
>
> **1 Corinthians 10:10** *Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer.*
>
> **1 Corinthians 10:11** *Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come.*

"Neither let us tempt Christ." (Some ancient manuscripts read *the Lord* here.) To tempt God is to test His patience by complaining against His provision, as Israel despised the manna. **"Neither murmur ye."** Discouragement brought to God finds help; discouragement that turns to complaint against God opens the door to the destroyer.

Do not worship the means. Nehushtan warns us that the things God uses to bless us can become idols. The power is always God's; the focus is always Jesus Christ.

To the Topic of Discouragement and Complaint

- **Discouragement on the long road is normal;** what we do with it matters.
- **Complaint grows:** first against Moses, then against God, then against God's own gift.
- **Ingratitude forgets daily mercies** — forty years of manna became "this light bread."
- **Honest confession** is the turning point: "We have sinned."

- **God's remedy is simple,** often too simple for pride.
- **God may not remove the trouble,** but He provides life in the midst of it.

The Main Takeaway

When Israel, discouraged on the long road, spoke against God and despised the bread He gave them, deadly serpents came among them; when they confessed, God did not take the serpents away but told Moses to lift up a bronze serpent on a pole, so that everyone who was bitten could look and live; Jesus said that in the same way He must be lifted up — on the cross, and then to God's right hand — so that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

- **Sin bites, and its end is death.**
- **God provides the only remedy.**
- **The remedy is received by looking in faith,** not by works.
- **Whosoever looks, lives.**
- **Keep looking to Jesus,** especially when discouraged.
- **Worship the Giver,** never the thing He used.

For Our Learning — The People

- **Moses.** Nearing the end of his life; interceded for the people who spoke against him and lifted up the bronze serpent.
- **The children of Israel.** A new generation near the end of forty years, discouraged by the detour around Edom.
- **Aaron and Miriam.** Both died in the months just before this story.
- **The king of Edom.** Refused Israel passage, forcing the long way round.
- **Hezekiah.** King of Judah seven centuries later, who broke the bronze serpent when it had become an idol.
- **Nicodemus.** The Pharisee and teacher to whom Jesus explained that the Son of man must be lifted up.

For Our Learning — Customs and Orientalisms

- **The king's highway** — the ancient trade route through Edom and Moab.
- **Asking passage** through another nation's land and offering to pay for water.
- **Mourning thirty days** for a leader.
- **The standard or banner pole (*nes*)** raised high as a rallying signal for a camp or army.
- **Copper working** in the Arabah, one of the oldest mining regions in the world.
- **Burning incense** as an act of worship — which made the bronze serpent an idol.
- **Naming something to show contempt** — "Nehushtan," just a piece of bronze.

For Our Learning — Figures of Speech

A figure of speech is a deliberate departure from the plain, ordinary way of saying something, used by God to add emphasis and feeling. These are the ones in this story:

- **Idiom** — "the soul of the people was much discouraged," literally *short* (21:4): impatient, worn out.
- **Hyperbole** — "there is no bread, neither is there any water" (21:5), from people fed daily for forty years.
- **Idiom of permission** — "the LORD sent fiery serpents" (21:6), where Paul names "the destroyer" (1 Corinthians 10:10), as this series understands it.
- **Paronomasia** — *nachash nechosheth*, "serpent of bronze" (21:9).
- **Simile (comparison)** — "as Moses lifted up the serpent … even so must the Son of man be lifted up" (John 3:14).
- **Amphibology (double meaning)** — "lifted up" (*hupsoō*), meaning both crucified and exalted (John 3:14; 12:32; Acts 2:33).

What the Bible Actually Says

- **The people spoke against God and despised the manna.**
- **Paul names the destroyer** in his account of the deaths (1 Corinthians 10:9-10).
- **God did not take the serpents away;** He provided a remedy.
- **Everyone bitten who looked, lived.**
- **The remedy was an image of the very thing killing them.**
- **The bronze serpent later became an idol** and was destroyed by Hezekiah.
- **Jesus applied the story to Himself:** "even so must the Son of man be lifted up."
- **"Lifted up" means both crucified and exalted.**

God's Will and Intent

- **God wants His people to live,** not die.
- **God provides the remedy** that man cannot.
- **God saves by grace through faith** — a look, not a work.
- **God's offer is to every one,** without exception.
- **God wants His gifts received with gratitude,** not despised.
- **God alone is to be worshipped,** never the means He uses.
- **God gave His Son** to be lifted up on the cross, raised from the dead, and exalted to His right hand.