

Thought For The Week

Articles: [Moses' Bronze Serpent](#) - 300 words, 1700 words

Moses' Bronze Serpent

Scott Reynolds September 20, 2026

Sunday Morning Sermon

Jesus is the one who first tied the bronze serpent in the wilderness to His own death. In a conversation with Nicodemus He said that no one has ascended into heaven except He who descended from heaven, the Son of Man, and that as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life. The comparison is not a later preacher's invention, nor even first of all Paul's language of shadow and substance. It is the Lord's own word.

That does not make the image less strange. We understand a lamb. The Law already taught Israel to bring a sacrifice, and John would later point to Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. A serpent is another matter. The Law never called for a serpent to be offered. Yet in the last year of Israel's wilderness wanderings, after Miriam and Aaron had died and after Israel had begun to win victories on the way toward Moab, God chose that image. The question worth asking is not only what happened beside the road around Edom, but why God used a serpent on a pole to prepare the world to see Christ on a cross.

Type, Anti-Type, and Substance

Scripture already gives us language for this kind of correspondence. In Romans 5 Adam is called a type of Christ. In 1 Peter 3 baptism is an anti-type of the flood. Paul, in Colossians 2:17, prefers another pair of words: the things of the old covenant are a shadow of what was to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. Type and anti-type, shadow and substance, are not imported categories. They are the Bible's own way of saying that God wrote history so that earlier events would teach later ones.

The bronze serpent belongs in that line because Jesus placed it there. Once He has done so, the old story cannot be treated as a curiosity from Numbers. It becomes a window onto the cross, onto the killing of sin, onto the vanquishing of Satan, and onto the way a person is born into the kingdom.

Impatience, Murmuring, and Fiery Serpents

Numbers 21 sets the scene just after Israel defeated the Canaanite king of Arad. From Mount Hor the people set out by the way of the Red Sea to go around Edom. They became impatient. They spoke against God and against Moses. Why, they asked, have you brought us out of Egypt to die in this wilderness? There is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food. The "worthless food" was the manna and the quail God was giving them.

Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people. They bit the people, and many Israelites died. Impatience may have prepared the sin. Speaking against God and Moses was the sin itself. God does not treat murmuring as a small thing. He sent poisonous serpents, and death followed.

The people at least recognized what they had done. They came to Moses and confessed that they had sinned by speaking against the Lord and against him. They asked Moses to pray that the Lord would take the serpents away. Moses did pray. Their solution was intercession. God's solution was not what the Law would have led them to expect.

The Lord told Moses to make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole. Everyone who was bitten, when he saw it, would live. Moses made a bronze serpent, set it on a pole, and if a serpent bit anyone, that person would look at the bronze serpent and live. One serpent. One pole. A crowd of more than a million frantic people. Looking was not automatic, and it was not a slogan about praying the serpent into the heart. God commanded an act, and life was joined to that act.

Why not a sacrifice already written in the Law of Moses? They had confessed. They were willing to repent. The Law had been given to deal with sin. Yet God implemented something outside that Law in order to save them. The strangeness is the point. The remedy did not arise from Israel's sacrificial system. It arose from God's word in a moment of judgment, and Jesus later said that His own lifting up would be like that lifting up.

Looking, Believing, and Being Born Again

John 3 will not let the comparison float free of the rest of the conversation with Nicodemus. Just before Jesus speaks of the serpent, He says that unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. A person had to be born of Israelite parents to be an Israelite. Jesus says a person must be born again to enter His kingdom.

The sentence "whoever believes in Him may have eternal life" is therefore not a charter for believing only. Nowhere does Scripture teach salvation by faith alone except in the supplements of commentaries, and commentary is not the Bible. The only place the words "faith" and "alone" stand together in Scripture is James 2:24, and that verse says a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. The word "may" in John 3:15 itself speaks of possibility or permission, not of finished entrance. Believing is necessary. Believing is not the same thing as entering. One must be born into the kingdom.

Under Moses the bitten person had to look. Faith was not a substitute for the commanded look; faith did the looking. The same pattern holds when Jesus applies the story to Himself. The point is not that mental assent replaces obedience. The point is that God attaches life to the response He names.

Why a Serpent?

If Jesus has made the correlation, the remaining question is sharper: why a serpent? The visible correspondence is the pole and the cross, the hung serpent and the crucified Son of Man. God told Moses to make a fiery serpent, not, in so many words, a bronze one. Moses made it of bronze. It is only speculation to wonder whether he took an actual fiery serpent, killed it, and bronzed it the way later generations bronzed a child's first shoes, preserving what already existed rather than

casting a new object from metal. The thought is only a thought. It does, however, keep the object close to death. Something that killed was itself killed and lifted up, and those who looked lived.

One common suggestion is that the serpent stood for Israel's sin rather than for the serpent in the garden. That reading has some force. In the crucifixion our sin is nailed to the cross. Paul describes that work in Colossians 2:11-15. In Christ we were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with Him in baptism, in which we were also raised with Him through faith in the powerful working of God who raised Him from the dead. Those dead in trespasses God made alive together with Him, having forgiven all our trespasses, canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This He set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame by triumphing over them in Him.

That paragraph is also a description of new birth. We are raised with Him in baptism through faith, and that is the faith that saves: when we die with Him in baptism, we believe we will be raised with Him. Forgiveness is located where Paul locates it, in being buried with Christ. The legal record nailed to the cross is the Law. To nail something to a cross is to put it to death. The Law dies there. Romans 4:15 and 5:13 say that where there is no law there is no transgression. Kill the Law, and you have also killed sin.

Galatians 3:13-14 belongs to the same cluster. Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written, cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree, so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles and we might receive the promised Spirit through faith. Romans 8:1-4 adds that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. The law of the Spirit of life has set us free from the law of sin and death. God did what the Law, weakened by the flesh, could not do by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and, for sin, condemning sin in the flesh. To condemn is to punish, usually by death. To condemn sin is to kill it. The serpent on the pole and Christ on the cross show that killing.

That Ancient Serpent

The other association should not be dismissed. Moses' bronze serpent was not the creature in Eden. The creature in Eden, however, was not merely a snake. Satan spoke through it, and later Scripture calls him not only a serpent but that ancient serpent. Revelation 12:7-9 describes war in heaven, Michael and his angels against the dragon. The great dragon was hurled down, that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. Revelation 20:1-3 shows an angel seizing the dragon, that ancient serpent who is the devil or Satan, and binding him. If the serpent on the pole also represents Satan, then Numbers 21 already foreshadows his destruction.

Genesis 3:14-15 said so from the beginning. The serpent was cursed to crawl and eat dust. God put enmity between the serpent and the woman and between their offspring. He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel. The seed of the woman would be injured. The seed of the serpent would receive a fatal wound.

Satan studies that promise. In Matthew 4 he took Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple and quoted Psalm 91: throw yourself down, for it is written that He will command His angels concerning you, and they will lift you up so that you will not strike your foot against a stone. When the New Testament quotes the Old, the quoted passage should be read in its own context. Satan is too large for one metaphor. He is a serpent, and he is also the roaring lion of 1 Peter 5:8. What he quoted

from Psalm 91:11-12 is true as far as it goes. What he omitted is the next verse. Psalm 91:13 says that You will tread on the lion and the cobra; You will trample the great lion and the serpent.

Set that verse beside Genesis 3:15 and the picture is no longer vague. The bruised heel is the stomp that crushes the head. The place of that stomp is the cross. Jesus is wounded and rises. The wound is not fatal. Hebrews 2:14-15 says that through death He destroys the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and delivers those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. The serpent on the pole therefore gathers more than one meaning at once. It foreshadows the Law nailed to the cross, sin nailed to the cross, and Satan destroyed at the cross. Jesus' death accomplishes all three. That is not a small God.

Born of Water and Spirit

The same death shows how a person is born into the kingdom. Romans 6 teaches that those baptized into Jesus' death are crucified with Him. Anyone who has died is freed from sin, and that sin is nailed to the cross. The faith that saves is the faith that, in baptism, participates in His resurrection. That is birth of water and Spirit. That is entrance, not merely permission to stand at the door. Eternal life is promised along that path because Christ was lifted up, as the serpent was lifted up, and because God still attaches life to the look that obeys.

The wilderness generation had to turn their faces toward one pole in the middle of a dying camp. We are called to the Son of Man lifted up, to the death in which the Law is canceled, sin is condemned, and the ancient serpent's head is crushed. The invitation remains what it was when the sermon closed: come to that death and that life. Be buried with Him. Be raised with Him. Be born again.

[back to top](#)

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Sunday Morning Sermon

Jesus Himself joined Moses' bronze serpent to the cross. Speaking with Nicodemus, He said that as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life. The comparison is not a later homiletic flourish. It is the Lord's own word.

The story sits in Numbers 21, in Israel's last wilderness year. Impatient on the road around Edom, the people spoke against God and Moses and loathed the manna God gave them. The Lord sent fiery serpents. Many died. They confessed and asked Moses to pray. God did not answer with a sacrifice already written in the Law. He told Moses to make a fiery serpent, set it on a pole, and promise life to everyone who looked. One pole stood before more than a million people. Life was joined to the look God commanded. Faith was not a substitute for that look. Faith did the looking.

John 3 will not let the image float free of new birth. Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom. "Whoever believes" is not "faith alone." The only time Scripture joins those words is James 2:24, which denies justification by faith alone. Believing is necessary. Entering requires being born again.

Why a serpent, not a lamb? The pole answers the cross. Paul shows sin and the legal record nailed there (Colossians 2:11-15). Where the Law is put to death, transgression loses its claim (Romans 4:15; 5:13; 8:1-4; Galatians 3:13-14). The same image reaches further. Satan is that ancient serpent (Revelation 12; 20). Genesis 3:15 promised a crushed head and a bruised heel. Psalm 91:13, the verse Satan omitted when he tempted Jesus, says the Lord will trample the lion and the serpent. That stomp is the cross. Hebrews 2:14-15 says that through death He destroys the devil.

Romans 6 then shows the way in: baptized into His death, crucified with Him, raised with Him. That is birth of water and Spirit. Look to the One who was lifted up, and live.

[back to top](#)