

26-0920a - Detailed Summary

26-0920a - *Moses' Bronze Serpent*, Scott Reynolds

Bible Readers: John Kessler and Roger Raines

See the transcript: [Transcript HTML](#) - [Transcript PDF](#)

Moses' Bronze Serpent

Scripture Readings

1st Reading (0:04 - 0:42): John Kessler

Genesis 3:14-15: *John opened the service by greeting the congregation and announcing the first reading from Genesis chapter 3, verses 14 and 15. He read the Lord's words to the serpent after the fall: because the serpent had done this, it was cursed above all livestock and all wild animals. It would crawl on its belly and eat dust all the days of its life. God then declared that He would put enmity between the serpent and the woman, and between the serpent's offspring and hers. The woman's offspring would crush the serpent's head, and the serpent would strike his heel. John closed the reading with the customary statement that this is the word of the Lord.*

2nd Reading (0:47 - 2:09): Roger Raines

John 3:3-5,13-15: *Roger greeted the congregation and announced that he would read from the Gospel of John,*

continued

chapter 3, verses 5 through 7 and then verses 13 through 15. For context he first read verse 4, in which Nicodemus asked how a man could be born when he is old and whether he could enter a second time into his mother's womb. Jesus answered 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. Jesus told Nicodemus not to be amazed that he must be born again. Roger then moved to verse 13: no one has ascended into heaven except He who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that whoever believes in Him shall have eternal life. Roger stated that this concluded the reading.

Summary of Transcript (0:04 - 29:55), Preacher: Scott Reynolds

(2:14-3:57) Sermon Opening and the Language of Type and Shadow

Scott greeted the congregation and restated the central comparison: as Moses lifted up the serpent, so must the Son of Man be lifted up. He recalled that Jim, in an earlier sermon, had pointed out a connection between the bronze serpent God told Moses to make and hang on a tree and Jesus on the cross. Jim had identified that connection as type and anti-type, terms Scott said are biblical. Type appears in Romans chapter 5, where Adam is called a type of Christ; that English word renders the actual Greek term for type. In 1 Peter 3, Peter uses anti-type when he speaks of baptism as an anti-type of the flood. Paul prefers the language of shadow and substance. Scott quoted Colossians 2:17, where Paul says that Old Testament things are a shadow of the things that come, but the substance belongs to Christ. Scott added that this comparison was not originally their idea or even Paul's. The person in the Bible who explicitly connects the bronze serpent and the Son of Man is Jesus Himself.

(3:57-5:58) Historical Background in the Final Year of the Wilderness

Scott turned to the historical setting of the fiery serpents. The event took place in the last year of Israel's forty years of wilderness wanderings. In that final year Miriam, Moses' sister, and then

Aaron, Moses' brother, died. After a month of mourning for Aaron, the Israelites set out on a series of military victories that brought them out of the wilderness and into the territory of Moab. They would soon prepare for the conquest of the promised land. The bronze-serpent account occurs during those victories, after they left the wilderness and before the conquest began. The narrative picks up just after Israel defeated the Canaanite king of Arad, as recorded in Numbers 21:4-6. From Mount Hor they set out by the way of the Red Sea to go around Edom. The people became impatient on the way and spoke against God and against Moses. They asked why they had been brought out of Egypt to die in the wilderness, complained that there was no food and no water, and said they loathed "this worthless food." Scott reminded the congregation that the worthless food was the manna and quail God was giving them. Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people; they bit the people, and many Israelites died.

(5:58-8:28) The People's Confession and God's Unexpected Solution

Scott asked why the people were being bitten. Perhaps their impatience set them up to sin. Perhaps it was because they spoke against God and Moses, and God does not like murmuring. God sent poisonous fiery serpents to kill those who sinned, and many died. Continuing in Numbers 21:7-9, the people came to Moses, confessed that they had sinned by speaking against the Lord and against Moses, and asked him to pray that the Lord would take the serpents away. At least they recognized their sin. Their proposed solution was that Moses intercede. Moses did pray. God's solution, however, was different. 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. God's remedy was one fiery serpent on one pole. Scott asked whether that was what anyone would have expected. Would not one of the sacrifices of the Law of Moses have been sufficient for forgiveness? The people had confessed and shown willingness to repent, yet God did not use the Law of Moses to save them. Scott pressed the question: why did God implement something outside the Law He had given them to deal with their sins?

(8:28-10:04) Why the Story Matters and Jesus' Direct Comparison

Before going further, Scott asked "so what?" Why is this story in the Bible, and why is it significant? It must be significant, he said, because Jesus Himself makes the connection. In the conversation with Nicodemus already read from John 3:13-15, Jesus 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. Scott said there are many lessons here. Jesus Himself compares His being lifted up on the cross to Moses lifting up the serpent. That comparison can and should be examined because Jesus said it. In a roundabout way the sermon would look at that comparison. One could also examine the statement that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life. If they were a denomination, Scott said, they might incorrectly conclude that believing only, or believing alone, is all that is needed to be saved.

(10:04-12:09) Faith Alone, the Meaning of "May," and New Birth

Scott insisted that nowhere in the Bible does it ever say "faith only," except in Bible-commentary supplements, and commentary is not the Bible. The only place in Scripture where the words "faith" and "alone" occur together is James 2:24, which says that a person is justified by works and not by

faith alone. The only biblical occurrence of “faith alone” therefore denies that we are justified by faith alone. Scott then focused on the word “may” in John 3:15: “whoever believes may have eternal life.” “May” expresses possibility rather than certainty, or permission rather than actual entrance. It can also express a wish or hope, terms that carry even less probability than mere possibility. In other words, whoever believes possibly has permission perhaps to enter the kingdom, but believing is not itself entering the kingdom. Believing is necessary to be permitted to enter, yet one must be born into the kingdom. Under Moses the people had to look upon the serpent. Scott asked what happened if they could not see it. Moses made one serpent for more than a million Israelites. It may have been difficult, though not impossible, for a frantic crowd of over a million people worried about being saved to look upon that single serpent.

(12:09-14:32) Looking Required Faithful Action, Not a Heart Prayer

The Israelites asked Moses to pray for them, and he did, but God’s answer was not to pray the serpent into their hearts. The command in Numbers 21:8-9 was to make a fiery serpent, set it on a pole, and look at it in order to live. Looking required faith that expressed itself in the commanded action. Scott noted that the context of Jesus’ statement in John 3 includes the earlier words, also read that morning, that unless one is born he cannot enter the kingdom of God. One could therefore look at what it means to be born again. It is interesting, he said, that to become an Israelite a person had to be born into the world by Israelite parents, while Jesus says that to enter His kingdom a person must be born again into that kingdom. One could also look at the association between those saved from their sins by looking on the serpent and those saved from their sins who believe in Him. In fact, if they were doing a typical Church of Christ sermon they would make the case for baptism at this point, because it is definitely there. Scott stated that they were not going to do that in this sermon.

(14:33-16:51) Why a Serpent, and a Speculation About How It Was Made

Scott posed the question that would occupy the rest of the lesson: why did God use a serpent hung on a tree to represent Christ on the cross? Having learned from Jesus that there is a correlation between the serpent on the pole and Christ on the cross, the congregation still had to ask why a serpent. The Lamb is understandable, Scott said, because Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away sin, and that image is already in the Law as a sacrifice. A serpent is not. It is not in the Law to offer a serpent. The comparison Jesus made between Moses’ bronze serpent and Christ is the pole and the cross: the killing of the serpent hung on a pole and Jesus put to death on a cross. As a side note and as speculation only, Scott observed that when God told Moses to make a serpent, He did not say to make a bronze serpent. He said to make a fiery serpent, and Moses made a bronze one. Scott suggested that people of his generation may remember having children’s baby shoes bronzed. Those shoes were not cast from bronze; existing shoes were dipped in bronze to preserve them. What if, when Moses was told to make a fiery serpent, he took an actual fiery serpent, killed it, and then bronzed it, and hung that bronzed serpent on a pole? Possibly, then, an actual serpent, now bronze, hung on the pole. Scott called it only a thought and returned to the question: why a serpent, and what does the serpent represent?

(16:51-19:23) The Serpent as Sin Nailed to the Cross

Scott said that if one looked the topic up on the internet, as he had, one would find that others also wondered why God had Moses make a serpent and hang it on a pole. One person suggested that the

serpent was not associated with the serpent in the garden that tempted Eve, but was a direct representation of Israel's sin. That reading works somewhat in the comparison of the serpent on the pole and Jesus on the cross. With Jesus' crucifixion, our sin is nailed to the cross, a truth the congregation had sung about. Scott then read Colossians 2:11-15. In Christ they 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 they were also raised with Him through faith in the powerful working of God who raised Him from the dead. Those who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of their flesh God made alive together with Him, having forgiven all their trespasses. Scott paused to say that this passage is a description of being born again: being raised with Him in baptism through faith, and that is the faith that saves. When they die with Him in baptism, they believe they will be raised with Him in the resurrection of Jesus. God made them alive together with Jesus, having forgiven all their sins. When? Verse 12: having been buried with Him in baptism, forgiving their sins. Verse 14 adds that God canceled the record of debt that stood against them with its legal demands, that is, the Law. 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.

(19:23-21:42) Nailing the Law to the Cross and Putting Sin to Death

Scott concluded that when Jesus was crucified, God nailed the Law to the cross. He killed the Law. That is what nailing something to a cross means: it dies. The Law is therefore dead; it no longer exists. As Paul says in Romans 4:15 and 5:13, where there is no law there is no transgression. There is no sin. With no law, sin is dead. In other words, if you kill the Law by nailing it to the cross, you have also killed sin. That reading, Scott said, makes sense of Galatians 3:13-14: 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 so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith. He then read Romans 8:1-4. There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. The law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. God has done what the Law, weakened by the flesh, could not do, by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in those who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. He condemned sin. The definition of condemn, Scott said, is to punish, usually by death. To condemn sin is to kill sin. It is dead. Thus the serpent on the pole and Christ on the cross show the condemnation of sin, that is, how sin is killed or put to death. That is one idea, and Scott said he liked it.

(21:42-24:34) The Serpent as Satan and the First Gospel Promise

There is also another interesting idea, Scott said, which they would look at before closing. What else can the serpent represent? They should not dismiss the correlation of the serpent to Satan. Moses' serpent was obviously not the serpent from the garden. But the serpent in the garden was not just a serpent; Satan spoke through it. Satan is referred to not merely as a serpent but as that serpent. This is seen in Revelation 12:7-9. War broke out in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back, but he was not strong enough and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down, that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth and his angels with him. Revelation 20:1-3 likewise describes an angel coming out of heaven with the key to the abyss and a great chain, seizing the dragon, that ancient serpent who is the devil or Satan, and binding him for a thousand years. If the serpent on the pole is also a representation of Satan, then the account is a

foreshadowing of the destruction or vanquishing of Satan. Scott returned to the morning's other reading from Genesis 3. The Lord said to the serpent that because it had done this it was cursed above all livestock and wild animals, would crawl on its belly, and would eat dust all the days of its life. God would put enmity between the serpent and the woman and between their offspring. He will crush the serpent's head, and the serpent will strike his heel. God prophesied at the very beginning that in the battle between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman, the seed of the woman will be injured, but the seed of the serpent will receive a fatal wound.

(24:34-27:43) Satan's Wilderness Temptation and the Verse He Left Out

That Satan studies Scripture to see how this might occur is seen when he tempts Jesus in the wilderness. The first time Scott saw the connection, he said, his jaw dropped. In Matthew 4:5-7 the devil took Jesus to the holy city and had Him stand on the highest point of the temple. If you are the Son of God, he said, throw yourself down, for it is written that He will command His angels concerning you and they will lift you up in their hands so that you will not strike your foot against a stone. Jesus answered that it is also written, do not put the Lord God to the test. Satan quoted Psalm 91. Scott said that when Scripture is quoted in the New Testament, one ought to go back to the Old Testament and read the quotation in context. Satan is a complex being; one metaphor is not enough to describe him. Peter says in 1 Peter 5:8 to be alert and of sober mind, because your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Satan is therefore seen as both a serpent and a lion. Scott then examined what Satan left out. Psalm 91:11-12 says that He will command His angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands so that you will not strike your foot against a stone. That is what Satan quoted to Jesus, and he stopped. The very next verse, Psalm 91:13, says, you, again being Jesus, will tread on the lion and the cobra; you will trample the great lion and the serpent. That verse is a prophecy of how Satan will be vanquished. Combining Psalm 91:13 with Genesis 3:15, the seed bruises his heel while stomping on and crushing the head of the serpent.

(27:43-29:55) The Cross Destroys Satan, and the Invitation to Be Born Again

When does that crushing occur? On the cross. Jesus is bruised but rises from the dead. The wound is not fatal. And He destroys Satan, as the writer of Hebrews says in Hebrews 2:14 and 15. The serpent on the pole therefore foreshadows the Law nailed to the cross, our sins nailed to the cross, and Satan destroyed, nailed to the cross. That serpent on a pole points to all of this. Jesus' death on the cross achieves all of it. Scott said that is amazing, and that our God is awesome. Christ's death on the cross also shows how we are born into the kingdom: by obeying the teaching presented in Romans 6. Being baptized unto Jesus' death, we are crucified with Him. Anyone who has died is freed from sin, and that sin is nailed on the cross. Believing that through baptism we participate in His resurrection is the faith that saves us. We are born into His kingdom, born again of water and Spirit, that we may receive eternal life. That, Scott said, is a blessing. He then extended the invitation to anyone subject to it and called the congregation to stand and sing.