

The Brass Serpent

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Numbers 21:4-9: *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. 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 loathes this [worthless] bread. 6. And the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died. 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. 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 looks upon it, shall live. 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. [Hebrew meaning]*

This is the last leg of Israel's journey to the land of Canaan. Just prior to starting out, Eleazar was anointed high priest and Aaron died. Edom refused to let Israel pass through their land, and in compassing their territory, the way was much more difficult, and the people were discouraged, resulting in many Israelites complaining against God and Moses.

Discouraged, the way is difficult: Jesus said that his yoke was easy and his burden light (Mt 11:30), and yet the way is still difficult. Why is that? To Thomas' statement, "We know not the way", and Jesus answered, "I am the way." (Jn 14:5-6) "The way" was used often to describe the way of salvation (Acts 16:17), or, of the Lord and God (Act 18:25, 26). The unconverted Jews, however, referred to "the way" as heresy (Act 24:14) because it did not fit their preconceived ideas. It is no different today, as we are thoroughly indoctrinated with man's knowledge and ideas about God. Knowing the way is not just accepting that Jesus is that way. Moreover, it is knowing that he is the literal Son of God sent by our heavenly Father. It is knowing God's purpose in sending His only Son and the mechanics of the plan to save mankind. And finally, it is choosing to apply the principles revealed to us by God so that we destroy the subconscious lie that God is angry with us.

In our spiritual journey to the promised land there are many discouraging trials along the way. However, most trials come from dealing with SELF. The wilderness journey reminds me of a story I read about a group of people on a long journey with everything they owned loaded in wagons. As the way became more steep and rough, they had to unload the wagons to make them lighter, and finally they had to discard the wagons. Being of the flesh, we carry a lot of emotional baggage as well as confused ideas about the Father and Son. The difficulty comes when faced with new ideas that seem contrary to the way we understand, especially if it is a favorite church doctrine, or some worldly lust we enjoy. We must discard all the worldly baggage to reach perfection in Christ.

The Lord was always there to encourage the Israelites: **Dt 1:21:** *Behold, the Lord thy God hath set the land before thee: go up and possess it, as the Lord God of thy fathers hath said unto thee; fear not, neither be discouraged.* Often we are discouraged with trials, and sometimes complain, yet the trials are a blessing of God. When truth comes, trials come; but many will not accept the truth. Note Peter's admonition:

1 Pet 4:12-14: *12. Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: 13. But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy. 14. If ye be reproached for the name of*

Christ, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you: on their part he is evil spoken of, but on your part he is glorified. Peter may have been thinking of the fiery serpents when he mentioned times when we are tried. I know it is difficult during a trial, but we need to think often, that we are partaking of Christ's suffering, and it is by suffering we learn obedience (Heb 5:8-9). So, it comes to choice - We can be encouraged and rejoice that God cares enough to correct us, or, we can be evil complainers.

Despising the bread: Some said: *for there is no bread, neither is there any water* (Num 21:5), and yet God was literally and spiritually furnishing both. The KJ Bible states, *our soul loaths this light bread*, but the actual Hebrew would be better translated our soul loathes this despicable or worthless bread. It is a spiritual picture similar to not desiring the new wine because the old is better. There are many lessons in the manna story.

In Exodus is recorded God giving Israel the manna two weeks before they arrived at Mount Sinai. His instruction: *Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a certain rate every day, that I may prove them, whether they will walk in my law, or not.* (Ex 16:4) The phrase 'certain rate' is the Hebrew word *dabar*⁽¹⁶⁹⁷⁾, which literally is 'word', spoken or written, and translated at times as 'matter, thing, act'. Here is the literal translation that fits the spiritual meaning: Behold, I am raining bread from the heavens; and the people shall go out and gather a word of a day in its day. The KJ margin says "the portion of a day in his day." Like the manna, we are to gather truth a little at the time and apply it to the heart. When we are settled with the last portion, God will give the next. We must keep advancing, or else the corruption not eliminated will once again take over. **Lk 11:24-26:** 24. *"When the unclean spirit has gone out of a man, he passes through waterless places seeking rest; and finding none he says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.'* 25. *And when he comes he finds it swept and put in order.* 26. *Then he goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first."* (Revised Standard)

If the manna was given to test Israel in the wilderness, how does the type apply today? **Dt 8:3:** *And he humbled thee, and suffered thee to hunger, and fed thee with manna, which thou knew not, neither did thy fathers know; that he might make thee know that man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord doth man live.* Notice the bread (manna) is contrasted with the spoken word. Jesus is the *bread of life* (Jn 6:35), and he is also called *the word* (Jn 1:1). The manna did not represent Jesus (Jn 6:31-33), as it ceased when Israel entered the promise land (Josh 5:12). Taken allegorically, manna represents the written word given through Moses. It is a tutor to bring a person to Christ; and when faith is come, that person is no longer under the tutor (Gal 3:22-25). In order to understand the written word, one must listen to the voice of God (i.e. follow the impressions of the heart - cp Dt 30:10). Those who considered the manna worthless were manifesting the spiritual condition of their hearts. This was the same point Jesus made to the Jews in his day (Jn 6:45).

Fiery serpents: A snake makes itself crooked to move on it's belly on the ground, which is a picture of the curse on man (Gen 3:14). Animals are symbols of thoughts, and God used a serpent to represent our inward iniquity. The Hebrew word *`avon*⁽⁵⁷⁷¹⁾, perfectly describes this iniquity of man. The root of the word, *`avah*⁽⁵⁷⁵³⁾, means "to bend, twist, distort." The iniquity of man is his thoughts, the nature of which are bent, twisted and distorted. This way of thinking is of the flesh; it is our "old man" which is corrupt according to deceitful lusts (Eph 4:22). The serpents in Numbers 21 are said to be "fiery." The fiery serpent can be seen in each of us from time to time, as described in the following verses: **Ps 39:3:** *My heart was hot within me, while I was musing the fire burned: then spake I with my tongue...* **Jam 3:6:** *And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell.* To control the tongue, our thoughts must constantly be upon the spiritual things of God. Is it easy? No! Diligence and understanding is required.

The tongue is bent to form words which express the thoughts of man, the serpent being one of the symbols of this idea: **Ps 140:3:** *They have sharpened their tongues like a serpent; adders' poison is under their lips. **Ps 58:3-4:** *3. The wicked are estranged from the womb: they go astray as soon as they be born, speaking lies. 4. Their poison is like the poison of a serpent: they are like the deaf adder that stops her ear...* (Cp Mt 23:33)*

A way of thinking determines a person's character, what they speak and how they act. The serpent is a symbol of fleshly thought, the "old man" over which Christ gives power to the obedient: **Lk 10:19:** *Behold, I give unto you power to tread on serpents (twisted, crooked thinking - our iniquity) and scorpions (rebellious thoughts, people - Eze 2:6), and over all the power of the enemy: and nothing shall by any means hurt you.* This power, or authority, comes by receiving His teachings: **Lk 4:32:** *And they were astonished at his doctrine: for his word was with power (or authority).* The words of Jesus are spirit and life (Jn 6:63), and he admonishes us to be *wise as serpents, and harmless as doves* (thoughts of the Spirit) {cf Mt 10:16}.

The Brass serpent: Because of their rebellion, many Israelites died from snake-bites. But, when the people acknowledged that they had sinned against Yahweh, He provided a solution via Moses so that anyone bitten by a serpent could look upon the brass serpent, mounted on a pole, and live. Jesus told Nicodemus: **Jn 3:14-15:** *14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: 15 That whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.* The serpent represents the wisdom of man, or, the "old man", which is our confusion about God and corrupted thinking. Why did Jesus liken his cross to the lifting up of the brass serpent? What does it mean to "look and live?"

The Son of God became the Son of man and died on a cross. Looking at the brass serpent from my earth, I see a piece of wood to which is nailed the Son of God, naked and bleeding from having been beaten, and he has a crown of thorns on his head. When I lift up the earthly picture into my heavens (view it from God's perspective), I see that all my suffering is from the fiery bite of my own crooked way of thinking by which I have lived my life. I realize that I am spiritually naked of God's knowledge, crowned with the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life (1 Jn 2:16). It is my "old man" which caused the death of the Son on the cross. When I understand and receive it, *knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin* (Rom 6:6), then I begin to be set free as I grow in knowledge.

Summary: The Bible is full of stories, when taken allegorically, point us to the love and mercy of God for humanity. The incidents of Israel's rebellion in the wilderness, when many died, remind me of the narrow way. As the people of this world traverse the way of salvation, they encounter many trials. When God reveals truth, many complain, and fall away because they see that it goes against what the majority think, and so the way is too hard for them. They don't want to suffer reproach in order to overcome sin, *Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leads unto life, and few there be that find it.* (Mt 7:14) Instead, they say, "We can't overcome sin, we can't change, God will have to change us at the end", yet, they really do not want to enter in.

By considering and studying the reason for the cross and knowing that God did not retaliate because humanity killed His only son, we can know that the Father loves us with an everlasting love. How? Because we recognize that Jesus is the real, literal Son of God, and God gave him as a sacrifice, so that our hearts might be broken as we look and live. **Mt 27:54:** *Now when the centurion, and they that were with him, watching Jesus, saw the earthquake, and those things that were done, they feared greatly, saying, Truly this was the Son of God.* We can be assured that as the Father raised the Son of His love, so will He resurrect us because He loves us. Amen.