

THE GOSPEL PROJECT – CHRONOLOGICAL

The PROMISED land

GOD THE SAVIOR

The Bronze Serpent

John Piper says, “God must become weary with how often we question his itinerary for our lives. How often we think we know better how to get from here to there! We are so much more prone to grumble with the conductor when the train turns south, than we are to sit patiently and wait for lessons from the Lord... God would never make it in the travel industry because He is always leading His best clients into the wilderness. He even led His own Son into the wilderness forty days. So it's clearly not because He has something against people that He leads them into the wilderness. He must think there is something good to be gotten out of it. He must think there is no hurry to glut oneself on milk and honey.”

In our study, we are now nearing the end of the Israelites' 40 year journey in the wilderness but their trials were not over. As they came into the Wilderness of Zin, they discovered there was no water. The Lord told Moses to speak to a rock and it would give water. Instead Moses struck the rock, called the people rebels and then took credit for the water when it came forth rather than giving God the glory. It was for this reason that Moses and his brother Aaron were denied entrance into the Promised Land. Even though Moses had been disobedient, the LORD still gave the people the needed blessing of water.

The easiest route to the Promised Land would have been through the land of Edom. The Edomites were descendants of Esau – the brother of Jacob making them distant relatives to the Israelites. Moses offered to pay for food and water and yet the Edomite army stood in their way and refused the Israelites passage. Preferring to keep the peace with the Edomites, the Israelites took another route.

This new route caused them to come up against the King of Arad and the Canaanites in the area. The Israelites were victorious over the enemy but having to go the “long way around” to enter the Promised Land brought discouragement. Like their parents, this new generation of Israelites began to grumble. What occurred next appears extremely unusual and strange. Keep the thought that it is another Old Testament picture pointing to Christ in the New Testament.

The bronze serpent points to punishment for sin.

Read Numbers 21:4-9 (ESV) ⁴ *From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way.* ⁵ *And the people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.”* ⁶ *Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.* ⁷ *And the people came to Moses and said, “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.” So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸ And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” ⁹ So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

The focus of Bible study should always be to apply scripture to our own daily lives. From this event, we are reminded how patience and impatience war with our emotions like two different voices screaming in our heads. We must recognize impatience for what it is – a form of the sin of unbelief.

1. Impatience tempts us to give up, bail out. If there's going to be frustration and opposition and difficulty, then I'll just forget it. I won't keep this job, or take this challenge, rear this child, or stay in this marriage, or live this life. Impatience tempts us to divert from the path the LORD has laid out for us. Patience on the other hand waits. *Psalm 130:5 (ESV)* ⁵ *I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope.*
2. Impatience often tempts us to make rash counter moves against the obstacles in our way like the children of Israel did when they were compelled to take the “long way around” to the Promised Land. *Psalm 27:14 (ESV)* ¹⁴ *Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!*

In their impatience to get to the Promised Land, they came up with the very same complaint their parents had made at the Red Sea. *Exodus 14:11 (ESV)* ¹¹ ... *“Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?... They allowed their impatience to take hold and cause them to say hateful things to the LORD who loved them so.*

Jesus said in *John 14:1 (ESV)* ¹ *“Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. Oswald Chambers asks, “Am I then hurting Jesus by allowing my heart to be troubled? If I believe in Jesus and His attributes, am I living up to my belief? Am I allowing anything to disturb my heart, or am I allowing any questions to come in which are unsound or unbalanced? I have to get to the point of the absolute and unquestionable relationship that takes everything exactly as it comes from Him. God never guides us at some time in the future, but always here and now. Realize that the Lord is here *now*, and the freedom you receive is immediate.”*

In their impatience regarding taking the “long way around” to Canaan, they began to complain about the food of all things. It is in human nature to want something different to eat. However, they said of God’s gift of nourishment: *we loathe this worthless food. Psalm 78:25 (ESV)* ²⁵ *Man ate of the bread of the angels; he sent them food in abundance.* It was the food of angels and they loathed it.

From what happened to the Israelites we are reminded of the consequences of taking God’s gifts and provisions for granted. The LORD’s judgment came swiftly and without warning. He sent poisonous serpents among the people. They had rejected God's bread from heaven, so God sent them suffering and death though the deadly bites of a serpent. Who is the serpent? *Genesis 3:1 (ESV)* ¹ *Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman,*

“*Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden’?*” The serpent in scripture is a picture of evil and Satan.

It was the serpent in the Garden who raised the question: *Did God actually say*. Then Satan boldly contradicts God. He presents God’s motives as being vile and evil with thoughts like, “God is not good to me” – “God is withholding the best from me.”

In the past, Moses had fallen on his face before the Lord and interceded for them, but now the people themselves begged Moses to intercede on their behalf. Quite possibly this revealed the “heart difference” between the first and second generation of the Israelites headed to the Promised Land.

When Moses prayed for the people, the LORD answered but not in the way expected. Moses was instructed to make a serpent of brass and put it on a pole where all the people could see it. If those who had been bitten looked at the serpent, they would be instantly healed. The lifting up of the serpent in the wilderness was a picture of an even greater “lifting up” to come.

This story of God’s punishment for sin is also God’s story of grace. God provided healing for the people when Moses intervened for them. Any stricken person who looked at the serpent would immediately be healed. It appeared to be a ridiculous thing – looking at a bronze snake to be healed from the deadly bite of a serpent but it worked. We see the New Testament parallel in Jesus being lifted up on a cross. Paul explained in *1 Corinthians 1:18 (ESV)* ¹⁸ *For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.* Though we are perishing, we find healing when we look to Jesus who was high and lifted up for us.

The bronze serpent points to Christ’s rescue from sin.

Read *John 3:14-15 (ESV)* ¹⁴ *And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,* ¹⁵ *that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*

These words were spoken to Nicodemus, a member of the Sanhedrin, when he came to speak with Jesus. Nicodemus would have known the story of the bronze serpent well. Jesus who was God in the Flesh connected the Old Testament story of lifting up the bronze serpent for physical healing to how He would soon be lifted up on a cross to save us from death because of our sins.

Jesus also said in *John 12:32-33 (ESV)* ³² *And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.* ³³ *He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die.* Jesus’ being lifted up on the cross, was the ultimate shame, but it would result in His being glorified as the Savior of the world. It resulted in God’s glory and Satan’s defeat.

Although not included in today’s focal passage, nearly a thousand years later, the “bronze serpent” became a stumbling block to the Jewish people. When King Hezekiah began his reform for the people of Judah we read in *2 Kings 18:4 (ESV)* ⁴ *... And he broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it (it was called Nehushtan).* At some point, the Israelites began worshipping the “fiery serpent” Moses had made. What does Nehushtan

mean? It simply means a piece of brass. We might be appalled at God's people worshipping a "snake on a stick; however," we need to watch our own worship as well. Worship is not for our entertainment and it should not be done simply out of habit. Worship should be our loving response to the Holy Presence of God!

The bronze serpent points to the foundation for mission.

Read 2 Corinthians 5:20-21 (ESV) ²⁰ *Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.* ²¹ *For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

We often hear that the Jews were God's "chosen people." Scripture confirms it. **Deuteronomy 7:6 (ESV)** ⁶ *"...The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession...* The ultimate goal of God's choice of the Jews as His chosen people was to produce the Messiah.

From eternity past God knew that He would need to be born into the human race in order to be lifted up on a cross to save us from our sin since we inherited a sin nature from Adam when he listened to the Serpent and rebelled against God. Jesus the Messiah being lifted up on the cross and becoming the sacrifice for our sins made possible our reconciliation to God – Jesus being "lifted up" did the impossible that is – Jesus closed the "gap" between God and man. We can now come boldly to His throne of grace.

There is no need to think that God "played favorites" in His choice to use the nation of Israel. We are His "chosen people" as well. **1 Peter 2:9 (ESV)** ⁹ *But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*

We are chosen for a special work! We are chosen to be ambassadors – ambassadors for Christ. When Jesus ascended into heaven, He left us with a mission. **Matthew 28:19-20 (ESV)** ¹⁹ *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,* ²⁰ *teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."*

It is a simple message but it is a matter of life or death. We are chosen to tell others how to *become the righteousness of God*. We are to share that message from God which is simple: **look to Jesus and live!**