

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

The Crushed Serpent: The Believer's Only Hope

BRAD GRAY

1



There is only one antidote to the venom of sin and death: the Savior who becomes the serpent so that every snake-bitten-sinner might live.

In one of those “blink-and-you’ll-miss-it” moments, the historian of the Books of Kings gives us an exceptional example of what it looks like when God’s grace and truth are defaced, demeaned, and degraded in [2 Kings 18](#). This, of course, is a strategy of the evil one, who is always doing his darnedest to the pure and precious words of God and contaminate, ever so slightly, so that they become something else entirely. From the very beginning, this has been his scheme. Ever since the Garden, that god-forsaken serpent has been in the business of falsehood. But instead of manufacturing lies, his industry has been one of tainted truth. The end result is the same, to be sure, but rather than convince you of some “new truth,” he apes what the Lord says and does and adds his corrupting twist to it. This is who Satan is: he’s a trafficker of half-truths — which is what’s illustrated for us in narrative form in [2 Kings 18](#).

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

King Hezekiah, being one of the good kings of Judah, begins his reign with a *bang!* He decrees that Judah's worship wasn't worth a grain of Egyptian salt and sets out to reform every religious fissure. This effort began right away, too. "In the first year of his reign, in the first month, he opened the doors of the house of the Lord and repaired them" ([2 Chron. 29:3](#)). He was faithfully committed to Yahweh; and, as the king of Yahweh's chosen people, he was resolved that they, too, would rekindle that commitment to God alone. The chronicler informs us, at length, that Hezekiah left no corner of Yahweh's house untouched ([2 Chron. 29–31](#)). Beginning with "the priests and Levites," every facet of worship in the kingdom was reviewed and reoriented back to where it rightfully belonged: aimed squarely at the glory of Yahweh.

Part of this reformation effort, though, included the destruction of an array of idols and fabricated images that had been set up by Hezekiah's predecessors. By this time, Judah had become a hotbed for religious icons and relics, just like all of its neighboring nations. When Hezekiah came to power, then, it must've felt like a "bull in a China shop," as he smashed to bits every place of worship which had grown to replace Yahweh himself. In that way, we might very well call Hezekiah an "[iconoclast](#)," that is, one who destroys images used in religious worship. It just so happened, though, that one of the icons which fell to the ground in tiny pieces was a beloved relic from Israel's own heritage. "He removed the high places and broke the pillars and cut down the Asherah. 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)" ([2 Kings 18:4](#)).

Within Judah, a special shrine had been erected, at which worshipers could pray to the brass serpent crafted by none other than Moses himself ([Num. 21](#)). Hezekiah considers this a gross abomination and wastes no time smashing that brass serpent all over street-corner. He even went so far as to give it a demeaning name, calling it "[Nehushtan](#)," that is, "a thing of brass." "You're praying to a hunk of bronze, people!" I can hear him shout. No doubt, you don't have to imagine too hard the looks Hezekiah received as he did that. Here was this freshly coronated hotshot king not only openly mocking but also actively destroying a timeless and priceless piece of Israelite lore. What in the world, man?

To understand the king's motivation for destroying that bronze serpent, though, we are obliged to know the original meaning of that serpent in the first place. This takes us to [Numbers 21](#), which records for us another instance of the Israelites griping about their situation ([Num. 21:5](#)). "It's too hot! There's no food! Are we there yet?" we hear them moan. As a result, the Lord sends a deluge of poisonous snakes into the Israelite encampment, causing a great many of them to fall to the ground dead ([Num. 21:6](#)). Eventually, the people wisen up and approach Moses, pleading with him to do something — anything — about all those gosh darn snakes! ([Num. 21:7](#)). The Lord hears

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

their cries of repentance and proceeds to give Moses a curious command. He tells him to forge a serpent out of bronze and “set it on a pole” for everyone to see. When anyone looked upon that brass snake, they would live. They would be healed ([Num. 21:8–9](#)).

That dolorous field of wounded, dying Israelites soon burst with life as the people of God gazed upon that serpent in Moses’s hands. It was a bona fide miracle! Fast forward 700-odd years later, and that same brass serpent was still around, having been carefully preserved throughout the centuries. Only now, its significance had been fundamentally altered. What was originally commanded by Yahweh to be an instrument of healing and worship, fixing the gaze of the soul onto the One True Healer and Deliverer, had become an object of worship itself. That serpent had become an idol before which folks from all corners of the kingdom would pray to and bow before in hopes of receiving something from it.

3

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G. Campbell Morgan sums up the situation nicely when he writes: “A blessing of the olden days was made a curse in the present moment by that misinterpretation of their own history. Setting up the brazen serpent as an object of worship suggested that the serpent itself had been the means of their healing on the past occasion. Their vision of God lost, the cry of their souls after such a God, and the blundering confusion of a people who, looking back at their own history, emphasized it wrongly, interpreted it falsely, and treated the serpent as though it had been the means of their healing in the past — such was the abuse of the brazen serpent” (*The Westminster Pulpit*, 8:198).

You can understand, then, why Hezekiah did what he did. It didn’t matter what that statue might’ve meant to your grandma. It didn’t matter how universally beloved that relic was. That brass snake was an object that was demeaning the glory of God by stealing the hearts of the people of God — and it needed to be crushed. For you and for me, though, there’s still more to unfold.

You see, while Moses and Hezekiah were not aware of what that brass serpent truly meant, we are. We know because Jesus tells us in the third chapter of John’s Gospel, which, of course, records for us that now an infamous dialogue between a curious Pharisee and a Galilean Teacher. During the course of that twilight conversation, however, we are told by Jesus himself what is the true, everlasting significance of that

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

snake made of brass: “No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And 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” ([John 3:13–15](#)).

Just like “Moses lifted up the serpent,” so, too, must the Messiah “be lifted up,” which, of course, was slang for “crucified” ([John 8:28; 12:32](#)). From the earliest days of Jesus’s ministry, then, he was very aware of how that ministry would end. It would close with a cross, with death. Like the hymn says, he was, indeed, “born to die.” That’s why he came. What Jesus divulges here is that the cross wasn’t optional to his mission on earth. It was his mission. “From the beginning, He knew that the Cross was to be the end,” [Alexander Maclaren affirms](#), “it was to Him the very heart of the work which He came to do” (10:1.165). And just as those paralyzed Israelites in the wilderness had only to look at the serpent in order to live, so, too, is “believing” the only requirement for sinners to be made whole.

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Notwithstanding what condition they were in, how many times they’d been bitten, or how far away they were from that brass serpent, all that mattered is that they looked. When they did, they were healed immediately. “The miracle of the healing,” R. C. H. Lenski notes, “by a mere look on a brass serpent is so real for Jesus that it typifies a still greater reality” (*Commentary on the New Testament*, 254). Accordingly, Jesus says the same is true for every sinner who wishes to enter the kingdom of God. All that matters is belief in the Son of Man, in the One who must be “lifted up” on account of the world’s sin. This brings us to, perhaps, the most powerful truth within these three texts.

How were the people of Israel healed in [Numbers 21](#)? By looking at a serpent made of brass. Of all things, it was a serpent that was held up for the people of God as a symbol of life. There’s almost never anything good associated with serpents in the Bible. They still bear the image of the curse of death put upon them by God in the Garden ([Gen. 3:14–15](#)). All of which makes it all the more stunning that God ordered a serpent to be crafted and “lifted up.” That emblem of curses was held up for all to see as an emblem of healing. The very thing that was bringing about the people’s death was reversed to bring about new life. And just as the serpent was lifted up, “so must the Son of Man be lifted up” ([John 3:14](#)).

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

God's only begotten Son is the bronze serpent held up for every sinner to look upon and live, to believe and "have eternal life." Jesus Christ fully realizes the image of deliverance in the wilderness. As he descends from heaven, he finds his creatures bitten half-to-death by sin, strangled by the venom of the evil one. Finding his beloved in such a state, he ascends the cross, taking the place of every sinner, where he becomes himself the emblem of death for the sake of those who are dying by actually dying so that we might live. He redeems us from the curse by "becoming a curse for us" ([Gal. 3:13](#)). He saves us from sin by being made sin for us, that "we might become the righteousness of God" ([2 Cor. 5:21](#)). Christ alone bears the full brunt of the Father's wrath and the devil's venom so that you and I might be delivered "once for all."

5

Such is the good news the devil doesn't want you to hear. In fact, he'll do whatever he can to twist this news into something that it isn't so that you don't receive the truth of it. This is the only ploy Satan has, and he's pretty good at it.

There is, perhaps, no greater hoax Satan has pulled off than duping droves of men and women into thinking that they can save themselves by being religious enough. The notion that our efforts and our disciplines can lead to eternal life is hogwash. That's nothing but a ludicrous lie from the father of lies himself. The devil's tactic is to take what is good and contort it into a scheme by which he hoodwinks humanity into false senses of security, assurance, pleasure, and peace. Religion, according to the Word of God, is meant for one thing — namely, the worship of the Creator who redeems and reconciles his creatures. That, and that alone, is the good news of God around which his church gathers. Everything else is just brass.

G. Campbell Morgan puts it like this: "Look and see that this cunning artifice of brass is not a serpent, it is brass. Then name it Nehushtan, a thing of brass. Call the church a building of bricks and mortar. Call the ministers a man, and remember that he is none other, and if he is other he ought not to be in the ministry. Call the exercises of worship forms, remember that form without power is in itself a curse. Call creeds and systematized theology human opinion, and respect it as human opinion and in no other way . . . If any or all of these things are coming between your soul and God Himself break them in pieces" (*The Westminster Pulpit*, 8:204).

What things or traditions are you burning incense to that need to be destroyed? What is it that you are worshiping that is robbing your worship of the One True God? There is only one antidote to the venom of sin and death: the Savior who becomes the serpent so that every snake-bitten-sinner might live.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

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