

Looking on Christ to Live by Thailer Jimerson

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. (Numbers 21.6-9)

Have you ever heard of the Rod of Asclepius? Me neither. But I guarantee you’ve seen this symbol on any ambulance rushing from behind or most healthcare facilities. It looks like a snake on a stick. Now, I didn’t know this, but this symbol has always been associated with healthcare because, as the story goes, Asclepius, the Greek god of healing and medicine, carried this serpent staff with him wherever he went. But when I see the symbol – it’s not Asclepius that I think about.

There is an even earlier story than that involving healing and snakes on sticks. In Numbers 21 we’re given the final incident of Israel’s moaning and groaning in the desert wilderness. God, in line with his promise to Abraham, saved his people out of slavery and bondage and was bringing his people into a rich land. But they were so intolerant of the traveling conditions that they actually began to complain that it would have been better to remain in slavery! God had enough and sent poisonous serpents among the people. However, there’s this weird remedy that he instructs Moses to prepare. “Craft a bronze serpent and place it on a rod,” he says “and everyone who looks on it will be healed.”

What does that mean?

For hundreds of years this story would remain enigmatic to Israelites as they wrestled with the scriptures and the works of God. But an answer would come with John’s writing about Jesus. Jesus, one night while speaking to the rabbi Nicodemus, reveals the truth and fulfillment of this story: “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). Here’s what Jesus is trying to communicate: “That story about the bronze serpent in Numbers, that story is about me.” In the same way that God judged Israel with snakes and they had to look on the snake to be healed, likewise God judged the sin of all mankind in Jesus Christ on the cross and when we look to him, seeing him with the eye of faith, we’ll be healed. When we see Christ going to the cross for us, when we revere God for the majesty in his plan to be both just and the justifier of one who has faith in Christ, when we believe that our sin was nailed with him, and when that belief compels us toward baptism, to die with our Lord, having our sins washed away – then we are healed, then we are saved.