

THE SAVIOR & THE SERPENT

BY DOUG BATCHELOR

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life (John 3:14, 15).

An Amazing Fact: *It is estimated that between 30,000 and 40,000 people die from snakebites each year, 75 percent of whom live in densely populated India. The most deadly snakes in*

India are the cobra, Russell's viper, and the Indian krait. Burma has the highest snakebite mortality rate, however, with 15.4 deaths per 100,000 people per year. Ironically, Australia has some of the world's most poisonous snakes, but the average death toll there is only six persons per year. In South America about 4,500 people die annually from contact with the Fer-de-lance. None of the snakes already mentioned are found in the United States, where the chief offenders are coral snakes, copperheads, cottonmouths, and rattlesnakes.

Four times in one year, John Fretwell's air conditioning equipment company in Dallas was robbed. Fed up with it, Fretwell went up to Oklahoma for a snake hunt and brought back what might be the ultimate in burglar protection: seven diamondback rattlesnakes. During business hours, he now displays the snakes in the window of his business

office, labeled with a sign: DANGER: SNAKES BITE.

Before going home at night, he frees the five-foot rattlers to glide around the premises. In the morning, armed with a hooked stick and a burlap bag, he rounds them up. The seven rattlers seem to be working like a charm to ward off burglars.

The key to his success is that most people find these creatures among the most revolting and terrorizing beasts on Earth. My mother was so deathly afraid of snakes that she would jump around and scream even if she saw one on TV. My brother and I would sometimes capitalize on her phobia by placing a rubber snake in her dresser drawer to enjoy a cruel laugh when she discovered it.

Why Study Snakes?

Few people relish the idea of studying snakes. It might not sound like a very appealing subject, but these cold-blooded,

legless reptiles are mentioned in Scripture from Genesis to Revelation. The Scriptures are an epic record of the battles between our Savior and the serpent and, ultimately, how Jesus wins the war. This is why it is very profitable for us to compel ourselves to consider these unusual creatures, which are often used to symbolize the enemy.

Throughout the Bible, the serpent generally represents the devil. It was in the form of a snake that the devil first manifested himself to the human race (Genesis 3:1). Through the snake in the forbidden tree, our first parents were enticed to sin, hence the symbol stuck all the way to Revelation 20:2, where he is called “the dragon, that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan.”

There can be some great benefits to understanding this slithery creature, which has traits analogous to our enemy. When I lived in the desert hills as a young man, rattlesnakes were abundant. A basic

knowledge about their habits and behavior helped me to avoid ever being bit, despite several close encounters.

The Bible says that “the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made” (Genesis 3:1). Perhaps this is why Jesus commands us to be “wise as serpents and harmless as doves” (Matthew 10:16). In order to be as “wise as serpents,” we must understand at least a little something about them.

Master Counterfeiter

Snakes are the ultimate experts in camouflage and counterfeits. Whether hiding in the grass or entwined in the branches of a tree, they are masters at blending into the scenery to remain undetected. When threatened, the harmless bull snake will coil up and vibrate its tail in the dry leaves to sound and look like its venomous cousin, the rattler.

Satan, too, is a clever counterfeiter. In Revelation 12:9 he is called “that serpent of old...who deceives the whole world.” For every truth of God, Satan has a convincing counterfeit. He has counterfeit baptisms, a counterfeit Holy Spirit, a counterfeit of speaking in tongues, a counterfeit Sabbath, and even a counterfeit for love.

In the Exodus story, the Pharaoh’s magicians were able—to a point—to counterfeit the power and miracles of God.

So Moses and Aaron went in to Pharaoh ... just as the LORD commanded. And Aaron cast down his rod before Pharaoh and before his servants, and it became a serpent. But Pharaoh also called the wise men and the sorcerers; so the magicians of Egypt, they also did in like manner with their enchantments. For every man threw down his rod, and they became serpents.

But Aaron's rod swallowed up their rods (Exodus 7:10–12).

Likewise, Satan is most dangerous and effective when he is imitating God's miracles and messengers. "And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light" (2 Corinthians 11:14).

Flying Dragons

In the Scriptures, the devil is called both a serpent and a dragon. Among many cultures around the world, stories and legends abound regarding flying dragons. These images can be frequently seen in their ancient carvings and art.

Legends are generally rooted in some element of truth, and this appears to be the case with flying dragons. Paleontologists have found amazing fossil evidence all over the globe of giant flying reptiles called pterosaurs, or "winged lizards." Pterosaurs were flying reptiles,

some with a wingspan of nearly 40 feet. (That's about the size of a small Cessna airplane!) They appear to be the largest flying animals that ever lived on Earth. They had lightly-built, hollow bones but 300-pound bodies. By comparison, the heaviest bird alive today, a Kori Bustard, is only 42 pounds.

The pterosaur had a long, thin beak with toothless jaws. The neck was 10 feet long, and the legs were more than seven feet. To someone watching from the ground, the long legs trailing behind a flying pterosaur might have looked like a pointed tail. The pterosaur had a large brain and big eyes, and a fur-like fuzz might have even covered some of its body. We can't tell from the bones, but it is also possible that some of these extinct "dragons" were red. It had a bony crest on its head that some think acted as a rudder for flying. Other scientists have surmised that the chambers in the skull could have contained chemicals, like the

bombardier beetle, that were mixed and expelled, spraying a fiery liquid from its mouth. Some of these creatures might have survived long after the Flood. The Greek historian Herodotus wrote about “winged serpents” living in Arabia in the fifth century before Christ.

According to the Bible, at least one dragon has managed to survive much longer than that! “He laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years” (Revelation 20:2).

The Bible itself alludes to the existence of flying serpents. One prophecy states, “Do not rejoice, all you of Philistia, because the rod that struck you is broken; for out of the serpent’s roots will come forth a viper, and its offspring will be a fiery flying serpent” (Isaiah 14:29).

Genesis 3:14 even explains why we do not see flying snakes today. “So the LORD God said to the serpent: ‘Because you have done this, you are cursed more than

all cattle, and more than every beast of the field; on your belly you shall go, and you shall eat dust all the days of your life.’” If the serpent was cursed to go upon his belly after he tempted Eve, it is obvious that before the curse, he propelled himself differently.

Satan is called “the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience” (Ephesians 2:2). Just as the serpent was grounded by the curse, the fallen angel Lucifer also had his wings clipped when he was cast to the earth.

Satan and the Sword

The first question found in Scripture is actually posed by the serpent, who sought to discredit God’s words. He asked Eve, “Hath God said?” (Genesis 3:1).

From that first insidious query to the present, Satan has been ever seeking to cast doubt on the Word of God in order

to undermine the faith of God's children. Sin, suffering, and death entered the world after Satan succeeded in leading our first parents to disbelieve God's words. Planting seeds of doubt regarding the dependability of Scripture remains the devil's primary war tactic.

Jesus explained this truth in His parable of the sower. "Behold, a sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds came and devoured them" (Matthew 13:3,4). Later, explaining the parable, Jesus says, "When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is he who received seed by the wayside" (Matthew 13:19).

However, victory comes to God's children when they embrace and believe the powerful promises in the Word, "by which [has] been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature,

having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust” (2 Peter 1:4).

When Jesus did combat with the arch villain in the wilderness of temptation, He deflected every assault with a word from Scripture. Indeed, the serpent trembles when God’s people take hold of the living sword of His Word! (See Hebrews 4:12.)

The Snake and the Seed

Genesis 3:14, 15 is where we find the first prophecy recorded in the Bible, and this prediction tells of the ongoing battle that would exist throughout mankind’s history between the woman (the church) and the serpent (Satan). This passage also promises the ultimate victory of the woman’s seed (the coming Savior), who would crush the head of the snake.

Verse 15 says, “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise

His heel.” The seed of the woman is, of course, Jesus.

Now a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a garland of twelve stars. Then being with child, she cried out in labor and in pain to give birth. And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great, fiery red dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads. His tail drew a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was ready to give birth, to devour her Child as soon as it was born. She bore a male Child who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron. And her Child was caught up to God and His throne (Revelation 12:1–5).

Notice in the Genesis prophecy that the serpent bites the heel of the woman's seed, not the toe. The heel is the back of the foot, the lowest part of the body. Satan gets us from behind, when we are at our lowest point. Likewise, he came to Jesus when He was weak and tired after 40 days of fasting.

The good news is that Satan only manages to bruise the heel of Christ and the church; the church continues to limp along, so to speak. On the other hand, the serpent receives a mortal wound to the head, promising the ultimate victory of Jesus over the devil.

Power Over Serpents

When the Lord commissioned Moses to return to Egypt and lead His people to freedom, at first the great leader was reluctant. Then the Lord gave Moses a strange command concerning his shepherd's rod. "And He said, 'Cast it on the ground.' So

he cast it on the ground, and it became a serpent; and Moses fled from it. Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Reach out your hand and take it by the tail’ (and he reached out his hand and caught it, and it became a rod in his hand)” (Exodus 4:3, 4).

A rod in the Bible is a symbol of power (Revelation 12:5) and protection (Psalm 23:4). When Moses’ rod turned into a serpent, it signaled that God would give him power over and protection from the forces of evil as he ventured into the snake pit of Pharaoh’s palace. This same power is promised to all of God’s children who seek to work with Jesus to liberate others from slavery to Satan.

Luke 10:19 states, “Behold, I give you the authority to trample on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means hurt you.” And Psalm 91:13 declares, “You shall tread upon the lion and the cobra, The young lion and the serpent you shall trample underfoot.”

Don't Play With Snakes

A rattlesnake only two minutes old can strike effectively. During a family picnic, a two-year-old girl discovered a brood of baby rattlesnakes. The unsuspecting child began to play with what she thought were merely pretty worms, until she had been repeatedly bitten beyond hope.

Likewise, some people feel there is no harm in toying with the devil. Or they believe that little sins are harmless and inconsequential, but these “baby” sins often prove more fatal in the long run than the more robust transgressions.

While we should never tempt the devil, we also should not fear him. This power over evil is what Jesus was talking about when He said, “And these signs will follow those who believe ... they will take up serpents” (Mark 16:17, 18).

Some misguided pastors have interpreted this passage to mean that Christians should double as snake charmers and

prove their faith by collecting and handling rattlesnakes or other venomous vipers. For obvious reasons, the membership in these congregations has always remained small. But the New Testament account of Paul's shipwreck reveals how to correctly interpret this passage:

Now when they had escaped, they then found out that the island was called Malta. And the natives showed us unusual kindness; for they kindled a fire and made us all welcome, because of the rain that was falling and because of the cold. But when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and laid them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat, and fastened on his hand. So when the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, "No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he has escaped the sea, yet justice does not

allow to live.” But he shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. However, they were expecting that he would swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But after they had looked for a long time and saw no harm come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god (Acts 28:1–6).

Notice that Paul did not go looking for this snake, but after it bit him he took it up and hurled it into the fire. Just as God saved Paul from the venom of that serpent, He will save us from the poison of sin. However, we are never to deliberately seek out snakes to flirt with disaster. That would be tempting the Lord (Matthew 4:7).

Most Famous Verse

Probably one of the most well-known, beloved, and memorized verses in the

Bible is John 3:16. But if you were to ask the average Christian what the two verses are that precede John 3:16, I would venture to guess not one person in 50 could quote them. Yet that immortal verse we all know is actually the continuation of a thought begun in the preceding two verses. Here they are all together:

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life (John 3:14–16 KJV).

These three verses together encapsulate the entire great controversy between the serpent and the Lord. Let's look back at the original story to which Jesus was alluding:

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 our soul loathes this worthless bread.” So the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died (Numbers 21:5,6).

Remember that sin first entered the world when the serpent succeeded in tempting our first parents to doubt God’s Word. Like Adam and Eve, the children of Israel also became dissatisfied with the food God was providing them and wanted something more. “Nor let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed by serpents” (1 Corinthians 10:9).

In this story, after the children of Israel rejected God’s bread (a symbol for Jesus and the Word), the serpents bit them. It is

the Word of God that keeps people from sin (Psalm 119:11). Let's read on:

Therefore 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. Then the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live." So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived (Numbers 21:7-9).

The Lord did not immediately take away the serpents, but He provided a remedy. Likewise, the devil might still be in our world, but God has provided

healing for sin as we behold “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

Snake on a Stick

But why did God ask Moses to do this, and what did it mean? For this nation of shepherds, the serpent lifted on a pole served as a vivid symbol that they all well understood. Snakes are a deadly menace to sheep. A dog might get bit by a rattle-snake yet survive without special treatment, but sheep are much more fragile. This is one of the reasons why shepherds carried a rod.

When I lived in the desert wilderness, I had a snake stick that served a couple of purposes. If I found a venomous intruder in my cave, I would club it to “bruise his head.” But a mortally wounded snake still might continue to thrash and writhe for hours. So rather than grab it with my hand, I would lift it up with the rod to

move it far away from my premises or a trail.

A snake on a stick is a vivid symbol of a defeated serpent. Beyond this, there is a much richer prophetic significance to this symbol. Christian author E.G. White writes:

All who have ever lived upon the earth have felt the deadly sting of 'that old serpent, called the devil, and Satan.' Revelation 12:9. The fatal effects of sin can be removed only by the provision that God has made. The Israelites saved their lives by looking upon the uplifted serpent. That look implied faith. They lived because they believed God's word, and trusted in the means provided for their recovery. So the sinner may look to Christ, and live. He receives pardon through faith in the atoning sacrifice. Unlike the inert and lifeless symbol, Christ has

power and virtue in Himself to heal the repenting sinner (*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 431).

She also writes, “The people well knew that in itself the serpent had no power to help them. It was a symbol of Christ. As the image made in the likeness of the destroying serpents was lifted up for their healing, so One made ‘in the likeness of sinful flesh’ was to be their Redeemer” (*The Desire of Ages*, p. 174).

Jesus said, “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself” (John 12:32). It is by looking to Jesus on the cross that we are drawn by His love for us. By gazing in faith at our Redeemer’s sacrifice, we are saved from the sting of the serpent.

Again, God did not take away the serpents but instead provided a remedy. This world is something of a snake pit; as long as we are in this world, we will have to contend with the devil. However,

God has provided an abundance of anti-venom in the blood of Jesus to save us from the viper's bite! When Jesus was on the cross, although His heel was painfully bruised, the serpent's head was mortally crushed.

Good Luck Charms

God did not intend for the bronze serpent Moses forged and elevated on the stick to become an idol. Nevertheless, this bronze relic somehow managed to survive all the wanderings and battles of the Israelites for more than 700 years. Most of the surrounding pagan Canaanite nations worshiped serpents as gods of fertility and mystical power. Over time, the Israelites began to imitate their neighbors and to treat this symbol of God's forgiveness as a deity in and of itself.

[Hezekiah] removed the high places and broke the sacred pillars,

cut down the wooden image and broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made; for until those days the children of Israel burned incense to it, and called it Nehushtan [something made of copper] (2 Kings 18:4).

Like the ancient Israelites, millions around the world today are inadvertently worshipping the serpent *thinking* they are worshipping the Lord. They have slowly and unwittingly been sucked into base idolatry.

Indeed, many Christians have done the same thing with the symbol of the cross as the ancient Israelites did with the bronze serpent. But as the Israelites were not to worship the serpent on the pole, we are not to bow down to the cross. Neither are we commanded anywhere in Scripture to make the sign of the cross or to wear a cross on our persons. While the symbol of the cross has evolved into

a logo for Christianity, there is no mystical power or virtue in praying to this shape of the ancient Roman implement of torture.

When Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me," He was commanding His followers to bear the cross, not to wear the cross (Matthew 16:24).

Revelation speaks of being saved not by the cross, but by the blood of Jesus. It was the cross as a demonstration of Jesus' love and sacrifice that Paul and the disciples exalted, not the revolting instrument itself. Hebrews 12:2 says, "Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." The redemption of the cross is what should be the focus of Christians.

The Cup of Sin

In the Topkapi Museum in Istanbul, Turkey, there rests a very precious goblet. In the center of the inside of that goblet is a gold serpent. It has ruby eyes and diamond fangs; its mouth is open, appearing ready to strike. When the goblet is filled with wine, the red liquid covers the snake. As the wine is drunk, suddenly the serpent with its menacing appearance is revealed.

Jesus, nearing the time of His crucifixion, shrank from the thought of sin and separation from the Father when He prayed, "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me" (Matthew 26:39). Yet humbling Himself, He drank the cup of sin down to the dregs. "Nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will." At Calvary, the serpent, which had been lingering through it all, struck with all of his diabolical vengeance. The intensity of evil ... Jesus bore it all!

Defeated Foe

Some have wondered, “If Satan was defeated by Jesus on the cross, then why do we still see and feel so much evidence of his evil works?” The devil knows he was defeated at the cross, but he is crazed with pride and anger. In order to inflict as much heartache on God as possible, he continues to fight tenaciously, wanting to take down with him as many human beings as possible.

Revelation 12:12 declares, “Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea! For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time.” Satan is now thrashing about wildly in his final death throes, striking any and all within his reach.

However, the Bible promises that, ultimately, Satan and his angels will be cast into the lake of fire. This also holds true for those people who follow the devil. “Serpents, brood of vipers! How can

you escape the condemnation of hell?” (Matthew 23:33).

The good news is that in heaven, we will no longer need to walk through the woods in fear. Isaiah 11:8,9 describes a paradise without harmful snakes:

The nursing child shall play by the cobra's hole, and the weaned child shall put his hand in the viper's den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

In the Father's Hands

A father and his eight-year-old daughter were driving down a busy highway one balmy summer afternoon. Suddenly the little girl screamed and covered her head. A honeybee had flown in one of the open windows and was buzzing angrily around the cab looking for a way out.

What so terrified the child was that, after having nearly died from them once before, she knew she was deathly allergic to bee stings. The father reached for the bee as it was buzzing, cornered between the windshield and the dashboard. The determined little creature escaped his grasp and now looked even more furious. The young girl pled, “Daddy! He’s going to sting me! I’ll die!”

The father tried to calm her. “Don’t worry, sweetie. He can’t hurt you now.”

“But, Daddy, he’s getting closer!”

Then the father held out his right hand to his frightened daughter; there she saw a little stinger in his palm. “I took the stinger so he can’t hurt you now. All he can do is buzz around till he dies.”

We can also rest assured Satan is doomed. Jesus has taken the venom of the enemy into His own body that we might be saved. Yes, the devil might still be rampaging through this world, but God’s children don’t need to be frightened. Jesus

promised, “You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world” (1 John 4:4).