

Series: STRANGE STUFF WE MISSED: Extraordinary Stories from an Extraordinary God

August 1, 2010

MOSES' SNAKE

Numbers 21:4-9; 2 Kings 18:1-4; John 3:14-15

1. Something you may not know about me is that I used to **love** snakes. Really! My brother introduced me to them when we were at camp—I was about 8 at the time. He showed me how to find them—and I just never stopped looking. One year at camp, me and the other guys in the cabin caught 24 snakes—and had them all in the wooden laundry bins in our cabin.

-I liked garter snakes—but when you caught them, they'd secrete this smelly stuff all over your hands. But what I **really** loved were the grass snakes. They were gentle—and were this gorgeous green color. In fact, one time in 6th grade, I really liked this girl—so I gave her a grass snake. **And she liked it!** I thought, "Oh, man, a relationship made in Heaven!"

-I can pretty much identify the moment when I got a **lot** less enthusiastic about snakes. A friend and I were out fishing near his house, and I started lifting up rocks, looking for some bait to put on my hook. I lifted up this giant flat rock, and there were two huge snakes under it. One took off; the other coiled up, and started striking at me. I was scared to death! It was the first time a snake fought back! And I was too dumb to realize I was too far north for it to be a Water Moccasin—which is poisonous. That encounter with what I thought was a poisonous snake still creeps me out when I think about it!

2. There's a story in the Bible about snakes that is really quite creepy. The Israelites were wandering in the wilderness—and up to their usual grumbling and complaining. Well, let me just read the story from the Bible.

They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!" Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed for the people. The LORD said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived. (Numbers 21:4-9 NLT)

- a. Is there anyone here who has never whined and complained? Does anyone here have children who have **never** whined and complained? Grumbling characterizes the human race. God was trying to get His people to live by faith. And they were **show me the money!** People. See, the manna and problem

with finding water was intended to be a short-term solution—1-2 years--until they could get to the land God had promised.

-But when, out of fear, they refused to believe God and take the land he was willing to give them, they in essence signed up for 40 more years of manna and wilderness living. And they were **sick** of it! Now, we all get tired of discomfort and inconvenience—but this went further. This was outright contempt for God and for their leader, Moses.

-So, to get them back on the right track, God disciplined them in a way they could understand. Poisonous snakes are sneaky; cranky—nasty. They hide—and if you get in their space, accidentally get too close—they'll sink their fangs into you and inject a lethal dose of poison! And **that's** the way critical, complaining people sometimes act. God allowed their camp to be infested with poisonous snakes. We aren't told **what** kind of snakes; but these five kinds of poisonous snakes inhabit the wilderness there—a variety of vipers and cobras--and they're **all** nasty. **[pics]**

-Imagine being infested by poisonous snakes in a place with no doors, and it has the makings of a good horror flick. Imagine being in a place with your kids—and not knowing where a snake might be hiding! How many of you would like me to stop talking about snakes--right now! Sorry—but I have to finish the story. We aren't given statistics, but the narrative says **many** died.

- b. Sometimes we don't realize how far down a detour we are—until the consequences of our sin get our attention. We can be pretty cocky--until big pieces of our lives start falling off. And suddenly, God has our attention. -That's what happened here. When the people realized that their rebellion had brought judgment, they begged Moses to ask for God's forgiveness. Moses, who loved these people more than his own life--despite their waywardness--interceded for them. What's interesting is that God did not take away the snakes. He gave the people an antidote to the poison. Moses was to craft a bronze snake, drape it around a standard—a cross shaped pole—and raise it up where everyone could see it. And anyone who had been bitten could look at this snake—and they would live. Now, that's a **very** unusual story isn't it?

3. It would appear that this snake on a pole is just kind of a footnote in history—until it shows up again about 700 years later.

In the third year of Hoshea son of Elah king of Israel, Hezekiah son of Ahaz king of Judah began to reign. He was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem twenty-nine years. His mother's name was Abijah daughter of Zechariah. He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, just as his father David had done. He removed the high places, smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles. He broke into pieces the bronze snake Moses had made, for up to that time the Israelites had been burning incense to it. (It was called Nehushtan.) (2 Kings 18:1-4)

- a. Hezekiah is probably the last bright spot among David's descendants who led Judah. This man seems to have a heart for God—and pretty much follows God through his entire reign in Jerusalem.

-What I admire about him is that at a fairly young age, he has the guts to confront and stop the blatant idolatry the Israelites had been engaged in ever since David led the country. And in the process—he came face to face with a snake! The same bronze snake Moses had made and stuck on a pole 700 years earlier.

-Now, the bronze snake was a wonderful reminder of how God had worked in the past to heal his people. But the **problem** is that the people were worshipping it. They even had a special name for it, **Nehushtan**. Anyone know what the name means? Something along the lines of DIRTY BRONZE SNAKE!

- b. Now, let's just think about this for a minute. In a weird sort of way, the reverence they had for the snake actually quite logical. It was the only specific image that God himself had ever commanded Moses to create.

-I mean, it was a means of healing people from lethal doses of snake venom; the natural connect would be, "Hey, if God used it to heal people then, why not now?" And it was from the glory days when Moses led Israel. Anyone know what we call days like that? The **good old days**. This was a time when God tangibly led them; performed miracles on a regular basis; spoke through Moses. It was a connection to a great past. What's not to love about that?

- c. And it fit their culture perfectly. Religions had been worshipping snakes for years. In fact, Egypt worshipped snakes. Pharaoh's headpiece had a cobra right at the front of it. You know it's true—you've seen the movie, **The Ten Commandments!** Am I right, or not?

-Well, Hezekiah does the unthinkable. He takes this priceless antique; this incredible memento from Israel's history—this **holy relic—NEHUSHTAN**--and breaks it up in pieces. Sotheby's of London would've flown their flag at half-mast! Why **do** such a thing? Because it was **insulting God and sabotaging their future!** Strange, isn't it, that something that once showed God's power and brought healing would eventually corrupt people's worship?

-History, antiques, honored traditions, collectibles, sentiment, nostalgia--all have their place. But when they dominate the present and sabotage the future—it usually takes something drastic—radical—to move on.

4. Believe it or not, the snake on a pole shows up again—about 700 years after Hezekiah! This time in a conversation Jesus, the Messiah, is having with a man by the name of **Nicodemus**. Jesus calls Nicodemus **Israel's teacher**, implying that he was the most respected teacher of spiritual truth in the country--kinda the Rob Bell or Chuck Swindoll of Israel. But Nick, like many of us, thought that personal transformation happened through the accumulation of knowledge and the performance of religious rituals.

-Jesus said, "Nicodemus, what I came to give is totally new. I came to bring a transformation so profound it's like being **born all over again!** As humiliating as it is for a teacher like you to admit--**you** need forgiveness and grace! And the **only** way this will happen is through the power of the Spirit."

- a. And it's right in the middle of this conversation that Jesus uses Moses' bronze snake as a sign of Who He is—and what He will do for the world:

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him." For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. (John 3:14-18)

- b. Here's the point. The outcome of sin—all sin—is death. The first people who ever lived were poisoned by Satan, the snake in the garden—and that poison has been passed down to us. What happened there has systematically destroyed all that God has created. And for Him to accomplish His Mission—restore **shalom** to everyone and everything—there has to be an antidote for the poison. And Jesus—Jesus **alone**—is the cure.

-Moses' snake was a short-term solution to snakebite; but it was a symbol of Jesus, God's Son—the antidote to **all** sin and the destructiveness that it's brought. All the people of Israel had to do—if they were bitten—is **look** at the solution—and they would be healed. For us, it's trusting Jesus' payment for sin on our behalf and choosing **His** way.

-It's **costly**, it's **simple**, and it is the **only** antidote to the deadliest poison on the planet. And God doesn't want **anyone** to perish—to be destroyed by the effects of our sin. That's the context for some of the most profound words ever written:

For God so loved the world he gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16)

- c. Why is this so counterintuitive? Why is it that when so many people hear about how God solved the sin problem through Jesus, they say, "Nah! It **can't** be that easy!" It's because our tendency is to think, "I don't have a problem! Now, the murderers, child-molesters and parking space thieves--**they** have problems! But not me." When God first told Moses to make this bronze snake, the people were desperate for help.

-My understanding is that when you've been bitten by a poisonous snake, your first feeling is absolute terror. Then there's a burning sensation. Your pulse increases, you begin to perspire and lapse into unconsciousness. Where you've been bitten will swell to 3 or 4 times it's normal size, get discolored, and

begin to decay. It's **very** obvious that something is wrong—and you're desperate for **any** help. Sin is infinitely more destructive—but not that obvious. There are a **lot** of people in our world in chaos, in messes—in pain—who would say, "I'm just fine! **I'm** not gonna grovel before Jesus begging for help!" -The laws of religion appeal to our egos. "You can work this out if you try harder! Study, read, do good for others. But Jesus is clear here: "That won't do. You don't have a performance problem or a knowledge problem. You've got a sin problem that will **kill** you if you try to solve it on your own!" And if you're struggling with this whole issue of what it means to get a brand new start, and have your sins totally forgiven--I want to explain exactly how that happens. Jesus makes it so simple you can't miss it.

*The first thing you have to do is own the fact that you're just like **everyone else** on this planet; you have a sin problem that affects all you do—and don't need behavioral modification; you need to be made new! You need to be forgiven. This sin problem is profound, invasive, and lethal. Have you ever admitted that to yourself—and to God?

*God, through Jesus, made it possible for **everyone** to come to Him and for the relationship to be restored. Like **any** relational problem we have, no one can resolve it for us. We have to **respond personally** to His offer of forgiveness, restoration, and life—just like those people bitten by snakes had to look to the bronze snake draped around the pole. Faith is putting your whole weight on what God has done through Jesus. The good works, the good things that come from your life are then an act of love for God and others—not a means of earning **anything**. The Bible says:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Ephesians 2:8-10 TNIV)

*This is the most amazing gift on this planet—and the only one that gives eternal life. Have you ever actually **received** it?

5. What I'd like to do in closing is to return to the middle story in the **snake trilogy**. It's the problem of snake worship. It's our tendency to, over time, focus on something that God has used in the past—in our life or in other's lives—and turn it into a kind of sacred snake...or sacred cow. To get stuck in the past. It's funny—in researching this, I found Hezekiah destroyed this snake at almost the precise halfway point between when Moses created it—and Jesus fulfilled it.

-What's fascinating about this story is that God specifically commanded Moses to make it. And it powerfully used it to spare **thousands** of lives. The mistake was preserving it as a kind of sacrament—believing that because God had once used it—He would always use it. And the problem was people putting their faith and trust in a snake on a pole—instead of the healing power of God.

-After God used it, it was a **great** memento, a **priceless** antique, a wonderful reminder of the destructive power of rebellion and grumbling—and how God heals defiant people. But that’s all. After that one time occurrence, it had no special powers. In fact, they could’ve just thrown it away—and that would’ve been fine!

- a. There is a **lot** that goes on in the name of Jesus—that fits into this category. The more obvious things would be what are called **holy relics**. Anyone ever heard of stuff like this? Little medallions, special statues, crosses, crucifixes, little pieces of bone from godly people, etc. I mean, you’d think that with Jesus being God in human form—that if you could just get a drop of his blood in a bottle—it would certainly have special powers, right? Wrong! All this stuff is **Nehushtan!** Sacred snakes.
- b. I just need to step into some messy territory here—do I have your permission to do that? We have our sacred snakes, too. A sacred snake is usually something God has used in the past—a method, a symbol, a way of working—that we have latched onto and made **permanent**.

-Jesus called this stuff **wine skins**. Let me read the passage for you:

And people do not pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the new wine will burst the skins; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins. And none of you, after drinking old wine, wants the new, for you say, 'The old is better.'
(Luke 5:37-39 TNIV)

Wine was a very important part of Jesus’ culture. They made it in goatskins. When the wine was aged, skins stretched and hardened. No one was stupid enough to use wineskins again—because the fermentation process would stretch and split them—and the wine would be lost.

-The context of Jesus comment is that he and his disciples were being criticized for not fasting as other religious people did. Jesus was audacious enough to say that the discipline of fasting is **not** the wine. It’s not the point; it’s not a guaranteed way of getting God’s attention. It’s a **wineskin**.

-Now, I know I’ve done this before—but I want to do it again. I would like to exegete/explain this wine bottle. What’s more important—the bottle—or the wine? People will sometimes pay several thousand dollars for a bottle of wine—but they’re buying the **wine**—not the bottle. Wine **needs** a container. But that’s all it is.

-And Jesus said, “Don’t miss the wine—the life-changing truth and power of the Good News that God has invaded his creation through Jesus and is making **all things right**—and reduce it to bottle worship. To sacred snakes.” Don’t institutionalize the ways God has worked—worship God and let God choose **new** containers!

- c. What are some things you can think of that are bottles; wineskins? The printed Bible—like this one. It's **very** helpful—but it's only come in this form for about 500 years. It's a container for God's Word, truth—which is never intended to change. But the form it takes—from mind to scroll to codex to book to I-pod—will change!

-There are others. Pulpits. Church buildings. Hymns. Pastors serving communion or baptizing—**wineskin!** In fact, believers in some cultures serve sticky rice and coconut milk for communion. How about altar calls? They're wineskins. God has used them effectively in the past—but there's not even a mention of them in the Bible.

Now, let me just pause to ask—are there any other things you have questions about as to whether it's bottle—or wine?

- d. As believers, we have to be **very** careful that we do not become bottle worshippers. Let me mention some things that are even messier.
-Having a cross at the front of a church building—using the sign of the cross—is not a bad thing. In fact, sometimes it's a great reminder of what God has done. But it's bottle—not wine! And it can be misused as a form of magic. Most of the Christian holidays and observances—Palm Sunday, Easter Sunday, Lent, Ascension Sunday, Advent, Christmas—are all human creations. They're helpful—and meaningful—but the Bible doesn't say a single word about them—which means that they're **bottle**—not **wine**.
- e. I want to step into one more messy area—if you don't mind. And it's in the arena of the spiritual disciplines—prayer, fasting and giving--the place where Jesus' comments originated. Jesus was very clear in his teaching that these disciplines—things that had become very public in his day—we're intended, primarily, as private personal expressions to develop our hearts and our life with God.

-Why? Well, it's because when they go public—and people become known for them—these things can totally contradict what Jesus said about them—that is, not parading them before others. And yet sometimes giving to the poor, praying, and fasting can become markers for how spiritual people are—where the people who do them **well** and are **known** for them are seen as more spiritual than others. Now, prayer is a really, **really** good thing, right? But prayer is not a form of magic. Prayer is a conversation with God. And it is **very** easy for any public conversation to become about showmanship and eloquence.

-Would you not agree that we are tempted to think that long prayers are more effective than short prayers; that eloquent prayers are more effective than stumbling prayers; that prayers accompanied by a lot of emotion—or volume—are better than emotionless ones? And the point of prayer is the wine—the cry to God—the conversation with God—not the bottle—all the other stuff that goes with it. Prayer is **not** magic!

-Let's get even messier. Would you not agree that the theory that tends to follow prayer is that the **more** people who pray about something—the **more** likely it is to get answered? We also have coined phrases around prayer; we call people who feel a calling to prayer—and are good at it—**prayer warriors**. That's not a bad thing, necessarily—but have you ever heard someone called a **leadership warrior**? Or a **hospitality warrior**? Or an **encouragement warrior**.

-All the gifts of the Spirit are important. All the ministries of the Body of Christ—inside, and outside the gathering—are important.

- f. My point is that we just need to stay **really** clear on these things. The disciplines of prayer, fasting, giving and serving are not magic—or a way of getting God to bless you. And, according to Jesus, the **best** way to do them is with simplicity—and with **no one knowing what you do!** All these things develop our hearts and enrich our lives and accomplish God's purposes—but the second we try to manipulate God or the opinions of others with them—they are effectively neutralized.

6. Unfortunately, in the years since Jesus died, rose from the dead, and called His Church into existence, more attention has been paid, I believe, to bottles than to life-changing wine of the Spirit.

-Followers of Jesus have split, created disunity, hated and slandered each other—and dragged Jesus' name through the mud over whether to dunk or sprinkle; whether Jesus is physically present or spiritually present in communion; whether or not those who follow Jesus are secure in their faith—or insecure.

-And in the past few years, **worship—how we worship**—has become a battle ground. Think about that for a minute; “If you don't sing the songs I like in the way I like, with the instruments I like—I will find ways to slander you, create chaos, call you a hypocrite—and bring Jesus' mission of **Shalom** to a full and sudden stop!”

-And people will hate, fight, break friendships and start wars over how the Bible is taught, over whether a church is traditional, seeker-friendly, or missional—or emergent. The point isn't titles or words or styles or any of the **bottles** we set up; the point is joining with God's **mission**—reconciling all people and all things to Himself. And we are called to do with in the spirit and **attitude** of Jesus; love, servanthood, grace, unity, **shalom**—and **humility!** Anything **less** than God's mission—and anything **less** than the attitude of Jesus tends to do more damage than good.

-And God is not stuck in the past. He doesn't have a museum in Heaven where he features the original ten commandments carved in stone; or a piece of freeze-dried fruit from the Tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil—or the original cross Jesus died on.

- a. In Revelations, God reveals Himself as the God who **makes all things new!** He's eternal—but younger than we are. He is not confused—or impressed--by

super-computers—or hydrogen technology—or Twitter. God is way, way, **way** ahead of us.

-And sometimes He will use something powerfully—like a bronze snake. He will do spectacular things through it. And even while we're clinging to it, wondering over it, figuring out how we can mass produce it—He's moved on! And it's just...a lifeless antique.

- b. Change doesn't shake **God** up—not at all! But it shakes us up, doesn't it? When I was in university, I sensed that God was leading me into some form of missions. But that never happened—until he called me from Punxsutawney, PA to Toronto. I always thought it would involve jungles and snakes and huts—not cement!

-And 20 years ago, Lori and I sensed that God was leading us to plant a church. We got a map—found the most unchurched area of the US—the Northwest—and began exploring how to start a church there. And God closed the door.

Bam! I never thought He would work in getting me out of a church where I was very comfortable to start a new one! And I didn't like it at the time!

-I thought I had the end-times pretty well figured out. God blew out all my categories. I have found that God has flipped me upside down in more areas in the past five years than in 25 that preceded it. I **like** bottles! But God is not a genie—He doesn't live in a bottle. What He does is **always** new! Always. And if you and I try to reinvent the **good old days**—mainly because they seem safer than the future—we will **miss** what God is up to.

7. I **really** admire Hezekiah's courage in this story. He lived in a very scary time in history—and faced challenges that would've paralyze most of us. On one occasion, the superpower of his day, Assyria, surrounded Jerusalem—and it looked like it was **all** over. He faced a fatal illness and was told by a prophet that he was going to die. See, it's in tough times when we would like to go back to the good old days! But he didn't. He put his trust in God—broke up the stupid snake they revered—and walked right into the future. And God did **amazing** thing!

-God is doing a new thing through his people. In fact, from what I can see, the future for us as God's people is going to be powerful, meaningful, effective and exciting—and **way** different from the past. It appears to me that God is not primarily using people like me—in my role. God is using people like you as light and salt in the dark, bland, decaying places of this world. God sends us where we are **most** needed. But God needs people who will live with their lives and their hearts open. Will you be one of them?

-And I want to ask **you**: Will you let go of what seems comfortable and safe from the past—so that you can walk into the future—arm in arm with a God who makes **all things new**? Will you ask God for the courage to trust Him to do new things on the edge of your life at this scary—but **profound** time in history? THAT'S what our calling as The Olive Branch is about: Not the past—but something new and powerful that God is up to—and WILL accomplish!

-See, you and I can't back into the future with our eyes on the past. We have to hold hands with God, face it, and ask "God, what **new** thing do you want to do in my life."