

The **third** occurrence Paul referenced was another hugely significant episode in Israel's history. Like the others, it took place during the wilderness period and it, too, centered in the nation's unbelief. Paul designated the golden calf episode as an example of Israel's *idolatry*, the second as showing its *immorality*, and this one as Israel *testing* the Lord, but all three – together with the fourth – speak to the same fundamental sickness which plagued the covenant son: Israel was incapable of loving and trusting its covenant Father; in the end, Israel was incapable of *faith*. By the time its forty-year test in the wilderness ended it was clear that Israel's only hope was for Yahweh to give them a heart to know, eyes to see and ears to hear; Israel needed a circumcised heart, and the Lord promised that the day was coming when He would circumcise it Himself (cf. Deuteronomy 29:1-4, 30:1-6).

Paul identified this episode in terms of a destroying plague of serpents (10:9), which indicates that he was referring to the time when Israel's unfaithfulness provoked Yahweh to send venomous snakes into their camp in order to begin killing them with their toxic bite. This account, too, is recorded in the book of Numbers (21:2-9), and its background and particulars are as follows:

- This episode preceded the one Paul mentioned before it, but it, too, occurred near the end of Israel's forty years in the wilderness. It took place after the nation had departed from Mount Hor – the mountain where God had executed His judgment against Aaron for his role in the act of unfaithfulness at Meribah (Numbers 20:1-29). Miriam had died and now Aaron was gone as well. Of the three siblings, only Moses remained, and he knew that he, too, was going to follow his brother in dying outside the sanctuary land because of Meribah (ref. 20:12 with Deuteronomy 34).
- The general circumstance surrounding this episode was a recurrent one in Israel's wilderness experience: The people resented their protracted wandering and its discomfort and difficulty and they gave voice to their resentment, first in grumbling and then in direct accusation against Moses and their God. As at Massah in Rephidim and then at Meribah in Kadesh, they accused Yahweh of malfeasance under the covenant: Their parched throats convinced them that He had brought them out of Egypt per His covenant oath to Abraham only to have them die before reaching the land promised to them (21:5; cf. Exodus 17:1-5 and Numbers 20:1-13).
- This was now the fourth recorded instance of Israel's accusation when confronted with the lack of drinking water. Three times before – at Marah, Massah and Meribah – the people had complained in disbelief and each time the Lord miraculously provided for their need. Yet here they were again, concluding from their unrequited thirst that their God had delivered them from bondage in Egypt only to abandon them in the wilderness. This was bad enough, but the people enlarged their accusation by again expressing their hatred for Yahweh's provision: Not only had He left them without water, He was depriving them of real food (cf. 11:1ff, 20:1ff).

Even their Egyptian slave masters had given them meat, fruit, vegetables and spices. All their Deliverer had provided was this loathsome manna – something not worthy to be called *food*. Israel complained about the manna from the time God provided it (ref. Numbers 10:11-11:6), but now, decades later, their hatred and resentment of it had festered to the point that they could not even regard it as legitimate food. Whatever it was, it certainly was no good gift from God; indeed, it was just one more way in which He showed His unfaithfulness and lack of concern.

- The result of their grumbling and accusation was that Yahweh sent poisonous serpents into the camp and soon many Israelites were dying from snakebite. However self-centered and stiff-necked the people were, they weren't stupid; they knew their grumbling was an affront to God (though that hadn't stopped them) and so quickly recognized that He had sent this infestation as just retribution against their insubordination. And so the sons of Israel came to Moses and begged him to intercede for them that Yahweh would relent and remove the serpents (21:6-7).

This incident is notable in that it deviated from its three previous counterparts while also paralleling them:

- It differed from them in two related ways. First, Yahweh didn't respond to Israel's complaints as He had before, namely by immediately providing water for the people. He obviously did supply that need at some point, for the nation didn't perish there, but the text makes no comment regarding it. Instead it emphasizes an entirely different response: Yahweh didn't miraculously provide water; He miraculously supplied poisonous serpents to punish the sons of Israel for their unbelief and blasphemous accusation.
- But this episode parallels its counterparts in that God *did* show Himself faithful by interceding to deliver His covenant son. At Marah, Massah and Meribah He'd done so by satiating Israel's thirst; here He did so by providing the remedy for His own retribution. In all four instances, Yahweh met the unfaithfulness and desperation of His people with His own abiding faithfulness. *Once again He showed that He was determined to uphold His covenant oath and see it through to fulfillment, not because of or in conjunction with the faithfulness of His covenant son, but in spite of the son's hopeless unbelief.* Israel would not and could not fulfill its covenant identity and calling; Israel could not be Israel. But Yahweh would see to it that Israel *did* succeed – not in itself, but by Him taking upon Himself and meeting in Himself Israel's obligation of sonship.

He emphasized that truth here by the way He responded to Israel's plea for deliverance. Yahweh instructed Moses to fashion a likeness of the serpents He'd sent against Israel and set it on top of a pole visible to the people. The bitten ones who gazed upon that image would be healed (21:8-9).

Several other things about this episode and Paul's reference to it are important to consider. Of primary concern is the way Paul understood it and how he was relating it to the Corinthians and their question respecting "idol meats." Toward that end, the first thing that stands out is the way he phrased his statement: "*Let us not try Christ as some of them did.*" This is the predominant reading in English versions, though the NAS and NIV reflect one variant in the Greek text, substituting the noun *Lord* for *Christ*. There is an obvious difficulty suggested by the more common reading, namely how Paul envisioned the Israelites testing *Christ* by their complaints and accusations. This difficulty may very well explain the textual variants (*Lord* and *God*) which, for various reasons, are likely alterations of the original. The issue has been addressed in various ways.

- 1) The easiest solution is to simply adopt the variant reading as the NAS and NIV do. But again, this is not particularly satisfying since the manuscript evidence and the principles of textual criticism argue for the noun *Christ* being the original reading. The very fact that this reading raises questions argues against a transcriber introducing it in the place of the noun *Lord*. Who would knowingly create a difficulty in the text? Rather, the tendency would be to mitigate a difficulty with an alternate reading.
- 2) A second answer is that Paul was alluding to his conviction that Christ was present with the Israelites as the pre-incarnate Angel of Yahweh, even as He was the rock which followed them through the wilderness (10:4). So also some have noted that Paul could have been drawing upon Jesus' own statements that correlated His self-offering at Calvary with the bronze serpent (John 3:14-15). The problem here is that Jesus wasn't in any way suggesting that He was present in that Israelite circumstance, but that it corresponded in some fashion to the cross event that lay ahead of Him. Beyond that, Jesus' statement isn't the least bit helpful in explaining how Paul could say that Israel was *testing* Christ; if anything, he'd have to say that Israel was *looking to* Christ to be delivered and healed.
- 3) Probably the best answer is that Paul was referencing Christ as the object of testing *with respect to the Corinthians*. That is, he was saying to the Corinthians, let us not be guilty of testing Christ as Israel tested Yahweh. Paul simply left the second direct object unstated, knowing that it was implied from the historical account to which he was alluding.

A second issue that must be considered is how the serpent episode constituted an act of *testing* as Paul insisted it did. Psalm 78:18 is helpful in this regard, and perhaps it was this passage that framed Paul's perspective on the incident. Israel "tried" Yahweh by indicting Him: They indicted His *character* by questioning His intentions and commitment in bringing them out of Egypt (ref. again Numbers 21:4-5a); but they also indicted His *judgment* by making themselves the determiners of what constituted "provision" (21:5b). God had provided; they just didn't accept His provision – they asked for food "*according to their desire.*"

A third matter is how the issue of testing pertained to the *Corinthians*. Paul exhorted the saints at Corinth to cease putting the Lord Jesus to the test; in what sense were they doing that, especially in relation to the issue at hand, which was their involvement with food sacrificed to idols? This topic will be addressed in full later on, but suffice it here to note that Paul clearly regarded the Corinthians' relationship with "idol meats" and the various issues surrounding it to be a matter of testing their Lord, even as it was a matter of idolatry.

One final thing to consider is how the serpent episode should be interpreted in the light of *Jesus Christ*. Jesus Himself affirmed that the entire salvation history – and therefore the whole of the scriptural record – testifies of Him. Beyond that general affirmation, He drew a direct correlation between this episode and His own impending crucifixion (John 3:14-15). That much is universally affirmed; what is debated is the nature and import of the correlation.

At the one extreme, there are those who tie the serpent motif to the biblical symbolism of Satan as a serpent creature (cf. Genesis 3:1ff with 2 Corinthians 11:3; also Revelation 12:1-17, 20:1-3). Noting that Jesus drew a parallel between the bronze serpent on the standard and His own crucifixion, they conclude that, in becoming the "sin-bearer" on the cross, Jesus was effectively transformed into a quasi-satanic being who, after dying, was consigned to hell as Satan's domain before being liberated and resurrected on the third day. Others, recognizing the same serpent/Satan symbolism, are puzzled and even troubled by Jesus' comparison and find themselves at a loss as to how to explain this correspondence without degrading the Lord or wading into blasphemous or heretical thinking.

The simple, contextual explanation for God specifying a serpent image was the fact that serpents were biting the sons of Israel. Moses' was to make a serpent that *corresponded* to the ones biting the people (cf. 21:6 and 21:8). The bronze serpent didn't signify or symbolize Satan, but God's just judgment and punishment of His people. He had Moses make a fiery serpent (hence, *bronze*) so that the people would discern the crucial truth that that which came against them in just judgment was also their source of deliverance and healing. *The issue wasn't serpents – either the living ones or the bronze one, but the God whose purpose they were expressing and serving. It was Yahweh who rose up against His people in just condemnation and it was Yahweh who arose on their behalf to deliver them.*

Here again the same salvation-historical theme comes to the forefront: The covenant son was an incorrigible covenant-breaker who could not be spared, and yet the covenant could not be voided. The only solution was for Yahweh to arise on behalf of Israel and fulfill their covenant obligation. But He had to do so in *their* name and not in His own; otherwise, He would effectively remove Israel as a party to the covenant and thereby nullify the covenant itself. No, Yahweh had decreed that His restoration and blessing would come to the world *through Israel*, and Israel could not be set aside without violating His oath. He would keep His oath, but by entering into and coming forth from Israel as Israel indeed.