

Nehushtan

2 Kings 18:1-5 ^{NKJ} **2 Kings 18:1** *Now it came to pass in the third year of Hoshea the son of Elah, king of Israel, that Hezekiah the son of Ahaz, king of Judah, began to reign. ² He was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned twenty-nine years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Abi the daughter of Zechariah. ³ And he did what was right in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his father David had done. ⁴ He 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. ⁵ He trusted in the LORD God of Israel, so that after him was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor who were before him.*

I remember as a teenager, one of the things I heard again and again from the pulpit was “A good thing becomes a bad thing, when it robs you of the best thing.” I used to think that bad things were bad things and good things were good things, and they lived in separate boxes. But I soon began to see how even if I avoided the bad things, the bad in my heart wanted to turn the good into bad.

That's exactly what had happened in Israel: a good thing had become a bad thing by displacing the best thing. And once it had done so, there needed to be some radical, even violent action to get matter right. Hezekiah was the man to do it.

Hezekiah was one of Israel's greatest kings. I'd put him up there as one of the three greatest kings Judah ever had – David and Josiah being the other two. Hezekiah, like Josiah, was a worship warrior. When they ascended to the throne, the first thing they did was to deal with the idolatrous and false worship that had grown up under their predecessors. Many of the kings that Scripture records as good had this blot against their name: they did not remove the high places. That is, they were not willing to deal with compromise and idolatry down to the root. Kings Asa, Jehoshaphat, Jehoash, Joash, Amaziah, Azariah, Jotham were all commended as doing what was right, but then this is always added: “Nevertheless, he did not remove the high places.”

Only Josiah and Hezekiah were truly thorough reformers. When Hezekiah got onto the throne, the first thing he did was clean out the now-defiled Temple. He gathered Levites, consecrated them, cleared out debris from the Temple, re-consecrated it, reinstituted the Passover, took down high places, smashed the idolatrous pillars and wooden images.

And then we read this almost hidden phrase: “He broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses made”. It's fascinating to think that Israel had kept this bronze serpent for these hundreds of years. We don't know where they kept it – it almost certainly wasn't kept in the Temple, probably some Levites had kept it. But Hezekiah, smashed it in pieces. Why?

This account of what Hezekiah did with this bronze snake becomes a lesson to every believer about good things becoming bad things. We need to see how this bronze snake was a good thing, that became a bad thing, when it displaced the best thing.

I. The Good Thing: A Means of Faith

What was it originally?

Numbers 21:4-9 ⁴ Then they journeyed from Mount Hor by the Way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the soul of the people became very discouraged on the way. ⁵ 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." ⁶ So the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died. ⁷ 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. ⁸ 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." ⁹ 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.

As the Israelites journeyed, they became weary, discouraged, and downright rebellious. They complained about their leader, and complained about God's provision. As judgement, God sent poisonous snakes, a truly terrifying plague. The people repented of their rebellion, and asked Moses for help. God instructed Moses to make a bronze serpent and set it up. Everyone who looked in faith to God's appointed means – was healed. People who repented of their rebellion against Moses, and were now willing to trust God's appointed means through the hands of Moses, were healed.

The bronze snake became a means for faith. It became a symbol of trust in God and in what He had said. This was such a good picture of faith, that Jesus Himself used it.

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

The bronze serpent was a symbol, a means for faith. In the same way, when Jesus would be lifted up on the cross, everyone who would look to Him as God's appointed means of healing – would be saved. This is what the bronze serpent was originally. It was a means for faith; a means to express obedience and trust, a help to the faith of Israelites.

Now after this account in Numbers, the bronze snake disappears into history until it pops up again in the record of Hezekiah. Apparently all those years, it had been kept: through the wars of conquest in Canaan, through the chaotic time of the Judges, through the kingdoms of Saul, David, and Solomon, and through the divided kingdom years. And now during the time of Hezekiah, we read what had become of it.

II. A Bad Thing: An Object of Worship

⁴ He 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,

We are not told when it happened, but at some point, this bronze snake became more than a means of faith. At some point, it became more than a reminder of God's grace. Somehow, at some point, this bronze serpent began to be worshipped. The children of Israel had begun to burn incense to it. They were venerating it, adoring it, worshipping it.

We don't know how but we know that our hearts are idol factories. Perhaps it happened in Israel's history like it did in church history: faithful believers wanted to travel to see physical piece of their history. And perhaps soon after that, some opportunistic people began surrounding it with all kinds of

special surroundings. Before long, pilgrims may have been coming for a chance to see, or touch the bronze serpent. Perhaps stories about its healing powers began spreading. Give a few centuries of this, and soon you will have a cult of the bronze serpent. Soon the bronze serpent is no longer a means of faith, it has become the object of faith. It is no longer a reminder, a symbol, a picture to help faith, it has become the substance, the object, the end point.

I'm sure had we asked the Israelites who worshipped the bronze serpent, "Is this your god?", many of them would have replied, "Never! We worship Yahweh. But this is how we express our adoration for Yahweh." Perhaps others would have simply said, "Yes, this is my god. This thing represents power and healing, and so I am dependent upon it, and devoted to it."

However they would have said it, the end point is the same- a means had become an end. Something meant to help trust in God had replaced trust in God. Something meant to enable faith in God had now eclipsed faith in God.

This repeated itself in church history. Things that were supposed to be means of faith, became ends. The waters of baptism - there as a symbol of dying and rising with Christ, there to aid and picture and strengthen our faith, became an end. The waters of baptism were looked to as saving in and of themselves. The Lord's Table, meant to represent the body and blood of Christ, and aid our faith in Him, became an end. Now some saw Christ Himself in the elements, and to eat them was to be saved. We see it in church leadership - Elders/pastors/overseers who are given to guard the flock, to lead God's people in faith soon became ends - the sole interpreters of God's Word, the priests who would mediate the sacrifice of Christ to His people; the infallible bishops who alone properly interpret Scripture. Now people were to place their faith in the church of Christ, rather than in the Christ of the church. Even great men and women of God, who deserve our esteem, now came to be venerated. Those people who are meant to be examples for our faith, became objects of faith - saints to be worshipped, prayed to, trusted in.

Some of these errors were obvious, so the ones that are left are often so subtle that we fail to detect them. But I suggest some of them to you;

Bible and theological knowledge. Many Christians use knowledge *about* God as a substitute for knowledge *of* God. Many love to read Christian books, read theology, or even read the Bible, but they come to look upon their growing education as something to be trusted in. How do you know you love God? Look at how much I know. Look at how much I've studied. Now knowledge of God is a good thing and deliberate ignorance is a sin. The life of the mind is to be encouraged, and no Christian should be content with not learning more. But all that learning and knowledge is supposed to lead you to commune with God: to speak with him in prayer, to respond to him in adoration, to obey Him deliberately. Many a Christian scholar has abandoned the faith, and the problem was not the lack of knowledge. Very often, the attainment of knowledge, the gathering up of degrees, the reading or writing of books becomes an end in itself, a god to be worshipped, a proof of atonement. Good things become evil things when they replace the ultimate thing.

Some Bible-believing Christians turn their church attendance and church membership into a kind of end. They look to the fact that they are part of a group that seems to know God, they are part of a group that seems to be going to Heaven and they place their trust in the fact that they are in church, or accepted by the church, or been baptised and recognised by the church.

Make no mistake, a person who exempts himself from God's people is probably signifying the fact that he is not part of God's family (1 John 5:21). Just like no organ can be counted alive if it is removed from a body, so a person who exists outside of a local church finds himself in a category nowhere recorded in the New Testament. But as vital as the local church is for our faith, it is still one of several vital means. Our faith is never in the church. Our faith is in Christ revealed in His Word, by His Spirit through His church.

Today you see a lot of this. Amongst all the confusion and fragmentation, you find that people want to throw their lot in with the right group. They can't work out all the competing positions, so they decide to throw their lot in with the church they think is the oldest, or the grandest, or the most traditional, or the largest, or the wealthiest. This attitude is turning a means into an end. Good things become evil things when they replace the ultimate thing.

For some, it becomes a particular Christian teacher, or pastor, or author, or biblical counsellor, or spiritual mentor. Again, God gives the church gifted men, and gifts Christians with particular abilities to teach and mature the body. And these gifts are not to be shunned, or deprecated, they are to be received with thanksgiving as from the hand of God. They are to be used to stir up more faith than ever before. But for some, that one teacher, pastor, counsellor, radio or TV teacher becomes nearly everything. This one teacher becomes to them the absolute ideal. He or she seems to have no faults. He is the epitome of being full of grace, or especially wise, or eloquent, or compassionate, or bold. And before we know it, this teacher is looked to as the incarnation of the Christian life. What was supposed to be a means has become an end. The Christian pins his hopes on this teacher. He's the one – I'm on his side, I'm collecting his books, collecting his sermons, making his every conviction my own, looking to him as the final authority on my every question of faith and practice.

For some children and young people, their parents can slip into this place. Oh, they know their parents faults all right, but Dad or Mom are the ultimate Christians, and they are looked to for all spiritual support, and stability.

For some it is a spouse. For some it is a spiritual mentor. But however it happens, that person looms larger than Christ. His or her approval is more important than Christ's. His opinion is looked to before the Word. His counsel is regarded more highly than the actual authorities God has placed in your life. You become dependent on her/his teaching, and feel you cannot live without it. Your Christian life stands upon, and rises and falls upon another human being. Good things become evil things when they replace the ultimate thing.

For some, the bronze serpent is doing a certain ministry. Certainly ministry is the expected fruit of a living, growing Christian. If you are one of Christ's disciples, you will be known for it by the love you have for His people. But even ministry is a means for faith, not an end.

For some, their bronze serpent is a particular kind of Christian ministry: be it teaching, preaching, evangelising, discipling, showing mercy, giving, organising, helping...this becomes more and more where the Christian finds his identity and his satisfaction. Doing some kind of ministry becomes not just a means of faith, but the very goal and object of faith, so that without it, you feel anxious, agitated, displeased.

Good things become evil things when they replace the ultimate thing.

So what did Hezekiah do to this good thing that had become a bad thing?

III. The Best Thing: Pure Worship

.⁴ He 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.

Now think about what Hezekiah's choices were. Here is a treasured artifact of Israel's history. Here is a physical reminder of God's grace. This thing has value as a piece of history, as a national symbol, as evidence of a miracle, as a symbol of salvation. Hezekiah could surely do all kinds of things with this. He could remove the idol worship around it, and leave it intact. He could confiscate it, and put it in one of the royal treasuries. Surely he could remove the idolatry, and save the symbol.

That all depends on how deep the idolatry is. When the people have now identified themselves with this idol, defined who they are, and who their god is through this idol, you cannot simply change the circumstances. You cannot just give it a surface scrubbing, once the rust of idolatry has corroded deep within.

What does he do?

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He broke it in pieces. He destroyed it. He mashed it up, until it was broken beyond repair. I'm sure some devoted worshippers gathered up bronze fragments, hoping to put it together again, but Hezekiah made sure that it was irrecoverable, irretrievable. He made sure that it was laid in the dust and seen for what it was: a piece of bronze. The Hebrew is unclear as whether Israel had always called it Nehushtan, or whether Hezekiah called it Nehushtan. I believe it was Hezekiah, because Nehushtan means 'piece of bronze' – not a flattering title for a god. I think Hezekiah was laying it out for all to see – this is just a piece of bronze. Mere metal. This object that had become a god was laid low, desecrated, ridiculed, humiliated. Hezekiah wanted all to see the emptiness and futility of looking to and depending on a piece of bronze. Hezekiah wasn't interested in re-using the snake, redeeming the snake, re-defining the snake. He was only interested in removing and destroying the snake.

So what about us, if we turn good things into bad things by using them as ultimate things?

God is incredibly gentle and patient with us. The very fact that He gives us means of faith, that He knows run the risk of turning into idols, shows how much He wants to nourish and nurse our weak faith into strong faith. He trusts us more than we would trust one another. But as we grow up, God expects us to recognise means from ends. He wants us to see that our theological knowledge, our local church, our spiritual leaders, our examples, our parents, our spiritual mentors, our ministries are all means to get to know God, and thereby trust Him and serve Him, and delight in Him all the more.

But what if we allow a means to become an end? What if we transfer our trust from God to man? What if we begin serving something or someone other than God? God is faithful to firstly warn us, and prompt us. The Corinthian church was first warned about its idolising of men. They were warned that

Apollos was just a man, so was Peter, so was Paul. God will first speak, remind, rebuke, admonish.

But if we persist, then some chastening will come our way, because whom the Lord loves, he chastens. God may have to remove that thing or person from us. That doesn't always come the same way. It may be an actual move.

But don't take this to mean that God is some cruel Being waiting to strike down our friends, parents, pastors. Often enough, God shows you their weaknesses. He reveals their humanity. He shows you that they make mistakes. They sin. They don't have perfect lives. They misinterpret things. They forget things. They make poor judgement calls. And God will sometimes let that happen, so that just like Hezekiah said "Just a piece of bronze", so you will say "Just a man, just a woman." He'll let you see how imperfect is the church that you've placed all your trust in. He'll let you see how imperfect are its members and leaders, so that just when you thought that it alone was Heaven's embassy on Earth, you will be led to say, "Just a church." He'll let that ministry that has become everything to you be filled with disappointments, frustrations, betrayals and hardships. He'll let theological knowledge become cold and dry, and seem to shut out the joy of loving God.

Spurgeon: "If we overvalue the blessings which God gives us in our teachers and preachers, he may remove them from us. We are to exalt not the pipes but the fountain head; not the windows but the sun must we thank for light; not the basket which holds the food or the lad who brings the loaves and fishes must we reverence, but the divine Master who blesses and multiplies the bread and feeds the multitude. To Jesus must all adoring eyes be turned, and to the Holy Spirit the revealer of the truth, and to our Father who is in heaven; and we must receive the gospel not as the word of man, but as it is in truth, the word of God. Love the ministers of Christ, but fall not into that form of brazen serpent worship which will degrade you into the servants of men."

Depending on how much you have allowed that person or thing to become an idol, it can be very painful, almost devastating. I have seen people become cynical, sceptical, hardened to the faith, because they held someone or something up as a direct link to God, and then God exposed the weakness, the sinfulness, the humanity of that person. If you have set someone up as a god, you feel betrayed, tricked, cheated. How could they do this? They're supposed to be perfect.

Really? Did they say that? Did that church, or that pastor, or that counsellor, or that parent ever say to you, "I should become your total and ultimate dependence". No usually, people don't ask us to worship them, we choose to. Because just like it was easier to worship the bronze serpent than it was to worship the invisible and true God, so it is easier to worship a parent, a pastor, another Christian, a ministry, a book or a church than it is to worship the true and living and unseen God.

What are we to do? Think of Abraham and Isaac. Isaac was a means of faith for Abraham. Every time he looked at Isaac, he saw the promises of God fulfilled. Isaac reminded him to keep trusting in God, keep loving God. But there probably came a day when Abraham began to treasure Isaac so much that Isaac became the focus of his faith. He began to rest his hopes not in God, but in Isaac, not in God's promises, but in Isaac's life. Isaac had gone from a means of faith to the object of Abraham's faith.

So we know what God did. God called on Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. To obey that command, Abraham had to place all his trust in God, trust God to keep His promises and give up on Isaac as his only hope. It must have been terrifying, but when Abraham raised that knife, the idol of Isaac had

already been smashed, chopped into pieces. He knew that Isaac was 'Just a boy.' God was his God. And once the work was done, God said, "Stop. Now your heart has been revealed. The idols are torn out. I alone am your God. I never meant you to harm the boy, only that you would destroy your idols."

You can do that before God sends you up a Mount Moriah. You can say, "Lord, this child of mine, this parent, this pastor, this teacher, this counselor, this spiritual mentor, this ministry, this church is in danger of, or is already sitting in Your place. It has become my trust, my devotion, and I have turned a means into an end. I sense it by how terrified I am that You would take it away. So I want to release my grip on this, and let it become another means to love you, a means of faith, and not an end.