

It Just Ain't So

Let me tell you a story that sounds like one in the Bible—but it's not.

#1 People were complaining about how bad a job God was doing in providing food and water in the desert. God didn't like it and sent snakes. People were dying. The leader went to God to ask advice. God said to make a metal snake, hang it on a pole in the middle of the tent city. If the people would look at it, they would be immediately healed.

Now, that story isn't really in the Bible. Find the mistake.

How carefully do you read your Bible? Did you spot the mistake?

I know you're thinking that it sounds exactly like the Bible you own, but it's not.

#2 People were complaining about how bad a job God was doing about providing food and water in the desert. God didn't like it and sent snakes. People were dying. The leader went to God to ask advice. God said to make a metal snake, hang it on a pole in the middle of the tent city. If the people would look at it, they wouldn't die.

How carefully did you read that?

In example #1 everything was just like the Biblical account until the next to the last word.

You see this was a test of faith. The Bible doesn't say they would be healed immediately, it simply says they would live. Maybe they were still sick for a long, long time, maybe just a short time; but if they looked, they lived.

Imagine this situation. Two brothers are lying in their tent sick as dogs. A messenger comes running through the camp yelling, "Go look at the brass serpent that Moses put up over near the Tabernacle if you've been bitten."

One brother rolls out of his cot and stumbles toward the door. He is a believer in **JHWH**. His brother, an unbeliever, stays in bed and asks, "Where are you going, bro?"

"I'm going to look at the snake."

"You feeling okay?"

"Nope. Feel rotten."

"Lie down, little brother. There's no magic in Moses' snake."

"Moses is God's man and he made a snake. I trust God. Oooh. Ughhh." He pulls back the tent flap and groans. He takes another step onto the dirt path, spots the brass serpent on a pole, turns around, and shuffles back to his bunk.

His brother asks how he feels now. "I feel miserable," and he curls on his bed and immediately falls asleep.

Big brother went back to sleep, too. Which one lived?

Do you remember Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in John chapter 3? Jesus is explaining how to have everlasting life. Just before he gets to John 3:16, he reminds Nick about Moses' brass snake. "As Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life." Faith is the central theme of the serpent story.

Now let's go back in the tent and imagine what it would have been like if the younger brother had been healed immediately. We'll pick it up as he gets to the tent flap and peeks out. As he pulls back the tent flap, he groans, takes one more step outside, and spots the snake! A wave of healing power jolts through his body! "Wow! I feel great! I'm going to run around the camp. See you later!" Zoom! He's off.

What do you think the big unbelieving brother's going to do? If he climbs out of his bunk, it's because he thinks he just saw a magic trick. It has nothing to do with his faith in God or obedience to God's command through Moses.

This illustration simple highlights the importance of reading God's Word carefully. In this case the consequences of not reading carefully don't result in poor theology or sinful living, but there are portions of Scripture which can cause serious error if we read too casually.

As I give this illustration, let me also say that we are free within limits to give our opinions in retelling stories in God's Word. For instance, if you believe that the people were healed immediately, you can say something like this, "The Bible simply says the people stayed alive if they looked at the brass serpent. It doesn't say they were healed immediately, but I think that God probably healed everybody right away."

Just make it clear that it is your opinion and that it doesn't disagree with the Bible.

Even if you're acquainted with the gist of the story, don't think that as a Bible teacher you have the right to slouch on your preparation. You are teaching the only bok God ever wrote. Handle it like a precious jewel.

"We don't think God is pleased with shoddy Bible study."

John Walvoord, president of Dallas Theological Seminary