

JESUS: THE SNAKE ON THE POLE

I. [Numbers 21:4-9](#) [John 3:1-18](#) [1 John 4:9-10](#) [2 Kings 18:1-6](#)

A. Last Sunday we learned all about the Edomites, descendants of Esau, and how they refuse to allow their "brother" Israel, pass through their land on their journey north in preparation to invade Canaan. We read also the sad news about Aaron's death and burial on Mount Hor. And finally we read about Israel's first big victory over the Canaanites at *Hormah* which means *destruction*. After 40 years of hiking through the desert has Israel turned a corner? Maybe so and maybe no...

B. Today we read another curious event from Numbers, one that's truly an important part of Israel's his-story. Let's go to the text...

C. [Numbers 21:4-9](#) (ESV) picks up where we left off last Sunday...

1) **V4-5: 4** From Mount Hor (*where Aaron passed*) they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. (Edom brashly said "no" to Israel's request to journey thru plus God said don't touch Edom...) And the people became impatient on the way. (**You're kidding?!**) **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 we loathe this worthless food." (Fortieth verse, same as the first, a little bit louder and a little bit worse! Notice Moses doesn't fall on his face this time and cry out to God! He may be wishing there was a rock he could strike a few times so water could flow out and drown the people!)

2) **V6-9: 6** Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. (**Awful! This makes frogs, boils, and locusts seem pretty mild!**) **7** And 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** And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live." **9** So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live. (And that folks is basically the end of this account. Or is it?)

D. I'm reading a book right now titled, *The Lost City of the Monkey God* by Douglas Preston. It's about the search and discovery of an ancient city of an unknown people, rivals of the Mayans, hidden in the dense Mosquitia Jungle of Honduras. A research team locates this legendary lost city using a special technology known as LIDAR. After much preparation, they venture into one of the most dangerous jungle environments on the planet. These inherent dangers include a snake called the *fer-de-lance*. French for *lance-head* or *spearhead*, this pit viper can grow up to 8 feet and is one of the most aggressive and venomous snakes in the world. Among all the high-tech devices, maps, film equipment, and necessities they haul in, they have all kinds of antivenoms on hand for various snakes, especially the *fer-de-lance*. One wonders what kinds of snakes God turned loose on His ever discontent, quarrelsome, and ungrateful people? But is there anything or anyone that can bring some relevance, some meaning to this desert infestation of serpents? What if I told you Jesus can and did?!

E. John 3:1-18 (NLT) Jesus explains this snake episode to one of Israel's top teachers...

1) V1: 1 *There was a man named Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leader who was a Pharisee. (The Pharisees were as religiously devout as they come and most rejected Jesus with a passion. But not this one!)*

2) V2-3: 2 *After dark one evening, he came to speak with Jesus. "Rabbi," he said, "we all know that God has sent You to teach us. Your miraculous signs are evidence that God is with You." 3 Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God." (Jesus takes charge of the conversation and starts talking about regeneration! Besides a few prophetic hints, this is beyond all revealed theology to this point. It's earth shattering news! How'll one of Judah's most learned teachers respond?)*

3) V4-10: 4 *"What do you mean?" exclaimed Nicodemus. "How can an old man go back into his mother's womb and be born again?" 5 Jesus replied, "I assure you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. 6 Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life. 7 So don't be surprised when I say, 'You must be born again.' 8 The wind blows wherever it wants. Just as you can hear the wind but can't tell where it comes from or where it is going, so you can't explain how people are born of the Spirit." 9 "How are these things possible?" Nicodemus asked. 10 Jesus replied, "You are a respected Jewish teacher, and yet you don't understand these things? (If you think this conversation was just for Nicodemus and not for you, you'd be sorely mistaken!)*

4) V11-12: 11 *I assure you, we tell you what we know and have seen, and yet you won't believe our testimony. 12 But if you don't believe Me when I tell you about earthly things, how can you possibly believe if I tell you about heavenly things? (We prefer to understand and then decide whether or not to believe; Jesus says, 'Believe and the understanding will follow!')*

5) V13: 3 *No one has ever gone to heaven and returned. But the Son of Man has come down from heaven. (Read between the lines; Jesus is indicating He's more than just another Rabbi or Prophet; He's referring to Himself as coming down from heaven! He's waxing Messianic and while many would be looking for stones to throw, Nicodemus is all ears! And just when you thought this had nothing to do with fiery snakes in the desert 1400 years prior, Jesus says...)*

6) V14-18: 14 *And as Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 so that everyone who believes in Him will have eternal life. 16 "For this is how God loved the world: He gave His one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life. 17 God sent His Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through Him. 18 "There is no judgment against anyone who believes in Him. But anyone who does not believe in Him has already been judged for not believing in God's one and only Son. (Jesus, referring to the cross He'd soon bear, becomes the snake on the pole! Those bitten and poisoned by the serpent of old, filled with sin and facing certain death, can now look to Jesus on the cross, dying for their sin, absorbing the punishment we deserve, and receive His record of righteousness and live! Live forevermore!) (2 Cor. 5:21)*

F. Was John present for this Jesus/Nicodemus meet-up? Perhaps. In 1 John 4:9-10 (NIV) John echoes in similar fashion: 9 This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him. 10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. (The Bread & Cup remind us!)

G. One of the chief tactics of that *serpent of old, the enemy of our souls*, is to steer people's hearts away from their Creator and onto His creation, even to the point of worshipping created things, even good things. Yes, good things can become objects of worship. There's a difference between seeking God's face and seeking His hands. In the desert, Israel always got into trouble when they quit seeking God's face. When His hands weren't providing what they wanted, when they wanted it, how they wanted it, they got angry. But when He did provide, their gaze often didn't shift back to His face, instead they worshiped the stuff He gave! Some things never change!

H. The story's told of the time British officer, T.E. Lawrence, took a delegation of Arabs to the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. Better known as *Lawrence of Arabia*, T.E.'s Arabian guests were intrigued by the sights and sounds of Paris. Places like Napoleon's Tomb, the Arch of Triumph, and the Eiffel Tower were indeed impressive. But what did they find more astonishing? The faucets in their hotel bathroom! Why? Water in the desert doesn't come easy; it's a very precious commodity. But here in Paris, a mere twist of the faucets, and water came gushing out! They were besides themselves! When the conference ended and everyone was packing to leave, Lawrence found his Arab friends with wrenches in the bathroom, trying to remove the faucets. When he confronted them, they replied: "*We need faucets, if we have them, we will have all the water we want!*" Unfortunately they viewed the faucets as something akin to magic but of course they were merely an instrument for allowing the water to flow.

I. Sometimes people even stoop to worshipping the symbols that represent what God has done rather than basking with thanksgiving in Him and Him alone. We view the cross as an immensely important reminder, symbol even, of our redemption. Some, however, wear crosses superstitiously, or for luck or protection or status. But it's not the cross itself that saved us; it was Jesus! He was the sacrifice that saved us! He was impaled on the xulon, the tree, the cross, but the cross didn't redeem us--Christ did!

J. In the history of Israel & Judah's kings, only a few did what was right in God's eyes. Most did evil. But one good king was named Hezekiah. 2 Kings 18:1-6 (NLT) clues us in: 1 Hezekiah son of Ahaz began to rule over Judah in the third year of King Hoshea's reign in Israel. 2 He was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem twenty-nine years. His mother was Abijah, the daughter of Zechariah. 3 He did what was pleasing in the LORD's sight, just as his ancestor David had done. 4 He removed the pagan shrines, smashed the sacred pillars, and cut down the Asherah poles. (With great zeal, Hezekiah crushed idol worship! But listen closely...) He broke up the bronze serpent that Moses had made, because the people of Israel had been offering sacrifices to it. The bronze serpent was called *Nehushtan*. (So that bronze serpent, from 7 centuries prior, became an object of worship rather than a symbol of the saving grace of Almighty God!) 5 Hezekiah trusted in the LORD, the God of Israel. (He TRUSTED WHO?!) There was no one like him among all the kings of Judah, either before or after his time. 6 He remained faithful to the LORD in everything, and he carefully obeyed all the commands the LORD had given Moses.

K. We take the Bread & Cup today as an act of obedience flowing from our trust in God our Father and Lord Jesus Christ. The symbols do not save us! They remind us of our Savior; of His atoning sacrifice--His shed blood for you and me. This ordinary means of grace declares the extraordinary love of God and the length He would go to restore us to Himself. Let's ask Him to move in our midst as we take the Bread & Cup...

*** Pray & Officiate Communion...**

*** 1 John 4:9-10 (NIV) takes us home: 9** *This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him. 10* *This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*

Scriptures, Videos, & Bonus Stuff

Numbers 21:4-9 (ESV)

4 From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient 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 we loathe this worthless food." **6** Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. **7** And 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** And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live." **9** So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

John 3:1-18 (NLT)

1 There was a man named Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leader who was a Pharisee. **2** After dark one evening, he came to speak with Jesus. "Rabbi," he said, "we all know that God has sent You to teach us. Your miraculous signs are evidence that God is with You." **3** Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God." **4** "What do you mean?" exclaimed Nicodemus. "How can an old man go back into his mother's womb and be born again?" **5** Jesus replied, "I assure you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. **6** Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life. **7** So don't be surprised when I say, 'You must be born again.' **8** The wind blows wherever it wants. Just as you can hear the wind but can't tell where it comes from or where it is going, so you can't explain how people are born of the Spirit." **9** "How are these things possible?" Nicodemus asked. **10** Jesus replied, "You are a respected Jewish teacher, and yet you don't understand these things? **11** I assure you, we tell you what we know and have seen, and yet you won't believe our testimony. **12** But if you don't believe Me when I tell you about earthly things, how can you possibly believe if I tell you about heavenly things? **13** No one has ever gone to heaven and returned. But the Son of Man has come down from heaven. **14** And as Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the

wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, **15** so that everyone who believes in Him will have eternal life. **16** “For this is how God loved the world: He gave His one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life. **17** God sent His Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through Him. **18** “There is no judgment against anyone who believes in Him. But anyone who does not believe in Him has already been judged for not believing in God’s one and only Son.

1 John 4:9-10 (NIV)

9 This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him. **10** This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

2 Kings 18:1-6 (NLT)

1 Hezekiah son of Ahaz began to rule over Judah in the third year of King Hoshea’s reign in Israel. **2** He was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem twenty-nine years. His mother was Abijah, the daughter of Zechariah. **3** He did what was pleasing in the LORD’s sight, just as his ancestor David had done. **4** He removed the pagan shrines, smashed the sacred pillars, and cut down the Asherah poles. He broke up the bronze serpent that Moses had made, because the people of Israel had been offering sacrifices to it. The bronze serpent was called Nehushtan. **5** Hezekiah trusted in the LORD, the God of Israel. There was no one like him among all the kings of Judah, either before or after his time. **6** He remained faithful to the LORD in everything, and he carefully obeyed all the commands the LORD had given Moses.

Bonus Goodies

The Bronze Serpent - Sunday School Adventure for Kids (In The Gap Kids)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fVN8gvzjefE>

John 3:16 - Scene from *The Chosen*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_p2XIUK9VgA

Who Was Hezekiah in the Bible? - GotQuestions.com
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eh7vGIJ_Tuk

The Fer-de-Lance - The Brain Scoop (The Field Museum - Chicago)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jEpn1JXH-jY>

More Verses, Quotes, Excerpts, & Extras

2 Corinthians 5:21 (NIV)

21 God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.

1 Peter 2:23-25 (ESV)

23 When He was reviled, He did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but continued entrusting Himself to Him who judges justly. **24** He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By His wounds you have been healed. **25** For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

John 7:45-52 (NIV)

45 Finally the temple guards went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked them, "Why didn't you bring Him in?" **46** "No one ever spoke the way this Man does," the guards declared. **47** "You mean He has deceived you also?" the Pharisees retorted. **48** "Has any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed in Him? **49** No! But this mob that knows nothing of the law--there is a curse on them." **50** Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their own number, asked, **51** "Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?" **52** They replied, "Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee."

John 19:38-42 (NIV)

38 Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jews. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. **39** He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. **40** Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. **41** At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid. **42** Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

Joseph and Nicodemus Bury Jesus

Ligonier Ministries

<https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/joseph-and-nicodemus-bury-jesus/>

"Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission. . . . Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes. . . . So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews" (vv. 38–40). - [John 19:38–42](#)

Our study of John's gospel resumes today as we pick up our exposition in [John 19:38](#). We are in the middle of considering the most significant events in all of human history—the death and resurrection of Jesus—and our text for this study describes the burial of Jesus.

Once it was clear that Jesus was dead, Joseph of Arimathea approached Pontius Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus so that he could give it a proper burial (v. 38). Ancient Jews had tremendous respect for the human body, so much so that they were sure to bury the bodies of Jews even in cases where they had been convicted of a crime. Normally, in cases of sedition, the Romans left the bodies of crucified criminals on the cross for the vultures to take care of. However, leaving a body hanging on a tree overnight was a violation of the Mosaic law ([Deut. 21:22–23](#)), so the Romans would allow the Jews to follow their traditions and bury even those who had been found guilty of rebellion against Rome. Normally, the Jews would bury criminals in a common grave outside the city gates, but the body of Jesus got a different treatment. Some commentators believe that Pilate's willingness to give the body to Joseph (and Nicodemus; v. 39) is a further indication that Pilate believed Jesus was innocent, since he allowed Jesus not to be buried with other criminals.

We do not know much about Joseph of Arimathea except that he was a wealthy disciple of Jesus who sat on the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of first-century Judaism ([Matt. 27:57](#); [Mark 15:43](#)). [John 19:38](#) tells us that he was a disciple in secret, and of course we know that Nicodemus' devotion to Jesus was likely not public knowledge either, since he came to Jesus at night (3:1). We might be tempted to look down on Joseph and Nicodemus for their reticence to identify publicly with Jesus, yet it is worth noting that taking the body of Jesus for burial was a public declaration of their allegiance to our Lord. What is important is that they did not stay in hiding but finally showed their devotion to Christ.

Following the burial practices of the Jews, Joseph and Nicodemus wrapped the body of Jesus in linen strips and spices that would mask the smell of decomposing flesh. Though Jesus had suffered much humiliation, the honor shown in His burial marks the beginning of a shift to a more exalted state for our Lord. He was laid in a new tomb, a special place reserved in God's providence for Him (19:40–42).

Coram Deo

It is sin to hide our allegiance to Christ ([Matt. 10:32–33](#)), but it is not unforgivable. The key is that we repent of being ashamed or afraid of our identification with Christ and publicly declare that we are His disciples. This is what Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus did when they took Jesus' body for burial. If we have been ashamed of Jesus, let us repent today and ask the Lord to give us the courage to be known as disciples of Christ.

Passages for Further Study

Genesis 23; [Isaiah 53:9](#); [Luke 23:50–56](#); [1 Corinthians 15:1–11](#)

Who Was Hezekiah in the Bible?

By S. Michael Houdmann

<https://www.gotquestions.org/life-Hezekiah.html>

Question: *Who was Hezekiah in the Bible?*

Answer: Hezekiah was one of the few [kings of Judah](#) who was constantly aware of God's acts in the past and His involvement in the events of every day. The Bible describes Hezekiah as a king who had a close relationship with God, one who did "*what was good and right and faithful before the LORD his God*" ([2 Chronicles 31:20](#)).

Hezekiah's story is told in [2 Kings 16:20–20:21](#); [2 Chronicles 28:27–32:33](#); and [Isaiah 36:1–39:8](#). He is also mentioned in [Proverbs 25:1](#); [Isaiah 1:1](#); [Jeremiah 15:4](#); [26:18–19](#); [Hosea 1:1](#); and [Micah 1:1](#).

Hezekiah, a son of the wicked King Ahaz, reigned over the southern kingdom of Judah for twenty-nine years, from c. 715 to 686 BC. He began his reign at age 25 ([2 Kings 18:2](#)). He was more zealous for the Lord than any of his predecessors ([2 Kings 18:5](#)). During his reign, the prophets [Isaiah](#) and [Micah](#) ministered in Judah.

After Ahaz's wicked reign, there was much work to do, and Hezekiah boldly cleaned house. Pagan altars, idols, and temples were destroyed. The [bronze serpent](#) that Moses had made in the desert ([Numbers 21:9](#)) was also destroyed, because the people had made it an idol ([2 Kings 18:4](#)). The [temple](#) in Jerusalem, whose doors had been nailed shut by Hezekiah's own father, was cleaned out and reopened. The Levitical priesthood was reinstated ([2 Chronicles 29:5](#)), and the Passover was re-instituted as a national holiday ([2 Chronicles 30:1](#)). Under Hezekiah's reforms, revival came to Judah.

Because King Hezekiah put God first in everything he did, God prospered him. Hezekiah "*held fast to the LORD and did not stop following him; he kept the commands the LORD had given Moses. And the LORD was with him; he was successful in whatever he undertook*" ([2 Kings 18:6–7](#)).

In 701 BC, Hezekiah and all of Judah faced a crisis. The [Assyrians](#), the dominant world power at the time, invaded Judah and marched against Jerusalem. The Assyrians had already conquered the northern kingdom of Israel and many other nations, and now they threatened Judah ([2 Kings 18:13](#)). In their threats against the city of Jerusalem, the Assyrians openly defied the God of Judah, likening Him to the powerless gods of the nations they had conquered ([2 Kings 18:28–35](#); [19:10–12](#)).

Faced with the Assyrian threat, Hezekiah sent word to the prophet Isaiah ([2 Kings 19:2](#)). The Lord, through Isaiah, reassured the king that Assyria would never enter Jerusalem. Rather, the invaders would be sent home, and the city of Jerusalem would be spared ([2 Kings 19:32–34](#)). In the temple, Hezekiah prays a beautiful prayer for help, asking God to vindicate Himself: "*Now, LORD our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone, LORD, are God*" ([2 Kings 19:19](#)).

God, faithful as always, kept His promise to protect Jerusalem. *“That night the angel of the LORD went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand in the Assyrian camp. When the people got up the next morning—there were all the dead bodies!”* ([2 Kings 19:35](#)). The remaining Assyrians quickly broke camp and withdrew in abject defeat. *“So the LORD saved Hezekiah and the people of Jerusalem. . . . He took care of them on every side”* ([2 Chronicles 32:22](#)).

Later, Hezekiah became very sick. Isaiah told him to set things in order and prepare to die ([2 Kings 20:1](#)). But Hezekiah prayed, beseeching God to be merciful and to remember all the good he had done. Before Isaiah had even left the king’s house, God told Isaiah to tell Hezekiah that his prayer had been heard and that his life would be extended fifteen years. Isaiah applied a poultice, and Hezekiah was healed ([2 Kings 20:5–7](#)).

However, soon after his healing, Hezekiah made a serious mistake. The Babylonians sent a gift to Hezekiah, for they had heard Hezekiah had been sick. In foolish pride, Hezekiah showed the Babylonians all of his treasures, all the silver and gold, and everything in his arsenal. There was nothing Hezekiah did not parade in front of them. Isaiah rebuked Hezekiah for this act and prophesied that all the king had shown the Babylonians would one day be taken to Babylon—along with Hezekiah’s own descendants.

During the years following his illness, Hezekiah fathered the heir to Judah’s throne, [Manasseh](#), who would turn out to be the evilest king ever to reign in Judah ([2 Kings 18–20](#); [2 Chronicles 29–32](#); [Isaiah 36–39](#)). Tradition has it that Manasseh is the one who murdered Hezekiah’s friend, Isaiah.

Hezekiah’s life is, for the most part, a model of faithfulness and trust in the Lord. His faith was more than superficial, as his bold reforms show. Hezekiah’s trust in the Lord was rewarded with answered prayer, successful endeavors, and miraculous victory over his enemies. When faced with an impossible situation, surrounded by the dreadful and determined Assyrian army, Hezekiah did exactly the right thing—he prayed. And God answered.

For Further Study:

[The Complete Book of Who's Who in the Bible by Comfort & Elwell](#)

- While he is not the author of every article on GotQuestions.org, for citation purposes, you may reference our CEO, S. Michael Houdmann.

Pastor Among the Arrested in Illegal Snake Trade Crackdown

Saturday, July 12, 2008 - Associated Press

FRANKFORT, Kentucky — The pastor of a Kentucky church that handles snakes in religious rites was among 10 people arrested by wildlife officers in a crackdown on the venomous snake trade.

More than 100 snakes, many of them deadly, were confiscated in the undercover operation after Thursday's arrests, said Col. Bob Milligan, director of law enforcement for Kentucky Fish and Wildlife.

Most were taken from the Middlesboro home of Gregory James Coots, including 42 copperheads, 11 timber rattlesnakes, three cottonmouth water moccasins, a western diamondback rattlesnake, two cobras and a puff adder.

Handling snakes is practiced in a handful of fundamentalist churches across the Appalachia region, based on the interpretation of Bible verses saying true believers can take up serpents without being harmed. The practice is illegal in most states, including Kentucky.

Coots, 36, is pastor of the Full Gospel Tabernacle in Jesus Name in Middlesboro, where a Tennessee woman died after being bitten by a rattlesnake during a service in 1995. Her husband died three years later when he was bitten by a snake in northeastern Alabama.

Coots was charged Thursday with buying, selling and possessing illegal reptiles. He had no listed telephone number and could not be reached for comment. There was no phone listing for the church.

"It is disturbing to me that individuals would keep such dangerous wildlife in their homes and in neighborhoods where they put their families, visitors and neighbors at such high risk," Milligan said.

The snakes, plus one alligator, were turned over to the nonprofit Kentucky Reptile Zoo in Slade. Most appeared to have been captured from the wild, with some imported from Asia and Africa.

Zoo Director Jim Harrison said some of the animals would likely have become exotic pets had they not been seized.

"There's been a large trade in exotics for years," he said. "Some people are just fascinated with them."

Undercover officers purchased more than 200 illegal reptiles during the investigation, some of which were advertised for sale on Web sites. One such Web site lists copperheads for \$50 each and cobras for \$450.

"You can purchase anything off the Internet except common sense," Harrison said. "A venomous snake isn't a pet. You don't play with it. If you do, you're an idiot."