

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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THE BRONZE SNAKE

Numbers 21:4-9

I am not a fan of snakes. Are you? In fact, I will admit to having ophidiophobia, which is the fear of snakes. Phobias are usually considered to be irrational, but I don't think there is anything irrational about the fear of snakes. I never saw the movie *Snakes on a Plane* (2006), but I'm pretty sure it was *not* a feel-good movie. And, as some of you may recall, Indiana Jones was not particularly fond of snakes. Along with spiders and scorpions, snakes are among the most intensely disliked and feared creatures in the world.

In the Bible, snakes are not usually presented in a favorable light. It is true that the Lord caused Moses' shepherd's staff to turn into a snake as a demonstration of His power (Exodus 4:4). It is also true that Jesus instructed His disciples to be "as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves" (Matthew 10:16) when He sent them out to preach the gospel of the kingdom and to heal every kind of disease and sickness (10:1-16).

But usually, snakes or serpents are not presented in a positive light – starting, of course, with the serpent that tempted Eve in the Garden of Eden and induced Adam and Eve to commit the first sin against God, which resulted in the fall not only of humankind but of the whole creation from the original state of grace (Genesis 3). That snake in the garden was the personification of Satan himself, the great deceiver, the archenemy of God and of our souls.

When John the Baptist burst onto the scene to prepare the way for the coming ministry of Jesus, he said to the Pharisees and the other religious leaders who came to be baptized by him: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath (of God)?" (Matthew 3:7; cf. Luke 3:7) When he called them vipers, he was not paying them a compliment 😊. Nor was Jesus paying them a compliment when He referred to the Pharisees and teachers of the Jewish law as "snakes" and "vipers" in Matthew 23:33.

Several times in the Book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible, the devil (or Satan) is described as a snake. Revelation 12 describes a "war in heaven" in which "the great dragon – that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray" was cast out of heaven and "hurled to the earth" (12:7-9). And Revelation 20, which speaks of the final defeat of our archenemy, refers to him again as "the dragon, the ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan" (20:2).

While snakes were a part of God's good creation in the beginning, since the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden, snakes are a reminder to us of our fallenness, and the poisonous venom of many snakes rightly strikes fear into our hearts. You don't want to mess with a poisonous snake. Anyone who takes the words attributed to Jesus at the end of the Gospel of Mark (16:18) as an invitation or a license to become a snake handler is just playing with poison and misconstrues the teaching of Jesus.

We encounter poisonous snakes in Numbers 21. Snakes whose venom is lethal. It is another case of “déjà vu all over again” for the people of Israel. Once again, they fall back into their old habit of grumbling and complaining. When will they ever learn? Happily, this is the last recorded occasion of their grumbling before entering the Promised Land. By the grace of God, they have just won their first military victory over an army of Canaanites (Numbers 21:1-3). But instead of marching directly into the land of Canaan from the south, they must take a detour, because the Edomites (descendants of Jacob’s brother Esau) refuse to let them pass through their land. So they have to take the long way around. And, as you might expect, the people grow impatient. They become “irritable and cross” (21:4, *MSG*). They start complaining again about the food and water. They are sick and tired of eating manna. They say: “We detest this miserable food” (21:5, *NIV*). “We loathe this worthless food” (*ESV*).

We have heard this song before. And it is not music to the ears of the Lord their God. We have seen more than enough in the history of God’s covenant people to know that grumbling is dangerous. It is not an attractive quality. You won’t find grumbling on any list of spiritual gifts. It gives God heartburn. Though God is incredibly patient and longsuffering with us, habitual grumbling and complaining make His heart burn with anger. Do you understand what I’m saying?

So what does God do? He sends judgment upon them in the form of poisonous snakes whose bite is lethal. And Israelites are dying by the droves. They are dropping like flies. They cannot do anything to save themselves. When the people repent of their grumbling – a repentance that appears to be genuine – Moses prays for them. But the prayer of Moses does not end the plague. Instead, God instructs him to make a bronze (or copper) replica of a snake and put it on a pole, with the promise that anyone bitten by a snake who then looks at the bronze snake will be healed. And that, we are told in verse 9, is what happened. Not because of some kind of magic in the bronze snake. But because of the grace and power of God shown mercifully to His undeserving people.

It is an unusual event in the history of a nation filled with unusual events. We might not pay much attention to this one, except that Jesus Himself refers to it in His conversation with a respected Jewish leader named Nicodemus in John 3. After telling Nicodemus about the need to be “born again” (John 3:3), Jesus goes on to say in verses 14 and 15: “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man” – a reference to Himself – “must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life.”

God’s provision of the bronze snake as a means for healing from the poisonous snakes in the desert was a pre-figuring or foreshadowing of the sin-atonement death of Jesus on the cross for us. Do you see that? In Numbers, the snake-bitten Israelites were required to look at the bronze snake – a symbol of God’s judgment upon them, a judgment from God they totally deserved because of their grumbling and rebellious hearts. They deserved to die. But God provides the bronze snake as an expression of His mercy. In His mercy, He did not treat them as their sins deserve (Psalm 103:10). Which is true for us as well.

The Lord’s provision, though, was not automatic. This was no blanket provision of healing. The people had to do something in order to be healed of the poisonous snake bites. They had

to look at the bronze snake. Whether they understood it or not, they had to obey God by looking at the bronze snake and trust in His power – God’s power, not the power of a sculpture – to heal them. They had to acknowledge their sin and see that it had been judged by God.

God could have removed the snakes. Instead, He left the snakes but provided a remedy. But this was only a foreshadowing of what God would do in the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross for us. We are all under the curse of death because of our sins. Whether it is grumbling against God or having other gods before Him, whether it is failing to love others or pride or lust or lying or greed or selfishness or ... you name your sin ... we have all sinned against God more times than we can count and in more ways than we know. What we deserve is the judgment of God. What we deserve is to be cursed by God. Our good deeds can never cure us of the snakebite of sin.

But, as He did with the people of Israel in the desert, God has provided the remedy for us. The remedy is the death of Jesus on the cross for us. Jesus was lifted up on the cross, where He bore our sins – yours and mine – in His body (1 Peter 2:24). The Bible says: “God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might” be made righteous and holy in God’s sight (2 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus “redeemed us from the curse of the law” – the law that none of us can live up to – “by becoming a curse for us, as it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree’” (Galatians 3:13).

Jesus *took* the curse that you and I deserve. Jesus *became* the curse that you and I deserve. Jesus *experienced* the last full measure of the curse you and I deserve when He suffered and died on the cross. In becoming the curse for us, Jesus has cured us – He has cured all who come to Him in true repentance of our sins and trusting faith in Him – of the ultimate curse of the deadly “snakebite” of our sin. Do you see that?

In the desert, the snake-bitten Israelites could escape death only by accepting the remedy God provided for them. Or they could reject God’s remedy. They could say “No” to God’s provision, and go on dying. The choice was theirs. There was no other way. There was no other hope. Only those who looked at the bronze snake were healed.

And so it is with Jesus. He did what He did to take away all of our sins and all the eternal consequences of our sins. He did it to reconcile us to God. He did it to give us peace with God.

The poisonous snakes were instruments of God’s judgment upon the Israelites because of their sins of ingratitude and grumbling against God. Yet it was a bronze replica of a snake that God ordained as a symbol of His grace – grace that comes free of charge to people who don’t deserve it and never will. They didn’t deserve it. They never would and never could deserve it. Just like us. We don’t deserve what Jesus did on the cross. And we never will.

As a young man, Charles Spurgeon wandered into a church in England one day and heard a sermon on Isaiah 45:22, where the Lord says: “Look to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other.” The preacher that day said that looking doesn’t

require any effort or any special status or qualifications. Anyone can look. He exhorted Spurgeon directly to look to Jesus. Spurgeon says he looked and God saved him.

Which is what God does for everyone who looks to Jesus in faith. It is what God does for everyone who looks to the cross where Jesus died for us. It is what Jesus did for me. You have heard it said that the ground is level at the foot of the cross. If you have not heard it before, you are hearing it now: *The ground is level at the foot of the cross.* Which means that no one is better than anyone else. We are all worse sinners than we know, and we are all equally in need of the salvation and forgiveness that only Jesus can give.

Just as Moses lifted up the bronze serpent in the desert and everyone who looked at it was healed, so Jesus was lifted up on the cross so that everyone who looks to Him in faith will be saved. Everyone who looks to Him in faith will have their sins wiped out. Everyone who looks to Him in faith will receive the promise of eternal life with Him.

But, like the Israelites in the desert, there is a choice involved. There is a decision to be made. You can come to Jesus, or you can reject Him. You can look to Him in faith, acknowledging your need for His saving work in your life, or you can say “No, thanks” and try some futile method of self-justification. You can minimize your sinfulness. You can try to rationalize it. You can compare yourself with people whose sins are more obvious than yours. You can try to convince yourself that you can make it through this life and get to heaven on your own. Or you can face the fact that you are sinful to the core, and that only Jesus and what He has done for you on the cross can save you from the hell you deserve.

Jesus was lifted up from the earth on the cross so that everyone who looks to Him in faith will have eternal life. So that everyone who believes in Him will be forgiven. So that everyone who trusts in Him will be set free from the power of sin and guilt – set free to live for His glory and to enjoy Him forever.

How is it with you today?

Have you come clean with God about the sin in your life?

Have you honestly admitted that you are a sinner in need of a Savior?

Have you looked to Jesus and His once-for-all sacrifice of Himself on the cross to save you from your sins?

I hope you have. If you have not, or if you are not sure, today is the day to look to Him.

Today is the day to turn from your sins and to turn to Jesus, trusting in His death on the cross to pay for all your sins. I promise you that Jesus will not turn you away. He will not turn away anyone who comes to Him in faith.

Look to Him to save you from the deadly snakebite of sin. Look to Him to do what you can never do for yourself. And then, as it says in Hebrews 12:2, keep your eyes on Jesus. Keep looking to Him as you run the race of faith. With a heart of gratitude for His immeasurable grace.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.