

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield,  
Virginia, on Sunday, August 29, 1993,  
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GENESIS 3:1 AND JOHN 3:14

"Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made."

"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life."

THE STORY OF TWO SNAKES

When we place these two verses alongside each other, we catch a glimpse of two serpents -- the serpent of sin and the serpent of salvation. Isn't it amazing that in Holy Scripture the same symbol, a snake, should be used to set forth both realities -- the reality of sin and the reality of salvation?

The serpent of sin! Well, that imagery seems appropriate enough, doesn't it? We can at once appreciate its force and relevance, for is there not something about a snake which instinctively reminds us of the ugly fact of moral evil?

But the serpent of salvation! Surely that figure doesn't seem to fit at all! It looks irrelevant, indeed irreverent. Yet I trust that before we are done we shall see the sublime significance of this symbolism also.

1. The serpent, we have said, is an apt symbol for SIN. But why? What is there about a snake which peculiarly fits it for that role? I think three things:

(a) First, its fascination. The old Genesis story tells us how the serpent approached Eve one day in the Garden of Eden. Now surely if it had been the ugly, squirming reptile with which we are familiar, she should have recoiled from it in terror, and fled for dear life. But it was not! It was only later that God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you above all the livestock and all the wild animals. You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life" (Gen. 3:14). But at the first, when Eve looked upon it, it must have been a creature of surpassing loveliness, so charming, so captivating, so bewitching that it captured her heart almost before she realized what was happening.

Even today some snakes are beautiful. In South America, for example, there is a particularly venomous snake called the "Bush master" which grows to a great length and is very cruel. So deadly is its poison that once a person is infected with its venom, he has only 20 minutes to live. Yet this reptile is so lovely that it has been described as

a sort of living rainbow as its many-coloured scales flame and flash in the sunlight.

But whether beautiful or not, it is an undisputed fact that snakes possess an uncanny mesmerizing power. Here in the jungle is a little bird perched on the branch of a tree singing its heart out. All at once from amongst the matted vegetation of the forest floor we see emerging the ugly head of a giant cobra. The eyes of the serpent meet the eyes of the bird, and instantly the song drops back dead into the bird's breast, and the little creature sits there hypnotized, enchanted, petrified, while nearer and nearer inches the hideous monster. At last, reaching the bottom of the tree, the cobra coils its huge length around the trunk and still fixing its victim with its stony stare, glides slowly along the branch toward it. Then, swift as lightning, there is a hiss, a flash, a spurt of blood, and the bird falls to the ground, a heap of crumpled feathers.

Is not that a graphic picture of the action of sin upon the soul? It does not, in the first place, reveal its true nature. It disarms all suspicion by appearing as something fascinating and alluring. That is what the Bible means when it speaks of Satan masquerading as "an angel of light" (2 Cor. 11:14). Isn't it true to say that sin, to which we are strongly attracted by the desires of our lower nature or by the seductions of external temptation, rarely appears otherwise than as immensely appealing? It's naughty but it's nice. Like the snake, it mesmerizes us, casts a spell upon us, robs us of the use of reason, and finally stings us with its poisoned fang, thus paralysing our will. Isn't that what actually happens? Haven't you experienced that in your own life?

The serpent is an apt symbol for sin because of its fascination.

(b) But secondly, there is its subtlety. The lion pounces on its prey with a roar, but the serpent noiselessly steals up to its quarry and with a low hiss strikes home lethally to its heart. Have you noticed how in the biblical narrative this aspect of the serpent's character stands out? It does not say, "God has not said..." Rather it says, "Did God really say...?" (Gen. 3:1). It does not openly deny; it insinuates doubt. It does not come with an affirmation; it comes with an interrogation. "The serpent", it has been said, "is the eternal question mark." Satan's attack is usually covert, not overt. He is forever questioning the goodness of God, forever suggesting that God's will is not our highest happiness after all, forever hinting that forbidden fruit tastes sweeter than any other.

Life, like the Garden of Eden, has its forbidden areas. You remember how the tree in the middle of the garden was off limits for our first parents. Now, concerning certain

pleasures, God has said that they are evil and that we must not indulge in them. It was said of Moses that "he chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time" (Heb. 11:25). But it is important to remember that when God forbids us to do certain things, His motive is not to keep us from enjoying ourselves; it is rather to keep us from destroying ourselves; for indulgence in certain things is terribly dangerous to the soul.

Suppose, for example, that an outbreak of foot and mouth disease occurs in a farming community, and a certain neighborhood is officially described as an infected area; and so, around some of the fields in this locality a fence of electrified wire is fixed up in order to keep healthy animals from straying onto the contaminated ground. Now, I can imagine a cow looking over that wire at the lush grass in the field beyond and arguing, in its bovine way, that the farmer could be neither good nor kind in barring its entrance to such an excellent food supply! But the cow would be wrong, for entrance to that field would mean ultimate death, and so the very thing that seemed to deny the farmer's goodness was, in fact, the strongest proof of it.

Similarly with God's fences -- the moral law, the Commandments. They are defences, but Adam and Eve didn't realize this, and they were suckered into doing what their crafty foe wanted them to do. You see, it is always Satan's strategy to persuade us that when God prohibits something, He does so out of a sadistic desire to see us suffer rather than with a view of serving our highest physical and moral and spiritual interests. Don't believe him, for he is the father of lies. Young people, never think that it's cool to go with the flow. It will destroy your life. Act on the advice of the Apostle James when he said, "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (James 4:7). The serpent is an apt symbol for sin because of its subtlety.

(c) Then thirdly, there is the fatal nature of its poisoning. You cannot localize the effects of a snakebite. Once you let the venom get into the system, there is no arresting it. Pervading every part of the body, it causes almost instant death.

So it is with sin. Its subtlety is such, as we have seen, that it often injects its venom into us almost without our realizing it; and the wounds that it inflicts are sometimes so small that no one but ourselves knows anything about them. Are there things in your life that you have thought or said or done, and as the Holy Spirit reminds you of them, at this very moment you realize with shame and alarm that the serpent's poison has entered your bloodstream and your soul is imperilled?

Yet how many people toy and trifle with the snake of sin! I'm always amazed at the people who keep pet snakes. It is surely not the kind of pet most of us would care for! Yet, how often do we find people making pets of moral snakes -- secret vices, bad habits, that grow stronger with the passing years; perhaps even ugly, crawling lusts too vile to mention; and these are the things which, unconfessed and unrepented of, issue invariably in the death of the soul.

I remember reading once about one of the keepers at the London zoo. Coming to work drunk one day, he picked up a dangerous cobra, and swaying precariously, let it twine itself around his body, holding its head against his brow. Another keeper, arriving on the scene at that moment, was horrified. "Put that snake down at once," he exclaimed. But the man paid no heed. "Why should I?", he laughed. "I am charmed today. It cannot hurt me." Hardly were the words out of his mouth when those terrible fangs struck home, and the man fell writhing in his death agony.

It is a parable. Sin is a deadly thing. To tamper with it is to court spiritual suicide. The serpent is indeed an apt symbol for sin because of the fatal nature of its poisoning.

2. So much for the first serpent -- the serpent of sin. Let us turn now to the other -- the serpent of SALVATION.

The devastation caused by the serpent of sin is such that man, by his own unaided efforts, cannot remove the moral venom from his soul, nor arrest its toxic action. But God can and does deal with it, and that is precisely what He did at the Cross. Listen -- "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life."

You remember the historical incident to which our Lord refers -- it is found in Numbers 21:4-9. At one point in their wanderings through the desert on their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land, the people began to complain bitterly against God, and against Moses, their God-given leader. "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is not bread or water and we detest this miserable food (the manna)." And, we read that "God's wrath was kindled against them, with the result that venomous snakes were sent among them, and these snakes bit the people mercilessly so that many died." It was not long before the Israelites confessed their sin, and repented, and asked Moses to pray to the Lord to remove the reptiles. "So Moses prayed, and God said to him, 'Make a snake, and put it upon a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.' So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived." And so it was.

But the point to notice is this -- the cure was like that which caused the disease. It was a snake that made the people ill, and it was a snake that made them well again! "And," declared our Lord, anticipating His own atoning death, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life."

Doesn't it seem almost bizarre that Jesus should liken Himself to the bronze snake? Why a snake? Would it not have been much more fitting to have compared Himself to a lamb? Other portions of Scripture make that fitting comparison, and we can see the beauty and aptness of it. But a snake! What can be the meaning of that?

I believe there is a hint as to what it is in Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 5:21, "God made Him (i.e. Christ) Who had no sin, to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." Or as the Living Bible boldly translates it, "God took the sinless Christ and poured into Him our sins. Then, in exchange, He poured God's goodness into us!" You see it, don't you? The cure is like that which caused the disease. The Serpent of the Cross destroys the works of the serpent of the curse. At Calvary Jesus became sin for us; that is to say, He bore, in His own blessed Person, all the sins of every person who will ever inhabit this earth. And the result was that God had to hide His face from His well-beloved Son, because God cannot look upon sin. That was why our Lord exclaimed, "My God, My God, why have You abandoned Me?" I say it reverently -- Jesus voluntarily became for us the serpent of sin in order that by His atoning death He might then become for us the serpent of salvation. Only God Almighty could have conceived such a perfect plan of salvation. When Jesus was crucified, our sin was crucified in Him, and by faith in Him we are set free from our sin's guilt and power, and are enabled to be accounted righteous before the holy God.

Notice that I said the death of Jesus delivers us not only from sin's guilt, but also from its power. As believers in Him, we are delivered from the bondage of old sins. Oh, to be sure, we are not delivered from temptation. Satan still hurls his legions against us. There are still all sorts of moral vipers that seek to fasten onto us and destroy us. Can Jesus give us power and victory over these?

Let me put my answer into a story. Years ago, during British rule in India, a party of English people were dining together, and as they sat at table, they were terrified to hear an eerie rustling among the palm leaves and coco matting of which the roof was composed; and looking up, saw to their horror that just above them was a huge and deadly snake. Slowly, while they watched, it slithered down one of the poles that supported the roof, and slid across the floor toward a chair on which a young girl was seated. Everyone

was petrified with fear while closer crept the snake. At last, reaching the place where the girl sat, it reared its head, and was on the point of striking when, with incredible presence of mind, the hostess rose silently from the table, and going over to the piano, began to play. Instantly the snake fell back, harmless, charmed by the power of the music!

That, in fact, is a true story, and it is a picture of what Christ can do. We often sing Charles Wesley's immortal hymn --

"O for a thousand tongues to sing  
My great Redeemer's praise..."

Have you ever noticed the second stanza? --

"Jesus, the Name that charms..." --

What? Well, we know that Wesley wrote, "Our fears", and that is gloriously true. But we must not stop there, for the Name of Jesus charms our sins as well --

"'Tis music in the sinner's ears,  
'Tis life and health and peace!"

Thank God it is! The Serpent of the Cross slays the serpent of the curse!

But how? That is the question. And the answer is so obvious that many people miss it. You have only to look to the Cross, as the Israelites looked to the bronze snake on the pole!

Charles Haddon Spurgeon was, by common consent, the greatest preacher in the English-speaking world in the 19th Century. They built the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London to seat 6,000 people, and he filled it twice a Sunday, morning and evening, for 31 years until his death at age 57.

As a boy of 15, Spurgeon was under deep conviction of his sin and need of salvation. He determined to visit every church in the town of Colchester where he lived; and although he heard orthodox sermons, he got no satisfaction. As he wrote years later, "What I wanted to know was -- how can I get my sins forgiven? And they never told me that!"

On Sunday morning, January 6, 1850, there was a severe snowstorm, and Spurgeon slipped into a little Methodist Church. The minister couldn't make it through the snow, and at last, one of the members, described later by Spurgeon as "a poor, thin looking man, a shoemaker, a tailor or something of that sort," entered the pulpit and gave out his text -- Isaiah 45:22 -- "Look unto Me, and be saved, all the ends of the earth." Now listen to Spurgeon's description of

what happened, "In about ten minutes the preacher had got to the end of his tether. Then he saw me sitting under the gallery; and I daresay, with so few present, he knew me to be a stranger. He then said, 'Young man, you look very miserable.' Well, I did; but I had not been accustomed to have remarks made from the pulpit on my personal appearance. However, it was a good blow, well struck. He continued: 'And you will always be miserable -- miserable in life, and miserable in death -- if you do not obey my text. But if you obey now, this moment, you will be saved!' Then he shouted, as only a Primitive Methodist can shout, 'Young man, look to Jesus! -- look, look, look!' I did, and then and there, the cloud was gone, the darkness had rolled away, and that moment I saw the sun! I looked until I could almost have looked my eyes away; and in Heaven I will look still, in joy unutterable! I could have risen that moment and sung with the most enthusiastic of them of the precious blood of Christ, and of the simple faith which looks alone to Him.

What a wonderful story of a soul re-born by the grace of God! There is a beautiful old Sankey hymn that goes like this --

"There is life for a look at the Crucified One,  
There is life at this moment for thee;  
Then look, sinner, look unto Him, and be saved,  
Unto Him Who was nailed to the tree."

Someone has said, "There is Life for a look if you are looking for a Life." "Life for a look!" "Never," says Dr. John Macbeath, "was so much dependent upon so little!"

"Life for a look." Do you believe that? Believe me, it is true. Look to Jesus! Anyone can look. Even a little child can look.

Do you feel Him looking at you and drawing you to Him? If so, then I beg of you, look full in His wonderful face. And when you do, the miracle will happen. The Serpent of the Cross will destroy the serpent of the curse, and bring to your life all the blessings of God's salvation!

"I looked to Jesus, and I found  
In Him my Star and Sun;  
And in that Light of life I'll walk  
Till traveling days are done."

Amen.