

Look and Live!

Numbers 21:4-9, John 3:14-21

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"Snakes! Everybody's favorite reptile. Snakes! They were loose in the camp of Israel. Slithering, all over the place. Hiding, in dark corners and under rocks. Slipping in, under tents, and into sleeping bags. And not the harmless little garter snake kind, but the poisonous and deadly kind. People were being bitten, and falling ill, and dying, all over the camp of Israel!

Where did all these snakes come from? The Lord sent them. They were His judgment over the grumbling of His faithless, ungrateful people. Ungrateful for the manna that fell from heaven every day, but Saturday; and for the fresh water that streamed from the stricken rock. They hated the Lord's food. Despised it! And they despised the Lord for it. They despised the freedom He had given them, and longed for Egypt, instead. So God sent snakes to bite them and kill them.

Do we ever complain? Our house isn't good enough. Or our bank account. Or our family. Our relationships. Our health. Our country. Our leaders. Our church. The weather. The food we have. The clothes we wear. The cars we drive. *All that the Lord has graciously given us!* The difficulties we face.

Stricken, smitten, and afflicted, the people came crawling to Moses with their confession. "*We have sinned, when we spoke against the Lord and against you.*" That's a good start, for them, and for us. Confession. Tell the truth. Admit it and stop trying to cover it up or defend yourself; justify yourself. (William Cwirla)

In the end, what does all our denying and attempts to cover up our sin do? It only makes matters worse and hardens our hearts. Separates us from God. Separates us from others. Separates us from ourselves. Like the Israelites finally did, stop making excuses and tell the truth.

The Lord sent the deadly snakes. Why? To drive His people to repentance. To soften their hardened hearts. To humble them. To turn their hearts back to Him. It could have been so much easier, had they admitted the truth from the start. Isn't that true with us as well? The sooner we repent, the sooner we turn back to the Lord, the better.

They ask Moses to intercede. "*Pray to the Lord to take the snakes away from us.*" They don't feel they can go to God on their own. They're looking for what? An advocate. A go-between. A mediator, to go to God *for* them. So Moses prays for the people, that God could take the snakes away. Can you think of a better prayer? Isn't that what *you* would pray?

And how does God answer Moses' prayer to take the snakes away? God has a better idea. A better answer than what they were asking. Have you ever prayed and God didn't answer the way you wanted? Can you trust that He knows what He's doing? That His answer is better than what you're asking for? We always want trouble taken away. But maybe it would be better if God *used* our trouble for good. Would He ever do that? All the time.

Like Israel, like us, the Apostle Paul prayed that God would take something away, some thorn in the flesh, something that was bothering him, some difficulty in his life. But God knew that because of the great revelations Paul was given, he was in danger of getting too big of a head, of becoming too proud. And that's not what he needed. What Paul *really* needed was not to have his thorn *removed*, his problem taken away – like he had prayed over and over. What he *really* needed was to be *weakened* so that He would *trust* more in God and not in himself or his circumstances.

Might you need something similar? Might God have a better answer than what you're asking for? Might He do, not what *you* think is best, but what He *knows* is best? And can you trust Him with His answer?

Romans 5 "... *but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.*"

James 1 *"Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."*

We want bad things, difficult things, taken away. God wants to *do* something in our lives, in our hearts, to bring us to deeper faith, better trust, in Him. Can you trust He knows what He's doing?

Moses prayed that the snakes would be taken away. That's what the people wanted. Notice, that the Lord doesn't take away the snakes, as they had asked. What good would that do those who had been bitten and were dying? Taking away the snakes wouldn't help them. Instead of taking the snakes away, as they had asked, God does something very strange. He says, *"Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live."*

What! How's *that* gonna help? What good is *that* going to do? Look, and live? How does that work? That makes no sense! God's asking them what? Not to make *sense* out of it, but to *trust* Him. Take Him at His Word. Can they do that? Can *you* do that? With nothing else to go on, just take Him at His Word?

"Look and live!" And as they looked, from every part of the camp came happy cries of, "I'm healed! I'm cured!" as dying people, looking at the serpent, found themselves completely healed. God provided the cure, a cure that looked curiously like the disease. All over the camp, the children of Israel learned a lesson that day, one they, like we, would have to learn again and again. Take God at His word. Trust Him, no matter what! Trust God's Word. For of course, it wasn't the serpent that helped them. As always, it was the promise of God that brought them healing. (Cwirla)

Suppose you were one the Israelites who had been bitten and were dying. *"Behold the serpent of the Lord. Look on it and live."* What would you do? Would you look up or would you complain how this makes no sense at all and you're not going to fall for such silliness? You know better.

Today, *you* are Israel. *You've* been bitten by the Serpent, the Great Deceiver, who tempts you to trust *him*, instead of God. *You've* been bitten by the serpent of unbelief. *You're* turned away from God, and *you're* dying. *"The sting of death is sin and the power of sin is the Law."* (1 Cor. 15:56)

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night, and Jesus said to him, "Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God. ... as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

Jesus is telling Nicodemus, and you, "look and live!" God has provided the cure, a cure that looks curiously like the disease. His Son on the cross, dying a cursed death. He looks damned by God, stricken, smitten, and afflicted. And He is, in *your* place. Why? *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."* Jesus, true God, born of woman, born under the Law, to take on the sting of death and become for the world the anti-venom for snake-bitten humanity. (Cwirla)

"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up. Notice the *must*. Jesus *must* do this. Matthew 16 *"From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."* Why *must* He? Because He loves you ... He *had* to. He *wanted* to!

"And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ... and were by nature children of wrath ... But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ - by grace you have been saved ..." (Eph 2)

And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.

Stricken, smitten, and afflicted, the people came crawling to Moses with their confession. *"We have sinned, when we spoke against the Lord and against you."* That's a good start, for them, and for us. Confession. Tell the truth. Admit it and stop trying to cover it up or defend yourself.

In the end, what does all our denying and attempts to cover up our sin do? It only makes matters worse and hardens our hearts. Separates us from others. Separates us from ourselves. And separates us from God, condemning us to hell.

The Lord sent the deadly snakes to drive His people to repentance. To soften their hardened hearts. To humble them. To turn their hearts back to Him. It could have been so much easier, had they admitted the truth from the start. The sooner we repent, the sooner we turn back to the Lord, the better.

Jesus must be lifted up. Why? Because there is no other way for you to be saved and live forever with Him.

Those who trusted God's Word and looked to the lifted-up serpent - lived - for many more years. Trust God's Word, look to the lifted-up Son of God, and live forever!

No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. Are you born again? How does that happen? How are you born again, born from above? "for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and abiding word of God." (1 Peter 1)

I like the way one person put it, *"When I hear God's Word proclaimed ... both the law which shows me my need and drives me to despair and the gospel which meets my need and gives me life, I find myself believing it. Do you find yourself believe this good news today? It isn't a decision on my part, it simply happens. In other words, I didn't believe, then I found myself believing after the hearing of the message of Christ. ... I'm told that there is an old word or expression in Norwegian that means just that: "I heard myself saved".* (Pat Thurmer)

Do you hear yourself saved? Then you've been born again. Born from above. *"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God ..."* (Eph 2)

Nicodemus. We don't know a whole lot else about him. The Scriptures don't say much more. But from the little we are told, it appears Nicodemus looked upon the Lamb of God, literally looked up to Him, condemned in his place. And Nicodemus lived, and continues to live with the Lord today, as Nicodemus was there with Joseph of Arimathea. Caring for Jesus' body. As they looked upon His body. As they brought it down from the cross that had lifted Him up. And together, the two of them wrapped Jesus' body with the linen strips, and laid Him in the tomb. And because Jesus rose and is alive, so too, is Nicodemus. So too, shall you live!

The single serpent on a staff is the most popular medical symbol in the world. It's such a blessing to have all the medical care we take for granted. But what will you do when the medical establishment can no longer help you? They can only keep you alive so long. What then? Will God's wrath remain on you? Will you be condemned to hell for all eternity?

The snake on the pole brought *temporary* healing. The cross of Christ is the only way to *eternal* healing. Israel prayed that the poisonous snakes would be taken away. Instead, God put a snake on a pole and instructed them to look and live. We pray that God would take away the poison of our sin. Instead, God's Son hangs on a cross. The Father didn't send His Son into the world to condemn you, but *to be condemned* for you.

Look to the Son and live forever! Point others to Him, that *they too* may live.