

Numbers 21:4-9

They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!”

Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us.” So Moses prayed for the people.

The LORD said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on 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.

Dear brothers and sisters in the Lord Jesus,

It is said that over 100,000 people die each year from snake bites. There are people who are trying to get this number to drop. Who are these people and how do they hope to save lives? There is a new show on the Discovery channel called, “Venom Hunters.” You can guess from the title what the show is all about. It is about a teams of adventurous people who go and catch venomous snakes. The problem is that they need to catch them alive so that they can use their venom to make antivenin which is used to help those who are bit by venomous snakes. This means that they have to handle venomous snakes all the time, and many of them talk about what it is like to get bit by a venomous snake. It is life or death to have the antivenin available to heal them. Without the antivenin they would most likely die.

As we look at God's Word for us today, we will see people who were bit by poisonous snakes, and we will see how God in his power gave them a cure from this deadly problem. While this account from God's Word talks about God's power over deadly snakes, we realize that God has a bigger intended meaning for the people of Israel and for all of us as sinners. There are millions and billions of people who are spiritually dying every year from the deadly “bite” of sin, and God wants us to share the only “antivenin” there is to save these lost souls. He reminds us that there is only one way to be saved and that one way is to:

Theme: Look To Christ and Live!

- 1. The deadly bite**
- 2. God's surprising remedy**

Let's get some background context on this section of God's Word. The children of Israel are finally on the home stretch to the promised land of Canaan. 40 years earlier, the Lord had led them out of

slavery in the land of Egypt. But their sins of grumbling and complaining had sentenced them to four decades of wandering in the desert. But now they're finally making progress, heading north and east under the Lord's direction. Just before the incident in our text, the heathen king of the city Arad, no doubt intimidated by the 2 million people coming near, attacked the Israelites and captured some of them. But the Lord exacted revenge, led the Israelites to complete victory and total destruction of that king and his people. They were on a roll, after all, the Lord Almighty was on their side.

A problem arises, however. Moses had asked the king of Edom (descendant of Esau) for permission to pass through his country as a shortcut, but the king said, No! This meant that the Israelites (descendants of Jacob, Esau's brother) would have to go around the southern edge of Edom, spending a few extra weeks in the desert. Certainly discouraging news, but what's a more few weeks after having survived 40 years in this desert? No problem, right?

That makes sense to you and me, but the people had had it. Forgetting their fresh God-given military victory over Arad, forgetting their deliverance from slavery 40 years prior, forgetting the fact that their clothes and sandals had never worn out in all of those 40 years, forgetting that the Lord had fed them and protected them, forgetting all this, they **“grew impatient... (Hebrew, literally, “their souls grew short”) and spoke against God and against Moses.”** They got crabby, cranky, like little children tired of riding in the car, whining from the back seat, “Are we there yet?” They whined and whimpered and complained. “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!”

Complain! Complain! Complain! They had bread. They had water. They had honey flakes of bread from heaven, manna—free every morning—6 days a week from their Heavenly Father. Granted, it wasn't the variety you'll find down a typical grocery store aisle today. But it was more than enough. And it was free! But they criticized the food, worse, they complained against the Giver of their food! This wasn't the first time they'd spoken against Moses and against God. And it wouldn't be the last. But they had no right, and God's reaction was swift.

“Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died.” Just as swift as God's punishment came Israel's repentance: **“The people came to Moses and said, ‘We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us.’”** All of sudden, the food didn't seem so bad. All of a sudden, the Lord's blessings and care seemed quite adequate given the fact that people were now dying all over the place.

God heard their prayer, but gave them an answer they did not expect. Instead of removing the snakes, he gave them salvation from the snakes. And he did it in a surprising way. Ever since the Garden of Eden, the serpent had been a symbol of sin and death. A serpent was the means by which Satan tempted Adam and Eve to sin. But now, this is where the bronze snake comes in. At God's command, Moses made me – a symbol of death – and put it up on a pole and God promised that anyone who was bitten by a snake and looked up at it would live and not die.

Let's be very clear, the snake itself had nothing to do with saving the people. It was just a hunk of metal formed into the shape of a snake. What saved the people was the Word of God. God promised to save those who looked at it, and those who believed God's promise and looked at the snake were indeed saved. The people had faith in God's promise. They took him at his Word.

I would imagine it was quite a scene. Snakes everywhere, biting people, screaming, crying, yelling, chaos. People looking frantically for that bronze snake Moses had put up. Was it really true? Would God save those who looked at me? The Scriptures confirm it. What we need to remember most about the whole episode was the mercy and love of God overshadowing his judgment, his anger over sin.

Now let's see how this Old Testament miracle applies to us. For this to happen we now need to fast-forward 1400 years to the words Jesus spoke to Nicodemus in the Gospel of John chapter 3. Everyone knows John 3:16, but remember what Jesus says in the two verses prior? **“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” (John 3:14,15).** Again, this is a surprising remedy. A symbol of death, the cross, brings us life. At Jesus' time, the cross was only a symbol of death and pain and suffering. It reminded everyone of the cruelty of the Roman style of execution. The Romans wanted to make it as terrible as possible, so that no one would ever want to be crucified. Yet the Lord used that cross to bring our salvation. It was there that Jesus took the deadly bite of sin for us. He died from its deadly venom, so that we won't have to!

So the Lord makes that bronze snake in Numbers 21, a type of Christ. In the same way that the snake was lifted up, so Jesus was lifted up, crucified, put to death on the cross. Everyone who looked to the snake and believed God's promise was saved from physical death caused by poisonous snakes. Everyone who looks to Christ and believes God's promise of forgiveness through him, has eternal life and is spared the poisonous sting of sin, which leads to death and worse.

What does this mean for us? Do we have anything in common with Israel? Complain! Complain! Complain! How often do we say, “Come Lord Jesus, be our guest, and let these gifts to us be blessed.” And then out of the same mouths come complaints? We'll push the food around our plate and complain about it. It's boring, it's dull. Doesn't taste just right. Ramen again. OK, maybe for a few among us. But seriously. We all shop at grocery stores that offer more than manna six days a week. Do we need dozens of varieties of noodles, of rice, of fruit and vegetables, yogurt, cuts of meat many around the world would die for? No. But God provides. Kids will open a fridge full of food and a pantry filled with boxes and cans, stare at all of it for a moment and then say, incredibly, “There's nothing to eat. Can we go to McDonald's, Applebee's, Perkins, Subway, or order pizza?”

We all like to complain. There are too many potholes in Watertown. The government – or at least the election of our government leaders -- is messed up, and getting more so by the second. I don't make enough money. I don't like my job. I don't like the weather. My life is too difficult. My friends or coworkers don't appreciate me. My relatives are from Mars. My teachers are clueless. My health, well, each us is at a different place. You may be sick momentarily, or chronically, or seriously. Do you complain about it? Do you have the right to complain? Is God involved? Does he care? He does, but do we acknowledge the incredible blessings he gives as well as the struggles that come our way?

One thing we all have in common, we're terminally ill with the fatal virus of sin. You and I do more than complain. We slash our way through the Ten Commandments, prideful, selfish, ungrateful, whiny, ill-fated captain of my soul, headed for a fate worse than death.

But that is why we need to go back to the hill outside of the city of Jerusalem called, Calvary. See, it is here that Jesus gave up his life for us. See him lifted up on the tree of the cross so that the devil, who overcame all mankind by a tree in the Garden of Eden, would himself be a tree, by Christ's cross, be

overcome. It's not possible to view this scene without thinking of God's love and how **"God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."** People looked to the bronze snake, and their faith in God's promise saved them from poisonous snakes. People look to Christ and their faith in him and his promises, in his death and resurrection, saves them from the spiritual poison of sin. Again, the Gospel, **"For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him"** (John 3:17).

So here we are in 2016, your life, your heart, right now. Learn the lessons of the past. Paul's words of warning still apply: **"We should not test the Lord, as some of them did – and were killed by snakes...These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come"** (1 Corinthians 10:9,11).

Be thankful, not thankless. Confess sins of dissatisfaction and discontentment and plead for forgiveness. The Lord's the one who's been let down, not us. The psalm writer has the right attitude: **"Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits—who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's"** (Psalm 103:2-5).

The most important thing that these words today tell us is that in order to live, in order to really live, to live now and forever, we must look to Christ. Remember that everything here (in hand/life – difficulties/struggles/failures/frustrations/sins) are much more manageable when our focus is away from ourselves and on Christ. May you **"fix (your) eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of (your) faith"** (Hebrews 12:2). May God always lead you, by his grace, to LOOK TO CHRIST AND LIVE!