

“Look and Live”

There is a rather odd story found in the Book of Numbers in the Old Testament. The people of Israel are near the end of 40 years of journeying in the wilderness since God freed them from slavery in Egypt. They have not yet entered the promised land of Canaan. Although God has miraculously provided for them during this long trek in the wilderness, they still grumble and complain. Discouraged, and somewhat ungrateful, they gripe against Moses and against God. “From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. 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 detest this miserable food!’” (Numbers 21:4-5). In response, God sends “poisonous serpents” – poisonous snakes – and many of the Israelites are bitten, and die.

Poisonous snakes! Do you like snakes? Some of us probably have snake stories to tell! When I served churches in the Pocono Mountains near Stroudsburg, we lived out in the country. I was leery of snakes in or yard in warm weather. We lived in a relatively new parsonage. There was a study in the lower level of the house. One hot day I left the outside door open. I was sitting at my desk which faced the door, and as I leaned back to stretch, my eye caught a snake at the door looking at me, with its head raised. Needless to say, I quickly closed the door. One parishioner told me that one day he found a rattlesnake curled up on top of his TV. When we lived in Bluffton, South Carolina, several times we had small snakes visit us on our patio. The first time I saw one I ran out in the garage to get my hockey stick, but by the time I found it and got out again to the patio the snake was gone. (Now if you’re a snake lover, please forgive me, but snakes are not my favorite part of God’s creation.

God sent poisonous snakes among the Israelites. Imagine camping out, and everywhere you go, there are snakes: in the grass, under bushes, coiled up in your clothing! The Israelites are getting bitten by snakes and dying.

In the wake of this the Israelites repent of their griping and unbelief, and ask God to take the snakes away: “The people came to Moses and said, ‘We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.’ So Moses prayed for the people” (Numbers 21:7).

God tells Moses what to do to address the crisis situation: “And the Lord said to Moses, ‘Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.’ So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live” (Numbers 21:8-9). Moses fashions a snake out of brass, puts it on a pole (probably the main military standard) in a conspicuous part of the camp. If people are bitten, they can look at that bronze snake, and they would live!

Jesus recalls that ancient story and compares it to something He’ll go through: “And just 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” (John 3:14-15). What did Jesus mean that He would be lifted up, just like the bronze serpent Moses fashioned? Jesus would be lifted up *on a cross*.

(Show picture from The Passion of the Christ)

Crucifixion was a Roman practice, done by professional executioners. The criminal was first stripped, then scourged. His arms were tied to a crosspiece, to prevent the body from breaking away from the wood. Large spikes were driven into the wrists (not one's palms). This way they could avoid rupturing an artery, which would limit bleeding and make death more slow and agonizing. Nerve trunks would be damaged, which added to the torture.

The crosspiece was then lifted to the upright portion (already in the ground) and nailed to secure it. At this point, execution actually began. It wasn't being nailed to a cross that killed the person; death came by asphyxiation. With one's arms stretched out, the person would be able to breathe in, but would have trouble breathing out. A victim could get temporary relief by standing on the nail through their feet, but after the person became too exhausted to put their body weight on the nail in their feet, death came about by slow strangulation (it could take up to a full day or longer).

Jesus said, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up" (John 3:14). **Why was Jesus lifted up on a cross?** "Christ died for **our sins**." (1 Corinthians 15:3). I know...we've heard that so many times, but it's true! 1 Peter 2:24 says, "He himself **bore our sins** in his body on the cross." "Sin" means our rebellion against God, our wanting to live life *our way*, to live by *our own rules*. So, we don't have to be a morally corrupt person to be a "sinner". Sin is putting self at the center of life rather than God. It is our natural bent towards doing evil rather than doing good.

In the story of the serpent in the wilderness, people were bitten by poisonous snakes, *and died*. The end result of our sin and rebellion against our Creator is death: "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). Not just physical death, but *spiritual death*. We are separated from God. We see this spiritual death played out in human greed and selfishness, in broken people and shattered relationships, in people without God and without hope. *Every one of us were there the day Christ died! Your sins and my sins were laid on Jesus as He hung on the cross.*

Back there in the wilderness as the people of Israel were bitten by snakes, **notice what the cure was: it was a bronze serpent, a snake!** *Moses was to make a bronze replica of the very thing that caused the problem!* There is an incredible verse of Scripture in 2 Corinthians, chapter 5: "For our sake he made him (Jesus) **to be sin** who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Did you get that? God made His Son Jesus, who was totally pure and holy, **to be sin**. God so identified with us in our sinful state that He allowed His Son to be like us in our sinful state that we may be like Him in His holiness and purity!

A famous plastic surgeon by the name of Dr. Maxwell Malz wrote a best-selling book, *Psycho-Cybernetics*. In it he tells of a woman who came to see him about her husband. Her husband tried to save his parents from their burning home. He couldn't get to them. They both

died and the husband was badly burned. His whole face became burned and disfigured. He had given up on life and gone into hiding. He wouldn't let anyone see him, not even his wife. Dr. Malz told the woman not to worry: "With the great advances we've made in plastic surgery in recent years, I can restore his face." But she explained that he wouldn't let anyone help him because he believed God had disfigured his face to punish him for not saving his parents. Then she made a shocking request: I want you to disfigure my face so I can be like him. If I can share in his pain, then maybe he'll let me back into his life. I love him so much. I want to be with him. And if that's what it takes, then that's what I'll do.

Of course, Dr. Malz would not agree to this, but he was deeply moved by the wife's love and determination. He got her permission to try to talk to her husband. He went to the man's room and knocked, but no answer. He called loudly through the door: "I know you're in there. I know you can hear me. My name is Dr. Malz. I'm a plastic surgeon and I want you to know that I can restore your face." Still no response. Again he called loudly. "Please come out and let me help restore your face." But again, no response. Still speaking through the door, Dr. Malz told the man what his wife was asking him to do. "She wants me to disfigure her face, to make her face like yours in the hope that you will let her back into your life. That's how much she loves you. That's how much she wants to help you." There was a brief moment of silence, then ever so slowly, the doorknob began to turn. The disfigured man came out to make a new beginning and find a new life. He was given a new start by his wife's love.

When Jesus was lifted up on the cross, He became *like one of us*. In some mysterious way, God allowed Jesus to become *disfigured by sin*, even though He never sinned, so that we can be healed of sin's grip on us. Again, 1 Peter 2:24 sums it up: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed." 1 Peter 3:18 says, "For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring us to God."

Moses was told to shape a bronze snake, and put it on a pole, so that "everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live" (Numbers 21:8). *Can you imagine what it must have been like there in the desert?* Snakes all over the place. Men, women, children getting bitten. The area of the bite gets inflamed. People are becoming violently ill. Friends, family members are dying. Panic sets in. Then Moses puts that bronze snake on the pole. Word gets around: "Just look at it and you will live!"

What kind of reactions do we think that generated? I'll bet some of the Israelites said, "I just can't believe looking at the bronze snake on that pole is going to stop anyone from dying. That sounds too easy.....that's so stupid!" Maybe someone had already made up a "do it yourself snake bite kit". "That bronze snake isn't the answer. This snake bite kit is all you need to heal yourselves. We don't have to listen to Moses to get out of this mess!" Others are into denial: even after they are bitten, they convince themselves, "Oh, I'm all right. It's just a little bite. I don't think the snake that bit me was a venomous one." But people kept getting bitten, and dying

However, someone (perhaps out of sheer desperation) drags himself or is carried to the pole, looks up at that bronze serpent with longing eyes, and the inflammation begins to decrease, the wound begins to heal, and the person lives!

There are similar responses today to Jesus' death on the cross.

Some say, "I'm a decent person. I go to church. I haven't really done anything that bad that I need to be saved by a Man lifted upon on a cross." I can handle this myself. Another says, "You say I'm saved simply by putting my faith in someone who died 2,000 years ago on a cross? How naïve! Certainly there must be more to it than that." Or yet another person argues, "You in the church are always so negative and judgmental. People are better than you make them out to be. You focus too much on our faults. Our "snake bite" isn't that bad or fatal.

But Christ has been lifted up so that we can find healing and life! "Just 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*" (John 3:14-15).

There is a film called *The Bridge*. It's about a beautiful young couple who have a son. The boy is trying to grow up to be just like his father. One day the father goes off to work. He's a switchman for a railroad line that carries people on vacation trips from one place to another. Part of the line crosses a river, where it has to be kept back most of the time to let boats pass. It's his job to wait until the last moment and then pull the switch that will swing the bridge into place before the thundering approach of the train. Those watching the movie see what the father doesn't see. His little son has followed him down to the river and is coming across the bridge. As the train whistle blows to signal the approach of the speeding train, the father sees the boy. If he closes the track, the boy will be hit by the train and die. If he leaves the gate open, hundreds of people on the train will get hurt or die as it plunges into the river. You see the agony on the father's face as he makes an excruciating decision. You also see people on the train laughing and having a good time as the train races across the bridge, oblivious to the life and death drama being played out. As the switchman closes the gate, they have no clue what it cost the father just to save their lives.

We can never begin to fathom the agony on the face of our heavenly Father as He allows His Son to die so that we may live – victoriously, eternally! Such amazing love should call forth from us an overwhelming sense of gratitude, and a desire to serve and honor the One who died for us.

We may be familiar with that classic hymn, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross." Remember that line in the hymn: "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my life, my soul, my all."

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