

NUMBERS 21:4–9. (EHV)

They set out from Mount Hor along the road to the Red Sea to go around the land of Edom, but the people became very impatient along the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? Look, there is no food! There is no water! And we are disgusted by this worthless food!” The LORD sent venomous snakes among the people, and the snakes bit the people. As a result many people from Israel died. The people went to Moses and said, “We have sinned, because we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD to take the snakes away from us.” So Moses prayed on behalf of the people. The LORD said to Moses, “Make a venomous snake and put it on a pole. If anyone who is bitten looks at it, he will live.” Moses made a bronze snake and put it on the pole. If a snake had bitten anyone, if that person looked at the bronze snake, he lived.

What’s the cure if you’ve been bitten by a venomous snake? Usually in the movies someone makes an incision around the bite and then sucks up the blood and spits it out in order to get rid of the poisoned blood. Or perhaps in extreme cases the appendage that has been bitten is amputated to keep the poisoned limb from affecting the rest of the body.

When the Israelites were bitten by snakes in the wilderness, God had a very different solution, one that I guarantee you have never seen in the movies. And his solution then was just a foreshadowing of the even greater, permanent solution for you and me and all those who have been bitten by *the* snake—the devil.

1.

The Israelites were at a critical juncture in their history. The first time they were about to enter the Promised Land, most of the people doubted that the Lord would be with them and help them to take the land. So the Lord consigned them to forty more years of wandering in the wilderness. Now they were approaching the end of those forty years. A new generation had replaced the old, and they were once again getting ready to enter the Promised Land.

But at this point there was a hitch in their plan. They wanted to pass through Edom. They didn’t think that would be a problem, because they promised the Edomites that they would not go through any field or vineyard or drink water from any well. They would simply travel along the king’s highway until they had passed through their territory. Not only that, but the Edomites were their distant relatives. The Edomites were the descendants of Esau, who was the brother of Israel or Jacob.

But the Edomites not only refused the Israelites, but they also made a show of might, bringing out a large and powerful army as if to say, “Go ahead, try to pass through our territory. We dare you.”

So now the Israelites had to turn back south along the route to the Red Sea in order to go around Edom. This detour, combined with everything else, made the Israelites rather short-fused. They were still traveling through the wilderness. They were still eating manna day after day. They still had no permanent home and had to sleep in tents. So they grumbled against God and against Moses. They said, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no food! There is no water!” And then, it was like they realized that their grumbling wasn’t

even true, because they did have food. God was providing the bread called manna for them every day. So they modified their complaint about the food and said, “And we detest this miserable food!” In other words, “Well yeah, there’s food, but it isn’t the kind of food we want.”

Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among the people. We don’t know exactly what kind of poisonous snakes they were, but the word used to describe them could suggest that the venom burned when it was injected into the skin. Many people from Israel died.

Now we often shake our heads at the Israelites for grumbling against the Lord over and over again, but we don’t often marvel at their repentance when God disciplined them. They could have very easily said, “Oh, that’s how you’re going to be, God? First you give us the same miserable food day after day. Then you make it so that we have to take the long way through the wilderness. And then when we complain, you attack us with venomous snakes!” But they didn’t. They realized that they had sinned and they owned up to it. “The people went to Moses and said, ‘We have sinned, because we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD to take the snakes away from us.’ So Moses prayed on behalf of the people.”

Whenever the people humbled themselves after they sinned and whenever Moses prayed to the Lord on their behalf, the Lord listened. And this was no exception. The Lord gave Moses instructions for delivering the people from the snakes. He told him to make a likeness of one of the venomous snakes and put it on a pole, so that it looked like a standard that might be carried in front of an army. Anyone who was bitten was invited to look to the snake on the pole, and he would live.

These had to sound like strange instructions. If tornadoes were ravaging our fields for weeks on end, we would hardly think to sew a tornado on a flag and then raise that flag on our church property. If rabid coyotes were coming out and attacking residents of our city in the open and killing some of them, we would hardly think to sew a rabid coyote on a flag and then raise that flag on our church property. But the Lord has Moses take the very thing that is destroying the people—a venomous snake—and fashion a model of it on a pole as a sort of standard or banner to set in the midst of the people. Not only that, but the people are to look to this model of the very thing that is killing them in order to live.

And perhaps even more amazing than that is that the people didn’t have to do anything else. They simply had to look to Moses’ snake and they would live. They didn’t have to go through a probationary period to see whether they would grumble or complain again. They didn’t have to make an offering or give some money. Just look, and live.

And that’s what happened. Moses made a snake out of bronze and put it on a pole as a standard. And if someone was bitten by one of the snakes and he looked at the bronze snake in response to the Lord’s invitation to do so, he lived. It isn’t that that person ceased to be bitten. It isn’t that there was no longer any venom in that person. Rather, the bite and the venom did not do that person any harm, so that he or she lived.

That’s how the snake-bitten Israelites were cured and able to live.

2.

What about us? Aren’t we snake-bitten too?

The snake, of course, was the animal that the devil assumed in order to tempt Adam and Eve and lead them astray. And he succeeded. And he still often succeeds with us today.

How often don't we grumble and complain about our circumstances because we're focusing on the length of our life's journey or on the conditions around us as we make our journey or on the monotony of our existence, instead of on the fact that the Lord is actually providing for our necessities day after day? How often don't we sit down to dinner and tell our spouse or our parent, "What? This again?" instead of jumping for joy that God is actually giving us food for another meal? How often do we focus on what we don't have instead of focusing on what we do? How often do we focus on the *kind* of possessions that we want instead of on the fact that God has actually given us *possessions* in the first place?

And when God lovingly disciplines us in an attempt to get us to realize just how good we have it, how many of us accept his discipline graciously? Or do we use the broken-down vehicle or increased financial burden or the illness or disability or whatever other discipline it might be as just another reason to grumble against God, instead of coming to him like the Israelites did and saying, "We sinned when we spoke against you"?

Yes, we too are snake-bitten, not by actual venomous snakes, but by the ancient serpent known as the devil who leads the whole world astray. His venom is our sin, which is killing us just as surely any actual venom would.

We need to humble ourselves before the Lord daily and come to him in genuine sorrow and repentance, and ask him to cure the curse of the devil.

And when we do, what a comfort to know that we have a far better Mediator than Moses. We have Jesus speaking to the Father in our defense. And the Father's solution seems just as ridiculous at first. Jesus said in our Gospel, "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."

Having Jesus hang on the pole of the cross didn't seem to be a very fitting answer. In Romans 8, Paul says that God sent his Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to deal with sin. In other words, just as Moses took the very problem that was killing the Israelites and put it up on a pole for them to look at as a standard, so too God took an ordinary man, who looked just like the one that brought us all into sin, who looked just like you and me with all our sin, and put him up on a cross for us to look to as a standard. Isaiah says he had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, and that there was nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

Yes, and the "pole" that Jesus was put on wasn't just some sort of flagpole or banner stand. It was a cross on which he was crucified and killed. It didn't seem like the right solution to put the God-man up on a cross and have him be a dead God-man and then tell us to look to this dead God-man that we may live.

And finally, it doesn't make sense that God would simply tell us to believe in him, and that by doing so we would not just have life, but everlasting life. Shouldn't we have to do something to make up for our grumbling and complaining? Shouldn't we have to prove ourselves? Shouldn't we have to grovel for a while? Shouldn't we have to pay something or give something in exchange?

No, just as God required nothing but faith from the Israelites, but told them simply to look at that bronze snake and they would live, so he requires nothing but faith from us snake-bitten people. He tells us simply to look at his Son hanging on the cross and to believe that Satan cannot do us any harm. It isn't that we cease to be bitten by him. It isn't that his venom of sin ceases to course through us. But through Christ crucified, the devil's bite and venom cannot do

us any harm. “For 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.”

That’s how we snake-bitten people are cured and live.

The standard there in the desert represented only the end of the power of those temporary snakes. But this standard, the cross with Christ crucified on it, represents the end of the power of *the snake, the serpent, the devil, forever*. By Christ’s cross, Christ’s heel is struck, but the devil’s head is crushed. He cannot harm us any longer.

As we sing in the Lent hymn: “When o’er my sins I sorrow, Lord, I will look to you and hence my comfort borrow that you were slain for me. Your precious blood was offered for me, oh, most unworthy, to take away my guilt. My manifold transgression henceforth can harm me none since Jesus’ bloody passion for me God’s grace has won. His blood my debt has canceled; of hell and all its torments I am no more afraid.” Amen.