

## **Snakes on a Plain – Numbers 21:4-9 – March 11, 2018**

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No doubt about it. Today's Old Testament lesson is a very strange story indeed. But the basic theme is nothing new. We've heard stories before about how the people of Israel complained during their journeys in the wilderness. They didn't like the bitter water, so God showed Moses how to make it sweet. There was not enough food, so they whined to Moses about starvation. Moses prayed to God, and God sent the manna. There was not enough water, so they griped about dying of thirst, so Moses prayed to God, and God provided water that flowed from a rock. Later on they complained that the manna wasn't good enough, they wanted meat, so came the quails. This final complaint story from Numbers continues this general idea, but it's a little different than the others.

Following their exodus from the bonds of slavery in Egypt, the Israelites had been wandering in the wilderness for many, many years. Still no promised land. They had faced critical times in their past, times where starvation and dehydration threatened their very lives. In those times, they questioned Moses' ability to lead them, and they wondered if God cared if they lived or perished. In those instances God responded favorably to their needs. And the people quit their grumbling.

But this time the grumbling was not a result of a life-threatening situation. Instead, and this is the key to understanding what follows, we see in verse 4 of the passage that the people were impatient. They weren't balanced precariously between life and death. No. They had simply grown weary of the wandering and began griping about their situation. And this time, they not only spoke against Moses, but this time, they spoke against God.

Why did you bring us out of Egypt to die here in the wilderness, they moaned. No one was dying. And really, was life so much better as slaves? How soon they forgot. The farther they moved from Egypt, the more years that passed, they began to romanticize that past. "Things were so much better back in the good old days." But were they really? Sure, they might have had a stable food supply, and life was pretty consistent for them. Consistent in the daily grind of having to work hard for their masters. They had no freedoms. They had constructed a fantasy about life in Egypt that did not correspond with what actually had occurred. Instead of being thankful for their freedoms, they focused only on the negatives.

"There is no food or water," they complained. Yet in the next breath, they said, "and we detest this miserable food." No food or water, eh? They exaggerated their condition. They had food. They had the manna that God provided for them each and every day.

But suddenly, their daily bread wasn't good enough. They grew impatient with having to eat the same thing day in and out. Their basic needs were being met, yet they were annoyed because they thought they deserved better. They succumbed to the sin of entitlement. God's provisions for them seemed lacking, and they wanted more. They questioned God's ability to provide for them.

The story tells us that God didn't take their grumbling very kindly. Instead God sent a bunch of poisonous snakes among the people. The snakes began to bite the Israelites and many of them fell ill and died from the venom. The people quickly understood that they had angered God. They recognized that they had sinned against God and were being punished, so they ran to Moses and begged him to pray to God on their behalf, specifically to take away the snakes.

And here is where the story gets a little interesting. God does not take away the snakes nor does God heal those who have been bitten. Instead of just banishing the little reptiles, God instructs Moses to construct the symbol of a snake and stick it on a pole. So, Moses fashions a snake out of bronze and attaches it to a pole. If any Israelite were bitten by a snake, he or she need only look at the pole to be healed. The alternative would also be true. If someone was bitten, and did not look at the snake, the assumption is that they would die. God didn't take away the snakes, but God did provide a means of salvation. The danger was still there, but the method for healing was readily available.

So, I think that even though this appears to be a really strange story, the basic message is pretty standard. Think about it this way. People sin, people reap the consequences of their sin, out of God's great love for humans, God provides a means of salvation, and all people need to do is respond in faith. Sound familiar?

There is an old fable that has taken on many forms over the years. It was first found in ancient Sanskrit folklore. I found this version on the urban legend website called Snopes from a book by Jacob Braude published in the 60's.

A scorpion, being a very poor swimmer, asked a turtle to carry him on his back across a river. "Are you mad?" exclaimed the turtle. "You'll sting me while I'm swimming and I'll drown!"

"My dear turtle," laughed the scorpion, "if I were to sting you, you would drown and I would go down with you. Now where is the logic in that?"

"You're right!" cried the turtle. "Hop on!" The scorpion climbed aboard and when they were halfway across the river, the scorpion gave the turtle a mighty sting. As they both sank to the bottom of the river, the turtle resignedly said, "Do you mind if I ask you something? You said there would be no logic in you stinging me. Why did you do it?"

"It has nothing to do with logic," the drowning scorpion sadly replied. "It's just my character."

The simple lesson of this fable is that some things simply are what they are and can't change from their basic nature. By its nature a scorpion will sting, even if by stinging something it may ultimately harm itself. The implication is that the turtle should have known better instead of thinking that somehow it would be the exception to the rule.

Sin is very much like the scorpion. Like the scorpion, sin cannot change its nature, and when we choose to sin, when we act the turtle in this fable and allow sin to join us on our journey, we know very well what it can do to us. We may think we can be the exception, that we can sin and nothing bad will come from it. And we may try to rationalize away our sinful decisions and our bad choices, thinking that we are safe from the harm that sin brings to us. We may think that we are letting sin come in for a just a short visit, just for a quick swim across the river and then it will be on its merry way, but we generally find ourselves drowning somewhere out in the middle. We fall prey to sin's deception and then react in shock when faced with its deadly consequences.

And this is exactly what the story in Numbers is all about. The Israelites, in their frustration and their impatience began to sin by pulling away from God, forgetting about the freedom that God had given them in their exodus from slavery in Egypt, turning their noses up in response to the daily provision of food, and falling prey to a sense of entitlement. They long for the good old days – the days lived in bondage to the Egyptians. This new life of freedom meant that they had to learn to trust God. And that is a very hard thing to do. They wanted the easy way out - to go back to the old ways of living, and so they railed against both Moses and God. The consequence of their sin is disastrous.

The Apostle Paul wrote that the wages of sin are death. By that he meant that when we humans allow ourselves to fall prey to our sinful natures, we draw closer to the darkness and farther away from the life that God has promised each of us. By its very nature, sin will turn us from God.

And this is the link between the story in Numbers and the lesson from John's gospel. John wrote, "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.” Then there is the famous passage we all know, John 3:16. For God so loved the world.

God recognized that the world was drowning in sin. Death and destruction was the result. The good news of the gospel tells us that out of God’s great love for humanity, God sent Jesus, the only Son. It was by his life, death, and resurrection that we all have been set free from the consequences of sin. No longer can death claim its hold upon us.

God didn’t just whisk us all out of harm’s way. God didn’t simply remove sin from the equation. God did not take away our free choice to sin or not to sin. Just like God didn’t take away the poisonous snakes from the Israelites. But God did provide the means of salvation. By looking at the bronze serpent on Moses’ pole, the Israelites would be healed. By following Jesus, we discover a new way of living, a path away from the selfishness of following our own destructive desires. In him we find a new life, an eternal life.

An interesting thing about eternal life is that, according to John’s gospel, this eternal life begins now. When we think of eternal life, we might look beyond the grave, what happens to us after we die. But eternal life is available to us now. So, what this means is that the word eternal doesn’t refer to a quantity, such as the length of life. Instead, eternal refers to a quality of life. A life that is lived in relationship to God through Jesus Christ. Our life now significantly changes when we live in relation to Christ. When we keep our eyes focused on him, the power of sin over us weakens. We are less likely to fall to temptation, when we are mindful of our life with Christ.

And so that’s the point here. During this season of Lent, we have been directed to look inward, to examine the desires and motivations of our hearts. We have been challenged to discover where sin has exerted its deadly power in our lives and to repent of that sin. And then when we look to the cross of Jesus, we are reminded of how much God loves us. When we believe in him and give him control over our lives, when we walk in his ways, we are less likely to succumb to the power of sin. But if we turn away and follow our own worldly paths, the scorpions of this world will have their deceptive way with us. God has provided the means of healing, of salvation, the gift of eternal life here and now – all we have to do is believe and accept the gracious gift God has offered to us in Jesus Christ.