

## *To God Alone Be The Glory*

I can picture you now. You're outside, and a snake slithers across your path, and you bend down and pick it up. After all, many snakes are harmless. Then you visit the reptile house at the zoo, and you look for the place where there is no glass between you and those rattlesnakes and the water moccasins and the copperheads. No? Snakes aren't a few of your favorite things? Yeah, most of us don't even care to look at snakes. And yet in our text for today we find people looking at a snake, with eagerness. Let's consider a few moments how THE BRONZE SERPENT is a FORESHADOW OF THE SAVIOR.

God promised to bring Israel into a land flowing with milk and honey. But things have not been going as well as expected. Traveling through the desert from Egypt to Mt. Sinai makes the Israelites hot and thirsty and dusty and cranky, so they grumble repeatedly. Each time, though, Moses calls on the Lord, and help is provided. Manna falls from heaven for their hunger each morning. Quails miraculously hover shoulder high over their camp every evening. Bitter water recently became better. Their clothing and shoes have begun to show signs of never wearing out. You'd think Israel would be the happiest, most grateful people ever.

It's been about a year and a half since leaving Egypt. Israel draws near to the promised land the first time. They send a

delegation of twelve men to spy out the land. The spies bring them a terrifying report about walled cities and giant warriors. Israel quickly forgets the Lord's mighty hand and blubbers on about their children dying at the hands of the Canaanites. So God makes them wander in the desert for 40 years until that generation of Israel dies off. And the children they were so worried about losing to the Canaanites, these the Lord will bring into the promised land.

Fast forward almost 39 years. Israel's wandering is almost over. Between them and the promised land stands only the land of Edom. Moses diplomatically asks the Edomites for permission to take the short cut through their land, but Edom answers, "Don't even think about it." Rather than fight distant relatives, Moses leads the Israelites back out into the wilderness down to the Red Sea, adding long miles to their journey, so they can enter the promised land by a circuitous route.

As they plod through some of the worst desert country, the heat and the wind seem never to end. Will they ever reach the promised land? Has it all been a hoax? Our text reports, "*They became impatient on the way,*" testy and tired. We can understand: their hopes feel dashed to the ground. So they make the problem worse by speaking "*against God and against Moses.*" How much does God have to do for them before they will trust him? They have pledged God their love and loyalty, like we do when we are

confirmed. But now they defy God's leadership, they complain about the manna he gives them to eat, and they doubt his gracious guidance.

No one ever gets away with wrongdoing. Our text reports: "*The LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died.*" This new generation of Israelites needs to learn the same lessons as the old generation. God is not someone to trifle with. He can make use of anything to teach us valuable lessons, and right now some venomous snakes are handy. The original Hebrew calls them "fiery snakes." Were they copper colored? Did the bites feel like burns? Travelers in that desert region tell us that, even today, large poisonous snakes, marked with deep red spots and stripes, are found there in abundance, and that the sand is marked with slithery lines where those snakes have crawled. Perhaps God has been protecting the Israelites from the snakes up to this point, and now He withdraws that protection. At any rate, the snakes enter the camp and bite the people. Many are dying. Will any of them survive?

Sometimes a person wants to say: "Serves them right. They got what they had coming. What's the matter with them anyway? Slow learners?" But let's be careful. Compared to Israel, we have it easy. Most of us have no real material needs, and yet we worry we won't have enough. We fret about inflation eating away at our spending power. It bothers us that someone "less deserving" enjoys a better standard of living than we do. The

weaknesses or pains that hit our bodies become our focus instead of the blessed fact that we are still living and breathing. Like Israel of old, we forget how many times God has helped us, and how all his promises come true. Maybe we should check for snakes under the pews.

What's the root of the problem? Isn't it that sin has bitten us and sent its poison coursing through our whole self? It's not fun to be reminded of it, but can you feel sin's poison working trouble in your body, in your thinking, in your attitudes, in your ability to respond well to stressors, in your ability to fight temptation? Fellow believers, it is wise to realize that we need God's help or else sin is going to get us dead.

The snakebites helped God's people realize their sin. As all around them their friends and relatives were dying, they came to their senses. Humbly, penitently they came to Moses and confessed, "*We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you.*" Earnestly, confidently they asked Moses, "*Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us.*" Faithful Moses did just that. And faithful God answered. Up on a pole in the middle of their camp went that serpent made out of bronze. The bronze snake itself was not some miraculous cure. Without God's promise, the bronze snake was just a lifeless object. But because of God's promise it became a thing of beauty, a sign that God would cure them. And he did.

1,500 years later, Jesus is sitting with

Nicodemus, who has come to him under the cover of darkness to ask about his teachings. Jesus tells him, *“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.”*

Jesus sees the bronze snake as a foreshadow of himself. Do you understand?

Consider four ideas that correspond. 1) Many Israelites were bitten by poisonous snakes and were headed for death. We have all suffered from the venomous bite of the old serpent, Satan, and we were headed for eternal death. 2) The cure for both bites was simple according to the Lord’s plan. The Israelites needed only to look to the bronze snake with faith in God’s promise. All sinners need only to look to Jesus with faith in God’s promise. 3) For Israel the only cure was looking in faith at the bronze serpent. For us sinners the only cure is looking in faith at Jesus and his atoning cross. 4) Israelites who trusted God’s promise and looked to the bronze serpent were healed right away and they lived. Sinners who trust in Jesus are healed of sin right away and live eternally.

Look at the cross on our altar. That’s what Lent gives us: time to look at the cross. Is the cross there just for us to polish so it looks pretty? Shall we wear crosses or put them up in our homes without thinking about their meaning? Do we ever touch a cross as if it has power in itself to decrease our pain, lighten our burdens, bring bigger success, make us feel good? No, friends, let’s not treat any cross in a superstitious way. By itself a cross is an empty symbol, just like the bronze snake. But because of

what our God has done on the cross, because of his payment for all sins, the cross calls out, “Don’t be afraid! All your sins are gone. Jesus is your Redeemer. God is your Father. Heaven is your home. Though things may not always go the way you want them to, things will always turn out the way your Savior wants them to.”

Picture Israel the day the bronze snake goes up on that pole in the center of the camp. No matter who is bitten or how far the poison has gotten into their system, as soon as that person looks up from their burning sores to the snake with God’s promise attached to it—they recover. There’s a man crawling to the crest of a hill to catch a glimpse—he is sorry for complaining against the Lord. Here’s a mother holding her little baby straining to look at the bronze snake so she can finish raising her child to know the God who keeps his promises. There’s an Israelite being carried by friends to where the healing sign can be seen, holding on to the lifelong hope of seeing the promised land. Everyone who looks at the bronze snake lives.

That look is still called for. And that’s why we are here today. Good Friday is looking time, time to look again at Jesus on the cross. Ours is much more than a casual glance. We look and believe, “That is where God’s Son paid the penalty. The blood of Jesus Christ, his Son, cleanses us from all sin.” The cross calls out, *“Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to people by which we must be saved”* (Acts 4:12). *“Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ*

*and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31).*