

Matt Henry  
Numbers 21:4-9  
11 March 2018

“Snakes on a Plain”

Grace and peace...

The text for today is a peculiar story from Numbers 21, from Israel's wilderness years. I don't know how to summarize it for you except to say, it's about a bunch of unhappy people getting bitten by snakes. So the first thing we need to do is just rate this story on a scale from 1-10 in terms of relevance to your life. Go ahead, give it a number. [I was surprised by how high people rated this story, by the way.]. Well, no one said negative five, but I get the drift. This story is a strange and distant one. But the story becomes immediately relevant when we see how Jesus recalls it in conversation with Nicodemus and reveals his place in the story. I don't want you to have to wait for that connection; you deserve it up front, so here it is. Jesus says to Nicodemus, “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). This of course sets us up for the most famous expression of the Gospel of John 3:16. So the snake story is the foundation and context for the Gospel. That means as people who love the gospel we can appreciate the snake story because Jesus showed its purpose to us and to Nicodemus.

Some context: at this point, the Israelites are done with the forty years in the wilderness and making their way to the Promised Land. This is a new generation; most of them were born in the wilderness along the way. Most were not alive when they left Egypt. Moses' sister, Miriam has died. Moses' brother, Aaron dies at age 123 on Mount Hor. In dramatic fashion he climbed that mountain with his son and dies at the top. His high priestly garments are stripped from Aaron's lifeless body and placed on his son, Eleazar, who comes down the mountain fatherless. Pretty dramatic moment, that's must see TV right there.

On their way to Edom, which is south of the Dead Sea, the Israelites become impatient and start to complain, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?" Well, where have we heard that before? It's the same complaint as 40 years earlier, but again, keep in mind, this is a new crop of people. They haven't learned that lesson firsthand for themselves.

This is actually an important point: each generation has to learn and experience truth for itself. When a generation misses out on truth, it affects the rest of society negatively. In this instance, they had to be reminded how God had saved them from the Egyptians. Basic stuff. But each generation has to make sure the basic stuff is instilled in the next generation. I would submit to you part of the reason why our society is so spiritually ill and illiterate in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is

because the stories of God are not getting handed down to the next generation. As a result, we've regressed culturally and spiritually. It's a big issue, but it's something that discipleship can fix by the way as we impart and model truth to one another and find our place in the story.

The Israelites complain like a teenager in front of the fridge, "There is nothing to eat" while at the same time saying, "I don't like this food." These statements can't both be true, but in the mind of the complainer, they are. When people bite the hand that feeds them, sometimes the hand finds a way to bite back.

God decides it's time for an attitude change, and since they are no longer on the mountain, God decides to send *snakes on a plain*. Fiery serpents slither onto the scene, bite the Israelites, many of which died. This is a very quick and effective way to change people's mind, don't you think? This judgment, this wrath, also had the effect of culling the ranks because of those who left Egypt, only Joshua and Caleb are going to the Promised Land. This sending of the snakes is wrath for sure, but it's a faithful wrath. It's God keeping His promise they wouldn't enter.

In my head, I imagine a conversation between two snake-bitten Israelites, Josiah and Eli: "Well, Eli, this is unfortunate way to go. Forty years of wandering

in the wilderness only to end up with a snake bite.” The other replies, “Yes, Josiah, but it’s all for the Gospel. Just think of the wonderful Christology that will come out of this.” I’m pretty sure that was not said. They cried out to Moses to take the snakes away! If God sent ‘em; He can get rid of ‘em.

By the way, if you have a fear of snakes, you have ophidiophobia. Isn’t that a great term? My wife is an ophidiophobe. Sally was born in Nigeria and lived there until age 5 because her parents were missionaries. So snakes, and in particular, the green mamba was something she and other villagers feared. Most snakes avoid people but green mambas actually seek people out—often from an above tree branch. They’re smart and wicked creatures. She remembers a time when the villagers had a green mamba trapped in a tree. They cut down the tree to kill the green mamba, but somehow *it was never found!* So Sally has never liked snakes in her youth, nor in her adulthood.

When we lived in Oregon City, and I had just started my job there as associate pastor—might have even been the first day at work—Sally calls me up. She says, “Matt, you have got to come home!” I said, “Why? I just got here.” “There is a snake convention in our back yard. I’m terrified. Get these snakes out of here!” “Are you serious? You want me to come home? I just got here.” Nigeria was flashing back. So I went home to find my wife standing on a chair in

the kitchen with a pair of binoculars looking into the backyard at the snake convention! There were all kinds of snakes, don't know what that was about. But I shoed them over to our neighbor's yard, called it good and went back to the office and tried my best to be a working professional...

How did the Israelites get rid of these venomous snakes? Who could they call? They confessed their sin and prayed for Moses to take the snakes away. Moses prayed for them and interceded on their behalf. But God didn't take the snakes away. He had a different solution in mind.

So many times we pray for God to take away whatever is vexing us or causing us pain or difficulty. "God, please take it away!" Like Paul pleaded for the Lord to take away the thorn in his side (2 Cor. 12:7). But sometimes God chooses to let whatever is vexing us remain. And instead, He gives us some other thing to fixate upon, to put our hopes on. So when you ask Him to take away this or that, and He doesn't, perhaps the solution lies in looking at the provision He **adds**. This is worthy of your attention.

He tells Moses, "Make a fiery serpent..." "What? No, God, I'm sorry, you must have misunderstood. We are trying to get rid of the snakes, not memorialize them or make more of them. "Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live." "So Moses made a

bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live” (v. 9).

So now this story can come together. Tucked into this life and death story are themes of repentance, intercession and salvation. Ever since the Garden of Eden, the serpent has always represented evil and sinfulness. But God does something to redeem the serpent by taking what represented sin and making it represent salvation. On the cross, *Jesus becomes like the bronze serpent* which is stunning symbolism. Even the material is important—bronze. From a Levitical point of view, that is the metal of judgment and sacrifice. Bronze is associated with fire like the brazen altar. God fights fire with fire. He fights serpents with a serpent. Just as whoever looked at the bronze serpent was saved, and so it is when one looks at the cross of Jesus with the eyes of faith.

As Jesus said to Nicodemus, “And 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). “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

This divine and joyful exchange occurs when we look to the cross of Christ. Just as 2 Cor. 5:21 says, “He became sin so that we would become the

righteousness of God.” So that by occupying the position of being lifted up, Jesus is being judged and condemned as sin for us. This means the cross is the only anti-venom to sin. Through faith, we receive the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. All because the Son of Man was lifted up for us! Now hopefully this is off scale of 1-10 in terms of relevance!

At this point, I could wrap it up and go easy on you all. It's Daylight's Savings Time after all. Cut you some slack. But the story isn't finished. I don't want this snake to go missing on you villagers. Because that bronze serpent went on the journey with the Israelites—a kind of traveling first aid kit if you will. It doesn't come back into the story until about 700 years later. A twenty-five year old king named Hezekiah came to power in Judah. Hezekiah was a good king. He did what was right in God's eyes. He removed the high places and broke the pillars and cut down the high places. And in the process of clearing out the idolatry, he came across that ancient bronze serpent, fashioned by the hands of Moses. He looked at the relic of the faith, an artifact of their heritage. Maybe marveled at its holy sheen and luster. And then do you know what He did? He destroyed it. He broke the bronze serpent into pieces. It makes me as a historian cringe, but why did he do it? Because the people were worshiping it. The bronze serpent had become an idol.

Now what had changed? The people were looking at the same thing—the same object—but now in an improper way! They hadn't been bitten by snakes. They didn't need what the bronze serpent was intended for. The gifts of God are not to be worshiped, revered or to replace Christ...but to point us to Christ. Hezekiah is a great example for us to have the courage to get rid of anything that detracts from the glory that is due Christ.

The reason why we have the cross before our eyes is because by beholding it in faith we receive life! I know snakes are no longer on the plain. But sin is. The cross and means of grace remains relevant because sin is still present. As long as there's sin in this world, it's good to know we have a Savior to look up to.

In Jesus' name, Amen.