

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI  
Pastor Mark Gartner  
Sermon for Lent 4 – March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2009

### **Numbers 21:4-9**

**They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!”**

**Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us.” So Moses prayed for the people.**

**The LORD said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.” So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived.**

Dear brothers and sisters in the Lord Jesus,

How do you feel about snakes? For some, all I have to do is mention the word, and that's enough to cause a shudder to go through your body – that is how I feel about snakes. Some people enjoy having them as pets. I've seen them and they're just fine as long as they are in their cages. But in nature and in the wild, seeing a snake slither through the grass, or anywhere else for that matter, and it's enough to give me the heebie-jeebies. It doesn't really matter to me if they are the good kind or not, just keep them away! And the snakes I am talking about now are the good kind, not the poisonous ones. What about the poisonous ones? Some of those snakes's venom is enough to kill you in a short amount of time. A poisonous snakebite is so deadly that if you are attacked, you had better get medical help and some anti-venom, quickly!

Many of us are leary about real snakes, but there is another kind of snakebite that is far more common and just as deadly. Today in the Word, we're going to discover:

**Theme: God's Remedy For Our Deadly Snakebite.**

- 1. The deadly bite**
- 2. God's surprising remedy**

### **1. The Deadly Bite**

This morning we join the children of Israel near the end of their 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. They had been wandering for a long time. It is now 37 years after God had told them that those who were 20 years and older would never see the promised land – except Joshua and Caleb. After all these years and another whole new generation, but the attitude is still the same. This is the next generation and they're still complaining! Like father, like son. But the circumstances this time are quite different.

Finally the long years are over, and they are heading to that promised land flowing with milk and honey. But someone blocked their way. The kingdom of Edom stood between them and Canaan, and the King of Edom would not let them pass through his territory. There was another option, to head straight north, and a Canaanite king came out to stop them. The people called on the Lord for his help and they

defeated him! So let's go – we've got them on the run! But the Lord had other ideas. Remember how the Lord guided them with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night? Well, He led them in the opposite direction, south into the desert again on a long detour around Edom. The promised land was so close! And now they were headed in the exact opposite direction. Their reaction? We read: **"The people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!'"** Isn't that just like us? One thing goes wrong, or our plans don't turn out quite the way we had hoped, and we complain about everything! Nothing is good enough.

The children of Israel quickly forgot just how gracious the Lord had been. God had provided freedom from slavery in Egypt. He had provided enough water and manna to allow over a million of them to survive for 40 years in the desert. Since they would not have the resources to make anything in the desert, their shoes and clothing did not wear out for those 40 years. The Lord had kept his promises and had provided blessing on top of blessing along the way. You would think he knew what he is doing? But they had a better idea. And when the Lord didn't go along with it, they showed their displeasure. The deadly bite of sin had struck.

So the Lord had to remind them how deadly sin was, by sending another deadly bite: **"Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died."** This generation was unlike their fathers in one way—they knew how to repent faster. **"The people came to Moses and said, 'We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us.'" So Moses prayed for the people."**

Dear friends, what about us? Like father, like son. We have the deadly poison of sin in our veins ever since birth. Human beings are all impatient people. We want things now. Do you know why it's important to understand that? Because it's human nature. The sinful nature we are born with naturally distrusts the LORD and believe that he's treating you badly. It's the human nature to think that he's holding back the good stuff because he's just a big party-pooper, to think that you'd be better off following your own rules. It would be way more fun! You know what I mean. It's why you treat your parent's rules the way you do, looking for ways to get around them so you can really have some fun. It's why lust after women whom the LORD has not seen fit to give you as wives. It's the same reason why you fantasize about being bigger or cuter or richer or more popular: You can't seem to stay content with the extraordinary blessings God has already given you. It's the same lie that Adam and Eve heard from that wily old serpent so many millennia ago. "God doesn't have your best interests at heart, keeping that tasty treat away from you. Not only will it not kill you, but you'll be smarter, happier—even more like God!"

And the venomous snakes God sent to Israel remind us what the wages of such sins really are. Many of the people died. They had no cure for the snakebite. And we cannot manufacture a cure or antidote for the deadly bite of sin. All it takes is one bite, one sin, and the result is fatal. Only God could provide a remedy to save us from death. And the Lord has done exactly that! Let's see:

## 2. God's Surprising Remedy

The Lord saw true repentance in the hearts of the people, and he heard Moses' prayer. So we read about his remedy: **The LORD said to Moses, 'Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.' So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived."**

What a surprising remedy this is! The Lord took a symbol of death, the snake, to be their remedy for death. This bronze symbol of death on a pole brought them life! Dear friends, our remedy to save us from death is exactly the same. The Lord took a symbol of death, the cross, to bring us life! The cross is a surprising symbol for salvation, because at Jesus' time it could only picture death and pain and suffering. It reminded everyone of the cruelty of the Roman style of execution. The Romans wanted to make it as terrible as possible, so that no one would ever want to be crucified. Yet the Lord used that

cross to bring our salvation. It was there that Jesus took the deadly bite of sin for us. He died from its deadly venom, so that we won't have to!

So what was required of those who were saved from death through snakebites? **“When anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived.”** It only took a look to live! God had promised to save them. He told them that by looking at the bronze snake, they would be saved from death. Everyone who believed God's promise and looked at the surprising symbol of death, lived! It was God who saved them of course. They really did nothing at all.

And the most famous passage in all of the Scriptures has its roots in the surprising remedy of the bronze snake. Jesus said: **“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. 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.”** For us too, it only takes a look to live! We look to the cross with eyes of faith, and we will not perish like we deserve, but have eternal life.

Go back to the desert for a moment. Can you imagine an Israelite, groaning on the ground in agony, dying of viper venom, when a friend approaches. “I was bitten too, but I'm OK! God has provided a way. Just look at that bronze snake and you will live.” Do you think that dying man would have said, “No, don't let me look at it. I don't really want to live. I don't want God's miracle.” Hardly.

Today, many see the cross of Christ, but refuse to believe it's their only way of salvation. Perhaps it's because they don't think they are in a life and death situation. Perhaps they think that sin is not such a big deal. You just say you're sorry, and God passes out forgiveness from the big boxful he has in heaven. But our holy God wants us to see that the cost of sin is high, and every sin had to be paid for. Forgiveness does not come cheap. For us to have it, it meant the cross and suffering and death for Jesus.

What a joy to know that Jesus has taken the deadly bite for us! With eyes of faith we look to his cross. Are you hurting because of things you've done wrong? Then look to the cross. There Jesus says: **Father forgive them.** Are you fearful about what might happen after you die? Look to the cross! There Jesus says: **Today you will be with me in paradise.** Are you down and out because life just doesn't seem to be going right? Then look to the cross. There Jesus says: **My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?** Because Jesus was forsaken in our place, we never have to fear that God will forsake us.

What happened to the original bronze snake? The people of Israel carried it with them to the promised land. Over the years, Israel forgot that the serpent on a pole was only a symbol. They started to bow down to it and worship it, until 800 years after Moses, faithful King Hezekiah destroyed it because it had become like an idol. He had called it Nehushtan, which was a pun on the word for bronze snake, but meant “unclean thing.”

So it's the same with the cross of Christ. Don't turn the cross into an idol, by thinking that if you wear one around your neck, you are protected, or if you have one on the wall of your house, a hurricane will never strike. A cross cannot save you. Only Christ can do that. So let us cherish that Old rugged cross, only because of what Jesus did there. God's saving remedy of deadly snakebites of sin, is not a thing, it's a person. We look up at that cross with eyes of faith in Jesus, and we are saved! Amen.