

## The Saving Snake, Nu.21:4-9, Jn.3:13-15

Images of Lent #4

Intro: Mr. Luskito failed to emerge after two hours at the bottom of a 90 foot oil exploration well in Murar Megang, South Sumatra. Mr. Rusli was lowered down to investigate. When a long time passed and he did not emerge, Mr. Amin was lowered down. The fourth man was lowered fully equipped with dynamite and other weapons which was fortunate for him as he soon discovered a giant python. The snake reared, the dynamite was lit, and when the dust cleared they discovered the bodies of the first three men inside the snake!

If you find snakes creepy, you are not alone. They have a bad reputation.

- ◆ We speak of our enemies as “snakes in the grass”.
- ◆ Paula Abdule popularized a song about a “cold-hearted snake” of a boyfriend who played with her heart.
- ◆ In the Jungle Book a snake tries to capture poor Moglie!
- ◆ In the Bible Book its a snake that advises sin and the fact that it crawls on the ground represents it’s punishment for sin.
- ◆ On the other hand, in the book of Numbers a snake becomes a savior for those bitten by a snake. And in the book of John, Jesus compares himself to this snake.

◆ *“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.” John 3:14-16, NIV.*

- ◆ In Old Testament literature to be “lifted up” means to be exalted!

Praised! In John this exaltation is a clear reference to the cross!

◆ “But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.” He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.” John 12:32, 33, NIV.

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◆ Strange isn't it, that a snake might be both an image of glory and of shame, or sin and of salvation? How is one "exalted" on a cross?

◆ Enthroned on an electric chair?

◆ Luxuriated in a gas chamber?

◆ What is so magnetic about the cross that it will "draw all men" in? What is so banner worthy about impaling a human on a log? Well, the lifting up of Jesus on a cross tells us...The snake on a pole tells us...

## ◆ **1. Our problem is my sinfulness.**

◆ In the Old Testament the snake was the representative of evil. In the new testament the Jesus on the cross is an image of sin. You notice I said "our problem" in reference to all the trouble, trouble, trouble we, mankind, experience in this life. An you'll notice I said "my" sinfulness. And that's because the problem exists in each and every single person. At least that is the Bible's tale.

◆ *"all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Rom 3:23*

◆ Now in our passage, Israel is in the desert on the way to the Promised Land. They have "dissed" God because they are hungry, and impatient, and thirsty. So God has allowed them to be overrun by poisonous snakes. Here's something else they know: they know they are dying! They know they are dying and they know why; it's because they disbelieved God's offer of the Promised Land.

◆ Little historical background: The Book of Numbers is the story of one generation of Israelites dying off in the desert, while the next generation comes to life and will be allowed into the new land. There are two parallel halves of the book, and part 1 ends in chapter 25.

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Back in Number 14, after they has spied out Canaan and decided they could never conquer it, and that God was wrong about the Promised Land, they received this word from God:

◆“So tell them, ‘As surely as I live, declares the LORD, I will do to you the very things I heard you say: In this desert your bodies will fall--every one of you twenty years old or more who was counted in the census and who has grumbled against me. Not one of you will enter the land I swore with uplifted hand to make your home, except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun. As for your children that you said would be taken as plunder, I will bring them in to enjoy the land you have rejected. But you--your bodies will fall in this desert. Your children will be shepherds here for forty years, suffering for your unfaithfulness, until the last of your bodies lies in the desert.’” Numbers 14:28-33, NIV.

◆The people of Numbers 21 are generation 1. They are mad at God, and they don’t like this stupid desert life. They also knew that it was their sin at the root of their pain.

◆v7 “we have sinned when we spoke against the Lord...”

◆**A.** See, the snakes brought their minds back to Genesis 3 and the creation story, where it was the devil, represented by the snake, that lured humans into distrust of God. The people of Israel knew by now that the physical difficulties of this world and life are a result of the spiritual difficulties in men and women. They knew that the moral world, and the physical/economic environment were connected. And you and I need to keep this in mind as well. Death and trouble and sin are all tangled together. Where there is death, there is always sin. It’s not always easy to know just what, or whose, but the connection is part of the equation.

◆**B.** Here’s something interesting. In John 3, Jesus tells a leader named Nicodemus that he must be born again in order to be a part of God’s

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kingdom. (It's just like Israel had to be born again in the desert in order to enter the Promised Land!) But the rebirth of the nation had a physical-spiritual connection. What had to die was the lack of belief and trust in God. Nicodemus is confused. It's not physically possible to crawl back into your mom's tummy! And Jesus surprised that Nic doesn't see this, points back to our text in Numbers 21. Listen to this...

◆ *“You are Israel's teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things?...I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No-one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven--the Son of Man. 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.” John 3:10-16, NIV.*

◆ Jesus is talking about spiritual rebirth. Only spiritual rebirth leads to lasting life. Where there are snakes and sin, there is always death. But where there is faith in God, there is always life.

◆ *“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Romans 6:23, NIV.*

◆ **C.** Listen friends, it is a healthy thing to look for sin in order to repent of it. It is a healthy thing to look for sin in order to steer clear of it, just as you steer clear of the winter's potholes in order to preserve the balljoints and suspension parts of your car!

◆ Scripture tells us that the fact is, that I have been bitten. There is no neutral ground in the spiritual realm. There is no DMZ. There is never any neutral ground in this life. Just look at John 3 again:

◆ v15 “whoever believes in him may have eternal life

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◆v16 “whoever believes in him shall not perish...

◆v18 “whoever believes in him is not condemned...

◆v18 “whoever does not believe stands condemned already...

◆v36 Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the son will not see life. NO NEUTRAL GROUND.

◆We are a dying race, just as Israel was a dying generation. We have been pricked with the spiritual AIDS needle. And it is not the lack of roughage, or the artificial sweeteners that are killing us. It's not a good economy that our nation needs. It's not more jobs, or free health care. Sin is what's killing us, both temporally and eternally. The refusal to believe and trust God's and his ways. The abandonment of morality is what destroys a nation and a person.

◆Do not believe this farce of “separation of Church and State” as though religion has no place in culture. That's nonsense. Of course religion has a place in culture. Morality is the foundation of culture. The question has always been which morality? Which religion? What laws shall we follow?

◆The snake on the pole also tells us...

## ◆**2. My faith is something that I live.**

◆That is, faith is something you live out, in life. It is not information you know about in your head. The time to exercise faith does not come after God has rescued you. The exercise of your faith is part of the rescue! You will notice that God did not take the snakes away as the result of Israel's repentance. He provided a healing for their damage. And he did not take them out of their desert either. This generation would live out their days, 40

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years of them, in the desert, being healed and cared for by God. They would spend those years learning to trust God. To believe. Learning to look to him in faith.

◆ You might notice too, that it was not enough for some poor Israelite to sit in his tent somewhere after getting bitten by a snake and think to himself, “Hey the snake on the pole will heal me. Oh Snake up on a pole, heal me!” No, he has to look at it. Presumably then, you get bit in the course of the day, maybe by the water fountain, or at the grocery store –and it’s not enough to just think, “Oh God will heal me, that’s his job.” No, the Israelite had to physically go outside and look toward the pole.

◆ Even so, it is the heart that looks to the cross that is saved into eternity. And it is the heart that looks to the cross that is saved in the moments of life as well. But what does it mean to look to the cross?

◆ A. Looking to the cross does not mean religious trinkets can protect me.

◆ I’m not saying that if you were a cross around your neck you’ll be safe from disaster. There is no magic in a cross. You might ask, “Was there magic in the Bronze Snake?” No, that’s not it. In 2 Kings 18 King Hezekiah actually has this very bronze snake destroyed because Israel had saved it and were worshiping it like an idol, as though it was magic.

◆ B. No, atonement for sin, comes whenever and wherever the heart repents and turns to God for healing. Looking to the cross means repenting of my sinning. Make repentance a regular habit. Every time we repent, that is, renounce the wrong path, turn around and go God’s way, we find healing.

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### ◆ C. Looking to the cross means trusting Jesus is my hope of cure.

Here's where the snake, or death symbol, becomes a saving symbol. It is a *snake impaled* on a cross. A snake killed and lifted up off the ground, hung where it is helpless.

◆ When Jesus was "lifted up" he was becoming our sin & snake-ness in our place. He was becoming our inoculation, where a dead virus is injected into the body to keep away the living virus. It was an inversion like forest rangers use when they burn sections of the prairie to stop the fire from burning the prairie. The Apostle Paul put that inversion like this...

◆ *"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." 2 Corinthians 5:21, NIV.*

◆ Listen, when you lay your sins at God's feet and ask forgiveness, God looks at you as a clean person. He doesn't see your sins because Jesus takes them. He sees a clean daughter. The devil will whisper to you to not bother going back to God in confession of sin because he will be disgusted with you messing up again, even as you are disgusted with yourself.

◆ Lay your sins at Jesus feet. Do it everyday! Don't try to be good the rest of the day to make up for your sin. You can't. Do good to say thank you for the cross.

◆ God is not like you and me. God can make a symbol of death (cross) a symbol of life!

◆ "For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin



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offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us," Romans 8:3, 4, NIV.

◆ That inversion has become a universal symbol for the medical field: a snake on a pole; a source of healing precisely because death is put to death.

◆ **Conclusion:** Tomahawks in hand, the Indians crept toward the strange tent and peered under the edge of a flap. They were prepared to kill the single white man inside by the name of David Brainard. In the center of the tent they was him, on his knees in prayer as a rattlesnake slithered across his feet. The snake paused, reared to strike, and then lowered and glided off into the darkness once again. It would be a long time later that David found out why the Indians has received him with such great honor as he sought them out to share the Gospel of Jesus with them. They had seen this event, and came to view him as a messenger from the Great Spirit, which in fact he was.

◆ We fear snakes because we fear that which has the power to kill. Unless of course you have a cure or an anti-venom.

◆ *"He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed." 1 Peter 2:24, NIV*