

See and Live Num 21:4–9 3-11-18

Paul writes in today's epistle, **Eph. 2:8-9**: Few events more clearly illustrate that than the one about Moses and the bronze serpent. It is even more worthy of attention because Jesus applies it to Himself.

The Israelites were saved from the sin of faithless complaining, but not by killing the snakes, finding an antidote for the poison, or anything in their power. They had no reason to boast. They looked up in repentant faith to accept God's healing. They just looked and lived.

What's the back story here? Forty years after God had freed them from 400 years of slavery in Egypt, the Israelites are again on the verge of entering the Promised Land. They have to go through the land of Edomites, but are denied access. So they now have to go another longer route, making a long wait and journey even longer.

Like their parents, they complain to Moses about their living conditions and even about the manna sent from God each morning.

Griping about having the same menu every day for 40 years seems understandable. But they were

forgetting why God had delayed their arrival for so long. At their first chance to enter the land they had distrusted God to conquer the inhabitants seen by their spies. God rewarded them with a 40-year time out in the desert until the doubting generation would die off. Only their children would enter.

And now their children also were complaining, against Moses and God. In fact, ever since they left Egypt, grumbling and doubt had become a pernicious habit. This time God sends poisonous snakes, perhaps cobras or vipers, so deadly that they were used for executions. The bite caused burning throughout the body. Death came quickly.

There was no antidote, ER, or 911 number to call. But there was God. To their credit, they confessed their sin to God. They didn't justify it or explain it. When you are being rightly punished, it's always wise not to act like a victim. Better to own up to it and ask for mercy.

Mercy was what they got. God directed Moses to lift a bronze serpent on the pole and tell them that whoever looked at it would live. He could have used some other remedy, so why this one. By

looking at the bronze serpent they would be reminded of the consequence of their sin. Yet as they looked at it, they would also see their salvation. The act of faith which accepted God's remedy was counted by God as worthy of life. He did not want them to die, but to live in trusting obedience to him.

This story of Israelites, snakes, and a bronze serpent is about God's dealing with us today. We often falter in our faith and ungratefully take God's blessings for granted. Jesus tells Nicodemus that the remedy for sin's death penalty is like the bronze serpent Moses lifted on the pole. Whoever looks to Christ crucified will find cure from the deadly poison of their sin.

So in repentance we look at Christ on the cross and see the consequences of our sin. God could not redeem us with anything less than His own bodily presence in His Son. He lived under the law, was tempted as we are and in our place suffered the penalty of our sin. We cannot look at the flesh ripped by Roman whips, the crown of thorns thrust on his head, the nail pierced hands and feet and take our sin lightly. St. Paul writes that He knew no sin, but became sin for us.

Isaiah wrote that by His stripes we are healed.

So as the Israelites looked and live, we too see in Christ not only the tragedy of our sin, but the triumph of our salvation. He became sin for us that we may become righteous before God.

Moses does not reveal when or even if the snakes went away—only that one bitten could look at the bronze serpent and live. Likewise, sin and temptation will not just go away. But when afflicted by sin, we too can look to the cross and live by grace through faith. Jesus makes this clear in **John 3:16-18**.

A sobering footnote to this event comes hundreds of years later. One of the good kings, Hezekiah, destroyed this bronze serpent almost 1000 years later. Why? The people had made an idol of it, sacrificing to it, as if forgiveness came through their work.

Likewise, I fear that without Christ on the cross, it can become a sanitized good luck charm instead of a reminder to repent. Let us always look only at Christ, crucified and risen for us, that we might live. Amen.