

Numbers 21:4-9

⁴They set out from Mount Hor along the road to the Red Sea to go around the land of Edom, but the people became very impatient along the way. ⁵The people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? Look, there is no food! There is no water! And we are disgusted by this worthless food!”

⁶The LORD sent venomous snakes among the people, and the snakes bit the people. As a result many people from Israel died. ⁷The people went to Moses and said, “We have sinned, because we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD to take the snakes away from us.” So Moses prayed on behalf of the people.

⁸The LORD said to Moses, “Make a venomous snake and put it on a pole. If anyone who is bitten looks at it, he will live.” ⁹Moses made a bronze snake and put it on the pole. If a snake had bitten anyone, if that person looked at the bronze snake, he lived.

Snakebit

I.

Was it bad luck, or failure? Merriam Webster defines snakebit as “having or experiencing failure or bad luck.”

The whole thing actually started decades earlier. An advance party had been sent to scout out the land of Canaan, the land God had promised to his special people. 12 scouts went to look things over, one from each of the 12 tribes of Israel. The land was beautiful, that much they all agreed on. There was all kinds of potential for their society.

Even though God had promised his people he would give them this land, ten of the twelve scouts insisted that the people wouldn't be able to defeat the people who were the current inhabitants of the land. Their negativity spread throughout the whole camp of the people of Israel.

The obstinance and lack of trust in God angered the Lord. Moses was to tell the people: “In this wilderness your corpses will fall... Every one of you twenty years old and up who have grumbled against me, ³⁰I swear that none of you will go into the land where I promised to settle you, except for Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun” (Numbers 14:29-30, EHV). Joshua and Caleb were the two scouts who had trusted God and his promises.

The 40 years were nearly over. The people were once again poised to enter the Promised Land. The plan had been to peacefully pass through the kingdom of Edom on their way in to the Promised Land. They were refused safe passage.

Snakebit. That's what they were. At least, so it seemed to the people. They seemed to have nothing but bad luck.

Had the new generation learned anything from their ancestors? The oldest among them, other than Joshua and Caleb and Moses, were 60. You would think the stories from that previous generation would have made them stop and think.

Did they really think it was “bad luck” that the king of Edom wouldn't let them pass? Did they think that because this petty king had refused, their God couldn't help them and make things work out, anyway?

“The people spoke against God and against Moses, ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? Look, there is no food! There is no water! And we are

disgusted by this worthless food!” (Numbers 21:5, EHV).

Snakebit. One instance of bad luck just piled on another.

They had become impatient with God. Impatience turned into complaints. Complaints turned into self-pity. For 40 years God had given them enough water in this wilderness to sustain a community of about 2 million people. There is no water? Worthless food? Were the people really so shallow as to complain about the food that literally came down from heaven to sustain them for these many years?

“The LORD sent venomous snakes among the people, and the snakes bit the people. As a result many people from Israel died” (Numbers 21:6, EHV).

Snakebit. Now the term took on a much more literal application than the bad luck they were convinced was their lot.

God does not tolerate such rebellion. He sent snakes. They were exceedingly venomous.

With the snakes, God showed his anger toward the people at their rejection of his grace and protection over the past 40 years. With the snakes God showed them that their own rebellious actions were the direct cause of their problems, just like their rebellion when the scouts came back with their report had resulted in these 40 years of wandering. Most importantly, though, with the snakes God was calling them to repentance.

II.

Snakebit. Maybe you think *your* life is just a series of bad luck events. It's *never* a good time to lose a job, or develop heart disease, or lose a loved one. Your bad luck might go deeper. Every business venture you try seems to be plagued by bad timing.

The pandemic multiplied the bad luck. To be sure, some businesses like Amazon have thrived during the past 12 months, but many have struggled.

Do you ever get impatient with God? Rather than complaining about “miserable food,” have you complained about the miserable conditions you have been forced to endure?

The snakebit problems of life you face serve the same purpose as the poisonous snakes slithering around in the camp of Israel. God's goal for Israel was to bring Israel to repentance and faith in him. He didn't want to condemn them, but to save them. He continued to love them in spite of their rebellion.

The adversity we face in life, the challenges and the problems we face, serve the same purpose. God wants to draw us back to him—or to keep us firmly by his side. Sometimes the problems we face are of our own making, just as the problems Israel faced. God wants us to repent.

III.

That's what God wanted for Israel, too. When they repented, God told Moses: “Make a venomous snake and put it on a pole. If anyone who is bitten looks at it, he will live.’⁹ Moses made a bronze snake and put it on the pole” (Numbers 21:8-9, EHV).

Put yourself in their shoes. Would you look? Unquestioningly?

God's instructions were completely illogical. While the people might not have had modern medicine, they certainly weren't so naive as to think that pointing one's face in a certain direction and staring at a brass snake hanging up on a pole was going to do anything to cure snakebite.

“If a snake had bitten anyone, if that person looked at the bronze snake, he lived” (Numbers 21:9, EHV). How many were stubborn, do you think? How many refused to look

and therefore perished?

Was it the snake on the pole that saved them? Was it some special magic that came with pointing their face in a certain direction? No. In reality, the bronze snake itself couldn't really help them. Those who looked were actually showing their trust in God and his firm and certain promises. Those who were dying were given life. Their faith in God—that he still loved them in spite of their rebellion—healed them and saved their lives.

It's no coincidence that this lesson is the Old Testament reading in the same week the gospel reading is from John 3. "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:14-15, EHV).

Snakebite. We were snakebit with our own sin. We were dying from the wounds caused by our sins.

The gospel teaches us that Jesus was lifted up on a cross. Jesus himself makes the comparison between himself and the snake on a pole that Moses lifted up. Everyone who believes, says Jesus, will have eternal life.

How many refuse Jesus? It is not logical that looking to Jesus and putting all your trust in a man lifted up for execution on a cross is going to save you. Looking to Jesus for life makes as much sense as looking at a brass snake on a pole for life-giving treatment for snakebite. Maybe even less.

IV.

Paul says in the Second Lesson: "God, because he is rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in trespasses. It is by grace you have been saved!" (Ephesians 2:4-5, EHV).

Once you were as good as dead. You were snakebit by sin. Just like those who believed the promise in Numbers, you believed God's promises to you. You have looked to Jesus and you are spiritually alive. You are snakebit no longer. Amen.