

Dear Christian Friends,

Snakes. Do you like them? Not many do. However, in some cultures snakes are held in high esteem as powerful religious symbols. The mythical "Plumb Serpent" was worshipped as the "master of life" by ancient Aztecs of Central America. Some African cultures worship rock pythons and consider the killing of one to be a serious crime. In Australia, the Aborigines associated a giant rainbow serpent with the creation of life. In India cobras are regarded as reincarnations of important people. Others have associated snakes with medical power or rebirth. Even our own modern medical symbol of two snakes wrapped around a staff, comes from ancient Greek Mythology. According to the Greeks, the mythical figure Asculapius discovered medicine by watching as one snake used herbs to bring another back to life.

But in Judeo-Christian cultures, snakes are almost always symbols of evil. In the Garden of Eden it was the serpent that beguiled Eve into eating the forbidden fruit and was cursed. The devil is described as a serpent in the book of Revelation. John the Baptizer and Jesus both called the Pharisees a brood of vipers. And in our text today God brought death into the Jewish camp through fiery serpents.

But God's purpose was not to destroy the children of Israel. Oh no, God wanted to refocus their attention on him. In fact, the Lord continues to refocus our attention today, too, through these snakes. Then and now, the Lord tells us to *Look and Live*. And as we....

I know I said that God is using snakes to refocus our attention this morning, don't worry. You don't need to lift your feet from the floor. God isn't sending actual fiery serpents into our midst. But let's take a look at the similarities. As was pointed out, the Lord brought death into the Jewish camp through fiery serpents - many were bitten; many died. Why would God do something like that? It just doesn't seem like

him, does it? Maybe over your life experience you have seen protesters carrying around signs making claims about what Jesus would say, do or think. One favorite over the decades is, "Who would Jesus bomb?" The point is that Jesus is all about love and not about death and destruction. All politics aside, I wonder how well he knew his scriptures.

Take a look at the background of this story. Israel had been on the move for forty years. It had been forty years since God had brought Egypt to its knees. Forty years since the Red sea swallowed Pharaoh's chariots and horsemen. Forty years since God first brought water from rocks, manna and quail from the heavens. Those forty years of wandering in the wilderness had been a direct result of complaining and rebellion against the Lord.

But now, the Promised Land was in sight. And as the children of Israel headed toward the Promised Land, the people could almost taste it. Soon they would have solid homes. Soon they would have new clothes and new shoes. Soon they could be confident that they would stay put.

But, the king of Arad had different plans for the Israelites. He tried to stop them from entering the promised land. So the Israelites asked God what they should do and he told them to go to war and destroy Arad. They obeyed and the Lord, in turn, gave them a complete victory.

But as they came off this victory, there were further problems: the King of Edom would not let them pass, either. He was afraid of the Israelites. They were too big, too strong, too numerous to let them be. He didn't want them living right next door. So he told them that he wasn't going to let them "just" pass through as they had asked. No, if they wanted to come through his country, they'd have to fight their way through.

But remember, these Edomites were descendants of Esau, Jacob's brother. These people were cousins of Israel. So this time, rather than go to war with Edom, God had Moses lead the people around the country – a longer journey yes, but a journey that

would end in the promised land none-the-less.

Sadly, this is where the plot, as they say, thickens. Instead of rejoicing at the great victory God had just given them over Arad. Instead of respecting God's decision to go around Edom, ***the people became very impatient along the way... [they] 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!"*** Yes, their impatience, their discontent, their I-know-better-than-God attitudes, blinded them to the many gifts God had given them.

It has been said that hindsight is 20/20. And we can certainly see much clearer today than the Israelites could see then. Its kind of like we're watching a show and desperately trying to tell the main character what to do: no, don't open that door; please, just say that you love her; come on, just do the right thing!

We read this text and it's as if we're screaming at the screen of this spiritual movie, on the edge of our seats trying to tell the Israelites, *Don't do it! Don't say it! Don't open your mouths and complain!!!*

And it's too late. They let God have it. And didn't he respond: ***Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among the people; and the snakes bit the people. As a result many people from Israel died.*** Only God wasn't doing it simply to punish the Israelites. In fact, if God had wanted to punish them, he could have wiped them out with but a breath. No, God wanted to refocus their attention away from themselves and back to him.

Sadly, we know, only too well, how we, too, let our eyes slip, we fail to keep our eyes fixed on ***the author of our faith and the one who brings it to its goal.*** And its exactly when we don't look beyond ourselves. We don't see His majesty beyond our own misery. God has been good to us...but we still complain. He has kept us alive, providing for our every need...but we still complain. He has opened doors that were closed in our faces...but we still complain. He's put bread on our tables...but

we still complain. He blessed us with a place to live...but we still complain. We want a better body. We want better health. We want better situations. We want better grades. We want. We want. We want. Until... YOUCH! Snake bite as the Lord gets our attention.

No, maybe its not an actual snake bite as the Lord allows the great Serpent the devil, to do his thing. But always and only for God's purposes. You see, as sickness...as pain...as suffering...as the heartaches and problems of a sinful life get us down, God uses these "snake bites" so to speak, to refocus our attention on him. God brings us to our knees, grabs our heads, and says, "Look at...me!!!!"

The Israelites certainly got the hint. Not only did they get the hint, they knew exactly what they had done. ***The 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"*** How can we admit any less? How can we ask anything else? The Apostle John invites us to have this conversation with our gracious God, ***If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*** (1 John 1:9)

People of God, the Lord was and is faithful. For ***The LORD said to Moses, "Make a venomous snake and put it up on a pole. If anyone who is bitten looks at it, he will live." So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. If a snake had bitten anyone, if that person looked at the bronze snake, he lived.*** Through Moses God spoke and said ***"Look and live."***

***Look and Live,*** my dear fellow redeemed children of God. Not at a bronze serpent, of course. That pole and snake was nothing more than a shadow of what was to come. No, we look at the *real thing*, just as Jesus invited Nicodemus to do in our gospel reading from a few moments ago. In that conversation Jesus makes the connection, ***"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."*** The snake on the pole was a prophetic symbol of the cross of Jesus Christ. On the

cross He who knew no sin became sin for you and me. Because He died you have been justified. Because He died the venom of sin has been taken away. Because He died you have peace with God. Because He rose you too will rise. By God's grace, you have Hope! By God's grace, you **Look** to the cross **and** by God's grace you **Live**.

Did you notice something, though, about the prayer of the people, something that maybe gets reflected in our own prayers for deliverance? Did you notice what they wanted? We're told that they pleaded with Moses to **Pray to the LORD to take the snakes away from us**. The snakes remained.

It is also interesting to note that this is the last time we hear of the people complaining before they entered the Promised Land. Do you think they finally figured it out? Or is it possible that the snakes did not leave the Israelites until they had crossed the Jordan, into the Promised Land, as a reminder to keep their focus on God.

No, God hasn't removed those snakebites from our lives either. And from time to time, as our focus slips to ourselves... YOUCH! God will refocus our attention and give us the strength through the power of his Holy Spirit to keep our eyes focused on him. For in him, we **Look and Live. Amen.**