

4 They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; 5 they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!”

6 Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. 7 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.

8 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.” 9 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, they lived.

### **God fights snakes with a snake and sin with his son**

There is a way to fight fire with fire. It's called a backburn. But it's the last resort because anytime you start a fire there is the possibility of that fire getting out of control especially when there already is a fire. Instead of fighting fire with fire - a fire break fights fire by removing fuel in the path of the fire. Instead of fighting fire with fire, retardant is dropped on fires and water is used to saturate and control fire. But a backburn fights fire with fire. It's a controlled burn which consumes all of the fuel in the path of a much larger fire.

But if you weren't aware of how a back burn worked, you might think it's crazy to suggest starting another fire in order to fight a fire. I wonder if that's how Israel must have felt when Moses came back from a meeting with the Lord concerning the deadly biting snakes only to inform them, “We need another snake.” Moses was instructed to make a snake and put on a pole to fight the snakes. They're not fighting fire with fire which has some logic to it, they're fighting snakes with a snake. There seems to be no logic. There is nothing for the people to do. It doesn't look like it will help. The idea is crazy without the command and promise of God, which is what they have and what Moses acted upon.

That is all we have in God's Word, command and promises. Sometimes it seems like, as with our lesson, God's commands and promises make absolutely no sense. We may not understand how God is working all things for our good. We may not understand the wisdom in God Words and write it off as foolishness. Let's take a moment to understand what God wants Israel and us to understand. I'm not saying everything, every problem in life can be explained or rationalized, but God does want

us to understand: Just as we fight fire with fire, he fought snakes with a snake and most importantly he fights sin with his son.

After 38 years Israel is still wandering in the wilderness. 38 years after the initial rebellion, where their parents refused to enter the Promised Land, and now a new generation stands before the Land. They have daily seen God's work, his provision, care, compassion, the miraculous ways he has provided for them. And now they are so close to the Promised Land they can practically taste the milk and honey.

But there is a fire closing from the North. Edom meaning red, might as well have been a fire that swept over the land stopping Israel in their tracks and forbidding they cross through their territory North West to the Promised Land. God will not allow them to attack. They are told to go back South East. They are just like their parents. They use almost the exact same complaint, almost 40 years later. They've learned nothing. *"There is no bread. There is no water. We detest this miserable food. God you've taken us out here to kill us."* They grumble and complain against Moses and against God.

There is a solution to the problem as God sends snakes that are described as fiery serpents. A snake whose bite feels like you've been set on fire, possibly the bronze desert adder. I imagine that being bit by a snake with such a painful fiery bite, and having people die around you certainly would make one rethink their current complaint against God and even call on God for deliverance, And that's exactly what happens, *"We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us."* The response from God probably wasn't what they wanted to hear. Instead of taking away the snakes, shutting their mouths so they can't bite, or providing comfort in the midst of their pain - he calls on Moses to, *"Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live."* He instituted the rather unusual Old Testament sacrament of snake-staring. They were instructed to look at the bronze snake and live. Logic says, "Keep the bite below the heart, apply pressure, ice, maybe suck it out as a last resort." There has to be something we can do. People are dying and God says, "Look at this snake" like a child proud of his work. Another snake. It doesn't look like salvation. But connected to a promise and command of God combined with his Word it is a promise to believe and has a sign connected to it.

As we look at our history we may think we are a bit better. We've learned a few things from our past mistakes. We've progressed. We won't be making the same mistakes as the previous generation. In reality 3400 years later we still haven't learned much. If we're honest with ourselves, we're just like Israel during the Exodus. When God tells us, "Go back. You've got some more time to spend in the hospital or nursing home." When we are so close to heaven we can feel it, can't wait to go, and we're told to wait. When we find disappointment, pain, fiery serpents - do we grumble,

complain against God? It's okay to complain to God and bring him our cares and concerns but if we are blaming God then we're blaming the wrong person.

God does everything he can to get our attention, to remind us there is a problem. It was no mistake that God chose snakes to remind his people of the cause of these problems. He did so in order to draw their attention back to the snake who tempted Adam and Eve. God wanted to remind his people and us this serpent is the one who makes life miserable. God makes us aware of our situation that we too have been bitten by sin. This snake's venom courses through our veins causing not only a temporal but an eternal death. It's been there since the beginning when the words, "*Did God really say?*" sank their teeth into humanity.

Sometimes God sends snakes at other times he points us to the problem, the sin, and suffering of this world in order to remind us the poison is still there, but there is a solution. Instead of a snake on a stick God provides Baptism and Lord's Supper, which don't look like much. They make no logical sense. What can water do? The question Martin Luther asks, "How can water do such great things?" It's just plain water but when it's connected to the command and promise of God - then it's something different. It's a powerful anti-venom. It's a powerful witness to our inability to save ourselves. I wonder how many questioned his wisdom of placing a snake on a pole and telling people to look to it, just how many refused to see the wisdom in God's plan of salvation,

But that's just like us. We think we can do something to solve our problems. We may refuse to look to the cross because it doesn't make logical sense. If we do something wrong we should try to make it right. If we think, "I can do more good to offset the bad things I've done." That's ignores the perfection that God expects and short changes God of the good things you should be doing all of the time. Moreover it ignores just how dead in sin we really are.

The problem wasn't with the snakes biting each other. It was with the people. The problem is us. People biting each other, biting the hand that feeds them. God's solution isn't to remove the problem but save us through it. Like a back burn, he is able to use something intended to destroy to save. The devil intended to destroy God's creation God worked through what had been ruined to restore it.

God graciously sent snakes to bring his wayward people back to repentance. It wasn't because the bronze snake was so powerful in and of itself rather it was connected to the commands and promise of God. It was because God forgave them, didn't give up on them, and continued to provide for them. God delivered them from slavery, death at the hands of the Egyptian army, and he gave them a land so they could be called his own. This isn't the end of Israel though it should have been, God brought them into the Promised Land just as he said he would.

1500 years later God again put the problem on a pole for everyone to see. Jesus was lifted up on the cross so that we could look to him and live. He then gave us the sacraments which point us back to the promise. He offers up his body and blood for you, for the forgiveness of sins. He offers baptism which connects us to his death and resurrection. He reassures us, "I haven't given up on you.

He even tells us why. *"God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life."* God loved this world. God loves you. He is the giver of every good and perfect gift. That's a gift that works fully and it's a gift that's given freely. Sometimes these gifts are unwanted corrections - like snakes or fires. When Israel saw people dying all around them. They turned to the Lord and to Moses and confessed, "We've sinned." The snake wants us to suffer, doubt God's promises, and join him in disobedience. No matter what happens, the hard times, or even instructions that don't make sense like, "Go back." we can be sure that God loves us and is working for us. That he's taken away the sting of sin; death. He's crushed the serpent's head and now his bite won't kill us. That snake can't hurt us anymore.

The commands and promises of God won't always make sense, we can't even be certain that we will see results. We can trust his word and hold on to his promises, and obey his commands. We can give thanks to God for the discipline that he puts in our life. We can confess our sins and trust in his forgiveness, fully, and freely given. Paul calls it the foolishness of the cross, which frustrates the wisdom of this world and yet it works not by force or compulsion but because God fought fire with fire, snakes with a snake, and sin by becoming sin for us.

If there is ever a fire, don't burn down the house trying to stop it. If snakes ever bite seek medical treatment. When you sin don't go searching for man-made solutions turn to cross and see God's son, look to his gifts and live. Know you're forgiven, fully, freely, for his sake. Amen.