

If anyone here is terrified of snakes, well this just isn't your day. We have to talk about them. They are in the story. We cannot go from, "the people spoke against God," to "it all turned out fine in the end." No, the snakes are part of the narrative. A crucial part of it.

It's a little like your life and mine. The snakes are there, too. You know, the troubles that come to bite us. They come because God sends them just as He sent the serpents. And here's the thing about the snakes He sends to us: without them, we would never get to that part of our story where it all turns out fine in the end.

The most horrific part of the story in our text is not the part with the serpents. It's before that. When the people become impatient, it says, and speak against God and Moses. Who does that kind of thing? We could expect this from pagans. But from the very people whom God delivered out of slavery? The people whom He is sustaining with manna as He leads them to the Promised Land? Yes, these are the ones!

But let's not get all high and mighty here. We wear the very same shoes as they. God delivered us, too, from slavery to sin in our baptism. And He sustains us as He leads us to the Promised Land. And do we never become "*impatient on the way?*" Do we never speak against God and His servants such as the president, the governor, those in Congress, father, mother, pastor, elder? Oh, but we do. Is it any wonder that God also sends snakes among us?

But hold on. Do not think that these snakes are punishments. Rather, were God wanting to punish us, and severely so, He would send no snakes at all. Let me explain. God did not send the serpents among His people to destroy them out of anger, but to save them out of mercy. To save them from unbelief. They had turned away from God. They were failing to trust in Him. Had God let them continue in this way, the infection would have spread so deeply among them, one wonders if any would have remained faithful. The snakes were necessary to bring them back to God.

Is this not why he sends snakes to us? Remember that we are all sinners. And as sinners, we fail to keep the First Commandment above all, to fear, love, and trust in God. And even when we are faithful, God will send troubles to us, yet always for a merciful purpose.

My dad was a Lutheran pastor. God sent the serpent of cancer to him. It proved to be a deadly serpent in his case. But it was a blessing for others, including one of his beloved sisters. She was falling away from the faith in which she had been raised. The serpent that bit my dad turned her eyes back to Jesus. I saw it happen. She, too, died of cancer a while afterwards. But she died confessing her Lord and Savior and is now with my dad in the Promised Land.

A serpent is a beautiful thing when it rescues from unbelief. "*We have sinned!*" admitted the people in the wilderness. But it took the serpents to bring them to this confession. Yet confession alone can save no one. Only God can save. He told Moses to put a bronze serpent on a cross. I know it says pole in our text, but it would have been shaped like a cross to hold the serpent in place. And anyone who looked to the bronze serpent would live.

No wonder we read in Hebrews 12 to “*fix our eyes on Jesus.*” For He is our bronze serpent lifted up on a cross that “*Whoever believes in Him may*” not just live as did the Israelites but live forever; “*may have eternal life.*”

So, are your eyes and mine fixed on Jesus? It troubles me when someone says, “Yes, my eyes are fixed on Jesus,” yet their life says the opposite. Who are they fooling?

In the wilderness, imagine if you will someone who is bitten by a serpent and their loved one says, “Come out of your tent and fasten your eyes on that bronze serpent up there. Do this and you will live!” But he hears this in reply: “Oh, I’ll be fine. I can picture that bronze serpent in my mind. And besides, I have faith in my heart, so I do not need to physically go out and look at the bronze serpent.” Will he live or die?

The same can be asked of those today who think that faith is only spiritual and has nothing to do with the physical. “In my heart I believe, so I do not physically need to fix my eyes, or any other part of my body, on Jesus. My heart is fixed on Him, and that’s all that matters. So I can ignore preaching and hearing God’s Word with my ears. I can dispense with the actual eating of the Sacrament with my mouth. I do not need those physical things.”

What’s the difference between that person and the one in the wilderness who refuses to look with his eyes at the bronze serpent? The only reason a person back then would look at the bronze serpent is because he had faith in his heart to believe in God’s promise which was connected to that serpent on a pole. If he had no faith, he would not go out to look at it. But those who believed the promise God attached to it would. The spiritual and the physical belong together.

The same is true with us. We dare never separate faith in Jesus from the physical actions of our baptism, our hearing of the words of God with the congregation, and our eating of the Lord’s Sacrament. Doing these faithfully, in fact, is how we fix our eyes on Jesus.

If you are hearing this, it is not too late for you. Centuries after Moses, King Hezekiah destroyed the bronze serpent, but our bronze serpent stands forever. And He stands as the Savior of all. It doesn’t matter how far away from God you or your loved one has fallen. He sent His Son Jesus to the cross for you. That is your Savior uplifted there.

So, yes, we do fail to trust in Him daily. Why do you think He went to the cross? To forgive you for your failures. And you are forgiven. Everyone of you is forgiven. Not one of you is excluded. No Israelite was excluded. Everyone, it says, everyone who looked at the bronze serpent lived. And since that was true for them, how much more for you who have been given the same promise from God.

In John 3, Jesus says, and I will underscore His words for emphasis, “*As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that all, all, all, all who believe in Him may have eternal life.*”

No greater promise was ever given. This promise is for you and your loved ones. Believing this promise, by the grace and working of God, you will, not might, but will fix your eyes on Jesus. Amen.