

Snakes in the Desert

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

5 October 2025

Children's Talk: Bad Snakes, Good Snakes

Our story from the Word today has to do with snakes. Who here likes snakes? Who here is scared of snakes? Do you think snakes are good or bad? It really depends doesn't it. Snakes can be very dangerous, and it is bad if you get bitten by one. But if they are just living in the garden they are nice to have around.

The Children of Israel were wandering in the desert. They didn't have any regular food or water and they had gotten sick of eating the manna, the bread that the Lord sent them from heaven. They got so sick of it that they complained to God and to Moses and said they would be better off going back to being slaves in Egypt. But then something terrible happened: venomous snakes came into the camp and started biting everyone!

They begged Moses and the Lord to help them, and the Lord told Moses to do something interesting:

Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against Jehovah and against you; pray to Jehovah that He take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. Then Jehovah said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live." So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived. (Numbers 21:7-9)

So this story has bad snakes and good snakes. The bad snakes were down on the ground biting people. But when someone got bitten, if they looked up to see the bronze snake they would be healed.

This story doesn't have an obvious message, but I wonder what the Lord might be trying to tell us? What could it mean that there are bad snakes that hurt the people but that there was a good snake from the Lord that helped the people? Are there things in your life that are sometimes good for you and sometimes bad for you? (video games; being lazy; competition) What makes the difference between them?

Maybe it has something to do with how we use things. Sometimes we can use things selfishly but other times we can use those same things for the Lord.

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You may or may not remember this story. It is a bit obscure. But as with all the stories in the Lord's Word it has a deep spiritual meaning that applies directly to our lives. That doesn't mean we can always tell what that meaning is, and we will never understand the full meaning. I found that as I looked into this particular story some parts became clearer but other parts I still had many questions about. But I think this story has a great deal to say about the times when spiritual life feels apathetic and devoid of happiness, and how following the Lord actually can make us happier, rather than just being a chore we have to endure.

We have to go back a few verses to set the stage here. The Children of Israel had been slaves in Egypt for centuries. At last the Lord sent Moses to lead them out of slavery and into the promised land. They were on this journey when our story took place, which starts with these words:

Then they journeyed from Mount Hor by the Way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom.

So they were heading out of slavery, around the dangers of the Red Sea and the enemies who lived in Edom. The spiritual significance of this is being led out of the slavery of hell, away from the threat of damnation, and into heaven. That sounds pretty fantastic right? The Lord breaks us free of the selfish and worldly desires that control us, leads us away from the path of destruction that they would have led us down, and into the blessings and joys of heavenly life!

But between Egypt and the promised land was a vast wilderness. To keep the people alive during times when there was no food the Lord sent bread from heaven, called manna, to sustain them. Even though the manna kept them alive there were

times they got so sick of it that they longed to go back to being slaves in Egypt where “at least” they were relatively well fed:

And the soul of the people became very discouraged on the way. And the people spoke against God and against Moses: “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread.” (Numbers 21:4-5)

Even though they were on the path out of slavery and into a land of plenty, the current moment was painful and even unbearable for the people. They craved happiness, any kind of happiness, even the most worldly of pleasures, just so they could have some enjoyment, even if it meant going back to slavery.

When the Lord is leading us on a spiritually upward path we go through the same experiences. We have to give up a lot of things that give us pleasure, and even though at first it is exciting to be free of the things that can control us, we can become bleak when the excitement wears off and it feels like we’ve lost the things that made us happy and the good things just don’t feel that great or give us much of a sense of satisfaction or fulfilment. We speak against the Lord and His Word, as it were, and say, “Why did you free me from the things that made me happy even if they were bad for me? At least then I could enjoy life and things made a certain kind of sense; now life is less fun and more confusing, and all those promises about heavenly life seem pretty empty and worthless and far off.” These are times when we are susceptible to temptations that drag us down, to the poisonous desires that we crave but that will kill us spiritually. There was a physical manifestation of this reality among the people of Israel:

So Jehovah sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died.

Snakes, as creatures that go down low to the ground, represent the most materialistic, sensory, sense-based desires that we have; raw worldly pleasure

(*Secrets of Heaven* §6398). Although in the story it is the Lord who sent the snakes among the people, spiritually it is we who draw these destructive desires into ourselves and so succumb to their poison. The reason it says the Lord sent them is because that's what it feels like: it feels like we get punished for doing things that are harmful, rather than the harm coming from the things themselves.

It's worth thinking about when we are most susceptible to this kind of feeling so that we can be on guard against it and identify it when it rises within us. When life is going well it's much easier to shun selfish or destructive desires and focus on our spiritual responsibilities. But when things go wrong or become stressful we lose touch with the point of any of those responsibilities and are tempted to fill the void with mere worldly pleasure. When this kind of spiritual exhaustion hits:

- Scrolling on your phone mindlessly feels much better than trying to work on a relationship with a friend
- Putting in less effort and sitting in resentment feels better than resolving a conflict with a colleague.
- Lusting other people's lives feels better than working with the little that we are blessed with in our own.

Spiritual exhaustion makes us susceptible to all these temptations.

That being said, this story is not just about avoiding these times, it's about what to do when we find ourselves immersed in them. The Teachings of the New Church lay out how we can tell if we have succumbed to making worldly pleasure our priority:

A person can easily tell, if he pays attention, whether sensory impressions occupy the first or else the lowest position in him [In other words, we can tell how much we prioritize sensory impressions]. If he says yes to everything his senses urge or desire and plays down all that his understanding tells him, then sensory impressions occupy the first position. When this is the case that person is carried along by natural desires and is completely sensual. The

condition of a person like this is little different from that of irrational animals; for animals are carried along in the same way. Indeed that person's condition is worse than theirs if he misuses his power of understanding or reason to confirm evils and falsities which the senses urge and tend towards. (*Secrets of Heaven* §5125)

If every time you want something you give in and go for it, and every time the more rational side of you cautions against it you put aside that part of your mind, you may be becoming controlled by sensory desires. That's especially true if you rationally justify always doing whatever feels good or whatever will make you the happiest in the moment.

The first step to dealing with this is recognizing what you are feeling and the direction these desires are pulling you, and then admitting to the Lord that you actually want something different. The people did this when the snakes had started to kill them:

Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against Jehovah and against you; pray to Jehovah that He take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. (Numbers 21:7)

Notice that the first step is *not* "stop feeling like that." You actually can't just change your desires or wants. (Note that later in the story, the snakes are not taken away; rather an antidote is given in the form of another sort of snake.) But there has to be some willingness to say, "even though I really want all these things, I'm not sure they're good for me." In other words the first step is to express that you want something different and ask the Lord to help you work towards that. Remember that in the story their attitude initially was that the Lord had nothing good to offer, and that's what makes this so hard for us too: these feelings often come when it really feels like the Lord and His Word are not offering us anything good and that they will never give us happiness.

But if we are willing to go back to the Lord, He will help us. If we look at the story we see that the Lord gave the children of Israel a solution:

Then Jehovah said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live." So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived. (Numbers 21:8-9)

The bronze serpent lifted up as an ensign or sigil is interesting. It's useful to notice the contrasts or even contradictions in this story: snakes were killing the people, but then another snake offered healing. The former were low down on the ground but the latter one was lifted up; the former were scaly and slithering, the latter was made of shining bronze. Remember, snakes represent the lowest parts of us, the merely worldly and sensory pleasures of life. And yet here the Lord provided the image of a snake as a way of healing people. Not only that, the Lord Himself would later, in the New Testament, refer to this story and compare Himself to this snake:

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:14-15)

It's a strange juxtaposition, the image of a serpent as a representation of the Lord. But as with all things in the Word there is a meaningful reason for this. But there appears to be more to the story than this.

We could take a couple of different lessons from this. Firstly, we have a tendency to see worldly pleasure and faith in the Lord as diametrically opposed to each other: to have one you must sacrifice the other. And there is a kind of truth in this, as we have seen: desire for worldly pleasure can drag us down into destructive behaviours and away from the Lord. But worldly pleasure is not actually the opposite of spiritual satisfaction. The feelings of pleasure that come from all sorts of worldly delights are only deepened when they are lifted up and purified by love from the

Lord. A craving for food can become gluttony, and a belief that good food is the only way to feeling ok. But when a desire for food is paired with working together to make a meal with friends and it is shared with good conversation, the actual food itself tastes better. The Teachings of the New Church even give the example of a married pair being intimate: the more they love each other spiritually the more they will enjoy being intimate. Spiritual life is supposed to be fun, even on the earthly level. The fact that it might not be right now doesn't mean you should give up on spiritual living and resort to the pursuit of raw pleasure; as much as possible you should rather hold fast to faith in the Lord by reminding yourself that this absence of delight is not for forever. If you keep living your faith, there will be amazing joys in store for you ahead.

A second lesson we can find represented here in the contrast between the creeping, venomous snakes and the healing bronze snake lifted up as a sign, is that worldly pleasure, even if it is very shallow, if it leads us towards the Lord or doing good things, is way better than letting it lead us into destructive and harmful behaviour. Think about getting to heaven as a reason for trying to be a good person. If your whole motivation for doing good things is that you'll get heaven as the reward, then that's a fairly superficial reason for doing good, and the Lord wants us to go beyond that way of thinking. But truth be told, thinking of heaven as the future reward for good behaviour is much better than indulging in hedonistic behaviour now. If the hope of heaven as a reward keeps you from lying about being sick so you can have a day off work, that's good! Is it superficial? Yes. Is it something you'll have to move beyond if you actually want to get to heaven? Also yes. But can it in some small yet important way connect you to the Lord? The answer is actually yes. While this is not

ideal, it can be a starting point that leads to a more meaningful relationship with the Lord and a more genuine practice of charity.

As the Lord leads us out of slavery, the spiritual food becomes tasteless and we crave the pleasures of the world. In losing sight of our spiritual path we are poisoned by snakes. But if we are willing to go back to the Lord, He can give us something better: the bronze snake lifted up on high that heals. He gives us this reminder that spiritual life does not mean earthly misery, and that even a shallow motivation is a good reason to do better. He leads us through the desert, and at the end of the journey is the heavenly promised land, where joys will never end.