

“And God sent fiery serpents”. I hate snakes. In fact, most people have a strong dislike for snakes.

A little while back there was a movie that was titled, “Snakes on a Plane.” For me that is a horror movie. Or Indiana Jones in the movie Raiders of the Lost Ark. He had to crawl down into an underground cavern, and they drop the torch down there and what happened? He saw that the floor was moving... because the floor was actually snakes! That’s a hard scene to watch.

I don’t like snakes. Most people don’t like snakes. Why? Maybe it goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve. Satan takes the form of a snake, and they fall into sin and ever since then people and snakes just haven’t gotten along real well.

It could just be the way they move. They slither through the grass. Or maybe because you know what a bite from one of those snakes can do to you. How the venom will course through your whole body and maybe even kill you. Snakes can be dangerous.

I know that some people **do** keep snakes as pets. I’m not one of them. And by the looks on the faces of most of you here, you’re not one either.

So, when I read that God sent fiery snakes. It makes you kind of wonder what kind of snakes were they? These aren’t your garden variety snakes. We don’t know exactly what they are. The best guesses are that they may be a puff adder, or a cobra, or carpet vipers. And when you hear the words, viper, cobra, or adder, you know that they are some of the most dangerous snakes ever and here they are slithering around the feet of the people of Israel.

What did they do to deserve this? Why the snakes? They complained. They grumbled. They got impatient. They had been wandering for almost 40 years since God had brought them out of Egypt. That first generation of people had pretty much died off and this was to be the new generation that was going in. And now God is taking them through this desert place before they entered the Promised Land.

It's hot. It's been kind of a miserable trip. And they talked about this worthless, detestable food. That manna that they had been eating for 40 years.

Think about it. You go over to Coborn's. On every shelf in every aisle is a box of oatmeal. And each box has just enough for you to eat for that day. And you go back the next day and what do you find? A box of oatmeal. Every day. Month after month. Year after year. Would you complain after a while? Maybe get just a little impatient. And there's fiery snakes when they grumble and they complain.

Actually, for us it would not take that long. We go over to Coborn's or Wal-Mart and we don't find the right size or the right brand that we're looking for and we're complaining.

Or it could be complaining about how things are going at work. Or how someone is getting on our nerves. Or losing an hour of sleep because of Daylight Savings Time. Or some aches and pains that we have. Or the high price of gas. Or you're upset with somebody at home. The grumbling and complaining, the impatience just seem to kind of course through us.

Now God doesn't send snakes among us today. But that doesn't mean that the fiery bites still aren't happening. There is a certain venom that's coursing through hearts and minds and systems from the grumbling and the complaining.

It makes you bitter. You become pessimistic about the future. You don't see people in a positive light. Only negative. There is an uneasiness. There is a lack of peace. A discontent with what you have and with what the Lord has given you. You become unthankful. **That's** the kind of venom that courses through **our** systems. What's worse is what it does with our relationship with the Lord.

That complaining and grumbling, and bitterness and negativity causes you to lose focus on God's gifts and blessings that He gives you. And thankfulness, and praise begins to drop out of your life. It makes you wonder why God would even want to be around us. I mean do you want to be around someone who is always complaining and crabbing and is negative? Of course not. I wonder if God is that way, too?

But thanks be to God, He doesn't turn His back on us. Go back to the people of Israel and what did they do? They recognize what they've done wrong. They confess it and they ask God for help.

And God answers that prayer. Moses puts that bronze snake up on a pole and they look up at it and they live! Now it was not some sort of magic in the bronze snake on a pole. No, the reason they lived is because they looked up. They trusted in faith that God would keep His promise. And He did. He is the one who gave them life when they looked up to what was lifted up.

And the same goes for us. It's not a snake on the pole, it's the Savior on the cross. When Jesus is lifted up on a cross the pattern is true for us. We need to recognize what we've done wrong, confess it before our Lord, and then look up in faith; look up in trust and live!

The cross isn't some sort of magical item that we look at. No, when we look up at the cross what we're looking at is how God has kept His promise to us, how He is giving us life. It's Jesus on the cross. He's there taking the sting of death. Our complaining, our grumbling, our bitterness, our negativity, anything that would have caused God to turn His back on us. There it is. And He is the one who is suffering the sting of death. And for us, what we get in return is life. Life now and for eternity.

John 3:16 is sometimes called the Gospel in a *nutshell*. You know it. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life." That's the Gospel in a nutshell. Anytime you have a *nutshell*, it hangs on a tree. And on the tree of the cross, God's love for us is there, lifted up, and we look up and live. What was once a snake on a pole, becomes a Savior on a cross. What was once physical life, for people bitten by snakes, now becomes eternal life for you and me.

We look up in faith and we live, *and* we give thanks. We look up to Jesus lifted up and we give thanks. Our giving thanks replaces the complaining and grumbling.

I'm reminded of a story told by Professor Glenn Nielsen from Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. He relates the true story of a missionary leading a worship service at a leper colony on the island of Tobago. Now,

leprosy is a horrendous disease that takes away part of your body, your flesh. It's a slow painful way to die. During this service, there was a woman who was turned away from him as he was speaking. When it came time to sing a hymn she turned around and the missionary said it was the most hideous face you'd ever seen. The nose was gone, the ears were gone. The disease had taken its toll on this woman.

She raised her hand which no longer had any fingers and simply asked can we sing "Count Your Many Blessings"? The missionary said he simply had to turn and walk away because he was so emotionally moved. A person who had accompanied the missionary said, "I guess you're not going to be able to sing *that* song again." And he said, "Oh, I will, but not in the same way."

A woman without a face and no fingers had looked up to see Jesus lifted up and she was counting her many blessings. The refrain from the song, by the way, goes like this:

"Count Your many blessings, count them one by one. Count your many blessings, name them one by one and it will surprise you what the Lord has done."

Complain about your food? No, give thanks for all that the Lord has given to you. Complain about a family member? No, give thanks you've got a place to call home. Complain about Daylight Savings Time? No, give thanks that you still have precious time to spend with loved ones and friends. Complain someone is driving or how high the price of gas is? No, give thanks you have some place to go and a way to get there. Complain about a co-worker? No, give thanks that you have an opportunity to work. Complain about aches and pains? No, give thanks for the medicines and the care that we receive.

Oh, one more, and this is a hard one, a very difficult one. Complain about snakes? No, they too are God's creation, and they remind us that we need to see what we've done wrong, and confess it and ask God for help, and then we look up to Jesus lifted up and we live and give thanks! Amen.