

**Look up, not down: snakes in the desert**  
**Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22;**  
**Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21**

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It was in the middle of the night that Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leader, came to Jesus for a good theological chat. He came to Jesus in the dark of night. Here in the Middle East, we understand that to have a good theological discussion, evenings are best - especially in summer.

'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher', is his opening move in his careful chess-game with words... Read John 3 when you are home. And in this sport of words, Jesus tries to lead Nicodemus from curiosity to a personal understanding about the Kingdom of God and to a changed life.

'Nicodemus, you may be born and bred in religion, in the holy nation of Israel, but that does not mean you have automatic access to God. You have to be born from above. God has to become your father. Your life needs to be turned upside down first.' These are words that also apply to us, people of the church.

**1 God sends snakes to punish people**

Nicodemus does not grasp this, so Jesus uses the story of the poisonous snakes from the Jewish Scriptures to explain what he means. Nicodemus knew this story, and he shared Israel's perspective: It was a clear sign of God's mercy.

In Psalm 107 Israel celebrated this event of the snakes in the desert. 'His mercy endures forever'. That is, the goodness of God for people who do not deserve it. For Israel, for Nicodemus, for Jesus, there was no doubt that Israel did not deserve to be saved from the snakes. They deserved to die.

The people of Israel, after having escaped from slavery in Egypt, had become impatient in the desert. Some translations also use words like: Israel was disheartened, depressed, discouraged. And in that state of mind, they spoke against God and against Moses and said:

"Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!" Mind you, this was the food that God generously rained down on them day by day.

There is nothing wrong with asking God 'why'. That is a very normal question. But Israel accused God, they blamed him for taking them out of Egypt, and for this, he held them accountable.

Nowadays, many of us have great problems with this idea that God punishes. We prefer a God of love and goodness only. A condemning God is not popular in our day and age. But may I suggest that God patting us on the shoulder and saying, you are fine, is rather meaningless if he would not also read us the riot act when we deserve it?

Interestingly, we may have problems with the concepts of God and accountability, and punishment, but anyone with personnel under him, knows about the importance of accountability. This is what I read in some management article:

You get what you reward; behavior is controlled by its own consequences. If you want people to behave in a certain way and to perform as desired, they need to be praised and rewarded. If they don't perform as desired, they need to be either redirected or reprimanded. The importance of accountability cannot be overstated.

Now this is a business principle, but the same is true in all realms of life; Without accountability, no good performance. And if you doubt this statement, I think you do not manage people or you do not have children.

Part of the Biblical worldview, not just in the Old Testament but in the New Testament as well, and very clearly also in the mind of Jesus Christ, is that all people are held accountable by God.

This is true for the maniacs of ISIS, or Boko Haram, and in that case we do not have a problem with God punishing. We find it harder to accept when it comes closer to home, when it is about us, ourselves deserving of punishment.

But we cannot deny that the Biblical, Christians worldview includes the idea that there are absolutes in morality, and that transgression of those guidelines has cosmic consequences – eternal in seriousness. We see this played out in the story of the poisonous snakes.

Very interesting that the story speaks of snakes as God's punishment. Why snakes? They were, I think, a reminder of Egypt, where the snake was one of the major gods.

The god of the Nile delta where Israel had labored in slavery, and the symbol of pharaoh himself, was the cobra, the snake. On the crown of the pharaoh of the Delta you always find the snake. Sometimes this snake was also depicted on a pole.

God wanted Israel to make a clean break with Egypt, but Israel wanted to go back to that land. They had Egypt and its culture and gods rooted deep in their hearts after having lived here in this great land for four centuries.

We see this for instance when Israel began to worship the golden bull, the Egyptian god Apis, in the desert.

We often hear the complaints of Israel in the desert – we want to go back to Egypt... And now, once again, they showed their love for that land, the land God had saved them from. And now God gave them what they asked for. It is as if God said to Israel: 'You want to go back to Egypt? You can have Egypt!'

Israel's rebellion was self-destructive. They wanted Egypt, they got Egypt. People who want to do their own thing and who do not listen to the guidelines and laws of the Creator, people who want to distance themselves from his Fatherly advice, must not be surprised that they reap the bitter fruits.

## **2 Second chance for Nicodemus**

But God is always merciful for those who return to Him. Israel did not deserve to be saved from the poisonous snakes; but when Israel confessed its sin, God in his mercy offered the solution.

We are all stumbling sinners. That is why we confess our sins again and again. 'Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you, in thought, word and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone.' And God then forgives.

Moses was to make a copper cobra, put it on a pole, and everyone who was bitten, had to look at it in order to live. In love God says: 'This is the solution; if you look, if you do this, you will live.'

God gave Israel a second chance. Or was this actually their fifth, or twentieth chance? Or had God already forgiven them a million times? God showed his mercy, again and again, and in this case, the only thing they had to do was look at the copper serpent Moses had made.

Well, 'only look', that is maybe a simplification. One Jewish Targum, an explanation of this story, points to the fact that if snakes are your problem, where do you look? Down of course. To only look up is a great act of faith in such a situation.

God has offered to is a simple solution as well. Simple for us – but costly for God. His mercy has a price – a price He himself had paid on Good Friday.

Jesus is pointing to himself. He is the cosmic solution that God offered on Golgotha, on the pole. 'Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.'

God wanted Jesus Christ to be lifted up; He made the cross of Christ the heart of history. He died at a certain time, at a certain place, and as he was the Son of God, this had universal and eternal impact. God's mercy extends into all directions of history, both in time and in space. It is for all ages, impacting the whole universe.

There was something odd in the solution God proposed to Israel, to look at a copper snake. People were bitten by snakes and in order to not die, they had to look at a snake. The solution looked like the problem.

Jesus on the cross, according to our Christian faith of 20 centuries, also reflects the problem of the people. The problem that we have – our rebellious nature – is reflected in Jesus on the cross. How? St Paul says: God made him, who had no sin, to be sin for us. (2 Cor 5:21) The spotless Lamb was slaughtered.

In that dark hour in history, from our perspective, Good Friday, God closed his eyes and it became dark in the land, for the LORD had laid on him the sins of us all. Jesus was nailed like that snake on a pole, so that we who are undeserving sinners, can receive forgiveness and have a new life.

The Evangelist John calls this the love of God. God loved the world so much, that he created this opportunity for starting over again, for healing, for restoration, for a new life, for all people who feel their life is old and worn out, for people in need of forgiveness. For people like us.

### **3 Eternal salvation**

The forgiveness and healing that Israel received in the desert was of course not due to a copper snake; forgiveness was donated by God as a free gift for those who trusted in Him, based on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ centuries later.

For Israel that was still in the far future – but for God – the sacrifice of Jesus Christ was in the timeless eternal now, stretching both back and forth in our human history. When Jesus died on the cross in Jerusalem, His sacrifice was effective at that same moment in God's eternal heavenly temple - because the Son of God himself died.

The forgiveness that God offers us today, as we pray, and believe, and participate in Holy Communion, is not based on the beauty of our prayers, or on the earnestness of our heart.

All forgiveness that He offers today is because of the sacrifice of Christ. He restored cosmic justice. The only thing we have to do is believe. Our faith connects us with Christ in that historical event. By faith we look up at him on the cross, and our sins are forgiven; God renews our life into eternity.

More than anything else, God uses our time of Holy Communion, when received in faith, to connect us with the heavenly sacrifice. Here we come to worship and participate in God's eternal solution for our sins and in the renewal of our lives. Our communion table is Golgotha; our communion table is the altar in God's heavenly temple. It is not repetition of the sacrifice. It is participation.

### **Conclusion**

The opportunity to start all over again, and again, and again is the great Good Friday gift from our merciful God. In the story of Israel in the desert, the sick people who asked God for forgiveness only had to look at the pole.

In the Gospel of John, we read that people who want to make a fresh start, who want to be connected to God, his kingdom and eternal life, only have to put their faith in Jesus Christ. Look up at him.

There is an important lesson here. We cannot deny that we are sinful people. But the solution is not to focus on our own shortcomings and to become depressed about it, or to condemn ourselves.

When I look in the mirror I see a very imperfect moral failure. But to focus too much on our imperfections does not help – it draws us deeper down. Our focus must be on Jesus. Do not look down at your failures too much, but look up at Him - our solution.

And when we, with faith in Jesus Christ, kneel for communion, to receive God's gift of life, Jesus Christ in bread and wine, we again connect with Him at that central moment in world history – at the feet of his cross where God gives us his precious gift: his forgiveness, his mercy, his love, his power for living.

**Amen**