

God saw me through it. One of first movies I ever saw in the theater was Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade. Like Indiana Jones, I hate snakes. But there are always scenes where he had to find his way through rats and giant bugs and ... pits and planes and corridors full of snakes. For what seemed like weeks after going to the theater, I would dream of snakes hiding under my covers. I would lie cold on top of the covers for most of the night because I was scared.

That thought returned to me when we visited the zoo this past week. We went to the snake exhibit, and I found myself looking up at the ceiling to check if there were any snakes slithering overhead. Later in the week I came to the preschool, and the children were playing with slime and stuffed snakes! But God saw me through it, even through my day of scary snakes at preschool. This is what God does:

God Sees Believing Sinners Through

1. When the snakes strike

God did not always look so nice in the Old Testament, sending snakes and plagues and things. Yet don't count out God's patience in the book of Numbers.

The book of Numbers gets its name from the numbers of Israelites in a census in the beginning of the book. It turns out the book could be named "Numbers" due to of the number of times when God's people don't listen to God. Oh, the number of times they wish they could go back to Egypt, and the number of times they complain! These should be the reasons it is called the book of Numbers.

It also turns out the book of "Numbers" could get its name from the number of times God showed them patience and love. The number of times God sent bread falling from heaven, "*manna*," as they called it, meaning "What is it?" Oh, the number of times quail miraculously flocked to their wilderness camp, all by the hand of God. He filled their backyards with food ... and still they grumbled.

For God so loved these sinners that he gave them their daily bread.

These gifts of God they took for granted. They complained so much that God had a different animal appear. Snakes miraculously gathered to their camp. Is it

no amazing how this punishment really fit the crime? Tasty manna and quail keep you alive; poisonous snakes take life away.

For God so loved these sinners that he adjusted their bad attitude.

Many died. The rest returned to God. They came to Moses and sorrowed over their sins. Moses prayed, and God offered a solution to take away their poison.

We New Testament believers wouldn't know what that's like. We would never complain about gifts of God, would we? Do we complain about our daily bread? Do we complain about authority? Our lot in life? Our unfriendly friends? Maybe we complain about the church's answers to difficult questions. The church answers as God does when it repeats his words. "*Man does not live on bread alone, but every word that comes from the mouth of God,*" said Jesus (Matt. 4:4). God's way doesn't fit my way as it didn't fit the Israelites' way.

No wonder we end up rolling snake-eyes and losing the table. Can't we see through our personal cross to bear? Can't we see through the hardships of life to a God who knows what is best for us? Can't we see that God is using uncomfortable events to see us through? Can't we see that these all find their source in sin; that is, the sin that came into our world through the devil, disguised as a snake, of the garden of Eden? Can't we see that we pass along that venom from generation to generation as basically wicked sinners?

The prognosis to the plague of snakes was not the herbs of a leaf, not a physical antidote, not sucking out the poison, not a vaccine, nor was it St. Patrick telling the snakes to leave. The strategy was to turn away from sin back to the Lord. The answer for the people was the same as it is for you and me—repent. Sorrow over your sins. Let God's Law do its work. Confess your wrongs.

If we can see through the snakes when they strike, God's caring hand becomes more and more visible. If God lets bad things happen, it means he cares enough to think about us and focus his time and energy. He not only sends trials and hardships, but He limits them and governs them for our good. He sees us through the bad. He sees souls through the sin. He sees us through the worst problems. *For God so loved.*

Have you taken today's evil to the cross in prayer?
Have you sat at the foot of the cross and heard his Word?

Have you buried your face into His Book and found His plan mapped out for you?

Before all this, God saw Moses through his first encounter with Pharaoh by showing some signs. One of those signs was throwing down his staff, and it turned into a snake. This is a fine miracle, but the Egyptian magicians could copy it. The devil is always trying to ape and twist and copy God. Still, God never let these magicians pick up their staffs again, because the staff of Moses, in snake form, gobbled up their staffs.

2. See through the snake

Imagine waking in your wilderness tent in the middle of the night after a long, hard day of complaining. You feel a couple snakes in your bed. You're horrified, but you can't tell where they are in the dark. You can't do anything. They bite you, and it burns. It also sends poison into your blood. Your time is now limited. You don't just have one hour off the clock; you have years ticking away with each second. You start to sweat. You know venom is coursing through your veins.

I'd like to talk about two different kinds of snakebite victims. One was like Moses. She heard that Moses was setting up this bronze snake on a pole, and why he was doing this, so that every snake-bitten Hebrew could look and be healed. She trusted God's promise from the beginning. She decides that, if God has indeed made that promise—that the bronze serpent on a pole can heal her—the serpent must be reliable, because His promises are reliable.

Now let's take yourself. You have heard that Moses set up a snake made of bronze. Moses announced that it was there for all victims to see and be healed. You may not like God, and you may feel that God is as mean of an ancient god as you have ever imagined. But you heard some rumors that it worked. Let's say you figure, "What have I got to lose?" So you go and look at the snake.

Which one gets the antidote? The woman with faith like Moses, who knew it would work? Or you, who doubted, but you went and looked at the snake anyway?

The answer is: Both. Both viewers in the antidote and are healed of the poison. Why is that? The healing power of the bronze snake was not in the strength of your faith, but in the promise of God. God's promises are true whether we put our faith in them or not. No matter if you trust those promises or not, you can go take a look and see. See if that snake will cure you. See if you can see God's

antidote through a snake. Both leave their tent, go to the assembly and look up at the pole. The burn goes away, the wound cools and scabs over, and the fever breaks. Now when the promise of God heals, you have learned something:

For God so loved. Only because you looked at that pole did you find the antidote to the snakebite, but it wasn't just the looking that worked. This wasn't a magic charm. The bronze snake did not suffer for your sins. See through the snake. When you see through it, you see that God's promises are reliable. You see that snake on a pole and you remember the first gospel promise, that God would crush the head of the serpent. You see God's love through the symbol of the snake, that he sees you through your worst problems.

That was the intended result—seeing the snake in faith, faith in the figure raised for all to see. Buried here in the OT book of Numbers is a figure that is so Christ-like. Throughout Christianity there have been people saying we shouldn't put together statues, pictures, and images of Bible things because it breaks the 1st Commandment. But some of the best teaching devices are symbols. Here God Himself commanded a figure as a suggestion of what he would do. And it would take the words of Jesus to point it out, John 3:14-15: *"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."*

That is why we say "FOR" God so loved the world. "God so loved the world that He sent His only-begotten Son" is the REASON WHY everyone who believes may have eternal life. This in turn is the reason Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, as a symbol.

What do you see when you look at the cross? A menacing snake? No, your Savior lifted high on wooden beams. But that's just it, the cross is just as menacing. It was an instrument of torture to the Romans. Its very design was to put our God on display for all the world to shame Him. Do you trust that all that shame that he took and felt, that crashed on him like a ton of bricks and bodies, is the meaning behind that symbol? May that cross represent all sadness and loss, but also all joy and goodness, love, hope and peace. He has remedied your wounds. He is the antidote to sin and death.

See through the trials and hardships, see through the gifts to the Giver, and see through the snake to the crushing heel of the cross. It is what God was going to do for you all along—see you through it. Amen.