

## HANDLING SNAKES

You've all had much more experience with snakes than I have. When my garden was having the builders rubbish removed and new soil brought in, I was outside watching the workmen. The heap of loam looked delicious. Then there was a slight movement and a snake came out of the middle. I rushed closer to look and exclaim at its markings to my next-door neighbor and Jude. The latter shrieked and yelled, 'Get back you fool. Who do you think you are? St Francis?' Next minute one of the blokes cut off its head with a spade and swung the rest of it in the air. Its body hit the new cream Colorbond fence and left a red stain. I grabbed the hose and squirted the blood from the corrugations - more concerned about the look than any danger.

That could well have been the Israelites problem as they grumbled about lack of spicy food. Worried about the detail when the big picture held truth. Sometimes when God's people murmur and complain, God responds with patience and grace. Sometimes, not.

*'Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people...'*

This doesn't sit well with many Christians' notion of the gospel. We don't like this, 'God is judge' aspect. But we can acknowledge that left to our own devices, we are all sunk.

The plague of snakes kills many and Moses is confronted with contrite people. They're not complaining about their diet now, they are devastated with snake bite.

*'We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take these death adders away from us.'* Numbers 21:4-9

This huge, 'motley lot' have learnt something. They know that if they gripe to Moses, they are griping to God. Interesting – wonder if it is still the case when we moan to our Christian leaders? They also knew that holy prayer changes things. Do we? So Moses prayed. God spoke. Moses then knew what to do because he listened. There's a wonderful phrase in one of WW1 padre, Studdert Kennedy's poems, 'I've bored the blessed angels with my battery of prayer...' Let's take this Lenten time to listen.

While the instructions were clear – a bronze casting of a serpent on a pole – the people had to do something for themselves. 'Look'. We can spend a lot of time noticing yet not recognize what there is to be seen. 'Look and live'. They saw, They were healed.

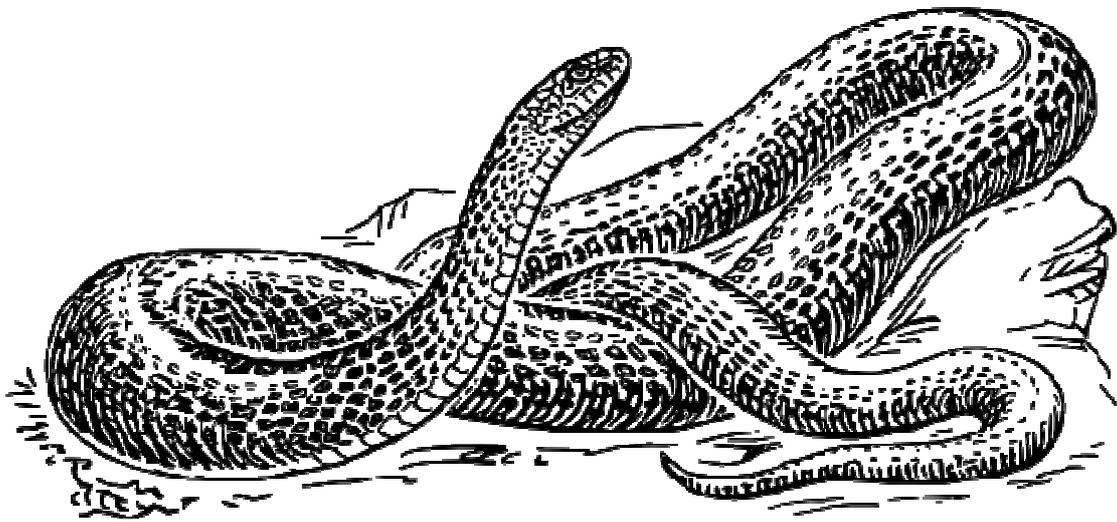
We are not left to our own devices. The psalmist reminds us,, 'God sent out the word and healed them, and delivered them from destruction.' Ps 107:20. And then there's grace... The Christians in Ephesus - the capital city of Roman Asia with 250,000 people, marble streets, running water, a big library, and an arena to seat 25,000 spectators – read  
*' We neither make or save ourselves. God does both the making and the saving. All we do is trust him enough to let him do it. It's Gods gift from start to finish. It's all grace.'* Ephesians 2:7-10

Jesus compares himself to a snake in the wilderness. Horror! He becomes an image of 'death-dealing', a source of derision. Isaiah picks up the inner sight later,

*'He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief: and we hid, as it were, our faces from him...'* Is 53:3

Yet, it is this suffering servant, Jesus, who is our Redeemer and Healer.

AMEN



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