

✠ Numbers 21:4-9 ✠

IN NOMINE IESU

The fiery serpents were sent out as harbingers of judgment. The people rebelled and so they perished. The people who had witnessed the parting of the Red Sea and the great plagues of Egypt grumbled against God and His servant, Moses. They were not afraid of God. They did not think, or at least they did not believe, that the God who destroyed His enemies so wholly and completely would also destroy them if they were to become His enemies. They had no fear of God, and so they gripped about meat and drink. They gripped about change even though the change was for the better.

And so, in His mercy, God sent the fiery serpents among the people. He mercifully sent what He knew would drive the people back to Him. He could have left them in their sin, languishing away under the curse of the Law. But He chose rather to have mercy and show them their sin and call them back to Himself. Our God is a merciful God.

And so, in His mercy, He did not remove the serpents from among the people. Because of the sting and venom of the serpent's bite, the people cried out to Moses, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us." Moses prayed and God answered. God let the serpents remain. In His mercy He did not take away the very thing that drove the people to seek Him out. Had it not been for the serpents, the people would have continued in their sin.

But the sinner does not know what is good for him. In his folly he drives himself from God, thinking that he knows better than God what he needs. And when God corrects him, chastising him for his sins, bringing him to his knees in repentance, the sinner prays that God remove the correction. We all want God to remove the Law. Not so that we can serve Him, but so that we will be free to do what we want. But God is merciful and kind, abounding in steadfast love. He lets the serpent remain.

Foolishness. That is what the world calls it. Why, if God is good, does He not remove all the sin and evil from the world? Why do bad things happen if God is in control? Why do I need to repent of my sins if God is so merciful? Won't He forgive me even if I do not repent? Those who do not believe, those who do not really trust in God's promises desire that He remove the very thing that draws them into His presence and life. But the folly is that if He were to remove the need to repent, if He were to remove the sting of the Law, then we would not seek Him out because we would think we no longer needed to be saved. And since the world does not think it needs to be saved from sin, because it doesn't believe that it is sinful, the cross is foolishness to the world. Who needs the cross when there is no serpent to bite us?

The world wants God to save it from the things that seem to hurt or impede it, not so that it may worship Him, but so that the world can continue in its decadence and sin. Thus God becomes the genie in the sky that should, if He were truly good, make my life enjoyable and free from pain so that I can have what I want. In sin the world does not desire God except to remove whatever stands in their way to what they want. Ironically and tragically, though they do not want God, it is them that God wants. He desires not the death of a sinner, but that all

would turn and repent.

God is merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Had God removed the serpents from among the people, they would have fallen back into rebellion and sin. If God were to remove all the sickness and disease, the famine and bloodshed, the hurricanes and tornadoes, it would not solve the problem of sin. Man would not learn his lesson.

If God removed the torn families torn by our lies, or if He removed the broken marriages broken because of lust, or if He removed poverty brought on by our greed, if He removed the preaching of the Law and the ill effects of your sins, you would not learn your lesson. You would continue to rebel. But the wisdom of God is wiser than the wisdom of men.

Therefore we Christians, we who purport to trust in God's promise of salvation from sin, should thank God for chastising us, creating in us a desire for Him. The Law is good. It shows us the folly of our sin and in its righteous judgment drives us to seek forgiveness from the Law Maker and Judge. God is merciful. He mercifully sends the serpents to show us our sin, and He mercifully keeps the serpents among us as a constant reminder and rebuke against our sin, and He mercifully provides salvation from the dreaded outcome of the serpent's bite. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life.

Moses provided a bronze serpent on a pole for those who were bit by the fiery serpents. And, as Moses lifted the bronze serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up (John 3:14). The cross is the power of God. It is the Gospel of Christ. It is the remedy of the deadly venom of the Law. Every man, woman, or child who looks upon the Son of Man nailed to the cursed tree, shall be saved from the wages of their sin. It is not the resurrection that saves us; the resurrection is the proof that the cross saves us.

That is why we preach Christ crucified. The One who lives is the Crucified One. He drank the venom of the serpent; He suffered the effects of your sin so that you don't have to. Sin remains, but its venom is powerless to those who believe on the Son of Man, for those who believe are baptized into His death. Those who believe die to sin, just as the Israelite who believed God's promise of the bronze serpent, died to the serpents' poison. Death no longer has dominion over Christ Jesus, and so no longer has dominion over you.

Go in peace.

In the name of the FATHER and of the ✠ SON and of the HOLY SPIRIT.

✠ AMEN ✠