

# “The Snake on the Pole”

John 3:14-21

In our Old Testament reading today, the Israelites are on their way to the Promised Land the second time after their 40 years of wandering in the desert – their punishment for not trusting God and entering the land the first time. And again they cry out: “Why have you brought us out into the desert to die. We would be better off as slaves in Egypt. We have no real food. We have no water. And we loathe this worthless food.”

What was the worthless food that they loathed? It was manna: Bread from Heaven. One of the real problems for Moses was that he was leading more than a million people who had nothing to do but to sit around and think and talk to one another.

Manna, their food, showed up on their doorstep every morning – except on the Sabbath, so God sent a double portion on Friday. All that they had to do was take two steps outside and pick it up off the ground. When they needed water, God would provide it. For 40 years, God did not allow their clothes or their sandals to wear out. God gave them everything that they needed.

The Israelites in the wilderness didn’t have to work for a living. They had everything given to them on their doorstep, and they grumbled, held grudges, and felt great contempt for Moses and God Himself. This was because they did not understand or appreciate God’s mercy and forgiveness.

Not only did they not appreciate food and water in the desert (it should have been a high priority to thank God for keeping them alive.) But they

also did not appreciate God's greater gift of mercy and grace. They went so far as to say that they would be better off if God would have left them as slaves in Egypt.

When we look at God's greatest gift in our lives: God sending His Son to be our Redeemer; bringing forgiveness, life, salvation; being freed from our slavery to sin – that awful master who once had ownership of you and me, we need to watch out that we don't stumble into the same pitfalls as the Israelites and desire to be a slave once again.

When you refuse to acknowledge your sin; when you sit in judgment of God and declare your sinful activities or lifestyle to be just fine in your eyes; or perhaps when you refuse to talk to someone who has offended you and choose to sit and stew about it instead, or when you refuse to forgive someone and hang onto that grudge, then you might as well cry out with the Israelites, "and we loathe this worthless food." Forgiveness from God and a home in the Promised Land has been graciously laid out before you.

Jesus said: "I am the bread of life. Your forefathers ate manna in the desert, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."

The bread that is "worthless" to the world today is the body of Christ. The concept of unconditional love and forgiveness is totally foreign and detestable to this sinful world. Postmodern society not only hates the concept of God – and has declared that God is dead, but the postmodern person actually hates the concept of unconditional love and forgiveness because, for them, all of the world is a social construct where your goal is to rise up that social ladder by exercising your power. Also, there is a denial of actual truth. Their claim is that there is only opinion and all opinions are equally valid.

In their mind, the only thing that mediates relationships between people is power. There is no reason to have civil discourse. "I don't care what your opinion is," says the postmodernist. "I am simply going join in

with my group of people who think the same way I do and beat you down with my opinion and exercise my will to power. This is why we have mob-like behavior instead of actual debate.

In such a place, there is no truth; therefore there can be no right and wrong; therefore if there is no wrong, there is no sin and therefore no need for forgiveness. Besides, offering unconditional forgiveness to your neighbor as an act born from love and lording power over that same person doesn't really go hand in hand.

The Israelites had a bit of this attitude out there in the wilderness. Random guy in the tent declares that he and his buddies who are tired of eating manna have just as valid of an opinion as Moses and God; and random guy and his buddies are going to exercise their power and push their way up the social ladder dominance hierarchy – a very postmodern idea. They hate Moses and God because they view their ways as being corrupt. Again, this is a very postmodern Neo-Marxist idea that those who are in positions of dominance only got there because they are corrupt.

The Israelite mob has been speaking out against God and Moses: “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?” They view God and Moses as being corrupt. They have no respect for authority and no inclination to believe that Moses has legitimate authority from God and is there with God because Moses is more qualified and competent to handle personally interacting with God, and they reject that he was chosen by God to be His prophet.

It was very eye opening for me this week when it hit me that this Israelite mob would fit in with the Neo-Marxist crowd on most any university in the western hemisphere. These sort of false ideas about truth and God which now dominate our culture have actually floated around here and there throughout history. As Solomon says, “There is nothing new under the sun.” Random Israelite guy and his buddies are thinking about their place in regard to God the same way many people in our society think about God. “My life is full of suffering and conflict, therefore He is not caring for me as I

think He should – according to my opinion. Therefore, God might as well be dead, and I’m going to treat Him as such.”

God is not dead and He sends the fiery serpents which leads to more suffering, but He immediately plans for their salvation with the snake on the pole. This is keeping in character with how God has always dealt with the children of Adam after the Fall. Adam rejects God; wants to be like God; essentially wants to be God, which would require God to be dead – God imposes temporal judgment upon Adam and Eve (work and childbearing are now difficult; kicks them out of the garden, no access to the Tree of Life), and immediately God provided the plan for their salvation, that the Son of God would come and crush the head of Satan, so they once again could have eternal life.

Israelite mob rejects God as the decision maker, essentially wants to be God. God imposes temporal judgment upon them (sends fiery poisonous serpents). And immediately, the Lord has Moses make a bronze serpent to set on a pole so that when you are bitten, you can look to it in faith and live, and journey to the Promised Land.

As Adam’s children, you and I still live under the temporal judgment of Adam. Life is still a struggle and we have no access to the Tree of Life – yet. We live in a world with proverbial “fiery poisonous serpents” in our lives. Some days there are more snakes around than other days – if you know what I mean.

One thing is constant, whenever the children of Adam have faced the judgment and wrath of God’s Law, our Lord has always and immediately provided the means to salvation.

Jesus said, “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.” Amen.