

A Snake in Your Cereal Box?

By Susan Verstraete

Do you see lots of wild animals where you live? Even though I live in a big city, just across the street from my house there is a wooded area where many animals live. Early in the morning I might see a doe and fawn in my front yard. During the day, I've seen squirrels and bunnies, all kinds of birds, turtles and toads and a big furry groundhog. Once, I saw a momma fox and her little cubs walking up the sidewalk, all lined up in a row with their bushy tails curled over their backs. A raccoon visits my yard late at night. He has learned to take the lid off the garbage can to look for food.

Usually when I see these animals I think about how beautiful and clever they are and how wonderful God is for creating them. But when I see *one* kind of animal, I don't think at all. I scream "Ahhhhhhh!" and run into the house, slamming the door behind me. Can you guess what that animal might be? If you guessed "snake," you are right!



Now, I don't have a good reason to be so afraid of snakes. Most of them are harmless and people who study them say they are fascinating. (After all, they hear without ears, move across the ground without legs and climb trees without arms. Wow!) But I know a Bible story about snakes and some people who had a *very* good reason to be afraid of them.

A long time ago, Moses led God's chosen people out of Egypt, where they were slaves to the wicked Pharaoh. God promised to take them to their own special land, and led them where He wanted them to go with a cloud during the day and a pillar of fire by night. God also provided food called manna for the people during this journey. The people just picked it up off the ground every morning. They didn't have to grow it, or hunt for it, or buy it at the store. The Bible says manna tasted sweet and was all the food the people needed.

But the people were grumpy. They couldn't wait to get to the land God promised them and they often doubted that Moses was the right leader. Sometimes they even doubted that God was kind and good in providing for their journey. Once, when there wasn't enough water, the people said to Moses, "Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die in this wilderness? For there is no food or water and we loathe this miserable food"(Numbers 21:5 NAS).

"Miserable food"? How could they call manna miserable food? They didn't have to work for it, God provided it every day, and it tasted good. It could not have been that they hated manna. It was that the people were ungrateful and angry with God, and, OK, maybe they were tired of eating the same food every day.

Imagine you had chosen a birthday gift for a friend, something you thought he would like very much. But when your friend opened it he said, "This is a miserable gift."

Wouldn't that hurt your feelings? It would be as if that friend not only didn't like the *gift*, but he didn't like the *giver*. That's just what Israel did to God when they rejected the gift of manna.

God punished Israel by sending fiery snakes among the people. Can you imagine what that was like? There were probably snakes everywhere. Some might have slithered under the edges of the tents and into piles of blankets or clothing. One might have crawled into the firewood or curled up in the baby's cradle. There were probably snakes among the rocks outside when the children went to play, and snakes that crawled into their beds as they slept. Think about what it might be like to find a snake hiding in your cereal box or in your backpack, ready to bite. Everyone must have been terribly frightened. The Bible doesn't say if the snakes were called "fiery" because of their color (like you might call something "sky blue" or "lemon yellow") or if it was because their bite felt like it burned. But it does say that the snakes bit many people, and many people died.

The people realized that God was angry and cried out to Moses, "We have sinned because we have spoken against the Lord and you" (Numbers 21:7). They begged Moses to ask God to take away the snakes. Moses did pray for the people, but God did not take away the snakes. Instead, he told Moses to have a bronze snake made and to put it on a pole, raised high above the people so that everyone could see it. God promised that anyone who was bitten by a snake would not die if they just *looked* at the bronze snake.

Do you think the bronze snake was magic? No, of course not. God wanted His people to trust Him. If they looked at the bronze snake, they did it because they believed what God said. They believed that God would not allow them to die because He promised. In this way, God saved the people who believed Him.

God still saves people who believe Him. You and I don't worry so much about fiery snakes that might bite us. We need to be saved from something even more dangerous. God says that sin—the bad things we do—is as poisonous to our souls as the bite of a fiery snake might be to our bodies. But God has provided a way for us to escape, just as He did for the people in our story.

Jesus said, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man (Jesus) be lifted up; that whoever believes in Him will have eternal life" (John 3:14-15). Just like Israel obeyed and trusted God by looking at a bronze snake, we obey and trust God by looking to Jesus. To "look to" Jesus means we trust that when Jesus died on the cross, He did everything necessary for our sins to be forgiven. We don't look to or trust other things to save us, like doing good deeds or wearing a lucky charm or praying a specific prayer. We just keep on trusting Jesus our whole life, because God has promised to save all who keep looking to, or trusting, Him.

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