

We all know people who are loving, faithful, and yet face difficult burdens. Our reactions are always the same. How could God permit something so unfair? When evil people suffer, we feel it is deserved, but to our way of thinking good people should be rewarded. We don't understand why God doesn't always seem to be fair with those who are most deserving of his love. Right?

After Israel left Egypt and were soon floundering in the sands of a vast desert, they had similar questions and anger. The book of Numbers describes a pity party they engaged in as life was not as easy as they hoped and felt they deserved! What in the world was going on? God had freed them from slavery in Egypt, carrying them through the sea on dry land. He led them with fire at night and a bright cloud during the day. He fed them manna and quail when normal food ran out. He took them to fresh springs where there should have been no water. But when the sand got in their way, or water was scarce, or a loved one died, their complaints returned! They felt they deserved better!

How often is that mindset ours? Don't we expect God to respond to every desire? If we are faithful, shouldn't we be blessed more than those who ignore God or laugh at people of faith? When He doesn't do what we want, don't we feel abandoned or disappointed? This is nothing new, as we are reminded how such feelings were present in the garden with Adam and Eve. Standing in a garden of delights, a paradise where everything was perfect, they found a reason to doubt, to complain, and to doubt the sincerity of God's love.

The forbidden fruit and Israel's desert whining are symptoms of bites from the same serpent! Life is often like a terrible B-grade movie with thousands of snakes crawling in every dark corner! How often is a perfectly good moment shattered by pain or loss that is unexpected, unwanted, and undeserved? And no matter what, such unfair moments can even get worse. As with any struggle in life we go to God and ask, "My God, why this? Why now? Don't I have enough on my plate?" How can we focus on anything else with such distractions? Why would God be so unfair? Please give me what I want!"

Consider how often we react to what we don't like but take good stuff for granted, as if it is all we deserve? Why not consider the possibility that all bad stuff might not be from God but simply symptomatic of a broken world. Are not pain, suffering, and death the fruit of an imperfect world and the broken relationships of creation? And at the same time, could it be possible that snake bites are an opportunity of getting our attention back to where they belong?

When Moses lifted up a bronze snake on a stick, God did not cause the fiery serpents to disappear. They were still around, but when Israel quit screaming about undeserved surprises and unfair pain, and instead lifted their eyes to the heavens, death was destroyed, and the people were healed. The pain still surrounded them, but God protected them from death. That image of bronze served as a reminder of their pain but caused them to look beyond that image to the God who is so much bigger!

Centuries later, Israel was sent into exile so that God could bring them back to him! They had taken God for granted and become enamored with the beauty of the land in which they lived. Instead of pausing to say thank you, or using the abundance of the Promised Land to give glory to God and love to neighbor, they became selfish and took their eyes off the God who had given them so much. And so God sent them away from the land.

The story of a snake on a stick reminds us to look at sin through a heavenly lens – a new perspective. Faith calls us to look at God through the image of what is so painful and realize that faith is the only vehicle that changes life!

And even though the desert dwellers couldn't have seen it then, we look back and understand that the serpent on a stick was a prophetic look ahead to Jesus on the cross. And our journey through Lent is about lifting up that image to get our attention and celebrate that God has stooped to lift us up in the same way!

Grace is not about what we deserve, but what God in love has chosen to do for us! We can moan and wait to die or look up from brokenness and see the broken body lifted on the cross so that we might be healed and live!

Jesus' birth in a manger began God's embrace of the earth's pain. Calvary's uplifting love carried earth to heaven on a stick called the cross. With the death-destroying-surprise of Easter, faith empowers us to live rather than fear life!

For God so loved the world that he sent his only Son. Into the desert of broken promises, selfish living, and a death none can escape, Jesus was lifted on a cross so a world might find healing, hope, and eternal peace. And yes, we might not get what we want or feel we deserve, but God gifts us with the cure! Think about that carefully. Is there anything better than that?

And whether deserved or not, snakebites can be moments in which we most easily understand the surrender of faith. Think of it this way: if faith wasn't surrender, it wouldn't be faith!

The reality is that some earthly battles are lost but the outcome of the war is never in doubt! Too often we get consumed with daily battles and forget the big picture and greater war that God has engaged in for us. Certainly, life is not always going to be fair, easy, or what we deserve. Yet, grace gifts us with incredible gifts that we never could have expected or deserved. And what a surprise that often it is in our daily struggles where we most often find the greatest clarity of faith in moments of greatest pain.

With such a reality, how can faith not also make the easy moments even greater opportunities to lift cross high? None of us ever would desire suffering or wish it on anyone else, and yet for people of faith, such moments cause us to remember to look up at the cross, remember whose we are, and believe in the gifts we have been given. We all have experiences that have also taught how faith is indeed strengthened when it is exercised, engaged in, and surrendered to.

One dark night, Jesus talked to Nicodemus about these same issues saying: "Just 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. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."¹

Remember life is not about what is fair but in keeping God first! Faith is about keeping eyes on God rather than what slithers around our feet. And when snakebites come (as they surely will) always look at your pain through the cross and empty tomb. (seeber)

¹ John 3:14-17 ESV