

First Aid for Snakebites

Acts 28:3-6 (account of Paul's encounter with a viper)

Introduction

1. This account of Paul's encounter with a viper on the island of Malta is a stimulating statement on Paul's faith.
2. But beyond Saint Paul, there is a lot to think and reflect on as to how this incident illuminates our own experience.
3. I'd like to first look again at the account of Paul and the viper, and then talk about our own encounters every day in a life of faith, with the viper of all vipers, Satan (Revelation 12:9).

To begin with, let us look at the story of Paul, and make a few observations along the way.

That old snake

1. Acts 28: 3-6

Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and put them on the fire, when a viper came out because of the heat and fastened on his hand. When the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, "No doubt this man is a murderer. Though he has escaped from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live." He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. They waited, expecting him to swell up or suddenly fall down dead; but when they waited a long time and saw no misfortune come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god.

2. A few comments.

- Notice how when Paul is suddenly bitten by the serpent, rather than recoiling away from it or shaking the creature desperately off his hand, he simply carries the snake into the heat of the fire where it automatically releases him in the intensity of the flames. A very smart move on Paul's part, no?
- The response of the local people to Paul's seeming misfortune is also quite telling. When Paul is first bitten the conclusion is that he must be a criminal (murderer, no less) and is receiving his just reward. But upon seeing that Paul bears no ill effects

from the venom of the animal, the opinion is completely turned around, and Paul is suddenly not a criminal but a god!

There are more than a couple of insights that this true story of Paul on the island of Malta can give us into our own lives of faith. (Whether the writer had the intent to teach us these lessons is negligible. But as God is alive, the lessons are there.)

That ancient serpent

1. First let us look at the elements of the story of Paul in symbolic terms.

Paul = the individual believer (you or I)

The fire = God's Word and work of salvation

The viper = that ancient serpent, Satan

The local people = the people of this world

(From this point, you can tell the story as you might tell a parable, reflecting on the inner meaning behind the events portrayed.)

2. Paul, a great witness to God, had gathered a bundle of sticks to add to the fire. Inner meaning: Paul, indeed, was adding new substantial fuel to the fire of God's Word and work after the time of Jesus; his missionary journeys were opening up so much of the Mediterranean world, Malta included, to the Gospel.
3. A serpent, slithering away from the fire, latches onto Paul's hand. Inner meaning: Satan, repelled by the fire of God's work and providence, naturally want to stop anyone from adding more fuel to the flame. Satan would like to bite Paul and send poison through his spiritual life. And how the ancient serpent does his best to hand on to those whom God has called, and who represent a threat to his false dominion!
4. Paul remains calm, however, and simply take the viper right toward the heat, where it gets burned and loses its hold on Paul's hand. Inner meaning: Paul, a true disciple of Christ, doesn't try to fight or struggle with Satan with just his own strength or cunning, but instead uses the heat of God's Word to defeat the evil. Think of Jesus after his 40 day fast in the wilderness when Satan tried to tempt: he used God's authority to repel each temptation. Paul knows clearly that more than anything Satan, just like the viper on Malta, wants to challenge us to personal battles. Had Paul simply tried to shake or pull

the viper off by his own strength there would have been ample time for the deadly venom to be injected.

5. How about us? (You should expand on this brief parallel between Paul and ourselves.) Are we not like Paul? Certainly as his spiritual descendent in the work of God we will encounter the same Satan who, predictably, will try to do to us what he would have liked to do with Paul. But, as in point 4, we can use these attacks of Satan to strengthen ourselves all the more.

IMPORTANT. In the story we see how Paul uses the fire to separate from the serpent (or use God's Word to separate from Satan). But there is still a blood relationship with the fall. Jesus said we must be as "wise as serpents." We've been bitten in the past by Satan, and so we seek an immunity from the effect of these bites, by inoculations of venom. If we're wise, serpents (Satan's efforts to attack our spiritual lives) help us to restore ourselves! Going through the trials and tests, overcoming them, and understanding they are coming from that "ancient serpent" will help us grow strong, like a Paul.

Last Note

Notice the response of the people around Paul, first as he is bitten by the viper and later as he defeats the viper and suffers no ill effects from it (in their minds he goes from criminal to god). Look at the parallel with Jesus: Was he not also thought of at first, by many, as a criminal, a transgressor of the law? So certainly as Jesus ran into the difficulties he had to face, there must have been those who stood by thinking that God was judging him for his unlawful behavior. (Surely the elders of the temple were among this group who, like those who watched Paul bitten, would say "justice has not allowed him to live.") But history and humanity, having seen the life and work of Jesus Christ, bear witness to a much higher justice than that embraced by the elders of the temple. And today, he who was judged a criminal is recognized as God's Son. How many times in history has the very same thing happened: the event of a great life among us, the chorus of indictments calling out for "justice" (as with those voices that were raised against Christ), and, finally, another voice (like that of the Roman centurion looking at the form of Jesus on the cross, "surely this was the Son of God") saying "surely this was a great person – how could we not

have realized?" (This is obviously a good section to mention Father, the case, and the historical parallel. How you go about it is in your hands, according to the audience.)

Conclusion

As Christians, we are called upon, through this disarmingly simple account of an incident in Paul's life, to look beyond the obvious. God's viewpoint and man's viewpoint are often different, sometimes with tragic results.

Though the ancient serpent has not yet been thrown into the fire, as each one takes the lesson from Paul (just as Paul learned from Jesus) Satan will progressively lose his hold on our lives. Each one of our personal victories undoubtedly hastens the foundation for God's coming Kingdom. Thank you, Paul!

(The length of this conclusion is up to you according to the audience and the occasion.)