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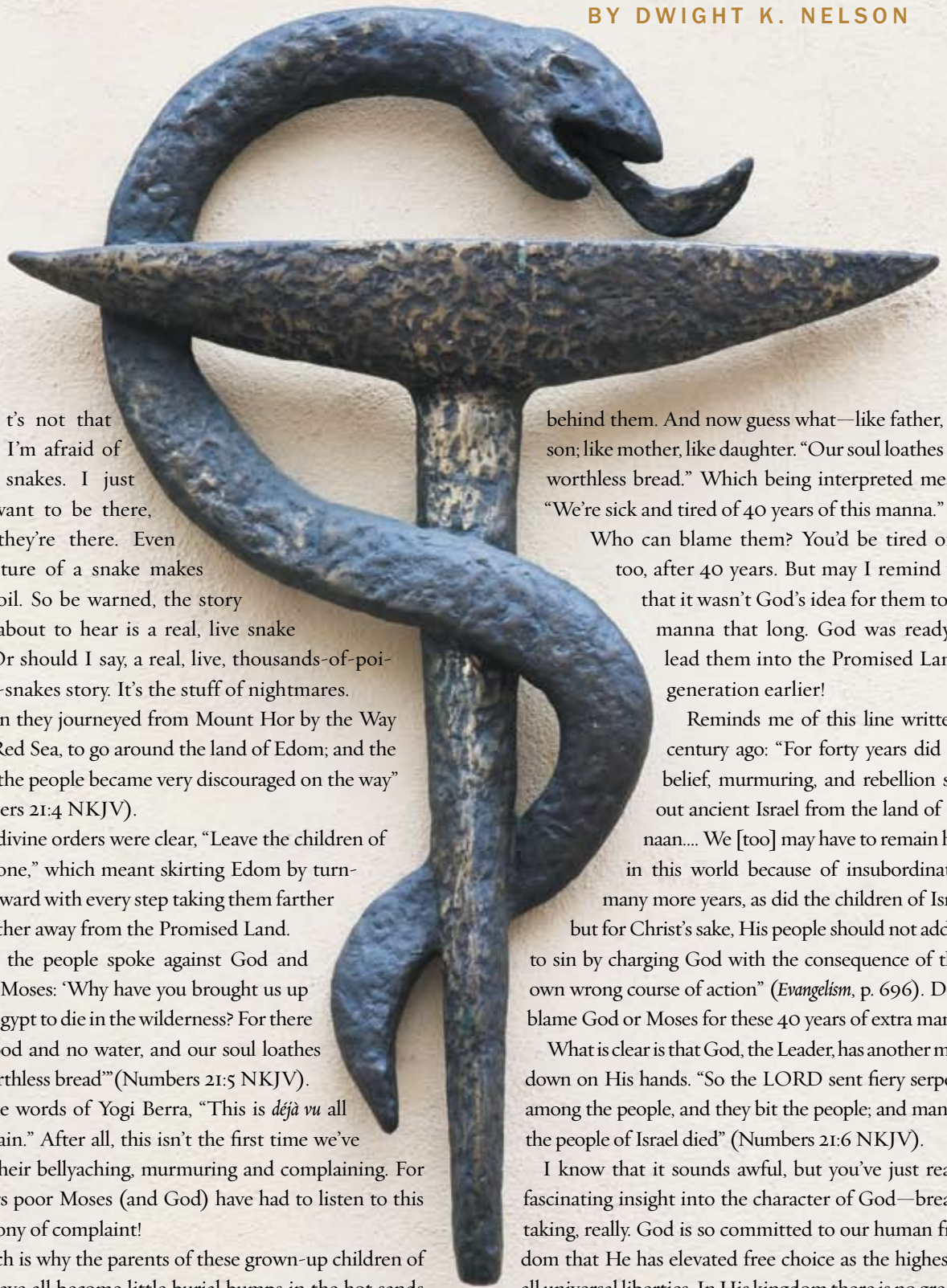
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SNAKES *in the* SAND

BY DWIGHT K. NELSON



I t's not that I'm afraid of snakes. I just don't want to be there, when they're there. Even the picture of a snake makes me recoil. So be warned, the story you're about to hear is a real, live snake story. Or should I say, a real, live, thousands-of-poisonous-snakes story. It's the stuff of nightmares.

"Then they journeyed from Mount Hor by the Way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the soul of the people became very discouraged on the way" (Numbers 21:4 NKJV).

The divine orders were clear, "Leave the children of Esau alone," which meant skirting Edom by turning eastward with every step taking them farther and farther away from the Promised Land.

"And the people spoke against God and against Moses: 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread'" (Numbers 21:5 NKJV).

In the words of Yogi Berra, "This is *déjà vu* all over again." After all, this isn't the first time we've heard their bellyaching, murmuring and complaining. For 40 years poor Moses (and God) have had to listen to this cacophony of complaint!

Which is why the parents of these grown-up children of Israel have all become little burial bumps in the hot sands

behind them. And now guess what—like father, like son; like mother, like daughter. "Our soul loathes this worthless bread." Which being interpreted means, "We're sick and tired of 40 years of this manna."

Who can blame them? You'd be tired of it, too, after 40 years. But may I remind you that it wasn't God's idea for them to eat manna that long. God was ready to lead them into the Promised Land a generation earlier!

Reminds me of this line written a century ago: "For forty years did unbelief, murmuring, and rebellion shut out ancient Israel from the land of Canaan.... We [too] may have to remain here in this world because of insubordination many more years, as did the children of Israel; but for Christ's sake, His people should not add sin to sin by charging God with the consequence of their own wrong course of action" (*Evangelism*, p. 696). Don't blame God or Moses for these 40 years of extra manna.

What is clear is that God, the Leader, has another meltdown on His hands. "So the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died" (Numbers 21:6 NKJV).

I know that it sounds awful, but you've just read a fascinating insight into the character of God—breath-taking, really. God is so committed to our human freedom that He has elevated free choice as the highest of all universal liberties. In His kingdom there is no greater

freedom than the freedom to choose. Without the freedom to choose, reciprocal love could not exist, because love must not only give you the right to say YES, it must also grant you the right to say NO.

If you're a man and you put a gun up to the head of a woman and announce, "Love me, or I'll kill you," what she gives to you will not be love! You may call it rape, but you cannot call it love. Why? Because love must not only grant you the right to say YES, but also the right to say NO.

Well then, why don't you tell that to God, since it's obvious in this story that He kills the people because they don't love Him. Not so fast!

Let me show you something about the wilderness plains through which the children of Israel tramped and camped for most of those 40 years. In his farewell address to Israel, Moses reminds them of the providence of God, "who led you through that great and terrible wilderness, *in which were* fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty land where there was no water..." (Deuteronomy 8:15 NKJV).

Please note that these fiery serpents, so called because of the searing pain and the ensuing rapid death that their poisonous fangs inflicted on the hapless victim, are the natural inhabitants of this wilderness habitat; God did not suddenly create a slithering horde of fiery serpents to punish the children of Israel. The snakes were already there. For 40 years God's presence (and I Corinthians 10 declares it was Christ Himself), has served as a divine shield of protection against those poisonous vipers already there. But it is clear that in response to the people's dark and murmuring wishes, God honors their free choice and removes Himself from their midst, thus lifting the divine shield that had protected them all these years. Why? Because God is love, and in order for love to be love it must honor your freedom to say YES or say NO. And when Israel said NO more. God quietly took NO for an answer, and sadly walked away.

"Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, '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.' So Moses prayed for the people" (Numbers 21:7 NKJV).

Moses prays ... and God responds ... in a most unusual manner ... with a three-fold instruction. "Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Make a *fiery* serpent, and set it on a pole; and it

shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live.' So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived" (Numbers 21:8, 9 NKJV).

The End.

Because it really was the end for those who did not or would not look.

But for those victims who were tenderly carried or urgently dragged to that open tent flap... Try to imagine the desperation in your heart

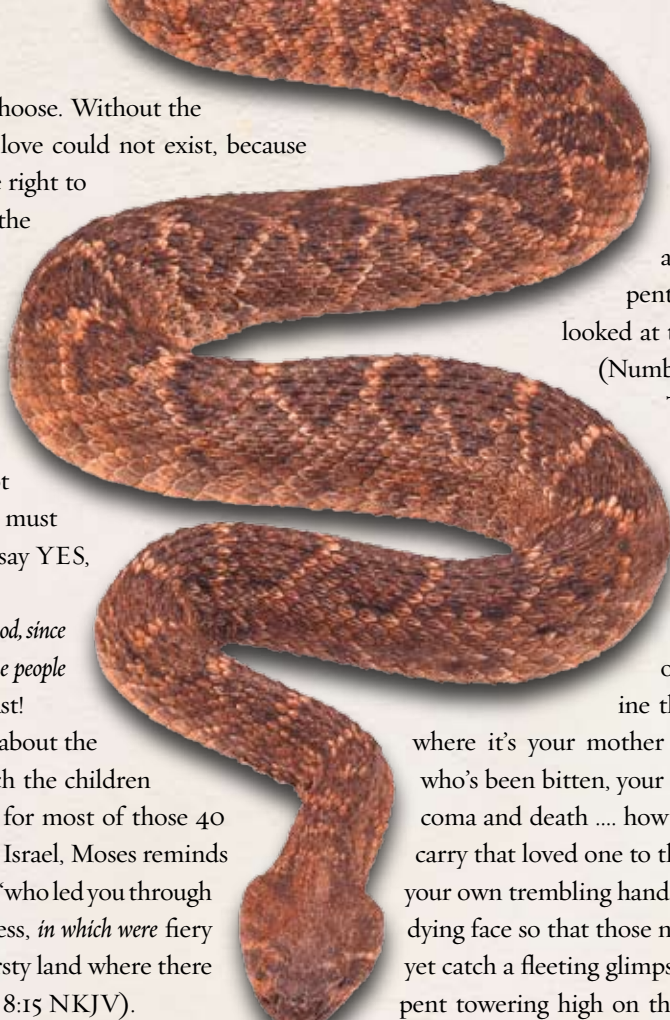
where it's your mother who is dying, your brother who's been bitten, your spouse who is on the edge of coma and death how you would have struggled to carry that loved one to the open tent flap ... how with your own trembling hands you would have turned that dying face so that those nearly-glazed-over eyes might yet catch a fleeting glimpse of that shining bronze serpent towering high on that pole in the middle of the camp... And if you had been the dying one, how desperate would have been your whispered prayer, "Take me to the pole, let me see the serpent."

Was it the bronze serpent that saved the chosen that day? Was there some sort of divine magic in that twisted brass atop the pole? Not at all. Nobody in Israel that day believed they were being cured by the bronze serpent. All who looked knew that it was by raw faith in the God who prescribed that bronze serpent that they were saved. And given the fact that Israel in murmuring complaint had just abandoned their trust in God, it is clear that this divine remedy was case specific, intentionally designed to replace their unbelief with reawakened faith and trust in God.

The remedy was simple: Look and live! Raw faith.

Which is precisely the point Jesus made in that clandestine midnight visit with Nicodemus. "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:14, 15 NKJV).

Remember that the Jesus conversing with Nicodemus is the pre-incarnate Christ who devised the dramatic intervention of that bronze serpent. "I will become that serpent, Nicodemus." Can you imagine the shock on that rabbi's coun-



tenance? “As the serpent was lifted up, so I will be lifted up, Nicodemus.”

And then follow the beloved and familiar words: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

Which is why the story of the serpent on the pole is much more than a snake story. It is God seizing the opportunity for another sandbox illustration.

Did they use sandboxes when you went to Sabbath school as a kid? Maybe you grew up with one in the backyard. The children of Israel had been living in one giant sandbox (literally) for 40 years. Into it God had already inserted the portable sanctuary, with all its attendant furniture, and the daily Sacrifices—all of them sandbox illustrations of God’s unfolding plan of salvation and the coming Savior. But now God thrusts into the hot sands something new—a pole with a brass snake on top.

Numbers 21 and John 3 introduce the healing metaphor into the divine plan of salvation. Whereas the lamb depicted the forgiveness of our sins, the serpent demonstrated the healing from our sins. It is the mysterious truth that in order to heal humanity, the Savior must become the very poison that was killing them (and us). It is as if an antigen (poison) is being injected mainline straight into the heart of our Savior on the cross, making available for the human race a divine antibody that might save every Earth child bitten by the dark and evil serpent.

God’s powerful healing metaphor is articulated with words like these: “Surely he has borne our griefs [the Hebrew can read “sicknesses,” for example sin’s poison] and carried our sorrows ... And by His stripes we are healed” (Isaiah 53:4, 5 NKJV).

“[Christ] Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by His wounds you have been healed” (I Peter 2:24 NASB).

“For He [the Father] made Him [Christ] who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (II Corinthians 5:21 NKJV).

The story of the serpent on the pole expands the shining truth of salvation. The power of the cross not only pardons us of our sins, it is also the power of God to heal us from our sins.

“Multitudes are still suffering from the deadly sting of that old serpent, the devil. The effects of sin can be removed only by the provision that God has made. Here, alone, hope and salvation can be found. As the Israelites saved their lives by looking upon the brazen serpent, so sinners can look to Christ

and live. Unlike that inert and lifeless symbol, Christ has power and virtue in Himself, to heal the suffering, repenting, bleeding sinner” (*Signs of the Times*, October 28, 1880).

How then shall the chosen be healed? Just like Israel of old, we must look to the pole; we must gaze upon the cross. It is the only antidote in the universe with the power to heal us from the poison of our sins. No matter our sins—whether they are sins of the mind or of the flesh or of the eyes or of the appetite or of the ego—Calvary is the only but all-powerful antidote to our fatal poison! Look to the cross!

And lest we conclude that our sins are hardly worth mentioning, since after all we’re “the chosen,” let us find comfort in the power of the cross to heal us of the toxicity of our spiritual pride. I am deeply concerned that with so distinctive a message and so countercultural a lifestyle—as the chosen have been called by God to embrace—the chosen are in danger of being duped into thinking that our salvation is somehow predicated upon our counterculturalness, our radical obedience, our distinctive teachings. But the serpent on the pole declares radically otherwise. For it is clear that all the righteous living in the world will never save the righteous or the wicked or the chosen. For the chosen are not saved because they are chosen—they are chosen because they are saved. Which is why we must look to the cross of Jesus—it is the only antidote that can save us.

“If you will only do your part and bow at the cross of Calvary, you will receive the blessing of God. God loves you. He does not wish to draw you nigh to Him to hurt you, oh, no; but to comfort you, to pour in the oil of rejoicing, to heal the wounds that sin has made, to bind up where Satan has bruised.... Will you bow low at the foot of the cross? Jesus will place His arms around you, and comfort you. Will you do this without further delay?” (*Review and Herald*, March 4, 1890)

Look to the cross ... and live!

What would happen if the chosen bowed at the foot of the cross every morning of this new year? A few years ago my friend, Roger Morneau, taught me to read the story of Calvary (Matthew 27:24–54) every morning. Trust me—it will change your life! Want to join me there each morning of the journey ahead? Where better to find the freedom of Christ and the healing of the Savior?

And as the story of the serpent on the pole makes clear, it’s the only way the story of the chosen can end in the Promised Land.

Dwight Nelson is the senior pastor of the Pioneer Memorial Church in Berrien Springs, Michigan. This article is adapted from a sermon series, “The Chosen: Snakes in the Cradle,” and the style published reflects the spoken word. Used with permission. To listen to the entire sermon series, visit www.pmhchurch.tv.