**Arad Destroyed**

Since the dawn of man’s history in the Garden of Eden, snakes have been seen by many as our natural enemy. I read that there are 3400 different species of snakes but this is of course incorrect as there is only one, the *serpens venenata* (poisonous snake). As a rule, I don’t like snakes but I am content to leave them alone if they reciprocate. Tim Friede, on the other hand, actively seeks them out for the purpose of having them bite him to build an immunity to venom (Hey Y’all, watch this!). He has teamed with an immunologist who is hoping to manufacture an antivenom. Like virus vaccines which are often a weakened form of the virus itself, antivenom is extracted from venom. It is ironic that the very thing that can kill you can also save your life. In our study of Numbers chapter 21 we see God using snakes to both kill and heal.

The chapter begins with a battle near Atharim against Canaanites ruled by the King of Arad. After some of the Israelites were captured, the people appealed to God to deliver the Canaanites to their hands. They made a vow to totally destroy their cities which meant they would take no plunder and God granted their request. As we often see in the Bible, a victory gained by being aligned with God’s will was soon followed by more disobedience. They traveled south towards the Red Sea, away from Canaan causing the people again to complain of harsh conditions in the desert, particularly lack of food and water which God had always provided. In the past, their complaints were directed to Moses, however this time they spoke against Moses and God Himself. God punished their unbelief by sending venomous snakes which killed many people. The people quickly repented, confessing their sin against Moses and God and Moses offered an intercessory prayer on their behalf. God responded by instructing Moses to craft a bronze snake and place it on a pole. Those who were bitten and looked at the snake lived.

After the snake incident, they turned north again, going through the desert and camping in several locations. There is a reference to ”The Book of Wars of the Lord” indicating some sort of victory in the desert but there is no other record of this. They reached the valley of Moab but did not confront the Moabites. Much like the Edomites, God directed the Israelites to avoid conflict with the Moabites since they were descendants of Lot (see Deut. 2:9). As they had done previously with the Edomites, they appealed to the Amorites to allow them to pass through their land. The king of the Amorites refused and sent his army to attack but unlike the Moabites they were not under God’s protection. The Israelites defeated the army and took the cities near Heshbon and occupied them. Next Moses sent spies to Jazer after which the Israelites again defeated the Amorites, taking additional territory. The chapter ends as they then fought Og, another Amorite king whom they defeated with God’s blessing.

It is significant that after the people repented of their sin which was punished by the snakes, God granted them victories. It may well be that many of the people who died from snake bites were of the older generation. God told Moses to craft a snake out of bronze which some might consider an idol, however it was authorized by God. The use of the bronze snake made such an impression of the people that the snake was kept for generations and it did eventually become an idol which they worshipped. The snake was destroyed by King Hezikiah (see 2 Kings 18:4). Snakes in the Bible are often references to Satan, beginning with Satan in the Garden of Eden. Jesus referred to the Pharisees and Sadducees as a brood of vipers and Isaiah used snakes as a metaphor for sinful people. It is curious that God would use a snake as an instrument for good so we can look to other scripture for an explanation. In the Gospel of John we read “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness , so the Son of Man must be lifted up” (3:14). This is clearly comparing the bronze snake on a pole to Jesus on the cross. Some think that the snake was mounted horizontally on the pole depicting a cross. Others think it was wrapped around the pole, an image used by the medical profession to illustrate healing power. Regardless of the orientation of the snake, it represents the sin that Jesus took upon Himself. The Israelites would probably have preferred to have the snakes removed completely but God chose to leave them while offering a way for the people to live that required no action on their part other than looking at the bronze snake. While God does not remove sin from our lives, He does provide an atonement for our sins and no action is needed other than accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior.