

Death Surrounds Us

Death surrounds us. Not to start out on such a gloomy note this morning, but we can't ignore the obvious. Death surrounds us. Whether it's the never-ending wars in the middle east or the famines in Africa – both of which have claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, whether it's the natural disasters throughout the world that destroy everything and everyone in their path or the massacres of hundreds of innocent people by deeply disturbed individuals, whether it's an unexpected tragedy that takes a person's life or the natural result of old age and poor health, death surrounds us. And the results of death are everywhere too! Memorials are set up to those who have gone before us, cemeteries are filled with tombstones and rotting corpses, homes contain the pictures of people who are no longer on this earth. Death surrounds us! We see it and hear about it almost every day. We deal with it on a very personal level. We cannot live on this earth without death swirling around us every step of the way.

But even though it's something everyone has to face on a regular basis, it's not exactly a popular topic of conversation, is it? In fact, sometimes we try to avoid that subject altogether! There are some people who don't want to go through the process of writing up a will because that means we'd have to think about death. There are some people who keep putting off that life insurance policy update because then we'd have to talk to someone about death. There are some people who won't even come close to mentioning death in a hospital room because why would anyone ever bring up something so negative and so awful when the sick person needs all the hope and the happiness they can get? Death might surround us every day, but it's one of those subjects that we usually don't want to touch unless we're forced to.

And so isn't it interesting that the Bible talks about death all the time? As you mentally thumb through the books of the Bible, death is a topic that is brought up over and over again – more than almost anything else. When death shows up for the first time in the third chapter of the book of Genesis, it remains a prominent piece of God's Word all the way through to the end. Why do you think that is? Why do you think the Holy Spirit – in his perfect plan to have the words of God written down and preserved for millennia – decided to include stories and teachings and entire chapters about death so often? There are probably many different reasons why that is the case, but one of the most important reasons is this: death is where the Lord is at his best.

Has that ever occurred to you before? Death is where the Lord is at his best. Death is certainly nasty and difficult and horrible and heart-breaking – I don't want to dismiss the appalling side effects of this unpleasant event – but the way the Lord handles death, the way he uses death, the way he defeats death, is absolutely stunning. Death truly is where the Lord is at his best. Take the story of the bronze snake for example. This is one of the many stories in the Old Testament that revolves around death, but it is a great example of what the Lord does all the time: in death he gives life.

They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!" Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed for the people. The LORD said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look

at it and live." So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived.

Well Deserved

Does the Lord seem a little vindictive to you here? Some people have mentioned that the Lord almost comes off as a bully in this story: the Israelites complain against him and so he immediately throws down a bunch of venomous snakes and says, "What do you think about that? That'll teach you to complain!" But the Lord wasn't just flexing his muscles of course or cruelly orchestrating a wholesale slaughter of his own people without any kind of compassion or mercy. The Lord never acts out of impulsive rage nor does he let his anger get the best of him. No, he had a plan. A wonderful plan. A plan that not only included death, but more importantly, centered around life. He sent those snakes with the very purpose of making his people aware of their sinfulness so that they would pray to him and he would have yet another opportunity to save them. And he did it right away.

Notice that when Moses prayed to the Lord on behalf of the people, the Lord didn't say, "I'm going to wait for a while; they need to learn a lesson." And he did not say, "Well, they're going to have to do something for me first to prove that they're really sorry." And he did not say, "You know what? I'm sick of this nation! I'm done dealing with their terrible attitudes and their stubborn hearts! I don't think I'm going to save them at all! It's just not worth it!" Instead, without any hesitation whatsoever, he told Moses to make a snake, put it up on pole, and anyone who was bitten and looked at that bronze snake – believing in God's promise attached to it of course – would live. And that's exactly what happened: everyone who looked at the snake and trusted in God's promise was saved.

The Lord didn't have to do that, you know. God wasn't obligated to give life back to those people. Not after what they had done to him! Because this certainly wasn't the first time they had rebelled against the Lord. In the chapter right before this one, the entire Israelite community griped in a very similar way: **"If only we had died when our brothers fell dead before the LORD! Why did you bring the LORD's community into this desert, that we and our livestock should die here? Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to this terrible place? It has no grain or figs, grapevines or pomegranates. And there is no water to drink"** (Num. 20:3-5). And so what did the Lord do in response to their ungratefulness? He gave them water that suddenly began pouring out of a rock.

Just a few chapters before that we have the story of a bunch of Levites in the Israelite nation who rebelled against Moses and Aaron – challenging the authority of the Lord himself. A couple chapters before that the grumbling of the people against Moses and Aaron became so intense that they talked about stoning them! A couple chapters before that they whined and moaned because they didn't have any bread or meat. And so what did the Lord do at that juncture of their journey? He gave them bread called "manna" six days a week for the next 40 years and he supplied them with so many quail that they couldn't gather them all.

Oh, there's more! There are plenty of other stories in the surrounding books of the Bible that recount all of the dissatisfaction and the rebelliousness and the outright mutiny that this nation was involved with over the years. And so by the time we get to chapter 21 of the book of Numbers and we read about the Israelites complaining once again to the Lord, it's amazing to me that the Lord doesn't take the back of his hand and wipe them off the face of the earth! It's

amazing to me that he was still so kind! Still so caring! Still so patient with these people! They deserved a lot worse than what they got! They deserved death!

Of course, we do too. Let's not point the finger at the Israelites but conveniently forget about all of the times we have complained about the Lord's plans and all of the times that we have rebelled against his commands and all of the times that we have refused to trust in his promises. We are guilty of our own fair share of mutinous actions, aren't we? And so what does the Lord owe us? What do you think he should do in return for our defiance and insubordination? What do we deserve? Forty years of wandering in a desert? Venomous snakes? A painful death? Something worse? All of the above?

Look to the Cross

If God assigned us to wander the next 40 years in a desert, we couldn't argue. If he let venomous snakes infest our homes, we couldn't say he was being unfair. If he even allowed death to sweep through our families – taking away the lives of those we love before taking our own, we wouldn't be justified in protesting that decision at all. We've earned for ourselves much worse than that! There isn't anything in this world that could happen to us that would pay off our crimes. The worst possible scenario would be nothing more than a slap on the wrist compared to what we should have coming to us!

And so I'm glad we have the kind of God that we find in the book of Numbers 21. I'm glad we have the kind of God who sent venomous snakes among his people – not to simply punish them in a terrible way, but to bring them back to him. Yes, people died that day. Yes, people were in an extreme amount of pain as they stood on the brink of death. But the Lord miraculously gave them life at just the right time because the Lord is at his best in death.

But the greatest part about this story is not in this story. What I mean is: about 1500 years later when Jesus was talking to a man named Nicodemus, he refers back to this very story as an analogy about what he would one day do on the cross. **“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert,”** Jesus said, **“so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3:14-15).** Isn't that incredible! The story about the bronze snake isn't just about God giving life to his Old Testament people in the middle of death, it's a story about God giving life to us through the death of his Son! That was part of his plan all along! He had every intention of using this rebellious group of people in the desert and the venomous snakes that bit them and the life granted through that reptilian sculpture on a pole to point *us* to the cross! And Jesus' death of course is where the Lord really was at best. That's where our true healing was produced. That's where the real remedy of this world was played out. That's where the complete forgiveness of everyone who believes was won. And so the instruction to the Israelite people back in the desert is the same for us today: “Look and live!” Look at the cross, believe in his sacrifice, trust in his promise, and live! And not just living here of course, but existing forever with our Savior in heaven! That's what this story about the bronze snake is all about: life on a cross, life by blood, life in death.

Which is very appropriate for us who are still surrounded by death all the time. Catastrophes and disasters and the horrible circumstances of this world still take the lives of every living thing around us. And one day our own lives will come to an end. But why is that a bad thing? Why would your death be a bad thing if you know where you are going after you die? The Lord is at his best in death, after all! And that includes your own! The Lord will transform even your death into life and that day is coming soon! How exciting! How thrilling!

Because you haven't seen Jesus at his best yet! And neither have I. We're still waiting. We're still waiting patiently for that day when death stops our hearts here but then we never miss a beat as we are immediately taken home. And that will be the best, won't it? That will be the day when we see Jesus in all of his glory and power and majesty. But only at death. And only through the death of Jesus. Because death is where Jesus is at his best.

Amen.

“Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” – 1 Cor. 15:55-57