

John 3:14-21; Numbers 21:4-9; Eph 2:1-10

Today is the fourth Sunday of Lent. How is your spiritual practice going? The fruits of spiritual practice ultimately belong to you and will be of great help to your spiritual life. Don't put the spiritual practice aside easily. In today's world, there are many thoughts and theories that will lead you away from God and prevent you from standing firm before God. All of these will slowly become serpents in your life. Many descriptions of serpents in the Bible regard them as a representative of evil. This is because in Genesis, the devil took the form of a serpent to tempt the first human beings not to listen to God's words. However, a serpent is actually one of the creatures created by God. It originally had a good relationship with humans, which also explains why the first humans and the serpent had a conversation. In fact, the serpent at that time was no longer a real serpent, but was disguised by the devil. So, the devil is the instigator of sin, and the serpent becomes a symbol of evil. The Bible constantly reminds us to be alert to the devil's deceptions, put an end to all his actions, and insist on staying close to God. Hence, whether the serpent in life is good or bad depends on whether we allow the devil to act in our hearts and lead us away from God.

The experience of the Israelites being bitten by serpents in the wilderness is worth pondering and learning from. Why did God send poisonous serpents to bite them? This was not the first time that the Israelites complained about God in the wilderness. God once said to Moses, **"How long will this people despise me? And how long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them?"** (Num 14:11) When we see the situation of the Israelites and compare it to your current situation, what do you think? What the Israelites were concerned about was the immediate supply of food, water, tangible things, and the comfort of life. When they encountered hard times, or when the supply was slightly delayed, they complained about God, thinking that it was the wrong of God or the problem of Moses. They forget that they have received abundant grace without paying any cost. The poisonous serpents biting them to death symbolized that God was going to deal with the sin in their lives. But on the other hand, it also symbolized the poisonous serpents in their hearts that were biting and killing their Godly lives.

Fortunately, they realized their mistake and turned around. God commanded Moses to make a serpent of bronze. The Israelites, who looked up at the bronzed serpent, were saved. God once again exerted the power of salvation through the bronzed serpent. Only by facing the serpent in their lives and looking to God could the Israelites overcome their sin. Whether the serpent in life is good or bad depends on whether you trust and look to God.

I don't know if the healing effects of serpents are original from the Bible, but many medical organizations use serpent as their organizational symbols. In fact, snake gallbladder and snake meat do have healing effects. The one we are most familiar with is probably snake soup. Therefore, the serpent has the image of positive power, but also has the image of negative power because of its fangs and toxins. As I have repeatedly emphasized, the good or bad brought by serpent, from the perspective of spiritual life, depends on whether we are drawn close to God and seriously put the bad side to death.

When Jesus said, **“And 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.”** (John 3:14-15) Likewise, we are asked to consider the double meaning of the cross. Of course, the original words were spoken by Jesus to Nicodemus, the Pharisee who came to ask questions. If you were Nicodemus, what would these words remind you of? At the beginning of John chapter 3, Jesus talked to Nicodemus about the topic of "reborn". Jesus said, **“Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born anew.”** (John 3:3) After the conversation on this topic, we come to today's lesson. The Israelites looked up to the raised serpent of bronze and were saved. Jesus wanted Nicodemus to realize what was about to happen. When people look up at Jesus on the cross, they can also experience the power of salvation and be reborn.

The cross was originally a cruel instrument of torture used by the Roman Empire to deal with those who resisted the regime and the Roman emperor. It was an evil punishment to the oppressed people. Jesus was also crucified because the Roman government, Jewish religious leaders, and the Jewish people conspired to murder and slander Him.

The cross symbolized sin and death. But when Jesus rose from the dead, the sin and death of the cross were shattered by God and became a symbol of rebirth and hope. So, in 1 Peter, the author said, **“He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness.”** (1 Peter 2:24) Those who look to the cross can receive life power from the resurrected Lord and have the opportunity to be reborn. Every time we look at the cross, we are reminded to put our sins to death and trust in God for help and salvation.

When I visit people, I am used to giving them a hand-held cross, encouraging them to hold the cross and pray, telling the Lord Jesus about their difficulties and hesitations, and seek His help and strength. Many witnesses tell us that if a person looks to the cross and sincerely believes in God, he or she will be able to overcome all kinds of evil forces and all kinds of temptations in the world. Amen.