

## Lowdown on the Snake Genesis 3:1-15, Revelation 20:1-10

There are more than six billion people in our world, but that is a very small number compared to the animal population. Some estimate that there are more rats in New York City than there are people. I don't know if that statistic is correct, but I do know there are more mosquitoes in Minnesota than our human population of around five million.

So, it should come as no surprise to us that there are lots of animals in the Bible: pigs and pigeons; lions and lambs; dogs and donkeys; ants and antelopes. Noah bred them. Moses sacrificed them. Nebuchadnezzar got down on the ground and ate grass as if he were one of them. Jesus rode them. Jonah was even swallowed by one of the bigger ones.

Of all the animals in the Bible there is one that has the worst reputation of them all. It is one of the first animals specifically named in the Bible and one of the last animals specifically named in the Bible. It is the snake.

Before you shiver, shudder or scream, remember that God created snakes and he liked what he made. He thought they were very good. Genesis 1:30-31 says:

*And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food and it was so.*

*God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.*

*Snakes are actually amazing animals, especially if you are a chiropractor. Snakes have from 100 to 400+ vertebrae. Humans have only 32. Imagine trying to line up 400 vertebrae! And, from a snake's perspective, if it throws its back out it has a serious problem because it is pretty much all back!*

Consider some "snaky" facts. There are more than 2,500 species of snakes. They live on the ground, in the ground, in trees and 400 feet below the surface of the sea. They are on every continent except Antarctica. There are only a few places

in the world that don't have snakes, most notably Ireland and New Zealand.

The smallest of the snakes is the blind snake. The adult blind snake in Texas grows to a maximum length of five inches and weighs one-tenth of an ounce. The largest are the anaconda and the reticulated python which grow up to 33 feet in length and weigh up to 550 pounds. Females are normally bigger than males.

Snakes regularly shed their skin as they grow. Some species shed their skins as often as every 20 days; some do it once a year. They don't have ears, but they sense heat, movement and location with their tongues. They have eyes that see very well, although a snake's eyes never close. They are cold-blooded.

Some are poisonous, injecting or spitting their venom. The Australian inland typan can deliver enough venom in one dose to kill 100 humans or 250,000 field mice. Snakes are carnivorous . . . they eat meat. They kill their prey either by squeezing them or poisoning them with venom.

There are between one and two million snakebites per year reported worldwide resulting in 50,000 to 60,000 fatalities. The country with the most fatalities is the island country of Sri Lanka. In the United States, about 45,000 snakebites are reported each year. Eight thousand are by venomous snakes with 9-15 fatalities per year.

There is a lot more information available about snakes. Lately I have learned more than I would

normally want to know. My favorite is the advice from an internet article on housing your pet snake. It says that the cage should be "escape proof". Sounded like good advice to me!

When God created all of animal-kind he designed enormous diversity, ingenuity and beauty. When God finished he looked at all he had done, including snakes, and said they were very good. Some people identify with God's evaluation. They actually like snakes. But most people I talk to don't like snakes. They don't want to see one, touch one or be near one.

***With Adam and Eve's loss of innocence came their fear of God. Everything was different.***

One night a cowboy was going to bed and, as he unrolled his sleeping bag, he found a rattlesnake coiled and ready to strike. He looked at the snake and said, “If we’re going to sleep together, you’re going to have to straighten out!”

Maybe that’s your perspective, too. You just wish snakes would straighten out and be different from the way they are.

To ancient Hebrews most snakes were bad. Every once in awhile there is a story in the Bible or in Hebrew history that puts snakes in a positive light, but not generally so. That is not true of many of their neighbor nations. The pagan Canaanites worshiped snakes. So do modern Hindus. I’ve been in a Hindu temple where there is elaborate worship of snakes. The modern symbol of medicine, a snake climbing up a pole, comes from Aesclepiion, the ancient Greek city.

There are twenty different opportunities to read snake stories in the Bible. The first is the story about the snake that talked, found in Genesis 3:1-15:

*Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’”*

*The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’”*

*“You will not surely die,” the serpent said to the woman. “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”*

*When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.*

*Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees*

*of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, “Where are you?”*

*He answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.”*

*And he said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?”*

*The man said, “The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.”*

*Then the Lord God said to the woman, “What is this you have done?”*

*The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate it.”*

*So the Lord God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this,*

*“Cursed are you above all the livestock and all the wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”*

This is the classic story of humanity’s fall into sin. It was the beginning of all our troubles, from physical sickness to broken relationships to alienation from God.

Eve should have been suspicious as soon as the snake started talking. If a snake ever talks to you, don’t listen! Snakes aren’t supposed to talk! That should have been a hint to her that things were not normal.

It was an amazing dialogue. The snake started the conversation with a lie that was hidden in a question. The snake asked, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’” The answer was no. In fact, it was quite to the contrary. God had offered every tree and all fruit in the Garden of Eden except one. The snake tried to make God look bad, casting him as restrictive rather than generous.

The woman did the same thing. She answered, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’” She got the first half right but she added a restriction that God did not make when she said, “. . . and you must not touch it.” God never said that.

As the dialogue continued, the snake became more bold and straight-out lie: “*You will not surely die.*” In other words: God is wrong; God is a liar.

She ate the fruit and so did her husband. Immediately everything changed. There was no going back. They did not become like God as the snake had promised. Instead, they were keenly aware of their nakedness and they made clothing out of fig leaves. (Contrary to medieval art and modern myth, it was not just one or a few fig leaves strategically placed. They sewed them together to make clothes that modestly covered their bodies.)

So, what happened here? They lost their innocence. They suddenly saw themselves and the world in which they lived in a totally different light. You know, little children run around naked and think

nothing of it. But when they get older they see the world and their own bodies differently. They are no longer innocent and ignorant. And with Adam and Eve’s loss of innocence came their fear of God. Everything was different.

This is not a sexual reference. It’s not saying that sex and sin are linked together. It is saying that they had struck out on a path that was independent of God and life wasn’t as good as they had expected it to be. Life with God was very good and they were happier then. They had lost something and they could never get back again.

God lost something that day, as well. It wasn’t just Adam and Eve. The children he loved so much had rebelled against him. He had given them his very best and they decided it wasn’t good enough. They must have hurt God deeply, choosing the words and the ways of a snake over the words and the ways of God.

So God confronted them. The man blamed the woman. As if it were all her fault! Every indication is that he was standing right there with her. He was as much a co-conspirator as anyone had ever been. It was his decision as much as hers.

She did what we often do when we’re caught doing something we know we shouldn’t have done. She passed the blame, too. She said it was the snake’s fault. As if she hadn’t made her own

choice. The truth is that she was fully responsible for her own behavior.

God cursed the snake. He said that his future is in the dirt and he will be permanently alienated from future women. We read about it in Genesis 3:14-15:

*“Cursed are you above all the livestock and all the wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life.*

*And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”*

The surface meaning of this statement is that every time any of us sees a snake slithering along on the ground it will remind us of this story and we will remember that most women and most snakes will never really like each other.

There is also something far more significant here, a hidden meaning. Ancient Christians had a Greek name for Genesis 3:15. They called it the Protevangelium, which means “the first gospel”. This is the first hint of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the Bible. It is symbolic language. The snake refers to Satan and the seed refers to Jesus as the offspring of the woman Eve and the virgin Mary. It anticipates a future day when Satan will hurt Jesus as a snake bits a heel and Jesus will conquer Satan as a hunter crushes a snake.

Yes, the snake talked, but this was much more than some ordinary snake. To check out his real ID we need to go from the first book of the Bible to the very end of the Bible where we meet the snake for the final time. We read in Revelation 12:9, “*The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray.*”

So, the animal in the Garden of Eden was actually Satan in a snake’s skin. This was far more than a conversation between an innocent couple and an everyday reptile. This was the first battle for the souls of us humans. Satan is the powerful and evil archenemy of God. He will say and do absolutely anything to make sin attractive and lure us away from God and his better way.

***Avoid temptation, run from sin  
and never ever listen to a snake.***

The tail end of this snake story is on the nearly last page of the Bible. It is interesting because it is written in the past tense even though it is a prophecy about the future. It is such a sure thing that it is recorded as if it were already history. It is Revelation 20:1-10:

*And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations any more until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time.*

*I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.*

When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth—Gog and Magog—to gather them for battle. In numbers they are like the sand of the seashore. They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God's people, the city he loves. But fire came from heaven and devoured them. And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.

We won't go into the details of Satan's obituary but we will focus on Satan's destiny. What the Bible says here is that God wins and Satan loses. Satan is doomed to an eternal hell. It is the end of the very long and painful story of sin that started in the Garden of Eden.

So, what do we learn from the snake story? If Eve and Adam were here today they would tell us that God's way is far better. They would tell us to believe God and do what he wants. If you disobey God, if you go your own way, it will be hell. They would tell us to avoid temptation, run from sin and never ever listen to a snake.

Several years ago I was invited to speak at a conference of missionaries in Columbia, South America. Charleen and I flew from the Twin Cities to Bogota and then on to a rural area for that conference. It was a place that looked a lot like we often imagine the Garden of Eden to look. While we were there I found something that I brought back to the United States, but Charleen has never welcomed it into our home. It is a very large snakeskin. It has lived in closets and in the garage for many years now.

This snakeskin is big enough to wrap all kinds of things in it. That's kind of what this story is about, that Satan wraps himself up in skin and makes modern-day appearances into our lives to try to tempt us all over again, just the way he did so many years ago in the Garden of Eden. He might misquote God, promise a better life and tell us that our way is better than God's way. The voice you hear is the voice of Satan trying to get you to sin. The snakeskin he wears may have scales made of hundred dollar bills. It might be the snakeskin of drugs, of an easy life or of selfish ambition or personal power. It might be the snakeskin of Internet pornography—so attractive and so full of venom. That old snake called Satan changes his skin a thousand times a day in order to trick us.

Just remember . . . never, never listen to a snake!

*Faith Matters*® is the Broadcast Ministry of  
Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church  
6630 Shady Oak Road  
Eden Prairie MN 55344  
952-944-6300  
www.faithmatters.fm  
©Leith Anderson