

Snakebit!

BY JIM PERKINS

One morning in June, a young dog was presented that had been bitten by a rattlesnake about 30 minutes before arrival at our facility. The dog's owner pointed out the punctures on the right foreleg. There was no evidence of significant local damage, and the dog was systemically in good condition. I advised the owners that we could probably just get away with conservative therapy that did not include antivenin. Antivenin is very expensive, and not without its own inherent risk. I advised that I continue to observe their dog in our facility during the day, and if we observed any signs of significant poisoning, I would initiate antivenin therapy. This approach has worked well for me on several occasions over the years.



In this case, about an hour later, I observed that the surface of the skin about 3 inches up the leg from the bite was beginning to slough. That means that the venom of the snake was causing necrosis (death of tissue). The hair in that location was beginning to fall out, the superficial layers of skin were starting to fall off, the skin was beginning to lose its normal color and leak serum, and was subtly turning more white than usual. We called the pet owner immediately for authorization to administer antivenin. The dog healed nicely, and was in our facility this week for a routine procedure, no ill effects observed.

One of the worst cases that I saw of a rattlesnake bite was a Weimaraner that had been bitten about an hour before presentation. The owner, a young man in superb physical condition, was out hiking with his dog, saw the snake bite the dog on the face, hoisted his dog on his shoulders, and ran all the way to his vehicle. He told me he could feel that the dog became suddenly limp after five minutes. We quickly administered antivenin, and during the day administered two additional vials, as we documented the liver enzyme blood tests skyrocketing. The dog survived, after 24 hours of intensive therapy. The liver enzymes returned to normal after several weeks. The dog went on to enjoy a long, healthy life.

The rattlesnake is much slower than its victims, and has to swallow them whole. So, the venom does two things. First, it interferes with muscle activity, so the small victim cannot run very far. Second, the venom delivers its poison through the bloodstream to all tissues of the victim, causing widespread tissue death and beginning the process of digestion of the rodent even before the snake swallows it.

Jesus effectively told Nicodemus in John 3:14 that he, like the rest of us, had been snake-bit!

The origin of this statement was the story in Numbers 21:4ff. The people of Israel had become impatient with Moses' leadership through the desert and began to complain (Philippians 2:12-14!). Numbers 21:6 tells us that Jehovah sent venomous snakes among them! Many Israelites died from their snakebites. The people realized their sin, repented to Moses, and Jehovah told them to go and look upon a snake that Moses had made and affixed to a pole for them. When anyone who had been bitten by a snake looked upon this bronze snake, they were healed!

So, Jesus told Nicodemus that he must look upon Jesus lifted up (on the cross, it turned out), and he would be healed. In effect, of course, he told Nicodemus that he was snake-bit, and had the death of the poison of that serpent Satan working in him. He also told Nicodemus that he was going to have to "start over" by being "reborn" through the water of baptism.

Over the years I have heard some say that Nicodemus was a coward, for coming to Jesus by night. I can't completely disagree with that conclusion, but I have to give Nicodemus some credit. He was a member of the Sanhedrin, a group of 70 men who were effectively the senate that governed Israel in matters of Jewish law. Jesus identified him as "Israel's teacher", so he knew the scriptures (although he missed the point of Ezekiel 35:25-27), and was acclaimed for his teaching. He may have been a Pharisee, a scribe, a priest, or an "elder" that represented his home "district," perhaps honored by his own community to represent them in Jerusalem.

Nicodemus was an honest man. The miracles convinced him that Jesus had come from God, and he referred to the lowly Galilean carpenter as "Rabbi", honoring Him as his teacher.

He had the courage to stand before his colleagues in the Sanhedrin (John 7:50-51) and challenge them to honor God's law by hearing Jesus before they judged him. I'm confident that he stood up virtually alone against that angry and prejudiced crowd of leaders to make that pronouncement.

Finally, Nicodemus summoned the courage to join Joseph of Arimathea in honoring the body of Jesus after His death. This, after Jesus' closest disciples had largely fled, were in hiding. The mission of Jesus as Christ seemed to be extinguished when He took His last breath in the shameful repudiation of Roman crucifixion! But, I can only surmise, it was Nicodemus' love for Jesus that caused him to put his reputation, perhaps ultimately the entirety of his life on the line for Him.

However, Jesus told this man, a pinnacle of spiritual success and godliness in his society and perhaps even held himself in high esteem, that he, like those in the desert who had to look upon the bronze snake of Moses to be healed, must look upon Jesus on the cross for his own healing from the poison that infected him.

When each of us, like Eve, chose to elevate “self” above the sovereignty of God, the poison of the snake enters. Much as I dislike the vision, I think God wants us to visualize the spread of necrosis in ourselves that commenced from that decision, and all the other decisions that followed because of “the spirit that is now at work among the sons of disobedience” (Eph. 2:2). Sometimes we refer to ourselves as having “baggage.” This simply means the captivities and consequences of us “following the course of this world.” And, even the “best” of us, like Nicodemus, have this poison inside.

Side note: John’s very next story, in chapter 4, tells us that Jesus can heal even the “worst” of us, like the Samaritan woman living in fornication.

What must Nicodemus, and the rest of us, do? Simply this: go to the cross of Jesus, see Him there, and claim the redemption from our sin that He provides for us there. (I love that we “re-enact” our “trip to the cross”, to see our Savior lifted up for us, every Sunday).

How effective is the “antivenin” offered by Jesus?

And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him...Colossians 1:21-22

Holy. Blameless. Above reproach. And, what about our part in this? We must live in repudiation of all choices that serve “self” above the leadership of God in the “desert” of our own lives on this earth (the original source of the poison), and honor the ways of God in every choice that we make: Continuing in the passage of Colossians:

... IF indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard (Col. 1:23)