

## Fallen snakes

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Following my first year in seminary, I did an overseas missions practicum in Calcutta, India. The six members of our group volunteered with the Missionaries of Charity, the order founded by Mother Teresa. We served in a variety of places, including a roadside health clinic and an orphanage. It was a life-changing summer.

I remember visiting the orphanage one day. My wife was with me. One of the sisters met us at an outside gate. She chatted with us a bit before leading us into the grounds.

While much about that day is lost to me, I remember one thing very well. As she was about to open the gate, the sister glanced at the ground. Then she quickly removed her sandal, bent over, and began beating it on the ground. It was only after she finished that we saw the snakes. Baby cobras, she called them. The sister had beaten them to death. Then she opened the gate and calmly continued our tour, as if killing baby cobras was no big deal.

This week's text from Genesis reads a bit like one of Kipling's *Just So Stories*. Why does the snake crawl on the ground? Why doesn't it have legs and feet? Why are human beings afraid of it? Why does a nun whip off her sandal and kill baby cobras?

Poor snakes. Like the late Rodney Dangerfield, they get no respect. Call someone a snake and they will most likely be offended. We all know better than to trust someone known as a real snake, or a snake in the grass. It's not only their physical bodies that we crush under our heels, it's their very reputations.

I think it is useful to consider the fate of the snake in this text. Not long before, the Creator called the snake good. Now it is suddenly transformed into a symbol of all that's wrong with the world. The snake *falls*, just as humanity does. Partners in crime in one moment, partners in exile the next.

The snake reminds us that the damage caused by sin goes far beyond us human beings. All of creation is harmed. And ever since that day when God walked in the garden looking for his children, the whole creation has been groaning. Even the lowly snakes are groaning as they await the day of redemption.

It's kind of humbling, if you think about it.