



Look at Jesus

Numbers 21:4-9

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From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. And the people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.” Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. And the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

1) The Israelites grew IMPATIENT along the way.

As we read in Numbers chapter 21, at this particular stage of the Israelites’ journey, they encountered a detour. Rather than being able to travel forward and go directly toward the Promised Land, they instead had to go around Edom, and they became bitter about it.

We don’t like encountering detours either, do we? Whenever we set out to go somewhere, we want to go from point A to point B, utilizing the most direct, time-efficient route as possible, and whenever we encounter a detour sign on the road, knowing that we are going to have to go all the way around something to eventually get where we want to be, it’s amazing how quickly the level of frustration rises within us.

Sometimes it happens while driving around town.

Sometimes it happens while driving on the freeway, and the exit we need to turn off at is closed, and we have to go to the next exit and figure out how to get where we need to go.

Sometimes it happens when we are running late. This is the worst. Whether it’s on the way to work or some special event we are going to, when we encounter a detour sign, knowing that it will make us even later, we become even more frustrated ...and let’s just say that we are not at our best.

With Egypt behind the Israelites and the Promised Land before them, when they encountered a detour, Scripture says they grew impatient along the way, and they not only spoke against Moses; they spoke against the Lord.

When the Israelites went around Edom, they would find themselves in severe desert conditions. It was hot, the terrain was rough, resources were scarce, they were fatigued after being recently attacked by the Canaanite king of Arad, and they were not at their best.

When God initially delivered the Israelites from Egypt, they had nothing but praise for God. But when things got tough, rather than continuing to rejoice and praise God for how He had freed them from Pharaoh’s grip, the Israelites instead complained about their travel circumstances and focused on what they did not have rather than thanking God for all He was about to give them. When the Israelites spoke against Moses – and even the Lord Himself – it exposed not only their ingratitude and discontentment; it revealed their utter contempt.

Church, there will certainly be times in our lives when things get tough; when life is not what we want it to be, but during such times, may we remember what God has saved us from, and that life in this present age is not all there is. Jesus, the Son of God, said He is preparing a place for us, a permanent home. Therefore, God's Word says that our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

Despite what the Israelites asserted, the Lord did not bring the Israelites out of Egypt to die in the wilderness, and the Lord was able to provide, and in fact did provide, for the Israelites' every need.

In response to the Israelites' rebellious complaints, the Scripture says that the Lord sent venomous snakes among them.

2) The Israelites asked God to remove the CONSEQUENCE of their sin.

Perhaps you're here today and you actually like snakes. You like to see them ... you like to be up close to them ... you may even want to handle them ... who knows, perhaps some of you may even have one as a pet. What's nice about caring for snakes is that they have a slow metabolism rate, so you don't have to feed them that often. And since they don't eat a lot, you don't have to clean up after them a lot. They don't bark like dogs, they don't claw your furniture like cats, and if you want to have a pet that will be around for a long, long time, snakes are ideal. I once read about a python that lived in captivity for 48 years!

But some of you are not fans of snakes at all. According to one study, nearly 1/3 of adults have an intense fear of snakes. So, if you are here today in the Worship Center and there is someone sitting to your left and there is someone sitting to your right, and a snake slithers in here right now, one of you is going to be absolutely terrified!

Years ago, when we were living in Arizona, a friend of mine invited me to go horseback riding. Now things were fun at first, but the moment I heard a rattlesnake nearby, without even thinking, I instantly kicked the horse I was riding, and I got out of there as fast as I could! As I am fleeing for my life, my friend yells out to me: "Hey, come back here, come take a look at this snake."

When he said that, I thought to myself, "Are you serious? I don't want to get *closer* to the snake; I want to get as far away as possible from that snake!" Since my friend was born and raised in the desert, he knew how to handle himself around snakes, so I begrudgingly trusted him, and I turned the horse around. The whole time I was there alongside him, looking directly at the rattlesnake within our line of sight, I was standing there shaking because the only time I want to get up close and personal with a snake is when I am watching the Discovery Channel!

Whether you like snakes or you are not a fan whatsoever, the situation the Israelites found themselves in was really, really scary. Note what the Scripture says, "Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died." It doesn't say a few Israelites died. It doesn't even say a good number of Israelites died. It says many Israelites died.

To give us a frame of reference, may we note that scholars estimate that about 2 million Israelites were traveling together in the wilderness. How is this number arrived at? We know from Exodus 38, based on a census that was taken, that there were 603,550 men who were 20 years old and older. When you take into account all the women as well, along with all the males and females under the age of 20, it is very reasonable to conclude that around 2 million people genuinely feared for their lives because of all the venomous snakes around them.

Imagine what it must have been like ... when the Israelites beheld thousands upon thousands of their fellow Israelites being bitten by a snake, falling to the ground, and dying. Family members. Friends. People that they knew and cared for, and all of a sudden, they're gone. How many thought to themselves, "What have we done?" So the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us."

In essence, what they said was this: “Ask the Lord to take away the consequence of our sin.”

I think this is something that all of us can identify with, isn't it? When we ourselves have done something, and all of a sudden we find ourselves dealing with the ramifications of our actions, and we just want it all to go away. But the truth is that we are all accountable for our actions. Even those things we think we have gotten away with it, our conscience is still dealing with the ramifications of our actions, and there is no sin that goes unnoticed by God.

Scripture says that the Creator of all life is also the great judge of all life, for God is holy ... God is righteous ... and God is just. Many of us understand very well the role and function of a judge in society, and it's good and right when a judge renders a verdict in accordance with justice.

Let me put it this way. Imagine if a violent action occurred here in the Quad Cities, and as a result, someone's life was tragically taken. There were multiple eyewitnesses who saw the person who did it. There was irrefutable evidence verifying that it was indeed the person who did it. And when the case finally came to trial, the person himself even admitted he was guilty. But then ... the person proceeds to tell the judge that he doesn't want to go to prison and asks the judge to take away the consequence of his wrongdoing.

Imagine if the judge decided to grant the person's request. The judge looks at him and said, “You know what, let's just pretend like it never happened. I'll just sweep it under the rug here in court. You are free to go.” If that actually happened, could you imagine the outrage of the family members and friends of the deceased person who were present in the courtroom? They would yell out, “This isn't right! How can you do this? A judge is supposed to render verdicts that are just!”

But let's say the opposite happened. If the judge instead rendered a guilty verdict and the man was sentenced to prison. Instead of outrage, there would be rejoicing! For although the family members of the deceased person would still be mourning the loss of someone they dearly loved, at least justice was served ... and they could be at peace about that.

Throughout history, around the world, there have been numerous courts, judges, and people who have been charged with all kinds of crimes. All of this serves as a preview for what is to come. I like how C.S. Lewis puts it: The things of this life are mere shadows of heavenly realities. Revelation 20:11-15 says, “Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.” When this happens, God will be praised and receive glory for doing what is right and just.

When the Israelites asked God to remove the consequences of their sin (the snakes), God did not grant their request. However, by way of His mercy and abounding grace, God provided a way for the Israelites to live instead of dying.

3) In order to live, the Israelites needed to exercise **FAITH**.

The LORD said to Moses, “‘Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.’ So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.”

I wonder what went through the Israelites' minds when they heard this. What would go through your mind if you heard this? Remember the story I told you about my friend in Arizona and how he invited me to go horseback riding with him? What if things took a turn for the worse?

As we were looking at that rattlesnake, imagine if the snake decided to have me for lunch. Suddenly, it comes slithering on over with great speed with its rattler shaking as loud as it could be ... and I just stood there paralyzed in fear ... and the snake bit me in the leg! I would probably yell really loud, look to my friend, and say, "Go get me help!"

And then my friend gets on his horse and rides off to his house. After a little time, he comes back with a fake snake, puts it up on a pole, and says, "Just look up at this snake, and you will live!"

If my friend actually did that, I would say to him, "Are you serious? Really, please, do something that will actually help me! Call 911 ... go find a neighbor who can help me ... suck the venom out of my leg ... just do something that is actually going to work so I don't die!"

I tell you what, in order for the Israelites to live and not die, they had to exercise faith. Even though it may not have made any sense to them whatsoever, every person who was bitten by a venomous snake and believed what God said, looking to the bronze snake that was lifted up on a pole, lived and did not die.

Why did God do this? What lessons are to be learned from this? There are at least two to pay attention to.

The first is that God's provision was very specific. Look at the bronze snake and live. If I were an Israelite during that period of history, I would make sure I knew where that pole was at all times! No matter where I went, whether I was taking a leisurely stroll or I was running an errand for a family member, whether it was day time or night time, no matter where I went, I would make sure that I knew precisely where the pole was located because if I got bitten by a snake, I want to know exactly where to turn.

Because that was it! That was God's specific provision – that was God's only way out of certain death – and nothing else would satisfy. I mean if I was bitten by a venomous snake, and I lost track of where the pole was, but I saw a lizard resting on top of a rock, and I thought to myself, "Well, it's not the bronze snake up on a pole, but I'm sure there has got to be others ways I can go about this and live as well." And so, I look intently at the lizard, resting high on a rock, and I would die ... because God made one way to live.

The second lesson we learn is this. Often, when God does something, it is not just for the present, but God does it to point us to something that has future implications as well. Perhaps the most well-known Bible verse in the world is John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life." But the two verses that precede it are not as familiar to people. Hear the Word of God. John 3:14, 15, and 16 says this: "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

This leads us to the following reflection question: What is my response to God's offer of life instead of death?

This historical account, as recorded in Numbers 21, is significant for us today because it helps us better understand what Jesus did for us. The Bible says that ALL have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. There are things in our lives that we knew we should not have done (things that are wrong), but we did them anyway. And there are things in our lives that we knew we should have done (things that are right), but for whatever reason, we failed to do the good we knew we ought to do.

Romans 6:23 says, "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

John 14:6 records this: "Jesus said, 'I am the way and the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me.'"

1 John 5:11-12 says, “And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.”

Praise be to God for His mercy and compassion. Just as God provided a way out for the Israelites, He has provided a way out for us: Jesus!

We’ll close with this. Last week, Pastor Brian preached from Revelation 2:12-17, which provides the account of what Jesus said to the church in Pergamum. Listen to what Pastor Brian shared about the city: “It was also a city steeped in pagan religions, with temples dedicated to Dionysius (the god of wine), Athena (the goddess of wisdom), Demeter (the god of crops), and Asclepius, the god of healing. Like an ancient Mayo Clinic, people came from all over the Roman Empire in search of healing. Sufferers would spend the night in the darkness of the temple of Asclepius while snakes slithered over their bodies, which supposedly brought health and healing. Interestingly, the symbol associated with Asclepius (a staff with a single serpent wrapped around it), remains a medical emblem today and is used by the American Medical Association.”

Pastor Brian was right on.

The following are direct quotes from the U.S. Department of Transportation, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, and Office of Traffic Injury Control in Washington D.C. (2019), regarding the design origin and meaning of the Star of Life: “Asclepius was the Greek god of medicine... In Greek mythology he was the son of Apollo... The centaur Chiron taught him the art of healing... The staff is the only true symbol of medicine.”

But wait – there is more!

This is so fantastic. Also included in these resources is this: “It is considered most appropriate to call attention to the other significant reference to the serpent on a staff associated with healing as follows: ‘Moses accordingly made a bronze serpent and mounted it on a pole and whenever anyone who had been bitten by a serpent looked at the bronze serpent, he recovered.’ Numbers 21:9.”

The next time we see emergency medical services pass us by, may we see something that God has redeemed for His purposes, and may we be reminded of what Jesus has done for us.