

Foreshadows of the Cross
Part 5 – Simply Look to Jesus
Numbers 21:4-9

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ March 22, 2026 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



⁴From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. ⁵The 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 detest this miserable food.”

⁶Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. ⁷The people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people.

⁸And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” ⁹So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live. (Numbers 21:4-9, NRSV)



I do a fair amount of air travel and I’ve become increasingly particular about my routes. One thing I will always try to avoid when I have a connection is getting on a first flight that is not headed in at least the general direction of my final destination. If I’m flying to Seattle, for example, I don’t want to make a connection in Salt Lake City. I certainly don’t want to make a connection in Los Angeles. Something about sitting on a plane headed in the exact opposite direction from where I am ultimately headed is deflating. I have been known to spend a little extra just to get me started in the right direction. It’d be one thing if the food on these flights was amazing. Longer flight, but more good food. Then maybe I’d sign up for the detour. But there’s no way I’m going to Seattle by way of Los Angeles for an extra bag of pretzels!

So in some ways I am sympathetic with the Israelites. When we meet them here in Numbers 21, they have been wandering in the wilderness between Egypt and

the Promised Land for nearly 40 years! There is a backstory to all this of course, and mostly has to do with their persistent refusal to trust the Lord.¹ As a consequence, the Lord promised them that this current rebellious generation would pass away before they reached the other side. But even though he punished them, God didn’t abandon them. In spite of their disobedience and refusal to trust, he nevertheless provided them along the way with daily food called manna, water when they needed it, and most of all his constant presence and protection.

When we meet them here they are finally getting close to the goal. They have just reached the Plains of Moab, after which they can cross the Jordan River into their new home. The direct route from that point would have been to go through Edom, but the Edomites are generational enemies, a conflict that stretched all the way back to Jacob and Esau. So the Edomites deny them visas and promise to destroy Israel if they step foot into their land.² For some reason the Lord, who had already conquered many other powerful enemies along the way, chooses not to conquer the Edomites, and instead sends Israel on a long detour around Mount Hor through the Arabah desert. This is going to Seattle by way of Los Angeles. And the food along the way is going to be just more and more pretzels.

Israel reaches a breaking point. We are told that they became impatient along the way. The root of the Hebrew word translated “impatient” has to do with cutting grain short in harvest.³ These people have a short fuse, and it gets lit. No longer can they hold in their frustration towards God or his servant, 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 detest this miserable food.”**⁴ They are so mad they are contradicting themselves. Which is it? Is there no food, or is it that there is food but you hate the options on the menu? The language is strong here. They find the food God has provided disgusting and worthless. And now this 40 year journey with disgusting food is going to take even longer!

¹ Read about this in Numbers 14.

² See Numbers 20:14-21

³ <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/7114.htm>

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, this and all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

Let's be clear about what's happening here. Why is the journey taking so long? Whose fault is it that this journey from Egypt to the Promised Land, a journey which, even on foot, would have taken at most a few weeks, has now turned into 40 years? It's certainly not God's fault. And yet in spite of their constant rebellion and idolatry, the Lord has not abandoned them.

Instead, he has provided divine sustenance that has kept them alive in a place where there was no food. And now, once again, they are rejecting God's sufficiency and questioning his character. And if we're honest, we may find that they are not so unlike us. How easy it is for us all to forget God's proven record of provision and protection when things don't go our way. How easy it is to begin to doubt the goodness of God when life doesn't move in the direction we think it should go.

This has been our way since the beginning. Think back to paradise. Adam and Eve have been given life in abundance. Everything they could ever need or want is there for them in the garden. They can virtually do anything they want, eat anything they please, enjoy everything before them. The Lord only gives them one single boundary. Eat from all these trees, but don't touch that one tree. To eat from that tree means death.⁵ But then a snake slithers into paradise one day. Of all animals, a snake. Interesting. And the snake dresses up a lie so much so that the man and woman believe it: "God's not being fair with you. He's holding something back from you. He's not treating you right. He can't be trusted. You should expect more. You should demand more. Eat the fruit. Life will be better for you if you do."⁶

Tragically, the man and woman believe the lie. And in that moment, as one commentator puts it, the spiritual venom of the snake enters the hearts of humanity and creates within an unquenchable thirst, an infinite discontent, a permanent mistrust in the Lord and his ways.⁷ This has been our condition ever since, and that ought to be as plain as day to us. Even when we get what we want, we are still discontent, thirsty in our souls.

Think about it, the people among us who we consider to "have it all" in this life are telling us this is the case. When Jim Carrey became one of the highest paid actors in the world he famously said in an interview with the *Ottawa Citizen*, "I think everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so they can see that it's not the answer."⁸ After the 2012

Olympic Games, and after amassing at that point 22 Olympic medals, swimmer Michael Phelps found himself sitting alone in his bedroom for days "not wanting to be alive."⁹ The most successful Olympian in history was ready to take his own life. Billionaire David Rubenstein recently said, "Some of the most tortured souls I know are very wealthy people."¹⁰

Here's *our* problem. None of us in this room will likely ever reach the pinnacle of fame, athletic accomplishment, or material wealth, or the very top of our vocational field. We won't get to experience what Jim Carey experienced. So we live with the illusion that the discontentment we feel in our souls must be because we have not yet reached the mountaintop with our circumstances. If only I had a little more. If only my body was healthy and pain-free again. If only I found a true soulmate in life. If only I had children, or grandchildren. If only I could get this job, or live in this house, or travel to these places. If only, if only, if only. The Dominican theologian, Thomas Aquinas, once declared, "There is within every soul a thirst for happiness and meaning." But our souls have been poisoned by a lie, a lie that tells us that the Lord cannot or will not satisfy that thirst, or at least do so in our time and in our way. So we, like the Israelites in the desert that day, tell God that he has it all wrong. There is something he is keeping from us.

Is God's ensuing response unfair? He's certainly not playing around. We're told that in response to the people's protest, "**The Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died.**" Wow. Let's acknowledge that this is a hard story. Does that seem a bit harsh to you? The customers are complaining about the food and so the chef has them executed! What's going on here?

Well, let's first get the translation right. These aren't just snakes; these are deadly venomous snakes. The word "poisonous" is the translation of the Hebrew word *saraph*. It literally means "fiery."¹¹ You might recognize that word, because in the Bible the seraphim (same root) are six-winged angels who surround the throne of heaven. You can read about them in that famous passage from Isaiah 6.¹² Seraphim literally means "burning ones." So when the writer of Numbers describes these snakes, he wants us to think of fire, even holy fire. Why is that? Well, did you realize that snake venom has toxins which directly activate acid-sensing pain receptors in the human body which immediately

⁵ "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden, 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." Genesis 2:16-17

⁶ See Genesis 3:1-7

⁷ I'm borrowing here from Timothy Keller, "The Serpent in the Desert," *Gospel in Life*, November 24, 2002. Listen online at <https://gospelinlife.com/sermon/the-serpent-in-the-desert/>

⁸ Cited in a 2005 interview with *The Ottawa Citizen's* Jay Stone.

⁹ <https://www.cnn.com/2018/01/19/health/michael-phelps-depression>

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Sv6-vjXMI>

¹¹ <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/8314.htm>

¹² See Isaiah 6:1-7

trigger massive inflammatory responses that can make it feel like your body is on fire. A raging fever can ensue, along with an insatiable thirst. Eventually death can come.¹³

Think carefully with me here. The people are once again entirely unsatisfied with what the Lord has provided them from heaven. It's as if God can never quench their thirst. So the Lord essentially says to them, "Okay, you don't like what heaven has to offer? Fine. I'll give you what the world has to offer then. Instead of being preserved by bread from heaven, now you can die of poison in the desert."¹⁴ Don't you see that if the Lord had never intervened in the lives of these people, just let life take its course, what would have happened to them? They would have died in despair as slaves in Egypt. Remember that this whole journey to the Promised Land begins with this statement from the Lord: **"I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings."**¹⁵ Apart from God's gracious hand, the poison in their souls is going to take effect one way or another. Apart from the Lord's gracious intervention, and his provision and protection, if snakes don't get them, something else will, either the sword, or disease, or eventually old age. We've eaten the forbidden fruit. Death is now the inevitable result. So in a way, the Lord, by sending snakes, is just speeding up the process.

It's his choice of snakes that is striking. Remember that the spiritual poison first came at the beginning through a snake. Now, physical snakes finish the job. In other words, what's happening now in their bodies is a mirror image of what has already been happening in their souls, making the consequences for their blasphemy towards God and their loathing of his good gifts perfectly fit the crime.¹⁶ Unquenchable thirst in their souls that now matches the unquenchable thirst in their bodies.

Would you have responded differently if you were God? Are you bold enough to imagine that you would have, that his ways here are not to be trusted, or at least not the best ways? And if you do respond that way, are you not continuing to allow that same ancient poison to infect your soul? If God had not intervened, we know what happens to these people. Right? They die a miserable death as slaves in a foreign land. Though we may not agree with or understand his methods of intervention, what happens when God does intervene?

I'm so glad you asked. When do things shift in this story? When do we see a glimmer of hope for these people? You see the moment, don't you? As the snake-bitten Israelites start to drop dead, they finally realize their sin and confess it aloud. **"We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us."** This is always the point at which things turn around. Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12-Step programs get this right. The first step in AA is where hope breaks in: "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable." Translate this to this story. The people admit that they are powerless over the poison that has affected their bodies and souls, that there is nothing they can do to heal themselves. And so desperately out of options, they cry out to the Lord for mercy and help.

Let me point something out here, especially to those of you who really don't like these parts of the Bible where, from your perspective, the Lord comes off harsh and unrelenting, excessive in his response to human sin. Your response may be to protest that God is being unfair here, but *that is not the response of the people who receive the consequences!* Did you notice that? The Israelites don't cry out, "Wow, Lord! That's a bit much don't you think! Couldn't you have just sent non-venomous snakes to bite us? Or couldn't you have just sent us something besides manna every day, a little variety on the menu every other day?" Then we would have been fine taking your little detour." No, that's not how *they* respond. In fact, that's rarely how people in the Bible respond to God's discipline, even though we sit here and judge his response to be harsh. Which means it might be good if we ask ourselves, could the reason we have such a hard time trusting God when he takes such drastic measures in response to human sin is because we have never, ourselves, come to see just how heinous our sin is before God, meaning we have never come to grips with the fact that nothing short of such drastic measures can ever bring healing.

These people, at least in the moment, do recognize that God is dealing with them fairly, and that unless he helps them, unless he shows mercy, they are done for. So they repent, confess their sin, and cry out for help. And God, as God always does, responds with mercy - though granted, the means of his mercy are incredibly strange. The Lord tells Moses to make a bronze image of the very snakes that are killing the people, to put it on pole, lift up the pole, and have everyone who has been poisoned look at the snake hanging on the pole for healing.

¹³ See this article from John Hopkins Medicine - <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/snake-bites>

¹⁴ I'm indebted here to Ronald B. Allen, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Numbers*, edited by Frank E. Gaebelin (Zondervan, 1990), 876.

¹⁵ Exodus 3:7

¹⁶ I'm borrowing here again from Tim Keller.

What in the world? Biblical commentators point out that this is completely strange and unexpected for several reasons. For one, the plague is spreading quickly. People are dropping like flies. But God gives Moses a task that would have taken some time. How long would it take you to make a bronze snake in the middle of the desert? How many people would die in the meantime? Second, God has already prohibited his people from making graven images of any animal.¹⁷ Remember the trouble they got into when they made a golden cow? Now he wants them to violate that commandment? And finally, why a snake? What an odd image for healing! Snakes are the symbol for the evil one, and had been since the very beginning. They were considered unclean animals.¹⁸ Most people despise snakes. On top of that, what could be more demoralizing than being told to seek healing by looking at the very thing that is killing you!¹⁹

None of it makes sense. And yet, this is what God does. He takes a despised symbol of evil and death and transforms it into a source of life and deliverance. No one wants to look at a snake on a pole when you are dying of snake poison, but that is exactly where healing was to be found, the great good in the midst of the great evil.

Are you starting to make the connection? Am I pushing this too far, taking the text where it was not meant to go? Maybe so. But at least I'm in good company. This time, in very good company.

In chapter 3 of John's Gospel, we read about a famous late-night conversation between Jesus and a Pharisee named Nicodemus. Even though all of Nicodemus' peers are against Jesus, this man sees something different in this rabbi from Nazareth, and he wants to know more. So he sneaks out late one night to meet Jesus so that he can ask him how a person can do the miraculous things he is doing if, as his peers suggest, he is against God. The question leads to one of the most famous conversations in the whole Bible. Eventually Jesus tells Nicodemus that if a person really wants to know God and enter into God's life, what he calls the Kingdom of God, that person must be "born again." This is quite confusing to Nicodemus, who is taking Jesus literally, trying to imagine how a grown man can enter again into his mother's womb and then come out again into the world. But Jesus isn't talking about physical birth, but spiritual birth. He's making clear that the human soul is poisoned by sin, fatally poisoned. And so for a person to be healed from that fatal poison of sin and know life again, the life that only God can

give, that person needs a remedy to that poison, a remedy which, when applied, is essentially like being born again.

This is all still very confusing to Nicodemus, so Jesus spells it out by pointing him to, of all places, this very story in Numbers 21. You'll recognize the end of this passage, but you might not have realized that it was this reference to snakes which preceded it:

“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. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”²⁰

Right in the very middle of his most famous teaching on who he is and what he came to do, Jesus uses this bronze snake lifted high on a pole in the wilderness so that whoever looks to it might be healed to make his point. He's saying to Nicodemus, and really to us as well, "What the snake was to those dying Israelites, I am to you." I can't help but think of that startling statement Paul makes in 2nd Corinthians 5:21, **“For our sake God made the one who knew no sin to be sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”** To be clear, God did not make Jesus sinful. Paul couldn't mean that. Jesus, even on the cross, remained sinless. Even in death he continues to love and forgive even those who are killing him. No, what Paul means is that Jesus *became* sin, he *became* evil itself, the very serpent, and then received what the serpent deserved to receive, what *we* deserved to receive. That perpetual thirst in our souls which, because of our sin, we can never quench, Jesus took that thirst to himself. When he cries out from the cross, **“I am thirsty!”²¹**, I don't think he's speaking of physical thirst alone. The one who is the perpetual source of living water takes on our thirst so that our thirsty souls can finally and forever be satisfied.

I love how commentator Dale Bruner puts it: “Jesus' greatest act is his willingness to be hoisted up on the cross. This wretched symbol, this great humiliation. What the world thinks is the lowest, God, through Christ, makes the highest. The sole bridge to heaven went down through hell.”²² This is how seriously God takes our sin. This is also how seriously God takes his love.

How are the fatally-poisoned people saved in the wilderness? What do they have to do to be healed?

¹⁷ See Exodus 20:4 – **“You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above or that is on the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth.”**

¹⁸ See Leviticus 11:41-42

¹⁹ Allen, 877.

²⁰ John 3:14-16

²¹ John 19:28

²² Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Eerdmans, 2012), 193.

Nothing. They don't have to *do* anything! All that is required of them is that they lift their eyes to the snake on the pole as the Lord told them to do. And then – bam! – they are healed in that moment. The bar is set so breathtakingly low for their salvation. No requirement to prove that they will be faithful in the future. No demand for penance. They just have to recognize that they are dying, and then turn to the snake on the pole for life. They just have to believe.

Is it not the same for us? Maybe you are here today because you have come to the end of your rope, or realize you are about to come to that desperate place. You've tried everything, but nothing satisfies the thirst in your soul that burns like a fire within. Maybe you have never really trusted in Christ before, but now you are so out of options that you are finally ready to do so. Can you see that all that is required is that you look to him? This is so utterly uncomplicated. Christ has done *all* the work. You don't deserve it. You can't earn it. You can't struggle for it. There aren't steps to take to get it. There are no preconditions to meet or promises to make. There are no techniques or secret work-arounds. All you need to do is look to him and believe, to look to him hanging on the pole, righteousness becoming sin for our sake, and trust him to bring the healing you are starting to realize you will never find without him. Why not make today the day you look to Jesus and live?

And for those of you who have come to that point already along the way, today is the day to keep looking to Jesus. Because, of course, the healing, though it happens all at once, is also ongoing.²³ I can't help but think of that beautiful passage from Hebrews 12 where the writer calls us to keeping running this race of the Christian life with perseverance, and he encourages us as we do so to **“fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.”**²⁴ Christ began this journey back home to life for us. Christ also finished this journey back home to life for us. So with every step along the way, let us keep looking to Jesus. In him we will find all the healing we will ever need, more than we can now ever imagine is possible.

Amen.

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The Next Step *A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application*

1. Read Numbers 21:4-9 again. What do you notice here? What parts of the story before this come to mind as you consider this part of the story?
2. The people complain against God and God's servant, Moses, because of their circumstances. In response God sends poisonous snakes to bite the people and some of the people die. Is this a fair complaint? And what do you think about God's response?
3. Why a snake on a pole? What's going on here? What are we supposed to learn here?
4. Read John 3:1-18. Jesus points Nicodemus back to this incident in the wilderness with the snakes. What do we learn here from Jesus that better helps us understand what God was doing there in the wilderness? How does this apply to us?
5. Consider again Paul's words in 2nd Corinthians 5:21, **“For our sake God made the one who knew no sin to be sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”** What does he mean here? How does this apply?
6. What, if anything, do we need to do to be saved? What is our part in our healing?
7. What does it mean to look to Jesus for healing? Have you done so? Are you ready to do so? How do we keep doing so?
8. What is Christ teaching you through this message? How will you live or think differently in response?

Table to Table: For kids and adults to consider together.



*Read this story again about the snake on the pole.
What does this story teach us about Jesus?*

²³ I think of Philippians 2:12-13 – **“Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence but much more now in my absence, work on your own salvation with fear and trembling,**

13 for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

²⁴ Hebrews 12:1-2 (NIV)