

Look and Live – Numbers 21:4-9

We are continuing our summer series this morning on the life of Moses. Our stated goal in this series has been to see that while Moses was great, Jesus is better. In this series it's as if we have been walking together through an art gallery filled with priceless paintings. Each of these paintings depicts important scenes from the life of Moses and the story of Israel. This morning we turn our attention to one of the most memorable portraits in the entire Old Testament: the story of Moses and the Bronze Serpent. Turn with me in your Bibles to Numbers 21:4-9:

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. ⁵ 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." ⁶ Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. ⁷ 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. ⁸ 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." ⁹ 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.

This morning, before we go to the Lord's Table together, I want to draw your attention to three aspects of this amazing portrait in Numbers 21 and then at the end we'll zoom out a bit and look at the whole painting and see what we can learn and love about our glorious Savior Jesus Christ.

Thesis: Through this portrait in Numbers 21, we see God calling sinners to look to Jesus Christ and live.

Let's remind ourselves of the context of Numbers 21. Remember that through His servant Moses, God had delivered His people Israel from their 400-year bondage in Egypt. After receiving the law on Mount Sinai, Moses led the people of Israel through the wilderness for nearly 40 years. The reason they wandered for so long was because of their recurring rebellion that was rooted in their unbelief. We pick up the story this morning in 21:4. This passage comes right on the heels of Israel's greatest military victory over the Canaanites as recorded in 21:1-3. The people of Israel had to be thinking that with this victory they would soon be entering the Promised Land, the land flowing with milk and honey.

I. Rebellion (21:4-6)

But the first picture we see in our passage is one of rebellion. Now how does it begin? *"From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom."* (21:4a) So instead of going North / West into the Promised Land, we read here that Moses leads the people South / East to go around the land of Edom. Remember, back in Numbers 20:14-21,

Moses had asked the King of Edom if Israel could pass through his land. But the King said “No.” So Moses is forced to lead his people around the land of Edom.

Israel had finally tasted victory and the Promised Land seemed so close but now they found themselves back in the wilderness yet again. How do the people of Israel respond? Look at Verse 4b: *And the people became impatient on the way.* Your Bible might read “they became very discouraged.” The people of Israel were worn out, they were frustrated, they were weary in their souls. They must have been thinking: “Moses, are we not there yet?”

Last year, I went on a road-trip with my wife and three small children to visit family down in Louisiana for the holidays. It was a 20-hour drive with multiple restroom and food stops along the way. Just a few hours outside of Atlanta the chorus of “Are we there yet, Daddy?” had already begun and continued the remainder of the drive. Dads: Next time things get a little tense in the mini-van with kids: just imagine being Moses: He had to put up with this impatient people saying “Are we there yet?” for 40 years!

Notice that this impatience, this spiritual frustration is expressed in what comes out of their mouths. Notice what they say in Verse 5a: *And the people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?"* The complaints of the people were against Moses and against God. The people murmured against God and against Moses. Israel was like broken record from the time they left Egypt. Instead of being grateful, they grumbled.

They asked: “Why have you (pl.) brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?” By my count this is the 5th time they have made this particular complaint (cf. Exodus 14:11; 17:3; Numbers 11:20; 20:5). Basically what they are saying is this: “Dear God and Moses: Did you two bring us out of Egypt for the sole purpose of dying in the desert?”

Why did they make this complaint? Look at the end of Verse 5b again: *“For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.”* The people are looking around and they aren’t in the Promised Land yet, a land flowing with milk and honey. They find themselves in the desert... and all they have to sustain themselves is what they call “worthless food.” I take this to be a reference to the manna, the miracle bread from heaven that God has graciously provided for them every day for 40 years (cf. Ex. 16). So their complaint is basically: “There’s no food! Except for this food from heaven, this angel’s bread (Ps. 78:25). And this stuff is worthless. This manna is miserable food; it’s wretched food; it’s good for nothing. All it’s done is keep us alive for 40 years... but we detest it. We loathe it.” There is a serious lesson here for us:

There is nothing that a fallen human heart needs more desperately than the grace of God. There is nothing that a fallen human heart gets more accustomed to than the grace of God.

God had graciously provided miracle bread to sustain Israel for 40 years. Notice how sin warps our view of God’s gracious provision. Sin deceives and distorts and lies. So instead of seeing God’s gracious provision as blessings, instead because of our sinful hearts we see His gifts as

burdens. Too often we receive gifts from the LORD and instead of expressing gratitude to Him, we grumble and in so doing we rebel against our Creator and Redeemer. It could be a job, a spouse, a friend, a child, a home. You name it: sin distorts our view of God's gracious provision.

For some of you, God has recently answered your prayers and provided a job for you! You initially give Him thanks with heartfelt gratitude but it isn't long until you are complaining about the hours, about a boss, about your coworkers. You have distorted a blessing into a burden. If you are married: Do you see your spouse as a blessing or a burden? If you are parents: Do you see your children as a blessing or a burden? If you call Providence your church home: Do you see being a part of this local church as a blessing or as a burden? Israel looked at the heavenly food that had sustained them for 40 years and called it worthless. They loathed it. They complained and grumbled.

We've seen throughout this series that the grumbling of God's people is symptomatic of a deeper heart problem that finds its root in unbelief. A mouth that's full of grumbling reveals a heart that's full of unbelief. Rebellion has its consequences. Notice how God deals with this rebellion. *"Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died."* (21:6)

God judges the people's sin by sending fiery serpents into the camp. What does the phrase "fiery serpent" mean? I take this phrase to simply mean a kind of "poisonous snake." The thought behind "fiery serpents" is something like the "snakes that cause burning." The NIV does a helpful job by translating this phrase as "venomous snakes." Moses is leading the people of Israel through the scorching desert of the Sinai Peninsula. This region of the world is home to many kinds of poisonous snakes: adders, vipers, cobras, etc.

But the text makes clear that this infestation of snakes is a divinely orchestrated judgment on Israel's rebellion. Verse 6: "The LORD sent the serpents among the people." The same God, who once brought quail to feed His people, now brings snakes to bite them. These snakes bite the people and we read that "many people of Israel died." The consequence of this rebellion is pain, sorrow, and death. But even amidst this dark portion of the painting there is a ray of hope...

II. Repentance (21:7)

In Verse 7 we see a picture of repentance: *"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."* (21:7) Repentance means to turn away from your sin, and to turn towards God for His mercy and forgiveness in obedience and faith. So the people recognize their sin. They confess it to Moses and they ask him to intercede on their behalf. They ask Moses to "Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us." And Moses prayed for the people. Moses blesses those who had cursed him. Moses intercedes on behalf of the transgressors.

What provoked this repentance? It was two things. First, the people of Israel by this time knew that the God of Israel was a merciful and gracious God. They knew God was “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,” a God who keeps steadfast love and forgives iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty.” They knew if they cast themselves upon God’s mercy they would be forgiven.

Second, the people realized the seriousness of their sin against God and against Moses. They could see the effects of it all around them where people were dying because of the deadly serpents. They couldn’t deny their sin. They realized they were in the wrong and they must repent. God uses the painful consequences of sin to rouse us to repentance.

CS Lewis once wrote in his book entitled *The Problem of Pain*: “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”¹

What about you? Have you given any thought to these two realities? Think about the painful consequences of sin and the marvelous God of mercy, who stands ready to receive all who genuinely repent of their sins and turn to Him for forgiveness.

If you are a Christian you must remember that repentance is not a one-time thing; repentance is a daily, hourly, and life-long thing.

Martin Luther wrote in his first of the *95 Theses*: “When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said ‘Repent’, He called for the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” Christian, is your entire life one that is characterized by repentance? May God grant it to be so in our lives.

III. Remedy (21:8-9)

In Verses 8-9 we see a picture of the Remedy that God provides. *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.”*⁹ *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. (21:8-9)* Time and time again, the people of Israel found themselves in an emergency situation. And in those times of crisis, the people of Israel were given gracious promises by the God of Israel. And the issue was whether or not they would respond in faith or in unbelief.

Notice what happens: The people are clearly in a crisis. God directs Moses to construct a serpent and set it upon a pole. And then God makes a promise: Verse 8: “Everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” So the way this Remedy is to be received is by faith; it’s by trusting God to keep His promise, trusting God to keep His word.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperCollins, 1940/1996), 91.

Just imagine it: There are probably over 2 million Israelites encamped around Moses. (That's more people than live in Wake and Durham County combined.) People are being bitten by snakes and people are dying. There is no hospital or trauma unit. The people beg, they plead with Moses, repenting of their sins and asking him to intercede, to pray on their behalf that God would remove the serpents from their midst.

I imagine it took some time to build this thing. It's not like Moses could just go on down to the Wal-Mart in Kadesh and buy a bronze serpent. He had to build it by hand. So all this time, as he is fashioning this bronze serpent, all around him people are screaming in pain and dying in agony. Finally, Moses finishes his task and the great crowd that surrounds him on the plain have to be wondering "What has Moses been doing? What has he been building?"

Then Moses lifts up the pole, one like you would use for a military banner or a flag. And Moses raises it up into the sky above. And as the fiery serpents are continuing to bite them, all the assembly of Israel looks up and what do they see before their eyes as God's appointed remedy? What they see is a representation of the very thing that's afflicting them. The image of the snake was a symbol of the curse that the Israelites were experiencing. God's remedy for the curse is a picture of the curse itself. Any and all in Israel who looked, believing God's promise, found life.

Many years later, Jesus used this story as an object lesson to teach a Pharisee named Nicodemus about the gospel. Most of us know John 3:16. Do you know John 3:14-17?

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." 16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

The lifting up of the Son of Man, Jesus, on the cross is similar to the lifting up of the serpent in the wilderness. Jesus dying on the cross is God's remedy for the curse of sin and it was also a picture of the curse itself. On the cross, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us- for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree'" (Galatians 3:13). On the cross, Christ became sin for us: "God made Him who knew no sin, to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:21).

We are all infected with something far greater than venom. We're infected with sin. We don't need some medicine or anti-venom to make us well. Jesus tells Nicodemus: "You must be born again." We need new life. John says in 3:15: "Whoever believes in Him may have eternal life." (And on the cross as Jesus died the wrath of God was satisfied for every sin on Him was laid / Here in the death of Christ I LIVE!) The Cross of Christ is life for those who believe in Him.

How should you respond to this passage? If you are not a Christian, you need to repent of your sins and trust in Christ. You must be born again. You need to look to Jesus and you will find life

in Him. Look to Christ and live! Turn from your sin and trust in the Son of Man, Jesus Christ, who was lifted up on a tree, who died in order to pay the penalty of the sins of all who would ever trust in Him. You don't need to do works. You need to look by faith to Christ.

On January 6, 1850, a young man in London, England was walking to a certain place of worship during a snowstorm. When he could go no further because of the storm, he turned down a side street and came to a small chapel where a dozen people were worshipping. Here is what happened next:

"The minister did not come that morning; he was snowed up, I suppose. At last, a very thin-looking man, a shoemaker, or tailor, or something of that sort, went up into the pulpit to preach... He was obliged to stick to his text, for the simple reason that he had little else to say. The text was 'Look unto Me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth (Isaiah 45:22).' He did not even pronounce the words rightly, but that did not matter. There was, I thought, a glimpse of hope for me in that text. The preacher began thus:

'My dear friends, this is a very simple text indeed. It says, 'Look.' Now lookin' don't take a deal of pain. It ain't liftin' your foot or your finger; it is just, 'Look.' Well, a man needn't go to college to learn to look. You may be the biggest fool, and yet you can look. Anyone can look; even a child can look. But then the text says, 'Look unto Me.' Many of you are lookin' to yourselves, but it's no use lookin' there. You will never find any comfort in yourselves. Look to Christ who says: 'Look unto Me. I am sweatin' and great drops of blood. Look unto Me; I am hangin' on the cross. Look unto Me; I am dead and buried. Look unto Me; I rise again. Look unto Me; I ascend to heaven. Look unto Me; I am sittin' at the Father's right hand. O poor sinner, look unto Me! Look unto Me!'

When he had gone to about that length, and managed to spin out ten minutes or so he was at the end of his tether. Then he looked at me under the gallery, and I dare say, with so few present he knew me to be a stranger. Just fixing his eyes on me, as if he knew all my heart he said, 'Young man, you look very miserable.' Well, I did, but I had not been accustomed to have remarks made from the pulpit on my personal appearance before. However, it was a good blow, struck right home. He continued, 'and you always will be miserable—miserable in life, and miserable in death—if you don't obey my text; but if you obey now, this moment, you will be saved.' Then lifting up his hands, he shouted, 'Young man, look to Jesus Christ. Look! Look! Look! You have nothing to do but to look and live.'

I saw at once the way of salvation. I know not what else he said—I did not take much notice of it—I was so possessed with that one thought. Like as when the bronze serpent was lifted up, the people only looked and were healed, so it was with me. I had been waiting to do fifty things, but when I heard that word, 'Look!' What a charming word it seemed to me! Oh! I looked until I could have almost looked my eyes away. There and then the cloud was gone, the darkness had rolled away, and that moment I saw the sun; and I could have risen that instant,

and sung with the most enthusiastic of them, of the precious blood of Christ, and the simple faith which looks alone to Him.”²

This is the conversion story of Charles Haddon Spurgeon, one the greatest preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ that has ever lived. His story reminds us that sinners must simply look to the Savior to find life.

If you are a Christian, remember to keep looking to Christ! “Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:1-2). You enter the Christian race by looking to Jesus by faith and you endure the Christian race by looking to Jesus by faith. So you need to take your eyes off of yourself and focus your gaze upon your Savior, Jesus Christ. Never stop looking to Him!

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² Charles H. Spurgeon, *C. H. Spurgeon Autobiography: Volume 1*, (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1962/2005), 87-88.