

## Look Upon Jesus - Numbers 21

- Easter is that Sunday after the Jewish Passover when we remember that a Man came back to life after spending three days in the grave
  - His name was Jesus of Nazareth, and He declared He was the only Son of God
    - He also said that His death would be a payment for our sin, and that our willingness to accept that payment would be all that was necessary to enter an eternity with God
  - Jesus He said that the proof for His claims would could three days after he died
    - He would be resurrected to prove He was God and that His words were trustworthy
    - When it happened as He said, many witnesses testified to the event
    - And these testimonies along with many supernatural signs and miracles confirmed the truth of Jesus' statements
  - So for two thousand years those who have believed this testimony have set aside one Sunday a year to remember Easter
- About 1,400 years before Jesus was born, an event took place in the deserts of the Middle East that also proved the truth of what Jesus said concerning His death
  - It's a story you may never have studied
  - And I'm fairly certain you haven't studied it on an Easter Sunday
    - So turn with me to the book of Numbers
- During the years after Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, they endured a difficult period
  - They rebelled against the Lord in the first months after the Exodus
    - And after testing the Lord one too many times, He declared the adult generation wouldn't enter into the land
    - Instead they were condemned to remain in the desert until they died

- Only their children were going to live long enough to enter
- And that would take 40 years of wandering in the desert
- The book of Numbers is a record of that period of wandering
  - In that book, there's an interesting account of one day near the very end of the Jews' wandering
  - On this day, the Israelites are back to their usual ways of grumbling and rebelling against God
    - They sin continually, rejecting both God and the leaders appointed by God, namely Moses and Aaron
  - And God decides to bring a judgment against the people to teach them (and us ) an important lesson
- The story is found in Numbers 21
  - At this point in the book, Israel has already been wandering for 40 years and their time in the desert is coming to an end
    - Aaron is also dead, as is Moses' wife Marion
    - Moses himself is nearing the end of his life as well
  - Now the people of God are moving northward through a sandy valley that connects the Red Sea in the south with the Dead Sea in the north
    - They're on the last leg of their wanderings
      - Soon will be the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua
    - But first, they must walk over 165 miles through this wilderness
      - The route was dry with steep mountains bordering on either side
      - It had drifts of granite and other stones, and terrible sand storms will appear out of nowhere
    - It's the kind of miserable trek likely to make anyone grumpy
      - But for the Israelites, it triggers an old weakness

[Num. 21:4](#) ¶ Then they set out from Mount Hor by the way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the people became impatient because of the journey. [Num. 21:5](#) The people spoke against God and 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 miserable food."

- Here we see the classic Israelite response to hardship during their wanderings
  - In v.4 we hear they are impatient because of the journey
    - And their impatience leads them to speak against both God and Moses
      - To speak against implies they are rejecting both God and Moses as their leader
    - In particular, they imply that Moses' leadership will bring them to death
      - In particular, they accuse Moses of bringing them out of Egypt without food or water and they will die in the desert
  - If we think about that statement for a minute, we see how ridiculous it was
    - First, they have been wandering in the desert for 38 years at this point
      - It was one thing to complain about dying in the desert in the first weeks after leaving Egypt
      - But they have seen God take care of their daily needs for nearly 4 decades
      - Consequently, their accusations hold little water at this point
    - Secondly, look at the end of v.5 when they say they loathe the miserable food
      - They're referring to the manna God has provided for them during the duration of their wanderings
      - Everyday when they wake up, there is manna waiting for them in the desert

- Obviously, their complaining about dying is an exaggeration, since they were receiving food and water everyday
  - Just a chapter earlier, God had Moses call forth water from a rock to accommodate the thirsty people
- People today really aren't different from the Israelites
  - When we are feeling unhappy with our circumstances, we'll turn every blessing into a reason to complain
    - I can remember sitting in the back of my parents' car on long road trips complaining about being uncomfortable on the long drive
    - Forgetting that the long drive was taking me to a Disneyland vacation
  - And our complaining is often exaggerated to help strengthen our case and win greater sympathy
    - This is a favorite technique of teenagers, isn't it?
    - If they don't get something they need, they will die
      - Die from hunger, die from boredom, die from embarrassment
      - It's a miracle that any teenagers survive to adulthood
- In this case, however, the Israelites exaggeration and insults were no laughing matter
  - By rejecting Moses and God, the Israelites were truly in jeopardy for their lives

[Num. 21:6](#) The LORD sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.

[Num. 21:7](#) So the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned, because we have spoken against the LORD and you; intercede with the LORD, that He may remove the serpents from us." And Moses interceded for the people.

- When parents hear their children complain about nothing, we may be tempted to use those time tested words, "I'll give you something to complain about"
  - I wonder if a similar thought went through the Lord's mind at this point
  - In any case, He sends fiery serpents into the camp

- We don't know for sure what these serpents were
  - They might have been purely supernatural creatures, or they could have been a plague of real snakes
  - They are called fiery, probably because of the reddish color of many desert snakes and the nature of their bite
- The poet Lucan wrote in a poem a description of the bite a desert snakes the ancients called the prester or dipsas, which lived in the deserts of Libya

Aulus, a noble youth of Tyrrhene blood, Who bore the standard, on a dipsas trod;  
Backward the wrathful serpent bent her head, And, fell with rage, the unheeded  
wrong repaid.

Scarce did some little mark of hurt remain, And scarce he found some little sense of  
pain.

Nor could he yet the danger doubt, nor fear That death with all its terrors threatened  
there.

When lo! unseen, the secret venom spreads, And every nobler part at once invades;  
Swift flames consume the marrow and the brain, And the scorched entrails rage with  
burning pain; Upon his heart the thirsty poisons prey, And drain the sacred juice of  
life away.

No kindly floods of moisture bathe his tongue, But cleaving to the parched roof it  
hung; No trickling drops distil, no dewy sweat, To ease his weary limbs, and cool the  
raging heat. With swift expansion swells the bloated skin.

Naught but an undistinguished mass is seen; While the fair human form lies lost  
within.

The puffy poison spreads, and leaves around, Till all the man is in the monster  
drowned.

- This is the fate appointed to the camp of Israel
  - It's important to notice two things at this point in the story
  - First, notice that everyone in the camp of Israel is being bitten
    - Not everyone was bitten in the same moment, perhaps, but the plague is reaching everyone in the camp

- There is no escape for anyone
  - Secondly, notice that the deadly effects of the bite require time to take hold
    - It's apparent from what they say in v.7 that the plague is ongoing and they seek relief lest everyone die
    - At least we see that the people are expressing a measure of repentance in the midst of the judgment
      - They acknowledge to Moses that they spoke against God and Moses
      - And this sin is responsible for the death they are experiencing at the bites of these snakes
- This plague is unlike anything God has done before during Israel's wanderings in the desert
  - In the past God has brought punishment on the entire camp of Israelites, but they weren't fatal
    - And in other cases, God brought fatal judgments, but never against the entire camp
    - This seems to be the first time God has brought a judgment against the entire camp of Israel that could result in everyone's death
  - Obviously, God would have to do something to interrupt this judgment, or there would be nothing to save Israel from death
    - And in response to the people's show of repentance, the Lord offers a way out of the death sentence

[Num. 21:8](#) Then the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a standard; and it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he will live."

[Num. 21:9](#) And Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on the standard; and it came about, that if a serpent bit any man, when he looked to the bronze serpent, he lived.

- In response to the people's cry for help, the Lord tells Moses to create a fake snake
  - Moses made it out of bronze (or copper), probably to give it an appearance similar to the snakes themselves

- Then Moses set this substitute serpent on one end of a wooden pole and held the pole up like a flag
- And then he carried this pole through the camp and as men were bitten, they could look upon this pole and just a glance at the bronze serpent would save them
- What a curious solution
  - It almost seems to easy, doesn't it?
    - In fact, it makes us ask why bother with the whole exercise?
    - What does looking at the serpent accomplish?
- Well, let's first consider what must have transpired as Moses carried out God's orders
  - After making the serpent on a stick, Moses must have begun to walk among the camp of Israel
    - The people are hundreds of thousands and probably more than a million
    - This will take time for Moses, and the whole time the camp is suffering under the plague of these serpents
  - As Moses moves, what can we assume he was saying to the people?
    - Undoubtedly, he was declaring how God had provided a solution to their predicament
      - As I imagine it, Moses moved from tribe to tribe in the camp declaring that God had heard their cries of repentance
      - And God had given grace to their death sentence
    - Then Moses said that the one who has been bitten must look up at the fiery bronze serpent, and God would save them from death
- In wonder the people thought when they heard this for the first time?
  - Perhaps they were desperate enough to simply do as Moses said without questioning

- We can assume some reacted this way, since we know that Israel survived that day to enter the Promised Land
  - But we also know that many died (v.6)
- And vv.8-9 leaves open the possibility that some might not have taken the advice
- What might have stopped someone from doing as Moses said?
  - The instructions were simple enough and cost the person nothing
  - The person had only had to do two things
    - They had to repent, recognizing that the serpent bite was the result of their own sin
    - And then take advantage of the opportunity God made available to be saved by following Moses' instructions
  - But if any of these steps were missing, the bite would prove fatal
- So why does God come up with such an odd judgment and relief?
  - When Jesus gave us the answer in the Gospel of John
    - And His answer also provides us with the connection to Easter

[John 3:14](#) "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up;

[John 3:15](#) so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.

- In talking to Nicodemus, Jesus tries to explain why a man must be born again
  - When Nicodemus first heard these words, he was perplexed
    - He asked how can a man go back into the womb to be born again?
  - Jesus explain that the term born again wasn't a reference to being physically reborn
    - Instead, Jesus was talking about being born again spiritually, receiving a new kind of spirit to replace the dead one every person receives at first

- Since we have been studying Genesis, we remember that the dead Spirit Jesus spoke about was the spirit we inherited from Adam, the man who brought sin into the world
  - And this dead spirit has left every person with a death sentence
    - Though we are living today, it's a temporary kind of existence
    - Our heart is beating...for now
    - But one day, it will stop
  - You can say we have a death sentence
    - The death rate among humans is 100% - we all die eventually
- In v.14 of John 3, Jesus was comparing Nicodemus - and all mankind - to the Israelites bitten by the serpents in the desert
  - Like them, we have been "bitten" by a judgment sent from God on account of sin
    - Paul says it this way in Romans 5:12

[Rom. 5:12](#) ¶ Therefore, just as through one man **sin** entered into the world, and death through **sin**, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned —

- In the desert, the sin of the Israelites was speaking against Moses and God
  - And we said that speaking against implied they were unwilling to be led by God and by God's appointed representative Moses
- Today, all men and women are engaged in a similar kind of rebellion
  - How? We are equally unwilling to be ruled by God and Moses
    - And by Moses, I'm referring to the Law of God which was delivered to men by Moses
    - Just as the Israelites rebelled against Moses' leadership, we rebel against God's Law
  - The Law of God is the definition of holiness, and it is the requirement for entering into God's presence in heaven

- God's word tells us that if we have broken even one of God's laws, it is a sin worthy of death
- There is no grading on the curve with God
- But Moses wasn't merely the reason why the Israelites sinned
  - God also used Moses to deliver a salvation from their affliction
  - After all, Moses was the one who called their attention to the bronze serpent on the pole, which brought salvation
- So here's Nicodemus listening to Jesus
  - He's like an Israelite who had been bitten by a deadly snake
    - He was still alive, for now
      - But he was headed to the grave sooner or later, and it was his sin that put him on that road to death
    - But if he recognized he was in jeopardy, Jesus said there was reason for hope
  - Referring to Himself as the Son of Man, Jesus said that He was pictured by that substitute bronze serpent
    - Jesus was to be our substitute lifted up on a wooden cross
      - And if someone would look upon Jesus in faith, he could be saved from his death sentence of sin
      - And instead of an eternity in fiery judgment, the one who believes receive eternal life
  - And just like Moses in the desert, God's Law is both the one that brought our sin to light and leads us to the solution
    - After all, today's chapter in Numbers is considered part of the Mosaic Law
      - And here it is today pointing us to Jesus for our salvation
      - If we are willing to look upon the historical Jesus Christ who was nailed on a cross for our sins
      - And if we believe in that payment, we will see eternal life
- But the outcome is a question of faith

- Look at the next three verses in John 3

[John 3:16](#) ¶ “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

[John 3:17](#) “For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.

[John 3:18](#) “ He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

- John 3:16 is easily the best known verse in the entire Bible, but it’s so well known, we may have stopped listening to what Jesus says here
  - The motive for God’s grace was love for the world
    - Specifically, God loved the created world that stood to perish had He not acted to save it from the judgment of sin
      - Just like the camp of Israel that stood on the brink of extinction
    - Rather than see that end, God made a way possible
      - He sent His Only Son to earth, and in His earthly existence, Jesus lived without sin
      - So that he had no debt of His own, but nevertheless He paid the debt of sin on the cross
    - And now Jesus says that those who accept this opportunity will see their death sentence commuted to eternal life
      - The Son arrived as a Man with this purpose in mind: to bring salvation to the world
  - We might ask our question again?
    - Why wouldn’t someone accept such a simple offer?
      - If we understand we have this jeopardy before God, as the Israelites did in the desert
      - Then surely, we can understand the need to comply with God’s simple request?
    - Sadly, many get stuck at step one: repentance

- They refuse to acknowledge they have been bitten by sin and the bite is fatal
- Look at what Jesus declared in v.18
  - The one who doesn't believe is already judged
  - Just like the Israelite who might have refused to look at Moses' serpent was already dying of the snake bite
  - They had already received their judgment even before they refused to look up
- The same is true today
  - Failing to believe in Jesus doesn't bring a new judgment
  - The judgment for sin is already in place
    - But Jesus can be our rescue
- We don't have to be that person, the one who dies without hope
  - On this Easter Sunday, we can be the one who heard Moses calling, looked up to sky and saw the gift of grace that God made available
    - In the desert, the Israelites could look around and see their brothers saved from death
      - And they could know that God's promise was trustworthy
    - And today we can look upon Jesus's death and resurrection and have our proof that Jesus' promise of eternal life is trustworthy