

The Serpent Lifted Up

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Preacher: Evan George

[0 : 00] Lord, you're so, so good to us.

Father, would you guide and lead us this evening?! Father, would you be with us? Lord, would much be made of you and of Christ? Lord, would you prepare our hearts for what you have to teach us tonight?

Would you keep me from error? And Lord, would we walk away this evening praising you all the more, for you are worthy of our worship. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

So tonight we'll be in Numbers chapter 21, verses 4 through 9. If you guys want to turn there, I invite you to turn there with me. Numbers 21, verses 4 through 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. And the people spoke against God and against Moses. Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?

[1 : 06] 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 they said, We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you.

Pray to the Lord God that he takes away the serpents from us. So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord God 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 certain serpent bit anyone, he would look to the bronze serpent and live. And so one of the first things we see about this passage, which will be our point number one, is that Israel has sinned.

Right now the Israelites have been wandering in the wilderness. The Lord has graciously and powerfully and magnificently brought them up out of Egypt. And they're in the wilderness now. They've been there for about 40 years.

And the Lord is on his way leading them to the promised land. They're going around this territory of Edom. In the few verses before this story, the Israelites are coming, and they actually conquer some Canaanites.

[2 : 20] But then they come to this territory occupied by the Edomites, which are descendants of Edom, which is Esau. And that would be the brother of Jacob. But these descendants, they're occupying this territory. And the Lord says, Instead of doing that, we're going to go around them.

And so they make their way down to the Red Sea. And the people become impatient on the way, as we see there in verse 4. And the people become 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. They grow impatient.

And thus, in their impatience, they speak against God and against Moses. They grumble against the Lord. They despise and they reject the Lord. They complain of no food and no water. They complain of this thing called manna, calling it worthless, equating it to nothing.

And in some of your versions, it may say loathsome or miserable. And to be clear, they're neither appreciative nor thankful for all of what the Lord has provided to this point. Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?

[3 : 28] They ask. Asking essentially, God, why are we here? Why have you led us to this point? So clearly, you're not providing for us. We hate your provision. We hate your care. And that kind of makes us think about this question.

Why is speaking against the Lord so bad? I think just from a few of the comments I've already made, you can see how it doesn't seem too good. But as one commentator put it, to speak against the Lord is to oppose the Lord.

If we think of speaking against, it's in direct opposition to what the Lord has. The grumbling of the Israelites is far more than just a surface level distaste of this food or a slight impatience.

It's a representation of their hearts. It's a representation of their posture before the Lord. It's a representation that they have a discontentment and a lack of trust in God.

They do not believe the Lord will provide. They do not believe the Lord will fulfill His promises. They do not believe in where the Lord is leading them. Their grumbling indicates a posture of dissatisfaction in the Lord.

[4 : 38] And this isn't anything new if we were reading the Old Testament at this point or even the book of Numbers. We continue to see that they complain and grumble against the Lord. Back in chapter 11 of Numbers, they complain and they say, why did we come out of Egypt?

The people would rather go back to Egypt than be led by the Lord. They'd rather be in bondage, in slavery, harsh labor. They'd rather experience that than be led by the good covenant creator, God. Why have you brought us here, God? Why did we leave Egypt? We want to go back. Now, they're really no different than us.

We all have metaphorical Egypts, right? If we've come to know the Lord, you all have things where the Lord has rescued us from, redeemed us from. And it makes us think, how often do we want to go back to Egypt?

We read this morning, and Mike noted how Jesus said, Father, your will be done, not mine. Christ said, Father, your will be done.

[5 : 52] But like Mike said this morning, often we replace that with, Father, let my will be done, or Lord, change my circumstances. When we say, Lord, change my circumstances, what we really mean is, Lord, lead me differently.

But Egypt may also just be a previous season of prosperity, or a season of blessing, or of particular enjoyment that we get to experience.

Whereas now, it may seem that we're not in the season of blessing. Storms have come, trials and tribulations, and we want to return elsewhere than to where the Lord has led us now.

But if we look again, they claim that God is not goodness provision. They claim that they're lacking, that they're dissatisfied in how the Lord has led them to this point.

But if we continued on, we'd see that in Deuteronomy 2, verse 7, the Lord says, For the Lord your God has blessed you in all the work of your hands.

[6 : 52] He knows you're going through this great wilderness. These 40 years, the Lord your God has been with you. You have lacked nothing. The Israelites have lacked nothing.

Neither food, nor water, nor anything. And that's just a different perspective than what they had. But we see numerous examples of this. If we look in the book of Numbers, we'd seen that the Lord had brought forth water.

Look at Numbers and Exodus. We'd seen that the Lord had brought forth water from the rock at Miriam and from the rock at Horeb. And if we go back to Exodus 16, the Lord brought forth manna. And he continued to bring forth manna. Daily bread from heaven, God's gracious, sustaining gift in the wilderness, in the desert. And he did so daily for 40 years, every day, except for the Holy Sabbath days, where he would give them plenty the day before.

Indeed, the Lord provided for the nation of Israel, and they lacked nothing. And yet they spoke against the Lord. And we're no different today. If grumbling was isolated to the Israelites only, we wouldn't see Paul in his letter to the church at Philippi.

[8 : 05] He says this in Philippians 2, 14 through 15. Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.

And if we kept reading in that chapter 2, we'd see that the Lord contrasts, you know, don't grumble, but instead rejoice. But in our impatience, our grumbling, our complaining, these reveal much about our posture, much about our heart.

Much about whether we are content and satisfied in the Lord, trusting in the Lord, or if we're not. We too often grow impatient, discontent, often find ourselves in disbelief.

These conditions of our hearts, they speak against God. Martin Luther said once, there's no way in which we can show greater contempt for a man than to regard him as false and wicked and to be suspicious of him.

What greater rebellion against God, what greater contempt of God is there than not believing in his promise? And so we see that indeed Israel has sinned.

[9 : 24] Which leads us to our second point, that God judges sin. If we look there in verse 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. Then the Lord sent fiery servants among the people, and they bit the people, so that many of the people of Israel died. In response to Israel's sin, their speaking against him, their rejection of him, the Lord sends fiery serpents.

Note that it's the Lord who sends them. These fiery serpents, or some of your translations may say venomous snakes, but their bite seems to painfully kill. And this is really a picture of God's anger and God's wrath.

The snakes are there because in the Lord's righteous judgment, he sent them. In his holy indignation, as one commentator put it, he sent them. His anger is burning against his people, burning against them because they've sinned.

This morning in Pastor Mike's sermon, he reminded us that God is holy, and he doesn't brush over sin. He doesn't pretend it does not exist. Our God is indeed a holy God, a just God.

[10 : 37] And his holiness and righteousness demand payment for sin, for rejection of him, for rebellion against him. The Bible tells us this clearly in Romans 6.23, for the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life, and Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen. And we'll get to that point in just a little bit. But for right now, the wages of sin is death. Sin has consequences. You see, God demands holiness because he himself is holy.

As described in Leviticus chapter 19, And the Lord spoke to Moses saying, Speak to all the congregation of people of Israel and say to them, You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy.

And where man, where you and me, where we lack holiness, where we sin, God's justice demands payment for that sin. Rightly so. God's justice demands payment for that sin.

That's how one commentator put it. God has right to punish sin, and we see that he does indeed judge sin. But what did we read earlier? We read that, you know, how does the Lord respond to their plea?

[11 : 47] And that brings us to our third point, that the Lord mercifully saves. And the people came to Moses, and they said, We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you.

Pray to the Lord that he take away the servants from us. So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, that 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. In response to God's judgment, they see and they recognize their sin. They realize that what they've done in speaking against the Lord, that they have sinned, and they come to Moses acknowledging that sin, confessing that sin to him, and asking him to intercede, to pray to the Lord God to take away the serpents.

And that should be our response when the Lord reveals us our sin, shouldn't it? We shouldn't try to hide it and cover it up like they did in the garden. We shouldn't try to pretend it doesn't happen.

[12 : 49] We shouldn't try to disregard it, think lightly of it. And again, as Pastor Mike mentioned this morning in his sermon, how we can always come to the Lord with anything.

And here too, we should come to the Lord. We should come humbly, acknowledging and confessing our sins, seeking his forgiveness and repenting by the power of the Spirit. For we are confident and trust in what the Lord said in 1 John.

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. And so as we think about this story in the Old Testament, this is really where the story has climaxed, as they're experiencing it.

Right? So they've sinned against the Lord. The Lord has rightly judged them. They've recognized their sin. They've come to Moses. He's prayed for them. And it's kind of this, as any story, as this is

the climax, this is the tension.

What is the Lord going to do? Right? He has no obligation to save them. They deserve death, just like we do. But what we see here is that the Lord is merciful and that he responds in mercy.

[13:57] He must by no means relent. He must by no means spare them. Yet we see the Lord respond mercifully.

In response to their sin, the Lord's punishment, his curse on them, was the serpent. And they were bitten and afflicted by the serpent. Now their curse, the object of God's wrath upon them, this serpent, has now become the picture of their deliverance, of their saving.

The curse that brought death, now lifted up on a pole to look to and have life. When they look to the serpent on the pole, they trust by faith that they will be saved, physically healed, as God declared and as God promised.

Now the serpent on the pole has no power in and of itself. It's not magical. The serpent itself didn't save them. God saved them. The bronze serpent isn't their deliverer. God is.

The bronze serpent isn't worthy of their worship. God is. And that gets the Israelites in trouble later on. In the book of Kings, we see Hezekiah destroy the serpent and the staff that Moses had crafted because the Israelites had come and started to worship it.

[15:09] But the Lord responds mercifully. And at the end of the story, the nation of Israel would have seen again that God judges sin, but they'd also see God's mercy again. Over and over again, as we talked about, they had complained and grumbled.

They had sinned against God. And yet, continually, they had seen the Lord's mercy again and again, even though they repetitively and repeatedly grumbled and complained, rejected God, were dissatisfied, discontent, and continued to be unfaithful and continued to break the covenant.

And this is really where they are at this time. So, as these people, this is how they experience, they end this with really saying, you know, God judges our sin, rightly, and we're thankful that he responds mercifully.

This is where they're at. But we know that when we get to the New Testament, as Jesus tells us in Luke 24, he says this, these are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled. Jesus tells us that he was written about in the Old Testament. And so, too, here, he was written about. And so, this brings us to our fourth and final point that the serpent lifted up foreshadows Christ.

[16:24] And this morning as we gathered, we heard Pastor Mike preach from John chapter 12. And Jesus said in John chapter 12, And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.

He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die. And that first phrase there, when I am lifted up from the earth, that was really when Mike and I were talking about what I was going to preach tonight, that's really the connection we made, was that, as he talked about this morning, Christ being lifted up from the earth here in John 12, I would tell a little about the Old Testament passage.

And so, we see that Christ uses this phrase when I am lifted up a few times. He mentions it here in John 12, he mentioned it earlier in John 8, and then he also mentioned it in John chapter 3 when speaking to Nicodemus.

In John chapter 3, he said, And 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. Now that's a bit shocking if we admit it.

Jesus, the Son of Man, likens himself to the serpent lifted up. The wicked, unclean, not fit for sacrifice, deceitful creature, cursed above all livestock.

[17:40] But indeed, that which struck an afflicted man in numbers, Jesus says, like that serpent, like that serpent was lifted up, so will he.

And we know that indeed, he was lifted up on the cross. As the Israelites looked in faith, trusting in God's word, to the serpent for deliverance, so we look to, in faith, to Christ, trusting in his atonement for the forgiveness of our sins, through which we have peace with God and are saved.

As the Israelites looked to the serpent that they may have life, we look to Christ that we may have eternal life. We mentioned earlier the Lord's punishment, his curse on them, was the serpent, the serpents, and they were bitten and afflicted by these serpents.

So their curse, the object of God's wrath upon them, had now become the picture of their deliverance, of their saving. The curse that brought death now lifted up on a pole to look to for life. And this too points to Christ, even more so when we consider 2 Corinthians 5.21. For our sake, he made him to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

[18 : 52] Jesus became sin. Christ made to be regarded and treated as sin even though he was without sin. And so, just to make sure we see the connection, we have the serpents resulting in the death of the Israelites and then a serpent lifted up for them to look at.

And so, we have our sin that's resulting in our death and then we look and our sin is on the cross. Galatians 3.13 says, 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. Here Christ becomes that curse. Christ became our sin.

He took our place on the cross. He took yours. He took mine. That whoever would look to him may be saved from their sins. From what we've studied tonight, what we've looked at, the problem here isn't that the Israelites reject the Lord sometimes and they need to try harder and stop doing that. The problem is not one of their behavior or their actions in and of itself. No, the problem is that we have a fallen condition. The problem is that we have a disposition to reject God, a disposition to hate God, a disposition to stand in opposition to him, to oppose him, to not be satisfied in him, to not trust him.

[20 : 25] And we need saving from that condition. The problem is not simply that we need a behavior change, but that we need a heart change. But praise be to God that there is a redemptive solution.

And we've been discussing him tonight. The good news, the gospel, is that in our fallen condition, in our sin, Christ has come and died on the cross for the full atonement, the full payment of our sins. Exactly what Pastor Mike was talking about this morning, that there is nothing left for you and me. And that we look to Christ who has been lifted up like the serpent in the wilderness. And that our heart change happens here.

And when we look to him, we have eternal life with him. And so I plead with you, if you haven't looked before, if you haven't looked to the cross, looked to Jesus, beheld him, recognized him for who he is and what he's done, believing in him, I plead with you to look.

And if you already have looked, I plead with you to look again, to be reminded of what he has done and rejoice and be glad in him, loving him, worshiping him because of what he's done and who he is. And as we look to Christ, because of the Lord's working internally in us, our outward changes.

[21 : 47] The way we live our lives changes. We then no longer grumble, we no longer speak against the Lord. We instead have a posture of thankfulness and contentment in Christ and in God, trusting and believing in his will, in his leading, in his promises, fully satisfied in him.

Psalms 16, 11 says, you make known to me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy and at your right hand there are pleasures forevermore.

love. And I believe that. And I know that many of you do too. And this verse describes the character and the actions of our Lord, his inclination.

And I think when we think about this description, we think about this verse, I don't think there's anywhere else that we would rather look than to him. would you pray with me?

Thank you, Lord, that Christ did come and that he bore our sins. Thank you that we get to look at your son, beholding him, believing in him, and that in him we find forgiveness and salvation.

[23 : 09] Lord, as we look to him, Lord, work within us. Reveal to us the ways in which we grumble and are dissatisfied in you.

Ways we're not content. And change our hearts, Lord, such that we would rejoice and find contentment in you. It's in Jesus' name we pray.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.