



Look and Live!

Numbers 21: 4-9

Reading the Old Testament is like walking through an art gallery; it is full of pictures. First we see a picture of the garden of Eden. Then a picture of the ark of Noah. Then a picture of Abraham sacrificing his son Isaac on the altar. Then a picture of the tabernacle and all of its furnishings. There are many, many pictures. And they are all drawn by a master artist – the Lord Himself, through His Holy Spirit.

Everything is Always Changing

Our text presents to us another picture in this gallery – although it is not a very pleasant picture. The people of Israel were preparing to enter into the land of Canaan. For forty years they had wandered in the wilderness as punishment for believing the negative report of the ten spies. Now, at long last, their wilderness wandering had come to an end. At long last they were permitted to enter into the promised land.

In preparation for their departure, Moses sent a delegation to the king of Edom, asking him to permit them to travel through his territory. The plan was to follow a well traveled trade route (known as the “King’s Highway”) as they made their way northward to the land of Moab and from there to Canaan.

Disappointed and Discouraged

The king of Edom, however, refused. Evidently, he was afraid that the people of Israel would attack him and take over his territory. To be sure, the Israelites assured him that they had no intention of doing so. In verse 17 they promised not to pass through his fields or through his vineyards. They also promised not to drink any water from his wells, or to turn from the right hand or to the left. But the king did not believe them. To deter them even further, he mustered a large army to block their way into his land. As a result, the Israelites had to make a detour all the way around the land of Edom – a distance of some 175 miles.

On the way, the people of Israel did what they had done many times before – they started to grumble. Verse 4 says, *“The soul of the people was much discouraged.”* Why were they discouraged? Our text gives two reasons: First, they were discouraged because of the way God led them. Verse 4 says: *“The soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way.”* As we observed already, the people of Israel were forbidden by the king of Edom to pass through his territory, forcing them to take a detour of some 175 miles. This was not easy for them. Not only did it mean extra travel, it also meant having to travel through some very difficult terrain. There were hills and mountains to climb and vast deserts to cross. It was not an easy journey. Consequently, they became discouraged.

Secondly, they became discouraged because of the provisions God made for them. They complained about the lack of water and the lack of bread. What is more, they were sick and tired of the manna which God had provided. They called it “light.” The word here means “vile,” “contemptible,” “worthless.” They loathed it with all of their heart.

Blame and Punishment

To make matters worse, they blamed all their troubles on Moses – and God. We read in verse 5: *“And the people spake against God and against Moses, Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?”* By asking this question, the people of Israel were suggesting that God and Moses brought them into the wilderness with the express purpose of putting them to death.

Needless to say, God was very angry. To teach them a lesson, He sent them a plague of fiery (poisonous) serpents. The people of Israel had probably seen these snakes before. But now there were thousands of them.

They were everywhere. They slithered into people's tents, into their belongings and even into their beds. As soon as they were discovered, they leaped in the air and bit their victims on the arm or on the leg or in the face. Within a few minutes they would feel a certain numbness. Then fever would set in. All of their vital organs would shut down. Eventually they would die. It was a terrible, devastating plague.

A Fatal Bite

What we have here is a picture of ourselves in our natural human condition. Like the people of Israel, we too (whether we realize it or not) have been bitten by a snake – not a fiery serpent but by the serpent of all serpents – Satan himself. He first bit us in Adam in Paradise. But he has been biting us ever since. Every time we fall into sin, he bites us. And as with the people of Israel, His bite is mortal. It inflicts a wound from which we will never recover and for which there is no human cure. And all of us are afflicted with it – from the moment of our conception.

Are you aware of this? Most of us have been taught from the time that we were children that we are sinners. We know intellectually – that we are sinners. But have we ever experienced our sin? Have our sins ever caused us to feel pain? Have we ever felt its poisonous effects? Do we long to be delivered from our sin?

The Remedy

If so, I have good news for you. The Lord has provided a remedy for you! For notice what happened next. As the plague spread throughout the camp, the people of Israel came to their senses. They realized they had sinned against the Lord and against Moses and they begged him to intercede on their behalf. Moses did as the people requested – and the Lord heard him. He instructed Moses to make a serpent (just like the ones that were biting the people) and to set it on a pole. Anyone who looked at the serpent would be healed and live.

This brazen (bronze) serpent points us to Christ. We know this because Jesus refers to this image in His conversation with Nicodemus and applies it to Himself. In John 3:4, 15, Jesus said to Nicodemus: *“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.”* Jesus here compares Himself to the serpent of bronze being lifted up. Just as the serpent of bronze was lifted up, so must He – the Son of Man – be lifted up. Just as whoever looked to the serpent would be healed, so whoever looks in faith to Christ and His atoning sacrifice on the cross and the only hope and ground of his salvation, would receive the forgiveness of sins and the gift of everlasting life.

Look or Perish!

What about you? Have you also looked at this serpent? How necessary this is! Unless we behold this serpent with the eye of faith we cannot be saved.

But perhaps someone says: I am not able to look. I am dead in sins and trespasses. That is true, and yet you must look. Unless you look, you will perish.

Someone else says, how do I know I may look? Do I not have to possess certain marks of grace? Do I not have to feel more of the poison of sin?

I ask you: Do you think that the people of Israel asked themselves whether the poison that was in their bodies had spread far enough before they looked at the serpent? Of course not! The moment they felt sick – indeed the moment they were bitten – they looked at the brazen serpent and they were healed. And you must do the same. If you know you have been bitten by the serpent, look and you shall live.

Someone else says: I am such a sinner. How do I know that God is willing to heal me? I know this for two reasons: First, because the serpent was made out of brass. Why brass? Because brass is a shiny metal; as such it could be seen for miles around especially in the bright sun of the desert. Secondly, because the serpent was set on a pole. All of this was designed by God so that even those on the furthest reaches of the camp could be healed.

Look then, before it too late. See the serpent in the midst of the camp. Look at it! Behold it with the eye of faith! Look – and live! Refuse – and perish!

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