

AM Exodus 16:1-15 & Numbers 21:4-16 The Serpent Lifted Up

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[0 : 00] Exodus chapter 16 and we'll read some verses from the beginning of the chapter. Exodus chapter 16 and reading from the beginning and this is entitled Bread from Heaven.

They set out from Elam and all the congregation of the people of Israel came to the wilderness of Sin which is between Elam and Sinai on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt.

And the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness and the people of Israel said to them, Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger?

Then the Lord said to Moses, Behold I am about to rain bread from heaven for you and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day that I may test them whether they were walking my law or not.

On the sixth day when they prepare what they bring in it will be twice as much as they gather daily. So Moses and Aaron said to all the people of Israel, At evening you shall know that it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt and in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord because he has heard your grumbling against the Lord.

[1 : 43] For what are we that you grumble against us? And Moses said, When the Lord gives you in the evening meat to eat and in the morning bread to the full because the Lord has heard your grumbling that you grumble against him, what are we?

Your grumbling is not against us but against the Lord. Then Moses said to Aaron, Say to the whole congregation of the people of Israel, Come near before the Lord for he has heard your grumbling. And as soon as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the people of Israel, they looked toward the wilderness and behold the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. And the Lord said to Moses, I have heard the grumbling of the people of Israel.

Say to them, At twilight you shall eat meat and in the morning you shall be filled with bread. Then you shall know that I am the Lord your God. In the evening quail came up and covered the camp and in the morning dew lay around the camp.

And when the dew had gone up, there was on the face of the wilderness a fine flake-like thing, finest frost on the ground. When the people of Israel saw it, they said to one another, What is it?

[3 : 01] For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat. We'll just read to there. May God bless to us this reading.

We'll read in Numbers, the book of Numbers, chapter 21, and just a short paragraph here, beginning at verse 4. Numbers, chapter 21, and from verse 4, entitled, The Bronze Serpent.

From Mount Hor, they set out by the way to the Red Sea to go round 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? 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 said, We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you.

[4 : 15] Pray to the Lord that he take away the serpents from us. So Moses prayed for the people, 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.

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. May God bless to us this reading also.

Now we'll again... Now we're going to look at Numbers chapter 21, the story of the bronze serpent. And we'll take verse 8, a verse that enshrines the main thrust of the story. 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.

Now this is a fairly well-known story for those that have been brought up in Sunday school and so on. But I do think that it would be a story that would be less well-known if it wasn't mentioned in the New Testament.

[5 : 37] And we've got the well-known words in John's Gospel about just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of Man also will be lifted up and so on.

And I think it's that New Testament fulfillment, if you like, of this story that makes this story more memorable. And yet what I want to say is this, that this story is worth looking at on its own.

And it's got lessons to teach us at that level, as well as being a preparation for looking at the story in John chapter 3. So what we're going to do this morning is to look at this story in its setting in the Old Testament.

And then this evening, all being well, we'll look at the way it's used as an illustration in John's Gospel as Jesus, as Moses lifted up the serpent, so Jesus was lifted up also.

So this morning we're looking at this, and this evening at its New Testament application, we might say. Now, I do think that folks, in reading this story, could put a slant on it that would be a wee bit misleading and unfortunate.

[6 : 54] If we just look at the surface of this, we will think it's a story all about disobedience and obedience. And it is that, but it's not only that.

And if you just stress these things and don't go a wee bit deeper, you can get a wrong impression, indeed, of what the whole story of the Bible is all about.

Because here, the story seems to be they disobeyed, they felt God punished them for it, they felt sorry for the sins, God told them to do something by way of obedience, and when they did it, all was well.

So it's a story, at that level, told only in terms of disobedience and obedience. And that, you see, goes against the grain, because it may lead to the impression this is the way things are.

This is what God wants of us. He wants us to be obedient, but if we're disobedient, He wants us to be sorry, and then to go on to be obedient again.

[7 : 58] And we may think that that's all that there is to it. But that, of course, runs against the grain of the gospel. The gospel is not about disobeying and obeying and all is well, as if that was all that was to it.

We are saved not by works, but by faith, by grace, lest anyone should boast. So if we just look at the surface of this, it may seem to be running counter to the doctrine of grace and to God's goodness and forgiveness that is such a familiar theme in the New Testament.

And we might therefore say, oh, well, I would say we looked at things in the Old Testament and would get a completely wrong impression of things in general. So, looking at this story, that's one of the themes that I want to develop a wee bit.

Behind this message about obedience, there is really a message about faith. Where did this obedience come from? In part, it came from the fact that they weren't exercising faith.

Where did their healing come from? Not just from an act of obedience, but from an act of obedience promoted and directed by faith. So that behind this story that seems to be out of obedience, we've got these elements of faith creeping in.

[9 : 17] So that it's a story of disobedience because of lack of faith and a story of obedience through faith. And that's one of the elements that we want to bring in here.

And that means that not only are we going to understand this story or see it as a preparation for the New Testament application, but we'll see this as something hopefully useful for ourselves.

Where does our disobedience come from? And so often it comes from lack of faith. If we'd only trust, we wouldn't be disobedient. Certainly in certain sins, that's the case.

And where does our restoration come from? Well, of course, it comes through faith. So this is something that has some practical relevance for us as well as being a story of interest in the Old Testament.

So that's what we're going to do. Look at this, not just in terms of disobedience and obedience, but bringing in faith with a view to showing how faith runs through our experience.

[10:20] It runs through genuine Christian experience. We're going to look at what went wrong and how things were put right. So what went wrong?

What was the nature of their disobedience here? Well, it's quite plain what is happening here, that they are speaking against God. They spoke against God and against Moses.

Now that is a pretty serious thing to do. They think they know better than God. They think that their wisdom is superior to his and that they know better how things should be done.

So it's a significant act of rebellion that they're criticizing God here. And a significant act of rebellion too, that they're criticizing Moses, who was obviously the chosen mouthpiece of God.

So they're again the government, the spiritual government of God's people. And that's a pretty serious act of disobedience. And what they're specifically saying is that they're complaining.

[11:25] Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? So you can see how they can say a thing like that from one perspective, looking at the matter from a purely human point of view.

You can see how people might say, well, there's no hope for us, such a big company of people in the wilderness. But they're complaining about the God who has brought them there.

And they're calling in question his wisdom and his goodness in bringing them out of Egypt. And that's a pretty desperate thing that they're saying against God.

Complaining about his providence. Complaining really about his grace and about his goodness.

And they're saying, there's no food and no water. And we loathe this worthless food.

This worthless food that they're speaking about is the manna. It was the food that God had provided for them. As we read about in Exodus 16. And at the time, they were very grateful for it.

[12:26] But when they got it morning after morning, they weren't so happy about it. And eventually, in not so very long, did it take them to say, we loathe this food. So they despise and they dislike the provision that God has made.

Even though the manna seems to have been particularly tasty. Wavers with honey, which sounds to me kind of attractive. But here they are, loathing the provision that God has made.

So it's complaining against God, despising his goodness, and in this way, being ungrateful for all that he has done for them.

And putting their opinion against his, we would have been better to have stayed in Egypt and died there. That sort of idea. So that's the sin that they've committed.

This is the disobedience. The act of disobedience. Now, let's just assess that and ask ourselves how serious this was and also, how come we can say that it was lack of faith that led them to this.

[13:31] Well, we've got to just go into the background a wee bit, which is familiar to you, so we're not going to spend time on it. But if we think about their past experience, you know, they should never have said nothing like this, given their past experience.

They had been in Egypt. They had been slaves there. For generations, they had been slaves there. What prospect had they of deliverance? And from the human perspective, they had no prospect of deliverance.

But they had been delivered. And they had rejoiced in that. And who had done it? It was only by God doing it. He raised up Moses.

He gave Moses signs to do. He performed miracles on their behalf. He sent plagues to the Egyptians. He demonstrated the power of his being on behalf of his people.

And through that demonstration of his power, he graciously brought about this deliverance. And it was a remarkable thing that they had to remember, year after year, a formative part of their history.

[14:36] And now they are turning their backs on it and forgetting it and calling in question the wisdom or the goodness of it.

Now, that is a desperately serious thing to do. So this is no light thing, given their past experience of God's goodness in redemption, in deliverance from Egypt.

If somebody asks you to do a great favour for them, and you do it, and then they turn around and complain and say, I wish you'd ever done that. It's very galling, to put it mildly.

If what you've done for them is not appreciated, it doesn't go down well. How much more, in this case, here? And you can see why I say there's a lack of faith in their attitude here.

All that they needed to do was to say, look, the God that brought us out of Egypt is with us still. The God that did miracles on our behalf is doing them for us yet. He's providing the manna, He's providing the quails.

[15 : 38] It's an act of His gracious providence. He's still the same God as brought us out of Egypt. And what they should say is, we can trust in Him, surely, to bring us through.

He's brought us this far, He'll take us the whole way. That's the sort of thing that they should surely have been able to say. But they don't. So, their disobedience stems from a certain amount of lack of trust in God's goodness and care and providence.

And they refuse to go on in faith, even though they've had ample demonstrations of His goodness to them in bringing them out of Egypt. So, their past experience shows how serious this was and also indicates how lack of faith was an element in their disobedience here.

So, think about their past experience. That's what we find. Think about the patience of God. They've been through this before. Shortly after leaving Egypt, as we read in Exodus 16, they started grumbling.

We would have been better off to have died in Egypt. And on that occasion, God didn't punish them or leave them to their own devices. He provided manna for them.

[16 : 53] He was patient. He was generous. And He supplied for them something very special. He gave them manna to test them. It was something that they didn't know about.

That's what the word manna means. It means, what is it? That's what they said when they saw this stuff because they had no experience of it and their fathers had no experience of it.

It was not within the knowledge of, within the ambit of human knowledge at that time. It was something outwith their experience entirely. And they said, what is it, manna? And that's how it got its name.

And that just shows how wonderful a thing it was that God was patient for them in that way. And this manna was given not just to feed them, but to test them. To test them, to see whether they would walk in God's ways or not.

And in particular, it was meant to teach them that man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from God's mouth. It isn't simply that the food came to them, the bread came to them.

[17 : 59] It was that God's word spoke and the manna was provided. God commanded and this substance came down to them. God commanded the birds and they flew over the camp and fell in the camp and the quails were there for them to eat.

It was God's command and providence. It was God's word that had provided this for them. And so they were being taught, don't just look at the food, look at the means by which this comes to you. It comes by the word, by the command of God. And that's what they should have been reflecting on. But yet, just a short time later, they're at it again, complaining.

Why did they bring us out of Egypt? They've done it before, they're doing it again in the face of God's patience with them, in the face of the provision that he had made for them in the manna, in the face of the fact that he said this is to test you, to see if you're going to walk in my ways or not. And clearly here they're failing the test because they're not trusting in the God who commands and things happen. They're not trusting in the word of God who would command nature, who would supply, which would supply for them, who would command the affairs of nations to work on their behalf, who would rule over all in the power of his providence to work out everything well for his people.

[19 : 22] They've forgotten his patience to them and they're walking in unbelief, not putting their trust in the word of God. And now, that's what they should have said is God has brought us this far, he's provided us with this fruit, he'll provide us with everything necessary.

He's a patient God, he's gracious to us, we can trust in him. And it was that lack of trust that led to this disobedience. So we looked at the past experience and we saw how culpable they were. We looked at the patience of God and we saw the same thing. And if you want to see a third evidence of how serious this is, you just need to look at the punishment that this brought on them. There's this plague of serpents. Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people so that many people of Israel died. When it says that God sent these serpents among them, it doesn't mean to say that they were created specially for the occasion or were special acts of creation in that sense.

God controls providence. He works out this purpose in nature and in his general control of nature he so caused it that these serpents invaded the camp and bit the people.

[20 : 47] They were fiery serpents. That is, they were serpents that had a fiery bite. When they bit you, you got a really burning sensation. And there's no doubt at all that serpents of that nature exist in that part of the world.

There's debates about what actually, what species of serpent this was but there's ample evidence that were serpents of that nature. A Roman writer speaking of Palestine in the old days says, there are snakes also of a dark red colour, a span in length, 9 inches, 23 centimetres in length, which spring up as high as a man's waist and whose bite is incurable.

So, this is nothing out of the ordinary. What is out of the ordinary is that came to the camp at that time and they came therefore sent by God as an expression of his displeasure.

And that, you see, shows the seriousness of it. No longer can he actually, can he act with patience towards them and forgive them their offences.

But he's got to bring against them some form of punishment to bring them to their senses. And that's what we've got here. It's serious because of the nature of the punishment that is allotted to it.

[22 : 07] So, here's the story therefore. Here are these people and they're just not remembering the past. And they're failing to put their trust in God's patience. And they're failing to trust his promises and his goodness that they've known.

And because they're not trusting they become disobedient and they complain about what God is doing and they're unhappy and discontented at the way things are working out for them.

That is a simple story. And I'm afraid it's too common a story because isn't this story repeated often enough today?

Isn't it repeated sometimes in the lives of God's people? Isn't it sometimes the case in our lives that we can do precisely the same thing?

Unhappiness about what's happening to us. Complaining about our lot in life and the way things have turned out for us. Rebellion against the way that providence has directed our paths.

[23 : 13] That we haven't had what we wanted. That we haven't had our ambitions fulfilled. or simple desires even acknowledged.

Discontent with life. Unhappiness about God's providence. And sometimes along with this also anxiety for the future. Grumbling about what is yet to be.

Unhappiness about what we anticipate to happen. Does it not happen amongst Christian people? Paul? Is it not the case sometimes that we've got to struggle to be happy with the way that God leads us?

That sometimes we've got a struggle to be reconciled to the way that he's dealt life to us as it were? It's the same thing as is happening here.

And I'm pretty certain it's the same cause that's leading to, that makes this happen. Namely a certain distrust in God. Despite past experience we don't trust him for the future nor are grateful for the present.

[24 : 19] It's the same lack of trust in God. A same lack of awareness of how good he is, how good he's been to us. It's a setting up of ourselves as supreme and disregarding God and therefore failing to trust in him as the great and good governor of the universe.

It's the same thing as we've got here behind disobedience of that nature. There is a lack of faith. And we should look back to the past and say God has been good to us. He brought us out of sin. He will surely bring us to heaven. God has been leading us and guiding us and we can look at different instances when we know that particularly it would have been the case and we can put our trust in him and say he'll lead us and guide us yet.

And that's what makes grumbling, that's what takes the spirit of grumbling away from us and gives us a spirit of contentment when we're resting upon the promises aware of what sort of God we've been dealing with.

And that's why we can say behind disobedience of this nature and other acts of disobedience as well there's often a lack of faith in a gracious and good God. So that's what went wrong.

[25 : 31] Now let's look at the second half of this which is how things were put right. And of course we're going to see how if disobedience was connected with lack of faith then things being put right was connected with the presence of faith.

Let's look at that. Now if the first half of the story was kind of ordinary because it happens still today the second half of the story is extraordinary.

This is an extremely odd thing that's going on here. And I think if we look at this and think about it a wee bit we would realise that this is extremely unusual what is going on here.

And people that don't appreciate the scriptures might look at this and wonder about it. It looks like a piece of magic. You just make a bronze serpent and put it up in a pole and people that look at it will be healed of their sickness.

How come? There's no rhyme or reason to that. There's no obvious connection. How does it come about? It looks like magic. And that means it doesn't fit in very well with the way that we understand things in the scriptures because magic isn't the way that the scriptures work.

[26 : 58] I do think that that's a serious problem. You know, if somebody were to say today the way to get over COVID is very simple. All you need to do is to make a bottle of a coronavirus and stick it up in your wall and if you feel the symptoms coming on you just look at that and you'll get well again.

Is anybody, well, some people are going to believe that if it was said, but most people say that's a piece of nonsense. It's medicine, we need not magic. You don't get over the sickness by looking at a bottle of what's causing the sickness.

You just don't do it that way nowadays and we would tend to agree with that. To say that is just a piece of nonsense. And that's therefore I feel a problem here.

We've got to explain why things were done this way by putting something up on a pole in order to look at it. Okay.

So, how are we going to explain this? Well, we've got to explain this first of all by remembering that this is the final stage in the process of restoration.

[28 : 10] It isn't the sum and substance of everything that Moses tells the people here. It's only the final stage in the restoration to God's favour and to their experience of freedom from this plague.

Other things have already taken place. There's, for example, a spirit of repentance. We have sinned for we have spoken against the Lord and against you.

So, you see there is some measure of confession of sin. This idea of putting up a serpent and looking at it doesn't come to those that are still lost in their sin and sunk in it.

These are people that have begun to come to their senses and they say we've sinned. And they say we've sinned against God. So they recognise that their gumming and complaining is not in order when you're talking about the sovereign Lord.

And they say we've sinned against Moses, recognising against the status that he has something they hadn't recognised before. So here you see is the beginning of the process of restoration which culminates in putting up the bronze serpent.

[29 : 26] But this is important. This is where it begins. A realisation of sin having been committed. A willingness to confess it. A spirit of repentance.

And then you see the Bible here tells us there's still something lacking. People are still dying. The serpents have not yet been removed. The instrument by which God expressed his displeasure is still in place.

And so they go to Moses and they say pray to the Lord that he take away the serpents from us. Now this is a practical way of expressing the repentance.

They're coming and they're praying and they know that they need to have access to God for that to happen. And they see Moses as the God appointed intermediary who will pray to God on their behalf.

But notice you see that they're praying to the Lord. They want to get in touch with him. They're looking to him for this problem to be resolved. There's an acknowledgement of him again.

[30 : 28] An acknowledgement that the serpents are in his control. That he's Lord over them. That he's supreme. And that was something that really was lacking in their criticism of what was going on.

They said we know better than God. We should have stayed in Egypt and not come out here like he wanted us to do. And now they're saying God's in control. The serpents are in his hand. And that's quite interesting that they have come to that conclusion.

So here you see is the background to this lifting up of the serpent and the pole. It comes to people that are seeking forgiveness and are seeking to know God again.

Who are penitent because of their sin and who are giving recognition to God as the sovereign Lord. There's an acknowledgement there of God being gracious.

He'll take away the serpents that they want them to do. They're wanting an act of grace for them. So there's a recognition of his grace there as well. So this isn't just a blind act of obedience that comes out of the blue.

[31 : 35] it's the culmination to a process of repentance that began with the confession of sin and with a prayer to God that these serpents would be removed.

And it's then that this act of looking to the serpent and the pole comes in. And that's where I think this demonstrates that there's faith to be in operation.

Because certainly rationality isn't in operation here. if somebody says why should I look at the bronze serpent what good will that do me?

There's no answer to that except that God has said it. And that to me is the key element to this bit of the story.

They can't say well that bronze serpent will cause this to happen and that to happen and the bronze serpents will be taken away. There's no explanation of it from the human perspective.

[32 : 33] There's nothing they can depend on except this, that God told them to do it. So there's nothing that they can do except trust in his word. And that's the big element in this story.

They're shut up to trusting in what he said. Why should I look at that? Because God said it and God promised it. In what spirit should I look at it?

Only in the spirit of confidence. You have to take God's word at its face value and you have to act on it. And here you see is the theme that we've been mentioning.

They were being taught by the manna. Man does not live by bread only but by the word of God. It's what he says that counts. It's what he commands that matters. And that's what they've been meant to learn.

And that's what they've forgotten about and hadn't learned. And now they're asked to relearn it. And as they relearn it they look and they're saved. That is the way that I think the story works out.

[33 : 34] So it's not just a mere act of obedience. It's an act of obedience that is impelled by this idea that God's commanded it. And we can trust in his word.

We're going to do what he says because he said it. Trusting in his word. That to my mind is the key element in this story. And you see that's why I say it's faith that comes in here.

It's not a matter of if you just say you're sorry for your sin and begin doing good. Everything's going to be fine. There's got to be an act of obedient faith. There's got to be an act of trusting in the promises of God.

Trusting in the word of God. And that's I think the meaning of this story for us today. So look at your grumbling and complaint and your disobedience and trace it to where it came from.

Trace it to unbelief. Trace it to a lack of trust in God's promises. Trace it to a failure to be aware of how good God is and how much you can rest upon him.

[34 : 40] And acknowledge that behind disobedience there is often unbelief and repent of that unbelief. And acknowledge that in restoration there is confession, there is prayer to God for help, and there is a trusting in his word, a trusting in his promise.

And that's the message in the story itself. And you can see how it's not difficult to think that this story then came into the New Testament. And as I say we'll look at it this evening but you can see how it's going to work out.

You can see how natural it is. If that's the way that things are, there's belief behind this, that in the New Testament Jesus should say as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up so that whoever believes the faith there, the faith that was already there in the Old Testament story.

And this idea of looking and being saved is really something quite prominent in the scriptures and in history indeed. There's other passages of course that speak in these terms.

Look and live was the basic message about the serpents and look and live was a message that was taken up by the prophets and it's a message that is often put over in the presentation of the gospel.

[36 : 05] Charles Haddon Spurgeon was a well-known preacher of the 19th century and the command that brought him to faith was the command to look and be saved.

The preacher had his text look unto me and be saved all the ends of the earth for I am God and there is none else. He didn't seem to say anything very memorable.

It was the text that struck Spurgeon. He pointed to where I was sitting under the gallery and he said that young man there looks very miserable. And he shouted as I think only a primitive Methodist can.

Look look young man. Look now. Then I had this vision. Not a vision to my eyes but to my heart. I saw what a Saviour Christ was.

Now I can never tell you how it was. But I no sooner saw whom I was to believe that I also understood what it was to believe. And I did believe in one moment.

[37 : 14] Look and be saved. It's a valid way of putting the gospel still. Look in faith as they did. And they were restored. Look in faith to Christ and you'll be saved.

As Spurgeon found it to be the case when that sort of message was put to him. So many people since then have and we can experience that also. Look to Jesus in faith.

Rest upon him and salvation will be yours. May God bless to us his word. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.