

Numbers 21:4-9 - Where to Look for Healing

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Date: 20 March 2016

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

Amen is right. That's beautiful. Thank you, Michael, for that beautiful song and reminder of our glorious Savior. What a great, great Savior we have. Turn with me to Numbers chapter 21. Numbers 21.

It's exciting to get to celebrate the entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem, coming as the King on Palm Sunday. We see Jesus there as the true King coming into Jerusalem, but we also see that Jesus is a very unusual kind of King.

The sobering reality is that He's coming to be exalted on a throne that you'd never expect. He's coming to be lifted up, but like that song Michael just sang, lifted up was He to die on a cross. So as we anticipate that kind of, that's a unique coronation. One that involves death and resurrection again before the end of this week.

[1 : 20] We've been talking about some images of the cross from the Old Testament. Some foreshadows of what it will mean for Jesus to give His life in our place.

We started talking about the scapegoat in Leviticus 16 on the Day of Atonement. And saw how part of what was happening on the cross is that Jesus was being sent away from the presence of God to die in our place so that we could come into the presence of God and live on His merit.

Then last week we looked at the blood of the Lamb from Exodus 12 and the Passover. And we saw how another facet of the cross is that sinners find safety and are covered from the death their sin deserves only by the blood of the spotless Lamb.

This morning we're looking at one more, a short story. It's represented there in the middle of that slide. Numbers 21, as God's people on their way to the promised land are wandering for 40 years in the wilderness, right?

They're wandering because of their sin. And time after time, what God is doing is He's teaching them to trust Him. Often by showing them some very painful consequences of their sin and their lack of trust in Him.

[2 : 39] This story is no exception to that. Let's read Moses' account of this situation together. This is God's holy word. Numbers 21 at verse 4.

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? 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. Pray to the Lord that He may 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.

[3 : 43] And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live. Pray with me. Father, this is Your Word.

And we would see Jesus in it this morning. We need to see Him. Would You show Him to us by Your Spirit? We ask in His name.

Amen. Amen. As our story opens this morning, we find God's people, the Israelites, wandering in the desert, right? Remember, God had delivered them out of slavery in Egypt to bring them to the promised land of Canaan.

He was taking them somewhere, but they didn't trust Him, did they? They didn't trust Him to get them into the land, to care for them as they went in. So now they're wandering away from the promised land.

And they're becoming impatient, verse 4 says. The word here, impatient, is the opposite of long-suffering. They're tired of any suffering or difficulty very quickly.

[4 : 52] No patience for it. And as a result of their impatience, verse 5 says, they spoke against God and against Moses. Why have You brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?

For there's no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food. If you're familiar with the story of the Old Testament, this sounds a little bit familiar, doesn't it?

It's not the first time that God's people have asked a question like this. Why did You bring us out of Egypt if we're just going to die out here in the wilderness? It seems that the setting sin of this generation of God's people was discontentment, distrust of God's good care for them and grumbling against Him.

They asked that question right when they had just gotten out of Egypt. Did You just bring us out here to die? There's no food and water, they say. Or, well, we'll be honest, there is some food. There is manna God sends every day, but it's worthless. So dull and so boringly the same every day when He sends it.

[5 : 59] The way You're providing for me, God, is not meeting my expectations. They've complained about that even though God has sent manna from heaven, water out of a rock, again, it's not good enough.

And they don't look trustingly to God, do they? Thankfully, distrusting God's provision and discontentment about the way that God has cared for us and provided for us is not something that anyone struggles with anymore.

It's one of those Old Testament sins, isn't it? That none of us has ever experienced or known what that feels like. Aren't you glad for that? Plus, we don't even know what it would be like to struggle with the same sin more than once, do we?

I mean, to come back and mess up in the same way again, none of us can relate to that. Let's be honest. We're an entitled bunch of people, aren't we?

We know the things we think we deserve. We deserve better. And we're not willing to suffer very long while waiting on God's promises to come to fruition, are we? And we know very well, don't we, what it's like to struggle with a sin and think we've got it behind us and then see it show back up.

[7 : 19] Back to the same destructive patterns, the same selfish habits, the same empty idols that we think we deserve and are going to fulfill us this time. You see, that's the poison of discontentment, of distrusting God and always feeling He should be caring for us differently.

That lie of Satan back in the garden creeps in again and tempts us to believe that God's not really good. He doesn't really have your best interest at heart. You know better.

It keeps coming back, doesn't it? It looks different each time, but it keeps rearing its ugly head in our hearts. It's poisonous in our hearts like that.

And God sends among His people here the manifestation of that toxic venom in their hearts. That poison of discontent that has spread shows up in the form of poisonous serpents that are there to remind them of the toxic venom in their hearts that has come out of their lips as well.

They've spoken against God and against Moses whom He's sent to represent Him. So the snakes are a constant reminder of what? Of their sin.

[8 : 36] That poisonous venom that is killing them spiritually just as the snakes are killing them physically. So what happens after God sends these snakes and many are dying?

God's people respond to His discipline and they turn back to Him for help, don't they? They're desperate. The snakes are killing them. And they plead with Moses to intercede for them and take the snakes away.

Verse 7. The people came to Moses and said, We've sinned for we've 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 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 the bronze serpent and set it on a pole and if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live. Notice a couple of things here.

Notice first the merciful heart of God, right? God who with these people having turned away from Him and spoken against Him and grumbled and complained.

[9 : 44] He woos them. Their distrusting and their grumbling hearts He brings back to Himself so that they cry out to Him. And when they do, He provides healing for them.

He shows them mercy. But notice also one other thing. God doesn't actually do what the people ask Him to do, does He? What is it that the people ask for?

What do they want God to do? Pray, Moses, to the Lord that He take these serpents away from us. They're killing us. Pray that He would make them go away. Does God do what they ask?

No, apparently people are still getting bitten by these serpents even after God responds mercifully. The serpents are still there but God does provide a way to be healed, doesn't He?

Looking to the bronze serpent held up on the pole. It's interesting. What are God's people told to do if they want healing? They're told to look at the same thing that is killing them.

[10 : 54] God uses the same word here for the fiery serpent that He tells Moses to put up on the pole. The same word as the serpents that are killing them and He says, look at that in order to be healed.

Now imagine for a minute that you're one of the Israelites in this situation. Of all the things in the world, what is the one thing you are absolutely sick of looking at at this point?

Snakes, right? They're all over the place. First of all, they're everywhere. I can't get away from them. And then remember, what do the snakes remind you of?

Do you remember what they represent? They're reminding me of, not of healing and deliverance and what I'm longing for, but my sin. They remind me of the poison, of distrust.

How I've abandoned and failed Yahweh over and over. And Yahweh says, look at that and you will live.

[11 : 58] I can imagine I'd want to look anywhere else. It's like sometimes when you have to look away when you're watching something develop in front of you and you've seen too much devastation and you see that there's more coming and you think, I can't bear to watch it.

I know what's about to happen. You don't want to look at all. But you have to. Because people still get bitten.

The serpent is held up and people trust God what He says to do and they look at it and the toxic venom inside them is healed and they live, right? People full of poison look at the very thing that is killing them and are healed.

And Jesus tells us that we shouldn't miss the foreshadow of His cross, of His healing work. We don't have to wonder about whether or not we get a picture of Jesus here, do we?

Are we making this up in trying to connect this story to Jesus? Jesus tells us when He speaks with Nicodemus in John chapter 3. This is what Jesus tells Nicodemus.

[13 : 07] 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. That sounds wonderful, doesn't it?

Eternal life. The people in the wilderness didn't even get that. They were just healed temporarily from the snake bite. Eternal life when the Son of Man is lifted up.

In fact, the next verse is what? What comes after John 3.15? That's right. John 3.16. Very good. Very good. You're awake. John 3.16 where God so loves the world that what He does is send His Son because everyone needs to believe in Him and therefore not perish but have eternal life.

It sounds wonderful. It sounds exciting that Jesus will be lifted up and people will have eternal life. But what does it mean that Jesus will be lifted up as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness? That's why we started with understanding the story in numbers. And so what we understand from that story is that Jesus, like the snake, is not merely a picture of healing.

[14 : 20] Right? But rather as He is lifted up on the cross, He is a picture of what is killing us. Isn't He? That sounds odd.

It was okay to talk about the snake like that, Will, but now you've confused me. Jesus as a picture of what is killing me? That's not how I usually think of Jesus.

Remember that these people full of poison, they look at the very thing that is killing them and they are healed. With Jesus, He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree so that what is happening on the cross is that Jesus, yes, He's a Savior, yes, He's bringing healing, but Jesus is actually becoming sin for us.

Do you remember how Paul explains the work of Christ in 2 Corinthians? God made Jesus, the one who knew no sin, the one who'd never sinned and didn't know what that would be like, God made Him to be sin for us so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.

God made His holy, undefiled Son to be sin. not just to bear sin, but to actually become sin for us so that we could become righteous.

[15 : 53] That's how eternal life happens. In other words, on the cross, Jesus receives the curse that sin deserves. Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.

Jesus hangs on the cross first as the sin that kills us as an object of scorn, of rejection, of cursing. And only when we see Him as such in our place can we receive the healing that He provides. He does provide healing there. But until He becomes our sin, we don't get His righteousness. Right? Isn't that what 2 Corinthians 5 says? It's when He becomes our sin that we become righteous. So for those of us who find ourselves time and again going back to the same sins rather than trusting God.

For those of us who are dying from the poison of sin that runs in our blood, from the toxic venom that comes from our hearts and destroys us, we must remember that we will be healed by looking at what is killing us.

[17 : 07] Not perhaps where we might think to look, but looking at our sin, we will be healed by looking at our sin on another.

God has provided for us a cure as He did for the people in the wilderness. A Savior who as He is lifted up on the cross, beaten, bloodied, dying, is not perhaps what we would expect or even want to look at, but who truly does save us.

Let me share with you a picture of this from a children's book called *The Watsons Go to Birmingham*. Sometimes when we don't think about things a particular way, having a picture of it, especially a children's book picture, can be a little bit helpful.

In this book, the main character Kenny is a ten-year-old boy who regularly gets picked on and teased and bullied at school and particularly on the bus this happens to Kenny.

He writes about and what I'm about to read you that the day that all of that stopped when some new boys came on the bus. Two new boys who were late getting on the bus.

[18 : 24] I'll read it to you as he writes. It starts with a little bit of background for this day. Every once in a while, Mama would make me go to Sunday school with Joey. Even though it was just a bunch of singing and coloring and coloring books and listening to Mrs. Davidson, I had learned one thing.

I learned about getting saved. I learned how someone could come to you when you were feeling real, real bad and could take all of your problems away and make you feel better. I learned that the person who saved you, your personal saver, was sent by God to protect you and help you out.

Now he takes us to the day that his trouble stopped. When the bigger one of the two boys who got on the bus late said to the driver in a real down south accent, thank you for stopping, sir.

I knew right away. I knew that God had finally gotten sick of me being teased and picked on all the time. As I looked at this new boy with the great big smile and the jacket with holes in the sleeves and the raggedy tennis shoes and the tore up blue jeans, I knew who he was.

Maybe he didn't live a million years ago and maybe he didn't have a beard and long hair and maybe he wasn't born under a star, but I knew anyway. I knew God had finally sent me some help.

[19 : 43] I knew God had finally sent me my personal saver. Not what Kenny expected his personal saver to look like. He says, I was kind of surprised that God would send a saver to me in such raggedy clothes.

Not what he expected. Perhaps he expected someone strong, someone dashing dressed, someone noble to come in and be his saver.

But he knew him when he saw him, didn't he? Someone who looked like everything he felt and feared he was as the kid who got picked on.

Outcast. Tattered. Shameful. Worthy of scorn. Someone else was going to be the butt of all the jokes.

The one who suffered what Kenny had endured for so long. And Kenny would be saved. So at the cross, we find healing.

[20 : 56] A personal saver, Kenny would call it, when we look at our sin on another. When we look to the cross and see Jesus, this very unusual kind of king, suffering shame, rejection, punishment,

that we know are rightfully ours.

When we see him actually become sin for us. So we look to the cross over and over because of that perplexing reality that God doesn't just take all of our sin away as we often wish he would.

He instead provides a way to be healed from the sin that keeps plaguing us, doesn't he? It's just like with his people, isn't it? Why not just remove all the snakes, God?

That would be easy. I've got a way out of this mess. Just get rid of the snakes. Well, the Bible doesn't tell us all the reasons why he doesn't do that in this story, but I think at least one is quite apparent.

What happens to God's people over and over and over when his discipline is removed? They forget the danger of their sin, don't they? And in their discontentment with God and how he cares for them, they go seeking fulfillment in other places over and over.

[22 : 25] And God wants to teach us to look trustingly to him. So he says, if you want to survive, you are going to have to keep trusting me, seeing your sin for what it is and looking to me for healing.

I'm convinced that's at least part of why we still struggle against sin. Because God knows what we need every day is to be looking away from ourselves and to him, depending not on what we think is best, but trusting him to heal us from the poison that is running through us.

So practically speaking, what happens when we look to Jesus over and over? We talk a lot around here about experiencing his grace every moment, right?

of our constant needs being constantly met in Christ. You've heard preachers like me say things like, preach the gospel to yourself every day. You need to remember it all the time.

What happens when we do? I think at least two things happen constantly. The first is that looking to Jesus helps me hate my sin.

[23 : 39] As opposed to my natural tendency to minimize or ignore or downplay my sin, I have to look at it head on. I have to face my distrust of God for what it really is when I see what it cost Jesus.

When I look at Him and see the shame and the disgrace and the pain my Savior took on the cross. And so I hate the sin.

But at the same time, I experience freedom from that shame and disgrace and pain that I feel as I experience God's forgiveness.

As I see someone else become my sin so that I will never be defined by it. I'm now free and when He becomes my sin, I become His righteousness.

The famous Scottish pastor Robert Murray McShane talked about it this way. I love this quote. He says, For every look at yourself, take ten looks at Christ.

[24 : 49] He is altogether lovely. Such infinite majesty and yet such meekness and grace and all for sinners, even the chief. He says, live much in the smiles of God.

I think that's what he meant by preach the gospel to yourself every day. That's what he's saying. Live much in the smiles of God. Bask in his beams. Feel his all-seeing eyes settled on you in love and repose in his almighty arms.

Let your soul be filled with a heart ravishing sense of the sweetness and excellency of Christ and all that is in him. Let the Holy Spirit fill every chamber of your heart and so there will be no room for folly or the world or Satan or the flesh.

For every look at yourself take ten looks at Christ. He says when you see your sin the poison and of your anger of your lust of your discontent of your self-focused self-obsessed life.

Look quickly to him who has taken your sin. See Jesus actually becoming anger anger and lust and discontent and self-obsession for you so that you can be filled with him and leave no room for sin in your heart that you hate it and there's no room for it.

[26 : 20] You then experience the freedom of God's forgiveness and can rest in your father's arms. That's the good news of the gospel. It's the glorious reality of preaching the gospel to yourself every day.

Every time you see the sin that is killing you looking at it in Jesus and remembering that you are free and righteous in him because he has taken your sin.

Can I push one more step with this while we're on it? Would you be willing to consider this morning the more difficult and painful task of doing the same with the sin of your brothers and sisters?

For every look at their sin take ten looks at Christ. You see Christ became their careless words their unloving spirit their prideful condescension their abusive actions which have hurt you so deeply and realize as you look at Christ ten times that if God has forgiven them at the cross you must too. Other people must get to live in the same freedom that you are enjoying in Christ. It's a little bit harder isn't it?

[27 : 49] I don't like that application so much pastor come on what about preach the gospel to myself? This is preach the gospel to yourself it's the gospel that applies not just to you but to all of your brothers and sisters who are hidden in Christ.

He's paid for their sins he's forgiven their sins too. It's how the gospel transforms us in our relationships because not only has Jesus become my sin in my place he's become their sin in their place hasn't he?

he's become your sin in your place too. Now remember I'm not saying you quit hating that sin or all its painful effects disappear and shouldn't be dealt with not at all seeing our sin on Jesus makes us hate the sin all the more but it also calls us and drives us to forgive sins that we could otherwise never imagine forgiving and the freedom of Christ is for you and for them are you expressing the grace that you're experiencing for yourself one last thing as we close this morning I hope you're seeing the beauty of yet another facet of the cross of Christ today but I think lots of times this can remain very theoretical look to Jesus preach the gospel to yourself every day that sounds so nice doesn't it you know preacher just say that thing

I don't know what you're talking about but sure that that sounded really spiritual when you said that I'm going to preach the gospel to myself every day I'll try that let me tell you I hope very practically what it looks like in my life to try to help us put some legs on this I'll just use one story and we'll be through a couple weeks ago my wife joined many of you on Southwood's women's retreat which was fantastic and meant for me that I got an entire weekend just me and my three girls whom I love dearly I was looking forward to that time together and probably to be honest a chance to prove to myself what an amazing stop laughing at me I am amazing I wanted God to give us a special weekend together that's what I expected by the end of Friday which in fairness to me was a day off of school

I mean come on really a full day by the end of Friday I was impatient my girls weren't giving me the space to do what was on my schedule they were responding disrespectfully to me and the volume of my voice was getting louder and louder with every interaction I was discontent I wasn't trusting God that he knew what was best for the weekend and what it should look like I had my own plans and my kids weren't cooperating with them I was the first parent ever to find himself in that position before and I lost my temper I yelled at them I hurt them I could see it in their eyes that night I'd like to say it's the first time that's ever happened but

[31 : 34] I don't want to add lying to my rap sheet for the weekend but I was a failure again the same sin that I hated and after I got them to bed that night I sat down and I started going through all the excuses in my head for how I treated them why I was still a great dad in that moment but pretty quickly I saw the horror of my sin I felt like such a miserable failure somebody else in here has felt that way before I think I was just ashamed remember this was my dad of the year weekend I didn't get many chances like this I built myself up I was going to prove it to myself if nobody else and I blew it I was so disappointed in myself I deserved none of God's love I hated myself for my sin and that night

I had to preach the gospel to myself I had to see Jesus on the cross becoming a self centered dad who yells at his kids again I had to see what happened to him because of that sin that was mine and then I had to see God forgiving and loving me right there because of Jesus so that I could be free and not be and not take what Jesus was taking for me and then to make it worse as I plotted how to teach my girls to be respectful the next day I had to see him do the same for their sin I had to wait until the next morning to apologize to my girls I tell you if you're ever hurting in your sin there there's very few balms of the gospel like the forgiveness of a child for a parent to have your child forgive you to show the love of

God to you we agreed that they still needed to be disciplined for their disrespect but I asked them in the same moment to help me remember not to yell at them but to show them God's patient love and we all were free to love each other as righteous not in how we performed on Friday but in Christ and in how much he loved us which is much more special than that of the year weekend I had planned for where do you need to preach the gospel to yourself what sin that is poisoning your heart do you

need to see Jesus on the cross becoming for you it's a painful place to look but the healing you find in the place of the shame and disgrace you deserve is so sweet that it sets you free and sets others free as well let me pray with me father we are gathered here as a community of great sinners we are so thankful for our great savior bearing shame and scoffing rude in my place condemned he stood

I deserve to be condemned like that and he didn't he sealed my pardon with his blood hallelujah what a savior thank you Jesus that you were lifted up to die that you cried it is finished that all of our sin was taken care of that you became sin for us might that change our hearts give us great joy give us great forgiveness for others make us grateful for how much you love us we ask it in Jesus name amen for more information visit us online at southwood.org and any work awesome and we be good