

Sermon on Numbers 21 prepared by Jonathan Shradar

Numbers 21:1-9

Every generation needs the rescue only Jesus provides.

[Skills Mapping Survey] What do you want to be when you grow up?

Do you know you can do that for the glory of Jesus?!

It is a common question this time of year. With the end of school and a view towards the future.

Graduation season, (when I was younger it was only High School!) Commencement speeches, where usually they invite experienced, older, maybe “famous” people to give advice on life after high school, or college. Our own Christian Zaal this year gave an amazing commencement speech at her alma mater.

Today’s sermon is my commencement speech, since it is unlikely I will ever be invited to give one!

Every generation needs the rescue only Jesus provides.

Look up and live!

We get this from the ancient story of Israel traveling through the wilderness. Two movements, what we need, and what we see.

What We Need

Pivotal text. The wandering is winding down and the story is ramping towards chapter 27, full hand off from one generation to another.

The next generation will go into the Promised Land and already their experience is changing.

Parents always say something to the effect of: “I want my kids to have it better than I did.” This is a great sentiment that doesn’t always produce great people! This second generation of Israel in the wilderness will have it different.

They will experience victories where Israel has not before.

Canaanites start to come for Israel and the chapter begins with Arad as a nation comes to fight and captures Israelites.

Numbers 21:2–3 “And Israel vowed a vow to the LORD and said, “If you will indeed give this people into my hand, then I will devote their cities to destruction.” [3] And the LORD heeded the voice of Israel and gave over the Canaanites, and they devoted them and their cities to destruction. So the name of the place was called Hormah.” (ESV)

“Arad Destroyed. This is the Israelites’ first victory over the Canaanites. It strongly contrasts with their first defeat 38 years earlier—also involving a place called Hormah (14:45). This victory signifies to the next generation that as they look to the Lord in faith, he will deliver all the Canaanites into their hands.”

Two more times in the chapter Israel will have military victories. Against the Amorites and against Bashan. God hands them over. And Israel learns to sing.

Victories will keep rolling in. It will be clear that God’s covenant hand is on these people.

The new generation was clearly new in more than just name: they were a generation who by faith were winning the battles that their parents never dared to attempt.

But in the midst of these stories of how the next generation is different, there is an experience that proves they share something significant in common with their parents.

Going around Edom, who beat the first generation in battle, the “people became impatient.”

Numbers 21:5 “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.” (ESV)

Immediately the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, they bit them and many people of Israel died.

Just like their fathers and mothers, they have a complaining problem. They grumble against God.

Impatience when the circumstances are difficult. And they take it out on God.

This is not lament - honest prayer anchored in covenant care of the Lord. This is just angry talk.

In judgment the Lord sends snakes.

Recently, Iona was on a family hike and was viciously attacked by snakes, hundreds of them. Surprised she made it out alive!

Truth is, she saw a snake off the trail, but the story gets better every time she tells it!

When snakes come at you, it's creepy. And this is a ton of snakes. They bite to kill.

Point to the person in your family that would be the first bit!

Just like the generation before, they need rescue. Death by snake - even of their own doing - is no bueno.

What they really need rescue from though is their own self-righteousness. They are so confident in themselves, how cool they are, that instead of running to God for help they think they can speak against Him.

In their anger they reject him... saying his provision (food) is worthless.

A generation spared in the Passover now rejects God and there are snakes on the plane.

We might not be under attack by actual snakes, but just like that generation in the wilderness, and every one since, we are thoroughly self-righteous. We become so convinced we don't need God we end up saying he doesn't exist. Or we presume upon his covenant becoming angry and impatient when life unfolds as we don't expect.

The world, the devil, and our flesh comes for us. Luring us to take the easy way out, to speak against God. We end up dying under their bites in need of rescue.

Thankfully... Israel comes to their senses.

Numbers 21:7 “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 take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people.”

“The aftermath of this grumbling was no different for the new generation than it had been for the old generation. The Lord sent judgment upon his grumbling people in the shape of fiery serpents,⁵ whose bite was fatal (v.6). The wages of sin and unbelief continued to be death for the new generation as it had been for the old. Yet once again Moses was there to intercede for the people when they repented. In response to his intercession, the Lord commanded him to make a bronze serpent and lift it up on a pole, so that anyone who had been bitten could look at the serpent and live (v. 8).” ID

Repentance and provision that beats the poison.

A bronze/copper snake (read) lifted up for the afflicted to see. They see it and live.

“The serpent on the pole was not a magical cure for snakebite. On the contrary, it was a sign that worked by taking the Lord at his word through faith. The people were to look intently at the bronze serpent, putting their trust in the power of the Lord's victory over evil, and then they would be healed. It is not coincidental that the Lord chose this means of healing the people, for faith is the key marker of those who would enter the Promised Land. The unbelieving generation of their parents, including Moses and Aaron, were excluded from the land because of their unbelief (see 14:11; 20:12). The judgment by the fiery serpents would similarly eliminate any from the new generation who were lacking in faith, for

those who refused to look to the Lord through the bronze serpent would die. Only those who believed could enter the land, for only those who believed would live.”

We don't look at a copper snake, but we do look up.

And that's my advice for all of life - look up to Jesus.

What We See

Israel saw a snake as a symbol of God's covenant care and salvation. We see the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus as our rescue - the cure for the poison - the way to real life.

Just as those in Moses's time looked upon this snake and were healed, those who look in faith to the Christ who was lifted up on the cross will be healed of their sins. Those who look upon him and believe in him would have eternal life..

Jesus, early in his ministry, sat with Nicodemus, a teacher of the law, who was wondering if Jesus was the promised Messiah. Jesus told him he needed to be born again - to be rescued.

John 3:9–21 “Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” [10] Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? [11] Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. [12] If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? [13] No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. [14] And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, [15] that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

[16] “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. [17] For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. [18] Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. [19] And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.

[20] For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. [21] But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.” (ESV)

Whoever sees Jesus and believes in him has their condemnation removed - the deep poison that ruins life.

Like Moses interceding for Israel... “Jesus Christ not only prays on our behalf, but he became a curse for us on the cross so that we might look to him and live. Like the serpent set upon a pole, so Christ crucified is the means God himself has provided for us to look upon our sin and be saved from his own righteous judgment. This is because, for believers, their end-time judgment has already taken place—at the cross of Christ, the punishment we deserve was poured out on Another in our place.”

And with him we are raised up to eternal life.

The snakes may still try to snip at us, but our rescuer has us, and he keeps us eternally safe.

We still come in repentance as that generation modeled, and we receive life in Christ. Abundantly good life.

“Repentance is turning our heart to Christ in the midst of recognizing our own sin and fixing our eyes once again on the remedy for that sin, offered to us in the gospel. Repentance is catching ourselves when we have grumbled over some challenge to our comfort or our sense of being in control of our lives or our acceptance by the in-crowd and deliberately turning our face afresh toward Jesus.”

And we keep looking up.

“When I first came to Christ as a poor sinner, I thought him the most precious object my eyes had ever seen. But I look to him when I preach, remembering my own discouragements and complaining, and I find my Lord Jesus dearer than ever. I have been seriously ill and sadly depressed. I fear I have rebelled. Therefore, I look anew to him. It is a delightful thing that there should be a fountain open for sinners to wash in. That fountain is not for outcasts only but for

the saints, for the citizens of Jerusalem, for the house of David. Do we still sin? Yes, that we do, but “the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin” (1Jn 1:7). The bronze Serpent healed me when I first saw the Lord—and the bronze Serpent heals me tonight—and will do so till I die. Jesus is lifted up that saints might not perish but might persevere in grace to everlasting life.” Charles Spurgeon

As we do, let’s live patient, trusting Jesus for the sake of others who have been bit by sin.

2 Peter 3:9 “ The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.” (ESV)

What do we want to be? A people rescued, given life and purpose.

Every generation needs the rescue only Jesus provides.

So class of 2023, and every class before and after, look up, see Jesus and live.

We pray as Charles Spurgeon did: “God keep us looking if we have looked, and bring us to look to Jesus if we have never looked.”