

Victory of the Lamb
June 14, 2020
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Series: God is Here
Theme: God saves us

Numbers 21:1-9

When the Canaanite king of Arad, who lived in the Negev, heard that Israel was coming along the road to Atharim, he attacked the Israelites and captured some of them. ² Then Israel made this vow to the Lord: “If you will deliver these people into our hands, we will totally destroy their cities.” ³ The Lord listened to Israel’s plea and gave the Canaanites over to them. They completely destroyed them and their towns; so the place was named Hormah.

⁴ They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; ⁵ they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!”

⁶ Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. ⁷ The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us.” So Moses prayed for the people.

⁸ The Lord said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.” ⁹ So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.

We are continuing our sermon series through the book of Numbers called **God is here through life’s wilderness**. This sermon series focuses the Israelites time wandering through the wilderness. In this series we wanted to compare what life has been like in 2020 AD to what life was like for Israel in 1440 BC. You see, in 1440 BC, Israel was in the wilderness, living during a time of restriction and limitation. And those limitations and restrictions tested the faith and the character of the Israelites.

Well, what has 2020 been like for us? It has been a time of restriction and limitation. And as we have been restricted, our faith and character has been tested.

When everything is stripped away from you, you get to see who you really are. So what have we learned about ourselves? What has this wilderness experienced revealed to us about human nature? Who are we? Let’s dive into Israel’s story and see what we can learn about the nature of human beings and how God responds to us.

Before I go any further, let me give you a little more background concerning Israel’s story. First of all before Israel was in the wilderness, they had been under Egyptian slavery for 400 years. For 400 years, God’s people had been crying out to the Lord for deliverance. So the Lord raised up Moses to lead them out of Egypt.

Through the power of God, Moses did miracles and plagues and rescued them out of Egypt. He even parted the Red Sea and led them through on dry land. But instead of going from Egypt straight into the

Promised Land, God led them to wander in the wilderness to test them, to challenge them, and to grow their faith. But the people rebelled against God. And that's what I preached on two weeks ago as we looked Exodus 16. The people complained and grumbled against Moses.

If we would have kept reading through Exodus, Leviticus, and into the beginning of Numbers we would have heard about how the Lord sent in spies to investigate the Promised Land, preparing the people to conquer it, But they doubted the power and promise of God. Because of their unbelief, the Lord told that generation that they would die in the wilderness, and their children would be the ones to enter into the Promised Land.

Fast forward to Numbers 20. By now the Israelites had been wandering in the wilderness for about 38 years. And the first generation of people who came out of Egypt have all died. And now the next generation has an opportunity to put their faith in God and be different than their parents.

Unfortunately, they are no better. They complain about not having any water. Even Moses loses his temper and responds in anger and unbelief, misrepresenting God. And now not even Moses is allowed to go into the Promised Land.

Now, we come to our reading from Numbers 21 and there seems to be a bright spot. The Israelites are traveling by the border of Canaan. And a Canaanite king named Arad crosses the border and attacks the Israelites. The Israelites call out to God and say, **"If you will deliver these people into our hands, we will totally destroy their cities."** (Numbers 21:2) The Israelites knew that God had planned to judge the Canaanites for all their wickedness and bloodshed. So the Israelites said that they would carry out God's judgment faithfully if God would be with them and grant them a victory. God listened to their prayer. And the Israelites won the battle.

Now the Israelites expected that that after they defeated the Canaanite king that God would lead them to continue north and enter into the Promised Land of Cana.

But instead we read the God led them in the opposite direction, directly south, back into the smoldering wilderness. **⁴ They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom.** (Numbers 21:4) This is not what they wanted. (Show map of the direction Israel was traveling)

We know what that feels like, don't we? What were your plans for 2020? Were you planning on starting a new business? Were you planning on going on a trip? Were you planning on going to the fair or Brewers games? Nothing is turning out in 2020 like we planned. It is not going in our direction. So what do humans do when things don't go according to our plans?

...the people grew impatient on the way... (numbers 21:4) We lose our patients. We get angry and frustrated. And how do we usually deal with our frustration?

We take it out on everybody else... **⁵ they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!"** (numbers 21:4-5) The people spoke against God and Moses. They believed that their problems were all because of God and Moses. In their anger and frustration, they believed that they were happier in Egypt. They even exaggerated their pain. They said that there was no bread or water. But they did get bread, bread from heaven, daily manna. And they did have water. Moses just gave them water from the rock.

But in the wilderness their true character came out. They kept speaking against Moses and against God to the point of wanting to get rid of them.

Now I want us to think about how we have been speaking over these last few months. Has our speech and actions been **For** the good of others, or primarily **against** others. Let me describe it this way. Imagine that I had two trays here. One that said “For” and the other that said “against”. Now imagine that everything you said over the last 3 months was recorded and transcribed. And we started to separate what you said into these two trays. How many papers would go in the “For” tray? And how many papers would go in the “against” tray? How many times did I speak for the good of others. How many times did we speak for God in a good way? And for those in our community? Then how many times did we speak against people? Against the other side?

Now maybe you might be thinking, what’s the big deal? Some people are wrong. And we need to speak against them. That’s true. But when you spend all your time speaking against others, you start to believe that all our problems are outside of us. We start to believe that if I could just get rid of those other people, whoever the other people are then I wouldn’t have such a big problem.

The Lord wanted the Israelites to see how wicked and twisted their hearts had become. When they were speaking against God and against Moses, they no longer saw where the real problem was. So God did two strange things to teach them a deeply profound spiritual truth.

Numbers 21:6 Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died.

This seems incredibly strange. Why would God send snakes to bite the people? I think the Lord was using this even to teach them a spiritual truth. You see, the Israelites thought that Moses was evil for bringing them out into the wilderness and God was bad for letting all this happen. But they needed to learn that they too were evil. They had been bitten by the snake of sin. The venom of the devil was in their veins.

This is what we don’t want to believe. We don’t want to believe that we have all been bitten by the snake. We are all infected by sin. This is the cause of our so-called little problems. That argument that you had with your spouse. It started because you didn’t want to believe that you have been infected by the snake. You didn’t want to believe that you were a sinner too. You thought your spouse was your problem. It’s the problem at work.

It’s behind the bigger problems going on in society. What makes a police officer kneel on the neck of a black man? He believes that he is not been bitten by the snake. He thinks his problem is the black race, so he believes he needs to get rid of a black man.

What is the cause of the violent riots and protests? People don’t believe they have been bitten by the snake. They think their problems are the police, so they want to get rid of them.

Every problem that you have in your home and in your community goes back to a lie that you and I believe about our heart. We don’t want to look at the dark places inside of us. We don’t want to believe that we have been bitten by the snake. Instead we bite others and try to get rid of them.

God hasn’t sent snakes. At least not yet. But as we continue in the wilderness, he has sent lots of other troubles into our lives. He is calling us to respond.

Well how did the Israelites respond when they were bitten by the snakes? ⁷ **The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. (Numbers 21:7)** The people cried out to God in repentance.

That’s what we need to do. We all need to cry out to God in repentance. I don’t care how much pigment is in your skin. If you are white stop crying out against the blacks. If you are black, stop crying out to whites. If you are a republican, stop crying out against the democrats. If you are democrat, stop crying out against the republicans. Don’t you see? Even if you could get rid of all those other people, you wouldn’t have solved the problem. We are the problem. We have all been bitten. Join with me in crying out to God. Oh, God we have sinned against you! Take our sin away!

When Israel prayed like that, God did a second strange thing. ⁸ **The Lord said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.” (numbers 21:8)** So that’s what Moses did. He made a bronze snake. Put it on a pole and anyone who looked at it would live.

Why did God have Moses do this strange thing? Why not just give them medicinal plant or a vaccine? Why a snake on a pole that they had to look at? I think the Lord wanted them to look at this snake a remember that their snake bite was teaching them a spiritual truth, they brought these problems on themselves because of their own sin. But God was suppling the remedy for theirs souls, if only they would look up to him and live.

Jesus made this point even clearer in the New Testament. One night a religious professional came to Jesus wanted to learn more about Jesus. And Jesus said, “You must be born again. No matter how good you think you are, you need to be born again. You are infected with the same sin as everyone else.” Then Jesus explained how he could be made new and healed. He referenced this story from the wilderness, ¹⁴ **Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,** ¹⁵ **that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.” (John 3:14-15)**

Jesus is saying that we are all infected by the poison of the serpent. And the only remedy is to look up to him and live. Just like the snake was this ugly reminder of Israel’s sin, the bloody body of Jesus stretched out on a cross is an ugly reminder of our sin. The blood is on our hands.

But we must also remember that he wanted to be there. Jesus wanted to be on the cross. And he wants you to look to him so that you might live.

You see, there is a deep desire to be on the right side of history right now. We try to find our identity in being a part of the right cause. I call it salvation by justice. So we are spending so much of our energy speaking against others. But it is not saving you. It’s only creating more hatred and anger and judgment. You can’t get right by getting rid of everybody that you don’t like because we are all part of the problem. But here is the good news. God didn’t get rid of us. God is still here even in the wilderness.