

GOOD FRIDAY 2026
“Lifted Up” Numbers 21:1–9

Our passage for Good Friday is **Numbers 21:1–9**. The theme for Good Friday and Easter this year is “Lifted Up.” The source of that statement will become clear in just a few moments.

But first, the context. In the book of **Numbers**, the Israelites were doing their best to make God burn with anger against them. God’s slowness of anger was tested to the max in the wilderness. God had freed them from slavery in Egypt. He was in the process of bringing them to the Promised Land. But along the way they *grumbled* and *complained* and *murmured* and *bellyached*. They were a stiff-necked people.

Even Moses, their unflappable leader, rebelled against God and struck the rock instead of speaking to it in **Numbers 20**. That got him barred from the Promised Land.

Earlier in the book of **Numbers**, God got so frustrated with the Israelites, that he decided that he was going to wipe out a whole generation of murmurers, except for Caleb and Joshua. Why? Because they wouldn’t stop grumbling! They wouldn’t trust God. They kept rebelling against God.

So when we come to **Numbers 21**, our passage for tonight, the next generation of young Israelites are now ready to take the Promised Land. And in fact, their first victory over the Canaanites in the Promised Land is recorded in **Numbers 21**.

¹ *When the Canaanite, the king of Arad, who lived in the Negeb, heard that Israel was coming by the way of Atharim [that’s an ancient road that would lead them to the Promised Land] he fought against Israel, and took some of them captive. ² 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.”*

So instead of rebellion and murmuring, these Israelites are *vowing vows* before the Lord. They are stepping out in faith and trusting God. You might say, **“These Israelites have turned a corner. This new generation is a better generation. They won’t repeat the mistakes of their parents.”**

Are you sure? Look at **verse 3**.

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.*

Hormah in Hebrew means “destruction.” So victory is in the hands of the Israelites. They trust the Lord. They vow before the Lord. They obey the Lord. And the Lord gives them victory. Hallelujah! These Israelites finally get it. They finally have left their old sinful practices behind.

Haven’t they? Well not so fast. **Old habits die hard.**

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.*

The Edomites, as many of you know, were the descendants of Esau, Jacob’s brother. And in **Numbers 20**, the Bible records that the Edomites wouldn’t allow the Israelites safe passage into the Promised Land. So the Israelites, after their great victory, had to go all the way around Edom, back by the way of the Red Sea.

And this became bothersome to them.

“More wandering in the wilderness! Ugh!”

“More manna every day! Ugh!”

“More delayed gratification!”

And the people became impatient on the way.

Literally it says, **“The soul of the people became *short* on the way.”**

“Really, God? Really? We just had this great victory over the Canaanites and now we’ve got to traipse back through the wilderness?” **“I’m not happy, God. I don’t like this.”** **Murmur. Murmur. Murmur.**

“Those crazy Israelites. We never act like them in our day, do we?”

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.”*

You might say, “That say that sounds like my children, Pastor Tony, complaining about my cooking.” **Yeah, children do that. But if we’re a little more honest with ourselves, we might say, “No! That sounds like me... complaining against God!”**

Why is it that we, like these Israelites, are so bent on bellyaching? It’s not just the Israelites who are a stiff-necked people? We are stiff-necked.

What is this universal, innate human action towards God? It’s rebellion. It’s murmuring. It’s grumbling. It’s discontent. Here’s the bigger category; it’s sin. And what we have here among the Israelites is a microcosm of the human experience. We are rebels and we are sinners: Gentile, Jew, male, female, children, adults, Hebrews and Americans. **We are grumblers. We are sinners!**

I want to give you in these next few moments four universal truths today from Numbers 21:4–9. Truths that are just as relevant for us today as they were for Israelites in the wilderness. And here’s the first truth.

1) Humanity’s natural inclination is to **sin** against **God** (21:4–5)

Now, some of you might have noticed this. If you look closely at **verse 5**, notice what they say.

For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.”

They say, “We don’t have any food.” And then they say, “We don’t like this worthless food.” So which is it? You don’t have food? Or you don’t like the food you’ve been given? There’s a sense here where their murmuring lacks any rational merit.

By the way, the food they are complaining about is the “manna” from heaven. And manna was a wonderful gift from God! They don’t have to work for it. They don’t have to grow it. They don’t have to cook it. They don’t have to pay for it. They just go outside and gather it every morning. That’s fantastic!

But notice how that which is good and a blessing from the Lord becomes “loathsome” to them. What a word! **“We loathe this worthless food!”**

If you’ve read through the book of **Numbers** before, you know that this isn’t going to end well for the Israelites. The Lord’s had enough of this bellyaching. And he’s about to give them a supernatural smack-down. But it’s not what you would expect. This is unlike anything else that God does in the OT.

⁶*Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.*

God’s like, **“You want to bellyache. I’ll give you something to bellyache about!”** And he sends these fiery serpents among them. That word “fiery” is very descriptive here. What happens with some poisonous snakes when they bite you is that your body swells up with a fiery pain and this fever comes over you. And this insatiable thirst comes over you. And then you die. That’s how the venom works. And it’s not a pretty way to die.

And by the way they still have these types of snakes in Asia and Africa. But snakes typically try to stay away from mankind. They have a God-given fear of man. But here it’s like God sets these snakes loose on the Israelites like a pack of wild dogs. “Sic ‘em, snakes. Get ‘em!”

And to that you might say, “Now wait a minute. The punishment doesn’t fit the crime. They were just complaining about the food. Do they really have to die for that? They insulted the cook for the menu, and the cook is ordering their execution. That doesn’t seem just. Why does God respond so harshly here?”

Two reasons for that: **1)** These Israelites have watched for forty years now their parents complain and murmur in the wilderness. And now they are right on the cusp of entering into the Promised Land. In fact, this is one of the final incidents before they enter the Promised Land. The book of **Deuteronomy** is just a sermon by Moses before they enter in. And then the next book **Joshua** records their entry. So God is throwing down the gauntlet right here. He’s saying, **“Don’t do like your parents did! Because their rebellion kept them out of the Promised Land!”** So that’s one of the reasons God responds so harshly here.

2) And secondly, God is illustrating for us here a universal principle. This principle was just as true 1500 years later in the life of Jesus and 3500 years later in our day. Do you know what that principle is?

Here’s a second universal truth from Numbers 21:4–9:

2) The wages of **sin** is **death** (21:6)

Now we need to be careful not to downplay the sin of these Israelites. They weren’t just criticizing the chef’s food. **Verse 5** says that they “spoke against God and against Moses.” That was a big no-no.

And so now, these snakes are running loose in the camp and people are dying left and right. What are they going to do? **Imagine yourself as one of these Israelites right here. Your friend who just got bit is swelling up with venomous poison and is dying right in front of you. Your kids are being bit. Your spouse is full of snake venom. Your camp is in total disarray and the smell of death is in the air. What are you going to do?**

Well here’s what *they* did. And they did right!

I think we can be really hard on the Israelites when we read the OT. I think we can be really judgmental as Gentiles 3,500 years after these wilderness wanderings. But how about we just applaud them for doing right here.

What did they do? Well according to **verse 7**, they repented.

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.*

Listen, church. One of the most powerful acknowledgements you can make before Almighty God is to acknowledge your sin. Do you know how powerful that is? We call it confession. And confession unleashes the favor of God on your life!

Just say it. Just confess it. "I've sinned." Some people go their whole lives without acknowledging that reality before God. And they never get to experience the grace that God gives to those who repent.

We should applaud these Israelites for doing the right thing in the wilderness. They repented. Maybe they've learned a thing or two from the mistakes of their parents.

They don't say, "This isn't fair God; the punishment doesn't fit the crime."

They don't say, "I'm a really good person. Why would God do this to me? We don't deserve this. We're not as bad as those Canaanites."

And they don't say this either, "You know I'd rather die than confess my sin before God. Come on snakes. Bite me! I don't care!"

They don't say that either. What do they say? **"We have sinned!" "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord."** They repent.

Here's a third universal truth from Numbers 21:4-9:

3) The proper response to our human sinfulness is **repentance** (21:7)

Listen, we're all sinners. We've all fallen short of the glory of God. Here's the good news concerning that, God only saves sinner. Are you happy that that's the case? The wages of sin is death. And therefore the only proper posture before a righteous God is repentance.

By the way repentance doesn't end after you get saved. There's a posture of repentance that continues even after you get saved. And it's essential to God's ongoing work of sanctification in your life.

Now watch what happens next. God's going to save these Israelites in **Numbers 21**, but his method for saving them here is... how do I put this?... unconventional.

Watch what happens.

⁸And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole,

"What? Really? You want me to make an image of the thing that's killing all the people?"

"Yes, I do."

and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it [this serpent on a stick] shall live."⁹ So Moses [who sometimes argues with God but not this time] 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.

The end! That's the story! It's totally anticlimactic. Because after this, they just go onto their next thing.

"Shouldn't they do some penance, Lord? Shouldn't they walk on hot coals or something? Should they, I don't know, have to cook the snakes and eat them or something like that as a form of punishment?" No, no, no, no, no, no. God says, **"Just look!" "Just look to this bronze serpent and you'll live."**

And then in **verse 10**, they're off to their next destination. No explanation. No commentary on what happened. Just another cosmic encounter with God in the wilderness! Just another mystery that won't be unveiled completely until Christ comes 1500 years later. What in the world was that all about? Why is this in the Bible?

Here's why it is in the Bible. Here's the truth that it elucidates. And here's what it foreshadows in the coming of Christ. #4.

4) God responds to repentance by providing **salvation** (21:8-9)

What is **Numbers 21:4-9**? Well, let me describe it this way. It's the gospel in six verses of the OT.

It's interesting to me how this story has had more broad-ranging influence than you might have guessed. There are a number of places where the symbol of a snake and a pole are used in the medical field. Did you know that? Here's an example of that.



How many of you have seen a symbol like this before? This insignia here is almost a universal symbol for healing in the medical community. You'll see it in medical schools, in ambulances, on EMS uniforms, etc. etc. It's almost a universal symbol for healing. Have you ever thought about that? A snake! A snake! Why not an aloe vera plant or something like that? Because snakes are disgusting and gross. And they are killers. Why would you use a killer as a symbol of healing?

Well the reason is that the Bible has more impact on our society than people even realize sometimes. And this insignia is a direct reflection of that and this text from Numbers 21.

But what's interesting to me is that even though the ailment was a physical ailment among the Israelites in Numbers 21, (I mean they were literally poisoned by venomous snakes), the remedy for their sickness wasn't medicinal. It was spiritual. It was a spiritual anti-venom for their physical ailment that God supplied to them. That reality is almost totally lost on the medical community today that still utilizes that insignia.

And here's the reality concerning humanity that this whole story illustrates. Here's the sickness that no doctor or medicine or vaccine will cure. **All of humanity is spiritually speaking snake-bit. We are all injected with a toxin that will ultimately destroy us. And God in his mercy provides the anti-venom for us.**

It's not found in penance. It's not found in good works. It's not purged from us in purgatory. There's no vile of antidote out there that you will find on your own. The anti-venom is found in the Son of Man, Jesus Christ, who like the bronze serpent in the wilderness, was lifted up on a pole, and whoever looks to him, whoever believes in him, is purged of their deadly toxins and receives eternal life. That's the gospel. That's the gospel.

That's what Jesus links together in **John 3**. Jesus alludes to his own crucifixion with this story even before he is crucified. He knew what was going to happen. And he knew how the sins of the world would be atoned. He would be lifted up on a cross and everyone who looks to him would be saved, just like Moses's bronze serpent was lifted up in the wilderness.

Now here's some food for thought. Why a snake? Why is Jesus foreshadowed in the OT with this image of a snake? I mean let's face it—snakes are disgusting creatures. They were unclean in the OT. They are slimy, slithery, ugly, repulsive, dangerous creatures. Everyone hates snakes... **not just Indiana Jones**. Everyone hates snakes. And people who like snakes are, let's face it, weird. They're weird!

Why would Jesus Christ, the perfect Lamb of God (lambs are pretty and cute and white and wooly and cuddly... I get the Lamb thing), the Son of God, be typified and prefigured as a snake on a pole?

I mean, didn't Satan take the form of a serpent when he tempted Adam and Even in the Garden of Eden? Why would Jesus be typified as a serpent? Why would Jesus be linked in any tangible way with Satan?

Well, I think, that's exactly the point. That was the moment in time where humanity as a whole became snake-bit. That's where sin took over and poisoned all of us.

And so what did Christ do? Well the answer to that is found in **2 Corinthians 5:21** where it says that **"He became sin who knew no sin."** Let me put it this way, **"He became snake-ish to save those who were snake-bit, so that we might become the righteousness of God."**

2 Corinthians 5:21 says as follows, "For our sake, he [God the Father] made him [Jesus, the Son] who had no sin to be sin..."

He didn't make Christ sinful! God the Father didn't make Christ sinful! Christ was perfect. He was sinless. He had to be sinless as the spotless Lamb of God. He didn't make him sinful; He made him "sin." He made him absorb the sinfulness and the penalty of mankind into his body!

"... he made him who had no sin to be sin ... for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

How awesome is that? And that's why Jesus says in **John 3**,

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.

Here's my question for you: **"Do you have eternal life?" "Have you been born again?" "Have you fixed your gaze on the Son of Man lifted up on that cross and said 'I believe.' 'I believe.'"**

Charles Spurgeon wrote in his autobiography, "Like when the bronze serpent in the wilderness was lifted up, the people only looked and were healed, so it was with me. I had been waiting to do fifty things in order to be saved. All I had to do was look to Jesus Christ!"

Have you looked to Jesus Christ? Have you believed in his finished work upon the cross as the payment for your sin? That's the only way to salvation.

And we commemorate that now by taking the Lord's Supper together.