

## Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> October 2015 AM The bronze snake - Numbers 21v1-11

### **Title: The bronze snake - Numbers 21v1-11**

**Purpose:** In this message we see a) "**The Lack**" and b) "**The Look**". By demonstrating our constitutional lack due to our fallen nature we can help people to have reason why they need to go on to Look - that is look to Jesus for the spiritual healing that they need.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Q. Do you ever feel that you are just going round in circles?

Q. That essentially you are no further forward than you were this time last year?

**For the people of God** that we have been following, from the book of Exodus through now into the book of Numbers, we have seen that **they are now locked into a pattern of 40 years of wandering in the desert**, 40 years of just going around and around and never arriving.

Of course this is something **incredibly futile, remarkably depressing** and all because they **refused to take God at His word**, all because they would not trust God to take them into the promised land and give it to them.

Last week - Numbers 19

Now last week we were in Numbers 19 and as soon as you turn the page into Chapter 20 we are going to lose two of Israel's great leaders Miriam and her brother Aaron. And what this tells us is that, as far as the **OLD GENERATION OF ISRAELITES GOES - WE ARE AT THE END OF THE LINE**. (And we probably \*don't\* go AHHH!!)

This morning - Numbers 21

This morning we are taking the story up from Numbers 21 and this means that really, from here on in, we are seeing **THE NEW GENERATION AT WORK**.

**And immediately we see something of a change** - let me read the opening 3 verses:

Numbers 21 verses 1-3 "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. Then Israel made this vow to the Lord: "If you will deliver these people into our hands, we will totally destroy their cities." 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."

Their first real test

It was **their first real test - their first slice of action** and it **does not go their way** - some of them get captured - if ever there was an early challenge then this was it and basically they pass it with flying colours.

Perhaps they said to themselves:

"We are \*not\* going to be like our parents - all their disobedience and lack of faith - see how far it got them!!  
No! We're \*not\* going to let this get us down - we're going to call upon the Lord, rely on Him and He will help us!"

What a decisive victory God gave them:

- not only did they get victory - recover all that they had lost
- but also - they completely destroyed them - so much so that they called the place Hormah - which in Hebrew means 'destruction'.

It is worth pointing out that in **Verse 3** where the NIV says that they **"completely destroyed them"** - it more literally says that they: **"devoted them and their cities to destruction"**.

In doing this the Israelites were choosing to hand over all the spoils in this case to the LORD - and God honours them for this.

(And this, of course, is a **consistent Scripture principle** that **God honours those who honour Him** - or as the NT phrases it: **'If we draw near to Him, He will draw near to us'** - there is a wonderful and gracious "reciprocity" with God)

### Bodes well

So you have to say: **"THIS BODES WELL - THIS IS A GOOD START"**.

**Just perhaps**, this NEW GENERATION (that Joshua is soon to take into the promised land) have learned a few lessons and have really left behind so much of what took their parents into their graves.

### Not so quick

Well let's read the next 3 verses:

**Numbers 21 Verses 4-6** " They travelled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!"

Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died."

And I guess we all sigh!!

- Q. Just how many times are these Israelites going to go off on a rant, complaining about pretty well everything in sight?

Perhaps it was the direction that got to them. They were headed on a route that was taking them, once again, back towards the Red Sea, back towards the land that they had emerged out of 40 years before! And so they grow impatient.

### We see ourselves here

And perhaps - we see ourselves here.

We are conscious that seem to be **CYCLES** in our lives and here in **Numbers 21** we are **presented with a cycle, with a pattern, that may be one that has some familiarity to you.**

This cycle is one that has 4 parts in total which operate across a couple of stages - so I have two points which map onto the two stages of this cycle:

## **1] STAGE #1 - THE LACK (which I am going to subtitle) "Sinning & Suffering"**

Now around the world there are thousands of **building, vehicles** and **items of clothing** which have **A PARTICULAR INSIGNIA**

- this is one which has **A SNAKE COILING AROUND A STICK** -

Q. Now does anybody know what that stands for?

YES - It is a **symbol for healing** - a symbol **commonly used by the medical profession**:

- Some people would trace the symbol back to the Greek god of healing Aesclepius
- but it would seem from this chapter here in **Numbers 21** that it has somewhat older roots as the LORD God instructs Moses to fashion a bronze snake and then put it onto a pole so that people may look at it and be healed.

So **Numbers 21** is a story about healing and that means that it is also a story about sickness.

Now you might think, when you first read the start of this chapter, that this story is very much one of stupidity.

You would say: **"How could these people just be so dumb -when are they going to learn their lesson?!"**

But these repeated bouts of complaining against Moses and complaining against God and all He has provided for them are clearly SYMPTOMATIC - there is evidently something more FUNDAMENTAL, something more CONSTITUTIONAL going on within them.

Q. Now how do we know that they are sick?

Well just look at their situation and what they are saying:

**Verse 5** "...Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!"

Now of course you could argue - "Well it's JUST FRUSTRATION" - but clearly this is not any one-off - we've heard this sort of language in Exodus and Numbers on numerous occasions.

Just think about the manna that they are describing as miserable food - the fact was that this has been literally **THEIR LIFELINE** - every day since they have left the borders of Egypt God has rained down for them the "bread of heaven".

- It is a faithful provision - God had never withdrawn it so that they would starve
- It is a miraculous provision - it comes every single morning without fail except for the Sabbath day when they rest from going out to gather it up
- It is a beautiful provision - God ensured that they would have a really pleasant, really flexible foodstuff that would properly sustain them.

Imagine if He had given them candy floss instead of manna! It just might have been nice for an hour or two, maybe even for a day or two - but anyone is going to get totally sick of it after a very short time.

This sickness in from the beginning

To demonstrate that this "sickness", this internal disorder or dysfunction, is something very real (and hence the symptoms of always ending up complaining) - let me take us back to the beginning - let's go back to the very Garden of Eden and Paradise.

Adam and Eve have everything - it is a perfect environment, they live lives of delight and unbounded pleasure. God says to them: "You have everything but just don't eat the fruit of this one single solitary tree - the tree of the knowledge of good and evil because on the day you eat of that tree you will surely die."

And along comes the evil one, the devil in the form of a serpent and he says to them: "You know what, God is keeping the best from you!! He doesn't really have your best in mind, in fact, He is keeping you down."

The poison of the serpent starts to take effect as Eve and then Adam both become deceived and start to receive the lie.

### Sin because we are a sinner

There is an important distinction that we need to grasp here - let me put it this way:

- we do sin (so things like perpetual grumbling, complaining, dissatisfaction, continual impatience etc.) BECAUSE we are sinners
- IT IS \*NOT\* that we are merely labelled sinners BECAUSE we do sins

It is easy to get the cause and effect the wrong way around:

- our SIN NATURE, our FALLEN/BROKEN NATURE is the CAUSE and the EFFECT is that we COMMIT MANY & VARIOUS SINS.
- \*IT IS NOT\* - that because we do tend to COMMIT MANY & VARIOUS SINS that we should be thus called SINNERS.

\*\*\* I'm taking time to emphasise this point because if we don't realise that there is a DEEPER more underlying problem then we won't really see things in the right light and therefore we won't really take things very seriously \*\*\*

### THE LACK - Part 2 - Suffering

Now in each of the 2 stages - "**the lack**" and also "**the look**" - we have 2 things that are tend to be like peas in a pod, things that are like the 2 sides of a coin that will typically be found together.

And for SINNING this is twinned with SUFFERING.

### The suffering

Now I don't particularly want to dwell much on this - because I suspect I don't need to persuade you of the fact that when you sin you tend then to start to suffer.

But one question that this passage does tend to raise is the particular judgment that God brings upon the people here in Numbers 21.

**Verse 6** reads: "Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died."

And we might say: Q. Well is that really very proportionate? Q. Is this really very fitting under these circumstances?

Let me just give some answer to that before we move on to THE LOOK:

- FIRST - think about what the serpent, the snake, represents:

It is a very **POIGNANT IMAGE**, it is a **SYMBOL LOADED WITH MEANING** - because you see all along with these Israelites (and also by extension with you and me) there is a pull, there is an inward urge to go back to Egypt.

As **Verse 5** says: "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert?"

Basically we were happy there and we would like to go back to our old ways.

For the Egyptians, the snake was one of their prime symbols, it was something venerated and perhaps you recall that royalty would wear an upright spitting cobra on their headpieces.

- And SECOND, even more fundamentally - it is a SIGNPOST back to the real origin of the problem - it takes us back to Genesis 3 and the serpent who deceived Eve in the garden.

We need to realise that God is not Himself becoming merely impatient with the people and thus lashing out at them - He is not simply saying to Himself "Well I haven't tried this punishment with them yet - so let it be snakes this time!"

OK - let's move on from the darkness of the passage to the light from "THE LACK" (Sinning and Suffering) to #2:

## 2] STAGE #2 - THE LOOK "Searching & Salvation"

As I have been trying to point out there is **AN AGE-OLD PATTERN HERE:**

- and this pattern is *\*not\** just limited to a particular people in a particular place
- this is *\*not\** just a Numbers 21 thing and for one easy demonstration of this we could simply jump on 3 books to the book of Judges.

### The Judges cycle

Now if you were to only remember 2 solitary things about the Book of Judges in the Bible then perhaps they would be these:

- **#1** - that this book is **all about 12 different Judges** (or Deliverers as they really are) and of these 12 - we get detailed accounts of 6 of them (you know people like **Gideon** and **Jephthah** and **Samson**).
- **#2** - that this book is a book that **shows us a pattern** that is **repeated with everyone of these 6 major Judges**.

Q. And what is that pattern? Q. What is that cycle?

Well it is **that same 4 step pattern** that we are observing here in Numbers 21:

- they SIN

- they SUFFER

THEN EVENTUALLY, when they've had enough:

- they SEARCH for God

- & they find SALVATION (and in Judges **that Salvation** comes through **the particular provision of a Deliverer**)

### So back to Numbers

So back to Numbers:

Verse 7 takes the story on, (and again I don't want to spend a lot of time on this), because I think we are already familiar and probably accepting OR persuaded about this aspect of things:

"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."

**They turn away and repent** of what they have done, their suffering has woken them up to the reality of what they are doing and so they come to God via Moses who is their intercessor and **they cry out to God for His forgiveness and deliverance.**

#### An immediate response

It is wonderful to see that God does not dilly-dally about His response.

I'm so thankful that God is not like us!!

(You know how it can be with us when someone hurts us and then comes back and says sorry - we can so easily want to take our time in forgiving them and restoring things back to the way they were).

But God responds immediately - and just as the punishment was fitting so also is the particular means of deliverance - let me read the final two verses:

Verses 8&9 "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." 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, he lived."

#### Q. Why fitting?

Now we ask the question - Q. So why is a snake on a pole fitting?

Well just as a snake was fitting:

- because it was a symbol of their desire to go back to Egypt
- because it was a signpost back to the garden of Eden, to Satan, and to the poison of sin with which they were sick

Also the bronze snake on a pole is fitting too:

- because here we see **the cause of the problem transfixed upon a pole**  
- it is as though **he is transfixed upon the rod of God's power**

Remember God's words to the snake after that first sin:

Genesis 3 verse 15 " And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."

Now we know that the people are sick from the snake bites, the bites are deadly because the poison is deadly and if anyone is to live then there has to be medicine, there has to be some anti-venom applied.

#### Last week - absorbing sin

I don't know if you can cast your mind back to last week and Numbers 19 - this was where we had another very symbol-laden procedure - this was the Red Heifer and perhaps you remember that in order to make the cleansing provision a clean person had to be involved in the making and what happened was that that person would become unclean.

And what we said was that here we see that for the one dealing with sin there must be an absorption of sin.

And it is no different here - if you want a picture for this then imagine a child getting a fatal snake bite and then immediately a parent, an onlooker takes hold of the child and sucks really hard on the area where the poison went in and sucks all of it

out into their own mouth.

There is a transfer of the deadly poison - one becomes well and the other now becomes sick unto death.

The snakes head is crushed - BUT the heel of the Saviour is struck - the Saviour does not come away unscathed.

### The Look

Now we called this second stage THE LOOK and given that the other side of this coin was THE LACK (where we have considered the sickness, the poison of sin) you might think that we would need something a bit more energetic - perhaps something like THE LEAP!! (Whereby, perhaps, man can make one big leap in order to extricate himself from his dire problem).

Fortunately for us the NT sheds light on this passage, in just the same way that last time the book of Hebrews shed light on the realities of the unique Red Heifer cleansing sacrifice.

One of the much loved stories of the Gospel of John is that one about Nicodemus. There he is, he comes at night most likely for fear of his colleagues and he wants to know how to get saved and Jesus tells him that unless he is born again, born of the Spirit of God - he will never enter heaven.

One commentator (Tim Keller) puts it like this:

"...Jesus is not just calling Nicodemus to get forgiven; he's calling him to be born again. The reason for that is, and it's very appropriate to use the [Numbers 21](#) reference, you don't need only to be forgiven; you also need to be repaired, because you're not only guilty, you're also damaged. You don't only need to be pardoned; you need a new birth."

And then we get a back-reference to this passage here in [Numbers 21](#) - let me read it:

[John 3 verses 14&15](#) " Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."

And it is here that we suddenly see how the poison of sin is actually dealt with, who it is that actually absorbs the venom of sin for us.

### Sin cannot be magic'd away

Q. I don't know if you realise this **BUT - SIN cannot be magic'd away?**

And so Jesus here is letting us know that the snake being lifted up onto that pole as a way of salvation for those bitten with the poison of sin - was nothing more than a PLACEHOLDER for Him. The bronze snake was SIGNPOSTING Jesus being hoisted onto the cross to absorb the deadly sin of mankind that whoever believes on him should not perish but have eternal life.

**YES - SIN cannot be magic'd away**

**BUT - SIN has been taken away - by dying the death we rightly should have died - his heel was struck, he died but didn't stay dead.**

### How do we take the medicine

So: Q. How do we take the medicine? Q. How do we get the healing? Q. How do we get repaired through being born again?

Well the answer, on first sight, is surprising - we are told and the people in Moses' day were simply instructed to look to the snake on the pole and then the healing would flow.

The reality is that there is never anything a child does in order to be born - this is the magnificence of Christian faith that it is all about DONE (what Christ has done) and \*NOT\* about DO (what supposedly we might vainly attempt).

### Charles Spurgeon

Let me finish with an illustration - and it concerns Charles Spurgeon, the great 19<sup>th</sup> century Baptist preacher in London:

His autobiography tells how he was converted. He was a young man. He was looking to find God, but he didn't understand things. He was sort of in a spiritual search mode. He didn't really understand, and he started visiting churches.

In January of 1850, he was trying to get to church. He was walking, of course, and there was an enormous snowstorm. It was so huge he couldn't get to where he wanted to go, so he turned down a side alley and went into the Primitive Methodist chapel. He says he got in there and there were only 12 people present because everybody else was snowed out, and the minister had been snowed out.

He said some poor guy (I think he was a shoemaker) who had not prepared anything ... He was a lay person. He wasn't a minister. Somebody said, "You go up and give the sermon," so without any preparation he got up, and he stood in the pulpit, and he opened the Bible to [Isaiah 45:22](#). The text was, "Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth ..." So he began.

"My dear friends, this is a simple text indeed. It says to be saved we only need to look. It ain't lifting your foot or your finger; it's just look. You needn't have gone to college to look. Even a child can look. You needn't be worth a thousand pounds a year to look. Anyone can look. Ah! But the text says, 'Look unto me ...' Aye now! Many of you are looking to your selves. It's no use looking there. The text says, 'Look unto me ...' "

Spurgeon says, "Then the good man lifted his arms to the heavens and began to cry. 'The Lord says, "Look unto me. I am sweating great drops of blood. Look unto me. I am hanging on the cross. Look unto me. I am dead and buried. Look unto me. I rise again. Look unto me. I ascend to heaven. Look unto me. I am sitting at the Father's right hand. O, look unto me.'"

Spurgeon says, "After the good man had gone on for about 10 minutes like this as long as he could, he noticed me sitting under the gallery and with so few present recognized me to be a stranger. Fixing his eyes on me he said, 'Young man, you look miserable, and you always will be miserable, miserable in life and miserable in death, until you obey my text. Young man, look. Look to Jesus Christ. You have nothing to do but look and live.' "

Spurgeon says, "The blow struck home, and I saw it at once. I had been waiting to do 50 things to find God, but when I heard that word, "Look," the cloud finally was gone. Like when the brazen serpent was lifted up, the people only looked and were healed. So it was with me. I looked and looked and looked until I almost could have looked my eyes away."

## **CONCLUSION**

Let me ask you this morning:

Q. This cycle of SINNING and SUFFERING - of SEARCHING and SALVATION is it one that you've ever noticed?

- **PERHAPS you are in the FIRST SEGMENT** - that part we called "**THE LACK**" (that sinning that suffering) and you are aware of the poison of sin in your life and you know that ultimately it will take you all the way down to the grave - for surely the wages of sin is death in the final analysis.



Q. What can you do? Well Moses would tell you to look to the one on the pole and be healed  
And Jesus would tell you to look to Him - lifted up for you and to be born again

- **PERHAPS you are in the SECOND SEGMENT** - and this is "THE LOOK".

Remember that this is \*not\* "THE LEAP" - it is not a leap of faith (it is merely a step of faith)  
AND it is not a leap of personal activity whereby you achieve your own  
spiritual re-birth.

It is nothing short of a simple look of faith AND it is nothing beyond a straightforward look of faith.

I don't know if it ever occurred to you that for many of the snake-bitten Israelites who were in the agonising throes of death, they would have been subject to high fever, to seizures and to paralysis - the only left in their power to do was "TO LOOK".

- **JUST POSSIBLY** for you this is **ENDING UP AS A CYCLE** - there is **LACK** and then you **LOOK** and before you know it you are back to the **LACK SEGMENT** all over again.

You need to learn to rest - there is nothing tiring about simply A LOOK - never replace THE LOOK with THE LEAP!!

Q. Tell me have you looked?

Let us pray ... AMEN