

Look & Live – Numbers 21:4-9

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Stand & Read the Text, Pray

B. An Example

1. The Apostle Paul told the Corinthians that the *story of Israel*, especially the Exodus, their wandering around the wilderness for 40 years, & their entrance into the Promised Land were all an example for us, today.
2. 1 Cor. 10:1-11 . . .

¹Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, ²all were baptized into Moses in the cloud & in the sea, ³all ate the same spiritual food, ⁴& all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, & that Rock was Christ.

- a. Paul is saying that there are all kinds of symbols & types of Jesus in these things Israel experienced.

⁵But with most of them God was not well pleased, for *their bodies* were scattered in the wilderness. ⁶Now these things . . .

b. the things Israel experienced - **these things became our examples, to the intent that we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted. ⁷& do not become idolaters as were some of them. As it is written, “*The people sat down to eat & drink, & rose up to play.*”**

- c. He’s referring to that whole sad incident with the golden calf,

⁸Nor let us commit sexual immorality, as some of them did, & in one day twenty-three thousand fell;

- d. we’ll read about this Wednesday night.

⁹nor let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, & were destroyed by serpents; ¹⁰nor complain, as some of them also complained, & were destroyed by the destroyer. ¹¹Now all these things happened to them as examples, & they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.

3. Those who refuse to *learn* from history are doomed to repeat it.
4. But you & I *can* learn from the mistakes of Israel & avoid the trap of unbelief they walked into & suffered for.

II. TEXT

A. Vs. 4-5

⁴Then they journeyed from Mount Hor by the Way of the Red Sea, to go around the I& of Edom; & the soul of the people became very discouraged on the way. ⁵& the people spoke against God & against Moses: “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the

wilderness? For *there is no food & no water, & our soul loathes this worthless bread.*

1. The years of wandering around the wilderness are coming to a rapid conclusion now.
2. Israel is once again at the southern border of the Promised Land.
3. But God doesn't want them to enter the land from the South.
4. They will enter from the east across the Jordan River & right into the very heart of the land.
5. To get there, they will have to go around the lands of Edom & Moab, distant relatives of Israel.
6. God does not want Israel to mess with the Edomites or the Moabites, so He leads them ***around*** their territory.
7. As He does, they have to pass through some of the most dreary & dry places in all the Sinai peninsula.
8. After being on the southern border of Canaan, & seeing the richness of the land spread out before them, the people fall into a deep funk.
9. You see, this is just weeks away from their entrance into the Promised Land.
 - a. the older generation is just about gone, there are just a few of the people God had said would die in the wilderness left alive.
 - b. the new generation is ready to enter & is itching to get to it.
 - c. while they were at Mt. Hor they had hoped they would ***then*** go up & take Canaan.
 - d. but now to be thrust ***back into the desert***, & the worst conditions they had known, moved them to a serious depression.
10. They had to blame their condition on someone – & who else was there but God Who was leading them & Moses His spokesman?
11. So once again, the grumbling began!
 - a. & though this is a new generation, they had learned well from their parents.
 - b. they pick up the same mantra spouted by them 38 years before . . .

“Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?

- c. this is exactly what the previous generation had said time & again in compliant against Moses! But it was so untrue!
 - d. God had ***liberated*** Israel from slavery in Egypt.
 - e. & their destination was blessed freedom in a rich land they could call their own.
 - f. it was ***their own unbelief*** & refusal to enter that had resulted in their being in the Wilderness.
 - g. the only reason the elder generation was dying in the wilderness was because they had said they would ***rather*** die there than enter Canaan!
 - h. now they are blaming that on God & Moses!
12. Then they say . . .

For *there is no food & no water, & our soul loathes this worthless bread.*

- a. what's this? No food & water? If that were true, then they would be dead & there would be no one to make this complaint.
- b. they had ***both*** food & water – provided by the gracious hand of God.
- c. God gave them all the water they needed at every place they camped.

- d. & every morning they collected the manna, a nutritious meal that kept them strong for 40 years!
 - e. but now they're expressing their *revulsion* at what God had provided so faithfully for them.
13. It seems nothing's changed. The words of the new generation sound just like the old.
 14. Has the plan of raising up a new generation that has the grit & mettle to conquer Canaan failed?
 15. No, it hasn't. But the new generation has been marked & influenced by the previous generation, just as children often duplicate the habits of their parents. [cutting eggs]
 16. They need to be shown that they *are* different, that the last 38 years have fashioned them into a *different people* than their parents.
 17. And that's why God does what He does in v. 6 . . .

B. V. 6

6^o So the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, & they bit the people; & many of the people of Israel died.

1. The word 'fiery' here refers to the *color* of these snakes.
 - a. even today this area is well-known as being the habitat of all kinds of reptiles.
 - b. the Bedouin who are the only ones to visit this area, tend to avoid it because of the many venomous snakes.
 2. As Israel traveled through this region, bitterly complaining against God & Moses, their camp became infested with these venomous serpents.
 3. This seems awful harsh – but is it, really?
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4. All parents learn a special language called "Parentese." Let me prove it to you. I'll say the first part of a phrase, & you complete it. These are things all parents say at some time or another.
 - a. when you're about to get disciplined, Parentese always says, "This is going to hurt me -
 - b. when at the dinner table, "Eat your dinner, don't you know there are -
 - c. when you're in trouble, your mother says, "Just wait until -
 - d. when you're trying to get out of trouble & say that everyone else is doing it, parents say, "Well, if some one told you to -
 - e. when you go to your dad & ask him for some cash, he comes back with, "Do you think that money -
 - f. "Your room looks like -
 - g. "Would you please close the door. Do you think we -
 - h. "Don't run with those scissors. You could poke -
 5. Parents all seem to speak the same language in the raising of their children because there are so many silly things children do that have to be dealt with.
 6. So when a child is whining & crying & complaining, you will often hear a parent say, "If you don't quit your crying, I'm gonna' give you -
 7. This is what God is doing with the fiery serpents.
 8. He's giving them a serious "wake-up call" about their attitude.
 - a. yes, their surroundings weren't the most cheery & yes, their diet was a

- bit bland.
- b. but they were on the road to blessing & God was taking care of their daily needs.
 - c. for 40 years now He has had an absolutely *flawless record of faithfulness* – proven to them on a *daily* basis.
 - d. don't forget, at any time they needed proof of God's presence, protection, & provision – all they had to do was look up & see the cloud covering them.
9. These people, this new generation needed to be delivered from *the habit of complaint* that had been their parents'.
 10. They needed to realize that their *attitude* was not determined by their outward circumstances but by their faith.
 11. And realize it they did –

C. V. 7

⁷Therefore the people came to Moses, & said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD & against you; pray to the LORD that He take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people.

1. In the light of the judgment of the venomous snakes, they realized they'd been *wrong* in their attitude & complaint. This snapped them back to reality!
 - a. God *had* provided for them & He *was* leading them.
 - b. the road was tough, sure; but it *was* the Road to Promise & Blessing.
2. They confessed their sin & asked for forgiveness.
3. Moses then prayed for them – & the Lord answered.

D. Vs. 8-9

⁸Then the LORD said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent, & set it on a pole; & it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live.” ⁹So Moses made a bronze serpent, & put it on a pole; & so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived.

1. Notice that God *didn't take the serpents out of the camp*.
 2. He told Moses to raise a pole high over the camp of Israel & to place on it the likeness of one of the venomous snakes.
 3. If someone was bitten, all they had to do was to look up at the serpent on the pole, & he/she would be healed.
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4. Why did God answer their prayer this way instead of just removing the snakes & healing the bitten?
 5. Because this was a crucial moment of *separation* in the life of the nation & people of God.
 6. Remember, this is just a short time before they enter Canaan.
 - a. & at this point there are still a few of the elders who need to die off.
 - b. there are even some of the younger generation who've taken up the mantle of unbelief of the previous generation - they too must be dealt with.
 7. Just as it had been a simple choice to grumble & complain & make false charges against God & Moses, so now it would be about a choice; to look up &

be saved, or to refuse & die.

- a. those who were genuinely repentant & realized the problem was with them & not Moses or God, would look up as a sign of their repentance.
- b. those who refused to accept their guilt would not & so would perish in their unbelief.

E. The Example

1. As Paul said in 1 Cor. 10, all of this speaks to us about *our faith*, our identity as the people of God.
2. Just as Israel was delivered from bondage to slavery in Egypt by the blood of the Passover lamb, so you & I have been set free from bondage to sin & death by the blood of Jesus Christ, the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.
3. God provided food & water to sustain Israel.
 - a. in the same way, God provides spiritual refreshment for us in Christ, our fountain of living water.
 - b. our spiritual bread is His word, which like the manna we need to collect & be nourished by each day.
4. God led them by the pillar of cloud & fire, just as He leads us by His Spirit.
5. Their destination was the Promised Land, ours is the Spirit-filled life.
 - a. and just as the older generation of unbelief had to die off before they could enter the promise,
 - b. so we must put off the old man, the old nature dominated by unbelief before we can enter into the fullness of the Spirit.
6. Understand that God has an awesome plan for your life. Jer 29:11 is a promise *for you* . . .

For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace & not of evil, to give you a future & a hope.

7. But that future & hope are a promise that is only entered by faith, a faith that has left behind the old & embraced the new life Christ rose for.
8. Here's how Paul puts it in Eph. 4 –
. . . Put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, & be renewed in the spirit of your mind, . . . put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness & holiness. [Vs. 22-24]
9. What I want you to see today, is that God will engineer your course in life so that what is the old nature dies out,
 - a. that sinful, selfish, me-centered thing, that which balks at believing God,
 - b. the old habits of the past that are incompatible with your new identity in Christ must fall away –
 - c. only then can He bring you into the glory & blessing of the new nature which abides in Christ & enjoys the fullness of the Spirit.
10. For Israel, it took 40 years before the old died off & the new was liberated from their worthless habits.
11. How long will it be before *you put off* the old nature, the doubtful habits, the attitude of unbelief?
 - a. 40 years? 40 months? 40 weeks?

- b. be assured, Israel didn't spend one day longer than they needed to purge out what was hindering them from entering in.
 - c. when the nation was fully committed to the Lord & walking by faith, on that very day, they crossed Jordan & entered in.
 - d. what was true for them is true for you & I.
 - e. God will not keep us in the wilderness one second longer than we need to be there to realize we are there **BY OUR OWN CHOICE!**
12. You see, this is what Israel came to realize when the snakes infested their camp. It wasn't **God's fault** as they were complaining. They were in the wilderness because of **their own unbelief**.
13. Their discouragement, disappointment, & the dreariness & dryness of their surroundings were the direct result of their own foolish choices.
14. People do this today – they're depressed & dry, they feel like they're in a dark & dreary place – & they blame God for it!
- a. or as Israel blamed Moses, they will blame others; their pastor, their parents, their boss.
 - b. they blame anyone & everyone but themselves.
14. There is an unalterable law of the Spirit – what you sow is what you reap.
- a. Galatians 6:7-8 says -

7 Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. 8 For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life.

- b. Israel had sown unbelief & rebellion – she reaped the wilderness & depression.
 - c. if you find yourself in a dry wilderness today & are discouraged, depressed, complaining, blaming your problems on someone else;
 - d. God, the pastor, your mate, your parents, your kids, your boss, the government,
 - e. wake up & realize the problem lies with you!
 - f. it's **your** choices that have landed you where you are.
 - g. Proverbs 13:15 says that **“The way of the unfaithful is hard.”**
15. Many years ago when the founders of AA began to lay out the truths that would help people stuck in bondage to alcohol break free, they realized the very first thing was to accept reality & admit personal need & responsibility.
16. If you want out of the wilderness, out of the darkness & despair, then stop blaming everyone else & admit the problem is you!

17. Notice what the children of Israel said in v. 5 –

“Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?”

- a. God **hadn't** brought them out of Egypt to kill them in the wilderness.
- b. He brought them out of Egypt **TO BRING THEM INTO** the Promised Land.
- c. they could never go **into blessing** if they weren't first freed **from bondage!**
- d. we can't come into this building without leaving our cars.
- e. we can't visit Hawaii unless we leave CA.
- f. to **enter** one place, we must first **leave** another.

- g. if we would enter the fullness of the Spirit-filled life, we must leave behind the flesh-dominated life.
- 18. The problem with the people of Israel was while God had *taken them out of* Egypt, He could not take *Egypt out of* the people. They must chose to let Egypt go.
- 19. In the same way today, many carnal Christians want the goodies of heaven in the sweet by & by, but they want all the lustful attractions of the world right now.
 - a. they see Christianity as a kind of spiritual fire insurance, prudent planning for *after they die*.
 - b. but faith in God rarely if ever impacts their lives today, right now, in the work-a-day world of 9 to 5.
 - c. they try to maintain a balancing act of keeping one foot in the things of God and another in the world.
- 20. Then they complain that church is boring. Bible study is dry!
 - a. "I'm tired of reading the Bible. I'm weary of praying, of worship."
 - b. "it's always the same old thing. My soul loathes this worthless bread!"
- 21. Like the children of Israel, the carnal Christian lacks contentment & blames his/her unrest on some fault, some lack in the church or in God.
- 22. When I read the words of Israel in v. 5 – "Our soul abhors this manna" I'm flabbergasted!
 - a. how could something that was provided so miraculously be judged so wrongly, so harshly?
 - b. then I'm reminded that when a person makes a *choice* to live in the flesh, even that which is a miracle of the goodness of God will be *despised*.

III. CONCLUSION

A. A Choice

1. God didn't just remove the serpents and heal the bitten because this judgment was a crucial point in preparing Israel to enter the Promise and lay hold of the blessing.
2. Those who stubbornly held on to their unbelief and rebellion needed to be purged out before the faithful could enter in.
3. So God told Moses to make a replica of one of the serpents and lift it high over the camp.
4. When anyone was bitten, all they had to do was look on the replica, and they would be healed.
5. Now, this was a simple thing; just look and be healed. And it was precisely this *simplicity* that would mark the distinction between the true & the false, the rebels & the faithful.
 - a. the rebels would say, "How can looking at a stupid bronze snake on a pole help me? That's ridiculous! I'm too intellectually sophisticated to believe something so absurd." They *wouldn't* look, & so would die.
 - c. the faithful would say, "God has provided a means for my healing. All I have to do is look at what God has said will bring the cure & I'll be fine. Excellent!" They *would* look, and find relief.
6. In this, we see a marvelous *picture of the cross*, in fact one that Jesus Himself

pointed to in John 3.

- a. you remember the story: One night while in Jerusalem, a ruler from among the Jews came secretly to Jesus with some serious questions about salvation.
- b. his name was Nicodemus.
- c. Jesus told him that unless he was born-again he could not even see the kingdom of God, which was every good Jew's chief aspiration.
- d. after clarifying what He meant by being born-again, Jesus said this in John 3:14-15 . . .

14As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, **15**that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.

7. Jesus used this story we're looking at in Numbers as the background for what would happen to Him at the cross.
 - a. just as Moses lifted up the serpent on a pole and all a person who was bitten and dying had to do was look and be saved,
 - b. Jesus says that He will be lifted up on the cross and all a person who's been bitten by sin & lies under God's judgment has to do is look to Him, believing His death *pays* for their sin, and he/she too will be saved.
8. Then John adds this, v. 16 -

16For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

9. Listen – God loves the world & every person in it!
10. And in His love He honors our “*power to choose*”, that God-given attribute & capability that makes us human – free-will!
11. It was God's love that moved him to make the first tree- the tree of the Knowledge of Good & Evil that was in the Garden.
 - a. Adam & Eve had been given the power of choice so that the love they expressed to God & one another could be a genuine & free thing.
 - b. love that is *forced* isn't love at all.
 - c. growing up, the girls all had a doll with a string in the back that when it was pulled played a little mini-record that had 11 phrases.
 - d. you never knew what the doll was going to say, but they were always from her limited repertoire of 11 sayings
 - 1) “Let's play. I'm hungry. I'm sleepy.”
 - 2) “Tell me a story. I'm thirsty. I love you.”
 - e. God didn't want a pull-string doll for an eternal companion – a pre-programmed set of empty responses.
 - f. He wanted a being who'd made a free choice to love Him.
 - g. only such a free being could understand & appreciate the greatness of *His* love.
 - h. the tree in the Garden of Eden was the way to make the power of choice *real* – God presented a choice – a real one, & the core & the crux of *all choice* – to love & obey God or to rebel.
 - i. we have no idea how long Adam & Eve exercised choice in obedience &

- love.
- 1) it might have been days –
 - 2) it might have been millennia
- j. all we know is that one day Eve found herself near the tree, with the serpent egging her on to eat.
 - k. we read that she ***looked at the tree*** & her slid into sin began!
 - l. from ever on, the serpent became the symbol of sin.
12. God told Moses to make a replica of the serpent of bronze & hoist it atop a pole over the camp of Israel because He was setting in play a picture of what Christ would later come to do in the cross.
13. But why a ***bronze serpent***?
- a. because the serpent has become the symbol of sin & rebellion against God.
 - b. when Adam & Eve fell, the poison of sin was passed to all of their descendants.
 - c. all of us have been bitten by sin, & all of us will die of it unless we are healed by the remedy God has provided in the cross of Christ.
14. In 2 Corinthians 5:21 we read,
For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.
- a. on the cross, Jesus became sin – He bore the curse & burden for sin.
 - b. in Galatians 3:13 it's put this way –
Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree"),
15. Jesus took your place & my place in judgment.
- a. this is why Moses made the serpent of bronze.
 - b. bronze is the metal associated with ***judgment*** in the Bible.
 - c. bronze was the metal that could withstand fire, so the altar was made of it.
 - d. the serpent spoke of the curse of sin, the bronze spoke of God's judgment on sin.
16. And just as the people of Israel had to look to the serpent on the pole to be delivered from the judgment on their sin & rebellion, so Jesus said that all people would have to do is look to Him and His work on the cross to be saved.

B. Look & Live!

1. Just as God offered Israel a point of choice when they were bitten by the fiery serpents,
2. So He holds forth the same choice today: Look & live, or refuse & die.
3. The people of Israel could not help being bitten by serpents.
 - a. no matter how careful they were, being in the camp of Israel meant an encounter with a venomous snake; it was inevitable.
 - b. once bitten, then a choice would have to be made; look and live, or refuse and die.
 - c. in the same way, all of us have been bitten by sin, and it's poison is working slow but inevitable death through our entire being.
4. We read this story and think how utterly foolish it would have been for a

- person to **not** look.
5. But realize what that look meant for the ancient Israelites.
 - a. it meant they were **admitting** that they'd been bitten by a serpent which was sent as the judgment of God on their sin, & rebellion.
 - b. the look meant they were admitting their error & turning to God for His help because they could not help themselves.
 - c. the look was an admission from the heart that **unless** they looked, they would die.
 - d. that look was nothing less than a look of faith.
 - e. not a blind leap into the dark – a reasoned response to the facts!
 6. We can rightly label those who refused to look as utter fools, but as we do, caution!
 7. For in such a judgment, do we condemn ourselves?
 8. What about you – does the refusal of some of those in the camp of Israel to look at the serpent on the pole strike you as foolish?
 9. Have **you** looked to Jesus? Have you reckoned that His death on the cross paid for **your** sin, or do you think you're okay on your own?
 10. If you think you're okay on your own & don't need Jesus, then let me ask you this,
 - a. why did Jesus come & endure such a heinous torture & death if there was another way to salvation?
 - b. I mean, apparently you've found some other way to heaven, & that means what Jesus did was unnecessary.
 - c. does that sound reasonable to you? Do you really think you are smarter than God - that you know something He doesn't?
 11. There is only one name by which you & I can be saved – Jesus Christ.
 12. Look to Him now & live.