

Jesus and the Bronze Snake (Numbers 21)

Hello, my name is Stephen Sizer. Please open your Bibles to the Book of Numbers. Signs are symbols often without words. Clear signs are instantly recognisable. We use them to educate, to guide, to warn, to instruct, even to intimidate and change behaviour. Common signs can be understood irrespective of your language or your culture. You don't even have to read or write to learn to recognise simple signs. In the Book of Numbers, chapter 16, we see a powerful sign God used to save his people from death. It's a sign we still use today to symbolise somewhere or someone you can go to when you are sick. Above all, it is a sign that points to Jesus and what he would accomplish for us. In Numbers 21 lets observe:

The Sin – the rebellion of God's people.

The Snake – the judgement of God's people.

The Saviour – the deliverance of God's people.

1. The Sin - The Rebellion of God's People

In the Book of Numbers, we find the record of the failure of God's people to go in and possess the land he promised.

They didn't believe God could protect and provide for them, so they wandered in the desert for 40 years. In Numbers 14, God explains why.

“as surely as I live and as surely as the glory of the LORD fills the whole earth, not one of those who saw my glory and the signs I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness but who disobeyed me and tested me ten times—not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their ancestors. No one who has treated me with contempt will ever see it.” (Numbers 14:21-23)

No one who had entered the desert would ever leave it. Only their children, led by Joshua and Caleb, would enter the Promised Land. So here they are wandering around the desert and they begin to moan, again. Numbers 21.

“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 wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!” (Numbers 21:4-5)

What were the people complaining about? God's food. But this was more serious than wanting a different menu. They wanted a change of leadership. They were criticizing God. But they picked the wrong person to criticize. The Book of Hebrews asks,

“Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies perished in the wilderness? And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief.” (Hebrews 3:16-19)

Negative criticism is a killer. We take our eyes off God and his glory and we home in on another person’s faults to hide our own. We drag people down, instead of building them up, and we test God’s patience.

The Sin – the rebellion of God’s people

2. The Snake - the Judgement of God’s People

“Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. 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 21:6-7)

Why snakes? Was God reminding them of the first snake in the Garden? Was God forcing them to face the root of their problem – sin? It’s so easy to focus on the symptoms – the little white lies, the sinful desires, the lusts, the gossip, the barbed criticism. Focusing on the symptoms – the snake bites – tempts us find a solution in a self-help book,

In attending a seminar or conference. Maybe we could wear trousers to avoid the snake bites; we could carry an anti-venom kit. We could exercise more so that our reflexes are quick enough to dodge the snake. But none of those things deal with the root problem. God wants us to face our sin – our rebellion –realise its consequences - separation and death. We are more sinful than we ever realised, but more loved than we ever dreamed.

The Sin – the rebellion of God’s people.

The Snake – the judgement of God’s people.

3. The Saviour – the Deliverance of God’s People

“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, they lived.” (Numbers 21:8-9)

Nowhere in the Hebrew Scriptures do we find a more striking sign of the cross of Christ than in Numbers 21.

Jesus confirmed the bronze snake to be a foreshadowing of His cross in a conversation with Nicodemus, the teacher of Israel. It is recorded in John 3. John 3:16 is the most well-known verse in the whole Bible. But just before Jesus identifies himself with the bronze snake Moses held high.

In doing so, he explains the purpose of his death.

“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.” For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” (John 3:14-17)

We have neutralised the terror of the cross – it was a terrifying means of torture and humiliating death – we have turned it into a piece of jewellery. We no longer see loved ones hanging in agony from crosses along our roads and in our town centres. But to Hebrew minds, to hang someone’s body from a tree after they had died was a sign of God’s curse. In Deuteronomy, God insists:

“If someone guilty of a capital offense is put to death and their body is exposed on a pole, you must not leave the body hanging on the pole overnight. Be sure to bury it that same day, because anyone who is hung on a pole is under God’s curse.” (Deuteronomy 21:21-22)

The New Testament insists Jesus not only empathised with our condition, he took our sin on himself. He was literally cursed by God for us. Paul writes in Galatians 3:13

“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written:

“Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole.” (Galatians 3:13)

That is why the bronze snake in Numbers is a terrifying but wonderful sign of the cross of Jesus.

The Sin – the rebellion of God’s people.

The Snake – the judgement of God’s people.

The Saviour – the deliverance of God’s people.

In the light of the bronze snake of the Book of Numbers, look at the cross of Jesus in a new way today. Look at the cross and remember the rebellion in the Garden of Eden; Look at the cross and remember the rebellion in the desert; Look at the cross in the same way God’s people looked at the snake in the wilderness. Look at the cross and remember the rebellion in your life as I do mine.

God invites us to come to the cross of Christ just as he called people to look at the snake on the pole. There we see that it is not our sin we face but the one who took our sin in our place. Hebrews 3:1 assures:

“Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus” (Heb. 3:1)

He will heal us, he will forgive us and He will give us new life. May God bless you!