

# Numbers 21

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[ 0 : 00 ] Do open up your Bibles to Numbers 21. Numbers 21, we're looking at verses 4-9. I was in London the other day, I was in one of the hospitals, just visiting someone, and I saw this kind of etching on the glass.

It was a snake wrapped around a pole, and I was surprised. And I asked the doctor about it, and he said, oh, they're all over the world. Whenever you kind of go, some kind of medical sort of operation, you'll find a snake wrapped around a pole. It's medical, it's in there, I've never seen it before.

And the reason why it's there is because of Numbers 21. I don't know if you've seen that. It's from Numbers 21. What does it mean? A snake wrapped around a pole. What's that got to do with health and well-being? How did it come to be a symbol of healing?

Well, it's all here in Numbers 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.

I don't know if you've been to Petra, you might know the place called Petra. You may have seen a photo of Petra. That's where this is. It's one of the most inhospitable places on the planet. And guess what? It's a big surprise if you've read Numbers. They are grumbling. It's Groundhog Day.

[ 1 : 26 ] And nearly every chapter in the book of Numbers is full of moans and groans and complaints. Someone said, isn't it, the more things change, the more things stay the same.

This is a different generation that came out of Egypt. Those people have died out. It's another generation, a new generation, but they're just as good at complaining as their parents and their grandparents were.

They're still complaining. Look at verse 4. From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea. To go around the land of Edom. People became impatient on the way. 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 there is no water. And we loathe this worthless food. Which contradicts what they've just said.

Every day God has given them manna from heaven. He's given them water from a rock. But they say there is no bread and there is no water. And why have you brought us up out of Egypt? That we might die in the desert.

[ 2 : 29 ] And we detest this miserable food. John Wesley, the great Methodist leader, in one of his sermons about 250 years ago, he was founder of Methodism.

He says this. To have persons around me murmuring and fretting about everything that happens is like tearing the flesh from my bones. I'd quite laugh inscribed in my office.

But Moses might have said the same thing, might be. What does God do about it? Well, three points. First of all, he sends a plague of poisonous, venomous snakes.

Verse 6, I'm going to call that severe mercy. And then he sets up, then he instructs Moses to lift up a bronze or a copper snake on a pole.

And he sets it in the center of the camp. And I'm going to call that an absurd remedy. And then he gives, thirdly, a universal prescription. And when he says, whoever looks will live. Three points.

[ 3 : 29 ] A severe mercy, an absurd remedy, and a universal prescription. So let's look at severe mercy. Verse 6, then the Lord sent venomous or fiery snakes.

They bit the people and many people in Israel died. It's an area which is still infested with snakes to this day. It's well known for that. In fact, 2,000 years after this, Lawrence of Arabia was in the area. T.E. Lawrence. And he hated any kind of creepy crawly things. He had a hatred of kind of reptiles. And this is what he said about this very area.

Three and a half thousand years after the event. The plague of snakes, which had been with us since our first entry into Saran today, rose to a memorable height and became a terror.

This year, the valley seemed creeping with horned vipers and puff adders, cobras and black snakes. By night, movement was dangerous. By night, movement was dangerous. And at last, we found it necessary to walk with sticks beating the bushes while we stepped warily through on bare feet.

[ 4 : 36 ] They got so much on our nerves that the boldest of us feared to touch the ground. Can you imagine that? If you've got a fear of snakes, your flesh is probably creeping down. Whether it wasn't like that before or not.

Anyway, God sent these snakes and went out into this territory. The Lord sent these fiery snakes, literally fiery snakes.

It may be because of the colour of their skin, the snake. But more likely, it was something to do with the bite itself. And the inflammation that that caused. And the raging fever that came upon them afterwards.

And it caused an insatiable thirst. That is what snakebite feels like. And that is what the word fiery is describing. But here they are. And children, I don't know if people still complain about school dinners.

Do they? People still complain about school dinners? Imagine I'm in school. When you go back to school. And this week, whether it's tomorrow or later on in the week. The head teacher calls you all into an assembly.

[ 5 : 39 ] And he says, I'd like all those to come to the front of the assembly who've complained about school dinners. He says, I've got punishment for you. He says, this afternoon, you will be executed.

You'll be put to death. It's a bit over the top, isn't it? That's very over the top. I hear these people. All they've done is complain about food.

And what does God do? God sends a plague of poisonous snakes among them. But it's not random. It's not a random thing God does.

God doesn't just lose his rag. And God never acts in a random way. There is always an appropriateness. It's not just as if God said, these people are really getting on my nerves.

And how can I afflict them today? I know. I tell you what. I'll send snakes. I've not tried that before. Let's see how that works out. That's not what God is doing. There's something appropriate.

[ 6 : 40 ] You can see that in verse 7. It's not just that they're complaining about the food. The people come to Moses and they say, we sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you.

And this isn't just moaning and complaining about school dinners. This is rebellion against God. And the God who has rescued them. And so there's an appropriateness about this.

And how do we know that there's an appropriateness about this? Because of what happened in the Garden of Eden in Genesis chapter 3. We talked a little bit about that. But the children have done we. Everything is perfect.

It's very, very good. Good in the environment. Good between human beings. Good between us and God. And everything lived in harmony. There was no sadness, no sorrow.

No sickness, no death. You can eat all the trees of the garden except for one. And then you remember what happens. Into the garden comes that old serpent, the devil. That's what the book of Revelation was about.

[ 7 : 40 ] Into the garden comes the snake. That old serpent, the devil. Did God really say that? Surely not. Did God really say that you will die?

You're not going to die. You can be God. You can live by your own rules. God is holding something back from you. God is just some spoilsport.

He doesn't want you to know. God wants to keep you in your place. You go ahead. You make up your own rules. You be your own God. And so they were poisoned.

Poisoned against their creator. And instead of gratefully trusting God and enjoying the world that he had given them to live in. And living in fellowship with God. They rebel against him.

And they listen to the voice of the servant. And they set themselves up as the ones who determine what is right and what is wrong. That is the nature of the fall. You see the big issue is not that we've broken the rules.

[ 8 : 37 ] The big issue is we think we can make the rules up for ourselves. Isn't that the trouble with our society? It's not that we've broken God's rules.

Yes we have. But we think we are gods in our own right. And we will make up the rules. Thank you very much. Ten commandments. Well no. Let's have some commandments of our own.

And as a result of that. An all consuming insatiable thirst has come. Into the human psyche.

Augustine I quote this loads of night during the series. Oh Lord you have made us for yourself. And our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee. Deep in the centre of the human soul is a thirst for God.

There is a thirst for God. There is a restlessness which leads to death. You see these people were dying in the desert. They were dying in the desert.

[ 9 : 43 ] And then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people. And they bit the people so that many of the people of Israel died. The day you eat thereof God says to Adam.

And even in the garden you will surely die. There's a connection. One of the things that we need to hear. And that we're being told here. Is there is a connection between sin and death.

Death is not a natural thing. It is the most unnatural thing. We've seen that already in way numbers. Death is a consequence of rebelling against God.

As human beings. Death has come into the human race. Because of sin. That's what God is teaching the people in the wilderness. He's showing them the link between sin and death.

And we need to hear that. Because we've persuaded ourselves in our culture. That death is just a natural neutral experience that comes to form. That death is really a purely psychological phenomenon.

[ 10 : 46 ] It's a friendly fate even in circumstances. People say, don't they, sometimes to me, well it was a happy release for them. But that's never how the Bible speaks of death.

It says death is the last great enemy. According to the Bible, death is the wages of sin. It's what you get for rebelling. It's God. James Denny put it like this.

James Denny was a Scottish theologian. He said, death is the sacrament of sin. That's brilliant, isn't it? Death is the sacrament of sin. It is guilt made visible. It is not simply an expression of our finitude.

It's not simply an expression of our weakness. It's an expression of our wickedness. You see, in death we don't just discover our physical limitations or the threatening forces of our environment. When we die, we encounter God. Because it is appointed for man once to die, and then after death, the judgment. And death is what we get for rebelling against God.

[ 11 : 47 ] It's what we get for believing the devil's lie. That the day you eat of it, the day you listen to that, the day you reconstruct reality around that lie, the day you make yourself God in your own right, that day you will die.

You might say, Adam and Eve didn't die that day, did they? And they lived on a very long time. So what does it mean?

What is death? Death is far more than ceasing to exist. Ceasing to be death is separation.

It is to be banished from God's gracious presence. From the garden. Death is not annihilation.

That's where people go wrong.

It's a happy release. That person isn't suffering anymore. Death is not that. Death is not ceasing to be. Death is not going to sleep unless you're a believer when you shut your eyes and you wake up in the presence of Jesus Christ.

[ 12 : 50 ] Death is not annihilation. Death is actually alienation. It's separation. And so to die in your sins, to die with your relationship with God up in the air and not sorted out, to die in rebellion against God is to be separated from him forever.

As the tree falls, so it lies, says the book of Revelation. And if you die in a state of rebellion against God, that is where you will be forever. Separated from him.

Just imagine that for a moment. What it is to be separated from the creator. To be cut off from the source of everything that is good.

The word God means good, doesn't it? He is the source of all goodness. Let's think about that for a moment. Let me try and picture it for you. Think of the news. They say nothing good news is no news.

So when you turn on the telly or you look at it on the internet, you watch the news, there are some pretty horrific things that you watch. But whether it's a domestic scene or whether it's an

international scene, whether things are going awfully wrong in a part of the world, no matter what is happening, no matter how bad the news is, there is always someone trying to bring good out of it.

[14:19] Think about that for a moment. If there's a break-in, or there's a murder, the police are there. Thank God for the police. They're trying, aren't they, to restrain evil.

They're trying to find the culprit. And they're trying to bring justice and retribution and restitution.

When something happens, when something bad like that happens, or imagine a great disaster.

Think of an earthquake or a great flood or a great disaster or war. But the Red Cross are there, aren't they? There is always someone trying to bring some good out of the situation.

People sometimes say, well, it's hell on earth. But no, it's not. Because hell is where there is nothing good. It's to be cut off from the source of good.

Imagine that. Imagine living in a world where every hand that seeks to restrain evil has been removed. Imagine living in a society where every hand that aims to do good is taken away.

[15:27] That is hell. And that is the consequence of listening to the serpent's lie. And that is what we encounter in death.

To be cut off forever from the source of good, which is God himself. And that is what it means to die in your sins. To die in rebellion against God.

Like these people in the wilderness, grumbling and complaining. Now what does God do about that? Well, he gives, secondly, an absurd remedy. Verse 8 and 9 are the weirdest, oddest, most counterintuitive thing maybe in this book.

And there's a lot of weirdness in this book, isn't there? Look at verse 8. And the Lord said to Moses, make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole. And everyone is bitten when he sees it shall live.

So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if the serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live. And they kept this serpent on a pole for 700 years.

[16:36] Until the time of Hezekiah. And by that time, they'd started worshipping it. And they were, and we are incurably superstitious. And by that time, they started to burn incense to it.

And King Hezekiah has had enough. He's a great reforming king. You can read about him 2 Kings 18. And in verse 14, he smashes it and destroys it because the people are worshipping it. It is odd. It's weird.

Matthew Henry says about this story. He says, That which cures, Is shaped like that which wounds. That which cures, Is shaped like that which wounds.

That is odd, isn't it? You make a replica Of a snake And you put it on a pole. This is not a warning sign.

It's not like, I suppose, if you go into the bush in Australia, there would be a sign that would say, Beware of snakes with a snake on it. It's not that. It's what uses a warning after you've been bitten.

[17:41] It's too late for that. You know, this is a remedy. And it's absurd. How is this going to help anyone? Make a bronze copper snake. Stick it on a pole. Put it in the centre of the camp.

Now I'm not into homeopathic medicine. Some of you might be. There is someone I know That goes on and on about it to me. But I don't really know anything about homeopathic medicine.

And it's not my place. It's not the minister's place to tell you whether it's good or not. I don't know.

The only thing I do know about it is this. It's the principle, isn't it?

That like cures like. That is right, isn't it? For those of you who are into all that stuff. I don't know if that's true in homeopathy. I don't know. But it is true when it comes to the gospel.

That like cures like. Because that is how God cures human beings of their sin and rebellion. So, so important to understand.

[18:45] That is the message of the cross. Let me remind you of a couple of passages. I'll just read them. You don't need to change them. In Romans 8. Where Paul says this. He says in the opening verses.

There is therefore now no condemnation. For those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the spirit of life has set you free.

In Christ Jesus. From the law of sin. And death. Here is this poison.

Here is this venom. That's working in the bloodstream of the human race. But something has set me free from that. So that now there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

But how does it work? Well you see look at verse 3. Let me read you verse 3. For God has done what the law weakened by the flesh could not do. By sending his son in the likeness of sinful flesh.

And for sin.

[ 19 : 41 ] He condemned sin in the flesh. There is the snake on the pole. He sent his own son in the likeness of sinful flesh.

In order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fulfilled in us. Who walk not according to the flesh. But according to the spirit. He sent his son. In the likeness of sinful man.

To be a sin offering. That is the gospel isn't it? Let me read Galatians 3 and verse 13. Where it says Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law.

By becoming a curse for us. That's when we are pathetic. He redeemed us from the curse by becoming a curse. For everyone who hangs on a tree is cursed.

That's the serpent on the pole. And at the beginning of Galatians 3. Paul talks about Christ crucified. Being placarded. He's talking about his preaching. He says you foolish Galatians.

[ 20 : 48 ] Who's bewitched you? Before your very eyes. Jesus Christ has been portrayed as crucified. He is the snake upon the pole. That is the business of the preacher.

That is what the gospel is all about. Doing what Moses did. Holding up a snake on the pole. And placarding Jesus Christ crucified. Before the people.

That is the message. 2 Corinthians 5.21 Jesus. He was made sin for us. He who knew no sin. He wasn't sinful. Never sinful. Not even on the cross was he sinful. On the cross he became hateful. Didn't he? No. He said father forgive them. They don't know what they do. He didn't become bitter and cruel and self-absorbed.

As you and I do when we suffer. When we experience extreme pain. He's not self-absorbed. No. He says. Look after my mother to John.

[ 21 : 51 ] He was never sinful. Not even the extreme of that cruel death. Was he sinful? No he wasn't. But he becomes sin. He who knew no sin became sin.

In other words. If I can put it like this. It sounds a bit crude to put it like this. But he sucked up into himself. The poison of that snakebund.

The venom. That has entered into the bloodstream of the human race. And he was made sin for us. So do you remember how he cries out on the cross?

He cries out. I thirst. I thirst. And of course that's true in a physical sense. Isn't it? That would be true. It's part of the awfulness of crucifixion. His body would have been dehydrated.

But it's much deeper than that. As one old Puritan said. The soul of his suffering. Was the suffering of his soul. And the thirst that he's talking about.

[ 22 : 51 ] It's not simply a physical thirst. You remember he cries out. My God. My God. Why have you forsaken me? And what did Jesus experience on the cross? He experienced God forsaken us. He experienced what it is to be cut off from the source of all goodness.

That is the thirst he's talking about there. As Peter said. The just for the unjust to bring us to God. There are people that say.

Well this is absurd. This is primitive Old Testament religion. And you Christians. You still believe this sort of rubbish. And if there is a God. Well. Why doesn't. Why doesn't he just forgive? Why does Jesus have to die like that?

Why does he have to die an awful death? It's absurd. The cross is absurd. And it's always been that. People have always thought it's a stumbling block. And it's foolishness. Why did Jesus have to die? Surely God could just forgive.

Well just think about it. Nobody just forgives. It's like. You drive home tonight. And some. Teenager. Without a license.

[ 23 : 58 ] Drives into the side of you. And as he gets up. He's obviously. As he gets up the car. You're obviously shaking up. What do you do? Do you press charges? Well you may be tempted to press charges.

But on the other hand. You feel sorry for him. And if you press charges. You'll get a criminal record. You'll maybe even. Go to prison. You can possibly spoil the rest of his life. It jeopardizes his career. Or his future. And so you decide. I won't press charges. I'll absorb the cost myself. I'll pay for the damages. But someone's got to pay. And it's either him or you.

Either the wrongdoer. Or the person who's been wronged. Somebody has got to absorb. The cost of what has gone wrong. And that is the principle. And God cannot. And God will not.

Just forgive. Someone has to pay. And that is the great message. Of the Bible isn't it? That God has absorbed. The cost. Of our rebellion on himself.

[ 24 : 58 ] He's lifted himself up. The son of man. Must be lifted up. Just as Moses. Lifting up the serpent. In the wilderness. Jesus says to Nicodemus. So must the son of man.

Be lifted up. And whoever believes in him. Will not perish. But have eternal life. John 3. There are two musts.

Aren't there? I don't want you to spite that. There is. In John 3. You must be born again. You must be born again. There's a wistfulness. About Nicodemus. Can I go into my mother's womb.

And be born again. The second time. There's an if only about him. If only I could turn the clock back. If only I could have my time over again. If only I could be like that Jesus.

And be born again. Ah for a man. Says Tannison. The poet. Ah for a man to rise in me. That the man I am might cease to be.

[ 25 : 57 ] But we all. We all know what that's like. But if people like you and I. Are going to have a fresh start. Something else has to happen. Then. There is another must. The son of man must be lifted up.

And I have told you the story before. Of a student going to see a young girl. They were on a mission trip. To somewhere in South America.

I think it was in Peru. And they went to see a young girl. She was playing in the dirt. And it was emotionally just too much for the student. Too much of a culture shock. Why doesn't her mother clean her up?

And the guy said. Well. That girl's mother probably loves her. But she doesn't hate the dirt. And you hate the dirt. But you don't love the little girl enough.

To go down there and clean her up. And until hatred. For the dirt. And love for the child. Are in the same person. That girl will say she is.

[ 26 : 54 ] And until hatred. For sin. And love for sinners. Come together. We say as we are. Isn't that the great news of the gospel? He has become the sin bearer. The son of man.

Hatred for sin. And love for sinners. Have come together. In the person of the Lord Jesus. Justice and mercy. Have met at the cross. Righteousness and peace.

Have kissed together. And so there is a way tonight. For you and I to have a fresh start. Because of Jesus' death on the cross. And that leads me to my last point.

And that is verse 18. Universal prescription. See what he says in verse 18. He says. Anyone who is bitten. All he has to do. Is look and live. In the discussion with Nicodemus.

In John 3. Jesus says. Whoever believes in him. The son of man. Like Moses. Lifted up the serpent. The son of man. Is lifted up to die on the cross. And anyone who believes in him.

[ 27 : 55 ] Anyone. Whoever believes. In him. Richard Baxter. And the old. Periodic preacher. From Kidderminster. And we read the confession of sin.

That he wrote this morning. Said this. I thank God. For that word. Whoever. Because if it had said. Richard Baxter. I would have always wondered. If there was another Richard Baxter.

But this word. Whoever. Includes the worst Baxters. Who have ever lived. Whoever. And so. Let me finish. With this. It's the testimony. Of C.H.

Spurgeon. I know that. I said. I was going to finish with this. Three times this morning. And I said. But I will. I'll finish with this. I was probably. The greatest preacher. Of the 19th century. He was a remarkable man.

And he was converted. As a teenager. I think he was about. 14 years old. And this one. He says. It's quite a long quote. But it's. It's worth it. He says this.

[ 29 : 03 ] Now. Now. Had it not been. For the goodness of God. In sending a snowstorm. One Sunday morning. While I was going. To a certain place of worship. When I could go no further.

I turned down a side street. And came to a little. Primitive Methodist chapel. In that chapel. There may have been. A dozen or 15 people. I'd heard of the. Primitive. Primitive Methodists.

How they sang so loudly. That they made people's heads ache. But that did not matter to me. I wanted to know. How I might be saved. And if they could tell me that. I did not care. How much they made my head ache.

The minister did not come that morning. He was snowed up. I suppose. At last. A very thin looking man. A shoemaker. Or tailor. Or something of that sort. Went up in the pulpit. To preach. Now.

It is well. That preacher should be instructed. But this man. Was really stupid. He was obliged. To stick to his text. For the simple reason. That he had little else to say. The text was.

[ 29 : 57 ] Look unto me. And be ye saved. All the ends of the earth. He did not even pronounce. The words rightly. And that did not matter. There was. I thought. A glimpse of hope for me. In that text.

The preacher began. Thus. My dear friends. This is a very simple text. Indeed. It says. Look. Now looking. Don't take. A deal of pain. It ain't lifting your foot.

Or your finger. It is just look. Well. A man needn't go to college. To learn to look. You may be the biggest fool. And yet you can look. A man.

Needn't be worth a thousand a year. To be able to look. Anyone can look. Even a child. Can look. But then the text says. Look unto me. I. Said he. In broad Essex.

Many. On e. Are looking. To yourselves. But it's no use looking there. You'll never find any comfort. In yourselves. Some look to God. The father. No. Look to him.

[ 30 : 52 ] By and by. Jesus Christ says. Look unto me. Some on e. Say. We must wait. For the spirits. Working. You have no business. With that just now. Look to Christ.

The text says. Look unto me. Then the good man. Followed up his text. In this way. 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. Oh poor sinner. Look unto me.

Look unto me. When he'd gone to about that length. And managed to spin out ten minutes or so. He was at the end of his tether. Then he looked at me under the gallery.

And I dare say. With so few present. He knew me to be a stranger. Just fixing his eyes on me. As if he knew all my heart. He said. Young man. You look very miserable. Well I did.

[ 31 : 47 ] But I had not been accustomed to have remarks made. From the pulpit. On my personal appearance before. However. It was a good blow. Struck right home. He continued. And you always will be miserable. Miserable in life. And miserable in death.

If you don't obey my text. But if you obey now. This moment. You will be saved. And then lifting up his hands. He shouted. As only a primitive Methodist could do. Young man. Look to Jesus Christ. Look. Look. Look. You have nothing to do. But to look and live. I saw at once. The way of salvation. I knew not. What else he said.

I did not take much notice of it. I was so possessed. With that one thought. Like as when the brazen serpent. Was lifted up. The people only looked. And were healed. And so it was with me. I had been waiting to do fifty things.

But when I heard that word. Look. What a charming word. It seemed to me. Oh I looked. Until I could have almost looked my eyes away. There and then. But then the cloud was gone.

[ 32 : 42 ] The darkness had rolled away. And that moment I saw the sun. And I could have risen that instant. And sung with the most enthusiastic. Of the precious blood of Christ. And the simple faith. Which looks alone to him.

Oh that someone had told me this before. Trust Christ. And you shall be saved. For God so loved the world. That he gave his one and only son.

That whosoever believes on him. Shall not perish. But have eternal life. Let's pray.