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## Numbers 21:4-9      “Look and Live”

Intro. Don't you want to have eternal life? If you haven't realized it yet, life on this earth is relatively short. The older you get, the more you realize how true that is. James 4:14 says, “For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away.” Hebrews 9:27 says, “It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment.” That being the case, it's great to know that you can have *eternal* life! So I'm going to show you from this Old Testament story how you can have eternal life. If you think that eternal life is obtained by doing good works, or keeping the Ten Commandments, or by going to church, you especially need to listen this morning. We have here before us one of the great salvation texts of the Old Testament.

Jesus Himself referred to this story in chapter 3 of the Gospel of John. There Jesus said, “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (vv.14-15). According to Jesus, this story illustrates how we can have eternal life. After death, you can live forever in a far better place, and in a far better state, than your life here on earth. I do not want anyone to miss out on heaven & eternal life. Allow me to show how from this story of the Old Testament you can know for sure that you have eternal life.

Now the first major point of our story is this:

### I. LIKE THE ISRAELITES, WE HAVE SINNED

If this were not true, we would already possess eternal life. But because we have all sinned, we will die. The Bible says that “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). We do not naturally possess eternal life because we have all sinned. The Israelites frequently manifested the sin problem that we all possess.

I need to give a little background to help you understand the setting of our text today. In Numbers chapter 20 Israel had asked the nation of Edom to allow them to pass through their land on their way to the Promised Land. The Edomites were distantly related to the Israelites through Esau. But Edom did not trust the Israelites and refused to let them pass through. So now the Israelites had to travel around Edom on their way to the Promised Land. That contributed to the problem we read about in chapter 21.

Now what did these people do that was so terrible that God sent judgment and fiery serpents to attack them and kill them. If we are honest today, we will have to agree that at times we have sinned like the Israelites. They illustrate the truth that:

A. We Become Impatient with our Difficulties - In v.4 we read, “Then they journeyed from Mount Hor by the Way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the soul of the people became very discouraged on the way.” At this point the Israelites were evidently at the southeastern edge of the country of Edom, which was south of Moab. It's not that they traveled back to the Red Sea, but in their wilderness wanderings they were at that time traveling south on the *road* to the Red Sea along the mountain range of Mt. Seir (cf. Dt. 2:1-3). Now it was time to

turn north to go to the Promised Land. And instead of passing through the land of Edom, they would have to stay at the edge of their border and skirt that same mountain range they had traveled before. The way was hard and very discouraging to the people. So they “became very discouraged on the way.” Actually, the Hebrew word translated “very discouraged” literally means “to be short.” They evidently became short-tempered and impatient.

The mutinous discontent of the Israelites can be understood to some extent. They knew they had a long, hard & difficult trip before them. It was described as a “horrible desert.” About the only wildlife they would see would be snakes, scorpions, and lizards. This low-lying plain of the Arabah, which runs long steep mountain walls to the Dead Sea would be most likely to furnish the Israelites with very little food, except the manna which God gave them; on the whole it is a horrible desert, with a loose sandy soil, and drifts of granite and sandstones, where terrible sandstorms sometimes arise.

Parents, have you ever gone on a long road trip, and your children became impatient, and hard to manage? They complain even though they have air conditioning and comfortable seats! Well Moses was on a long trip with the children of Israel, and they were certainly acting like a bunch of impatient children. Yet if you and I were in their place in that rocky, wilderness, I doubt if we would have fared much better.

Are you experiencing a difficulty right now in your life? Some of you may be going through a financial hardship. Some of you are having trouble at work. Some are having family problems. Trials and difficulties put us to the test. How are you responding? Does difficulty tend to lead to sin in your life? Well, it did in the case of the Israelites. Notice something else we tend to do:

B. We Complain in our Difficulties – That was true of the Israelites. Notice what they said in the last of v.5, “For there is no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread.” It was indeed true that there was no naturally occurring food or water in that wilderness, but God had supernaturally provided for them for almost 40 years. Whenever water was lacking, God always provided as He supernaturally caused water to flow from the “rock that followed them” (1 Cor. 10:4). But notice what they said about the food God had provided, “our soul loathes this worthless bread.” They were tired of the manna God had provided all those years. They began to consider it contemptible; even worthless. They did not consider it fit for men and soldiers. They wanted something different to eat. Yet they had no business having such disdain for heavenly bread that came from the good hand of God.

Parents, do your children complain about the food you give them? Are they tired of eating what you provide? Then you know how God felt with the Israelites.

Unfortunately this is characteristic of many of us today. When life is hard we complain and murmur. Have you complained about God’s provision? To do so is a sin. After all, Paul said in 1 Corinthians 10:10, “nor [should we] complain, as some of them also complained, and were destroyed by the destroyer.”

All of us have at times become impatient about our difficulties and complained. Some of us have also sinned like the Israelites in this way:

C. We Question God’s Goodness in our Difficulties - In v.5 we read, “And the people spoke against God and against Moses: ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?’” In chapter 20 they spoke against Moses and Aaron, but not directly against God. But now they are including God in their complaints. Sin rises to a new level when we publicly

say or do things that demean or question the character of God. They were questioning God's goodness. In their minds, this latest difficulty showed that God did not deliver them from Egypt to save them, but to kill them in the wilderness. These faithless, ungrateful pilgrims broke into the same old refrain. God had told them that He saved them from Egypt to lead them into the Promised Land, but they flat out told God that He had been lying to them. They looked God straight in the eye and arrogantly said, "We don't believe you."

Have you ever questioned the goodness of God as you have gone through a difficulty? "God, if you really loved me, this wouldn't be happening to me." So we can see ourselves to some degree in this story. We have sinned.

Since we have sinned, that puts us in an awful predicament. For the next main point we need to understand is this:

## II. SIN BRINGS JUDGMENT

God does judge sin, and that is a truth that we find, not only in the Old Testament, but also the New. We see that truth illustrated in this text of Scripture. Here we see that God acts to judge this public sin and rebellion. Notice how God judged the people.

A. God Judged Israel with Deadly Snakes - We read in v.6, "So the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people...." That wilderness is still infested with venomous serpents. Up to this time God had protected them from the serpents, as Dt. 8:15<sup>1</sup> seems to indicate. But now, God calls them out from the rocks & mountains and allows them to strike full force against the people. They were questioning God's goodness like that old serpent, the devil did long ago. So the Lord withheld His protection & gave them a full dose of venom from the serpents of the region.

Can you picture the scene? Suddenly, and without warning, these snakes starting slithering into the camp, and biting everyone they came up to. People started screaming in fear, screaming in pain, and running for their lives. Imagine if we were a snake-handling church, and we let loose a whole bunch of poisonous snakes, and they started slithering on the floor under the pews. Many of you would become like old fashioned, pew-jumping Baptists, not because you are happy in the Lord, but to get out of here!

Why are they called "fiery" serpents? It's not because they were literally on fire. Some are marked with fiery red spots. But they were most likely called "fiery" snakes because of the red, burning inflammation caused by their poison.

They in their pride had lifted themselves up against God and Moses, and now God humbled and mortified them.

Now what is the point? God is trying to tell us that suffering follows sin just as surely as night follows day. Proverbs 13:15 tells us, "The way of the transgressor is hard."

B. God Judges Sin by Means of Death - In the last of v.6 it says, "and many of the people of Israel died." The verb is in the imperfect tense in Hebrew, which speaks of past continuous action. One by one the Israelites were dying all over the camp. Many others were near death.

Even so, the Bible says that "the soul that sins shall die" and "the wages of sin is death." Every person born into this world has been bitten by the fiery serpent of sin and is destined to

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<sup>1</sup> "Who led you through that great and terrible wilderness, in which were fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty land where there was no water; who brought water for you out of the flinty rock."

die. It's just a matter of time. Now the same serpent that inflicts death, is the same serpent that will tell you that God does not punish sin. But I want to tell you that there is a fiery, fatal, fearful punishment for those who die in their sin. If you fail to obtain forgiveness of sin, you will not face the fiery inflammation of serpents, but the fire of hell. The Bible says that sin is a debt, and when a person has a debt, either the debt is paid, or the debtor is punished. Mark it down, defiant sinners will always face the judgment of God.

Now somebody immediately says, "Oh, you're talking about hell." Well, whether you realize it or not, everybody is talking about hell. Have you ever thought about how often the word hell is used, just in common everyday language? When calamity takes place, we say, "All hell has broken loose." If you had a bad experience, "You went through hell." Deep down inside people instinctively know there is a hell, or they wouldn't talk about it so much!

Let your imagination wander back with me again. Think about it. Can you hear the sobbing and the wailing all over the camp? Perhaps every family's been hit. Eyes are red with weeping, for people are dying by the hundreds and even thousands. God could have ignored His people's plight, for they deserved to die, but in His love and grace He provided a remedy. So I have good news. In this text of Scripture we see that:

### III. GOD OFFERS SALVATION

Though God is a righteous judge, He wants to instead be your Savior. What He did for the Israelites He will do for you:

A. He Provided a Mediator to Pray for their Salvation - In v.7 we read, "Therefore 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." They knew they had sinned, and they felt they were too sinful to approach a holy God themselves. They needed a mediator to pray & provide atonement on their behalf. So they came to Moses to intercede on their behalf. In the last of v.7 we read, "So Moses prayed for the people." Even though the people had also sinned against Moses, he forgave them, and prayed for them.

Herein was Moses a type of Christ, who interceded for His persecutors. He prayed, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). Not only that, but Christ is God's appointed Mediator for us today. Paul said in 1 Timothy 2:5, "For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus." If you are going to be saved from sin and have eternal life, you need to come to the one and only Mediator God has provided, Jesus Christ.

By the way, if you are not yet saved, you probably have a Moses in your own life. There is someone who cares about you, and is praying for your salvation. Perhaps that's why you were invited to Sunday School and church today.

God not only provided a mediator, but:

B. He Provided the Means of Salvation - In v.8 we read, "Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live.'" At the command of God, Moses made a brazen serpent, and put it upon a standard. That was a pole used to hold up a banner or tribal insignia.

Why did God command Moses to make a brazen serpent? Obviously it had nothing to do with the pagan use of a serpent as a symbol of healing, a symbol that is still used today. It is irreconcilably opposed to the biblical view of the serpent, as the representative of evil (Gen. 3:15). Rather, I believe that God commanded Moses to make a serpent because it was intended as a figurative representation of the poisonous serpents, rendered harmless by the mercy of God. For God did not cause a real serpent to be taken & lifted up on a pole, but the image<sup>2</sup> of a serpent. Here was a serpent that must have looked like the rest of the deadly serpents, but without poison, hanging harmless on the pole.

Have you ever had someone scare you with a rubber snake? Indeed, they can look very real, and the unexpected sight of one may strike as much fear in you as a real one. But the fact is, a rubber snake is harmless.

Even so, God provided the way to render the poison of the fiery serpents harmless, as visibly illustrated by the harmless serpent on the pole. Likewise, the great enemy of man is death. It takes loved ones away from us. It is never satisfied, but pulls every soul into an unseen eternity that will be terrifying for sinners. Ah, but because of God's salvation provided by Jesus Christ, the following cry of victory is ours, "O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?" (1 Cor. 15:55). Because of what Christ has done, death is rendered harmless for the child of God. I understand that when a bee stings someone with its venom, it is rendered harmless. Well Jesus took upon Himself the sting of sin and death. He died in our place, but rose again. Now, death is harmless for the child of God.

This provision of salvation is also indicated by another aspect of God's prescribed provision of salvation. Moses was not only to make a serpent, but according to v.8, he was also to "set it on a pole." Why did he elevate it on a pole? First, to typify how the true Savior would provide salvation for us. Again, Jesus said in John 3:14, "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up." Note that the serpent was not effective in Moses' hand, or on a shelf. It had to be "lifted up" on a pole, probably a wooden pole. As Moses lifted up the serpent, even so Jesus Christ had to be lifted up on a Roman cross if we were to be saved. Christ had to be crucified. There was no other way for us to be saved.

Now the fact that the brazen serpent was lifted up on a pole leads to another wonderful truth:

C. He Provided Salvation for All - The elevation of the serpent was clearly intended to make it visible from all over the camp. The wounded were in many cases carried from the distant parts of the wide-spreading encampment to places whence they could catch a glimpse of it glittering in the sunshine. Furthermore, God specifically says in the last of v.8, "it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live." Thus, none were excluded.

Even so, God's salvation is for all people. This application is specifically made in John 3:14-15, "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life."

Now just because God provided salvation for *all* the Israelites, that did not mean that all would automatically be saved. That's because each person had to trust God, and obey the required steps to obtain salvation.

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<sup>2</sup> The command to make a brazen or copper serpent is remarkable, especially in light of the fact that they were not to make any graven images. Later this did become a problem. The brazen image of the serpent was taken by the Israelites to Canaan, and preserved till the time of Hezekiah, who had it broken in pieces, because the idolatrous people had presented incense-offerings to this holy relic (2 Kings 18:4).

#### IV. WE MUST FOLLOW THE PRESCRIBED STEPS OF SALVATION

You can ignore the problem and die, or you can get up and do something about it. That is exactly what these people did. They took three steps that every person has to take if he is going to be cured of the snake bite of sin, and escape the fiery judgment of hell.

A. Confess Your Sins - The Israelites understood this principle. They said in v.7, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you....” This punishment brought the people to reflection. They did not confess their sin until they began to suffer the consequences of their sin. Even so, many today do not confess their sin until suffering strikes them. Don’t wait until then to recognize and confess your sins. Furthermore, the swift stroke had fallen without warning or voice to interpret it, but the people knew in their hearts why it had come. Their quick recognition of its source and purpose, and their swift repentance, are to be put to their credit. The serpents had done their work, and the prayer that the chastisement should cease would be based on the fact that the sin had been forsaken.

B. Believe the Promise of God - This seemed like a most unlikely cure. Never had such a remedy for snakebite been prescribed. They would want something else, something more tangible than just turning around to look at a serpent of brass. This remedy would require faith in God’s Promise. What was the promise? It is found in the last of v.8, “and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live.” The reception of help was made to depend upon the faith of the people. Trust in God was an essential part of the look. That is taken for granted. Before they would bother to look to the serpent raised high on a pole, they would first have to believe the promise of God. Why else should a half-dead man lift his heavy eyelids to look? It was faith in the promise of God. God promised healing for a look. No doubt the faith was very imperfect, and the desire was only for physical healing; but none the less it had in it the essence of faith. It did not matter from where you looked. It did not matter if you had bad eyesight. It did not matter if your faith was weak. All who looked did live.

Salvation by the cross of Christ may seem rather foolish to the world (1 Cor. 1:18, 23), but it is God’s only way of salvation. If you are going to be saved from death and have eternal life, you must believe God’s promise of salvation.

Now what God asks you to do, my friend, is this:

C. Look unto Jesus by Faith – After all, He took your place there on the cross. You are a sinner and you are the one who deserves to die. Yet God says in Isa. 45:22, “Look unto me, and be saved....” It will cost you nothing. Salvation is of grace, for all you have to do is look unto Christ in faith.

There was one way to be saved, and that was to look to the serpent, lifted on a pole, that God had provided. And just as there was only one way to be saved in the camp of Israel, even so there is only one way today. Peter said in Acts 4:12, “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (KJV; cf. John 14:6). Unless a sinner looks to Christ by faith, he or she is lost forever.

This clearly illustrates the fact that salvation is not by works, but by faith. Salvation from the deadly bites did not come by human effort. It was not by beating the serpents, applying medicine, or trying to flee that the afflicted people were saved. It was God Himself that devised

and prescribed an antidote. Nor are we saved by faith plus works. The dying were not saved by looking at the serpent and then keeping the law, or looking and bringing a sacrifice, or looking and making promises to do better. They were saved by faith alone. Even so, our salvation is prescribed by God. We must be saved His way, and not our own way. We must follow the plan of God that is beautifully illustrated in this passage of Scripture.

Conclusion: Now if you follow these steps of salvation, what will happen? In v.9 we see that God's promise was fulfilled, "So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived." Those who looked to it lived. They were saved. God was true to His Word. Everyone who looked lived, for they were immediately.

Imagine what may have happened that day. Word began to spread throughout the camp of what God told Moses. Then after Moses lifted the brazen serpent, some nearby believed God and looked. Immediately they were healed! They and their family began to rejoice and shout, "There's a cure! Just look, and live." Word began to spread through the camp. In one tent was a mother weeping over her son who was deathly sick. Someone rushed into the tent with the good news. Having seen and heard of God's great saving works, she picks up her son and carries him closer. She begs her son to look upon the serpent before it is too late. At first he does nothing, but his dear mom continues to press upon him the appeal, "Look son, and you will live." Then at last, he looks at the serpent lifted high on that pole, and suddenly, the fever subsides. The pain is gone. Strength returns. He stands up and gives his mom a big hug, and everyone rejoices in the saving work of God.

It is just that simple today. Confess your sins. Trust in God's promise of eternal life. Look to Jesus by faith, and in just a moment you will pass from death to life. Salvation is not a process; it is an immediate miracle that takes place when the sinner looks to Christ by faith. Christ saves instantly, immediately, and completely.

What have you been trusting in for eternal life? The poison of sin is in your veins, and if you do nothing, or if you trust in the wrong way of salvation, you will die in your sin. Don't count on being good enough or religious enough to earn eternal life. Today I have shown you that eternal life is as simple as a look of faith to Jesus Christ, who died for your sins while being lifted up on a cross. Will you look to Jesus today? No one can do it for you. Just as each Israelite had to look for themselves to be saved, even so you must make a personal decision to look to Jesus and be saved.

Sources: Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961); C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978 reprint); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 1 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1981); James Merritt (notes from his sermon on this text, [www.sermonsearch.com](http://www.sermonsearch.com)); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Warren Wiersbe, *Expository Outlines on the Old Testament* (Wheaton: Victor Books/SP Publications, 1993). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

#### ABOUT THESE SERMON NOTES

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