

ABC 8/10/25

Where does my help come from?

Scripture - Numbers 21: 4-9/Psalm 121

Introduction

The story goes that there was once a young farmer, still learning the trade, and it happens that he had a very stubborn mule. No matter what he tried he couldn't get the mule to go where he wanted it to go. He tried pulling hard on the rope. He tried pushing. He tried coaxing her out with a carrot. Nothing seemed to work. One day as he was struggling with the mule in front of his barn his neighbor stopped by to say hi. They talked for a bit and the young farmer expressed his frustration with the old mule. "I just can't get her to go where I want her to go!" "Well," said the old farmer "I think I know what might work". He bent down and picked up a fallen tree branch that had come down in a recent storm and he gave that mule such a whack on the haunch that it reared up and galloped straight into the pasture. "There you go" said the old farmer with his thumbs in his overalls. "Works every time." "Clever," replied the young farmer, "it's just that I was *trying* to get her *in to* the barn."

What do *you* find more persuasive? A carrot or a stick? I think most of us would prefer the carrot, right? But sometimes, what we need is the stick. In our passage today God decides to use the stick. Because despite everything God has provided for the Israelites – including their rescue from slavery – they continue to complain and drag their feet.

Our story for today is found in **Numbers chapter 21: 4-9**. I would invite you to follow along as we study God's word this morning. May our eyes be open and our ears receptive to the message God wants us to learn today.

Numbers 21: 4-9

They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom.

This is simply a detour. They wanted to pass through Edom, but the king didn't trust them and sent his army to shoo them away. So, they have 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!"

The Israelites have short memories. What was their life like in Egypt? They were slaves, right? It was drudgery, but they are looking at it now through nostalgic lenses. And as for food and water, God has been providing both for them along the way.

Last week we saw how God provided water, and manna, and quail... and this is the food that they are calling "miserable" – some translations use the word "detestable". Despite everything God had done and continues to do for them, they complain.

Now, to be fair, I get it. Just recently our family traveled to the west coast for a family reunion. It was a wonderful time and we were very blessed to be able to make the trip... but the traveling part was, well..., not fun. And when everyone is tired and hungry and sick of waiting in lines in crowded airports

you can guess what tends to happen; we start whining and complaining. Complaining is contagious, once one person starts it tends to spread... and that is what is happening here, so let us see what God does about it.

Picking up in Verse 6

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.

If you are familiar with this part of the Bible you might recognize a recurring pattern here. God uses a variety of ways to wake up the people when they complain or when they are being disobedient. There have been plagues and pestilence. Once the ground opened up and swallowed some rebels. In each of these cases Moses acts as an intercessor – he places himself between a righteous God and an unfaithful people and he pleads with God to forgive – and each time God relents and does not destroy the whole community.

So, here it seems like we are walking a similar path. The Lord sends out venomous snakes – some translations call them “fiery serpents” possibly because the bites burned – or possibly because they were bright red – or orange-colored – snakes. The text is ambiguous – but they were clearly poisonous because the people are dying, and so they come to Moses again to ask him to intercede and he again prays for the people.

Picking up in verse 8 – and finishing our passage for the day:

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.

May the Lord bless the reading of his word.

...

I don't know about you, but I didn't see that last bit coming. (...) Why didn't God just... take away the snakes? Consider for a moment, a similar situation in Egypt during the time of 10 plagues. When the Lord sent frogs upon the land, as well and later the gnats and the flies, Pharaoh asks Moses to pray to his God to take them away. The language is remarkably similar. And in that instance God simply takes away the flies and the gnats and the frogs – well, technically, the frogs just die and are left lying in stinking heaps... but the point is that Moses prayed to God for relief on behalf of Pharaoh and God granted it. So why doesn't God do the same thing here? Why the business with snake on a stick?

The short answer is that the way God answers prayer is a mystery. And it is worth reminding each other that we are taught to pray for “God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven” ... not that our will be done.

This is a hard lesson to learn. When we are in financial trouble, and pray for help, it might seem like the obvious way to answer our prayer would be to send a gust of wind that blows a winning lottery ticket across our path, but God normally doesn't work like that, does he?

And when we are dealing with a medical condition, we might pray that God would take it away... and sometimes, by the grace of God, he does... and leaves the doctors scratching their heads. But often God chooses to let the doctors work with us to find a medicine, or therapy, or some kind of treatment that makes things better.

I'm sure Moses and the Israelites would have *preferred* that God simply take away the snakes, but for whatever reason, this time God prescribes a treatment, a cure, instead. It *is* an answer to prayer, just not what Moses probably had in mind. **I believe that God did this in order to help the Israelites, and indeed us, learn more about Himself AND more about ourselves.**

As we dig into this passage today I would suggest that there are three lessons we can take away from it.

- 1.) A Reminder
- 2.) A Promise
- 3.) A Warning

So, first, a reminder – because I think we know this already. Let us consider that the people are complaining because they are hungry and thirsty and tired, yes. But mostly it is because they are too focused on themselves. They are too busy looking inward to realize what God has been doing for them ever since they left Egypt.

But NOW if they get bitten, in order to find healing, they look UP at the snake on a pole. They lift their eyes off of themselves and their problems and look up. This ends up as a recurring theme for the Israelites. Look at the first lines of the Psalm we heard earlier: *I lift my eyes up to the hills, Where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord. The maker of heaven and earth.*

That Psalm becomes one of the traditional songs the Israelites sing on their ascent, the ritual walk up the mountain of Zion to the temple in Jerusalem, but today the Israelite nation is still young. God is *just starting* to form them into a nation that lifts up their eyes to the Lord.

The clever thing about this treatment is that it solves both of the Israelite's problems. Looking up at the bronze snake heals the one who has been bitten. But learning to look up, to look beyond the self, to trust in the Lord, becomes a way for God to begin to heal them from the inside out. So, as we read this story today **it is a reminder for us to lift our eyes off of ourselves and turn them toward Jesus.**

Second, the **snake on a stick is a symbol of God's promise, or of God's intention, to redeem the Israelites from their sin.**

I remember one year in my high school English class I had to read the novel *Ethan Frome*... (It's very depressing, not recommended. But it is memorable!) Ethan is a miserable sort of cripple always hobbling about his town sometime around the year 1900. And he seems to have a terrible relationship with his wife. The great reveal at the end of the book – here I'll spare you ever having to actually read it – is that when Ethan was young and unhappily married, he had an affair with his wife's cousin. One day they went sledding and crashed into a tree. That's how he became a cripple, and what is worse, she became an invalid and he spends the rest of his life caring for her in his house along with his actual wife

- who remains angry at him for the affair. Like I said, it's a very depressing story. But it is relevant because Ethan becomes this picture of what it means carry your transgressions. He lives out his life with constant reminders of his infidelity.

That is one way to think about the snake that Moses sets up on a pole in the middle of camp – it's a visual reminder of the people's unfaithfulness. It becomes a symbol of their sin. And yet, it also becomes a symbol of the promise – something Ethan Frome badly needed – the promise of healing and new life.

Michel Card said it best in a song he wrote about this very story. He sings *“the symbol of their suffering was now the focus of their faith, and with a faithful glance, the healing power would flow.”*

The bronze snake on a pole – lifted so that all can see – is a symbol of the suffering brought about by disobedience, by unfaithfulness. But because the people find healing when they look up to it, it doesn't stay that way. Instead, it grows to become a symbol of things being put to rights. A symbol of healing - to the point that we still associate a snake wrapped around a pole with medicine today!

Does this look familiar? This is the logo for the World Health Organization. In fact, a snake, or sometimes 2 snakes, wrapped around a pole has been a symbol for medicine or doctors for centuries. The history behind this association between the snake on a stick and medicine is a very long tangent that I would be happy to share with you another time... the short version is that it's all wrapped up in Greek mythology but there are lines that trace it all the way back to Numbers 21.

THE POINT, is that God permanently transforms the snake on a stick from a symbol of suffering into a symbol of faith. He redeems the symbol. And THAT is also foreshadowing, right? Can you think of another symbol that God redeems from representing death and despair to representing life and forgiveness? Anyone? **Yeah, the cross!**

Jesus was lifted up on a pole too, on a cross of execution. The cross that was the symbol of Roman oppression. The cross that was saved for the worst of sinners. But God raised Jesus to life, and because of the resurrection the cross has a new meaning today. Rather than symbolizing terror and death it now symbolizes hope and forgiveness. The symbol of suffering becomes the focus of our faith. **If God can redeem a symbol, then he can redeem you too.** (say that again!)

If you only take one thing away from this message today, let it be this: God wants to redeem you – all of you – including the parts of you that feel broken. God wants to take your sinful habits and turn them into holy ones. God wants to meet you where you are and lead you onward toward righteousness.

At the end of that path, when we look back on the challenges and indeed the painful parts of the journey, we will then be able to see how **God was working always to redeem us just as he worked to redeem the Israelites.** We will see that he promises to take all of the bad things that happen to us – even the self-inflicted ones – and turn them into something beautiful – something that strengthens our faith.

Finally, our story today serves as a warning against looking for help in the wrong places.

You see, it turns out that Numbers 21 is not the end of the snake on a stick. It turns up in one other place.

This is from 2 Kings chapter 18: 1, 3-4

In the third year of Hoshea son of Elah king of Israel, Hezekiah son of Ahaz king of Judah began to reign [...] ³ He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, just as his father David had done. ⁴ He removed the high places, smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles. He broke into pieces the bronze snake Moses had made, for up to that time the Israelites had been burning incense to it.

So... the snake on a pole that Moses made, survived for hundreds of years. And over that time, it became what? another idol. People forgot what it was for and turned it into just another idol that Hezekiah had to destroy.

I always thought this was the most curious part of the whole story. Surely God would have foreseen this as a risk factor. When God told Moses to make a snake and place it on a pole I wonder if Moses thought "Wait... why am I doing this? It seems very similar to a certain golden calf incident... are you sure you know what you are doing God?"

Well, in fact I believe God DOES know what he is doing. And in addition to everything we have already learned today, I think that God wants to help us to know, to really know, where our help comes from. The snake on a stick never healed anyone. God did. And when the people forgot that, they started putting their trust in the symbol instead of the real deal.

What about us? **Where does our help come from? Symbols? Or the real deal?**

This story serves as warning against putting our hope in the wrong place.

- Our help does NOT come from politicians and governments. It comes from obedience to God.
- Our help does NOT come from financial or material security. It comes from God who provides what we need.
- Our help does not come from medicine or doctors. God can and will use them for his glory, but it is God who ultimately heals.
- Our help does not come from our pastor or our church or our denomination. These are humans, or human institutions, and we know that sometimes they fail. But our help comes from the Lord.

Conclusion

We worship the God who is the real deal. We trust in the one who promises to redeem us, to transform you and me from something dead and broken into something full of life and joy and peace. Lift up your eyes to Him – your ever-present help in time of need. Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting, both now and for ages and ages to come. AMEN