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Numbers 21:4-9

One of the reasons I know the Bible is true is because there are countless stories in it that, if I were trying to start a religion, trying to sell people on my God, I would have taken out of the Bible. For instance, if I were Peter, and I wanted to start this religion, why on earth would I include that part where I cursed and swore that I didn't know Jesus and wept about it, unless it actually happened? Why would James and John allow the fact that they wanted to call fire from heaven on a village that didn't let them in, and that Jesus severely rebuked them, be written unless it actually happened? I think the same applies to the Old Testament. If I were a group of Jewish religious zealots trying to start a religion, this is not a good story to include... unless it actually happened. Yet, I'd like to show you that on display in this true story is not primarily God's judgment, but his mercy. I'm serious. Because in this true story one of the most tender, most important, and most foundational parts of the Christian faith is revealed. Not a command, an invitation: **Just. Look.** 1. Says Moses, 2. Says Jesus.

1. Moses. Last week, we were dealing with the nation of Israel who had just escaped slavery in Egypt and were on their way to the Promised Land- all about 1400 years before Jesus was on Earth. Today, we are talking about their children, 40 years later, close to entering that promised land- the fact that they were going around Edom means they were right there. Their years in the desert were almost complete. And Moses, their spiritual, governmental, military leader has good reason to be optimistic! Just before this, a desert tribe had captured a chunk of the people, and the people prayed to God and relied on his strength to go and take back their people, and it was a tremendous show of their faith! Things were good! But then they took the long way around Edom, southeast of the promised land, through the desert. No water. No food. They were put in a position where they would have to rely solely on God. And God was faithful! He was sending them "manna," a sweet flaky bread that appeared on the ground every morning- and God would often provide them water from a rock and other miraculous ways. God was taking care of them! But even miracle bread and water wasn't enough for Israel. It probably started with a few Debbie-downers saying, "Manna again, huh?" But slowly, Satan slithered into the ears and sunk his teeth into their hearts, whispering, "Why does your God make you struggle in the desert? Look at Edom. Look at the other nations. Their gods give them wine, fids, pomegranates, rivers of water, meat, grain. Why does your God ask so much of you? Why does your God make you wait so long? Why should you have to trust him for everything?" And that poison produced a fever in the souls of Israel, a fever that produced unquenchable thirst- not even God's miracle bread and water could satisfy them, a fever that produced a delusion that caused them to not just grumble against Moses like their parents did, but against himself: "I guess you just brought us out here to die! You must hate us! We hate this disgusting food! We hate you! I wish we were in slavery in Egypt! Because then we didn't have to trust you."

Do you see what's going on? It's not that they are just showing concerns about food and God kills them. God could have sent bears to maul them or lions to tear them to shreds. But he doesn't. Literally, the Hebrew says "fiery serpents," in the sense that they set you on fire. Their bite would cause your

body to swell and burn, and give you a fever with an unquenchable thirst and it would burn you from the inside out. He sends snakes to poison them because they desperately need to feel in their bodies what is happening in their souls, and it would take something harsh and painful to wake up a whole nation of hardened, delusional, grumbling, unsatisfiable, impatient people blinded by the lie that their God doesn't love them. *The snakes were not a punishment! They were a wake up call.* And praise God for his mercy, they repent. They finally realize how foolish they were, how wrong they were and they admit exactly what they did, no excuses, no sugar-coating. "We sinned. We spoke against you, Moses, and against God. Please pray for us." And what God tells Moses to do is as bizarre as it is beautiful. Moses has to forge a snake of bronze, which would have actually taken a long time, while his people are dying and tells his dying people, "Just look." God doesn't institute a day of fasting or tell them to make a sacrifice or an offering to buy their lives back. He'll give them their life for free! Just look. Just trust that God would be loving and kind enough to give your life back in such a foolishly easy way. This is what God has wanted the entire time. Their trust! God is inviting all who are bitten, whether they can run, walk, or can barely move their head- all can look, all can trust, all can believe, and therefore all can live. Just look.

2. Says Jesus. As it so happens, Jesus says the same thing to all of us today. 1400 years later, Jesus is speaking with a Pharisee, a religious expert, and when Jesus wants to communicate with him exactly who he is and what he has come to do, and how one enters his kingdom and is saved from sin, of all the ways he could have told him, he brings Nicodemus back to Numbers 21, a story he would have known well. Why? Why that one? Because we are all poisoned. You sang it earlier- in the garden of Eden, at the beginning of time, our parents Adam and Eve lived in paradise. No sickness, no death, no sadness, no trouble, no strife, only perfection. And the snake came and injected his poison into their hearts and said, "it's not enough, he isn't enough. You can't trust him. Eat from that tree- disobey God- he doesn't love you." And from flows every sin, every evil, every sadness, every illness, every death- symptoms of the fever of Satan's poison that has been passed down to you and me. Do you need evidence? Look within. At least once in your life, you likely thought, "If I could just get that person to love me, then I would be happy." "If I could just get that job, that promotion, that house, that degree, then I would be happy." Did it work? Be honest! You got what you wanted, and then you needed more! That's the fever- we need more and more and more because the very thing we need to complete us was lost when we fell into sin, and the fever causes a delusion that instead of embracing the Water of Life that can actually quench our thirst, we run away from it and grab onto anything else- money, sex, comforts, pride, only killing ourselves faster.

And Jesus is telling Nicodemus, I've come to heal you. How? Did you know that to the Israelites in the desert, the snake wasn't just a dangerous reptile, it would have represented all that is evil and sinful, and the fire of a furnace was often associated with divine justice. When they looked at that snake forged in the fire, they saw that evil had been punished. That's what they were looking at. Paul, the one who wrote the Ephesians passage, also wrote something breathtaking, another way of talking about Jesus' death on the cross: "God made him who had no sin, *be sin* for us, so that we could be the righteousness

of God.” Jesus was perfect, healthy, good, and he drank our poison and suffered the just wrath of God, not the fires of a furnace, but he was scorched by the fire of Hell itself and hung upon a tree so that all who are sick and dying in their souls could lift their eyes and live. Do you understand what this means? Salvation is by faith alone. It’s free. God doesn’t demand a sacrifice- Jesus already was sacrificed for you. He doesn’t demand that you change your life now and then you’ll be saved- you get saved and then he changes and heals you. You don’t make your decision for Christ and declare him to be the center of your life- he decided for you long before you knew him and declares you to be perfect. We are saved by faith alone, which is at the same time liberating, beautiful, and frustrating, infuriating, and scandalous. Because in order to simply look to the cross, you have to stop looking at yourself. You have to stop paying for your own sins, stop trying to heal yourself, and you have to admit that you’re not okay. All you need, is need, which is the hardest thing to admit. Let’s admit it. We’re sick. We’re dying. We’re not okay. And lift your eyes to the cross and see the Son of Man punished in your stead and trust. Trust that God would love you enough to save you for free. Look. Trust. You will live.

One final thing I’ll say is this: Wake up calls are never pleasant, but thank God for them. There are times in our lives where God allows us to suffer pain, not because he’s punishing us, but because we are going the wrong way, we are straying from him, we are blinding ourselves, and we need to be disciplined- we need to be woken up. Do you think God enjoyed hearing the sick moans of his people in the wilderness? Do you honestly think he enjoyed that? Of course not! It broke his heart! When you love someone, you can’t see them suffer pain without you suffering pain too! How much more does God suffer when we suffer? But he let it happen because they were on the verge of spiritual destruction and this was the only way. It is possible that he takes things away from us, lets us hurt, not because he hates us, but because he’s saving us from ourselves and ultimately showing us that this world is not our home? I’ll share some lyrics from a song, “Blessings,” that sums this up well:

*When friends betray us
And when darkness seems to win
We know that pain reminds this heart
That this is not, this is not our home..
What if your blessings come through raindrops?
What if Your healing comes through tears?
And what if the thousand sleepless nights
Are what it takes to know You're near?
What if my greatest disappointments
Or the aching of this life
Is the revealing of a greater thirst this world can't satisfy
And what if trials of this life
The rain, the storms, the hardest nights
Are Your mercies in disguise?*

Israel's snakes were God's mercy in disguise that woke them up and saved them from themselves.
Could yours be too? Amen.