



NUMBERS 21:1-9

Bible Study

MT. ZION FIRST AFRICAN BAPTIST CHURCH
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VISION

The vision of the Mt. Zion First African Baptist Church of Charlottesville, Virginia will reach and reproduce within its surrounding community, a people inspired and equipped with a passion for the truth of God's Word and His compassion for others who will be enablers of change.



THEME

MOVING FORWARD

AS A

GROWING CHURCH



The Book of Numbers

The Serpent of Brass

Numbers 21:1-9

Dr. Alvin Edwards, Teacher



*The Serpent of Brass
Numbers 21:1-9*

And when king Arad the Canaanite, which dwelt in the south, heard tell that Israel came by the way of the spies; then he fought against Israel, and took some of them prisoners. ² And Israel vowed a vow unto the LORD, and said, If thou wilt indeed deliver this people into my hand, then I will



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utterly destroy their cities. ³ And the LORD hearkened to the voice of Israel, and delivered up the Canaanites; and they utterly destroyed them and their cities: and he called the name of the place Hormah. ⁴ And they journeyed from mount Hor by the way of the Red sea, to compass the land of Edom:



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and the soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way. ⁵ And the people spake against God, and against Moses, 'Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? for there is no bread, neither is there any water; and our soul loatheth this light bread.' ⁶ And



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the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died. ⁷ Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, 'We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD, and against thee; pray unto the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us.' And Moses



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prayed for the people. ⁸ And the LORD said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live. ⁹ And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived.



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The Canaanite king of Arad, ruling in the Negev, heard that Israel was advancing up the road to Atharim. He attacked Israel and took prisoners of war. ² Israel vowed a vow to GOD: “If you will give this people into our power, we’ll destroy their towns and present the



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ruins to you as a holy destruction.”

³ GOD listened to Israel's prayer and gave them the Canaanites. They destroyed both them and their towns, a holy destruction. They named the place Hormah (Holy Destruction).



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The Snake of Fiery Copper

4-5 They set out from Mount Hor along the Red Sea Road, a detour around the land of Edom. The people became irritable and cross as they traveled. They spoke out against God and Moses: “Why did you drag us out of Egypt to die in



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this godforsaken country? No decent food; no water—we can't stomach this stuff any longer.”⁶⁻⁷ So GOD sent poisonous snakes among the people; they bit them and many in Israel died. The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke out



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against GOD and you. Pray to GOD; ask him to take these snakes from us.” Moses prayed for the people. ⁸ GOD said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it on a flagpole: Whoever is bitten and looks at it will live.” ⁹ So Moses made a snake of fiery copper and put it on top of a flagpole. Anyone bitten by a snake who then looked at the copper snake lived.



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The Book of Numbers might be called, “Moses’s Pilgrim’s Progress.” Why?

It contains a full account of the progress of the Israelites through the wilderness until they came to the promised land. And it is not a history of any one person or nation, but it is the picture of the life of all God’s people.



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However, all of us together as the church of God will find that our lives are mirrored, pictured, and foreseen in the travels of God's chosen people from the land of Egypt to Canaan. I am afraid that many of us can see ourselves in this passage.



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Historically, this passage of Scripture occurred almost at the end of Israel's wanderings. For forty years they had been traveling in the wilderness, and now that they had come within sight of the Promised Land, all they had to do was cross the mountains of Edom, and to get through the passes of Seir, and



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they would have been at the land *which floweth with milk and honey*. But the Edomites would not permit them the privilege of passing that close to them, and so just when they seemed to be on the border of the Promise Land, they had to go way out of their way because the Edomites refused to let them pass their land. Verse 4 – “*discouraged*”



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The Hebrew word means to be “shortened, to be cut off, to be impatient,” and to become irritable. This was a discouraging situation, but it was also an opportunity *to trust God*. The same God who just gave them victory at Hormah and provided all their needs would also guide them through this setback.



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What happens when people become irritable or discouraged?

The people spoke against God and against Moses - (*Exodus 15:24, 16:2, 17:3; Numbers 12:1, 14:2, 16:3, 41, and 20:2*) and don't think Moses didn't know: (*Exodus 16:6-8 & Numbers 14:26-30*)



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Moses and Aaron told the People of Israel, “This evening you will know that it is GOD who brought you out of Egypt; and in the morning you will see the Glory of GOD. Yes, he’s listened to your complaints against him. You haven’t been complaining against us, you know, but against GOD.”



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⁸ *Moses said, “Since it will be GOD who gives you meat for your meal in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, it’s GOD who will have listened to your complaints against him. Who are we in all this? You haven’t been complaining to us—you’ve been complaining to GOD!”* ***Moses knew.***



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Here is the Numbers passage:
GOD spoke to Moses and Aaron: “How long is this going to go on, all this grumbling against me by this evil-infested community? I’ve had my fill of complaints from these grumbling Israelites. Tell them, As I live—GOD’s decree—here’s what I’m going to do:



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Your corpses are going to litter the wilderness—every one of you twenty years and older who was counted in the census, this whole generation of grumblers and grouseurs. Not one of you will enter the land and make your home there, the firmly and solemnly promised land, except for Caleb son of Jephunneh & Joshua son of Nun.



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Why was this a major problem?

They were on the threshold of Canaan, closer to it than the previous generation of unbelief had been, and now they started to act with the same unbelief – or worse.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon said in a sermon: “When the grumbling humor is on us we complain of anything



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and everything, as did these Israelites: they complained of God, they complained of Moses; they complained of the manna. They would have been ready to complain of Aaron; but, fortunately for him, he had been dead a month or so, and so they poured the more gall upon Moses. To men in this state nothing is right: nothing can be right.”



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Our soul loathes this worthless bread:

Just like the generation of their fathers, this generation despised God's provision of manna, calling it **worthless bread**. Their complaining against the "bread of heaven" ([Psalm 78:23-24](#)) was the sin of ingratitude against the God who miraculously sustained them in the wilderness.



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“When GOD heard that, he was furious— his anger flared against Jacob, he lost his temper with Israel. It was clear they didn’t believe God, had no intention of trusting in his help. But God helped them anyway, commanded the clouds and gave orders that opened the gates of heaven. He rained down showers of manna to eat, he gave them the Bread of Heaven. They ate the bread of the mighty angels; he sent them all the food they could eat.”



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The LORD sends fiery serpents.

So, the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died.

a. *The LORD sent fiery serpents among the people:* Some folks think these *serpents* were *fiery* in the sense that they were red, like the color of fire.



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Others believe their bite caused an intense burning, so they were called *fiery serpents*.

There was a connection between their *despising* of manna (Numbers 21:5) and these fiery, poisonous snakes. What were they thinking to despise what God had done?



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- *They despised the bread from heaven; God gave them serpents from the earth.*
- *They despised God's blessings; God gave them burning poison.*
- *They despised the life God sustained for them; God gave them death.*



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The LORD sent fiery serpents: WHY?

These came from God, to get the nation's attention at this critical place in their journey to Canaan. If they continued in the unbelief of the previous verses, they would never take the land.

c. Many of Israel's people died, why?:

Probably, these victims were mostly those of the older generation of unbelief.



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This was God's final way of fulfilling His promise that they would perish in the wilderness, and not enter His Promised Land.

When you are in trouble with the Lord how will you be delivered?

Deliverance through looking at the bronze serpent.



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6-7 So GOD sent poisonous snakes among the people; they bit them and many in Israel died. The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke out against GOD and you. Pray to GOD; ask him to take these snakes from us.” Moses prayed for the people.



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⁸ GOD said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it on a flagpole: Whoever is bitten and looks at it will live.”

⁹ So Moses made a snake of fiery copper and put it on top of a flagpole. Anyone bitten by a snake who then looked at the copper snake lived.



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If the new generation was capable of deeper sin (such as quickly and openly complaining against the LORD in [Numbers 21:5](#)), they also had hearts softer and quicker to repent. Here, they quickly humbled themselves before the LORD and Moses, confessing their sin in a worthy way.



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i. “Their quick recognition of its source and purpose, and their swift repentance, is to their credit. It is well for us when we interpret for ourselves God’s judgments and need no Moses to urge us to humble ourselves before Him.” (Maclaren). Hear their request: ***Pray to the LORD for us:***



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In their humility, they asked Moses to pray for them. This was an expression of trust in Moses and in the LORD.

“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.” God commanded Moses to make a serpent (and **Moses made a**



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bronze serpent), set it on pole, so that those who looked upon it could be saved – and they were.

This was an unusual miracle. There was no immediate logical connection between merely looking at a serpent on a pole and living; or refusing to look and dying. But God commanded that such an unusual thing – even a foolish thing – be used to bring salvation to Israel.



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Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole: Jesus referred to this remarkable event 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.*” Jesus clearly said there is a similarity between what Moses did here and what Jesus did on the cross.



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The ***serpent*** is often used in the Bible to represent evil ([Genesis 3:1-5](#), [Revelation 12:9](#)). However, in the Bible ***bronze*** is associated with judgment because it is made with fire. In a sense, ***bronze*** receives the fire of judgment as it is made. So, a ***bronze serpent*** speaks of evil; but evil having been judged. A ***bronze serpent*** is a picture of evil judged and dealt with.



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“The pole resembled the cross upon which Christ was lift up for our salvation; and looking up to it designed our believing in Christ.” (Poole)

If a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived: The people were saved not by *doing* anything, but by simply *looking* to the bronze serpent. They



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had to trust that something that seemed to be as foolish as looking at a serpent on a pole was enough to save them. Again, history repeats itself, because it is likely that some in Israel perished because they thought it was too simple, too foolish to simply look and live. When the new generation of Israel complained and doubted earlier in this



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chapter, they were not looking to the LORD. They looked to themselves, to their difficult circumstances, to the challenges ahead – but not to their God. Here, God put them in a situation where they *had to* look to Him.

The *saving power represented by the serpent could not be exhausted.* There



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was no limit to the number of those who could look and live.

This idea is later found in [Isaiah 45:22](#):
“Look to Me, and be saved, all you ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other.” We might be willing to do a hundred things to earn our salvation, but God commands us to only trust in Him – to look to Him.



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“They that looked upon their sores, and not upon the sign, died for it; but those who looked on the sign, with one eye, with a squint eye, or with half an eye, were healed presently. So, they that fix their eyes upon their sins only, and not upon their Savior, died; but those that look to Christ, being faithful in weakness, though weak in faith, are sure to be saved.” (Tragg)



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So Moses made a bronze serpent:

God commanded Moses to make an image of a serpent, even though such images were forbidden by [Exodus 20:4](#), *how do you justify Moses doing this?* Actually, [Exodus 20:4](#) forbids the making of idols, and this was no idol – it was a symbol, commanded by God, that they could look to in faith and be saved.



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Sadly, to say, this God-ordained symbol was made into an idol. In the reforms of King Hezekiah, he *broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made;*



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Sadly, to say, this God-ordained symbol was made into an idol. In the reforms of King Hezekiah, he *"broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made; for until those days the children of Israel burned incense to it, and called it Nehushtan"* ([2 Kings 18:4](#)). A fallen person can take any good and glorious thing from God and find an idolatrous use for it.



Numbers 14:13-25 (MSG)

Next Week

Read Chapter 14:13-25

Caleb

