

Why was Jesus lifted up? Numbers 21

How many of you like snakes? I don't think many of us would answer yes to that question. For many of us the best kind of snake is a dead snake. What image comes up in your mind when you think about snakes? Some people keep them as pets. Some people eat them as a delicacy.

The story today is a snake story that can be found in Numbers 21. The story begins with the Israelites moving closer and closer to the promise-land, but in verse 4 they encounter a problem. Verse 4 says "they had to go the way of the Red Sea instead of going through the land of Edom."

They were hoping to go straight through Edom which would have made the journey shorter. The previous chapter tells us why they had to go around. The nation of Edom were the descendants of Esau, Jacob's brother. Since the two nations were related, they were hoping that their King would give them permission to pass through the land. Not only did the King say no, you can't pass through, he even sent an army out to make sure that they didn't even think of trying. This incident is what leads their fussing and fusing.

They complained about the food. They complained about the water. They complained about Moses. They complained about God. In verse 6, God sends poisonous snakes into the camp and people start dying. It does not take very long for the Israelites to figure out, this can't be a coincidence. They immediately run to Moses and ask him to talk to God on their behalf. Verse 7 says, "The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against God and against you."

They realized that they were dying, not just because of the snakes, but because of their rebellion against God. So Moses prays, but God does not make the snakes go away. Instead God tells Moses to make a bronze snake and put it on a pole so that everyone who looked at the snake would be healed from their snakebite. Let us now fast forward 1500 years later into the N.T.

In Jn 3:14, Jesus says something that bridges a huge gap in time. "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."

Why was Jesus lifted up? And what does this have to do with the snake story in Num 21?

I. Jesus was lifted up to bring salvation.

In the Apostle John's first letter chapter 2 says, "My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous."

Many of us would like to know, "God what will you do with the problem of sin?" What's the answer? It's the same thing He did in the desert. Instead of removing all the sin in the world, God made a provision. He sent His Son to be lifted up on an ugly wooden cross.

2 Cor 5:21, “Says that He who knew no sin became sin for us so that we might be the righteousness of God.”

Just like God promised salvation to those who looked at the bronze snake on the pole – Jesus promises eternal life to those obey His Word and look to the cross for salvation. Like the bronze snake, God would take something that symbolized death and a curse to be the means of blessing all mankind.

Gal 3:13, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.” Jesus was lifted up-bring salvation.

II. Jesus was lifted up to show the High cost of Sin.

For someone who was bitten to live, they had to be willing to look square in the face of their trouble. They had to look at that bronze serpent and remember why they were bitten.

By looking at the bronze serpent they would have been reminded of the high cost of sin. They would have been reminded of the death that they deserved. Jesus says to us in the N.T. “I am the bronze snake that was raised up in the desert. And I want you to look at it.

The cross of Jesus reminds us of the death that we deserved, and it reminds us of our sinful condition resulting in eternal death.

Hebrews chapter 2 says, “Look unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, For the joy set before him, Jesus endured the cross, despising the shame. “

Isaiah 53:5, “He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed. Like sheep we have all gone astray, we have turned, everyone, to his own way; And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.

III. Jesus was lifted up to display his grace and mercy

The bronze snake reminded the wandering Israelites of the profound depth of God’s mercy and love. Although the cross reminds us of our sins and its penalty, we are also reminded that God has provided a way for us to live.

The cross of Christ is both terrible and wonderful. It’s terrible because our sin is what nailed Jesus to that tree, but it’s also wonderful because at the cross I can see God’s wonderful love for me. Jesus declared "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to Myself" (12:32).

The job of Moses was to lift up the bronze snake for everyone to see. Today, our job to lift up the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the cross, so that all may see it and live.

Rom 5:8, "God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

4. Jesus was lifted up to bring us new life

John 10:10 "The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly." Jesus makes our lives better.

2 Cor 5:17, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new."

5. Jesus was lifted up so that we might respond

If we go back to Numbers 21, what does the text say about how they were saved? The text says they had to do something. They had to look at the snake being lifted up. The Israelites were confronted with a decision. They could either look up and live or not look up and die. The text says in verse 8, "then when anyone looked at the bronze snake they lived".

Jesus tells us that in order to be saved we have to look up at the cross and believe in what he did to make salvation possible. We have to turn away from our sin (repentance), confess that Jesus is Lord, and be baptized.

Close: God will you forgive me? Jesus answers that question by telling us to "Look at the tree."

"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"

Why was Jesus lifted up? Bring salvation. Show the high cost of sin. To show God's amazing love. We can have life. Respond with faith.

Before we close, I want to go back to Num 21 one more time. The Israelites complained about the bread. In John 6, Jesus says, "I am that bread, I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry."

Guess how they reacted? Verse 41 says, "The Jews complained because He said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven."

In Numbers 21, they complained about the bread and now they're doing it again with Jesus. Let us be so very thankful that Jesus became the bread of life to remove the snake bite of sin. Jesus invites all of us to look unto Him, so that we may have eternal life.