

Tusculum Hills Baptist Church
Paul Gunn, Pastor
Hidden Treasure Series

THE ONE WHO WAS LIFTED UP

Numbers 21:4-9 and John 3:14-17

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There are four points to today's sermon:

- Because of sin, the Israelites were lost.
- The payment for sin was death.
- God provided a means of salvation.
- They were saved by faith.

INTRODUCTION: For the past few weeks, we have been digging into the Old Testament in search of the hidden treasure of Jesus Christ. We have discovered Jesus as the offspring of Eve who was destined to crush the serpent's head. We learned about a type or image of Jesus as presented in the ark, the place of safety and refuge. Last week, we talked about how manna was representative of Christ as the bread of life. Let's see what treasure we will find today in the form of foreshadowing.

Foreshadowing is a literary term. A foreshadowing is a warning, an indication, or a hint of what is to come. For example, in the Shakespearean love story of Romeo and Juliet, there is a scene where Romeo, who is hiding outside, speaks to Juliet who is standing on her balcony. Romeo professes his love to her and basically says that he does not mind risking being caught by the guards because it would be better for him to die from their hatred than to live without her love. This, of course, foreshadows the tragic end to the story where both lovers die.

In the Bible, we see foreshadowing throughout the Old Testament as it points toward Christ. Today, we are going to see how the crucifixion of Jesus was foreshadowed through the story of the bronze snake on a pole.

1-BECAUSE OF SIN, THE ISRAELITES WERE LOST

SCRIPTURE: Numbers 21:4-5

Then the people of Israel set out from Mount Hor, taking the road to the Red Sea to go around the land of Edom. But the people grew impatient with the long journey, ⁵ and they began to speak against God and Moses. “Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die here in the wilderness?” they complained. “There is nothing to eat here and nothing to drink. And we hate this horrible manna!”

EXPLANATION: Let me refresh your memory. The Israelites were enslaved in Egypt. God sent Moses who miraculously led them out of Egypt and to the Promised Land. When they got to the Promised Land, they were scared and sinned by refusing to enter the land. God punished them by making them wander in the desert for 40 years. However, God did not abandon them. He continued to provide food for them in the form of quail and manna and made sure that even their shoes did not wear out.

ILLUSTRATION: Have you ever been around someone who never took responsibility for their own actions? Maybe you worked with a person who always wanted to blame someone else for their mistakes. There was a woman who once said that if a glass of milk was spilled in her house, she was always to blame---even if she was not home when it happened. Some people simply cannot or will not see the error of their own ways.

The Israelites were that way. They were the ones who chose to disobey God’s instructions. Their disobedience was the reason they were in the desert instead of feasting in the Promised Land. You might think that they would be thankful for God’s mercy and the way in which he continued to provide for them. Instead, they whined and complained—not only against their human leaders but more importantly against God.

- Because of sin, the Israelites were lost.

2-THE PAYMENT FOR SIN WAS DEATH

SCRIPTURE: Numbers 21:6

So the LORD sent poisonous snakes among the people, and many were bitten and died.

EXPLANATION: We talk a lot about God’s mercy and grace because God is merciful and gracious, and we are the benefactors of his goodness. However, this story is a prime example of another attribute of God—his holiness. God is holy. He is perfect and complete, and he cannot tolerate unholiness. He is long-suffering with mankind because he does not want anyone to perish, but his mercy has limits. The Israelites failed to recognize their own sinfulness and spoke out in disregard and outright defiance toward their holy God. As a result, God punished them, and their punishment was death by venomous snake.

ILLUSTRATION: Although it varies depending on what kind of snake bites you, the symptoms of a poisonous snake bite are in no way pleasant.

- Redness, swelling, bruising, bleeding, or blistering around the bite
- Severe pain
- Nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea
- Labored breathing
- Rapid heart rate, weak pulse, low blood pressure
- Disturbed vision
- Metallic, mint, or rubber taste in the mouth
- Increased salivating and sweating
- Numbness or tingling around face and/or limbs
- Muscle twitching

EXPLANATION: We have to wonder what exactly the Israelites experienced before they succumbed to their wounds. And I wonder who got bitten? My guess it was those who had defied God and refused to repent.

The Lord’s punishments are not like a grandma’s slap on the wrist or a mother’s time-out.

SCRIPTURE: Nahum 1:2 says, *“The LORD is a jealous and avenging God; the LORD takes vengeance and is filled with wrath. The LORD takes vengeance on his foes and vents his wrath against his enemies.”*

Colossians 3:5-6 warns us, *“Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. ⁶ Because of these, the wrath of God is coming.”*

Why did God specifically choose a punishment of poisonous snakes? The Bible does not spell it out for us, but perhaps it was a specific reminder of satan, the one who was behind their sin – and a reminder of the serpent in the Garden of Eden. The Bible tells us that satan is a liar and a thief. The Israelites chose to listen to his lies instead of trusting God’s provision. There was a price to pay for their sin.

- Because of sin, the Israelites were lost.
- The payment for sin was death.

3-GOD PROVIDED A MEANS OF SALVATION

SCRIPTURE: Numbers 21:7-9

Then the people came to Moses and cried out, “We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take away the snakes.” So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸ Then the LORD told him, “Make a replica of a poisonous snake and attach it to a pole. All who are bitten will live if they simply look at it!” ⁹ So Moses made a snake out of bronze and attached it to a pole. Then anyone who was bitten by a snake could look at the bronze snake and be healed!

EXPLANATION: God could have just taken the snakes away. He could have provided Moses with a healing balm to rub on their wounds or just miraculously cured them. But God wanted to use this experience as another way he could teach his people about himself. He wanted to provide a hint of what was to come.

As we know, the serpent is a symbol of satan and sin. In addition, in the ancient culture, bronze symbolized judgment. The bronze serpent was a reminder to the Israelites that their sin and the sin of all mankind would eventually be judged.

When Moses lifted the serpent onto the pole, the Israelites had no basis to think of the cross. However, they did learn what it meant to have faith.

- Because of sin, the Israelites were lost.
- The payment for sin was death.
- God provided a means of salvation.

4-THEY WERE SAVED BY FAITH

SCRIPTURE: John 3:14-17

And as Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. ¹⁶ “For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him.

EXPLANATION: When talking to Nicodemus, Jesus compared his upcoming death to the lifting up of the bronze serpent. The bronze serpent represented God’s judgment of the Israelites’ sin. In the same way, Jesus took judgment for our sin.

SCRIPTURE: Galatians 3:13 says, “*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole.”*

2 Corinthians 5:21 says, “*God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*”

Listen to the comparisons between Israelites and us:

- The Israelites were geographically lost. We are spiritually lost.
- In the same way that the Israelite’s sins were judged, the Bible tells us that all have sinned and that the wages of sin are death.
- There was nothing the Israelites could do to save themselves, and there is nothing we can do to save ourselves.
- The Israelites were totally dependent upon God for physical healing. We are totally dependent on God for spiritual healing.
- When they looked at the bronze serpent, they were placing their faith in God. They believed that he would save them. When we place our faith in Christ as the atonement for our sins, we too are saved.

CONCLUSION:

- Because the Israelites sinned, they were lost.
- The payment for sin was death.
- God provided a means of salvation.
- They were saved by faith.

We look at the Israelites and wonder how they could be so ungrateful to the God who saved them from Egyptian slavery, who parted the Red Sea for them to cross, who miraculously provided bread from Heaven for them to eat. We wonder why they were so ornery, so rebellious, and so disobedient. Yet we fail to see the similarities between them and us.

- How many of us have run from the Lord?
- How many of us disregard his blessings?
- How many of us refuse to obey his word?

The story of the bronze serpent is a powerful reminder. God is merciful and gracious and good, but he is also a holy God who will not tolerate sin forever. Just as he did with the Israelites, there will come a day for each one of us, a day when we will stand before the Lord and face judgment for our sins. The Bible tells us that there is absolutely nothing we can do to save ourselves. Just as the Hebrews had to look up in faith, we have to look to the One who was lifted up on our behalf.

Romans 10:9 says, *“If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”* God calls us to have faith in his one and only son who has already paid the price on our behalf. All we have to do is commit our hearts and lives to him.

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Sincerely, Paul Gunn
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