

# Look to the Lord

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, could you please turn with me to the passage we read in the book of Numbers, the book of Numbers in chapter 21, Numbers chapter 21, and we're focusing on verses 1 to 9 of the chapter.

Numbers 21, verses 1 to 9, but if you look with me especially at verses 8 and 9. And the Lord said to Moses, make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten when he sees it shall live.

So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole, and if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live. And especially at the end of verse 9, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

Robert Murray McShane used to speak of communion as being a time of self-examination. But he said that when it comes to self-examination, we should look once to ourselves and then look nine times to Jesus.

Because there's this great problem I think we all can suffer from, that we focus on ourselves, that we focus on how well we are doing at a time of communion, rather than looking at the author and the perfecter of our faith.

[ 1 : 22 ] And so this evening I really want us to look at Jesus as he is presented in the short, strange, stunning passage from God's Word. And as we look at him in this passage, I want us to be encouraged to simply look at him, and receive him, and rest on him, and rejoice in him, as we prepare to take communion this coming Sunday.

We're going to look at this passage under a number of headings. The first thing we see is the rebellion, the rebellion, verses 1 to 5. And we see in these verses that the people turn against the Lord.

The people turn against the Lord. The context is given in verses 1 to 4. And there is a promising start as we see in verses 1 to 3. We're told that Israelites have been attacked by the Canaanite king of Arad, and they pray to the Lord, and he enables them to totally destroy the king of Arad and his towns.

Those Israelites have time and time again experienced the Lord's gracious and glorious deliverance. But we're told in verse 4, they're in the wilderness. They're going round and round in circles as the Lord teaches them more and more to depend on him in a terrain that was bleak and barren and bare.

The writer T.S. Eliot, better known as Lawrence of Arabia, walked through this same landscape at the beginning of the 20th century. And he said, this is a place of hopelessness and sadness, deeper than all the open desert we had crossed.

[ 2 : 50 ] There was something sinister, something actively evil in this snake-devoted land, full of salt water and barren palms and bushes which neither served for grazing nor firewood.

And this was the environment that those Israelites were walking through in Numbers 21, verse 4. And this brings us to the behaviour of the people in verses 4 and 5.

We're told the people became impatient. They've been wandering through this wilderness for 40 years. They're on the edge of the promised land. They just want to enter it. And the Lord says to them, not yet.

I wonder if you ever wanted something so badly. Maybe it was a very good thing. And God said, you can't have it. Or you can't have it yet.

If you have, perhaps you'll empathise with how the people of Israel felt. They just want this wilderness experience, this wandering existence to be over. They just want to enter the land of promise.

[ 3 : 53 ] Is that so wrong? But we also see the people speak against the Lord and against Moses. They're questioning God. They're asking, what are you doing, Lord? Do you know what you're doing in my life?

Do you know what you're doing in my husband, my wife, my child's life? And perhaps there have been times, or there will be times, when we question the providences God is placing in our paths, or the paths of our loved ones.

And we are left saying, what are you doing, Lord? Why are you doing this to this person? But not only that, the people question the Lord's plan of redemption.

They ask, why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? They're saying to the Lord, your plans for our lives aren't good plans. You should have left us in Egypt.

You should never have saved us. We were happy. We were content. We were satisfied before you intervened in our lives. They would rather have been left alone by the Lord, and not known as salvation, and not known as grace.

[ 4 : 54 ] They want to go back to Egypt, back to slavery. They want to be away from the Lord. But the people also, we might note, doubt the Lord's ability.

They say to Moses, there is no water. We're going to die of thirst. That's a very legitimate statement to make. They're in the wilderness. It's in a dry environment.

But you remember the Lord had miraculously provided them with water back in Exodus 17. But even more significantly, just look over the chapter. Numbers chapter 20. The Lord had provided them with water from the rock.

But not only that, the people also complain about the Lord's provision. The Lord had provided them with manna, bread from heaven every single day for 40 years without fail.

They had never grown hungry. They had never known starvation. And they turn around and they call the Lord's gracious provision miserable. Worthless. They're saying that what the Lord has been graciously and abundantly giving them has no value.

[ 5 : 58 ] It doesn't satisfy them. They dare to call the bread of life miserable. Worthless. You know, as we look at the behaviour of the Israelites, we see that they are rebelling against the Lord.

They're dishonouring the Lord. These people don't acknowledge the Lord's power. These people don't appreciate the Lord's generosity. These people don't recognise the Lord's mercy.

These people don't accept the Lord's sovereignty. These people don't trust or treasure the Lord and His word. The people turn against God. And I think every single one of us, at one time or another, has behaved in exactly the same way as the Israelites.

You see, there may have been times when we rebelled against God. The one who made us and owns us and said to Him, I want to go my own way. I don't want you to tell me what to do.

There may have been times when we turned our backs on the salvation God offers us and said, I don't want to be religious. I don't need this Jesus. I don't need this cross. I don't need this gospel.

[ 7 : 04 ] I don't need any of it yet. I'll have it on my deathbed, but I won't have it now. There may have been times when we rejected the purposes of God for us and we thought to ourselves, but I'm safe.

I'm comfortable. I'm secure. I'm becoming a Christian, becoming a follower of Jesus. It's too hard. It's too costly. It's too sacrificial.

There may have been times when we weren't satisfied with God's provision for us and we said, I'm not that interested right now in coming to church. I'm not that interested in reading my Bible.

I'm not that interested in spending time in prayer. I really can't be bothered spending time with Christians. I don't want to make use of God's provision of the means of grace right now. We probably all go through seasons in life where we can think and behave in these ways.

Even, friends, as Christians, we become tired of serving God and living for Him becomes wearisome. We're just going through the motions until we stop going through them altogether.

[ 8 : 11 ] That's the rebellion. This brings us to the retribution in verse 6. And what we see in verse 6 is that people experience the judgment of God.

The people experience the judgment of the Lord. You remember how the Israelites have behaved in verses 4 and 5? They've turned their backs on the Lord thinking He doesn't love them.

Thinking He doesn't care for them. Thinking He isn't there for them. Thinking He doesn't have their best interests at heart. And now they want to go against Him. And this problem isn't unique to them.

This problem can be traced all the way back to the Garden of Eden because Adam and Eve were living in paradise. They had everything they could want. They had everything they could ever need. And the serpent hisses, This isn't fair.

This isn't right. This isn't good enough. God is withholding good from you. And they believe the forked tongue words of the serpent and they're no longer content with what God has given them. [ 9 : 11 ] Paradise isn't good enough for Adam and Eve. Have you ever thought that? The paradise wasn't good enough for Adam and Eve. And here in Numbers 21, the people of Israel have fallen into the old age-old problem Adam and Eve fell into.

A failure to be satisfied with God and what He had given them. And look at the response of the Lord. Verse 6. The people have been saying things are so bad they can't get much worse. We're better off without God. And the Lord responds, You want to see how bad things can get? You think things can't get much worse? You think you're better off without my presence? Better off without my protection? Better off without my provision? Better off without my peace? Better off without my promises? You think you're better off without me? Watch this. And we're told the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people.

And when the writer speaks about fiery serpents, he's not saying these serpents were on fire. He's saying they set you on fire. When those serpents bit you, you would become inflamed.

[ 10 : 20 ] You would suffer a terrible fever. You'd know an unquenchable thirst. And eventually you would die. And look at the outcome for the people in verse 6. This wilderness was notorious for serpents.

Lawrence of Arabia again spoke about it creeping with vipers and cobras and puff adders. He said that people would be afraid to walk at night. He claimed that the bravest of men would be unmanned by the snakes they encountered.

Just imagine what it would be like when the Lord sent those snakes into this camp as an act of judgment. The Lord uses these creatures as instruments of judgment to bring these people to the... to bring His judgment upon these people and bite them. It would have been a terrible period. Hundreds, thousands of Israelites screaming, writhing, dying. It is a scene of horror.

It is a scene of fear. It is a scene of death. The rebellion of the people has brought about the retribution of the Lord. The people experience the judgment of God.

It is a scene of fear. It is a scene of death. The rebellion of the people has brought about the retribution of the Lord. The people experience the judgment of God.

[ 11 : 26 ] And as we survey this scene of wriggling serpents and writhing people, as we see these biting snakes and broken Israelites, we are reminded of the sobering reality that the consequences of rebelling against God are very, very serious.

One writer has said, there is no such thing as a little sin because there is no little God to sin against. The Bible plainly teaches that a place of intense, everlasting fire and suffering and thirst awaits those who repeatedly rebel against God.

The God we worship, friends, is loving, but He is also just. And He will not be mocked. He will not allow His character to be dragged through the mud.

And He will not be rebelled against forever. He will bring about His retribution. Sinful actions have just consequences.

And this brings us to the repentance, verse 7. And what we see in verse 7 is the people turn to the Lord. The people turn to the Lord.

[ 12 : 38 ] The Israelites realize in verse 7 that they have offended the Lord. And they turn to Moses and they say, we have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord. Now this is a very important point to note.

The Lord sent those snakes not simply as an act of judgment on the people. The Lord used those snakes, this fiery trial, for the spiritual well-being of His people.

It was hard grace. It was tough grace. But it was still grace. Israel hadn't seen their problem in their relationship with God until they were dying.

And sometimes we don't see there's a problem in our relationship with God until crisis hits, until something goes wrong and we are forced to run to the great physician.

C.S. Lewis once said, God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain. It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.

[ 13 : 41 ] And the Israelites now know in their pain that they need the Lord and they need His forgiveness. And they realize in verse 7 that they cannot help themselves. They plead to Moses, pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us.

They don't even say, pray the Lord will give us the grace to remove the snakes ourselves. They say, pray that the Lord will take the snakes away. They realize there is nothing they can do to save themselves.

They realize that nothing and no one can rescue them. They realize that help, salvation, deliverance is to be found in only one place, the hands of the God they have offended by sinning against.

And this is what God does with His people time and time again. He brings us to the point of saying, I can't, but God can. He brings us to the point of saying, it is not what I can do for God.

It is what God is able to do for me. He brings us to the point of saying with Jonah, salvation is of the Lord. Salvation is of the Lord.

[ 14 : 48 ] The only thing, friends, that you and I can possibly contribute to our salvation is the sin that we need to be saved from. That is all we bring to the table.

Salvation is of the Lord. Salvation is of the Lord. Not your prayer meeting attendance. Not the way we dress for church.

Not our years of church attendance under our belts. Salvation is of the Lord. Lord. I am a big fan. I don't know if I told you this four years ago.

You probably heard anyway. I am a big fan of the rock band U2. And their lead singer, Bono, is a committed Christian. And he compares the idea of karma and grace.

He compares the idea of us doing something for God and God doing something for us. And he says that the centre of all religions is the idea of karma. What you put out comes back to you.

[ 15 : 45 ] As you reap, so you will sow. And yet along comes this idea called grace to abend all that. Love interrupts the consequences of our actions, which in my case is very good news indeed because I've done a lot of stupid stuff.

It doesn't excuse my mistakes but I'm holding out for grace. I'm holding out that Jesus took my sins onto the cross because I know who I am and I hope I don't have to depend on my religious behaviour.

The people in Numbers 21 realise they cannot depend on themselves or their religious behaviour. They know they have to turn to the Lord. They have to depend on the Lord.

They repent. And as we look at the people turning to God, we are given a picture of what repentance looks like in the life of a Christian. You see, if you and I were to go up to the people in the street today, if you were to walk up a lower or upper bar of us today, and I'm not encouraging you to do this for one minute, but if you were to do it and shout to the person you meet, you must repent, what would they think you were telling them to do?

Well, some might think that you were telling them to feel sorry about something they'd done. Others might think that you were telling them to say sorry for something they had done. But repentance doesn't simply mean feeling sorry or even saying you're sorry.

[ 17 : 08 ] repentance means turning back to God. It is about a change of heart. It is about a change of direction. That was the difference between Peter and Judas in the New Testament.

Both were disciples. Both were followers of Jesus. And both let Jesus down badly and equally. Peter denied with curses that he knew Jesus.

Judas betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. And both felt sorry about what they had done. The difference was Peter turned to Jesus in hope and Judas turned from Jesus in hopelessness.

Peter turned to Jesus in his desperation and Judas turned from Jesus in despair. And here in Numbers 21 we see the Israelites having turned from the Lord now turning back to him.

And that is the encouragement. That is the warm invitation to each and every one of us this evening. If you are not yet a Christian tonight there is a God who invites you to turn to him.

[ 18 : 14 ] And he promises he will never turn those turning to him away. And if you are a Christian and perhaps you've turned away from God for a period and you know you've grown cold and you're afraid thinking that God will want nothing more to do with you he invites you to turn to him once again and he promises he will not turn you away.

In the Song of Songs we have this wonderful drama that depicts a relationship between a woman and her king who is also her husband. And the woman abandons the king she walks out on him. If she were alive today she would be no longer responding to his text messages or Facebook compliments doesn't respond to the flowers he sends just puts them in the bin. She treats his loving words with cold indifference.

She is unfaithful. And then she comes to her senses and she realises what a wonderful person she's forfeited. What an amazing relationship she's missing out on.

And she wonders will he take her back. And she comes to him broken with her head bowed wondering will he take her back.

[ 19 : 28 ] And he turns to her looks her up and down and says your eyes overwhelm me. You have captivated my heart. And that is how Jesus responds to us even when we've wandered from him even when we've let him down even when we've messed up so badly it is not only a private sin it is also a public sin even when we're wondering will he ever take us back he looks at us when we turn to him and he doesn't look at us with indifference or coldness he looks at us and says your eyes overwhelm me you have captivated my heart.

That's the repentance the turning to the Lord. Lord. And this brings us finally to the remedy the remedy verses 8 and 9 and we see in these verses the people experience the mercy of the Lord. The people experience the mercy of the Lord. Look at what the Lord doesn't do in this passage. The people have asked the Lord to do what? Take away the snakes.

And the Lord doesn't remove the snakes. And that gives us a very valuable lesson on prayer. God always always always answers your prayers.

There is not a single prayer that he doesn't answer when it comes from one of his children. But God doesn't always answer the prayers the way that we want or the ways that we expect.

[ 21 : 05 ] He doesn't always remove the thorn. But he always answers our prayers in ways that will bring him glory and that will be for our benefit and eternal good.

And the Lord knows that if he suddenly removes those snakes that people would have thought it was an accidental occurrence. They would have thought that evil had been removed naturally. And they would have turned away from him once again.

And so the Lord doesn't remove the snakes because he wants them to depend on him alone and always know that salvation is from the Lord. And so look at what the Lord does do, verse 8.

Verse 8 narrates one of the weirdest, one of the oddest, one of the most enigmatic things that happen in scripture. The people ask for serpents to be taken away and the Lord says, no I'm not going to remove the serpents from you, instead I will give you another serpent.

And the Lord commands that a bronze serpent be constructed and placed on a pole. and anyone who is bitten by a snake just needs to look at this bronze serpent believing in the mercy and grace of God and his promise of life, his promise of salvation and they would live.

[ 22 : 21 ] And look at the response of the people, verse 9. The Lord has given this command, build a bronze serpent and he's given a gracious divine promise. Anyone who is bitten and looks at this serpent will live.

No qualifications were demanded, just looking in faith. There was nothing magical, nothing psychological about the bronze serpent. It wasn't to be touched, wasn't to be paraded about, wasn't to be treated as a relic, wasn't to be worshipped.

All the people were to do was look at the serpent, believing in the mercy of God and his promise of salvation and they would live. And it's all followed through where we read in verse 9, so Moses made a bronze serpent, set it on a pole and if a serpent bit anyone he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

The people experienced the mercy of God. Now there is a clear link between Jesus and the bronze serpent in the gospel. You see in John chapter 3 which we read, Jesus points to this passage when he is trying to explain faith to a religious leader called Nicodemus.

And in that passage Jesus speaks the most famous words in the Bible where he says God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life.

[ 23 : 44 ] But even before Jesus speaks those words to Nicodemus he says something very strange. He says Nicodemus as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness so I must be lifted up that whoever believes in me may have eternal life for God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life.

Jesus was telling Nicodemus that just as the Israelites had to look at this bronze serpent and simply trust God's word and promise of salvation so everyone must simply look to him lifted on the cross believing the promise of salvation and they will live.

As Christians friends we believe and we look to we trust in a lifted crucified Jesus because he received the judgment of God we deserve.

He endured the great thirst that we deserve. He experienced the forsakenness we deserve. He paid the debt we deserve. He tasted the debt we deserve.

He took the hell we deserve. we are pardoned. We are healed. We are saved through Jesus alone. There is no other way we receive God's mercy and eternal life.

[ 25 : 10 ] And we receive this healing. We receive this life. We receive this salvation simply through looking. Simply through believing.

I love what Charles Spurgeon says when he speaks about his conversion experience. And he says the minister, this is when he was a young boy, the minister did not come that morning.

He was snowed up I suppose. At last a very thin looking man, a shoemaker or tailor or something of that sort went into the pulpit to preach. He was obliged to stick to his text for a simple reason he had nothing else to say.

The text was look unto me and be ye saved all the ends of the earth. He didn't pronounce the words rightly but that didn't matter. There was I thought a glimmer of hope for me in that text. The preacher began thus, this is a very simple text indeed.

It says look. Now looking doesn't take a great deal of pain. It isn't lifting your foot or finger. It's just look. Well a man needn't go to college to learn to look. You may be the biggest fool and yet you can look.

[ 26 : 10 ] A man needn't be worth 10,000 a year to look. Anyone can look. Even a child can look. But then the text says look unto me. Many of you are looking to yourselves but it's no use looking there. You'll never find any comfort in yourselves.

Some say look to God the Father. No, look to him by and by. Jesus Christ says look unto me. Some of you say we must look for the Spirit's working. You have no business with that just now. Look to Christ.

The text says look to me. Then the good man followed up his text in this way. Look unto me I am sweating great drops of blood. Look unto me I am hanging on the cross.

Look unto me I am dead and buried. Look unto me I rise again. Look unto me I ascend to heaven.

Look unto me I am sitting at the Father's right hand. Oh poor sinner look unto me look unto me.

When he had managed to spin out about ten minutes or so he was at the end of his tether. Then he looked at me under the gallery and I dare say with so few presents he knew me to be a stranger.

Just fixing his eyes on me as if he knew all my heart he said young man you look very miserable.

[ 27 : 11 ] Well I did but I had not been accustomed to have remarks made from the pulpit of my personal appearance before. However it was a very good blow struck right home. He continued and you will always be miserable miserable in life and miserable in death if you don't obey my text but if you obey this moment you will be saved.

Then lifting up his hands he shouted young man look to Jesus Christ. Look look look. You don't have nothing to do but look and live. And the encouragement that I want to put to you tonight and the challenge I want to put to you and to myself is that every one of us wherever we are at in life's journey wherever we are at in our Christian experience that we would be going to Calvary and that we would be looking and as we participate in the communion service on Sunday and then prepare to go into a new week that we would daily transfer our trust to Jesus.

Where instead of looking for happiness security identity and so many other things things that may seem good things that other people may tell us are good that we would look to Jesus and that we would find happiness in him and that we would find security in him and that we would find identity in him because friends it is in Christ alone that our hope is found and it's in Christ alone that we stand in the love of God tonight.

Amen. We will close this time of worship by singing to God's praise in the words of Psalm 130.

Psalm 130, the Scottish Salter version on page 421 and singing the whole psalm, a psalm that celebrates the freedom, the forgiveness we have from God through Christ.

Lord, from my depths to thee I cried, my voice Lord, do thou hear, and to my supplications voice give and attend to fear. Lord, who shall stand if thou, O Lord, shouldst mark iniquity, but yet with thee forgiveness is that feared thou mayst be.

[ 29 : 22 ] We'll stand to sing the whole psalm to God's praise. Amen. Lord, from the dead to thee I cried, my voice, Lord, to fear.

On to my supplications, the constitution point s give unattended verse.

Lord, you shall stand with us, O Lord, And why can't he be with me?

But yet with thee forgiveness is The fear thou make us speak.

I wait for God, my soul doth wait, My hope is in his word, More than they thought, For morning watch, My soul is for the Lord.

[ 31 : 24 ] I said, Lord God, They've had to watch, The morning light to see, Let Israel open the Lord, For with him mercy's peace, And plenty of retention Is ever found with him, And from all his iniquities,

The Israel shall redeem. Let's pray.

Our Father in heaven, We do give you praise and thanks this evening For the plenteous redemption that is found in you, For the salvation that we have in Jesus, And that all we need to do, All you require us to do is to look, And we will find life.

Lord, we ask and pray that you would direct Our eyes of faith to Jesus tonight, That we would set our focus on him As the author and the perfecter of our faith, And that we would see him As the greatest of all prophets, The greatest of all priests, And the greatest of all kings, That he would be precious to each and every one of us, And if there has been anyone in here tonight Who has been struggling, Wondering whether they are good enough, Wondering whether they should go to the table or not, That you might encourage them through your word And through your gospel, That it is in Christ alone that our hope is found.

Bless this congregation, Bless Andrew as he preaches over the next few days, That he would know liberty and unction and joy In his own soul as he preaches, And that you would bless him, And that he would be a blessing to this congregation.

[ 33 : 59 ] Bless us we pray, Impart us, Knowing what it is to be under your smile, As we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.