

Guest Preacher - Rev. Hugh Ferrier

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Preacher: Rev. Hugh Ferrier

[0 : 00] Well, friends, would you turn back with me, please, the words we read together in Numbers 21, Numbers chapter 21, and reading again, verse 9.

! 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.

A few years ago, I was walking in Arden, American, on the very west coast. It was a hot summer's day. I was on holiday, full of the joys.

And suddenly I stopped because lying in front of me was a sunbathing snake. And I completely froze. I could hardly move.

I'm not good with snakes. I don't like seeing snakes on TV. I don't like seeing snakes behind these perspex cases. And certainly I don't like seeing snakes slithering out in the wild.

[1 : 02] Well, needless to say, I've never gone back to that particular place for fear of coming across more slithering snakes in the west coast. This evening, though, we come to a narrative that is full of snakes.

And what it shows us is the salvation of a gracious God. A salvation that would be supremely seen in the Lord Jesus Christ.

We'll divide the passage under three headings. We'll look at the rebellion, then the release, and finally the remedy. The rebellion, the release, and the remedy.

First, the rebellion. You see that in verse 4 and then verse 5. The author focuses here on the rebellion of the people. In verse 4, the author provides us with the context.

The people of Israel have experienced the Lord's great deliverance. For hundreds of years they had endured slavery in the land of Egypt, but the Lord had remembered the promises that He had made to their fathers, to Abram, Isaac, and Jacob, and had powerfully intervened in their situation and dramatically rescued them from Pharaoh's cruel grip.

[2 : 13] They had proceeded to make their way through the wilderness where the Lord had sustained them for 40 years with miraculous supplies of bread and water. They're now on the cusp of entering the land of Canaan.

The end of the journey is now in sight. And at the beginning of Numbers 21, we find the people inflicting a heavy defeat on the Canaanite king of Arad. He had fought against Israel and had taken some of them captive.

The people of Israel had then cried out to the Lord, and He had responded by handing the Canaanites over to them so that they destroyed the Canaanites, and not just the Canaanites, but also their cities.

It was Israel's first victory over the Canaanites, and a timely reminder to them that with the Lord on their side, with the Lord working on their behalf, they could indeed enter and take possession of the land.

And the area where all this took place was called Hormah, which means destruction. And then in verse 4, we come to the detour. The people set out from Mount Hor, and they make their way toward the Red Sea.

[3 : 24] And the reason why they do this, we read, is so that they might go around the land of Edom, a people who had already refused them safe passage back in Numbers chapter 20.

It's a massive detour. But it's not just a massive detour, it is also a major discouragement. The people appear to be regressing rather than progressing toward the promised land.

They're going in a southerly direction when they ought to have been going in a northerly direction. We move, though, from the context to the complaint in verses 4 and 5.

The author highlights the restlessness of the people. Look at verse 4. We read that the people became impatient. Literally, their soul became short. They feel like they're going round and round in circles.

They feel like they're not getting any closer to the land of Canaan. They've been on the cusp of entering it. They're now heading in the opposite direction. They've just defeated a group of Canaanites.

[4 : 22] They're now shrinking back from the Edomites. It seems that they're taking one step forward, but for every step that they take forward, they're also taking two steps back.

And it leaves the people restless. It leaves them impatient. It leaves them short-tempered. It leaves them hugely frustrated. And having highlighted the restlessness of the people, the author highlights their rejection.

Look at verse 5. We see the rejection of the Lord's person. We read that they spoke against the Lord. They speak in a hard and a harsh manner about the God who had delivered them.

We also see the rejection of the Lord's prophet. They don't simply speak against the Lord. That would have been bad enough. But they also speak against Moses. They speak against the Lord's spokesman.

They speak against the bearer of God's revelation, God's communication. We also see the rejection of the Lord's promise. The Lord had said He had promised that He would bring them to the land that He had sworn to give to their fathers.

[5 : 29] And now the people suggest that the Lord has brought them out of Egypt not to bring them into the land of their fathers, but to let them die in the wilderness. And finally, we see the rejection of the Lord's provision.

They claim that there is no food, there is no water in the place that the Lord's brought them to. And then in the very same breath, they say that they loathe, they detest, they despise the miserable, worthless, light food that the Lord has been giving to them.

Now, friends, as we consider these verses, we have been shown the sin that the Lord sees. The sin that the Lord sees.

That's what we see in Numbers 21. The people express frustration over the way that the Lord has been leading them, and that frustration spills over in the way that they speak badly about the Lord's person.

They speak badly about the Lord's prophet. They speak badly about the Lord's promises. They speak badly about the Lord's provision. In short, they rebel against the Lord.

[6 : 42] That is the sin that the Lord sees. And that's worth our attention tonight. Joseph Stalin was the tyrannical dictator of Russia during the Second World War and the early years of the Cold War.

As a young man, Stalin was quite a different character. He had studied at a seminary. He had expressed a desire, an interest in going in for the ministry. But he became increasingly influenced by the atheistic ideology of thinkers such as Marx and Lenin.

Stalin eventually became an oppressor and persecutor of the churches, and not just the churches in general, but their clergy in particular. Many years later, Stalin lay on his deathbed.

And his daughter spoke about how he managed to raise himself up just for a brief moment. And as he raised himself up for this very brief moment, he clenched his fist toward heaven, shook his fist, and then collapsed back onto the pillow and died.

Stalin's very last act was to demonstrate his rejection of God. The Bible, friends, makes it clear that sin at its essence, at its core, is the rejection of God.

[8 : 08] Sin is rebellion against the maker of heaven and earth. R.C. Sproul famously defines sin as cosmic treason. And after defining sin as cosmic treason, Sproul went on to say this, Sin is treason against a perfectly pure sovereign.

It is an act of supreme ingratitude toward the one to whom we owe everything. The slightest sin is an act of defiance against cosmic authority.

It is a revolutionary act. It is a rebellious act. It is an insult to the holiness of God. That was Israel's ongoing problem throughout their long, multicolored history.

Their repeated refusal to give due allegiance to the God and his all-encompassing kingship and his all-encompassing authority over their lives.

And it's equally true of the 21st century atheist who rejects Christ and his claims on their lives. And it's also true of the professing Christian who might declare themselves to be a follower of Jesus with

their lips.

[9 : 23] And at the same time, they deny him with their life. With their lifestyle. Friends, this evening, we are being reminded that every time we resent God, every time we resist God, every time we rebel against God, every time we reject his authoritative word, every time we shake our tiny fists in his direction and say, I'll do it my way, my will be done, we are committing cosmic treason.

That is the sin that God sees. I sometimes hear Christians saying, well, it was just a little sin. I sometimes hear Christians say, it was just a white lie.

I sometimes hear Christians say, it's not doing anybody any harm. I sometimes see Christians saying, I'll behave one way on Sunday and I'll behave another way on Monday.

But the word of God makes it so clear, friends, that any sin and every sin, small or great in the eyes of the world, is cosmic treason, rebellion against the living God.

That is the sin that God sees. But second, we come to the release. Look at verse 6 and 7. The author now focuses on the release of the serpents.

[11 : 01] Verse 6, we see the plague. We're told what the Lord did at the beginning of verse 6. The writer T.E. Eliot, better known as Lawrence of Arabia, traveled through this same wilderness at the beginning of the 20th century.

And he would later write about his experiences. And here's what he says. This was a place of hopelessness and sadness, deeper than all the open desert we had crossed.

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

It's quite a description. A sinister, snake-devoted land. And now we read about the Lord sending fiery serpents among the people. That word fiery can refer to the shiny, shimmering appearance of the serpents as the sun shone down on their scaly skin.

But it's more likely that it refers to their venom, to the burning effect of their bite, the fiery effect of their bite. And the author highlights here that the Lord sent.

[12 : 11] He released. He let loose these serpents. It would seem that the Lord had been providentially restraining the serpents from coming among the people for these 40 years in the wilderness.

For 40 years, the people never saw a single serpent. But after seeing the rebellion, the Lord now removes, as it were, his protective hand from his people and allows them to see what living without his presence, living without his protection, would actually look like.

And we're told what the serpents did. Verse 6, we read that the serpents bit the people, and we read that many of Israel died, presumably after a number of days of suffering in an intense manner.

We move, though, from the plague to the plea in verse 7. We hear the plea of the people. Look at the beginning of verse 7. The people come before Moses with a humble admission.

They admit that they have sinned. This is really the first time that the people admit to committing any sin in the whole Exodus wilderness narrative. And they admit that they have sinned by speaking against the Lord and by speaking against Moses.

[13 : 28] And after making that humble admission, the people present a heartfelt appeal. They ask Moses to pray to the Lord, and they ask Moses to pray to the Lord to remove the serpents.

They realize that they're in a situation beyond their ability to control. They realize that they cannot get rid of the serpents themselves. And so they say, Moses, Moses, will you pray to the Lord, and will you pray to the Lord to take away these serpents?

And having heard the plea of the people, we see the prayer of Moses. Look at verse 7. We read that Moses prayed for the people. You know, sometimes it's very difficult to pray for people.

It's not easy to pray for the person who's done wrong to us. It's not easy to pray for the person who has criticized us and humiliated us, especially in public.

It's not easy to pray for the person who has called our own motives into question. But here's Moses, and he's praying for the very people who had spoken badly, harshly, in a hard manner about him.

[14 : 45] Well, friends, as we consider these verses, we're not just showing the sin that the Lord sees. We're also showing the siren that the Lord sounds. The siren that the Lord sounds.

That's what we see in Numbers 21. The people of Israel, remember, were speaking against the Lord. They were cosmic traitors. They were rebels. And the Lord sees the need to wake them up and rouse them and draw them back to himself.

And so he releases these fiery serpents among them, not simply to punish them, but rather to rouse them and to bring them to the place of crying out to him for help.

That is the siren. That is the alarm that the Lord sounds. And again, that's worth our attention. A few weeks ago, I was sharing the story of Thomas Chalmers, the founder of the Free Church, with our congregation.

And now Thomas Chalmers, in his early life, was an unconverted minister. He was appointed minister in a parish church, but he had no real interest in the gospel, and he basically saw ministry as a means to an end.

[15 : 59] It would advance his social status. It would provide him with an income. But he would spend most of his time lecturing at the universities. He would spend most of the year away from his pulpit.

He used to say that he could prepare a sermon on the morning that he was due to deliver it. No interest in the gospel. But as the years went on, the Lord began to work in a powerful and yet very painful way in Chalmers' life.

First his brother, and then his sister, died of tuberculosis. And then his uncle died. And as Chalmers traveled to sort out his uncle's affairs, he himself became unwell.

Chalmers was convinced that everything was now pointing to the fact that he was going to die. And what was worse, he realized that he wasn't ready to meet with the living God. And it resulted in Chalmers desperately embracing the gospel.

And not just embracing the facts of the gospel, but embracing the Savior, the Jesus, the Christ, who is freely offered in that gospel. The troubles that Chalmers experienced were the Lord's appointed means of rousing him and turning his life around.

[17 : 19] You know, sometimes, you know this yourselves, friends, the Lord might well use painful trials to bring a person, to draw a person to himself.

C.S. Lewis put it very well when he said, God whispers to us in our pleasures, He speaks in our conscience, but He shouts in our pains.

Pain is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world. And perhaps that's been the experience of some of us.

Perhaps we've known what it is to live without any thought of the Lord. Life was going very well. Life was going very nicely. Life was going very comfortably.

We saw absolutely no need for Him. And then a trouble came our way. A trial came our way. And it roused us and it caused us to cry out to the Lord for the very first time.

[18 : 25] It was His megaphone. It was His siren. It was His alarm to us. Perhaps. Or perhaps. Perhaps we've known what it is to drift from the Lord.

We've known what it is to backslide. And it didn't really bother us in the slightest at first. We just coasted along getting further and further and further from the Lord without a care in the world. And then a trouble came our way. A trial came our way. The rug seemed to be pulled out from under our feet.

And it caused us to cry out to the Lord once again because we had no one else to turn to. We had nowhere else to turn. It was God's megaphone.

It was God's alarm. It was God's siren to rouse us. And looking back, we can say with the psalmist, it is good that I was afflicted.

[19 : 32] I didn't enjoy the affliction. The affliction didn't feel good in itself. But it had beneficial results all the same. Friends, this evening, we're being reminded that God will do everything that is necessary to rouse a person and draw them to himself.

He will use painful providences. He will use afflicting alarms if he has to. That is the siren that God sounds. You know, friends, sometimes, if the Lord didn't send a particular pain into our lives to rouse us, he would in effect be saying, you can drift off to hell for all I care.

That is how much the Lord cares for his people, that he will use pains if necessary to draw a person and keep a person near to himself.

And I'm preaching to the converted, I know, tonight because I know that there are some in this congregation who have experienced terrible pains and yet in the midst of it all, you've run to the Lord and run to the Lord and run to the Lord.

Third and finally, we come to the remedy. Look at verses 8 and 9. Here the author focuses on the remedy from the Lord. The remedy from the Lord.

[21 : 18] In verse 8, we hear the command. The Lord tells Moses what he's to do, beginning of verse 8. Moses has prayed to the Lord for the people and now the Lord speaks to Moses.

He doesn't ignore his prayer and he tells Moses to make a fiery serpent, an image of one of the snakes that had been biting the people and he continues and tells Moses to set the serpent on a pole, on a banner, a place where anyone, and not just anyone, but everyone could see it and the Lord goes on and tells Moses what will happen.

Look at verse 8 again. He says that if anyone is bitten, they only need to see the serpent on the pole and they will live. So simple. Even a child can look.

So simple. Even an elderly person confined to their home, lying in their bed, can look. It's so simple. Even a person with the poison running through their veins, the death rattle in their throats, even such a person as that can look.

We move from the command to the compliance in verse 9. We see what Moses did beginning of verse 9. We read that he made a bronze copper serpent. He makes this metallic serpent that would sparkle, that would shimmer in the desert sun.

[22 : 34] And we read that he said it on a pole. Moses does exactly what the Lord commanded him to do. And after seeing what Moses did, we can see what the people did. Look again at verse 9.

We read that if a serpent bit anyone, they would look at the bronze serpent and they would live. That verb, look, means to observe. It means give careful attention to.

This isn't just a little glance. This isn't just a casual nod of the head. This is a fixed, settled gaze. And as the people set their gaze on the merciful provision that the Lord had made for their healing, we read that they miraculously live to tell the tale.

And so, friends, as we consider these verses, we're not just shown the sin that the Lord sees and the siren that the Lord sounds, but also the salvation that the Lord sends.

That's what we see in Numbers 21. The people ask the Lord to take away the snakes. And the Lord doesn't take away the snakes. He refuses to take away the snakes.

[23 : 44] He leaves the snakes as they are. Instead, He commands Moses to make a bronze snake, set it on a pole, and if anyone's bitten by a snake, all they need to do is look at the bronze snake, and they would find a remedy for their sickness.

They would find a rescue from death. That is the salvation that the Lord sends. And again, that's worth our attention tonight. In the Gospel of John, we find Jesus talking with a Pharisee named Nicodemus, one of the most religious men of his day.

And Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born again, and that he must believe in him if he is to enter the kingdom of God, if he is to enjoy eternal life.

And Jesus goes on to remind Nicodemus about this incident from Numbers 21, where Moses, Jesus says, lifted up the serpent in the wilderness. And then Jesus says to Nicodemus that in a similar manner, he is going to be lifted up.

And he is going to be lifted up on the cross. And Jesus says that everyone and anyone who believes in him, everyone and anyone who looks to him in the same way that the people look to the bronze serpent, will have eternal life.

[25 : 07] Richard Phillips puts it like this in his exposition of John. Like the Israelites, we have sinned, and the punishment for sin is the curse of death. We too have been bitten by the serpent, and received his deadly poison.

But Jesus entered the world to be lifted up on the cross and bear the curse that our sins deserve. The way of salvation then is not self-improvement. It is not human striving.

Salvation is by looking to the crucified Jesus in faith to be forgiven and so to live. Friends, the gospel announces that all that is required of a person, if they want to be saved, if they want to enter heaven, if they want to enjoy eternal life, if they want to know forgiveness, is they must look to Jesus, the crucified one, the lifted one.

That's how simple the gospel is. That is how glorious the gospel is. I love Charles Spurgeon's account of his conversion, and many of you I know are probably familiar with it.

You remember how Charles Spurgeon was a 15-year-old boy who was desperate to get to church. He longed to go to church, and he ended up going to a church during a snowstorm, and very few people turned up at the service, and Spurgeon stayed near the back of the church, and the preacher hadn't turned up.

[26 : 39] And eventually, someone did turn up, and here's how Spurgeon tells the story. A poor man, a shoemaker, a tailor, or something of that sort, went up into the pulpit to preach.

He was obliged to stick to his text for the simple reason that he had nothing else to say. The text was, look unto me, and be ye saved all the ends of the earth. He began thus, my dear friends, this is a very simple text.

Indeed, it says, look. And after some time, he looked at me under the gallery, and I dare say with so few present, he knew me to be a stranger. And he then said, young man, you look very miserable. Well, I did, but I had not been accustomed to have remarks made on my personal appearance from the pulpit before. However, it was a good blow struck. The man continued, and you will always be miserable, miserable in life and miserable in death if you do not obey my text.

But if you obey, now, this moment, you will be saved. And then he shouted, as only a primitive Methodist can, young man, look to Jesus Christ.

[27 : 47] There and then the cloud was gone, the darkness had rolled away, and that moment I saw the sun, and I could have risen that moment and sung with the most enthusiastic of them of the precious blood of Christ.

Spurgeon came to realize that all he needed to do to be saved was to look to Jesus. And that is what every single Christian in this building has done, and not just done in the past, but is continuing to do in the present.

They have looked, and they are continuing to look to Jesus. But perhaps there's someone here tonight who isn't looking to Jesus.

You might not be looking to Jesus because the bitter poison of sin and its fatal results isn't real to you. I've got a friend right now, we've just got to know each other over the last couple of months, and I get on really well with him, but he keeps on telling me I'm a good guy, and I do this and I do that and I do the next thing in my community.

I don't need church. I don't need the gospel. I'm good enough. That might be you tonight. You're in the church, but you still don't think you're that bad a person.

[29 : 16] You don't think that sin and its consequences is all that serious. or you might be here tonight and you're not looking to Jesus because you're aware of the bitter poison of sin that is coursing through you.

You know that there's a heaven to gain. You know that there's a hell to shun, but at the same time you think that you're a pretty moral person. You're a pretty decent person.

You're a lot better than other people. You're a lot better than a lot of Christians that you know, and surely God will accept you. He'll welcome you into heaven because of all your good deeds.

Or you might be here tonight and you're not looking to Jesus because you are lamenting over your sin, but you've also convinced yourself that there is nothing that can be done for you.

You feel like you're a lost cause. You feel like you're a hopeless case. Friend, whoever you are tonight and wherever you are tonight, I want to simply say to you, consider the issue of your sin.

[30 : 31] Consider where that sin could take you and look to Jesus and live. Look to Jesus and live.

this evening, we've been reminded that there is a remedy for all those who've rebelled against God, all those who deserve nothing but God's retribution.

And that remedy is found in Christ and in Christ alone. The one who was lifted up for all his people. This is the Savior.

this is the salvation that God has sent, that God has provided, and that we are called to receive. And having received it, rejoice in it. I was preaching in a congregation in the North Coast just a couple of weeks ago, and I was with a friend.

[31 : 36] We've been friends for 18 years. And after I finished preaching, she said to me, Hugh, we Christians should be the happiest people in the world walking out our Sunday services.

Hugh, we've not been to a funeral. We've not been given good advice to follow. We've not been given good morals to live by.

We have been given good news to hear, good news to receive, good news to rejoice in.

My friend, there should be a sense in which after every service that you have been to, where you have heard the gospel preached, you should be able to leave with a smile on your face, with joy in your heart, because you have heard good news, not good advice, not good life lessons, good morals, good news, but good news of what God has done for you in Christ.

He has sent a so great salvation. let's sing in response now the words of Psalm 107.

[33 : 15] Psalm 107, the Scottish Salter version, and singing verses one down to eight. Praise God, for he is good, for still his mercy's lasting be.

Let God's redeemed say so, whom he from the enemy's handed free. And gathered them out of the lands from north, south, east, and west. They strayed in deserts pathless way, no city found to rest. Then verse eight, O that men to the Lord would give praise for his goodness, same for his works of wonder done unto the sons of men. Psalm 107, the Scottish Salter version, verses one to eight. Please do stand if you're able. Praise God, for he is good, for still his mercy's mercy's lasting be. Let God's redeem say so, whom he from them is handed free.

[34 : 23] And gathered them out of the lands from north, south, east, and west.

They strayed in deserts pathless way, no city found to rest.

For thirst and hunger in them fades, their soul and strength and rest.

They cry unto the Lord and he them frees from their distress.

them also in our way to walk the dry deceded guide, that they might to our city go, wherein they might abide.

[35 : 51] Oh, that man to the Lord would give praise for his goodness then, and for his words of wonder done unto the sons of men.

Our Father in heaven, our prayer now as we leave this building is that we would be able to leave this building and go into whatever lies our way, whatever lies ahead in the week, praising you and praising you for your goodness, the goodness that is supremely displayed and demonstrated in the gospel, the fact that you would send your own son for the salvation of your people.

Our prayer this evening is that every one of us might know the joy of looking to Jesus and in looking to him know the salvation, the eternal life found in him and in him alone.

Part us with your blessing as we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. God to to him him to him to him He's him to!