

3-7-10

LOOK AND LIVE

Numbers 21:9 John 3:14-15

(Numbers 21) One of the dearest men in the world to me is a man who has spent most of his life in a wheelchair due to muscular dystrophy. He has long outlived his life expectancy largely because of his faith and good cheer. His name is Shawn Casey, whose internet identity is, “Oshawnhas bin Laughin.” He recently sent me by email a story, no doubt fabricated, about a tourist who entered a Chinese gift shop in San Francisco. While looking around at the exotic merchandise, he noticed a very lifelike, life-sized bronze statue of a rat. It had no price tag, but was so striking the tourist decided he must have it. He took it to the old shop owner and asked, “How much for the bronze rat?” “Ahh, you have chosen wisely!” he said. “It is \$12 for the rat and one hundred dollars for the story.” The tourist quickly pulled out \$12. “I’ll just take the rat, thanks.” So, he bought the rat and began walking down the street with it when he noticed that a few rats had crawled out of the alleys and sewers and had begun following him down the street. He started walking faster, but a couple of blocks later he looked behind him and saw to his horror that the herd of rats had grown to hundreds, and had begun squealing. Sweating now, the tourist began jogging toward the bay. As he approached the bay he saw that the rats behind him numbered in the millions. Terrified, he ran to the edge of the Bay and threw the bronze rat as far as he could into the Bay. Amazingly, the millions of rats all jumped into the Bay after the bronze rat and were drowned. The tourist walked back to the Chinese gift shop. “Ahh,” said the owner, “you have come back for story?” The man said, “No, I came back to see if you have a bronze Democrat.” (pause) Now you can adjust the last line of the story as needed. Shawn liked the “democrats” line but you could make it lawyers, Buckeyes, Ravens, Baptists, anything.

Now, just a few days after reading this story, I ran across a similar story in the Bible, a story which also featured a bronze animal, and again, a bronze animal with a very strange power. Look with me at Numbers 21 which records for us the journeys of the children of Israel under Moses.

And we read in Numbers 21:**4-9**

Then they set out from Mount Hor by the way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the people became impatient because of the journey.⁵ The people spoke against God and Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this miserable food."⁶ The Lord sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.⁷ So the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned, because we have spoken against the Lord and you; intercede with the Lord, that He may remove the serpents from us." And Moses interceded for the people.⁸ Then the Lord said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a standard; and it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he will live."⁹ And Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on the

standard; and it came about, that if a serpent bit any man, when he looked to the bronze serpent, he lived.

Like the bronze rat in our story, the bronze serpent had the power to eliminate something unwanted – namely disease. I expect you will recognize this symbol (show AMA symbol). This is the symbol of the American Medical Association. The snake on a pole has been the emblem of the healing arts for many years. And it goes back to this story in Numbers. But interestingly, the story in Numbers and the symbol of the raised serpent have a far more important connection that is presented to us in the New Testament. I wasn't reading in Numbers when I came upon our snake story. I was reading in the gospel of John where, in chapter three, we get to listen in on a conversation between Jesus and a Pharisee named Nicodemus. After the Lord's famous words about being born again, and just before John 3:16 we read this **14-15** *As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; 15 so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.* The title, "Son of Man" is the one Jesus most often uses with reference to himself. So, understand that Jesus is the Son of Man. And understand that Jesus draws the parallel between the snake episode in Numbers and what would soon happen with him. As you read the book of Numbers, it may just strike you as really weird that God would choose to heal people as he did through a bronze snake on a pole. There is no rhyme or reason to it – or so it appears- until you come to the New Testament and discover that the bronze snake, like so much in the Old Testament, becomes an object lesson, a type, a prefiguring of the Messiah. We are going to spend our morning meditating on the parallels between Jesus and the serpent, but I want to say before we start that, that one reason I believe the Bible is God's word is because of the Old Testament/New Testament connections which just could not occur by accident. As you grow more and more familiar with the Bible, you see just how obvious it is, that this is one book, written by one brilliant author over a period of 1000 years or so. And the only author that good or that old is God.

Alright, let's look at the four parallels which exist between the gospel of Christ and the saga of the bronze serpent. First, there is in both stories a situation in which death is threatening due to sin. ® In the Numbers passage this is explicit, as it says in vs. 6 that many of the people were dying from snakebites. And they were dying in this way due to the judgment of God who was angry about the grumbling of the children of Israel. Grumbling, at which most of us are experts, is presented in the Bible as a sin, and a sin worthy of serious punishment. Last Sunday we saw that the sin of worry says to God, "you won't provide." And the sin of grumbling says to God "you aren't providing for me now." That is a serious offense against your maker. In essence it is what Adam

and Eve accused God of when they first bit into the forbidden fruit, having been tempted thru the lies of the serpent. The serpent of old being the first expression of Satan in the Bible, snakebite is kind of an apt picture of what sin does to us. And what it does is called death. Romans 6:23a “*For the wages of sin is death.*” Ezekiel 18:4c says *The soul who sins will die.* Now, this is implied in the John passage. It does not say anything about dying directly, but it does say that whoever believes in Christ receives eternal life, implying that failure to believe means death. Clearly there is a difference in the type of death under consideration. The ancient Israelites were in danger of physical death. We sinners are in danger of a spiritual eternal death that is far, far worse. And notice, that it is critical for our healing that we be aware of our disease. We need to understand that we are in the way of death. Apart from this reality the bronze serpent was a pointless symbol, and apart from this the cross of Christ is merely a decoration on a chain. You will notice that the healing in Numbers 21 came in verse 9. But in verse 7 the people made the connection between death and sin. 7a *So the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned, because we have spoken against the Lord and you.”* That simple confession, “We have sinned.” Or “I have sinned” sets up the context in which salvation can flow.

Alrighty, moving along, the second parallel in our two passages is that in both cases, God sovereignly provides the remedy. ® Meaning that it was no human device that saved the day. I am sure that, given enough time, some folks would have stepped forward with ideas, with man-made solutions to the problem. Maybe some Hebrew medicine man would have developed a snakebite cream, or a politician would have devised venom-aid, but if he had the people would have continued to die and their attention and hope would have been tragically deflected from God where it should have been, to their own genius and their own devices. The same thing often occurs with respect to the problem in the gospel. Men imagine that they have and can devise solutions for our spiritual death. They suggest to you that the solution to your problems is already within us and you just have to bring it out. But God’s word says our solutions are outside of us. They are found in the Lord and in what He provides. Others will devise schemes and rituals and religions and philosophies that become like spiritual placebos – they allow us to imagine that we are doing better, whether we are or not. We confess to a priest, say a few “Hail Marys,” repeat our mantra, make an offering to the idol. Maybe we are told we can solve our problems by doing better, by being more careful to avoid snakes today and tomorrow. We can reform our lives. And reform is swell, but suppose you own a business and someone who hasn’t paid their bill for months comes to you and says, “I realize I have been making a very grave mistake in the way I have been dealing with you. I

have been buying on credit and have gotten myself into debt. I am reforming. Henceforth, I am going to pay cash for everything.” You may be very glad to hear that, but you likely will still have one outstanding issue with the customer. What is that? (pause) The unpaid bills! Those debts still have to be addressed and paying cash from now on won’t do, anymore than avoiding snakes tomorrow will save me if I have been bitten by one today.

Let’s quit kidding ourselves. Human remedies for the problem of human sin just do not work. They can’t stop me from sinning tomorrow. And they certainly can’t do anything about my guilt. But God can. And praise His name, God does. He provided the bronze serpent plan for those dying in the desert. And He provides the gospel for those dying in their sin.

The third critical parallel between our two stories is that in each the remedy involved a lifting up.® In Numbers 21:8 *Then the Lord said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a standard; and it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he will live."* A standard is a pole or a post. It would have been made of wood and it made the healing snake plainly visible for the people. Now, if you are familiar much at all with the story of our Lord, you know immediately the parallels. Jesus too, like the serpent, was lifted up on a pole, on a post, on a wooden cross which displayed him before all. John 3:14 *As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up.* Some might look at that and think Jesus has in mind His future exaltation to the right hand of God. It is true that Jesus, forty days after His resurrection was lifted up. He was exalted to the place of all power and authority. And we can surely look now to the risen Jesus and be saved. But more likely what is in view is the lifting up of our Lord on the cross. John uses the term “lifted up” with that in view. John 8: **28a** *So Jesus said, "When you lift up the Son of Man..."* This he said to the Jewish leaders. And the only lifting up of Christ they ever did was to kill Him. Then in John 12: **32-33** *And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself. 33 But He was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which He was to die.* So there you have it. The serpent lifted up (show pic) and the Son of God lifted up. The first a picture and foreshadowing of the other. But both supplied by God for healing. One big difference though is that the lifting up of Christ was, in fact, instrumental in the cure and critical for the cure. The bronze serpent had no power to do anything. But the death of Christ, is powerful to the salvation of all who are His. For there at Calvary, Jesus took on Himself our sicknesses, our sins, our death and our hell. The serpent was lifted up just to be seen. But Jesus was lifted up to become our substitute, our redeemer and the bearer of our sin, so that we can point up to Him and say “Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world.!”

And now to the application, to the appropriation of what God supplies. The fourth parallel between our stories is that in each case the healing is obtained through a look of faith. ® Jesus says that whoever believes in the Lifted Up Son of Man will have eternal life. God said through Moses that whoever looks at the bronze snake will live. The believing and the looking – may I suggest- are essentially the same. One who believes will look. The one who looks does so out of faith. Ultimately in both cases, faith is the issue. It is not a matter of any human work, moral work, ritualistic work, religious work. It is simply the look of faith upon what GOD HAS SUPPLIED! Maybe that explains, maybe that gives us some clue, as to why some will not look. They would rather not feel obligated to God. They would rather not admit their need. So, they look for some other way. Or they find an excuse for not looking. For some it is a matter of not wanting to be counted a fool for looking. “Ha, no stupid snake on a stick can heal me! That’s ridiculous!” Some of you still say, “Hey, this Christian gospel is a bit far-fetched don’t you think? How can a man dying on a cross do anything for me?” In both cases the result would be the same – life rejected. People around you are being saved, but you? Too smug, too sophisticated, too self-reliant for the ways of God? Maybe too there were some in Israel who weren’t sure that the look would really cure them. So rather than risk disappointment they died. I can’t imagine this one, but maybe there are some like that here. You’ve been disappointed so often you have just hardened yourself and refuse to hope any more. Listen, people around you are looking and being saved. Don’t let your self-protection damn you. The promise is that if you look to Jesus in faith your sins will be forgiven, your spiritual life renewed, your eternity made sure and wonderful. All for a look at the Savior. And today I exhort you to look, see, behold the love of God’s Son. Don’t think for a moment that you don’t need Him. The poison of sin will destroy your soul. And don’t let your pride keep you from salvation. One of our hymns says, “*O Soul are you weary and troubled? No light in the darkness you see? There’s light for a **look** at the Savior, and life more abundant and free. Turn your eyes upon Jesus!*” And I make that this preacher’s plea this morning. Turn your eyes on Him. Look to Christ with faith and enjoy a life that is abundant and eternal. He is lifted up for your salvation. Now, look unto Him. Look to Him needy sinner and live. (Let’s pray)

With a little help from Isaac Watts I wrote a hymn to help us respond to God’s word and direct our thinking where it needs to go. As we get ready to look to Christ in the Lord’s Supper, let’s join together and sing these words to the tune of Amazing Grace.

As when the Hebrew prophet raised
The brazen serpent high,
The wounded looked and straight were cured,
The people ceased to die.

So from the Savior on the cross
A healing virtue flows;
Who looks to Him with living faith
Is saved from endless woes.

For God gave up His Son to death,
So gen'rous was His love,
That all who look to Him shall know
Eternal life above.

High on the cross the Savior hung,
High in the heav'ns he reigns:
Here sinners by the serpent stung
Look, and forget their pains.

Look and have life, O sinner, now
Look unto Christ and live;
It has been promised in his Word
That you may look and live.