

# Cursed Like a Viper for You

*From the Gospel of John*

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**Bible Text:** John 3:14-15; Numbers 21:4-9

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Numbers 21 beginning with verse four.

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. 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." The LORD sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. 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. 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." 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.<sup>1</sup>

And then if you would turn back to the gospel of John, please, chapter three and verses 14 and 15.

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.<sup>2</sup>

Let's pray together.

*Father, again, thank you for your grace, for your Word, for your Spirit, for the love that you bear to us in Jesus Christ. May it be that as we look into your Word this morning that your Spirit will come and open our hearts, open our eyes, and give us understanding that we might better see your work on the behalf of the likes of us through Jesus Christ. We*

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<sup>1</sup> Numbers 21:4-9.

<sup>2</sup> John 3:14-15.

*pray that this will, indeed, be the case and that our hearts will be warmed by your Spirit and by the power of the Savior. We pray in his good name. Amen.*

Again, the text is John chapter three and verses 14 and 15. “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.”<sup>3</sup>

Several years ago as a youngster—and I see some young fellows in the congregation and I was about your size—I persuaded my mother to go on a hike with me in the woods. It took a little persuading. We lived right across the street from a wooded area. After we got into the woods a little ways, lo and behold, in the middle of the path, we came across a snake curled up *on* the path. Guess what I did? I was a very brave young man. I ran and left my mother standing with the snake. Needless to say she wasn’t too happy with me about this.

This reminds me of Erma and I walking in Frick Park not too long ago. We were just walking along one of the paths. Erma said, “Look out. There is a snake.” We had never before seen a snake in Frick Park. But they are there. This one was slithering across the path. “Oh, it is just a black snake,” I said. And so we moved on. These snakes do startle you, don’t they? They are not pleasant. We don’t find them pleasant. Most folks don’t have them for pets or enjoy petting them or embracing them.

But snakes not only symbolize evil, as they do in the Bible, and that which can harm us. We are familiar with the fact that the snake can also be an emblem of good. The medical emblem that is often used is an example. It is a staff, or a winged staff, with a couple of snakes entwined around it. You will see this in the doctor’s office on occasion, if the doctor is willing to use this symbol. This symbol is a symbol of healing.

And so the symbol which, on one hand, can refer to that which leads to death, the serpent, is often a symbol that leads to life. This is what we see in our text this morning. Jesus refers to the serpent in the wilderness. Look once again at John chapter three and verse 14. “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.”<sup>4</sup> And so we have this symbol of death, on the one hand, that is rather transformed, if you will, into a symbol of life.

To understand this adequately we really need to go back to Numbers 21 and examine what is going on in Numbers 21. So if you would turn back with me, please, in your Bibles to Numbers 21 and to verses four and following. To set the stage here, you should realize that the children of Israel are at the end of their wilderness journey, as we come to Numbers 21. And at the beginning of Numbers chapter 20, we find this. “Then the sons of Israel, the whole congregation, came to the wilderness of Zin in the first month; and the people stayed at Kadesh. Now Miriam died there and was buried.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Numbers 20:1.

And so as we come into Numbers 21 Miriam has died. You see, we are at the end of the wilderness wanderings. And then if you also look in chapter 20 at verses 27 and following.

So Moses did just as the LORD had commanded, and they went up to Mount Hor in the sight of all the congregation. After Moses had stripped Aaron of his garments and put them on his son Eleazar, Aaron died there on the mountain top. Then Moses and Eleazar came down from the mountain.<sup>6</sup>

Here is the transfer of the priesthood from Aaron to his son Eleazar. A new generation has now arisen in Israel after 40 years of wandering in the wilderness.

And as we come to our text more particularly in verse four of chapter 21, you see they are there in this location at Mount Hor. There is a new generation. Keep this in mind. Verse four says, “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.”<sup>7</sup> It is a new generation now. The older folks have passed by the board. Some of them have died for sure. Most of them in fact have died. The younger generation, it appears, has learned from the older generation. Immediately, they too become impatient with the journey. It does seem that they have learned well from their parents.

Then verse five. “The people spoke against God and Moses, ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?’”<sup>8</sup> The implication being, “Why didn’t you leave us back there in Egypt? How much better off we were back in Egypt.” This younger generation does not remember the hardships of captivity.

And then notice what they say at the end of verse five. “For there is no food and no water, and we loathe... we loathe...”<sup>9</sup> The New American Standard Version says, “We loathe this miserable food.”<sup>10</sup> God had given them food, manna from heaven, water from the rock, quail. They were getting tired of it. Unfortunately it too often reminds me of my own grandchildren. You set the plate before them and what do they say? You can almost hear their words if you listen closely. “Grandma, I loathe this miserable food you have put in front of me.” This is their tribute to grandma’s cooking. You youngsters who are here this morning never do this, do you? But this was the attitude of the Israelites.

And so it was that they despised the condition in which they were. They railed against God and against the appointed leadership that God had given them. They railed against Moses. They would rather have their condition to be other than it is. Of course, none of

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<sup>6</sup> Numbers 20:27-28.

<sup>7</sup> Numbers 21:4.

<sup>8</sup> Numbers 21:5.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

us would ever do this sort of thing. Correct? We must pause for a moment for station identification. We must understand that we ourselves might very well have this same mindset with regard to the providences of God.

Well, let's look at our text in Numbers 21 once again. Verse six. God responds to the people. "The LORD sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died."<sup>11</sup> I suspect that if we could go back to the scene on the ground, we would not see just one or two serpents that were there. It was a brood of serpents which God sent against the people of Israel. You would want to step lightly in this circumstance. These snakes would be around your ankles, slithering and sliding and biting. And it is very possible that the reason they are called fiery serpents is not because there was fire on the serpents. It was because of the result of the venomous bites of the serpents. Sores would break out on the flesh of the people bitten. Their flesh would be on fire because of the venom. It was rather an awful scene. This venom would quickly pervade the systems of the individuals who were bitten. And they would die quickly because of these venomous bites.

And certainly this is a providence of God, a piece of the plan of God. This was the way in which God was pleased to deal with the people. And in the circumstance in Numbers it is judgmental, is it not? God's hand of judgment is coming against the people of God in this circumstance.

You and I need to be able to understand the providences of God around us. We need discernment to understand the providences of God. God is certainly at work around you and me. His works of providence, the way he works out his plan, is not always judgmental. I am not trying to intimate that this is the case. But God is certainly at work around you and me. And you need to be discerning. God's providence usually puts you in a corner and puts me in a corner. We are taken to the corner, as it were, so that we don't have any place to turn. We are not able to turn to our own strength. We are not able to turn to our own ingenuity. God deals with us in this way. He puts us in the corner. To put it in contemporary terms, God puts us in a big "time-out."

And there is rationale for this in the mind of God. We see this in the text. Look again at our text, verse seven. "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."<sup>12</sup>

Well, the first thing verse seven tells you is that the people see themselves in the corner. What are they going to do? They know that they have railed against God. They know that God has given them food. They know that God has given them manna and water and quail. He has provided for them. And we read in the Bible that for the 40 years they have been in the wilderness, their clothes did not wear out and the soles of their shoes did not wear thin. God was providing for them in marvelous ways. They now realize that they have sinned against God. And, in part, this what happens to you and me. In God's

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<sup>11</sup> Numbers 21:6.

<sup>12</sup> Numbers 21:7.

providence, he comes to us. He puts us in a corner. He says to you and me, “Time-out.” “Think about your disposition, the inclination of your heart toward me.”

Any child that takes the step to slap a parent knows.... Any of you young people know the consequences of such an action. And here the people of Israel were slapping God in the face. God responds. And now the the people are in the corner. They are in “time-out.” What are they do to do? They must contemplate their own disposition of heart. They must have a proper view of God and of Moses, their leader. And so this is what they do. They confess their sin. They realize their need. God has now dealt with them. They see their predicament. And the predicament was meant to bring them to a conscious awareness of their sin. And so the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned, because we have spoken against the LORD and you; intercede with the LORD.”<sup>13</sup>

They knew that Moses had often, on previous occasions, interceded for their lives. They knew that Moses could go before God and beg, beg God to have mercy upon them. And so this is exactly what Moses does in this circumstance. They want Moses to plead that God might remove the serpents from them. And so Moses interceded for the people.

We don’t get a view of exactly what Moses said. But I think we can be pretty confident that Moses pleaded with God not to destroy the people. On other occasions Moses did, indeed, plead with God not to destroy the people. Moses understood, and he knew God understood, that if the people were destroyed, the heathen nations all around would say, “Oh well, God brought Israel out of Egypt. But he is not strong enough to bring them into the land he promised them.” And so Moses would argue in this way. “Don’t let your good name, Lord, be besmirched by destroying the people. Bring deliverance to them.” And so God does.

Verse eight. “Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a standard.’”<sup>14</sup> Well, this would be a replica of the serpents, the snakes, the vipers around the camp. “Make a replica of this fiery serpent and set it on a standard. Set it on a pole. Set it up so that everyone in the camp scan see this replica of this serpent.” And then verse eight goes on to say, “And it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he will live.”<sup>15</sup> This is God’s promise with regard to this replica of the serpent that is hung up on this standard.

Verse nine then tells us, “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.”<sup>16</sup>

And so the idea again would be, understanding the promise of God, that you must look on the serpent. You must not just casually gaze on it. You must not just look at it and say,

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Numbers 21:8.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Numbers 21:9.

“That’s interesting.” This would be like going into the art museum and looking at the paintings. You go down the row and comment, “Oh, that is interesting.”

No. More is required. It is looking on this replica of the serpent and trusting God. The people must trust God to utilize this means, the means that he appoints. They must trust God to use the appointed means to bring life and save the people from death from the bite of the serpents. It is quite important to see that God was setting certain means before the people. In the Church, especially in Reformed churches, we talk about the means of grace. This was a means of grace that Moses was instructed to set up in the camp. And the people were also instructed to properly use the means of grace.

There is a lesson for you and me right here. You are called upon and I am called upon to properly utilize the means of grace. In the New Testament Church, the traditional means of grace are the Word preached and read, the sacraments, and prayer. When we engage in these things, we are utilizing the means of grace. And when you properly utilize the means of grace, it means that you are trusting God to utilize these means and to affect his purposes through those means. Is this not correct? Is this not be the case?

And so it is quite important not to just take the means of grace for granted. We should not think that because God has given them to us, if we simply go through the routines, we will be all right. This is not what God is about. God is purposeful. He gives these means and he wants you to properly utilize them.

When I was doing a little preparation for our recent studies in Ezekiel, I ran across a statement about the means of grace by William Greenhill. Greenhill was a Westminster Divine. He talks about means and says something like this. He says, “Trust God in the means.” In other words, don’t just trust God to act without the means. That is presumption. Sometimes we are in this mode. We ask, “Why doesn’t God act and change my life without utilizing the means?” Because this is not his procedure. Do you realize this? This is not his procedure.

Further, Greenhill observes: Don’t just trust the means as an end in themselves. This is legalism. That is, you think that your observance of the means is sufficient. Rather, trust God in the means. When you trust God in the means, you will see that God is everything in the means. Then after the means have been utilized what will you do? You will give praise to God because you will see God is everything. This was the idea here in the wilderness. The people were to trust God through the means of the raised bronze serpent. And then they were saved from physical death.

This is quite a little bit of background. Now let’s go back to John chapter three and verses 14 and 15. “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.”<sup>17</sup> You see, the text says that the serpent being lifted up in the wilderness by Moses pictures for us, typifies, or foreshadows Jesus Christ being lifted up on the cross. And it is a pretty dramatic picture. But our Lord Jesus makes this comparison.

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<sup>17</sup> John 3:14-15.

Now, as you think through this comparison a little bit, what is the cross? It is an instrument of death. In the Old Testament Moses said this: “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.”<sup>18</sup> And this is part of the dynamic, it seems to me, that we see in the text. In the end what was to take place? The serpent was hung on a pole or hung on a staff. It was an emblem before the people that the serpent was cursed of God and that they in turn were delivered.

This is the message Jesus is taking to himself. We note that the apostle Paul utilizes the words of Moses in speaking about Christ. “CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO HANGS ON A TREE”<sup>19</sup> And so there is a similarity between that Old Testament picture and what is going on on the cross. In the Old Testament that serpent, that snake, hung on a pole as cursed, was a way to life for the people. And this is the case with Jesus Christ. Hanged on that cross, Jesus Christ is cursed of God. He becomes a way to life for you and me. This is the picture that Jesus is painting. Verse 14 again. “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up.”<sup>20</sup> The text actually reads, “It is necessary, it must take place. It is necessary that the Son of Man be lifted up so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.”<sup>21</sup>

And, again, the idea would be: Look at the cross. Look, friends, at the cross. Look at Jesus Christ on the cross. Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree. Look at him on the cross. When you really look at him, when you look at him in faith, this is life. We are not just talking about physical life. We are talking about a higher life, a life with God, spiritual life.

And one of the reasons that this is the case, friends, is that you ought to be on that cross. I ought to be on that cross. Each of us needs to see that this is the case. The punishment of death for sin is due to you. The punishment for sin is due to me. But Jesus Christ takes the punishment of death for you and for me.

Let me suggest to you how this works out. Turn in your Bible to the gospel of Matthew, to the beginning of the gospel of Matthew. I want to look quickly at three different texts. First, Matthew chapter three and verse seven. “But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism...”<sup>22</sup> This would be John the Baptist. He saw them coming and particularly the Pharisees and the Sadducees and he said to them, “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”<sup>23</sup> What does he call them? “You vipers. You brood of vipers.” He is saying, “You are children of the devil. You are the seed of the serpent of old. You brood of vipers.” We don’t like this kind of language. It is too strong for us. But this is the language of John the Baptist used against those who

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<sup>18</sup> See Deuteronomy 21:23.

<sup>19</sup> Galatians 3:13.

<sup>20</sup> John 3:14.

<sup>21</sup> See John 3:14-15.

<sup>22</sup> Matthew 3:7.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

were despising the way of righteousness and attempting to work up their own righteousness.

And then look at Matthew 12 verse 34. This now is Jesus speaking. “You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart.”<sup>24</sup> Now we know the Bible says the devil was a liar from the beginning.<sup>25</sup> And Jesus looks at the people, particularly the leadership, and says, “You brood of vipers... the mouth speaks out of that which is in the heart.”<sup>26</sup> And what is in your heart? It is dark and dismal and dank in your heart.

Those in the medical profession could easily take you in the operating room or into a morgue to open up the chest of an individual who has been a life long smoker. They would pry open that chest and ask you, “Look into that lung.” Do you know what you would see in that lung? Tar. Tar just like the tar you see on the street on a hot summer day. You would see oozing black tar in that lung. And what is in the human heart without Christ? It is dark and dank and sinful and full of black oozing tar.

And then another text. This one is in Matthew 23. Lets read from verse 29.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, and say, “If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.” So you testify against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of the guilt of your fathers. You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell?<sup>27</sup>

They are murderers. Jesus essentially asks, “What are you if you have hatred in your hearts? What are you if you have hatred in your hearts?” You are murderers. You speak against your neighbor with hatred in your heart and you tear down your neighbor. You are a murderer. “Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.”<sup>28</sup> It is a good question, then, that comes to you and me in the text, is it not. “How will you escape the sentence of hell?”<sup>29</sup>

There is only one way to escape the sentence of hell. Jesus Christ must go to the cross in your place. You are the viper and I am the viper but Jesus Christ goes to the cross. He goes to the cross and takes your place. He is that serpent hanging on the cross, hanging on that pole, cursed of God. You should have the curse and I should have the curse. But Jesus Christ takes the curse for you and me. What are you to do?

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<sup>24</sup> Matthew 12:34.

<sup>25</sup> See John 8:44.

<sup>26</sup> See Matthew 12:34.

<sup>27</sup> Matthew 23:29-33.

<sup>28</sup> 1 John 3:15.

<sup>29</sup> Matthew 23:33.



Look at John again. Look at John chapter three and verse 15. “So that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.”<sup>30</sup> You are to trust him. Trust Jesus Christ and his work, dear friends. And this means that you don’t simply say, “Oh, yes, I believe in Jesus.” Unfortunately there are a lot of people that are running around and saying, “I believe in Jesus.” You know full well, that this is the case. You need to understand that Jesus Christ was on that cross for you and in your place. You need to trust him and his work. Jesus Christ was placed on that cross as a cursed viper *for you*; trust him. Trust him. He took your place.

In classes last week one of my students, John, said to me during a break, “I grew up as a Catholic. I was five years in seminary. I went to Duquesne University.” He was headed for the priesthood. And he said a group of students came to the university to talk to them about Christ. One of them, using some of the Catholic doctrine, talked to him about Christ and that Christ is not just a religion and following Christ is not just a religion. It is a matter of heart. It is a matter of heart. This student worked over John a little bit in this regard. And John said, “After all this time in the seminary I realized that Jesus Christ went to that cross to pay for my sins, my sins. This is why he did it. And life has never been the same since.” Jesus Christ was placed on the cross as a cursed viper *for you*; trust him.

This is what our text is telling us. Look at it again. “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.”<sup>31</sup> In the name of Jesus Christ, dear friends, I say to you, “Trust the Savior, Jesus Christ. He takes your place on that cross. You need—young people, children, older people—you need to trust him and him alone as the one who gives you life, new life, sin free life. He is the one who gives life to you personally. Jesus Christ was placed on the cross as a cursed viper *for you*; trust him.

Let’s pray together.

*Father, thank you. Thank you for your grace. We pray that you would be pleased to utilize your Word as your means of grace this morning. Pierce our hearts. May gospel arrows pierce our hearts. Bring each one of us to the foot of the cross, to look at Christ your Son who bore the brunt of your wrath on behalf of people just like us. By the power of your Spirit put faith in our hearts. We implore you that this would be the case so that we might in every way be the recipients of life eternal. We pray that this would be the case in the name of Jesus Christ who is the only Lord and Savior. Amen.*

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<sup>30</sup> John 3:15.

<sup>31</sup> John 3:14-15.