

Healing in the Wilderness, Numbers 21:4-9

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From the beginning stories of the Bible, we see God creating spaces where heaven and earth overlap—spaces where humanity can live close to God and learn to live by his wisdom. But again and again, humanity rejects God's wisdom. We decide we know better. We choose our own way, our own timing, our own definition of what is good. And the result is always the same: these false promises of life, lead us toward death.

For 430 years, Egypt enslaved the nation of Israel. Generation after generation lived under oppression. Then God rescued them. He brought them out of Egypt through the Exodus. He defeated their oppressors, led them through the sea, and brought them to freedom.

But freedom is not the same thing as knowing how to live as free people. These men, women, and children are exhausted. They are scared. They have spent generations learning how to survive under Pharaoh, and now they have to learn the ways of life with God.

They camp at Mount Sinai for about a year.

God teaches them who he is.

He teaches them how to worship.

He teaches them how to live with one another.

He is forming a people who will carry his presence into the world.

And now it is time to leave Sinai and begin the journey toward the land God promised to their ancestors.

SLIDE - The book of Numbers gets its English name from the census reports that appear near the beginning and end of the book. But the Hebrew title is more revealing: "Into the Wilderness." They leave Sinai and begin walking toward the Promised Land. And perhaps the best way to describe Numbers is this: It is a two-week trip that took forty years.

Bible Project has fascinating summaries to follow the overarching narrative. We are going to jump into two passages. The first, Numbers 21. The people are traveling through the wilderness, moving around the land of Edom, and we are told that they become impatient with the journey.

SLIDE - They begin speaking against God and against Moses.

"Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?"

There is no food. There is no water.

And they have come to hate the food God has actually provided for them.

"Manna again? I'm tired of this horrible manna!"

Have you ever noticed how our complaints can cause us to forget the truth?

Impatience can distort our vision.

They were slaves in Egypt. God had rescued them.

They had no food. God had provided food.

They had no water. God had provided water.

They were not abandoned. God was with them.

And yet their frustration becomes a story they tell about God: “You brought us out here to kill us.” They begin to believe that their way would be better than God’s way. And that takes us all the way back to the garden. The fundamental human temptation is still the same: We know better than God.

We want it our way.

We want it on our schedule.

We want to decide what is good and what is not.

And in Numbers 21, that rebellion reaps consequences. Poisonous snakes come among the people, and many are bitten and die.

We read this story and become alarmed at the snakes. But God is alarmed much earlier in the story. The snakes are not the beginning of the problem. They are a symptom and symbol of the death the people have already embraced.

The real problem is the growing gap between God's people and God himself—a gap created by distrust, rebellion, complaint, pride, and disobedience. Eventually the people recognize it. They come to Moses and say, “We sinned by speaking against Yahweh and against you. Pray that Yahweh will take the snakes away from us.” Moses prays and God gives Moses a solution.

SLIDE - Make a bronze replica of a snake. Put it on a pole. Lift it up. And anyone who has been bitten who looks at it will live. Moses does exactly what God says. And everyone who looks at this snake is healed.

Now, is this a medical manual for treating snake bites? No. But this *is* a story about healing.

The people have broken relationship with God. And God provides a way back.

The relationship is healed, put right.

Creature to Creator.

Rescued to Redeemer.

The beloved to the source of Love itself.

They have been choosing death. And God gives them a way to experience and re-enter life.

But notice something else. Their repentance isn't complete when they simply say, “We're sorry.” Their words have to become action. God tells them to look at the snake. And they have to actually look. Their physical action becomes a sign of their inner change. They are saying with their bodies:

God's way.

God's timing.

God's rescue.

The Israelites begin moving again. Four times the passage describes them moving. But this time there is no complaining. No blaming. No impatience. No “We know better than God.” The people simply follow. The passage rings with the serenity of healing and trust.

Now fast-forward to John's Gospel. Jesus is talking with Nicodemus, and he points directly back to this story in Numbers. Jesus says: “Just as Moses lifted up the bronze snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.” Jesus says, in effect: That story was pointing toward me.

The Israelites were perishing—not simply because of snake bites, but because rebellion and distrust had opened a death-dealing gap between them and God.

And God provided rescue.

He provided healing.

He provided life.

Anyone who looked to the bronze snake in faith could live.

And Jesus says that the same thing is happening now.

People are perishing.

The poison is still at work.

The poison of rebellion.

The poison of complaint.

The poison of pride.

The poison of blame.

The poison of distrust.

The poison that tells us, “I know better than God.”

But God provides rescue.

God provides healing.

God provides life.

And this time, the one lifted up is not a bronze snake. It is Jesus himself. Lifted up on the cross.

And raised again in resurrection. And why does God do this?

John gives us the answer:

SLIDE - “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.”

God's rescue begins not with our merit, but with his love.

Not our credentials. His grace.

Not our ability to find our way back to God.

God making a way for us.

God has put the cross in the middle of our wilderness of bitterness, rebellion, distrust, and complaint.

And he says:

Look.
Trust me.
Come back.
Live.

God's way.
God's timing.
God's rescue.

The Christian life becomes more than simply knowing the story. God doesn't just rescue us once and then leave us alone. God continues to heal us. One theologian puts it this way: "The healing power of God begins in baptism, when Christians are recreated. It is when God opens the medicine chest, infuses humans with divine serum, and defeats death. Communion contains divine vitamins that give strength." It's a beautiful image. God gives us practices through which we continually receive and remember his grace.

And throughout Scripture, God gives his people another practice that is remarkably simple:
SLIDE - Bless one another.

The book of Numbers contains several blessings spoken over God's people.
But the most famous is found in Numbers 6. God tells Moses to instruct Aaron and his sons—the priests—to speak these words over Israel:
"May God bless you and keep you;
may God make his face shine on you and be gracious to you;
may God lift up his face on you and give you peace."

You might have known those words your whole life, but not remembered they come from the book of Numbers. This is the priestly blessing. And there is something beautiful happening here. To bless someone in the biblical sense is not merely to say something nice about them.

It is to declare God's life-giving presence over them. It is to ask God to bring his abundance, his protection, his grace, and his peace into their lives. And then God says something remarkable about this blessing. Through the blessing, God's name—God's presence—is placed upon his people.

Think about that.
Israel is going to walk out into the wilderness.
They are going to live among the nations.
And they are going to carry God's name with them.
The question becomes:
What will the world see when it looks at God's people?
Will they see God's character?
Will they see his generosity?
Will they see his peace?

Will they see his faithfulness?

Or will they see the same rebellion, bitterness, complaint, pride, and distrust that characterizes everyone else?

God's people are meant to carry his presence into the world.

And one of the ways they do that is by blessing one another.

Maybe this is why blessing is such good medicine.

Because we live in a world full of words that wound.

Words of accusation.

Words of contempt.

Words of cynicism.

Words that tell people they are not enough.

Words that divide.

Words that create fear.

Words that slowly poison relationships.

And into that world, God gives his people a different kind of speech.

Blessing.

To look at another human being and say: The peace of Christ be with you!

SLIDE- May God bless you.

May God keep you.

May God's face shine upon you.

May God be gracious to you.

May God turn his face toward you.

May God give you peace.

That is not sentimental. That is resistance.

It is resistance to the poison of the wilderness.

It is choosing to speak life where the world speaks death.

It is choosing God's way instead of our way.

And perhaps this is part of what healing looks like for us.

The people in Numbers had to look at the sign God provided and trust his rescue.

We look to Jesus.

We trust his cross.

We receive his resurrection life.

And then, having received that life, we become people who give life away.

We bless.

We encourage.

We forgive.

We speak peace.

We remind one another that God has not abandoned us.

We remind one another that God's face is still turned toward us.

We remind one another that grace is still available.

We become, in our own small way, spaces where heaven and earth overlap.
Because that has been God's purpose from the beginning.
God creates spaces where his presence dwells.
He creates a people who carry his name.
And through Jesus, he is creating a people who can become agents of healing in the world.

So when you leave this place today, don't underestimate the power of a blessing.
Someone around you may be carrying the poison of shame.
Someone may be exhausted by the wilderness.
Someone may be impatient with how long the journey is taking.
Someone may have forgotten what God has already done.
Someone may need to hear that God's face has not turned away from them.
And you may be the person God uses to speak that word.
So bless them.
Not because they have earned it.
Not because they have everything together.
Not because they deserve it.
But because that is how God has treated us.
We were dying in the wilderness.
And God came looking for us.
He lifted up his Son.
He gave us life.
And now he sends us into the wilderness carrying his name.
So let us be people who speak life.
Let us be people who bless.
Let us be people through whom others encounter the good medicine of God's presence.
May Yahweh bless you and keep you.
May Yahweh make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you.
May Yahweh lift up his face upon you and give you peace.