



Surrey Hills

BAPTIST CHURCH

“Snakes on the Plain”

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Take your Bible and turn to Numbers 21. Today we are looking at a message entitled “Snakes on the Plain.” It is a significant message in the life of the Old Testament Israelites as it points to Jesus. Things don’t always turn out the way we would expect them to, and thus is the case for the children of Israel. God had delivered them from the Egyptians. They were supposed to go on a trip that should have been about an 18 month to a 2-year trip to Kadesh-Barna. Instead, it ended up taking them 40 years. In our text today, we are going to see what happens when God provides for a group of people and they become impatient.

Numbers 21:4, *“Then they set out from Mount Hor by way of the Red Sea to bypass the land of Edom, but the people became impatient.”* Let’s just stop right there. Do any of your Bibles have the word “murmured” or “murmuring”? It is the same word there. We are going to see what that word really means. We will do a word study on that. But the people became impatient because of the journey. Verse 5, *“The people spoke against God and Moses: “Why have you led us up from Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread or water, and we detest this wretched food!”* Let me just say there parenthetically—you should never complain about the food your mother makes for you. Now notice the next verse, *“Then the LORD sent poisonous snakes among the people, and they bit them so that many Israelites died.”*⁷ *The people then came to Moses and said, “We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you. Intercede with the LORD so that He will take the snakes away from us.” And Moses interceded for the people.*⁸ *Then the LORD said to Moses, “Make a snake [image] and mount it on a pole. When anyone who is bitten looks at it, he will recover.”*⁹ *So Moses made a bronze snake and mounted it on a pole. Whenever someone was bitten, and he looked at the bronze snake, he recovered.”*

Today we are looking at this message entitled “Snakes on the Plain.” The story is just kind of clear. Here the children of Israel found themselves going around in circles on what should have been an 18 month but ended up being a 40-year trek. Really, what happened is when they were murmuring and when they were complaining, they were telling a lie because God had provided this really sufficient meal for them. Maybe in Bible study in the past, you have studied about manna. God had provided for the needs of the children of Israel going around in circles for 40 years with this sustenance called manna. Let’s be real—anything in abundance gets a little bit old. I can understand the fact that these folks were getting tired of God providing the same old thing. Manna was a very interesting thing. It was a bread, essentially. It would come down, and the women would go out in the morning, and they would collect enough bread, enough manna, for the day. You remember the story. If they took too much manna, it would turn into worms. It would get sour. It would be polluted. So they could only get enough for the day except on Fridays and then they could get enough for the Sabbath day; they could get two days worth. I don’t know how many ways you can make manna. You can bake it. You can broil it. You can sauté it. Ba-manna bread. I don’t know. Manna bagels. Manna burgers. How many ways can you do manna? Dad comes home and says, “What’s for dinner tonight?” Manna. Same ole, same ole. I get it. They were getting tired of this, but understand the deal. They were going around in circles because they had disobeyed, and they

hadn't gone into the Promised Land like God had promised them—a land flowing with milk and honey where they would have had all they wanted and all they would have ever needed. What they were getting was really what they deserved.

I just want you to see in these first few verses (verses 4 and 5) that there was willful sin. These folks knew what they were getting into. This manna had been provided for them. It was angel food that God was providing for them. In verse 4, you will see exactly what happens when they had gone out and they became “impatient” in the journey. That is the word “murmuring.” Now I have become intrigued by this word. I looked it up on Wikipedia, and it is “to complain” literally, but the dictionary says it has to do with complaining in a whispering way. Here is the literal definition: “It is a low, indistinct, continuous sound.” It is a whispered complaint. There is a lot in the Bible about how dangerous it really is to throw spears at God's elect. I want to be straight up with you, not because I'm the Pastor, but you need to be very careful about criticizing God's elect. That is why I don't talk a lot about other ministers and things even though I don't agree with some of them and some of their antics because I don't really know who the favor of God might be on. I don't want to be guilty of throwing spears against God's elect nor do you. It is a very serious thing. In fact, this word “murmuring” is so serious that in Acts 6, that is the one thing that caused such a schism or such a division among these Hellenistics or these Grecian folks that they were not getting their daily needs met. It caused for a whole office to be raised in the church, which we call the “deacon.” I mean, if you really get back to it, the whole role of the deacon is to squelch murmuring. It is to meet needs, and that is who we believe the deacons were in Acts 6. It is a very serious thing, and I want to be very clear to our folks. It is unacceptable in our fellowship—this kind of murmuring and this kind of behavior. It is very serious. We desire the favor of God. Amen? We are not going to get caught up into something where we want God to turn His face from us. I want you to know right up front. Here is how you deal with it. If someone starts doing that to you, you say, “I'm sorry. I can't hear that.” But a better thing is if someone has an issue with someone else, they need to go to that person. It is Matthew 18.

Here we see these children of Israel. They defied the prophet of God after they denied the power of God. Notice in verse 5. I think it is interesting. *“The people spoke against God and Moses.”* In other words, “God, you are not providing our needs. God, you brought us out here with nothing to eat and with nothing to drink.” And then, they spoke against Moses—the one who had delivered them, God's instrument that God had used to deliver them out of captivity from those Egyptians where they were in slavery into freedom, and now they found themselves complaining and griping and gossiping. Can I be honest with you? This is very serious stuff. All because some people chose to complain. They denied the power of God, that God would do what He said He would do. Secondly, they also defied the prophet of God. Very serious here, speaking against the man of God.

Notice in verse 6. I think they deserved the punishment from God as well. *“Then the LORD sent poisonous snakes among the people, and they bit them so that many Israelites died.”* Did I tell you this is serious stuff? You may say, “Wow! No, no God wouldn't do that. God is a loving God.” Absolutely! God is also a God of justice and a God of judgment at times. As parents, do you love your children enough to discipline them to keep them away from very dangerous practices? Sometimes discipline is painful. It is the truth. It is absolutely the truth. Here we see that in my mind they deserved the judgment of God. Well, what does Romans 6:23 say? *“For the wages of sin is death.”* You get what you deserve. The punishment here is just really interesting, this whole thing about the snakes. I'm in verse 6, *“Then the LORD sent poisonous snakes among the people, and they bit them.”* I don't like snakes. Biblically, the idea of a snake is a reference to sin. It even sounds kind of sinful, this hissing snake. Here we see, I think they are actually deserving what they get.

They had willful sin, but we are going to transition to verse 7 where I want you to see, hallelujah, a wonderful salvation. Look in verse 7, *“The people then came to Moses and said, “We have sinned.”* Write down the word “confession.” It is to say the same thing. It is to agree with God. God got their attention. How many times,

church, does it take for us to have to get thrown on our back before God can get our attention? How many times does God have to burn your barley field to get your attention? Sometimes to take away that which is precious and meaningful and significant to get your attention. That is what happened. This is a good word about confession because they were specific. *"We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you."* Confession is within the realm of the offended, confession is as wide as the sin, and confession is specific.

Now notice what they are asking. These folks are asking Moses to enter into a relationship, a priestly relationship, called that of being an "intercessor." It is a beautiful picture of what they are asking Moses to do. *"We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you. Intercede with the LORD so that He will take the snakes away from us."* It is this great picture of what a leader ought to be in the home, what a leader ought to be in the business world, and what a leader ought to be in a church. The leader becomes one who intercedes on behalf of the people to God. That is the prophetic role that you see right there. Here it is, very clear, in verse 7B. Moses entered into the priestly role of being an intercessor, of praying on behalf of another. And so this wonderful salvation.

I want to share with you a couple of things. First of all, it is wonderfully symbolic. Isn't it interesting, this remedy? Notice in verse 8 when it says then the Lord said to Moses, "Okay. Here is the remedy." It is strange. It does not make a lot of sense to us on the surface. He says this in verse 8, *"Make a snake [image] and mount it on a pole."* Let's just stop here for a second. Have you ever wondered why God said to Moses, "Take a snake and put the snake on the pole so that everybody that looks at the snake is going to live if they have been bitten." Doesn't that seem upside down a little bit? Did anyone think that perhaps he could have put a lamb up there to look at and get saved or be healed? Could anyone think that he could have put up some luscious fruit to talk about the bounty of who God is and what God wants to do in your life? Isn't there anything that God could have put up there other than a hissing snake? It is a beautiful, symbolic picture of the cross. And isn't it great that this entire Old Testament points us forward to the cross. For you see, when our Lord was on the cross, he was taking all sin—past, present, and future—and He was standing in the gap and He represented sin. As a matter of fact, take your Bible. We are going to take time to turn to this. Turn to John 3:14, *"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,¹⁵ so that everyone who believes in Him will have eternal life."* Do you see the picture? Do you see the symbolism? Jesus on the cross, though He had never sinned, the Bible says, *"For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."* (2 Corinthians 5:21) Jesus became sin for us by what He had accomplished on the cross.

John 3:14 is right next to the most known verse in the Bible, *"For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him,"* you could put out in the margin of your Bible "looks to Him"—looking to Jesus—that is what it is referencing there, *"shall not perish but have eternal life."* What a picturesque thing for us to see how symbolic it was.

It was not only symbolic; it was also sufficient. All they needed to really do was to look. In Hebrews 12:2, *"keeping our eyes on Jesus, the source and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that lay before Him endured a cross and despised the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of God's throne."* What is he saying that we should do? Look to Jesus, the one who was lifted up. This Old Testament picture of getting this snake and putting him on a pole that everyone who had been bitten by these poisonous vipers might look to the snake and live is a picture, it is a foretaste, it is a shadow, it is an emblem, it is a token of what happens when we look to the cross of Jesus and live—because we have been bitten by the sin snake. We have all had this toxin in us. The only way that we are ever going to live is by looking to Jesus. That is the gospel. That is what God has provided for us.

Furthermore, it is not only symbolic and sufficient, but notice how simple it was as well. I want you to look. He

didn't say, "I want you to make an offering to this brazen serpent on the pole." He didn't say, "I want you to bow down and to this." He didn't say, "I want you to fill out any card." He didn't say, "I want you to go through any kind of ritual." He said, "I want you to look to the serpent on the pole representing sin," which is a picture of Christ on the cross. Salvation is much more simple than we make it. Can we have some family talk here? When the Lord allowed us to come home, to come to a smaller church, I really felt like God was giving me another chance—to start over. I'm going to be very real to you today. I don't want to do things just because they have always been done. I don't want to do things just because someone did it however many years ago. I want us, as a church, to be about what Jesus would have us to be about and not to be shackled and not to be bound and not to be snared by history and by tradition. It's not legalism, is my point. It is about looking to Jesus. It is not about living up to someone else's mores or what anyone thinks we need to do. It is a matter of looking to Jesus. Look to Jesus. That is what God has called us to do and to be about. I just find that to be very refreshing.

Back to our text in Numbers 21. I find it interesting that these folks repented after they had been bitten by sin, by the serpent, by the poison viper. The truth is repentance and proper behavior sometimes only come through strong discipline. It would be better if we didn't go through hard times, but sometimes we would never experience the redemptive quality of our Lord if everything were just easy.

Did anyone receive an invitation to the Royal Wedding? It is very significant around the world, this whole idea of who was being invited to the wedding and who wasn't. The Bible talks in Matthew 22 about a king who was preparing for a wedding. This king had put together all of this ornate wedding production, and all of these people that the king invited started giving lame excuses about not being able to come to the wedding feast. So what did they do? The king said, "OK. In that case, I want you to go out into the highways and the byways and the hedges, and what I really want you to do is just make it a y'all come." It is just everybody. Everybody, we want you to come in to the wedding feast. Well, it is amazing the result that took place. The wedding hall was crammed full with people that wanted to be there. That, I think, is significant. The book of Revelation talks about a marriage supper of the Lamb, and everyone who is going to be at that marriage supper are those who are in Christ.

Now, I've got some awesome news for our church today. I really do. This really stokes me. As a minister of the gospel, as a member of the royal priesthood of believers, according to scripture, I stand here today and give you a royal invitation to a wedding. I invite you today to the wedding feast of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Bible says, "*For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.*" (Romans 10:13) Whosoever looks to Jesus can come and can dine and can be a part of this. So the real question today is this: Will you RSVP today? You might not know what that really means. That means you let us know whether you are coming or whether you are not. It is not just, "Well, I'm not going, so I'll deep six this." No. That is really not what an RSVP means. An RSVP means, "Yes, I am attending/No, I'm not attending." We are all called today to RSVP to Jesus. You might be here for any number of reasons, but the truth of the matter is that you never really have looked to Jesus. It is simple as looking, but when you look the natural result is you are going to realize Jesus is the Lord of your life as well. Today, will you look to Jesus? Will you receive Him into your life, and then will you be healed from the poisonous vipers of this world that you might live?