

Pastor Joe Polzin  
Numbers 21:4-9  
“Serious Sin, Simple Salvation”  
Year B – Fourth Sunday in Lent  
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Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

“And the people came to Moses and said, ‘We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us.’ So Moses prayed for the people. And the LORD said to Moses, ‘Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.’ 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” (Num. 21:7-9).

This is our text for today from our Old Testament reading, Numbers chapter 21. Now, as we consider the depth of meaning found in God’s Word, two statements come to mind. Sin is serious. Salvation is simple. And these may seem very obvious to us. So obvious, in fact that we may quickly take them for granted and not consider them any further.

But before we’re tempted to say, “Well, of course we know that,” and just move on, we really ought to carefully consider them—sin is serious. Salvation is simple. In our Old Testament reading, for example, for the Israelites, these two statements were an accurate description of their dire reality. The life or death situation they were facing. And as we consider what was happening for the Israelites, what we’ll find is we have a lot in common with them.

Here they were, journeying through the wilderness before they were permitted to enter the land God had promised them. And again, they demonstrated their impatience with God. And it wasn’t just a complaint about food. It was an expression of their distrust in the Lord.

They spoke out against God and Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?” How quickly they had forgotten. How quickly they overlooked what truly happened in Egypt. They were slaves in Egypt, and they were already dying *there*. God saved them from their suffering and death, and promised them not death, but life and land. But that faded from their sight. After all that God had done to save them, they still distrusted His promise.

Not only that, but they also said, “For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.” They were referring to the manna that God provided for them. So, it’s not that they didn’t have food, it’s that they didn’t want the food that God had given them. And again, after all God had done to provide for them, they still distrusted not only His promise, but also His provision.

Sin is serious. It’s not something that we ought to ever take lightly. The Israelites’ sin was that they did not trust in God. They had stopped relying on Him to save them and provide for them, even though that’s what He did time and time again. And by not trusting God, they were guilty of breaking, among others, that first commandment.

Ultimately, all sin comes back to the first commandment: you shall have no other gods. When we sin, it indicates that we have chosen to trust in a god other than the true God. It may be that we are trusting in our wealth, in our health, in other people, or in ourselves. Whatever we put our trust in to take care of us *is* our god. So, if we steal, then we’re not trusting God to provide what we need. If we murder, we’re not valuing God’s gift of life, and we’re placing ourselves in

the position to take the life of someone else. If we commit adultery, we're not honoring God's fulfilling gift of marriage, and instead we're seeking out our own sense of fulfillment.

While we wander in the wilderness of this earthly life, we face all sorts of temptations to fall away from, grumble against, and stand opposed to God. And we do this, like the Israelites, despite all the ways God has provided for us, despite all that God has done to secure our salvation. So when we sin, we're telling God that we don't actually trust in Him, and we'd prefer to do things our own way. We'd prefer a different god at the moment. Sin is serious.

God doesn't overlook sin, either. He can't. Sin requires a holy and just God to take action. It requires judgment, the just consequence to breaking God's will. If God overlooked sin, He would be like an earthly judge who overlooked those who broke the law and committed crimes. That would not be a fair judge, nor a good one. God responds to sin. He must.

With the Israelites, He responded to their sin by sending "fiery serpents." "Fiery" likely referred to just how deadly the venom was, and the fiery sensation as the toxin spread throughout their bodies. Many died as a result of the snakes, yes, but the true cause of death was the Israelites' sin, and God's judgment. Sin is serious, and it has consequences.

But one of the traps that we fall into these days is that when we indulge our sinfulness, we think there *aren't* any consequences. But all sin eventually has a consequence. Anger, jealousy, infidelity, deviousness, dishonesty, all these have consequences. Unchecked, they will eventually destroy our relationships with those around us, and will also eventually destroy *us* from the inside out.

But often we convince ourselves that sin doesn't have consequences. It's no big deal if we permit certain sins in our lives. In fact, they may not even be all that bad. It's alright if I talk about this one person behind their back, they won't find out. It's alright if I cheat this one time, no one will know. It's alright if I allow myself to not forgive that person, they don't deserve it. It's alright if I don't help my neighbor, I've already done it before. It's alright if I have an intimate relationship before marriage, it's an old-fashioned rule anyway. It's alright if I say something I'm not supposed to. It's alright if I drink more than I should. It's alright if I look at these videos. It's alright if I only worry about myself. It's alright if I don't trust in God. It's alright if I trust instead in what *I* think, trust in what *I* feel, trust in what *I* want.

All sin prioritizes our own desires over God's. All sin breaks that first commandment. And all sin has consequences, both now, and in eternity. It's not an imaginary scenario that, one day, we will all literally stand before God in judgment. We will be held accountable for what we have done here on earth, or what we have left undone.

How do you think that encounter will go? Are you secure in presenting the resume of your life—all your thoughts, words, and deeds—before the Almighty God? Can you honestly admit that you have prioritized God at all times, firmly trusting in Him every moment for the provision and salvation He has shown you, never putting your trust in anything or anyone else above Him?

When we take sin seriously, we see that we are just as lost, just as misguided as the Israelites were, and just as much in need of a way out of the mess that we've created. We haven't earned anything before God. The only thing we've earned is eternal death, eternal destruction. Sin is very serious indeed.

But salvation, by God's grace, is simple. It's important to note that although God sent the serpents as proper judgment upon the Israelites, He also provided a way for their salvation. The people went to Moses and recognized the seriousness of their sin. They repented. They said, "We

have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you.” Moses then prayed for the people, and immediately, immediately, God provided a way for them to be saved.

He told Moses to make a serpent and set it on a pole in the midst of their camp, and if anyone was bitten by a snake, he need only look at that bronze serpent and be saved. That’s quite simple. When the Israelites turned to God for forgiveness, God provided a sign for them to look at, and believe, and trust that they were saved. They didn’t save themselves. They simply looked with faith upon that which God provided. Salvation is simple.

It always strikes me when I read this passage that the sign the Israelites were commanded to view was the very thing that was killing them. The serpents were biting and killing the people, and so God saves them by having them look at yet another serpent. They had no choice but to see the symbol of their sin. They had no choice but to take their sin seriously. But by doing so, in repentance, in humility, they were enabled to approach God for His forgiveness. And God forgave. God’s very sign of judgment, a serpent, was transformed into the sign of their salvation.

Jesus says in John chapter 3, “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (3:14-15). In other words, our lack of trust in God, the seriousness of our sin, has grave consequences, both here on earth as well as in eternity. We are literally dying, in our bodies, and in our souls.

But God provides a way for our salvation. The serpent in the wilderness foreshadowed when His own Son would be lifted up on a pole, so that whoever would see that sign and believe that the death accomplished there was for the forgiveness of their sins, they would be forgiven, and would be given eternal life.

We, too, look upon the cross and see the symbol of our sin. We see the consequence that our deadly sin has. We have no choice but to take our sin seriously. We see the very thing that kills us in body and soul. Except, when we look upon the cross, it no longer kills us. Instead, it’s kills the One who has taken our place, Jesus Christ.

On the cross, the seriousness of our sin took the life of God’s own Son. But he willingly exchanged spots with us, so that we could approach God for His forgiveness. And God forgives, because of Jesus. God’s very sign of judgment, the cross, where Jesus *was* judged for us, has now been transformed into the sign of our salvation.

And this salvation is not our work. It is entirely the work of Jesus on our behalf. We don’t have to prove to God that we deserve it or have earned it in any way. He simply asks that we look at His Son on the cross and trust that our forgiveness was accomplished there. That we can have confidence that we are saved from our deadly sin. That we can have confidence to even approach God’s throne in judgment, and fully trust we will be judged not based on what we have done or not done, but on that which was done for us by Christ. We have been graciously saved. It is profound. And yet, it is also profoundly simple:

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His Only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16-17). In Jesus’ name. Amen.

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord.