

The Bronze Serpent, Numbers 21:4-9¹

The relatively short narrative that constitutes Numbers 21:4-9 provides a wonderful catalyst for us to accomplish three goals in our discipleship context of Sunday School.

1) Giving proper attention to the larger context and precise content of Numbers 21:4-9 requires us to better acquaint ourselves with areas of Scripture that are often overlooked or taken for granted without having received proper attention and esteem. Namely, The LORD leading and caring for his covenant people in a time of temporal judgment before championing their great victories in the securing of the land promised to the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob). Through these accounts, we observe God's great faithfulness, revelations and demonstrations of both his character and power, and we are confronted with our own appetite for demonstrations of weakness and failure.

2) Giving attention to the principles that can reasonably be extrapolated from the larger context and precise content of Numbers 21:4-9 helps us think through elements of the major historical event that we are specially commemorating this year – the 500th Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. This is because the events of the Reformation demand that we consider such things as opposing spiritual leadership – when, if, and how is this proper, acceptable, or even necessary. It also provides an element of historical caution about spoiling wonderful memorials of God's faithfulness – making idols of Ebenezers.

3) Studying Numbers 21 gives us a more complete understanding of Jesus' very consequential reference to this narrative when discussing the hope of Israel with one of its chief teachers, namely Nicodemus in John 3. This will help us recognize that the wonderful and universally known John 3:16 has a contextual home, and that which immediately precedes it is Jesus drawing on this six-verse narrative's conclusion. This is important because if one loves the beauty and breadth of John 3:16, then one must also love the whole of John 3.

Goal One: The larger context and precise content of Numbers 21:4-9

The Context of Location

An important element in establishing the context of a passage and thereby its proper understanding is often location, particularly in a passage that involves a promised land, substantial geographical movements, and engagements of various peoples. The following is an overview of Israel's movement during their wilderness wanderings which became a reality when the people rejected the minority report of Caleb and Joshua.

Israel was in the wilderness of Paran when the original spies were dispatched to the Promised Land.

"After that the people set out from Hazeroth, and camped in the wilderness of Paran." Numbers 12:16

"So Moses sent them from the wilderness of Paran, according to the command of the LORD, all of them men who were heads of the people of Israel." Numbers 13:3

The original twelve spies went as far as Hebron which provided a healthy evaluation of the wonderful land that The LORD had promised Israel.

"They went up into the Negeb and came to Hebron." Numbers 13:22

The people of Israel were on the southwest side of their land, at Kadesh, in the wilderness of Paran when the ten spies gave their bad report.

¹ Prepared by David Crowe for Pray's Mill Baptist Church Adult Sunday School
ALL Scripture Quotations are from the ESV Bible unless the Scripture reference is in a quote from another author – their original translation was kept.

"And they came to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation of the people of Israel in the wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh."
Numbers 13:26

After the rebellion following the bad report from the ten spies The LORD directed Moses to lead the people toward the wilderness by the way to the Red Sea taking them away from the portion of the land that had been evaluated and esteemed as good. This set of directions were provided in part on account of the other peoples in the area – Israel did not exist in a vacuum there were other peoples and their presence and engagement always needs to be considered in understanding the context.

"Now, since the Amalekites and the Canaanites dwell in the valleys, turn tomorrow and set out for the wilderness by the way to the Red Sea." Numbers 14:25

Israel traveled from the wilderness of Paran to the wilderness of Zin where they stayed in Kadesh.

"And the people of Israel, the whole congregation, came into the wilderness of Zin in the first month, and the people stayed in Kadesh. And Miriam died there and was buried there." Numbers 20:1

While at Kadesh Moses dispatched messengers to Edom to request peaceful passage along the King's Highway, but Edom threateningly rejected this request forcing Israel to take another and less efficient route.

"Moses sent messengers from Kadesh to the king of Edom...." Numbers 20:14

"And here we are in Kadesh, a city on the edge of your territory. Please let us pass through your land. We will not pass through field or vineyard, or drink water from a well. We will go along the King's Highway. We will not turn aside to the right hand or to the left until we have passed through your territory." Numbers 20:16-17

"Thus Edom refused to give Israel passage through his territory, so Israel turned away from him. And they journeyed from Kadesh, and the people of Israel, the whole congregation, came to Mount Hor." Numbers 20:21-22

Later Israel was militarily engaged by the Canaanite king of Arad of the Negeb and some of Israel was initially taken captive, but upon petitioning The LORD and making vows, Israel defeated and destroyed the cities who had come against them - the name of that place then being called Hormah.

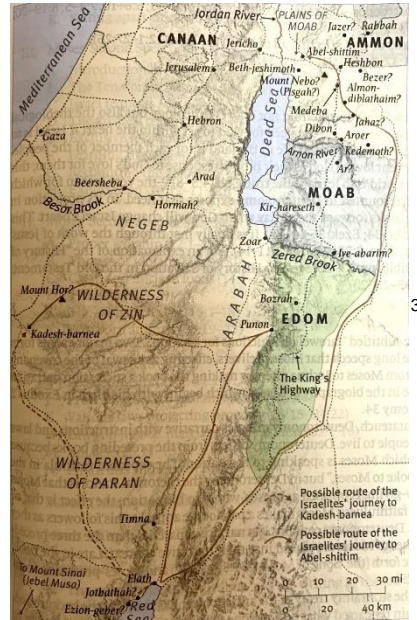
"And the Lord heeded the voice of Israel and gave over the Canaanites, and they devoted them and their cities to destruction. So the name of the place was called Hormah." Numbers 21:3

Israel at this time was still in the same general geographic area, having been at Mount Hor, where Aaron had died, they set out by way of the Red Sea and around Edom (noting the prior lack of welcome for safe passage on the highway). This was the location of the recorded incident of the bronze serpent.

"From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. " Numbers 21:4

Moses provides a summary of these travels as well as a more complete articulation regarding why Israel was not permitted to contest Edom's obstinate rejection of their peacefully passing through their territory on the King's Highway. It fundamentally came down to the brothers Jacob and Esau – The LORD provided Edom to the descendants of Esau and it was not Israel's prerogative at this time to put themselves in a context to possibly enter a conflict with them as this land was their heritage from The LORD.

"Then we turned and journeyed into the wilderness in the direction of the Red Sea, as the LORD told me. And for many days we traveled around Mount Seir. Then the LORD said to me, 'You have been traveling around this mountain country long enough. Turn northward and command the people, 'You are about to pass through the territory of your brothers, the people of Esau, who live in Seir; and they will be afraid of you. So be very careful. Do not contend with them, for I will not give you any of their land, no, not so much as for the sole of the foot to tread on, because I have given Mount Seir to Esau as a possession. You shall purchase food from them with money, that you may eat, and you shall also buy water from them with money, that you may drink. For the LORD your God has blessed you in all the work of your hands. He knows your going through this great wilderness. These forty years the LORD your God has been with you. You have lacked nothing.' So we went on, away from our brothers, the people of Esau, who live in Seir, away from the Arabah road from Elath and Ezion-geber. And we turned and went in the direction of the wilderness of Moab." Deuteronomy 2:1-8



The Context of Conduct

The Israelites went from **groaning** for deliverance to a pattern of **grumbling** for servitude and treats. The people of Israel were groaning for The LORD's deliverance from the tyrannical wickedness of Egypt, and when their deliverance was secured by The LORD who remembered his covenant promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, they soon began to grumble in fear and then with ingratitude.

"And God heard their **groaning**, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob." Exodus 2:24

Unfortunately, Israel, during this season of Redemptive History, is well known for having been a grumbling people. However, this was not simply a distasteful weakness of character, but a substantial problem of the heart that manifested itself in the challenging of leadership and a morbid evaluation of their past and present circumstances. The following is an overview of this pattern of grumbling from the time of The LORD delivering Israel from Egypt to the moment that they were judged by fiery serpents in the wilderness. The conduct of the people in these moments betrayed the failure of their hearts, the strength of their leadership, and the majestic character of their God.

² English Standard Version Study Bible. Crossway Bibles, 2008. (Hereafter: ESV SB), Pg. 258

³ ESV SB, pg. 327

To help draw out the two primary elements of emphasis for this study portions have been *italicized* and underlined.

Italicized: *Grumbling against the leadership: God and his servant Moses.*

Underlined: Why were we taken from Egypt only to die in the wilderness.

In a context in which The LORD is further hardening Pharaoh's heart and drawing him out to be made a further demonstration of God's power... the people began their complaining.⁴

"They said to Moses, 'Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? *What have you done to us* in bringing us out of Egypt? Is not this what we said to you in Egypt: 'Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness." Exodus 14:11-12

In the same chapter that records the worship song of response to The LORD rescuing Israel and drowning the Egyptian army the people of Israel lacked drinkable water and immediately began to grumble. Note that this was also an experience in provision as The LORD made the waters drinkable here.

"And *the people grumbled against Moses*, saying, 'What shall we drink?' And he cried to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a log, and he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet." Exodus 15:24-25

The people were quickly grumbling again... needing food they grumbled for it. This is where "manna" was introduced to the people - the supernatural provision of food from The LORD.

"And the whole congregation of the people of Israel *grumbled against Moses and Aaron* in the wilderness, and the people of Israel said to them, "Would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." Exodus 16:2-3

Manna was Israel's diet of miraculous provision for forty years.

"The people of Israel ate the manna forty years, till they came to a habitable land. They ate the manna till they came to the border of the land of Canaan." Exodus 16:35

More grumbling... about water. Again, the grumbling was regarding The LORD's provision and again the grumbling was directed at Moses. The LORD provided water this time through Moses striking the rock.

"Therefore *the people quarreled with Moses* and said, 'Give us water to drink.' And Moses said to them, '*Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?*' But the people thirsted there for water, and *the people grumbled against Moses* and said, 'Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?'" Exodus 17:2-3

The people again chose to complain - this time about their perceived misfortunes and The LORD responded with a fire consuming some of the outer areas of the camp. Note that this grumbling was not stated to be against Moses or a longing for Egypt at this precise time though it certainly made The LORD angry....

"And the people complained in the hearing of the LORD about their misfortunes, and when the LORD heard it, his anger was kindled, and the fire of the LORD burned among them and consumed some outlying parts of the camp." Numbers 11:1

The people again complained... this time about The LORD's supernatural provision and it being so deficient to the abundance of delightful food they enjoyed as slaves.

"Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving. And the people of Israel also wept again and said, 'Oh that we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at." Numbers 11:4-6

⁴ Arguably this was already present as early as Exodus 5:20-21, but their deliverance was not clear to them at that time and I am willing to be more sympathetic to this initial struggle.

The people's complaining became an unbearable burden to Moses and he petitioned The LORD for help, and The LORD provided Moses his requested help by dispersing some of his leadership load among seventy other leaders in Israel. The people and their complaining made Moses' leadership a grievous burden.

"Moses said to the LORD, 'Why have you dealt ill with your servant? And why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay *the burden of all this people on me?*'" Numbers 11:11

"I am not able to carry all this people alone; the burden is too heavy for me." Numbers 11:14

The LORD also addresses the ungrateful rabble here... angry that they had no regard for his delivering them from Egypt and their wicked ungratefulness of his provision The LORD sent the people what they wanted in a judging abundance and the matter concluded with the offenders being struck down with a very great plague.

"...you have wept in the hearing of the LORD, saying, 'Who will give us meat to eat? For it was better for us in Egypt. Therefore the LORD will give you meat, and you shall eat.'" Numbers 11:18

"...because you have rejected the LORD who is among you and have wept before him, saying, 'Why did we come out of Egypt?'" Numbers 11:20

Unfortunately, even those among leadership were not beyond speaking against Moses – thereby attempting to diminish his unique authority and role, but The LORD championed his servant Moses.

"Miriam and Aaron *spoke against Moses* because of the Cushite woman whom he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman. And they said, 'Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?'" Numbers 12:1-2

Following the bad report from the ten spies the people of Israel grumbled against Moses, Aaron, and The LORD - choosing to mutiny and form plans to return to Egypt!

"And all the people of Israel *grumbled against Moses and Aaron*. The whole congregation said to them, 'Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! *Why is the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword?* Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?' And they said to one another, 'Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt.'" Numbers 14:2-4

Following the rebellion at Kadesh, The LORD was furious and prepared to strike dead the entire nation... but Moses patiently plead with The LORD and it was here that The LORD declared the judgment of the wilderness wandering and the death of the present adult generation during this time of wandering.

"And the LORD said to Moses, '*How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them?*'" Numbers 14:11

"Please pardon the iniquity of this people, according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have forgiven this people, from Egypt until now." Numbers 14:19

"But truly, as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD, none of the men who have seen my glory and my signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have *put me to the test these ten times and have not obeyed my voice*, shall see the land that I swore to give to their fathers. And none of *those who despised me* shall see it." Numbers 14:21-23

"And the LORD spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying, 'How long shall this *wicked congregation grumble against me?* I have heard *the grumbings of the people of Israel*, which *they grumble against me*. Say to them, 'As I live, declares the LORD, what you have said in my hearing I will do to you: your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness, and of all your number, listed in the census from twenty years old and upward, *who have grumbled against me*, not one shall come into the land where I swore that I would make you dwell, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua the son of Nun. But your little ones, who you said would become a prey, I will bring in, and they shall know the land that you have rejected.'" Numbers 14:26-31

Korah and his company attempted to mutiny against Moses, Aaron, and ultimately The LORD. Moses addressed the matter and provided a context for The LORD to make his desires plain for the leadership and for those who would oppose God's leadership - Korah and his company were all judged.

"They *assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron* and said to them, 'You have gone too far! For all in the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?' Numbers 16:3

"...is it too small a thing for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the congregation of Israel, to bring you near to himself, to do service in the tabernacle of the LORD and to stand before the congregation to minister to them, and that he has brought you near him, and all your brothers the sons of Levi with you? And would you seek the priesthood also? Therefore *it is against the LORD that you and all your company have gathered together*. What is Aaron that you grumble against him? And Moses sent to call Dathan and Abiram the sons of Eliab, and they said, 'We will not come up. Is it a small thing that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey, to kill us in the wilderness, that you must also *make yourself a prince over us*?' Numbers 16:9-13

Following Korah's rebellion the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron for The LORD's judgment of Korah and the others! This is among the incidents that make the association between The LORD and his leadership quite clear. The LORD judged these rebellious grumblers too and 14,700 people died before Aaron made atonement for the people and the plague was stopped.

"But on the next day *all the congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and against Aaron*, saying, 'You have killed the people of the LORD.' And when *the congregation had assembled against Moses and against Aaron*, they turned toward the tent of meeting. And behold, the cloud covered it, and the glory of the LORD appeared." Numbers 16:41-42

After Korah's rebellion and the subsequent rebellion that followed, The LORD chose to distinguish the leadership of Aaron in his priestly role to put a conclusion to the grumbings against Moses, Aaron, and The LORD himself regarding these matters. This was executed through a supernatural testing of the leaders' staffs. Note also the intertwining of grumbling against The LORD and against his leaders (first, grumble against "you" in 17:5, and second, grumble against "The LORD" in 17:10).

"And the staff of the man whom I choose shall sprout. Thus I will make to cease from me *the grumbings of the people of Israel, which they grumble against you*." Numbers 17:5

"And the LORD said to Moses, 'Put back the staff of Aaron before the testimony, to be kept as a sign for the rebels, that you may make an end of *their grumbings against me*, lest they die.'" Numbers 17:10

Lacking water the people again assembled themselves against Moses and Aaron and pined for Egypt. This incident became a point of great frustration to Moses and Aaron and they themselves sinned against The LORD when Moses struck the rock and they (Moses and Aaron) failed to treat The LORD as holy before the people.

"Now there was no water for the congregation. And they *assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron*. And *the people quarreled with Moses* and said, 'Would that we had perished when our brothers perished before the LORD! Why have you brought the assembly of the LORD into this wilderness, that we should die here, both we and our cattle? And why have you made us come up out of Egypt to bring us to this evil place? It is no place for grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, and there is no water to drink.'" Numbers 20:2-5

"And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice, and water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their livestock. And the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, 'Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them.' These are the waters of Meribah, where *the people of Israel quarreled with the LORD*, and through them he showed himself holy." Numbers 20:11-13

The next record of grumbling is the passage under examination, the incident involving the bronze serpent. Numbers 21:4-9

Numbers 21:4-9 From Grumbling to Raised Serpent

21:4 – The Context

In the immediately preceding context Israel had just enjoyed a military victory from the hand of God - they initially suffered loss, they made vows to The LORD, he gave them victory, and they honored their vow. It was in no way ambiguous that The LORD supplied their victory yet once again. Nevertheless, here they are grumbling again.

The route that Israel was taking was likely a contributing factor to their larger context of discontent toward their leadership and their provisions. Israel was covering regions of territory that were unfavorable and not appearing to advance them in ways that they would prefer.

This general route that Israel took was addressed in the **Context of Location** portion of the Study Guide and it addressed the need for Israel to take a less than preferred route around Edom and not on the King's Highway. Because Israel was not granted peaceful access through Edom by Edom or authority to engage Edom by The LORD, Israel had to make a larger and less favorable circuit to reach the border of their own land.

Note that later, after this passage's incident, whereas Edom was entreated as "brothers" and Israel was provided special instructions about them from The LORD, it was a different context when Israel petitioned Sihon king of the Amorites for safe travel through their land by picking back up on the King's Highway (the route that they had hoped to be on at an earlier location through Edom). There was no bypassing this people's land. Sihon responded aggressively, his people engaged Israel, and Israel soundly defeated them.

At this time, with the less than favorable route around Edom, Israel's patience was shortened or deficient and they failed to discipline this attitude and instead fed it and became fools in this moment. However, it is proper to appreciate the nature of their genuine challenges too. Keil & Delitzsch state the way of the pass that Israel had to make was particularly harsh, "...on the whole it was a horrible desert, with a loose sandy soil, and drifts of granite and other stones, where terrible sand-storms sometimes arise from the neighborhood of the Red Sea...."⁵

Israel was certainly enduring challenges, but these were first on account of their failure to submit in confident faith when the land was first engaged almost forty years before, and second on account of a larger providence – The LORD was certainly faithful to Israel, but he would also be true to his word to Edom. We too endure various challenges. Some of them by our own making, some by the making of others, and some on account of a larger providence that we may or may not understand. The danger and potential tragedy is when we fail to discipline our hearts amidst struggle and instead feed an improper attitude that will inevitably produce foolish grumbling and displeasing conduct. This tragedy is compounded in that it spoils an honest perspective and strips away the gratitude that we would otherwise freely express.

21:5 – The Offense

Here the fruit of Israel's impatience came to full form as the people spoke against God and against Moses.

Grumbling against God! That should still shock our conscience...

Grumbling against God's man... unacceptable.

Slandering God's supernatural provisions... unbelievable!

The dialogue is provided and it appears to be toward Moses directly, but as The LORD's man leading the people it would also be a direct offense against God too.

⁵ C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch; Keil & Delitzsch: Commentary on the Old Testament, Volume 1 – Pentateuch. Hendrickson Publishers, 2001. (Hereafter: Keil & Delitzsch), Pg. 745

The people complained about being delivered from Egypt. They complained that they were destined to die in the wilderness (as though that were the reason for their deliverance from Egypt) and this accusation was rooted in their allegedly having no food or water.

At this time, previous incidents of grumbling and rebellion should come to mind as they also provided clear testimony of The LORD's unique and supernatural provision for his people. In the **Context of Conduct** section, it was observed that The LORD provided drinkable water both by natural and supernatural means. The LORD also provided manna in sufficient portions for all the people to have what they needed. Therefore, this was an impossible accusation – words of foolishness rooted in impatience and blinded by bitterness. A morbid ingratitude.

Though speaking with an exasperated patience the people still ultimately recognized that The LORD had provided for them and they finally concede as much, but framed this concession in a shroud of vulgar ungratefulness. "...we loathe this worthless food." They detested... or greatly despised God's special provision. A terrible statement that betrayed their hearts' wickedness in this moment.

The complaints were regarding their present experiences and being discontent with their provisions. Israel had lost all perspective on their prior suffering in Egypt - their judgment being clouded by their selfishness.

John Calvin articulates this offense so well, "...their insolence proceeded still further, so as not only to rail against the minister, but to vomit forth also their wicked blasphemy against God Himself, as if He had injured them most grossly by their deliverance."⁶

R. Dennis Cole perceptively stated, "When a persons' heart is intent on rebellion and beset on discontent, even the best gifts from the Lord can lose their savor; nothing will fully satisfy until the heart is made right."⁷

Israel's complaining at this time was biting and false - The LORD magnificently delivered them from Egypt and he was pleased to use his servant Moses to this end. They were not compelled out of Egypt just to be passively murdered in the wilderness. That is a vulgar foolishness speaking and as observed this was a repeated and worn out folly of the people. Further, the matters of their grumbling were matters of testing and refining and in this incident they failed...

"And you shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. Your clothing did not wear out on you and your foot did not swell these forty years. Know then in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, the LORD your God disciplines you." Deuteronomy 8:2-5

What about your own heart in times of pronounced discouragement and exhausted patience amidst testing? Might you also besmirch the grace of God, that so magnificently has worked in your heart and life, on account of struggle and enduring hardship? Are you too submitting to the proneness we all have to weakness and wandering... or are you demonstrating the magnificent truth of Christ in you, the hope of glory?

21:6 – Divine Judgment

The LORD responded to the people's wicked complaint by sending fiery serpents among them, and the reason for this was so that many of the people would die. It was not a threat, it was immediate judgment.

⁶ John Calvin; Calvin's Commentaries, Volume 3 – Harmony of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. Baker Books, 2003. (Hereafter: Calvin), Pg. 154

⁷ The New American Commentary: Numbers, Volume 3B. R. Dennis Cole. Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000. Pg. 347

While likely indigenous creatures, these serpents did not arrive on their own, they were dispatched by God. The reference to them as “fiery serpents” has a range of possibilities that primarily involve the effect of their bites (causing inflammation and pain to a euphemism for being venomous) though it could also be a reference to their appearance. Whatever the reason for this description, in this moment they were delivering fatal bites to the people in consequential numbers so as to have become a clear sign of judgment.

The people grumbled that they were taken from Egypt just to die in the wilderness and then this was exactly what they experienced by means of immediate judgment through a plague of poisonous snakes. They were dying in the wilderness, but it was not on account of The LORD’s deficiency – it was on account of his provoked wrath.

These fiery serpents appear to be a unique element of judgment among the ones already demonstrated, some of them however were noted to be absolutely unique (the earth swallowing those in Korah's rebellion). So, over the time of Israel’s wandering and provision it is observed that The LORD sent fire, openings in the earth, too much food, various plagues, and now fiery serpents.

This judgment also secured a correction in Israel's thinking and heart too: it bridges "Why have you..." (accusation against Moses in 21:5) with "We have sinned" (admission by Israel in 21:7). This is further manifested with both an admission of guilt and in beseeching the leader they besmirched to entreat the God they dishonored. Real pain and real death woke them up.

Have you examined yourself lately? Might your present hardships be the Lord disciplining you for correction and restoration? Will you require severe restorative action to finally wake up too? We are a repentant people and will continue to be until in the Lord’s presence and this work of conforming to the Risen Savior is completed.

21:7 – Recognition of Offense and Intercession

The people confessed their offense: having sinned against both The LORD and Moses himself by speaking against them. The element or form of their admission is the same as their offense (speech) - they appear to have put the hyperbole and ugly speech away.

Israel recognized that their prior statement was sin - it was not true and it was an offense to both The LORD and to Moses.

Having recognized and confessed their sin, the people petitioned Moses to petition The LORD to take the serpents away. The people looked to the man who had been so consistently faithful to plead that mercy may be extended toward them time and again.

Further, the people recognized that the serpents were sent by The LORD. They recognized that it was not an unfortunate infestation or strange danger, but a supernatural judgment by God.

Moses, humble, faithful, and loving his people, again prayed for them, that The LORD would have mercy.

While I personally wrestle with properly concluding what may or may not have been the actual motive of admission and restoration of the people, Calvin sees in this incident a wonderful picture of acknowledgment of sin and of one’s inability to resolve it themselves. So, while I cannot affirm that this was necessarily the intentions of the narrative it does provide a wonderful picture of these truths.

“Consequently, they both confess their guilt and acknowledge that there was no other remedy for them except to obtain pardon from God. These two things, as we are aware, are necessary in order to appease God, first, that the sinner should be dissatisfied with himself and self-condemned; and, secondly, that he should seek to be reconciled to God.”⁸

⁸ Calvin, Pg. 154

Be it a true reflection of Israel's heart in this moment or not, is it true of your crying out for mercy and help that you recognize your guilt and your inability to remedy the offense in and of yourself? God is who disciplines us, but He is also our refuge and only hope.

21:8-9 – Divine Provision and Deliverance

The LORD was pleased to hear and respond to Moses directly and a means was provided for the people's deliverance.

Note though that the serpents were not immediately expelled... the people still suffered this terrifying judgment in some measure – while it likely subsided there was still pain, they just would not necessarily have to die from it now. However, to be delivered from death the people still had to act, they still had to execute the simplest measure of faith and obedience – they had to look.

Viewing the crafted serpent was The LORD's chosen means to preserve those bitten; still, in some ways, it almost appears to be a curious means that The LORD had Moses make a fixed object such as this that was not involved in worship and that replicated an animal. Nevertheless, it was God's chosen means and Moses obeyed and made a fiery serpent for the dying to behold and live. Further, because a bronze serpent will accomplish nothing by way of neutralizing poison it did become an overt expression of faith to behold this object knowing that doing so would preserve life. It was effective because God is pleased to respond to faith in his commands.

John MacArthur see the people looking on the bronze serpent as an act of genuine faith and restoration: "Those who were bitten would be healed if they but looked at it, thereby acknowledging their guilt and expressing faith in God's forgiveness and healing power."⁹

Once again, examine your heart. It was clear that the serpents were still present on some level and still fatally biting people, but there was a deliverance from the fatal nature of the bite if they looked on the bronze serpent. We are assured victory over the world, the flesh, and the devil, but not immediate victory over their influence, their sting, and their general might. Faith in this present experience of life will be accompanied by the residual consequences of sin, yours and everyone else's too – will you persevere in looking in obedience and faith when the pain lingers?

Reflections on Numbers 21:4-9

Likely most reading this Study Guide and working through this passage are Gentiles like myself. This is not our national history, our peoples have another story (certainly less exciting!). This is, however, our Redemptive History – the narrative that we have been grafted into and whose principles and truths we glean from to better understand God, man, this world, and the outworking of the redemptive plan. So, it is my hope that you do not walk away from the narrative proper of this passage bemoaning these people who long ago never could seem to get themselves consistently in order. Walk away understanding the nature of man, the struggle of faith, the demands of God's justice, and the wonder of God's mercy. Walk away examining your own heart.

But... do not walk away just yet. As stated in the introduction this passage can serve as a catalyst to think through some important elements of the Reformation and of greater importance this passage was a magnificent element in Jesus' articulation of the hope of Israel and by extension the hope of the world, too.

⁹ The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: John 1-11. John MacArthur. Moody Publishers, 2006. Pg. 114

Reformation Application

One must remember that the gospel was not wholly lost in the dark days before the Protestant Reformation – God maintains his remnant and his testimony.

One must also recognize that in the course of the Reformation, leaders of the church were challenged and their authority was not honored. There is a place for this in such times, but such times are very dangerous and all involved must advance with a proper fear before God.

One must also be careful to not disregard the value of the good things that have been abused by others. The Roman Church made many precious things into spectacles, but that does not mean they cannot again be valued as precious.

Reformation Application: Numbers 21:4-9, Leadership

Note the unique leadership of Moses.

“The LORD said/spoke to Moses” is recorded repeatedly throughout the Torah.

Exodus: 4:4,19,21; 6:1,10,29; 7:1,8,14,19; 8:1,5,16,20; 9:1,8,13,22; 10:1,12,21; 11:1,9; 12:1,43; 13:1; 14:1,15,26; 16:4,11,28; 17:5,14; 19:9,10,21; 20:22; 24:12; 25:1; 30:11,17,22,34; 31:1,12; 32:7,9,33; 33:1,17; 34:1,27

Leviticus: 16:2; 21:1

Numbers: 3:40; 5:4; 7:4,11; 11:16,23; 12:4,14; 14:11; 15:35,37; 17:10; 20:12,23; 21:8,16,34; 25:4,10; 26:1; 27:6,12,18; 31:25

Deuteronomy: 31:14,16

“The LORD commanded Moses” is recorded repeatedly throughout the Torah.

Exodus: 12:50; 16:34; 38:22; 40:32

Leviticus: 7:38; 8:4; 8:9,13,17,21,29; 9:10; 16:34; 24:23; 27:34

Numbers: 1:19,54; 2:33,34; 3:42,51; 4:49; 8:3,20; 9:5; 15:36; 17:11; 26:4; 27:11,22; 30:16; 31:7,31,41,47; 36:10

Deuteronomy: 29:1

"And [The LORD] said, 'Hear my words: If there is a prophet among you, I the LORD make myself known to him in a vision; I speak with him in a dream. Not so with my servant Moses. He is faithful in all my house. With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles, and he beholds the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?'" Numbers 12:6-8

Moses had an unparalleled relationship with The LORD and the inferring of principle has no intention, and I am persuaded produces no threat, to the proper esteeming of this unique relationship. However, the principle still stands that The LORD has and continues to establish his leadership over his people. In this context, it was Israel and their leader was Moses, and it would later be kings. In the context of the Church the Lord first provided the temporal leadership of the Apostles at the Church's foundation and then provided a means of a multiplicity of leadership on the local level for the individual churches of various cities and regions in the form of Pastors/Elders. Ultimately though, just as The LORD was the leader of Israel, so with the Church the Lord Jesus is its head. But in both contexts, there are local leadership structures that are to be submitted to as they are provided by the Lord

for the leading and shepherding of his people. So, while we are not Israel and while this season of history is completed even for our Reformation brothers, there are still principles that can be deduced for our benefit.

One recalls the burden that the people so consistently put on Moses as he attempted to lead them, and finally in Numbers 11 some of this burden is distributed and shared.

So, what might be a New Testament principle: Do not burden those who have been entrusted with your care...

"Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you." Hebrews 13:17

This begins to provide a very palpable tension that was present in the early stages of the Reformation. It is dangerous and taxing to engage the leadership of the church and one had best not be cavalier when doing so... in the providence of God he has placed and allowed various leaders to be over you and others. We all must exercise great discernment and humility if we believe it is necessary to challenge their authority and care. Paul further affirms this by the distinct manner that an Elder is to be accused/rebuked - it is not the standard procedure for the members of the body in general.

"Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses." 1 Timothy 5:19

So, is the resolution to the tension then and possibly even now to have enough witnesses? If the tension is addressing personal sin and/or failure, then certainly two or three witnesses is proper. However, if the tension is the whole of a leadership's authority we may have another matter, such as the Reformers experienced.

So how do we weigh these matters?

First, in Moses' context he was both faithful and humble. The people's problems with Moses were fundamentally problems with The LORD and they were addressed accordingly.

Second, the New Covenant pastors of the local church have clear charges and responsibilities. When they stray or fail they should be corrected/restored properly.

Third, systemic and morbid straying from the gospel by leadership (of any nature) or a church (of any size) must be addressed with the authority of the Lord whose gospel is being compromised and/or functionally besmirched. This is where the Reformers stood their ground. They did not attempt to oppose leadership that took them down the challenging roads that faith and faithfulness required. They did not attempt to oppose leadership that needed restorative correction. They opposed leadership that bore the marks of Jesus' most scathing rebukes and the Apostles' greatest admonitions. They opposed those that were of kindred heart to those Jesus referred to in Matthew as white washed tombs full of dead men's bones and who travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte – himself being made twice as much a child of hell as themselves. They opposed those who Paul referred to in Philippians as dogs and evildoers. They opposed those who Paul referred to in Galatians as damned for preaching another gospel. They opposed those who Jude referred to in his letter as ungodly deniers of our Lord. They opposed those who Peter referred to in his letter as false teachers bringing in destructive heresies.

It is wrong to oppose God's man, and it is wrong for God's man to fail to oppose the imposter.

Reformation Application: Numbers 21:4-9, Spoiled Ebenezers¹⁰

"In the third year of Hoshea son of Elah, king of Israel, Hezekiah the son of Ahaz, king of Judah, began to reign. He was twenty-five years old when he began to reign, and he reigned twenty-nine years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Abi the daughter of Zechariah. And he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, according to all that David his father had done. He removed the high places and broke the pillars and cut down the Asherah. And he broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it (it was called Nehushtan)." 2 Kings 8:1-4

We know nothing of what came of the bronze serpent from Numbers 21 until we reach the record of King Hezekiah in 2 Kings 18 where he has to destroy what had become an idol.

Recognizing this unfortunate outcome, I would caution one not to confuse the abuse of the bronze serpent by unfaithful men and thereby discredit its magnificent role in the past and its imagery for something magnificently greater in the future. Remember also that there were many faithful men, leaders, and kings between Moses and Hezekiah who likely abused it in no way, but cherished it as a memorial of mercy. However, at some point in time the bronze serpent had transitioned from a means of remembrance to a means of relic worship, and it was Hezekiah who finally did away with it because of this. However, this season of abuse did not discredit Jesus' reference to it nor its original good.

There are many similar abuses today. The Roman Catholic Church has in many ways turned beautiful places marking Redemptive History in Israel into cheap costume jewelry shops, crossing the line from reverence to silliness. They are also well known for their many relics and gaudy decorations of person and structures. Such is always a temptation and we must not fail to watch ourselves and when necessary discard what may have once been a treasured memorial when it becomes a corrupted relic.

One must never esteem a memorial and make it the object of value when it was only ever designed to point to the object of value. Remember at weddings we do not stand to honor the bridal march, but upon hearing it we stand for the bride. It serves its intended end of pointing to the greater. It would be a perplexing shame to leave the bride in her place of waiting while rejoicing in her song.

It is wonderful to remember the kind works of God, but it is wrong to improperly esteem the means of memorial.

The Bronze Serpent in the New Testament

The bronze serpent makes another appearance, by way of reference in a most important discussion between two Jewish Rabbis one evening. The one states to the other, "No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And 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." John 3:13-15

Prior to this statement Jesus has just articulated the necessity of being born again to see the kingdom of God, a truth that any faithful teacher of the Hebrew Scriptures should have understood. Now he continues to unpack just how the plan of God will unfold that can make this exchange of hearts of stone to hearts of flesh possible – the lifting up of the Son of Man.

¹⁰ An Ebenezer is a memorial stone or altar. Here used more broadly as an object of remembrance.

This is the first of three times that Jesus, in the Gospel of John, states that he will be “lifted up” in direct reference to his redemptive work on the cross. John 3:14, 8:28, 12:32.¹¹

"And 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." John 3:14-15

"So Jesus said to them, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me. And he who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him." John 8:28-29

"And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die." John 12:32-33

D.A. Carson provided a very helpful insight regarding the greater image present in Jesus' references to being lifted up in the Gospel of John, explaining that the term for lifted up assumes not one of its potential applications, but two simultaneously. "This is a theological adaptation of the literal ('to lift up') and the figurative ('to enhance') meanings of the verb."¹² Further developing this understanding of the dual use of the term, Carson demonstrates how it fits into the passage's immediate and greater context, stating, "If in v.13 the Son of Man is the revealer, the one who came down from heaven, here he is the sufferer and the exalted one – but it transpires that it is precisely in the matrix of suffering and exaltation that God most clearly reveals himself in the person of his Son."¹³

Whereas the bronze serpent served as a means of temporal salvation from death, the raised Son of Man serves as an enduring salvation from eternal death. Further, as Frederick Louis Godet demonstrates in his treatment of this passage there was a reasonable and even right expectation of Nicodemus to understand Messiah as assuming the throne of his father David, but as articulated earlier in the chapter and in its allusion to Ezekiel this kingdom consisted of a people with new hearts, a people who have been born again. Recall for a moment John the Baptist's preparation of Israel for Messiah "Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!" Now with this in view, note Godet's connection with the dual nature of lifted up as also articulated by Carson, "This word (*will be lifted up*), intimates indeed that by this strange elevation the Son of Man will attain not only to the throne of David, but that of God. Such is the full meaning of the word: *to be lifted up*."¹⁴ He then continues that by the act of being "raised up" Jesus is indeed establishing the context of his Kingdom, "Here, Jesus declares, is the salvation on which the establishment of the Kingdom will be founded; here is the second heavenly decree revealed to men."¹⁵

¹¹ ESV SB, Pg. 2025

¹² The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to John. D.A. Carson. APOLLOS, 1991. (Hereafter: Carson), Pg. 201

¹³ Carson, Pg. 201

¹⁴ Classic Commentary Library: Commentary on the Gospel of John, Volume One, 1-5. Frederick Louis Godet. Zondervan Publishing House, Reprint of 1893 Edition. (Hereafter: Godet), Pg. 392

¹⁵ Godet, Pg. 392