

AN UNGRATEFUL PEOPLE

+ **SESSION IN A SENTENCE:**

God is right to judge sin, yet He is gracious to provide a way of salvation.

+ **BACKGROUND PASSAGE:**

Numbers 21

+ **SETTING:**

The Israelites had been confronted afresh with God's holiness through His grace in providing them with water and His punishment of their leaders. Aaron soon died in the wilderness on Mount Hor as a result of his disobedience at the rock, but not before the priesthood had passed on to his son, Eleazar, so the people's relationship with the Lord might be preserved. Aaron's death was yet another tangible testimony of God's commitment to and expectation of holiness, and the people mourned him there for thirty days. And then the Lord provided them with their first victory over an enemy nation. Yet Israel remained undeterred, and they would soon sin again.

DAY 1

READ:

Numbers 20:14–21:5

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Numbers 21:1-5

NOTES



ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #39: SIN AS SELFISHNESS

When we sin, we are acting out of a selfish attitude and mind-set that assumes our action will lead us to more happiness than if we were to obey God. Because sin is manifested in our tendency to be “curved inward” toward self, it is the opposite of love. Love looks outwardly to place others before oneself, operating from the mind-set that others are more important (Phil. 2:3). Where sin selfishly seeks personal gratification and happiness, love works for the joy of others in the hope of making others happy in God.

There is no shortage of home improvement reality shows on television these days. Shiplap and demo days have become all the rage. However, the stories not often told on pieced-together, overly-produced episodes are how difficult in-home projects actually are, how much time they truly take, and how much they truly cost. Often upon setting out on one’s own renovation journey and encountering such difficulties, people find it is easier, in the end, merely to do a cosmetic touch-up rather than get at the bones of a structure to shore up what needs to be fixed.

In the Book of Numbers, this sort of surface-level transformation plagues the Israelite people. The people’s affections for God ebb and flow, and their obedience follows suit. In Numbers 21:1-5, we are privy to the nation’s first successful military conquest—a God-wrought victory over the Canaanites. But moving from verse 3 to verse 4, the Israelites shift from celebrating the Lord’s power and goodness in their victory to growing impatient and discontent. What seems to be a reaction to external circumstances is, in actuality, much deeper. Often outward circumstances seem to warrant our complaint and distrust in God, but in reality, they effectively take our focus off the real issue at hand. The Israelites’ problem was not merely that their needs were not being met; they had heart-level issues that needed to be cured.

The plight of the people of God is a stark reminder to us to be diligent in addressing heart-level issues in our own lives. We ought not be content with merely skating on the surface of a life lived for a holy God—we must go deeper. Christ has given us all we need to ask the hard questions, to repent, and to receive sweet relief.

Are there heart-level questions you need to ask of yourself today? How is seemingly insignificant outward sin manifesting itself from the deeper level of your heart?

DAY 2

READ:

Numbers 21:4-9

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Numbers 21:6-7a

NOTES

Corrective action is often unpleasant. Whether a parent disciplining a child or a superior in the workplace reprimanding an employee, the conflict is usually difficult to navigate, not to mention the fallout that inevitably results. Yet we know discipline can be a good thing too. A parent's correction of a child's behavior over time typically helps shape him or her into a productive and thoughtful adult. Done rightly, a boss's stern words can help build character and maturity in an employee, traits which cultivate virtue and reach far beyond the bottom line. What can be true about earthly discipline is true of God's discipline.

In Numbers 21:6-7a, God's discipline looks strange, if we are honest. The Israelites have rebelled yet again, only this time God was not content to provide for their needs and simply reaffirm His faithfulness. His judgment fell upon Israel in the form of poisonous snakes that bit many of the people, and many perished from their wounds.

Despite the harshness of the punishment, we know God does not discipline for discipline's sake. God is right to judge sin on account of His holiness, yet He is not pleased to unleash an arbitrary punishment, contrary to some ill-motivated caricatures of Him. Rather, God intends to restore a right relationship between Himself and His people. The Lord desires that His people would repent of their sin and return to Him. Thankfully, in this case, the people did so.

Don't take God's kindness toward you for granted. Though His wrath toward sin is often not immediate, as it was here, the seeming delay is not an encouragement to dig your heels in further. Rather, God's kindness and patience are meant to lead us toward repentance (Rom. 2:4), just as His kind and quick discipline is designed to do as well.

How has the Lord been kind to you? Reflect today on the many ways He has been faithful to His promises.

DAY 3

READ:

Numbers 21

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Numbers 21:7b-9

NOTES

VOICES from THE CHURCH

"Jesus became what was killing us—sin itself—when he was lifted up on the cross and thereby became the remedy for sin."²

-Nancy Guthrie

The longest bridge in the world—the Danyang-Kunshan Grand Bridge—spans 102 miles between the Chinese cities of Shanghai and Nanjing. The bridge required a workforce of 10,000 workers over four years to build at a cost of \$8.5 billion.¹

Sometimes drastic measures are needed for people to get from one place to the next. Because of Israel's persistent disobedience, the Lord sent serpents into their midst. Naturally wanting relief from the situation, the Israelites pleaded with Moses to go before the Lord on their behalf, asking Him to rescue them.

This request for God's help was not altogether unusual, but the circumstances certainly were. A significant piece of this encounter was Israel's motivation for seeking the Lord's help. Apart from a physical rescue, which they certainly desired, Israel's plea was marked by contrition and remorse. Their request was a sign of their repentant hearts.

So the Lord instructed Moses as to the means of deliverance, a bronze statue of a serpent to which the people were to look for rescue. Upon acknowledging God's means of saving them, the people were healed.

Later in Scripture, in John 3, Jesus used this episode as an example when talking with Nicodemus. The gist of Jesus' message? He cast Himself as the true and better bronze serpent to be lifted up before all humanity so that we will look up at Him and acknowledge Him as the God-sent means of deliverance and salvation from sin.

Though we are born into sin, the Lord has graciously provided a way of rescue for us. Our acknowledgment of Christ's death on the cross as the way of our salvation is key, both in the moment we are saved and perpetually as we are being made more like Him in His resurrection (1 Cor. 15:1-4).

How does our faith in Christ on the cross compare with the Israelites' faith in God to look to the bronze serpent?

DAY 4

READ:

2 Corinthians 5

FOCAL PASSAGE:

2 Corinthians 5:21

NOTES

At times the gospel is hard to comprehend, though not necessarily in the content of its message. We are well acquainted with our sin and depravity; we inherently act from it most days, or every day. We may also be convinced of the truth that Jesus Christ came, lived a sinless life, and died to redeem those who would put their faith in Him, followed by His resurrection from the dead. These two points of theology are reasonable enough to the regenerate mind.

The difficulty arises in the gospel's application, at the intersection of these two realities. We are sinful; Christ died for sinners; but did He really die for me?

Reread 2 Corinthians 5:21 slowly: God made Christ, who was sinless and perfect, to be sin for us. He took upon Himself the punishment we deserved for our sin. The amazing truth that Christ took our place is a fact we should never tire of hearing, but that still is not the entire gospel story. The verse continues: "so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Christ took our place so we could take His and all the rights and entitlements that go with it.

Martin Luther referred to this glorious transaction as the "wonderful exchange," writing:

This is that mystery which is rich in divine grace to sinners: wherein by a wonderful exchange our sins are no longer ours but Christ's, and the righteousness of Christ not Christ's but ours. He has emptied himself of his righteousness that he might clothe us with it and fill us with it; and he has taken our evils upon himself that he might deliver us from them.³

By faith in Jesus, our sins are no longer ours and we will not suffer for them, and Jesus' glory is not only His, it belongs to us as well. What wonder and joy fills the heart that responds to this good news with humility and gladness!

Who will you bless with a reminder or a declaration of this "wonderful exchange" through faith in Jesus?

DAY 5

READ:

1 Corinthians 1

FOCAL PASSAGE:

1 Corinthians 1:17-18

NOTES

Picking a favorite college football team is serious business in the South. The region is known for its large stadiums and raucous crowds. On game days, southern college towns are practically painted in their local squad's team colors. For SEC football fans, when allegiances are formed, loyalty is everything.

In 1 Corinthians 1, Paul was addressing allegiances of a different kind. Believers within the church at Corinth had begun to pick sides, aligning themselves with a particular gospel messenger in some sort of opposition to others. Paul challenged their divisions, insisting on the unity that exists at the core of the gospel message.

Using baptism as an illustration, Paul contended it was a good thing that he had baptized very few people, since it meant no one could claim they were baptized in his name rather than in Christ's. Further, Paul clarified his role within the kingdom: He had not been sent by Jesus only to baptize; he had been sent to preach the gospel. But it was the kind of preaching Paul noted that is most fascinating.

Paul's preaching of the gospel was not done with "eloquent wisdom." Fancy words and clever turns of phrase are not necessary to get the job done of communicating the gospel. If such extras were required, the cross, as Paul says, would be emptied of its effect or power (1:17). Therefore, the cross will do the work; the gospel message can stand on its own because it is backed by the power of God.

Let Paul's words be of great comfort to you. Now that you have heard the gospel and embraced its truth, and because it does not require eloquence or sophistication, you can go and share the good news with others with boldness and confidence!

With whom will you have a gospel conversation this week?

GROUP

NOTES

VOICES from THE CHURCH

"Because we often focus on our sins to the exclusion of the One we have sinned against (Ps. 113:4-6), we fail to remember that all of our sins—even the 'small' ones that don't seem to harm anyone—are acts of rebellion against our Creator. We fail to understand that what is deemed culturally appropriate changes from generation to generation, but God's Word remains unchanged."⁴

-Shaq Hardy

POINT 1: The Lord's people sin, despite His gracious provision (Num. 21:1-5).

The Lord graciously provided a military _____ for His people, in addition to the _____ and _____ He had provided throughout their wilderness journey.



How does reflecting on God's gracious provision help us not to sin against Him and others?

ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #39: SIN AS SELFISHNESS

When we sin, we are acting out of a selfish _____ and mind-set that assumes our action will lead us to more happiness than if we were to _____ God. Because sin is manifested in our tendency to be "curved inward" toward _____, it is the opposite of love. Love looks outwardly to place others before oneself, operating from the mind-set that others are more important (Phil. 2:3). Where sin selfishly seeks personal gratification and happiness, love works for the joy of others in the hope of making others happy in God.

POINT 2: The Lord's people are disciplined, drawing them toward repentance (Num. 21:6-7a).

The Lord responded to this instance of His people's rebellion _____ and _____. The punishment of snakes also reminded the people of their oppression in Egypt.



How should this punishment of Israel cause us to think about our own sins?

The Lord's discipline always has a purpose of leading His people to _____ and _____. This is God's mercy and grace.



What should our repentance of sin entail?

POINT 3: The Lord's prophet intercedes, prompting the means of healing

(Num. 21:7b-9).

The Israelites acknowledged God's _____ to save them as they pleaded with Moses to _____ for them, which Moses graciously did.



Why might we doubt God's ability to save us?

By God's command, the Israelites could _____ their sin and death for healing and life by looking upon the bronze serpent. Similarly, we are to look upon _____ for our salvation.

MY RESPONSE

Because we have been spared from punishment of sin through the intercession of Jesus, we plead with others to look upon the cross and receive salvation through Christ Jesus.

- **HEAD:** How will you intercede and pray for others this week? Begin right now.
- **HEART:** What heart-level issues in your life keep you downcast and distant from God? Repent and look afresh to Jesus for your salvation and healing.
- **HANDS:** Who are people you have sinned against, and how will you seek restoration of those relationships for the glory of Christ?

NOTES

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"This is wonderful news to believe that salvation lies outside ourselves. I am justified and acceptable to God, although there are in me sin, unrighteousness, and horror of death. Yet I must look elsewhere and see no sin. This is wonderful, not to see what I see, not to feel what I feel."⁵

-Martin Luther (1483-1546)