

Look and Live

Numbers 21:4-9

Introduction

Let's begin with a bit of background ...

At the time of this particular Old Testament story, the children of Israel had been wandering in the desert for 39½ years. And now the Promised Land was in sight – just across the Jordan River. They could almost see it.

To finally get there they only need to travel another few miles along the King's Highway and they would be at the point of crossing – just across the river from Jericho. But, unfortunately, the King's Highway ran through the heart of the country of Edom. So, as a diplomatic courtesy, Moses asked the king of Edom for permission to pass through the country:

Please let us pass through your country. We will not go through any field or vineyard, or drink water from any well. We will travel along the king's highway and not turn to the right or to the left until we have passed through your territory. (Numbers 20:17)

The response of the king was a firm "no."

You may not pass through here; if you try, we will march out and attack you with the sword. (Numbers 20:18)

That meant the only option left for the Israelites was to take the bypass – not a bypass around the city, but around the entire country – a route that would take them back toward the Red Sea where they had started their journey 40 years ago. And the people were NOT happy. After 39½ years they were right back where they started.

As a result they were angry with Moses for his leadership and with God for not fulfilling His promises to them. We can justify their response all we want, but it is clear from our text that their anger was sin. In fact, they would confess it as such midway through the text:

We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. (Numbers 21:7)

Let's give them credit. They acknowledged their actions as sin and they confessed it as such. And that's good. Sin needs to be confessed. Confessing is the necessary first step in the process of forgiveness. We know that.

We also know that sin – even confessed sin – has consequences. A holy and just God cannot allow sin to go unpunished. In the New Testament we read:

The wages of sin is death... (Romans 6:23)

And it is stated in a similar way in the Old Testament too:

The one who sins is the one who will die. (Ezekiel 18:20)

God can't look at sin. Neither can He overlook it. There has to be a punishment for sin. Ultimately that penalty is death. Here in Numbers that death came in the form of snakes. We read:

The LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. (Numbers 20:6)

A holy God cannot tolerate sin. But God is both holy and loving, so in His wonderful, amazing grace by His very nature He also provides a remedy for the punishment. In this instance the remedy was rather unique: a bronze snake on a pole.

Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live. (Numbers 20: 8)

Sounds like a new food item at the Clark County Fair, doesn't it? Snake on a stick.

Someone might ask "Why didn't God just take the snakes away?" Two reasons:

1. He created snakes. They serve a useful purpose in the overall ecology of our world.
2. He still hates sin. Sin still has to be punished. It would be outside of His Holy nature to take away the punishment.

So God didn't take the snakes away, but He did provide a remedy through which those bitten could be healed. All they had to do was "look and live."

Look and live. Faced with the penalty of sin, with the poison of the snake bite flowing through their veins, anyone who chose to acknowledge that God had provided a solution for their punishment could move from guaranteed death to guaranteed life looking to the bronze snake.

The word "look" needs to be understood as much more than a passing glance. The Hebrew word here carries with it the idea that one's gaze needed to be fixed on the snake with all the faithful expectation that God will keep His promise and restore life.

Could it be any simpler? You sin. You die. You look. You live.

Yet the text seems to indicate that some people opted not to look. It doesn't say that everyone who had been bitten lived, but only those who looked in faith lived. Such a simple cure, why wouldn't everyone do it?

Some people will refuse to look because ...

#1: They don't understand how it works

They hear the Word of the Lord to "look and live" and they can't see how that could ever work. They are filled with questions that need answers first.

I will confess to you that this is me. If I had been one of those complaining in the wilderness and suffered a snake bite, I can picture the scene. I would be rolling on the ground in agony and Karen would be shouting "Look and live!" and I would be responding "It's just a snake on a stick. How is that going to cure me?"

You know people like that, right? If they don't understand it, they aren't going to do it.

Other people will refuse to look because ...

#2: They don't think they need it

I can handle this myself, they say. I don't need anybody's help. I can do this on my own. I'll just tough it out. It's not that big of a deal. It's just a little snake bite. I know people who have worse snake bites than this one.

Still others will refuse to look because ...

#3: They don't think they deserve it

In my devotions this past week, I was reading a passage in Mark 1 where a man with leprosy came to Jesus and said "If you are willing, you can heal me." He knew Jesus COULD. He just didn't know if Jesus WOULD. Ever since he had been diagnosed, people marginalized him. He wondered if his leprosy was so horrible that Jesus would say "No, not for you. You are the exception."

And still others will refuse to look because ...

#4: They chose not to believe it

They gave up on believing God years ago. They had spent 39 ½ years wandering in the desert, eating the same old "miserable" food. They didn't God cared about them, that He loved them or that He even had the power to bring healing.

And so they died in the desert. Died within eyesight of the remedy for their sin. How very, very sad!

And yet the story continues ...

Fast forward a few thousand years to a scene in the middle of the night where Jesus is engaged in a conversation with a man named Nicodemus. As a part of that conversation Jesus recalls the story we've just examined and says this:

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him. (John 3:14-15)

Lives that doomed to die because of their sins, as our Ephesians passage teaches, are invited to look to the cross and live. Look and live!

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

Look and live! So simple. And yet ...

There are some ... in our families, in our neighborhoods, in our world ... who will choose not to look to the cross and experience eternal life because ...

#1: They don't understand how it works (Questions)

They have too many unanswered questions, especially about how the death of one man who cover the sins of the whole world. Most of their questions are nothing more than stall tactics, but they will use them. Their real issue is they won't accept anything on the basis of faith. Wherever faith is at work, questions about ... but we believe anyone.

- Peter wondered if he could actually walk on the water as Jesus had invited him to do ... But he stepped out in faith, questions unanswered.

Others will choose not to look to the cross and experience eternal life because ...

#2: They don't think they need it (Self-sufficiency)

I can handle this myself, they say. I don't need anybody's help. I can do this on my own. I'll just tough it out. It's not that big of a deal. My sins aren't that big. I know lots of people who are worse than I am.

But it's not the quantity of sin that matters; it's the reality. We all need a Savior.

There will be those who choose not to look to the cross and experience eternal life because ...

#3: They don't think they deserve it (Pride)

They know they are sinners. They know the people whose lives they've ruined. They know the damage their sins have caused. And they aren't sure God could ever forgive them. They know He CAN; they just don't know if He WILL.

And there will be those who choose not to look to the cross and experience eternal life because ...

#4: They chose not to believe it (Disbelief)

They have bought into a belief system that says "There is no God. There is no hell."

And all of these people, bitten by sin, within eyesight of the cross, the remedy for their sin, will die and spend eternity in hell. How very, very sad!

APPLICATION

So what can we do about that?

1. Pray: Recognize that this is a spiritual battle requiring a spiritual solution.
2. Point: Raise your voice and shout "Look and Live!"
3. Pass It On: Don't fall victim to the consumer mentality that dominates American Christianity today. Be a faucet not a sponge!

Pray:

Lord, all around us are people who need to know Jesus, people we know, people we love. Be patient, Lord! Give them another chance to look to You so they can live! Amen.