

9/15/24 Christ Fellowship

Jesus Lifted Up – Numbers 21

How many of you like to go mountain climbing? Any mountain climbers here this morning? George Mallory was one of the first British mountaineers to climb Mount Everest and was famously asked why he wanted to climb it. Do you remember what he said? “*Because it’s there.*” Because it’s there. Who else thinks that’s the dumbest answer ever?

How about tent camping? Anyone still like to do that? That’s better if you have a good bed. What about going hiking? Who likes to go hiking? Now, who likes bread? Could any of you live on just bread? Now, who wants to combine all of that and do it with your whole family and while carrying everything you own? Does that sound fun? Get a couple million of your closest friends and go hiking through the desert from Egypt to Israel while climbing mountains, living in tents and eating only manna. And do it for years and years. That’s what I call fun, how about you?

But if that is what you had to do to survive, you would do it for as long as you physically could but how many of you could do all of that without ever complaining? That’s asking a lot, isn’t it? Well, that’s the position the Israelites were in after they left Egypt. You know, we all love the story of Moses leading Israel across the Red Sea on dry ground. That’s a great and powerful story and we all wish we could have been there to see that amazing historical event that is recorded in **Exodus 14**.

But sometimes we forget what they had to endure after they left Egypt. We kind of think of them just crossing the Red Sea and walking right over into the Promised Land of Israel. But they had to endure forty years of hiking around in the desert, sleeping in tents, going up and down mountains with all their worldly possessions and for quite a few of those years they ate only manna. Some of you are optimists and some of you always seem to be in a good mood but how long could you do that without a little bit of grumbling and complaining?

Some of you have a ruined day when the barista puts too much low-fat milk in your latte. I hate to think what you would say about your leader and about God if you had to endure what the Israelites went through. Well, they weren’t perfect by any means. In fact, they did quite a bit of complaining in their time in the wilderness. In **Exodus 14**, the people complained because the Egyptian army was pursuing them. In **Exodus 15**, the people complained about bitter water. In **Exodus 16**, the people complained about the food. In **Exodus 17**, the people complained about the lack of water. In **Numbers 11**, the people

complained about food again. In **Numbers 13**, the people complain about the spies' report. In **Numbers 20**, the people complain about water again.

That gets us to where we are in **Numbers chapter 21**. Go ahead and be turning there in your Bibles, if you would. Let me set the scene for you here. As I said, they have been wandering around in the wilderness for years at this point and they aren't too terribly far from their destination. From up on Mount Hor they might be able to actually see the Promised Land on a clear day. All they have to do is go across the land of Edom and they will be right there.

The problem is that won't happen. The land of Edom is where the descendants of Esau lived. And you might remember from last week that Esau and his brother Jacob didn't always get along. Well, evidently Esau's descendants were still mad and so they wouldn't let the descendants of Jacob (renamed Israel) go through their land for any price. So, that meant that the Israelites had to backtrack way south almost to where they had just come from hundreds of miles in the wrong direction to go around Edom. How would you be feeling if you were there? Well, just wait. It gets way worse. Let's read **Numbers 21, verses 4-9**.

We are continuing our study of finding Jesus in the Old Testament and we are going to find Him in this passage as a symbol. We have seen Him show up physically a couple of times. Now He is symbolized here in this passage. **Numbers 21:4-9** says, *“They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; ⁵ they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!” ⁶ Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. ⁷ The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us.” So, Moses prayed for the people. ⁸ The Lord said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.” ⁹ So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.”*

How do you think Christ Fellowship would do in just such a situation? I have an idea somebody would say, *“Hey, where's Ben?”* And we would look all over the place only to see him running halfway back to Egypt by this time. I know Ben doesn't like snakes but even if snakes don't really bother you, can you imagine this? Here you are out in the middle of nowhere with little to eat or drink and going the wrong way. It's hot and dry and

you are making your way through the desert and now, all the sudden...snakes. Snakes everywhere. Snakes when you walk, snakes when you sit down, snakes in your tent at night. This is a nightmare for anybody.

So, let me ask you a question. Is complaining a sin? Well, there are some factors we need to know before we can say whether complaining is a sin or not. Your attitude, your motive, your heart is the biggest factor. Are you trying to solve a problem? Or are you just yapping about it? Do you have new information that might help somebody to solve the problem? It's sort of like gossiping. How do you know if sharing information is gossip or not? Well, are you part of the problem or part of the solution? Are you one of the parties involved talking to the other party involved? If not, keep your mouth shut.

With complaining, it's similar. Are you saying something that will help the situation? Are you bringing out something that those fixing the problem need to know? I remember being in middle school gym class. Kids today have air conditioning everywhere they go. We had a couple of big fans in the boys' gym and it was hot. Real hot. Stupid hot. And I remember the gym coach yelling at us saying, *"Stop saying it's hot. We all know it's hot. The guy next to you is hot. He knows it's hot. You don't have to say it. We all know it's hot!"*

I have an idea that's what God was thinking about the Israelites. We all know that God wants us to come to Him when we have a problem but when you go to somebody else and complain about God, now God has a problem with you. Read the first part of **verse 5** again. *"they spoke against God and against Moses..."* Double trouble right there. Don't bad mouth God or His servant and if you bad mouth both, just expect God to retaliate.

But let's take a step back and see what all is going on. Let's see what the context is again. They are hot and tired and mentally and physically worn out. They have been through more than we will probably ever go through. They have seen slavery and have seen God provide a way out. But life is rarely like we want, is it? And God allows us to get to a similar point as the Israelites and He uses those points to test us so He can reward us.

But how many of you know that is right when Satan likes to pounce? He loves to find us tired, physically or mentally. He loves to kick us when we are down by catching us when we are weak and not thinking straight. And you can't say the Israelites were sissies. They had been through the grinder but it's when you have been through the grinder that you have to move yourself closer and closer to God. They were moving themselves away from God so God sent some reptilian reminders to bring them back. And it worked. They repented.

Look again at **verse 7**. *The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us.”*

Notice here that they had brought this on themselves. In fact, had they just been obedient, they actually could have just walked through the Red Sea and into the Promised Land but they had bad mouthed and complained from day one so God allowed them to wander for forty years. All of this could have been avoided if they had just been obedient. We see BOOCOD even way back then. There are Benefits of Obedience and Consequences of Disobedience. But now they have repented and now we expect God to take the snakes away, right? But what does He do?

Look at **verse 8**. *The Lord said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.”* God doesn’t take away the snakes. He still allows the snakes to bite them but God gives them a way to live through the painful bites.

Speaking of snakes, you might remember in **Genesis chapter 3** when the serpent tempts Adam and Eve to sin. They fall for it. They are disobedient and because they sin, there are consequences; huge consequences. Not only did they have to leave the garden but God curses the snake, causes the man to have work harder to get food and the woman has to work harder to give birth. And the temptation to sin is always there. God didn’t take that away. Thanks a lot, Adam and Eve!

But what God did do was to make a way for us to live even though we have sinned.

Romans 3:23 says that we have all sinned. We have all been bitten by the deadly serpent of sin. And **Romans 6:23** says that what we deserve for that sin is death. The bite of sin is deadly and would kill us dead for eternity unless God had provided the anti-venom, the cure for sin and that is Jesus. But we have to look to Him to do that. We have to allow Jesus to save us.

Look at **verse 9**. *So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.*” I read an account of this area by Laurence of Arabia. He went through this same place and called it hopeless and sad, with barren palms and bushes not good for grazing nor firewood. He also described the valley as creeping with horned vipers, puff adders, cobras and black snakes. (T.E. Laurence, Revolt in the Desert 1927, pg. 132)

Can you imagine the sting of the viper, puff adder or cobra? I did a quick Google search on those three snakes and I have to tell you, I’ll have nightmares for a while. I don’t recommend it at all. It’s no wonder snakes are so often associated with Satan and hell. Most of those snakes depend on their great camouflage and can bury themselves in the

sand and strike at whatever goes by. So, you can't even see them. Except some of the different kinds of adders can climb trees and will fall on their prey from above. There are even certain types of snakes in that area that have wings. No kidding. All of them are venomous and all of them cause very painful bites and, if left untreated, are deadly...just like sin.

Isn't that how sin works? You're minding your own business, a thought comes in your head camouflaged as something insignificant and then before you know it...Gotcha! Sin. You're watching a harmless TV show and all the sudden it turns into something you shouldn't be watching and it falls right down on you causing you to sin. Bitten by the sting of sin. It's painful. If you are a true believer, it should be painful. It hurts you even if nobody else ever finds out about it. But if you aren't a true believer then it's always deadly.

Do you remember in **John chapter 3** when Nicodemus comes to visit Jesus at night? And Jesus tells him that a man can't get to Heaven unless he's born again. And Nic is like, *"What? Born again? How do I get back in my mother's womb?"* But Jesus tells him, *"No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. ¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."* And then He tells him that most famous of verses, **John 3:16**. *"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."*

Verse 15 says "everyone who believes" and **verse 16** says "whoever believes". But what does it mean to believe? C. H. Spurgeon claimed that 98 percent of the people he met--including the criminals he visited in England's prisons--told him that they believed the Bible to be true. But the vast majority had never made a personal, life-changing commitment to Jesus Christ. For them, "believe" was not an active verb.

To truly believe means to have your life changed and to have your life continuing to change. It means to do things differently than you used to. It is a 180 degree turn from your old self to your new self. It means to be different from the rest of the world. It means to be holy, different, set apart for God's work. It means you don't sin near as much as you used to. And like I said, when you do sin, it pains you and you immediately look to Jesus for forgiveness.

Yes, there will always be consequences for that sin just like there were consequences for the snake bites in our passage. And worst of all, those consequences rarely affect just the sinner. They almost always affect the loved ones around us as well. I hear people sometimes say, *"Well, we all sin every day."* No, we don't! We shouldn't. If you were getting

snake bit every day, wouldn't you start to be more careful? Wouldn't you stop going to the place where you last got bit? Wouldn't you do something to protect yourself from those snake bites? Instead of saying, "*Well, that's just the way God made me. My daddy had anger issues so I have them.*" Or, "*My mama was an alcoholic so I'm just a chip off the old block.*"

You know what that is? That is speaking against God just like these Israelis did. God didn't create you to sin and you saying He did is a sin in itself. Stop it. And start looking to Jesus more and more every day. Get closer to Him. Abide in Him. Hang out with Him. Sing about Him. Talk about Him. Listen to Christian music. Read about Him. Think about Him. And pretty soon, you'll be so close to Him, those evil snake sins won't have the power they used to.

You know, that snake that Moses made and put on the pole had no healing power of its own. It was by looking that the people were saved, looking and believing. But they didn't deserve it! They were grumblers and complainers to the core. They ran to sin more than they ran from it. God didn't have to provide a way for them to live. But He did. It's called grace.

Grace is what keeps you and me from getting what we deserve and that's Hell. But thank you, Jesus, for showing us grace and for dying on that cross to pay the price I couldn't pay. Thank you, Jesus, for being lifted up so I didn't have to be. Thank you for grace, Lord. Thank you. Let's pray.

music

Father, it's not enough to just say "thank you" for Jesus. I pray that you would help us to live out our gratefulness by running away from sin and all the things that might trigger us to sin. But we can't even do that without your help. Lord, Jesus taught us to pray by saying "*Protect us from the evil one*" so we do that right now. We ask for your protection and we don't deserve it but we want to be closer to you so please help us with that. Thank you.

While you still have you eyes closed and heads bowed, if you have never made that decision to trust in Jesus as your Savior, do that right now. Ask Him to forgive you of all your many sins and then repent of those sins – turn away from them forever. Do it with His power and by His grace. I'd love to pray with you right now about anything going on in your life. Do it right now as the music plays.