

# HEALING OF THE IMPATIENT

CORE PASSAGE: NUMBERS 21:1-9

## CONTEXT

Numbers 21 is yet another account of Israel's complaining and grumbling and God's punishing them for it. One would think, after numerous cycles of plagues and punishments, Israel would learn the lesson. But again, we should not assume we are any different from the Israelites; our fallen nature virtually guarantees we will always repeat this pattern. This time, the people rebelled and God sent venomous snakes throughout the camp. This time, however, when they confessed their sin, God made a way for them to be healed.

## KEY CONCEPT

**Confession and repentance will lead to healing.**

As you examine Numbers 21:1-9:

- Consider that impatience leads to ungratefulness and faithlessness, which leads to judgment.
- Meditate on Jesus comparing the bronze snake to Himself when He spoke to Nicodemus (John 3:14-18).



## TIMELINE

The People Believe the Bad Report from the Spies and Must Wander in the Desert for 40 Years (Numbers 14)

**SESSION STUDY:** Because of the People's Grumbings, God Sends Snakes but Also Heals Them (Numbers 21)

Moses and Aaron Strike the Rock and Are Forbidden from Entering the Promised Land (Numbers 20)

Before His Death, Moses Gives the Law to the New Generation on the Plains of Moab (Deuteronomy)

### Daily Readings

- Day 1:** Numbers 20:1–21:35
- Day 2:** Numbers 22:1–26:65
- Day 3:** Numbers 27:1–30:16
- Day 4:** Numbers 31:1–32:42
- Day 5:** Numbers 33:1–36:13
- Day 6:** Psalm 103



Scan this QR code to access this session's Scripture passages.

## PERSONAL PREPARATION

NUMBERS 21:1-6

### IMPATIENCE WITH THE LORD LEADS TO SIN AND JUDGMENT.

*Underline any verse that might indicate why the Israelites became impatient with God.*

**1** When the Canaanite king of Arad, who lived in the Negev, heard that Israel was coming on the Atharim road, he fought against Israel and captured some prisoners. **2** Then Israel made a vow to the LORD, “If you will hand this people over to us, we will completely destroy their cities.” **3** The LORD listened to Israel’s request and handed the Canaanites over to them, and Israel completely destroyed them and their cities. So they named the place Hormah. **4** Then they set out from Mount Hor by way of the Red Sea to bypass the land of Edom, but the people became impatient because of the journey. **5** The people spoke against God and Moses: “Why have you led us up from Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread or water, and we detest this wretched food!” **6** Then the LORD sent poisonous snakes among the people, and they bit them so that many Israelites died.

#### THEOLOGY CONNECTION

**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 (Philippians 2:3).

**Key Concept:** Confession and repentance will lead to healing.

Numbers 21 opens with a Canaanite king fighting against Israel and taking some prisoners. Israel promised God that if He handed over the Canaanites over to them, they would completely destroy their cities. God did His part; Israel did theirs. Apparently this victory may have led the Israelites to believe they could reduce the years of God's judgment for their rebellion in Numbers 14. Yes, God had told them there would be forty years of wandering until the entire generation who had left Egypt died out (v. 34), but if God was on their side in this battle, maybe He would be with them if they went through the land of Edom. Instead, God led them along a different path, and they became impatient with the journey.

**What circumstances cause you to be impatient, and how does impatience reveal a lack of faith?**

When God once again took them the long way round to bypass the land of Edom, they began to grumble again. Why couldn't they take the more direct route? Hadn't they just demonstrated they could trust God and fight in His name? Their impatience showed they still had a long way to go before they were ready to inherit the land God had promised them. Once again, they grumbled about water and bread, despite the fact that Moses had just given them water from the rock (Numbers 20:1-13) and they still had daily manna—the “wretched food” they denounced (21:5). As

a result, God dispatched poisonous snakes throughout the camp. Many people died from snakebites.

**How is God challenging you to trust Him at this stage of your life?**

The Israelites were not entitled to God's grace. God had already pronounced judgment, and He gave them the timeline: forty years. If God was going to adjust that timeline, it would be out of the abundance of His mercy, not because the Israelites deserved it or had done something to earn it. What a picture this is of our own attitudes sometimes. We often believe our hard work and effort grant us God's favor. It doesn't. Only the sacrifice Jesus made for us on the cross can do that. And God was about to give one of the clearest portraits of Jesus's death on the cross in the Old Testament.

#### VOICES FROM CHURCH HISTORY

“Do not think it is a light thing to murmur against God or to complain of his providential dealings with us. No, it is really setting up our fallible judgment or our self-will against the infinite wisdom of the Most High. It is high treason against the King of kings.”<sup>1</sup>

—Charles Spurgeon (1834–1892)

## PERSONAL PREPARATION

NUMBERS 21:7-9

### WHEN GOD'S PEOPLE CONFESS AND REPENT, GOD IS GRACIOUS TO FORGIVE AND TO HEAL.

*Identify the three scenes in this passage and summarize each with two or three words.*

**7** The people then came to Moses and said, “We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you. Intercede with the LORD so that he will take the snakes away from us.” And Moses interceded for the people. **8** Then the LORD said to Moses, “Make a snake image and mount it on a pole. When anyone who is bitten looks at it, he will recover.” **9** So Moses made a bronze snake and mounted it on a pole. Whenever someone was bitten, and he looked at the bronze snake, he recovered.

#### GOSPEL CONNECTION

God's people, suffering under judgment, confessed their sin, and God brought them physical healing when they looked upon the image of a bronze snake lifted up on a pole. Jesus said that in the same way, eternal life will be granted to all who look to Him lifted up on the cross and believe in Him (John 3:14-15).

**Key Concept:** Confession and repentance will lead to healing.

Verse 7 marks a unique point in Israel's rebellion. For all the times throughout Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers that the people have grumbled and complained, this is the one and only time they uttered the words, "We have sinned." While they "cried out to Moses" in Numbers 11:2, and they admitted they were wrong about refusing to enter the promised land in Numbers 14:40, nowhere else did they come anywhere close to repentance. But this time, the people confessed their sin and begged Moses to intercede for them. Moses heard their pleas and prayed to God on their behalf.

**What is the difference between true repentance and merely regretting the consequences of your sin?**

God's instructions were simple and clear: Make an image of a snake and put it on a pole. The people who were bitten by a snake looked at the snake on the pole to be healed. God could have made the snakes disappear, but He did not. The snakes remained, and the people had to trust in God's healing by turning toward the snake on the pole. Jesus referenced this episode in His conversation with Nicodemus: "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in

Him may have eternal life (John 3:14-15). The afflicted Israelites had no other means of rescue than to look at the bronze snake, just as sinners have no hope for salvation except faith in the crucified Savior, Jesus Christ (John 3:16).

Why would God choose the snake—the cause of their suffering—to also be the means of their deliverance? The text doesn't say. However, there are vital theological truths. We all are victims of sin. Sin acts as a poison that will kill us. But Jesus was born in the likeness of sinful flesh according to Romans 8:3. In 2 Corinthians 5:21, Paul wrote that Jesus didn't simply forgive sin, but God made Him "who did not know sin to be sin." He became that thing which kills. So just as the snake was the symbol of death and the source of redemption, Jesus was also.

**How has Jesus taught you that repentance is good?**

#### VOICES FROM CHURCH HISTORY

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"The bronze snake preached gospel grace to Israel and speaks to us of Jesus, the only Saviour of sinners like ourselves."<sup>2</sup>

—Gordon J. Keddie (1944–2023)

**GROUP EXPERIENCE**



**A NEW CYCLE**

*Read Numbers 21:1-9 and write down examples of the Israelites' humility, obedience, and blessing.*

**NUMBERS 21:1-6**

**NUMBERS 21:7-9**

**HUMILITY**

**OBEDIENCE**

**BLESSING**

We've watched the cycle of sin and unbelief.  
What cycle are you in with the Lord right now? What's keeping you there?



**Key Concept:** Confession and repentance will lead to healing.



## HEAD

What is one practical way you can increase your level of patience this week?

## PRAYING SCRIPTURE

Read Psalm 103. Focus on 7, which praises God for making His ways known to Moses and His acts to the people of Israel. As you reflect on today's session, make a list of things God revealed about Himself and His ways to the people of Israel.



## HEART

What can your group do to foster an attitude of confession and repentance?

## PRAYER REQUESTS AND PRAISES



## HANDS

How can you point someone to Jesus for spiritual life?

