

I. Intro.

A. Do you believe in magic ... I mean real magic ... like Harry Potter kind of magic at work in the world today?

1. If so, understanding this Num. 21 story probably not too hard
2. But if not, then this story doesn't make much sense to you
3. So before talking re. this story in context of J.C., want to provide a little background explanation to clarify a passage often not understood

B. *Hang rubber snake on displayed hall tree*

1. You've seen my sermon title "The One lifted up" ... You know I'm referring to this, right?
2. Isn't this replica snake on a pole just as effective today as it was in the Numbers story, about 3300 years ago?
3. Anybody want to try their faith with a real poisonous snake, to see if it really works? Don't worry, I'm not a snake-handling preacher!
4. If you don't believe this snake on a pole is just as effective, then it just highlights the basic problem for many of us today:

C. *How can just looking at a bronze serpent on a pole heal someone who was bitten by a poisonous snake?*

II. One way for us to begin to understand this strange passage is to understand the concept of sympathetic magic

A. One theologian has given a definition: "Belief that the fate of an object or person can be governed by the manipulation of its exact image."

1. ie. Believing you can control or influence what happens to someone or something by using an image of that person or thing
2. Here's what it means for our passage: Israelites apparently believed they could neutralize the effect of a snake's bite by looking up at an image of snake

B. When we in the 21st C look at this text, sympathetic magic is a troubling concept for us for 2 reasons:

1. 1st, Reminds us of voodoo, evil spirits & the occult
 - a) Stereotypical e.g.= a witch doctor sticking a pin in a juju doll and the person whom the doll represents gets a stabbing pain at the same time

b) that, too, is a form of sympathetic magic

2. A 2nd troubling thing = when an image believed to have magical powers, leads people to worship the image itself

a) Please read with me a brief biblical story that follows up on Num. 21

(1) Turn in Bibles to *2 Kings 18: 1-4*, a story taking place about 500 years after Moses & the bronze serpent (*read*)

(2) King Hezekiah is praised for destroying the bronze serpent because people were sacrificing offerings to the image

(3) Ie. the very thing God told Moses to build at one time ... then much later God told the people to destroy it, because it had become an idol to worship!

b) So as readers, we've recognized things like voodoo and idolatry as red flags associated with sympathetic magic

C. Now why does it look like sympathetic magic is portrayed in Num. 21 in a positive way?

1. 1st we need to realize that many ancient societies positively associated the symbol of a serpent w/ the restoration of life



a) Our modern symbol for medicine and the healing arts derives from the ancient Greeks and their association of certain serpents with healing

b) In ancient Egypt, mummies often had serpent-shaped objects on them whose express purpose was to ward off snakes. Many ancient Egyptians wore serpent figures around their necks in order to repel real serpents.

c) It's possible that the Israelites had lived so long in Egypt, they may have also absorbed this Egyptian use of the serpent symbol as a repellent for biting snakes, even after the Exodus

2. Here's another reason that the bronze serpent was seen positively: Perhaps God allowed the use of the symbols of sympathetic magic to point to God as the source of the real healing

a) Passage is NOT trying to tell us that the bronze serpent itself had healing power

b) Rather it served as a reminder of the God who stood behind the image ... the God who had the real power

c) God is the central figure in this healing story, not some bronze serpent

3. Finally, let's also remember that most people who were bitten &

dying were not bitten w/in sight of the serpent pole

- a) In a caravan of hundreds of Ks of people spread out over a large area, they would have had to search & find the pole, & then look up at it
- b) Looking up at a serpent on a pole was faith taking action for those willing to make the effort to go to it & look at it

4. A similar effort is required for those wanting healing from the "sting of death" & the sickness of sin (*rd. Jn. 3:14-15*)

- a) Anyone "bitten by sin" only needs to look up to the one hanging on that cross, for healing.
- b) No one is automatically healed from sin & death just because somewhere, some time long ago that cross was lifted up.
- c) To be healed, you have to make the effort ... you have to go find the crucified Jesus & look up at him in faith for salvation.
- d) This, too, is faith taking action.

III. Beyond that little introduction to sympathetic magic, **what else is going on in these Bible passages?**

A. One obvious thing is fear, especially for those wandering Israelites: they have fear of starvation & dehydration in the desert ... fear of poisonous snakes

B. In John 3 Jesus connects fear with the subject of light & darkness that he spoke about with the Pharisee Nicodemus:

- 1. After reminding Nicodemus how the light has come into a world that prefers the darkness of its own evil deeds, Jesus names why some people avoid the light
- 2. He says such people stay away from the light out of fear that their deeds will be exposed
 - a) When our minds are drawn toward evil and self-centeredness, it makes us shrink back from the light that Jesus Christ wants to bring
 - b) Among the many things in life that block out God's light, fear is one of the biggest forces that holds us in darkness

C. Now I want to tie those themes together by focusing on the common message that is found in both passages: one figure lifted up leads to all being lifted up

- 1. In the O.T. story people are afraid of these poisonous snakes ... fear is rampant in the Israelite camps

- a) Yet the solution is a despised & feared figure raised up for all to see ...
- b) That feared figure (raised up) results in healing ... it results in the reduction of people's fears

2. Similarly, in John chap 3, the gospel writer taps into people's fears of suffering & death

- a) We hear of another despised & feared figure raised high for all to see, but this time it's a cross w/ a bloody dying man on it, a man who was labeled an enemy of Rome
- b) THAT despised figure also results in healing & removal of our fears

3. About 15 years ago "Fear Factor" was a popular reality TV show



- a) Remember it? Contestants were challenged to face their worst fears by completing series of 3 fear-inducing stunts
 - (1) E.g.: Walking thru glass ... Eating live creatures like large spiders or worms ... Climbing a tall crane to retrieve some flags ... Swimming with snakes
 - (2) If they failed the stunt, or were too afraid to do it, they were eliminated from the contest
 - (3) Why would people do such terrifying things? \$50K prize!
- b) Fear is very much a factor in our daily Xian lives, but not usually as sensational or disgusting as what contestants faced on this show
 - (1) Sure, some of us are afraid of snakes, or heights, or water or other natural things
 - (2) But there are other fears that really enslave us & control us at more profound levels
- c) What kinds of fears am I talking about?

IV. (A few examples of fears)

A. Fear of missing out on something

1. Since my kids have grown up and some have moved out, my life is definitely not as full as it was ten years ago when we had one kid in high school, one in middle school and one in elementary
 - a) But I still recall some of those weeks of feeling hectic & frazzled: a datebook crammed with events for the church, at 3 different schools and just family stuff ...
 - b) I remember being embarrassed when I missed some deadlines &

communications ... I recall going to bed exhausted every single night

c) Some of you are smiling and saying "Welcome to my world!"

d) Yet even now in my 50's I still often feel tired, not because I had so many events crammed into my schedule.

(1) It's because I didn't get enough sleep. Why? Because I stayed up too late watching sports on TV, or reading a magazine or a newsfeeds on my phone

(2) And why don't I just go to bed earlier? Because there's so much interesting stuff going on in the world, that I want to catch up with what I missed while I was doing all those other things

(3) In other words: I'm afraid of missing out on something

2. You know, I think that's why many of us run ourselves ragged and keep ourselves and our kids so busy: We're afraid of missing out on something

a) Afraid of being left behind technologically ...

(1) afraid of being out of the conversation loop when people are talking about that must-see movie ...

(2) afraid that our kids will be deprived of all the great experiences that other kids seem to be having

b) When we're afraid of missing out, it reveals how insecure we are about who we are

c) It means that we have not fundamentally experienced the Christian virtue of "contentedness" ... It means we have not understood God's concept of "enough"

B. Fear for our security

1. This is probably the #1 fear that Americans have identified since that fateful September 11th of 2001

a) Governments today, including our own, are using more & more violent power & secretive power, all supposedly in the name of keeping us safe ... to me it reveals a growing sense of insecurity as people

b) I'm talking about much more than just the natural desire for a basic level of personal security and safety ... I'm talking about an obsession in our country

(1) We have elaborate and expensive home security systems and car security systems

(2) We have this deep fascination with movies and TV shows

about violent crime and solving crimes

(3) We hear constantly in the media about terrorism and what our governments have called a "war on terrorism"

(4) And we have this particularly American obsession with guns, including those semi-automatics used in mass shootings recently

2. All of this & more keeps us feeling in a constant state of insecurity ... it reinforces a culture of fear in our country ...

3. This fear is based upon a raw appeal to self-interest ...

a) What drives this security obsession in us is a fear of losing what we have now

b) We're insecure because we're afraid of losing our personal freedoms ... of losing cheap energy and food ... of losing our luxurious lifestyles that exist partly at the expense of poorer countries around the world

4. Hallelujah for the Gospel ... Because the message of God's grace & self-sacrificing love that was demonstrated in Jesus Christ radically kicks the legs out from under this culture of fear!

a) Our society's security fears lose their power within us when we Christians no longer live under the tyranny of the fear of death!

b) If our security rests in God, who conquered death for us and has glittering mansions prepared already for us, then let us stop depending on our bank accounts and our concealed carries as our primary defense!

C. Fear of what others think

1. This fear takes many forms: Fear of offending people ... fear of disappointing people ... fear of losing face ...

2. I think Satan uses this fear more than almost any other to imprison Christians and to quench the Spirit of God

a) I know this one very well myself ... the more reserved and inhibited is our personality type, the stronger the hold of this fear, but it can also affect even bolder, outgoing people

b) This fear can keep us from forgiving someone who has wronged us ... and from asking for forgiveness ourselves

c) It keeps us from following what God may clearly be telling us to do ... because we don't want to upset other people

3. I'm not suggesting God wants us to run roughshod over others

a) But when fears of what others think paralyze us from growing as Christians, then we need to stop looking around and start looking up.

- b) We need to set our sights less on those around us and more on Jesus!



V. Conclusion

A. Please turn to SJ 105 & have it ready **invite you to sing it as a prayer of confessing your fears & bringing them to the foot of X's cross**

1. But first I'd like you to get yourself mentally & spiritually ready: close your eyes & get in touch with the fear that most grips you & paralyzes you right now... Could be ...

- a) One of those fears Steve named early in the service ...
- b) Fear of not getting everything you feel you're entitled to
- c) Fear of losing your life, comfort & privileges
- d) Fear of losing face
- e) Fear of losing your family & having nothing to live for

2. For a moment here, feel that fear weighing you down, like a 50 lb sack of flour on your shoulders

3. Now when we sing the song, imagine yourself literally bringing your most pressing fear up to this cross up front,

- a) Feel each slow & heavy step as you come forward, carrying that fear
- b) watch yourself dumping that load as you lift your head to look up
- c) Then feel your shoulders higher & your steps lighter as you walk away unburdened
- d) Listen to the voice of Jesus saying, "Don't be afraid. My love is stronger than your fear."

4. At the end of this song, we will transition to singing our theme song, "Between me and you"

B. Let us bring ourselves and our fears to the foot of the cross and behold the One who heals us by being lifted up for us ...