

**Friday, September 6, 2024 ▫ Read Numbers 21:4–9**

*Questions from the Scripture text: From where did they journey (v4)? By what way? To go around where? What happened to the people in the way? Against whom did the people speak (v5)? Of what do they accuse them? What do they complain is missing? But what do they complain that they hate? Who sent what in v6? What did the fiery serpents do? With what effect? Who came to whom in v7? What do they say they have done? How had they sinned? Against whom? What do they now ask Moses to do? What, specifically, did they ask him to pray? Who spoke to whom in v8? What did He tell him to make? What did He tell him to do with it? What would people continue to suffer? What must they do in that case? For what result? What did Moses make (v9)? Where did he put it? What could anyone do under what circumstance? With what result?*

**How can entrenched sinners be forgiven and saved?** Numbers 21:4–9 looks forward to the evening sermon on the coming Lord's Day. In these six verses of Holy Scripture, the Holy Spirit teaches us that **God shows great grace to great sinners by giving them to look to His Son for salvation.**

**The danger of impatience** (v4). The problem in v4 is literally that the people "were very shortened." It's not so much "discouragement" (NKJV, v1) as "impatience." In their impatience, their repentance (v2) turns back to rebellion (v5; cf. 20:4, Ex 17:3). We must learn to wait on God's timing; impatience is a source of anxiety, ingratitude, complaining, and other wickedness. Learn to trust God in His providence!

**The danger of speaking against God's servants** (v5a). We see how speaking against God and against His servant go hand in hand in v5. The people recognize this in their confession of sin in v7. The fact of divine ordination is a major theme in this book (chs. 16–18). To speak against God's servant among you is to speak against God Himself (e.g. 2Ki 2:23–25). Since almighty God governs and leads us by use of mortal sinners, our own sinfulness takes advantage by directing against those mortals what is really hostility to God Himself. We may feel more justified, or less guilty, this way; but such feelings are self-deception. Let us be careful of speaking against God's servants, when our dissatisfaction is really with God Himself.

**The danger of speaking against God's salvation** (v5b). For at least the third time, the people respond to their deliverance from Egypt on account of their present circumstances. Complain against God's salvation? Who would do such a thing? We mustn't forget that His salvation includes not only the moment of justifying faith, but the whole of the life lived in union with Christ. Whenever we complain about the "hardships" (may such thinking be removed far from us!) of being a Christian, are we not doing just that? Complaining against His salvation? When we pine after sin, or wish we could live for pleasure or praise or property, or bristle at persecution that comes for His sake... aren't all of these ways that we complain against His salvation? And, more subtly but quite applicable from the context, when we grumble at the progress that we are making in grace, isn't that a form of complaining against His salvation?

**The danger of speaking against God's provision** (v5c). Have you ever heard someone, staring into a full refrigerator or pantry, say, "there's nothing to eat"? Israel do that in v5. They say, "there's no food" ... "and our soul loathes this worthless bread." How can there be "no food" if they hate it?! And woe to us when we are so self-deceived as to turn up our noses at His provision, as if our preferences or ideas would be better. But whereas Israel did this with the wonderful gift of manna, we have often done it with the ways that the Lord Jesus gives to us to feed upon Himself as the bread of life.

After all these years of our lives (or all these centuries of the church's life), we mustn't give in to the inclinations of our flesh—lest we may bore of, or tire of or even come to the place where we find tedious, or loathsome, Word, sacrament, and prayer. Soon, then, we will be adding to God's design for worship and plan for our sanctification. I'm afraid that in the time and place where this devotional is being written, the vast majority of "churches" have come up with their own replacements for the means by which the Bread of Life has given us to feed upon Himself. How dreadful when the plain ways of Christ are "loathsome to the souls" of the church!

**The kindness of chastening providence** (v6–7a). The sending of the fiery serpents seems like a severe judgment, but look at what it produces. Israel are brought to confess sin and plead for forgiveness. Thus, the serpents are severe judgment upon the people, and yet providential mercy to the people at the same time. For, it is better to die physically of venomous bite than to die eternally of a wicked and rebellious heart.

**The kindness of self-forgetfulness in the ministry** (v7b–c). The people have spoken against Moses and against YHWH, but now they need Moses to pray and YHWH to forgive. The Lord's true servant must have the gentleness of character to forgive offense and even injury. "Moses prayed for the people." When the people of God have sinned against him, they are all the more in need of his ministry. Whether a husband, a father, or an elder, spiritual leaders must be men of great patience and great prayer for those entrusted to their care. They must be slow to take offense and quick to put it entirely away.

**The kindness of differently-answered prayer** (v8–9). The people had asked for serpents to be taken away, but the Lord does not do this. Instead, He makes provision of the bronze serpent on the pole. Still, they would be bitten for their sin, but there was a God-provided forgiveness to which they could look for entirely unmerited (demerited!), unachieved deliverance. God does not facilitate sin, but He does provide forgiveness. How blessed is the answer to prayer that does not remove consequences but does turn us to Christ for forgiveness. Jesus identifies this bronze serpent as an image of saving faith (cf. Jn 3:14–15).

**The danger of idolatrous use of God's signs** (cf. 2Ki 18:4). God had given them the bronze serpent as a means of looking to Him for forgiveness by grace, and He had given very specific instruction for its use. But for five hundred years, they made idolatrous use of it as if it were a deity or infused with some spiritual power. To add insult to idolatry, they named it after an Egyptian deity ("Nehushtan"). It is all too easy for men to trust in the means that God has provided, using them in a superstitious manner, rather than trusting in Him to employ the means by His own grace. Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and even the way that we use Scripture or prayer, are all susceptible to our abuse. Let us never use these means of looking to Christ as if they have power of themselves apart from trusting in God Himself to employ them in almighty grace, according to His own instruction for employing them.

Against what, in your life, and in God's work of bringing you at last into glory, are you tempted to complain? Against whom? Against Whom are you really complaining, when you do this? What is your heart attitude toward the means by which Christ has given you to feed upon Himself? How does this show up in your frequency, diligence, and delight in the use of those means?

*Sample prayer: Lord, we have been impatient, and our impatience has produced a wicked, grumbling attitude toward Your providence and even toward Your means of grace. We thank You that You have given Your Son, our Lord Jesus, to be the Bread of Life for us. We are amazed that when we had sinned so greatly against You and against Him, You demonstrated Your love by giving Him and by His giving Himself for us. And we thank You for those painful consequences of sin by which You make us to feel its wickedness and hatefulness. But we thank You most of all that You have given to us to look to Him in faith and live. Grant unto us life, by that faith, and to live by that faith, we ask in Christ's Name, AMEN!*

**Suggested songs: ARP32AB "What Blessedness" or TPH449 "As When the Prophet Moses Raised"**

**"(The following is a machine-generated transcription. PLEASE BE AWARE of—and patient with—transcribing errors. If there is something confusing or obviously erroneous, you are invited to listen to the audio recording via [hopewellarp.org](http://hopewellarp.org))"**

Numbers 21 verses 4 through 9. These are God's words. Then they journeyed from Mount Hore, by the way of the Red Sea to go around the land of Edom. The soul of the people became very discouraged on the way. And the people spoke against God and against Moses, why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?

There is no food and no water and our soul loathes. This worthless bread. So you always send fiery, serpents among the people and they bit the people and many of the people of Israel died.

Therefore, the people came to Moses and said, we have sinned for we have spoken against Yahweh and against you. Pray to Yahweh that he take away the serpents from us. Some of us just prayed for the people. And he always said to Moses, Make a fiery, serpentant set it on a pole and it shall be that everyone who has bitten who, when he looks at it.

He shall live. So Moses made a bronze serpent and put it on a pole. And so it was if a serpent had bitten anyone when he looked at the bronze, serpent. Who lived? And then they'll send us this reading of God's inspired. An air tort We often live our lives and impatience we.

Are frustrated with the way things are going. Even with the way, our own progress in Grace is growing and not that we should be content with sin. And we ought to be pressing on. And looking forward to, Uh, what God has promised first? Sanctification throughout this life and a sinless state of death and the resurrection.

In the last day. But there is an impatience that we can have in which we Grumble against the rate at which the Work progresses. We have no one to blame but ourselves. And so we should remember that whatever God does is not just right and wise but merciful done in love according To his care.

For us and not Grumble against him or despair. The Lord was bringing Israel into the land, that he had promised, he had promised and it would surely be done. Since he had promised. But, They now had to go around the land of Edom instead of through the land of Edom.

And it says, the people became very discouraged. On the way. Word means shortened. They, they became extremely short. Along the way. And this may mean, Short of Of temper. Uh, with one another, it may mean that they Simply did not have. The character resources, the goodness, the godliness. To conduct themselves rightly before God. Probably impatient. Is a good translation here. The soul of the people became very impatient. Uh, on the way. And so, we must watch against impatience.

The complaining that arose, the chastening of God in response to it. All of that stemmed first from impatience, not waiting upon the Lord Frustration. Um, maybe there are things that we have worked on for a long time and they have not gone, well, prayed for for a long time and has not yet happened.

Uh, maybe Reformation in the church. Um, That we have labored for, or prayed for. Um, whether the local church local congregation or the broader Church, many different things. Um, and then, especially Uh, fleshly desires, which Uh, God for those whom he is saving is often kind enough. Merciful enough not to Satisfied.

But impatience is dangerous. We must learn. To wait upon the Lord and learn to trust God. In his Providence, lest we become anxious or ungrateful or complaining. Uh, in our wickedness. The second thing that we see is not just the danger of impatience as a cause but the danger of speaking against God's servants as a symptom, The people spoke against God, and Against Moses.

Saying, why have you brought us up out of Egypt? To die in the wilderness. And then when they confess in verse 7, it says we have sinned for we have spoken against Yahweh and Against you. Often people will speak against the Lord's servants. Because it feels and sounds better to them than speaking against the Lord himself.

But there's two big problems here one. That the Lord is the one who has set the servant over you. And That often the thing that you're speaking against the Lord's servant for is something that is according to the instruction. Of the Lord. And so, when the people speak against Moses, they are speaking against God to speak against God's servant, whom he has put Among Us is to speak against God himself.

You remember, The children in the town of Bethel where there was a school of the prophets, and there had been the transition from Elijah to Elisha and the people at Bethel. Had evidently spoken against the new prophet and probably spoke against the former Prophet. It's not like Elisha was a big departure from Elijah.

But their children then who According to the culture of the town and according to the culture of their homes and according to their own sin. Um, when they saw Elisha told him go up, you bald head, go up. You bald head? Basically saying we wish that what happened to Elijah would happen to you, too Elisha.

And you remember that cursing? The Lord's Prophet. Um, grumbling against speaking against the Lord's servant was received against the Lord himself. So that Elisha Curses the children. Not Uh, Hasty. Anger. Uh, but in his office as Prophet on behalf of the Lord and the two, she Bears come out.

And, Uh, and tear to pieces, 42 of them to speak against God's servant Among Us. Is to speak against God himself. Now, there are Servants of the Lord or rather, those who have the name of servant or in the office of servant. Who say and do, and Command that, which is against the word of God.

And in that case, we must speak and act. For the word of God but we must be careful. Not to speak against God's servant. You remember, even the Apostle Paul when he was on in being unjustly, tried and accused, when he realized that, the man that he had spoken against was the high priest at the time, Um,

Asked for forgiveness because he had spoken. Um, against a ruler among the people. Knowing, of course that the aaronic priesthood was done. And that Christ's everlasting priesthood. Had been inaugurated. And yet because the man was a ruler among. The people. Uh, Admitted believed that he should not speak against him.

So to speak against God's servant Among Us is to speak against God himself. We must. See in the scripture that almighty God governs and leads us by use of mortal. Sinners And our own sinful. Fleshliness or remaining sinfulness takes advantage. Of the fact that God is using Immortal, Sinners to lead us to direct against Mortals.

What is really hostility to God himself. So we're opposed to his law. We are Uh, irritated by Uh, whatever it is in God's dealings with us and it feels safer. To speak against the man to speak against God but it is not safer. And we may feel more Justified or less guilty in this way, but such feelings are self-deceiving.

So let us be careful. Speaking against God's servants. When the reality is that our dissatisfaction is really with God himself and When God takes speech against his servants is speaking against himself. The third place, you see the danger of speaking against God's salvation, why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in this Wilderness?

I want to speak against. The consequences or experiences, as those whom God is redeemed. We're actually speaking against his salvation. And when people talk about how hard it is to be a Christian or how hard it is, To fight against sin, not really talk about it and stronger when they complain against.

Grumble murmur over. Bristle act. How hard it is to be a Christian, how hard it is to fight sin. How hard it is to pursue righteousness, how hard it is. Uh, to be persecuted for Christ's name's sake or any of these other costs that come along Um, with genuine salvation.

Um, this is all speaking against God's salvation, it is Similar in nature to why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? God had delivered them, he'd even delivered them according to their own crying out. Uh, but also he had of course. Delivered them.

According to Uh, Uh, promise and intention towards them. But it was a great Deliverance when he saved them out of Egypt. And they, because of the difficulty that they had, in the wilderness the discomfort The complained against circumstances that were part of God's saving them. So, let's be careful.

When we complain again, not to complain against Providence because when we complain against God's provenance, as Those whom God is saving, We're complaining against those, all things that God is giving to us. When he says, all things work together, for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose, or when he says, Um, he who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all.

How will he not? Also together with him? Give us all things. Well then when we come into a difficult Providence, And we Grumble and complain against it. Are we not complaining against those old things? That he is giving us together with Christ. And so to complain against providences, for the Christian is to complain against being saved.

To complain against the Um, What God has decreed. In the course of saving us. And when we indulge a grumbling complaining, heart, we become even irrational. Now speaking against God's provision, God has given us what we need. Uh, we know that by way of comfort, in Matthew 6, he's given us the food, we need, he's given us the clothing, we need, he's given us the trouble.

Uh, that we need. But in verse 5, you see how irrational and self-contradictory? Ungrateful. An anxious thoughts can be, they say there is no food and no water and our soul loathes. This worthless bread. Well, if there was actually no food, you wouldn't have worthless bread to loathe. And what they're calling worthless bread literally appears from Heaven every day, a fresh batch and can be Processed and used and eaten in many different ways.

And it was. Uh, delicious and it was nutritious. And yet, because of their grumbling against God and the heart and they're grumbling against salvation because of their impatience with his Providence, they really become irrational. They say there's no food. It's like the person who stares into a full refrigerator or Pantry.

And they have a craving for something, and rather than A genuine desire for something to eat. They have a particular desire to be self-indulgent and say there's nothing to eat and they're looking at a full refrigerator or Pantry. Well, we must be Um, Careful against our hearts of being gratitude.

In which we take that, which God has provided and we become satis unsatisfied and we wish that we had something else or something better. We, we do this. Often. With the bread of life that came down from heaven, Analogous way to how they did it. With the Mana that came down from Heaven, the Lord Jesus gives himself to us By the means of his grace word, Sacrament and prayer, God gives himself to us in his son by his Spirit through those acts of worship that he has commanded.

And yet many come to. Uh, whether for their own discipleship, their own Christian walk or the worship of God specifically. And they look at what God has commanded and what God has given and they say, there is no food in this place and our soul loathes. This worthless bread.

Like opening the refrigerator or the pantry and saying there's nothing here to eat. They come to biblical worship and they say, I don't get anything out of it. The attend biblical Church, where there is the worship of God as Instructed by the scripture and the shepherding of the elders and the leadership in Earthly service of the deacons and the facilitation of the family worship that God has commanded all of the things that are God's program for growing the church.

And they say, why don't you have any programs?

And we hate the worship and we don't like to do family worship. Well, why don't we have any program? Why don't you have any programs? There is no food here. And we don't like the The public worship and the family worship. And the ordinary means of Grace, our soul loathes.

This worthless bread. And so we can read numbers 21 and we can be shocked at how self-unaware and irrational. Or the complaints that. Uh, that Israel makes But let us be careful that we not therefore justly accuse ourselves and expose ourselves when we ourselves are so susceptible to thinking this way and so much of the church the visible church in our day and In our nation.

Operates this way. Valuing what man imagines fancy's desires over. What God has given Now, over against this, we see the kindness of God's chastening Providence, he could have just destroyed them About what the Lord does in verse six. Is the means in his wisdom and his decree of bringing them to the confession, Uh, in verse seven, you always sent fiery serpents among the people.

They bit the people and many of the people of Israel died Therefore, the people came to Moses and said, we have sinned for we have spoken against Yahweh, there is great grace here. Now, not every time that the Lord sends consequences, is it in Grace? There's also necessary, the merciful operation of his Spirit to give confession and repentance.

We know very well that this is in Israel. That was had been very capable of saying you are killing the Lord's people. And to accuse Moses or to accuse Yahweh further. But in this case, God, uses the Providence to Chase an entity. Bring confession of sin Brokenness Contrition of heart.

And it's a great Mercy. When God does this And so, when we are under, A difficult Providence, when the Lord afflicts, We should look for it as a mercy. Which means rather than simply wish for the trouble to go. Uh, we should look to him to use it for our and others spiritual good.

Because the chastening Providence is a kindness, he is A father. A good father, who mercifully disciplines his children. And we see that not only is God. Merciful and gracious. In bringing the serpents. And in the way that he uses, The surface to bring them to confession of sin. Since it is better to die, physically of a venomous bite than it is to die eternally.

Of a rebellious heart. Not only is God kind, but Moses is kind. The people come to Moses and they say we have sinned, we have spoken against y'all and against you pray to Yahweh. That he take away the serpents from us. It was very important to see, for instance, in the last latter, part of Galatians 5 or the latter part of Ephesians 4, that a big part of the character of Christ being worked out in his people is putting away bitterness.

Refusing to hold grudges being quick to forgive. Gladly serving those who have spoken against us. There's no time here for Moses to nurse wounds or to dwell upon offense or take offense. The Lord has called him to Shepherd these people. And the last time that he indulged this, The desire or the bitterness at the offense of the people.

Uh, he was convicted by God of unbelief. Back in verse 12 of the previous chapter because you did not believe me to hallow me in the eyes of the children of Israel. You remember, in that context God was being gracious to a complaining people and Moses didn't feel so gracious.

And so instead of speaking to The Rock for water to come out, he spoke to the people and he blasted them With his words. But here the Lord gives him to respond rightly. Rather than nursing bitterness or holding a grudge or Uh, he immediately prays for the people, they ask, pray to Yahweh that he take away the serpents from us.

So Moses prayed for the people. There is much in the Christian Life. Praying for For the Lord. Be merciful and gracious to those who have attacked us. And especially, so when you are in leadership, This was part of Moses's office to mediate for the people. This is going to be true especially for Uh, moms with their kids.

The kids will sin against you. And yet, they are the ones who need from you. Uh, Uh, instruct them to pray for them. Must never discipline. In a hot angry. Uh, rather it must be the discipline of the Lord, a discipling.

The action that is according to God's instruction and God Provision. All the more. So if you are a husband or a father, Uh, we're a big part of your calling is to pray for your wife, to pray for your children to pray for your household. There's just not room.

For nursing, bitterness. Moses needed to have the grace. To quickly let go of having been spoken against again. At the age of 120. Because, It was his. To pray for the people and he did. And so there's a knowing the kindness of God. That for us. Uh, should produce the fruit.

That being kind and forgiving like God. This doesn't always mean doing what the people under you want. So, certainly not what God does, he he doesn't actually do what they want. They say pray to you all who that he take away? The serpents from us. He didn't actually take away the serpents from them.

He just added. The bronze are probably copper serpents since. Moses obeys the instruction to make it look fiery. Verse 8, by making it out of and The new King James translates this as bronze, but it's a That's also used to refer. To Copper, and it's probably, Um, Uh, probably copper in this, in this case, for the color and to represent the fieriness, That doesn't matter so much as the fact that they asked for the serpents to be removed, but God did not remove Uh, consequence for the sin.

What God, what God did was he added? A way for those who are suffering the consequences of their sin. To be forgiven. And so when when one sins and this a serpent uh bit him, He was able to look at it and live. Now, this would be A. Uh helpful as far as sanctification is concerned or just behavioral, control is concerned.

You grumble against God in your heart, serpent appears and bites you But it shows that the God who is afflicting, them was also the God, who is saving them, he gave them A way of being saved, a way of being delivered from the venomous bite that didn't require anything of them.

You know, they simply looked to the serpent. Uh, to the one that was lifted up. And the Lord Jesus in John chapter 3. Identifies this as an illustration of him himself. That there was not some atoning process that they were to go through, you know, they looked to God's provision, they hoped in what God did not, they didn't do.

Um, anything to save themselves. God did all of the forgiving, all of the delivering, all of the healing, all of the saving of their life. Um, and so here there is Uh, first of all, the kindness of the differently answered prayer. Sometimes we have our idea. Of what Mercy would look like and we ask for that and God gives us something different.

And he's being kind to us. But the the second thing to see there is This picture of, Salvation. By faith alone. And the last thing to see, In this passage is Danger of making idolatrous use of God's signs. 500 years later in the Reformation under King Hezekiah and second Kings 18.

One of the things Hezekiah would have to do. Is to shatter. To destroy this. Bronze serpent or this copper serpent. That Israel still had. And they had given it the name of an Egyptian, serpent God nahushtan. And they had offered incense to, For 500 years, rather than Receiving it as a method of Salvation by God's grace and trusting God.

That he would do according to his word and therefore, having a good illustration of looking away from ourselves and to Christ, for salvation, They had taken the symbol. And treated it as if it had saving power in itself, using it in a superstitious manner using it. In an idolatrous manner.

Everything that the Lord gives us is susceptible to Arby's baptism. The Lord's supper even the way that we use Uh, scripture or prayer. We may come to any of these superstitiously by thinking that. Um, Simply. Uh, having the sacrament has power in itself, rather than Uh, being a means that God uses to direct our faith.

To himself in Christ. Even though the way. People will. Uh, read the Bible not to understand. What the Bible itself is teaching, but because they have a superstitious idea that Something is going to come from the Bible? To help them or even that they just get brownie points with God.

Um, for using it there are Um, There is nothing that God has given. That we cannot abuse. By coming in a superstitious or adulterous way using it differently than in the manner. Then he has instructed. And therefore trusting in ourselves. Rather than trusting in God himself, Uh, who has given us instruction.

And whom we hope will in whom we hope. That he will employ them in almighty Grace. And so, even God's mercy, here was something that they abused Um, that's a warning. Also to So may the Lord give us to see. His great kindness here, and to watch against. All of these.

Uh, dangers that Very much.

Possibilities. To which we are very susceptible. In our own life and our Day, let's pray. Our Father in Heaven, we pray that you would Forgive us our sins. We thank you for raising up Christ to everyone who looks to him, who believes in him. Will not perish. But we'll have everlasting life.

We pray that you would make us always to be looking to Always looking to him. We ask that you would Take from us impatient. Uh, grumbling Hearts make us content to wait upon you. And to trust you and what you are doing? Um, never to Grumble or complain. To take ownership of.

Our own sin but to Hope. Entirely. Grant these things, we ask Uh, in Christ. Amen.