

LIFTED SO WE CAN LIVE

Numbers 21:4–9 | John 3:14–15

Rev. Yaqub Kashif

Israel was approaching the end of nearly forty years in the wilderness. The journey had been long and painful. Miriam had died, Aaron had died, Moses had learned that he would not be the one to lead the people into the Promised Land, and Edom had refused Israel permission to pass through its territory. They were forced to take the longer road around.

Yet just before Numbers 21:4, Israel had also experienced another remarkable victory. The Canaanite king of Arad attacked them, but the LORD heard Israel and gave them victory. They had just seen once again that God was with them.

Then immediately after victory came another difficult road.

Numbers 21:4 says, “The people became impatient because of the way.” They were getting closer to the promise, but they were tired of the road.

The Hebrew expression is vivid. Their *nephesh*—their inner life, their soul—became “short.” Their capacity to endure was shrinking. Before rebellion came from their mouths, something was already happening within their hearts.

That is often how spiritual struggle begins. We may still believe that God is faithful, yet become weary of the way He is leading us. We pray about our family, future, work, health, finances, relationships, or ministry, and the road becomes much longer than we expected. Sometimes our deepest question is not, “Is there a God?” but, “God, why this road?”

The wilderness did not create everything inside Israel; the wilderness exposed it. Waiting exposes things. Delay exposes things. Disappointment exposes things. Closed doors expose things. Sometimes the road reveals what is still unsundered.

Soon what was hidden in Israel’s heart came through their mouths. “They spoke against God and against Moses.” They accused the very God who had delivered them from Egypt of bringing them into the wilderness to die. Yesterday their testimony was, “God delivered us.” Now their accusation was, “God brought us here to die.”

Their pain had begun rewriting their testimony.

God had not changed. His faithfulness had not changed. But present pain had become greater in their eyes than remembered grace.

There is a difference between lament and rebellion. Lament says, “Lord, I do not understand what You are doing, but I still bring my pain to You.” Rebellion says, “God, You are against me.”

One difficult chapter must never be allowed to rewrite the whole story of God’s faithfulness.

Then judgment entered the camp. Fiery serpents came among the people, many were bitten, and many died. The rebellion that had seemed small while it was coming from their mouths suddenly appeared very different when its consequences spread through the camp.

But then their language changed.

Before, they had asked, “Why did YOU bring us here?”

Now they came to Moses and said, “WE have sinned.”

Repentance changes the pronouns.

Rebellion says, “You did this to me.” Repentance says, “I have sinned.” Israel stopped blaming, stopped defending, and named the sin honestly before God.

Real repentance begins when we stop negotiating with God about our guilt and simply confess, “Lord, I was wrong. I sinned.”

Then something remarkable happened. The people asked Moses to pray for them. The very man they had wounded with their words became the man they needed to intercede for them. Scripture simply says, “So Moses prayed for the people.”

Moses did not use their crisis as an opportunity for revenge. He interceded for those who had spoken against him.

Yet Moses points beyond himself to a greater Intercessor. Jesus also prayed for those who wounded Him. While He was being mocked, rejected, and crucified, He prayed, “Father, forgive them.”

Humanity wounded the very One we needed for salvation.

We wounded the One we needed.

The people asked God to remove the serpents, but the passage emphasizes another answer. God commanded Moses to make a bronze serpent and lift it upon a pole. Anyone who had been bitten could look toward God’s appointed provision and live.

They asked for removal; God gave provision.

Why a serpent? The bronze serpent visibly represented the judgment under which the Israelites were dying. The living serpents carried deadly venom; the bronze serpent had the likeness of the threat but contained no venom. There was no magical power in the bronze and no healing power in its shape. God was not commanding Israel to worship it. Life came because God attached His promise to the provision He Himself appointed.

The movement of the story becomes beautifully simple:

Bitten. Looked. Lived.

The dying Israelite could not remove the venom from his own body. He could not promise to become a better person and make death disappear. He could not save himself.

He needed what God provided.

When he looked according to God's promise, "he lived."

The final word was not poison, judgment, or death.

The final word was **life**.

Centuries later, Jesus opened this wilderness story for Nicodemus. Nicodemus was religious, educated, respected, and knowledgeable in Scripture. If religion alone could give life, Nicodemus should have had everything he needed.

Yet Jesus told him:

"You must be born again."

Nicodemus had religion, but he still needed life.

New birth is not self-improvement. It is the gracious work of God's Spirit giving spiritual life to the sinner. Jesus was not telling Nicodemus to become slightly more religious, slightly more moral, or slightly better informed. He needed a new life that he could never produce for himself.

Israel carried deadly venom in their bodies; humanity stands under the deeper power and guilt of sin. Neither problem can be solved through human effort.

Life must come from God.

Then Jesus said, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in Him."

Suddenly the whole wilderness story reaches its fulfillment.

Something was lifted for dying Israel. Someone was lifted for a dying world.

The bronze serpent was a sign; Jesus Christ is the Savior.

Jesus did not become sinful or evil. He remained the holy and spotless Son of God. Yet at the Cross, the sinless Son bore the judgment due to sinners.

The Cross was not an accident. Jesus said that the Son of Man **must** be lifted up.

Why?

Because sin is real. God's holiness is real. Judgment is real. And mercy is real.

The Cross reveals two truths at the same time: our sin is more serious than we imagined, and God's mercy is greater than we imagined.

The righteous One stood where the unrighteous should have stood. We were guilty; He was righteous. We rebelled; He obeyed. We deserved judgment; He bore judgment.

The death was ours. The wounds were His.

And just as the Israelite did not earn life by looking, we do not earn salvation through religious achievement. Faith does not save because faith itself is powerful. Faith receives Christ and rests upon Christ.

A trembling hand can receive a priceless gift.

The power is not in the hand.

The power is in the Savior.

And the Savior is alive.

The Cross was not the end. The tomb is empty. Jesus Christ has risen. Because He lives, there is forgiveness, new birth, eternal life, and a future that death cannot destroy.

So do not allow a difficult road to rewrite God's faithfulness. Stop blaming and confess honestly. Look beyond Moses, because even the greatest intercessor cannot save. Look beyond the bronze serpent, because it was only a sign.

Look to the One to whom the sign was pointing.

Look to Jesus.

The Son of Man was lifted up.

The price has been paid.

The tomb is empty.

The Savior is alive.

Everyone who believes in Him has eternal life.

Christ was lifted so we can live.

The final word is not rebellion.

The final word is not judgment.

The final word is not guilt.

The final word is not death.

The final word is LIFE.

Look to Jesus and live.