

Numbers 21: Trampling Over Death By Death

By

Peter Martin

July 5th 2026

“The king of Arad, the Canaanite, who dwelt in the South, heard that Israel was coming on the road to Atharim. Then he fought against Israel and took some of them prisoners. So Israel made a vow to the LORD, and said, “If You will indeed deliver this people into my hand, then I will utterly destroy their cities.” And the LORD listened to the voice of Israel and delivered up the Canaanites, and they utterly destroyed them and their cities. So the name of that place was called Hormah.”

-Numbers 21:1-3

As we continue our study through the book of Numbers, we reach a chapter that is actually fairly positive. At this point in the story, the older generation that rebelled against God and refused to enter into the land of Canaan has passed away in the wilderness and the younger generation is moving into the land of Canaan in order to take it. This chapter consists of five major events, there are three military conflicts in which God gives His people victory, one act of rebellion where God sends serpents to bite the people of Israel (we will talk extensively about this event), and finally an uneventful sojourn through the wilderness where God provides His children with water.

As we will talk about throughout this chapter, the one event that holds the other four together is actually the one act of rebellion where God sends serpents to bite the people, but then, in a strange turn of events, after they repent, God allows for them to be healed by looking at a bronze image of a serpent raised up on a pole. At the center of this image is the center of the narrative. Instead of merely removing the serpents from the nation, God has the people, in some sense, “exposed” to the image of the serpent in order to heal them from their wounds.

The children of Israel, who have been poisoned by the spirit of complaint and fear, are being made strong and courageous by God through exposure to the very threat that caused their parents to flee from God’s call. God allows His people to fight three different battles, and even exposes them to uncertainty as He has them traverse two different wilderness areas. The first time, they unfortunately fail. But when they fail they actually repent of their sin, and when they enter the second wilderness, they succeed and wait for God’s provision in the form of a well.

Before we talk more about the symbolism of the bronze serpent I wanted to give a brief overview of the three military victories that the nation wins:

The first is against the king of Arad who launched an unprovoked attack where he defeated Israel and took captives. The Israelites make a vow to God to “utterly destroy their cities” and God grants them victory. Then they made a similar request to King Sihon of the Amorites to the one they made to Edom last chapter, where they would merely pass through their land. The king rejects their request and attacks the Israelites, but God gives them victory and they actually conquer the land of their attackers, which is the first land that the nation of Israel will own. Finally they are attacked by King Og of Bashan, this time God explicitly tells Moses that He will give them victory and they defeat their army and seize their land.

As we have talked about before, the number three stood for cosmic perfection in the ancient mind. This is why the image of the pyramid was important to them and why most structures of political authority have three faces to them. For instance, in ancient Egypt it would have been the Pharaoh, the administrative authorities (like the viziers), and the priesthood. But this same structure can be seen in the economic, military, and religious power within a nation, or even the Hindu Trimurti made of their three primary deities (Brahma, Vishnu, and Krishna). Even Israel has this structure with Moses, his brother Aaron, and his sister Miriam as the leaders of the nation. As Christians we believe that this structure ultimately comes from God’s divine, triune nature composed of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The reason why this is significant is that in ancient myths and legends usually events happen three times to signify this same cosmic perfection. Think even of Peter’s three denials of Christ, and then Christ allowing him to reaffirm his love for Him three times. This story represents a similar pattern. The nation, who has been fairly faithless towards God up until now, are now given three chances to trust God and find victory over different military powers. Which means that, fundamentally, this is a story about repentance and transformation. Now let’s look at the main symbol of this story to see this point a little more clearly.

The Bronze Serpent

“Then they journeyed from Mount Hor by the Way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and 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? For there is no food and no water, and our soul loathes

this worthless bread.” So the LORD sent 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 the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD that He take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. Then the LORD said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, 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, he lived.”

-Numbers 21:4-9

As we have spoken about through our study in the Old Testament, it is the “strange” parts of scripture that we have to attend to the most. For it is within these “strange” stories that God hides immense treasures of wisdom for us to uncover, and this story is indeed strange. The first part of the story is something that we have seen before. The nation of Israel is led into a barren stretch of wilderness and complain against the provision of God. We will discuss this event in more detail later in this paper, but for now it is important to see that the complaint against God that they make here is both more audacious but also an improvement on their previous complaints.

Previously, all their other complaints have been made towards Moses, and when he was alive, Aaron. This showed that the nation of Israel still struggled with the kind of idolatry that was prevalent in the nation of Egypt in which the Pharaoh was the incarnation of the sun god Ra. But in this passage, they specifically complain against God. So in some ways this is more audacious, since they are complaining against God Himself, but in some ways this is an improvement because at least they have come to realize that God is indeed their God, and again we will discuss this point more later.

This leads into the first strange element of this story, God’s judgement of the people. In order to discipline the Israelites God sends fiery serpents to bite His people. We will discuss the symbolism of this punishment more as we go, but it is important to see the parallel between this judgement and all the others throughout this book. God has used the punishment of fire several times in Numbers specifically, starting in Numbers 11:

“Now when the people complained, it displeased the LORD; for the LORD heard it, and His anger was aroused. So the fire of the LORD burned among them, and consumed some in the outskirts of the camp. Then the people cried out to Moses, and when Moses prayed to the LORD, the fire was quenched.”

-Numbers 11:1-2

But in this passage He does something a little different. I like the insight that the “Pulpit Commentary” has on this passage:

“Fiery serpents, נחשים שרופים. Nachash is the ordinary word for serpent. The word saraph which seems to mean “burning one,” stands (by itself) for a serpent in Num. 21:8, and also in Isa. 14:29; Isa. 30:6. In Isa. 6:2, Isa. 6:6 it stands for one of the symbolic beings (seraphim) of the prophet's vision. The only idea common to the two meanings (otherwise so distinct) must be that of brilliance and metallic luster. It is commonly assumed that the “fiery” serpents were so called because of the burning pain and inflammation caused by the bite, after the analogy of the πρηστήρες and καύσωνες of Dioscorus and Aelian...”

-Joseph Exell - “The Pulpit Commentary”

Unlike the other usages of fire that communicated the consuming nature of their sin, this symbol seems to stand for two distinct things, it is a visible sign, as well as a painful reminder. The fact that the word translated for “fiery” is the Hebrew word “saraph”, which is used to describe the angels in God’s presence, tells us that this is a little different than the other usages of fire in this book. Like the reflective skin of the serpents, God is trying to grab the attention of the nation of Israel, in a negative inversion of how the “burning” angels in God’s presence direct their glory to God Himself.

God then doubles down on this symbolism when He commands Moses to make an image of the serpent out of reflective metal and display it in front of the nation. In other words, this “fire” was not pure judgement, it was intended to capture the attention of the nation of Israel. This leads to the second way to understand “fiery serpents”, and that is the painful burning that the venom produced. This event was meant to reveal to the Israelites the spiritual destruction that their sin was causing. In this way, this story is a reflection of Pharaoh’s false repentance in the book of Exodus.

“And Pharaoh sent and called for Moses and Aaron, and said to them, “I have sinned this time. The LORD is righteous, and my people and I are wicked. “Entreat the LORD, that there may be no more mighty thundering and hail, for it is enough. I will let you go, and you shall stay no longer.”

-Exodus 9:27-28

Remember that the plagues of Egypt were not just performed to penalize the nation of Egypt, though they were meant to do that, they were there to reveal the true spiritual rot that was happening in the nation. I think that the first plague shows this best, the waters of the Nile turning to blood. Remember that the infants of Israel were drowned in those

waters. God wasn't "cursing" the waters of Egypt to spite the Egyptians, God used a plague to reveal the truth of their depravity. Those waters were already "filled" with the blood of the Jewish infants, God merely revealed the truth of what the Egyptians were doing, removing any pretense or moral justification.

God is doing the same thing to the children of Israel. By having serpent's bite them, God is showing that the "poison" of complaint has already filled the veins of the nation and is threatening to destroy them as a people. Remember that it was this same spirit of complaint that led to the Jewish rebellion against God earlier in this book. It was from that rebellion that the older generation was condemned to death and the younger generation had to wander in the wilderness for forty years.

Understanding this point is what allows us to see the true purposes of God in this story. It isn't to simply judge the nation, but it is to "cure" them of this venom so that they might be healed before God in true repentance and transformation. This sin of complaint has been killing this nation for an entire generation, and God is granting this younger generation an opportunity to break away from the sin of their fathers and learn courage and fidelity towards God. But God does this in one of the strangest ways imaginable. Instead of removing the serpents when they repent, He has Moses create an image of their reflection that will heal them if they look at it.

Trampling over Death by Death

*"Christ is risen from the dead,
trampling down death by death,
and on those in the tombs bestowing
life!"
Paschal Troparion*

The above passage comes from an eastern Christian hymn sung around passover. This short poem reveals an interesting pattern that we find both in nature as well as in spiritual wisdom. In order to be cured of something, we have to be exposed to a small part of it. In order to be inoculated against a virus, we need to be exposed to a small amount of the virus in order to develop the right antibodies. In order to be healed from venom, we need to have a processed form of the venom given to as the "antivenom". And in order for God to "cure" His people of sin and death, He had to become sin and enter into death in order to do so.

This reality is present throughout the Old Testament Law. As the Biblical commentator Gordon Wenham puts this point:

“Blood which pollutes when it is spilled can be used to sanctify and purify men and articles. The ashes of a dead heifer cleanse those who suffer from impurity caused by death. In all these rituals there is an inversion: normally polluting substances or actions may in ritual context have the opposite effect and serve to purify. In the case of the copper serpent, similar principles operate. Those inflamed and dying through the bite of living snakes were restored to life by a dead reddish-colored snake.”

-Dr. Gordon Wenham - Commentary on Numbers

Slightly different from the “Pulpit Commentary”, (though I believe in a way that adds to that commentary as opposed to contradicting it), Dr. Wenham sees that the bronze color of the serpent was not merely to reflect the “fiery serpents” but instead to be a picture of blood, death, and earth. It is this concept that we will spend the rest of the paper focusing on. That is how God exposes His children to fear, sin, and even death in order to cure us from these very things.

Fear

“So all the congregation lifted up their voices and cried, and the people wept that night. And all the children of Israel complained against Moses and Aaron, and the whole congregation said to them, “If only we had died in the land of Egypt! Or if only we had died in this wilderness! “Why has the LORD brought us to this land to fall by the sword, that our wives and children should become victims? Would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?” So they said to one another, “Let us select a leader and return to Egypt.”

-Numbers 14:1-4

As stated before, the venom of the serpents is a symbol of the real things poisoning the nation of Israel, at the fore of the issues is their cowardice. To be fair to Israel, this is a people group held down and controlled by fear for over a generation. Any people subjected to this can be forgiven for succumbing to cowardice here and there.

This seems to be why God did have tolerance for this attitude throughout the book of Exodus, but like any good Father, He is not content to let His children wallow in their fear, He aims to have them overcome it. And like venom and disease, fear can only be overcome through direct confrontation.

While this truth would have been obvious to our ancestors, it is wisdom that our modern world severely lacks. Starting when I was a kid, a new form of so-called “gentle parenting” emerged. This was to counter the harsh “authoritarian parenting” of the

previous generation in which it was a common perception that parents were widely negligent and tyrannical within the home, with a special emphasis on fathers.

While I have no doubt that cases of this portrayal were present, and might have even been prevalent, these portrayals were ultimately exaggerated to make way for this new type of parenting. In this view, the parent's role was not to discipline or instruct their child from a position of authority, it was instead to befriend their children as they gently led them along their own unique path. This is why spanking was universally condemned, self-esteem became more of an important focus, and discipline became more about understanding children and empathizing with them as opposed to correcting them.

While there is much I could say about these trends and the severe negative side effects they have had on my generation and the ones that came after, I want to primarily focus on how this has affected our views on fear. As stated before, the common wisdom for our ancestors was that fear was a poison that turned someone to one of the most dishonorable dispositions, cowardice. As such, there was an active motivation for parents to expose their children to dangers, and this was usually a job for fathers.

Dad's were encouraged to take their children with them to work the fields, watch the animals, and even engage in slaughtering the animals and fending off predators. This was not just done to prepare children for these tasks, but to make them brave, something we will talk about much more in the next section.

However, in our world of gentle parenting, such actions would be considered cruel and insensitive. Instead we have created "safe spaces" for our children, given them trigger warnings, insulated them from almost every conceivable discomfort, and taught them to take "mental health days" when things get too difficult for them. To put it another way, we have literally trained our children to run away from difficulties instead of facing them head on.

Coupled with this, our world has become increasingly materialistic and therefore we are all but blind to the world of the spirit. Therefore, since we can see in the brain the effects of trauma, this has become the only "real" thing we believe in when it comes to anxiety and distress. While our ancestors believed in the soul, and the reality of virtue and vice, which can't be measured in the brain but only exist in our spirit and expressed in our character. As such, we are honestly perplexed that the young in our culture are increasingly emotionally fragile, lack self-control, and anxious, when this would have been obvious to our ancestors.

Many modern sociologists and psychologists have noticed this reality and have even come up with a modern way of categorizing this fact. Here is one example from a university professor named Nassim Taleb:

“Taleb coined the word “antifragile” to describe things that actually need to get knocked over now and then in order to become strong... The ultimate antifragile system is the immune system, which requires early exposure to dirt, parasites, and bacteria in order to set itself up in childhood. Parents who try to raise their children in a bubble of perfect hygiene are harming their children by blocking the development of their antifragile immune systems. It’s the same dynamic for what has been called the psychological immune system—the ability of a child to handle, process, and get past frustrations, minor accidents, teasing, exclusion, perceived injustices, and normal conflicts without falling prey to hours or days of inner turmoil. There is no way to live with other humans without conflicts and deprivations.”

-Jonathan Haidt - “The Anxious Generation”

Notice how he is relating our issues with fear to our immune system against disease. While our modern world has had almost miraculous advances in our understanding of the material world, our knowledge of the world of the spirit has shrunk to a level of ignorance that would have shocked our ancestors. This incredibly bright university professor is talking about this principle as if it is a new discovery, while every ancient religious system, including the Jewish texts, related these things together. And this ancient story teaches the same lesson without feeling the need to spell out the implicated to its audience.

To put this point more simply, if we teach someone to avoid stressors, we are training them to run from conflict which makes them fragile and lacking the strength to overcome their own anxiety. If you teach someone to face their fears, it trains them in courage and gives them the ability to overcome stressors. This is why this passage begins with an unprovoked attack from a Canaanite tribe in which they are forced to retaliate to get back the Israelites who were taken prisoner, and it ends with the nation boldly meeting King Og in open battle. God allows for this attack for the same reason why God doesn't remove the serpents from among them, He is training His people to overcome their fears by confronting them.

Even though this would have been common sense to our ancestors, we have all but forgotten this lesson today, which is why we have repackaged this wisdom in psychological language. The modern articulation of this idea is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, or CBT. CBT functions on this exact premise, expose someone progressively

to the things that they are afraid of until they gain courage. The journalist Abigail Shrier explains this therapy this way:

“A core tenet of therapies like CBT is that a kid’s extreme aversion to, say, dirt may be based on the false belief that dirt is harmful. The best way to demolish this maladaptive belief is for your kid to have direct and repeated contact with precisely the thing she is afraid of. If your kid is afraid of dogs, you prompt her to pet a dog. For a germophobic patient with obsessive-compulsive disorder who is washing his hands a hundred times a day, the therapist might insist the patient touch a toilet and, eventually, stick his hand into a messy toilet bowl... “Exposure therapy” is CBT’s escalating method of encouraging patients to confront things that make them uncomfortable. It is among the few therapies with an evidentiary track record of benefits... School psychologists and counselors so often do the opposite: solidify a child’s worry through affirmation and accommodation... None of this encourages the development of a child’s natural resources for coping with her worries or overcoming stressful situations.”

-Abigail Shrier - “Bad Therapy”

While I agree with most of what she says, I will offer a small alteration to her point. CBT doesn’t actually get rid of a particular fear, it instead trains someone to “deal with” or “handle” their fear response and to overcome it, the ancients called this “courage”. A movie that details this fairly well is Christopher Nolan’s “Batman Begins”. In this movie, Batman is shown to have a fear of bats that was caused by a traumatic childhood event in which he fell into a cave as a child and was trapped with a swarm of bats. This trauma is then connected to the death of his parents because his father was able to pull him out of the pit, but then was shot by a mugger shortly after.

This made Bruce a coward who tried to overcome his fear through anger and vengeance. It wasn’t until later in the movie that he understands his error and challenges himself to develop genuine courage, and it is only when he does this that he adopts the bat as a symbol of his heroic alter ego. In the movie there is a particularly powerful scene in which Bruce stands in a swarm of bats and is clearly shown to be struggling with intense anxiety, but he fights the urge to run away, stands in the midst of the bats and gains control of himself. This shows that his training worked. He is still afraid of bats, but is now able to overcome that fear through his inculcated courage.

Another more recent film that showed this was “Twisters”. In this “sequel” the protagonist is a storm chaser who made a mistake that got her team killed. She spends the next five years running away from her passion in order to be “safe”. But, even though she is safe, she is haunted by her memories and is trapped in her trauma. It isn’t until she meets her eventual love interest that he shows her that the only way to

overcome fear is to “chase it”. By teaching her this lesson, she is shown to overcome her fear and return to her calling.

This movie actually shows more real truth than modern psychologists offer. When it comes to Post Traumatic Stress, modern psychologists are finding more and more ways to have someone avoid the trauma of their past. And don't get me wrong, I am not suggesting that someone re-confront the person or the thing that traumatized them directly, though in some cases that might be important if it is possible. But understand that the many symptoms of PTSD, vivid nightmares and “trigger” responses, are actually our subconscious minds trying to *make* us re-confront our trauma.

In other words, since we are consciously running away from the memories that traumatized us, our subconscious minds are trying to expose us to our fears so that we can overcome them. This is one reason why we might have nightmares to begin with. They are a type of “simulation” run by our minds to try to force us to confront our deepest fears. It is also why people pay money to go on rollercoasters and watch horror movies. There is something in these activities that calls us to confront the things that we are afraid of, and if we succeed in doing this, we can gain courage. Failure to do so leaves us with the Israelites, in the wilderness where we are doomed to repeat an endless cycle of failure in which we are governed by our fears and lusts.

This is another insight that this story provides for us. God doesn't give this wisdom to His people through a sermon or a teaching, He makes them stare at the object of their dread in order to be healed from the venom in their bodies. What this means is that courage can't be taught intellectually, it has to be lived out. Consider this quote from the sociologist Jonathan Haidt:

“This relates to a key CBT insight: Experience, not information, is the key to emotional development. It is in unsupervised, child-led play where children best learn to tolerate bruises, handle their emotions, read other children's emotions, take turns, resolve conflicts, and play fair. ”

-Jonathan Haidt - “The Anxious Generation”

In the above quote he is directly challenging the modern parenting that takes explorative play away from children and relegated it to the “safety” of screen based play. We can't teach our children to be brave in the traditional sense, we can only train them in it. God sees the same problem. He can't just tell His people that cowardice is wrong, He has to actually expose them to their fear, gradually, until they are ready to enter into the land, a task that their parents never did and therefore never taught their children the way to do it.

Sin

“But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins.”

-2 Peter 1:5-9

This leads us to our next insight, God’s ultimate purpose with the children of Israel, and ourselves, is not merely to give us a materially good life, oftentimes this is not what God does. Instead, it is God’s purpose to make us more like Himself, hence the term “Godly”. And as we can see from the above passage, this is not a simple task that can be merely “taught”. Instead it is a process of consistent “adding”.

It would be nice if we could overcome our sin in an instant, if we could go through some sort of ritual or experience that allowed us to put our problems to bed and never deal with them again, but this isn’t the case. Overcoming our sin, like overcoming our fear, takes a long time of constant exposure to our sin and a development of virtue, love, and dependence on God. As counterintuitive as this might sound, it is unavoidable when we couple this story with the following verse:

“But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.”

-2 Corinthians 3:18

From this verse we derive an interesting principle, we are becoming what we are beholding. So why would God cause His people to “behold” the serpent which is a symbol of sin and death? The answer to this has to do with the pole that Moses placed the serpent on. In our imaginations this could look a bit like a military standard in which the serpent is “exalted” or held up by the pole. While this isn’t a bad way to look at it, it is more closely related to the ancient practice of placing enemy heads on pikes, or even the practice of crucifixion, something that our Lord pointed out:

“And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself.” This He said, signifying by what death He would die.”

-John 12:32-33

The Romans “lifted up” those they crucified not to exalt them, but to exalt their judgement. And even though Christ inverted this image in an interesting way, the point remains for the story in Numbers. Moses “lifting up” the serpent was not a picture of exalting the serpent, but instead a picture of judgement or condemnation.

So, when I say that we must be exposed to our sin, this is not an encouragement to go sin. Instead this can be seen in two ways, the first is temptation to sin, and the second is exposure to the judgement of sin, both of which produce repentance. Let’s look first at the effects of temptation:

“Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.”

-James 1:12-15

One of the prime virtues that God wants to give His children, and the one that most allows for us to fight our sin is called self-control, or as James puts it, long suffering. This is the ability, not merely to avoid sin, but to actually resist it, and even overcome that temptation. It is this ability that we see in Christ when He wanders in the wilderness for forty days and resists the temptations of the devil. Christ doesn’t avoid these temptations or run from them, He instead controls His desires and doesn’t give in to the temptations of Satan.

Another reason why this is the only path towards virtue is given to us at the end of the passage from James. The sad truth is that sin entices us because we do desire to sin. This helps us understand why God sends serpents into the camp of the Israelites. Just as the serpent in the Garden tempted us towards sin, that same “venom” has been coursing through our veins ever since. We are already polluted by our own desires that rage against the commandments and the character of our Lord. And even though, as Christians, we have received God’s forgiveness and we now long to honor Him in our lives, this same poison still affects us and moves us away from God.

This is why the reformer Martin Luther called the state of the redeemed Christian: simul justus et peccator, which means that we are simultaneously righteous and sinful. He likened it to someone who has had antivenom given to them after a snake bite. Though they have received the cure, the effects of the venom will still affect them until they are fully cured. This is the same for the Israelites bitten by the serpents. As they gazed

upon the image of the serpent, they were both receiving the cure and experiencing the venom.

Which leads to the next point, we have to look upon the judgment of sin. I like how the early church Father Gregory of Nyssa put this point when he commented on this story:

“There is only one protection against these wicked passions: the purification of our souls which takes place through the mystery of piety. Among the things we believe in the mystery, faith in the Passion of the One who has accepted suffering for us is a capital point. The cross, in fact, is a suffering; whoever looks at it, as the story explains, is not struck by the poison of concupiscence. To look at the cross is nothing other than to convert one's entire life into crucifixion and death to the world, immovable by any sin, truly crucifying one's own flesh with the fear of God, as the prophet says. The clove that subjects the flesh is continence... The true serpent is sin; he who marches along with sin is clothed in the nature of the serpent. So man is freed from sin by the one who took upon himself the appearance of sin and made himself like us who had become the image of the serpent. It avoids death from bites, but does not annihilate the beasts... Believers, too, are often struck by the bites of concupiscence, but those who look at the one who has been lifted up on the tree avoid the passion, dissolving the poison with the fear of the precept, as if it were an antidote.”

-Gregory of Nyssa - “The Life of Moses”

God is foretelling of the final judgement of sin through His Messiah in this story, and the subsequent curative effect that this sacrifice would have for those who would “behold” this sacrifice. By pointing His people to look upon the judgement of sin, He was filling them both with hope and an understanding of the end of sin, namely death. Like the shiny bodies of the serpents, sin is always enticing and attractive at first, but this enticing package always hides a destructive poison that is aimed at killing us.

This is one way to understand the common trope of dragons guarding treasure. The hero is drawn into the clutches of the dragon because of the allure of the treasure. While it is usually shown that this symbol is a representation of this story, that in order to gain the treasure of virtue, we have to first confront the danger of the dragon, But this more negative interpretation is shown in J.R.R. Tolkien's “The Hobbit”. The Dwarves are drawn into the den of a dangerous dragon in order to recover a lost treasure. But once they slay the dragon, the treasure immediately corrupts the main dwarf and poisons him towards virtue and charity as he is consumed by the same greed that animated the monstrous dragon.

In order to overcome our sin we must understand its end. We have to be aware that the allure of sin is a facade and that Christ has called us to die to our sins. As the Apostle Paul puts this:

“But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”

-Galatians 6:14

Dependence on God

This doesn't mean that God is moving His people to be “afraid” of sin, but to be knowledgeable of the end of sin. What is most important is not our aversion to sin, but our affection for God. What precedes the complaining is that God allows His people to go through a time of want in order to test them. As Moses reiterates to the people in the book of Deuteronomy:

“And you shall remember that the LORD your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. “So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD.”

-Deuteronomy 8:2-3

God leads His people into a wilderness of scarcity so that they might learn to rely, wholly, on His heavenly provision, namely the manna. This was meant to “test” their faith, meaning to show or reveal the strength of their faith, as well as to temper or prove their faith through trial, in much the same way that we would “prove” metal by bringing it through a tempering process. And we will see as we discuss this passage, even the failure of the Israelites has a tempering effect to the overall faithfulness of the nation.

However, in the beginning, they fail in the same way that they have done so many times before. Instead of thanking God for His provision and learning to lean upon Him in their time of need and desperation, they do as we do, they complain against the provision of God. This is an aside, but important nonetheless, every trial that we undergo, no matter how big or how small, is an opportunity for God to teach us this same lesson. If we can allow God to draw us near to Himself, we can find joy and refreshment in His presence even when this world is proving barren and destructive to us.

This week I find this lesson timely for myself. For about six years now I have been struggling with a constant migraine, with no sign of relief in sight. For a while I had found a small solution, but now even that has faded and I find my strength fading. In this time of need, I have found incredible discouragement in my heart, a desire to “resent” the various provisions that God has given to me and complain about my situation, or even to slip into despair or apathy. So I am thankful for this study to remind myself of the abundant goodness of God and the amazing provision that He offers, even when my deepest desire for healing is being currently denied.

But in my own discouragement I find a way to graciously empathize with the nation of Israel. They are traversing a barren land that can’t be cultivated, and they are facing down the prospect of warfare with powerful nations. In this context their complaint is understandable, yet still destructive which is why God still judges their behavior.

The Bible is actually filled with various complaints against God, made by incredibly faithful people from King David all the way to Jeremiah the prophet. And while God is always patient to hear the complaints of His people, He is also quick to discipline the lack of faith contained in these complaints.

The reason is quite simple. While groaning against painful circumstances is welcome by God, mourning without hope, which is what complaint is, is poisonous to the human spirit. It turns us from joy, thanksgiving or even compassion, and turns us towards our own bitter selfishness. Because of the danger of this spirit, God must discipline it. As Paul puts this point in his letter to the Philippians:

“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”

-Philippians 4:6-7

God allows, and even welcomes, His children to pray their most anxious thoughts to Him, but the promise of God’s infinite peace is only made on the caveat that we do this “with thanksgiving”. Even within our deepest most painful lamentations, we must not forget about the provision of God, and we must discipline ourselves to thank Him for this provision lest we fall into the abject misery of the nation of Israel. One of my favorite passages that does this so well is in a book written by the prophet Jeremiah called “Lamentations”:

“You have moved my soul far from peace; I have forgotten prosperity. And I said, “My strength and my hope Have perished from the LORD.” Remember my affliction and

roaming, The wormwood and the gall. My soul still remembers And sinks within me. This I recall to my mind, Therefore I have hope. Through the LORD's mercies we are not consumed, Because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness. "The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "Therefore I hope in Him!"
-Lamentations 3:17-24

May we all learn to pray with this kind of honesty and hope. Jeremiah lays out his internal torment to God in unapologetic candor, but he also acknowledges the mercies of God that preserve him in the midst of his grief. It is this balance between deep internal honesty before the throne of God, coupled with humility and thanksgiving that prevent him from being subject to the bitter venom of complaint and despair.

And if we can learn to do this well, we can learn to find joy in the mere presence of God. It is true that God enjoys lavishing blessing and goodness upon His children and He desires for us to see Him through the good things that He provides. The issue is that this is more difficult than we care to admit. It is far easier to idolize the blessings of God and to forget Him altogether. As God puts this point in the book of Hosea:

"I knew you in the wilderness, In the land of great drought. When they had pasture, they were filled; They were filled and their heart was exalted; Therefore they forgot Me."
-Hosea 13:5-6

It is in our time of lack that we have the opportunity to depend on God alone. In the movie "I am Legend" with Will Smith, this point is made to him. In his loss he is moved towards despair and wrath. But a woman tells him that now the world is quiet and if he listens he can hear the voice of God. It is unfortunate, but the blessings of God can become distractions, just look at our modern world and how we use our incredible blessings and power to distract ourselves from what is most important.

Because of this, God will often bring us through the wilderness in order to learn dependence on Him. This idea is also present in the image of the serpent. They can't turn to any other source of healing. In their pain and their torment, they have no choice but to find healing in the image that God provided to them. But even this serves as a temptation towards idolatry. Generations in the future, this image is actually turned into an idol by the people of God. This is the power of temptation in the human heart, we can turn, even the greatest provisions of God, into means of distracting ourselves from God. This is why in all of this, God is training His people to simply rely on Him.

Death

“No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven. “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, “that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

-John 3:13-16

In this passage, Christ makes a direct reference to the story in Numbers and reveals that He is the fulfillment of this passage. As we have discussed throughout this paper, the wisdom of this story does have a notable and profound effect on those who are willing to walk in its wisdom. In order to overcome fear and sin itself, we have to be exposed in some way and learn the strength to overcome it. But there is something in this story that was not fulfilled for the nation of Israel, overcoming death.

From the beginning of Genesis, the most potent result of the fall was that we are now subject to death, which is the ultimate enemy of all life. No matter how prosperous we make our lives, no matter how healthy we make our bodies, no matter how just we make our societies, death is an inevitable fact of life. And it is this curse that God promised to address all the way back in Genesis:

“Because you have done this, You are cursed more than all cattle, And more than every beast of the field; On your belly you shall go, And you shall eat dust All the days of your life. And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, And you shall bruise His heel.”

-Genesis 3:14-15

But as we have been talking about throughout this paper, the mystery of how God would accomplish this defeat of the serpent is contained in this passage and the story from Numbers, that Christ would somehow defeat death by death. After the cross, this mystery has been revealed to us in great clarity. We now can see that it was only by Christ succumbing to death that He could defeat it. As the writer of Hebrews puts this:

“Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.”

-Hebrews 2:14-15

Christ, being the center and the source of life could never be destroyed by death, but instead destroy death by entering into it. Christ being the center of all light, would destroy darkness by allowing Himself to be swallowed by it:

“In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.”

-John 1:4-5

But here is the interesting point. Even though Christ has defeated death, His children are still asked to follow Him to the grave. That until Christ returns, each individual Christian will, strangely, overcome death by dying.

“The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.”

-Romans 8:16-17

And because of this, God asks His children to overcome our fear of death, by confronting it, knowing that He has removed the eternal consequences of death. Just like the children of Israel, they had to face the biting serpents, but they could do this knowing that while they could be bitten, the venom was no longer fatal to them. So with death itself defeated in our Lord, we serve Him in confidence and hope for His righteousness and glory.

“For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”

-2 Corinthians 5:21