

I. Intro self

A. Let me start off with what may seem like a strange Q to ask:

1. Do you believe in magic? ... I mean real magic at work in the world today ... like Harry Potter kind of magic?
 - a) If so, understanding the story we heard from Num. 21 is probably not too hard for you
 - b) But if you don't believe in magic, this story doesn't make much sense
2. So before talking re. this story in context of Jesus Christ, I want to provide a little background explanation to clarify a passage that's often not understood

B. Let's suppose for just a minute that you are on a Middle Eastern tour in the country of Jordan, post-pandemic.

1. It just so happens that you have a cast over your broken wrist, but you would not allow the injury to cancel this special trip.
 - a) About an hour's drive south of the capital Amman, you visit historic Mt. Nebo. This is the site where God allowed Moses to look across the Jordan River into the Promised Land, just before he died
 - b) At the tourist site, on a stone wall looking into Palestine and Israel,



you find this (I have seen this magnificent view from Mt. Nebo myself but the sculpture did not exist 30 years ago)

2. As you the tourist are standing there with this as your view, would you expect your broken wrist to be healed just by looking at this bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness?? Probably not!
3. If you don't believe this snake replica on a pole is just as effective as the one Moses lifted up in our Old Testament story, then it just highlights the basic problem many of us readers have 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 may have believed they could neutralize the effect of a snake's bite by looking up at an image of a snake

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

1. 1st, It may remind us of Western stereotypes of voodoo
 - a) The stereotypical "voodoo doll" has someone sticking pins in a small doll and the person whom the doll represents feels pain or gets ill at the same time
 - b) That would be a form of sympathetic magic, although this is not a typical practice in modern vodoun
2. A 2nd troubling thing is when an image believed to have magical powers leads people to worship the image itself. This happened in the Bible: Please read with me a brief story following up on Num. 21
 - a) Turn in Bibles to *2 Kings 18: 1-4*, a story taking place about 500 years after Moses & the bronze serpent (*read*)
 - b) King Hezekiah is praised for destroying the bronze serpent because people were sacrificing offerings to the image
 - c) Ie. the very thing God had told Moses to build ... then much later God tells the people to destroy it, because it became an idol to worship!
3. So as readers, sympathetic magic may raise a few "red flags"

C. So 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) This image is almost like our modern symbol for medicine. It derives from the ancient Greeks, who associated 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 they fled Egypt

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) In this way the passage is NOT trying to tell us that the bronze serpent itself had healing power ... Rather it serves as a reminder of the God who stood behind the image ... the God who had the real power

b) Here is one artist's rendition of how it might have appeared in the rugged Sinai desert



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

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

A. The biggest thing I see is fear, especially for those wandering Israelites: they have fear of starvation & dehydration in the desert ... there are also poisonous snakes to be afraid of

B. In John 3 Jesus connects fear with the subject of light & darkness as he speaks 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 our hearts toward self-centeredness, we shrink back from the light that Jesus Christ brings

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 let me try to tie these themes together by focusing on the common message that is found in both Numbers and John:

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 his people's fears of suffering & death

a) We hear of another despised & feared figure raised high for all to see, but this time the pole is 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. That despised figure leads to the removal of our fears

3. What kinds of fears am I talking about?

- a) Really, there are so many fears that enslave us, like ...
 - (1) Fear of what others think of us
 - (2) Fear of not mattering to anyone
 - (3) Fear of missing out on something
- b) In our short time today I'll name just one ... a huge one:

IV. Fear for our security and our health

A. This is probably the #1 fear for Americans these days. Sadly one effect of COVID has been to reinforce a culture of fear that was already rampant in our country

1. Almost 20 years ago security fears jumped up several notches on Sept. 11, 2001 with those infamous terrorist attacks

- a) I don't think it's an overstatement to say there's an obsession with security in our country. You see it in ...
 - (1) Fascination with movies and endless TV shows featuring violent crime and those who solve crime cases
 - (2) Elaborate security systems in our homes and cars and in churches, where some even have armed security people!
 - (3) Pervasiveness of guns ... with more firearms in private ownership than the number of residents in this country

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Estimated_number_of_civilian_guns_per_capita_by_country

- b) This fear is based upon a raw appeal to self-interest ...
 - (1) What drives this security obsession in us is our deep-seated fears of losing what we have now
 - (2) We're insecure because we're afraid of losing
 - (a) our personal freedoms ...
 - (b) of losing cheap energy and food ...
 - (c) of losing our comfortable lifestyles that exist partly at the expense of less fortunate people around the world

2. But the widespread fear of our day is not just about our physical security: the literal invasion of a global pandemic has unleashed new levels of fear – for our health!

- a) I want to be clear that I do support science-based public health precautions because these benefit the greater good of the community & the nation as much as they benefit our individual health
- b) But now, being a full year into these burdensome COVID restrictions, it's also clear that health-related fears have taken hold within us, like it or not ...

c) In the privacy of your own home, are you willing to admit if sometime in the past year you've felt ...?

- (1) Fear of hospitals and medical facilities
- (2) Fear of going out to grocery stores, or any public places
- (3) Fear of traveling
- (4) Fear of strangers
- (5) Even fear of family and friends!

3. Please hear me:

a) I'm not saying these are wrong or unfounded fears. There are many good and wise reasons for some people to limit or avoid situations that are risky for their health

b) I'm actually not referring to outward protective actions you do, as much as I'm talking about the prominence that health fears hold for you.

- (1) To what degree do health-related fears overshadow your life, maybe even control your life?
- (2) I invite you to reflect on your own emotional life, day in and day out over the past 12 months ... Does fear feature larger in your emotional life than it did a year ago?

c) Again, I'm not judging if you do feel more fearful these days.

- (1) We feel what we feel, and we are often driven much more by our emotions than by our thoughts or beliefs ...
- (2) Fears can trap us & imprison us ... poison us or debilitate us.

d) If fear has found a stronghold in your life these days, the message today is "look up to the One lifted up!"

B. In such fearful times, I say "Hallelujah for the Gospel!"

1. ... because the message of God's grace & the self-sacrificing love that Jesus Christ demonstrated radically kicks the legs out from under this culture of fear!

2. When we no longer live under the tyranny of the fear of death, then the physical health of this "tent" that we call our body is not our ultimate concern!

- a) This past summer and fall, as the COVID death toll racked up and as infection rates rose high here in Elkhart County, I found inspiration for how to handle fear in my friend and fellow pastor Terry Zehr
- b) Twice already he had faced down death in the form of cancer and he knew what was in front of him.
- c) But he was not a victim of fear! Terry modeled beautifully for us how to keep trusting in the loving goodness of God.
- d) Even as his health failed, this allowed him to live with deep purpose

rather than to go out clutching at what he was losing.

3. And if our security rests in the God who has glittering mansions prepared already for us, then our bank accounts and our concealed carries will no longer be our primary defense!

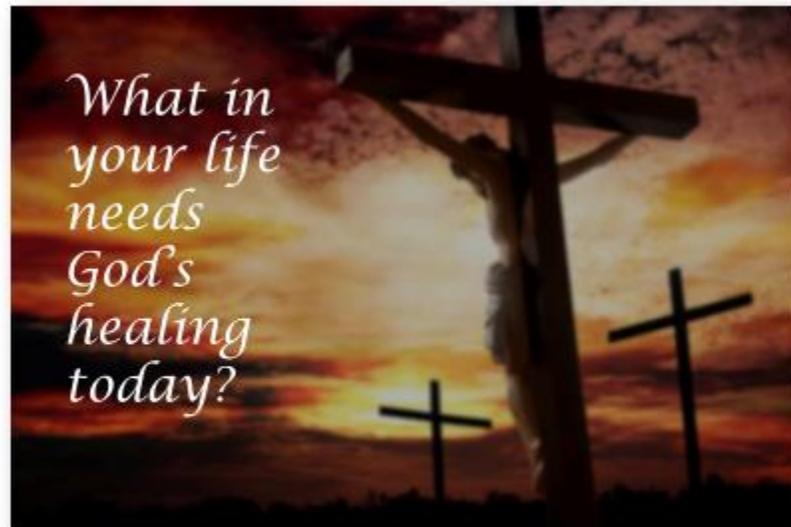
4. After all, if God is for us, who can be against us?!

V. Conclusion

A. As we've been doing this Lent, we'll have some reflective moments in our ritual of response. Please find your bowl of Lenten stones or just a simple piece of paper to write on. **During this time we will sing the song "Don't be afraid" which will be on your screen**

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

2. Perhaps today's focus question will help you ...



What in your life needs God's healing today?

3. As we sing the song, you may want to write on your stone what that fear is that you named, or perhaps just write the word "healing".

a) If it helps you, imagine that fear being released from your hand and into that stone ... the stone which the builders rejected but which has become the chief cornerstone ...

b) And listen to the voice of Jesus saying, "Don't be afraid. My love is stronger than your fear."

B. After a moment of silence, we will sing and behold the One

who heals by being lifted up for us ...