

- We are in the last week of a short little series, called “Unusual Encounters”, of some bible stories that maybe you haven’t read, or when you did, you thought, “What was that all about?”
 - If you haven’t listened to these last weeks, I encourage you to go on back and do so.
 - Let me tell you, there are tons of these stories scattered throughout Scripture. Don’t ever tell me the bible is boring. Read it, my friends.
-
- Several years ago, Yvonne and I traveled to Scotland for a vacation.
 - We decided the best way to see the country was to rent a car and drive. We flew into Heathrow airport, took the shuttle to the rental place, and got our car.
 - I had done this once before, but it is a bit nerve wracking to know the steering wheel is on the other side of the car from what we are used to. You have to shift with your left hand, and then, of course, vehicles drive on the other side of the road.
 - It takes everything you have spent a lifetime learning and flips it. It just feels . . . wrong.
 - The last piece of advice the car rental guy gave us before we drove away was the most helpful piece of advice when driving in the UK. Always look to your RIGHT first when you come to any intersection. Look RIGHT first.
 - Seems simple, but it is important because it’s the opposite in the U.S.
 - You have to be very intentional. Most of the time, it was fine. Everything is different, but you are really concentrating and so it goes fine.
 - The biggest dangers is after you have been driving for several days. I began to get more comfortable. Everything started to feel normal. I began to get more confident. I relaxed a bit. And I immediately began to default to what I was used to.
 - I remember coming to one intersection. I looked left like I normally would and started to move and Yvonne said, quite emphatically if I remember, “STOP!”
 - I hit the brakes and a full sized truck went zooming by at a high rate of speed right in front of my bumper. I thought things were clear because I was looking the wrong direction. My focus was not where it needed to be.
 - Suffice it to say, my attention was ramped up again fairly significantly. Look RIGHT!
 - Our focus, what we put our attention on, is critical in life. Not simply in physical situations like this one, but this is a picture of our lives in general.
 - In today’s tumultuous times, we are tempted to put our attention in a multitude of places.
 - What we are going to see in today’s story is that **where you put your faith determines the direction of your life.**
-
- Today’s story is actually connected to one of the most (if not the most) famous verses in the entire bible.
 - It is one of the first verses many of us learn (for some, the only) as kids. It the famous words that Jesus spoke to Nicodemus, a religious leader who came to Jesus at night to understand more about this kingdom that Jesus had been talking about.
 - You all know the verse right? John 3:16? You can probably say it with me.
John 3:16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.
 - We use this verse to explain salvation. To show what it means to come to Jesus.
 - It is a marvelous verse. But let me put it into the whole sequence of events that Jesus was talking about.
 - Jesus explained that to be in God’s kingdom meant to be born again. Nicodemus was confused, so Jesus explained it’s not a physical rebirth, but a spiritual one. A spiritual rebirth that came from the Holy Spirit through faith in Jesus and his life and mission.

- It is a bit confusing and then Jesus makes a statement that connected to a story that Nicodemus would have been quite familiar with that might not make sense to you.

John 3:14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.” 16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

- Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness? What’s that all about?
- The account is found in Numbers 21, back when Israel was wandering the desert in their travels to the Promised Land.
- New generation of people is growing up in the wilderness.
- The last generation had disbelieved God. They had little faith. They had grumbled and complained and had been denied entry into the Promised Land.
- The next generation is growing up, being trained and learning to trust God, to obey him, to walk in faith.
- Chapter 21 starts with an attack by an enemy. Israel, as they wander the desert, is a threat to some of the kingdoms and in this case, the kingdom of Arad decided to go on the offensive and attacked Israel. Instead of panicking, the nation turned to God, made a covenant with God for deliverance, and God did it. It was a great victory for the nation.
- The chapter ends with them encountering more resistance, first from another neighboring kingdom called the Amorites. They attacked Israel with their entire army and they had to again trust God as they went to battle against this enemy and God delivered them. They were then attacked by another king who brought out his whole army and God delivered Israel again and they won the battle and actually took over some of the land east of the Jordan that became the part of the Promised Land.
- But in between these two events, the author records another event.

Numbers 21:4 They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; 5 they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!”

- Understanding the geography helps us here. They had just been attacked by one kingdom, and the Promised Land looked like it would be difficult for the people to enter from the south, so the Lord, through Moses, took them on a circuitous route around the eastern frontier.
- This meant their journey in the wilderness took longer. They had to travel further.
- This would be probably been frustrating for the people, to have this change in plans that meant their journey in the wilderness was than much longer.
- God, who had just proven himself faithful, was now called into question again. He was not living up to their expectations.
- The second this happen, their vision, their focus, switched off of God.
- What did this look like?
- **Their impatience led them to take their focus off God.**
- God was not moving quickly enough. Things were not changing fast enough.
- This next generation of Israelites thought that they were right there to enter the Promised Land. They could see it. They could taste it. And now they had to wait.
- When the Coronavirus hit and people went into lockdown, they did not like it, but they accepted it as necessary. There was a level of patience.
- Now, as the end is in sight, people can feel it. They want it. Impatience is increasing and as it does, people’s focus is changing.

- For the Israelites, they now had to endure another season of waiting, and they did not like it.
- Our impatience with God often leads to a shift of focus.

- **Their perspective became skewed.**

- Did you notice how it changed their perspective of the entire timeline.
- They saw the past with rose colored glasses. It has been almost 40 years and they are still talking like Egypt was better. They had bread and water.
- Think about this statement. It was better when we were in slavery with bread and water. Do you know what they are remembering fondly? Prison!
- What's even more amazing is that most of these people had not even been in Egypt or had been very small children then. They let the memory of some and a type of ideal to see the past.
- They saw their present with bitterness. This statement is amazing. We detest this miserable food. Do you know what food they are talking about? The bread that God made for them that miraculously appeared every day to provide for all their nutritional needs.
- They hated the season they were in. They did not like the desert, the food, the longer than expected hike.
- Sometimes, the drudgery of life and our present obscures the miraculous hand of God.
- And they viewed the future with no hope. They could not see an end to this. We are going to walk longer. Am I ever going to get out of here?

- **This led to blaming and complaining.**

- They complained against God, but since God is God and they can't face him physically, they extended their complaining and blaming to Moses, their leader.
- They questioned two things. God's directions and God's intentions.
- God, you led us into the wilderness. We've wandered around. Now we are detoured and delayed again. Do you have any idea what you are going.
- But they also questioned God's intentions. Your whole purpose God (and Moses) was to bring us out into the wilderness to die.
- It is easy to question God's directions. It is easy to question his intentions. To wonder if he has a clue. To begin to think he does not love us or is not that interested in us personally.

6 Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died.

- They did not have access to anti-venom, doctors, hospitals and the like. The venom in the bloodstream could be a painful death.
- It seems like quite a punishment from God.
- Remember where they are. They are on the threshold of the Promised Land.
- God has been training, teaching and leading them for decades.
- They are supposed to be ready to face the challenges of what lies ahead in faith.
- They are supposed to be God's example in the world as they take over the land
- Instead, they are whining and complaining. There is no time for this. God wants them to not lose focus at this late time.
- And this time, unlike others, the people get the message.

7 The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed for the people.

- Now, God's response is fascinating. It is certainly not what we would expect.

8 The LORD said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." 9 So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.

- Pay attention to what he did NOT do.
- He did not remove the snakes. People were still getting bitten. Poisoned.
- Instead, he made a model of a bronze snake, put it on a pole, set it up where people could see, and if they were bitten, all they had to do was look at it and they were fine.
- Why? What was God trying to teach in the midst of all this?
- Snakes would have had obvious implications for the Israelites. They were familiar with the story of Adam and Eve. Of the serpent enticing their sin. It was an object lesson.
- Sin is a poison. Sin will kill you. When your focus is on yourself and you take your eyes off of God, you put yourself in a bad situation.
- The solution is simply to turn your eyes on God. Miraculously those who are bitten are healed when they look upon the representation of the origin of their sin.
- There must have been those who heard the instructions and thought it was crazy. OK, I am in agony and dying, and I just have to look at a snake on a pole? That's it? Yup!

- There were consequences to their sin and rebellion. They were dying and there was nothing they could do to fix their own problem.
- Instead, the only solution was to have the faith to look up at a representation of the object of their sin and they would be healed.
- In other words, **where you put your faith determines the direction of your life.**
- Their view, their focus, their faith, had gone from trusting God to help them to complaining, blaming and generally putting the focus of their life back on themselves, their problems, their issues, their issues.
- God was reminding the nation that only he was the solution to their sin. Only faith in him would let them enter the Promised Land. Only trusting him would make them victorious.
- The question for the Israelites, and the question for us, is **where will you put your faith? It will determine the direction (and ultimately the results) of your life.**

- 1400 years later this object lesson found it's full illustration in Jesus.
- Jesus was lifted up on a cross.
- The absolutely perfect and holy Son of God became sin for us. He became like a hated, dead snake on a pole for our sins. *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:21)*
- Jesus took our place, bore our judgment, because sin for us, so that only by looking at him and believing, having faith, in him would we be delivered from the deadliness of sin and find healing and freedom.

John 3:14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him." 16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

- **Where you put your faith determines the direction of your life.**
- The only salvation that can be found is through Jesus. To believe that he died on your behalf on the cross and took your place.
- To believe that he sacrificed for you and put your faith in him.
- If you have never done this, I urge you to do so.

- For those of you that wonder if faith is some absurd thing that only foolish, uneducated people do, I saw a quote this week that I really liked.
- *"Faith is not belief without proof, but trust without reservation."* (Elton Trueblood)
- For those of you that have decided to follow Jesus, let me speak to you this morning as well. "Where are you putting your faith?" You started by trusting in Jesus. You won a battle. Have you now found yourself impatient? Complaining about God? Finding problems with his leaders? Trying to control your own life? Living in bitterness with no hope for the future?
- There is an interesting postscript to this story. Hundreds of years later, a king in Israel took over power and realized that the nation was no longer trusting God. They had put their faith in other places. His name was Josiah. He decided to bring the nation back to God and we read this:

2 Kings 18:4 He removed the high places, smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles. He broke into pieces the bronze snake Moses had made, for up to that time the Israelites had been burning incense to it. (It was called Nehushtan.)

- Instead of having faith in God, they had started to put their faith in the symbol.
- I wonder how many of us, having come to Jesus to be saved, have taken our eyes down off our Savior and put them on us. Or people. Or circumstances. And we have forgotten that where we put our faith determines the direction of our lives.
- Let me remind you today, that **where you put your faith determines the direction of your life.**
- Let's put our faith in the one place it truly belongs. Jesus.