

Imputed Righteousness  
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Numbers 21: 5-9, John 3: 14-21

Let's pray... Almighty God, by the power of the Holy Spirit, open your Word and illumine our darkened world, that we may see clearly and live faithfully not by our own insight but by the light of your truth in Jesus Christ. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O God our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

According to Google maps, the distance between Cairo in Egypt and Jerusalem in Israel is about 452 miles or six days and four hours worth of walking. But here's the deal: the Hebrew people, at this point, were *several years* into the journey. Now, as a man who all too often does typical man things, I gotta say, I get it. I understand not wanting to stop, admitting you're lost, and asking for directions. Whether it's on the road or just being unsure where to find something at a store, personally I'd much rather wander aimlessly for hours than ask for help even once. So, really, this story just makes sense to me.

See, looking at our Old Testament reading, we are dealing with a story here about folks unwilling to let go of their pride and admit that they're lost. And to tell you the truth, it's a story we've all been through.

Can you see it now? The Hebrew people wandering. The desert sun beating down. The hope to stretch any water they have as long as they can. Speculations as to whether that rock formation is one you've seen before or not. I can imagine, church, that as the days turned to weeks and weeks to full blown years; the courage it took to march out of Egypt began to wane. Anymore, it was just a bad mix of weariness and hubris.

And now, Moses, always the reluctant leader, stayed close by but as they marched through the sand day after long day, he began to let some of the others take the lead. We don't know their names, we don't know all the details, but imagine it with me church.

For the sake of our story, let's consider first a man we can call Reuben. He journeyed with the rest of the lot through the desert. But, one day, something caught his eye and he piped up. "Everyone, look, an oasis just about half a mile out! We need to turn to the left." And so, they do. But, as they walked out a half mile, they found the oasis yet another half mile out. Reuben pipes up again "that's weird, but it's right there. Let's keep going." And so, they keep going. Another half mile, another chance to look up, and another realization that the shimmering water on the horizon was further out still. They followed it for some time, yet it seemed every step they took, the oasis stretched further away.

Church, if you haven't guessed by now, Reuben had been tricked by a mirage. We all have. Maybe not a literal one but have you ever found the get rich quick scheme, the one book that will change everyone's life forever, the online influencer and their "life hack?" It always promises some sort of fulfillment: be the person you've dreamed of becoming, you *can* have it all. And yet as you follow it, the promise just stretches further and further out to the horizon, never really being reached... All it really does for you is get you lost.

Well, back in our story, sheepishly, Reuben finally admits the error to his good friend Simeon. And Simeon, being a wise and patient man, listens and eventually says to Reuben "Hey you were wrong and that happens.

But, here's what we need to do. We are going to take a vote and hear from everyone. Surely, a whole group of us can't be wrong." And so they vote and they discern that from that position, they really should take another left turn. And they do. And they start marching out that way.

And wouldn't you believe that all too soon, they found out the depth of truth in that old Groucho Marx joke "I wouldn't want to belong to any club that would have *me* as a member."

Would you believe that a whole group of us *can* be wrong? Church, would you believe that the bible describes our very human condition exactly like that? From 1 Corinthians 1 verse 20 "*Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?*"

And so, pretty soon a new guy, Judah, runs to the head of the pack. He pulls out a large map and tells them "everyone, we're going the wrong way. See, I did some research. I've been watching the Sun and the stars, and I know you're not going to like this, but we need to turn to the left." And of course, at this point, the Hebrew people are a little suspicious. But, Judah, he reminds them that back in Egypt he had several degrees and a fancy title, he was even a professional cartographer for the Pharaoh. The answer is simple, turn to the left.

Now, let's say, just for the sake of this sermon, that Judah was exactly right. He had pointed them directly towards the promised land. But, let's also say that Judah could, uh, be a little rough around the edges. See, by now, it's evening and the Hebrew people want to sit and have a meal. But here Judah is, hollering away. "Keep going. Keep going!" And then it's nightfall and there Judah goes again "We can't stop now!" And so, they walk through the night, Judah yelling and hollering at them the whole way through.

And so, as you can imagine, that didn't last long. Judah quickly found out that you can be exactly right and totally wrong at the same time. See, under his nose, Benjamin was starting to gossip. He had started saying "I don't like Judah's tone." And eventually that got met with "Yeah! And honestly, I think we should just go back to Egypt at this point." And some in the crowd hear this and they say "yeah, we'll go back to Egypt... now which way is that exactly?" And Benjamin, he didn't want to let them down, so even though he didn't know the way, you know what he says to the Hebrew people? He says "I think we should take a left."

I'll spare you the gory details but wouldn't you know that Benjamin led them straight into a viper's den? And so now, the Hebrew people aren't just lost, they're dying too. Right now, the Hebrew people are facing physically what all of us as human beings face all the time spiritually.

They're lost. All humans, myself included, are by nature lost. I mean, we've all made pretty much all of those same mistakes, haven't we? Isn't it true that life does not come with an instruction manual? Humans are, by nature, lost. And they all pretty quickly find out they're on borrowed time too. They're slowly but surely dying. And all their reasonability and all their best-laid plans and all their so-called fixes and resolutions just seem to be making it worse.

And so, it's at this point that Moses sneaks off to pray. Church, notice this because it's what causes the entire story to turn around here. Moses, see, he's the first and last person in this whole story to do this -- he just prays. Church, Moses looks not to himself but to God, to the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night that had been available to them this whole time, and he admits how bad things have gotten. He confesses his

limitations. He admits that he can't figure this journey of life out on his own.

And then he listens. And curiously, God tells him something strange. Like, really strange. Just bizarre.

**“Moses, my servant, fashion a serpent out of bronze, lift it up on a pole, and have the dying people behold it.”** Moses doesn't understand. But, he's not really in a position to argue, is he? So, he gathers up bronze from the Hebrew people's jewelry, and constructs it. He sets up the bronze serpent. And it's, you know, a bronze serpent on a pole. It's strange but it is what it is. No big heavenly glow or anything, just a bronze serpent exalted up in the sky. But, at the same time, it's what God called on the people to behold and so Moses goes back to the people to tell them to look at it.

He announces to them just as we will announce to you each week as we journey closer and closer to the cross -- Behold, exalted for us is the very image of the evil and folly that courses through us. Whether it be the serpent and its venom or the rest of us and the crosses we both build and suffer, there it is. Look. Behold. It is plain, it is cruel, it is the very name of our collective depravity, and yet somehow it is a life-saving gift. It is here to heal us. It is here to restore us.

Church, it's striking to me that we so often look to John 3:16 but completely miss the verses just preceding it. See, John 3:16 through 17, we know is an amazing and crystal clear overview of God's love and plan for us. But, what I want us to appreciate today is that John 3:14 through 15, just above it, is yet another crystal clear picture. But, this one is not a picture of God's love. This is a picture of the cross -- the source and ends of that love.

*John 15-3:14: And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*

See, what we're being taught in today's scripture is that the cross is how we get to God's love in the first place. And further, we're seeing that the bronze serpent, just like the cross of Jesus Christ, just like most everything in our faith walks is humbling. Looking to the cross is a free and amazing gift that restores us and gives us eternal life. It's our anti-venom. But, looking to the cross requires us to acknowledge our condition. It requires us to acknowledge that we're out here ultimately lost and dying. It requires us to acknowledge we were the ones who got us into this mess. It requires us to admit “I don't have the answers. My friends don't have the answers. One more book or podcast or expert doesn't have the answers.” Only God has the answer, only He gives a light unlike any other light, and here's the thing -- He's given it to us in a way that we can *apprehend* but we can't *comprehend*. I mean it's a bronze serpent, it's a cross that heals us. What is that about? That's something we can *apprehend*, but not *comprehend*. What that is, is that God's given us His love in a way that works but also in a way that we can't figure out and master and treat like a feather in our caps. It will always be God's gift that we receive in love, not our good idea to flaunt.

The cross of Jesus Christ is the historical event of God's ultimate self-revelation. In every way, shape, and form, we cannot claim that the cross of Jesus Christ was a good idea from us. It's from God. And it's given as a mysterious but free gift.

As Martin Luther understood it, the cross works as a gift by way of exchange. When God looks upon the cross of Jesus Christ, He sees our sin. And just the same, when God looks upon us, He radiates out with all the love

He has for His Son and our Savior. Do you see how humbling that is? We bring our sin, the venom already in us, that's all we bring, and we receive God's love. And not just God's love but the exact love God has for His Son Jesus. We contributed nothing of value and we got everything in return.

It's like when you finally pull into some unknown gas station and admit "I'm lost, I'm completely in the dark here. And so, all I'm bringing to this equation is my ability to admit how lost I am." It's the same concept. All we bring to our relationship with God is our need, our outstretched hand.

These next few weeks of Lent, as we journey closer to the cross, we are embarking into territory where there can be no mistake; it is all God's doing. It's His intervention, not our morals and good acts. It's him journeying to the cross, us disciples fell asleep. And see, that's good news. I want us to be aware of that, God is working even when we aren't. God loves you even when we don't understand it. That's part of what makes Lent so special. It's our opportunity to let go and just watch God work, to *apprehend* the depths of God's abiding love, even knowing we'll never fully *comprehend* it. That's how the cross works. It heals us. It restores us. It's a gift from God. It wasn't us figuring it out and getting it right. Quite the opposite. But it's a gift given freely.

See, we all too often try to short-circuit the work of the cross. We understandably want to be good Christians. We want to have it all together. We want to be the best neighbors and the smartest teachers and the kindest helpers. And all that's good. But, that's not the cross. That comes later. Right now, just look to it without any merit on your end. Just let God be the one who is working here.

That's how the cross works. That's how the bronze serpent works. That's how prayer and growing as a disciple and just about everything else in our faith works. Look to God, not ourselves. Trust His love, trust His righteousness. We don't have to have it all worked out. That's why we have Him.

Let's pray... Almighty God, through Jesus Christ you bring salvation to the world. Give us strength to trust in him. As we journey to the cross, let us stay close to him. In the lost areas of life, grant that we may simply witness to Your work, that we may share in Christ's victory over the power of death, for he dwells with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.