

WHY SHOULD I LOOK AT IT?

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Text: Numbers 21:4–9

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. 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 we detest this miserable food." Then God sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against God and against you; pray to God to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. And God said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

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One of my favorite aspects of the Torah in the Hebrew Bible is a story like this one: a story in which we see the Ancient Israelites as fully complicated humans. They have been liberated from their servitude in Egypt, they are a freed people with a prophet leader and a God who has saved them. They are moving towards their promised land, but they also have been wandering the desert for decades and in this constant liminal space between captivity and an unseen home. What do they do? They are impatient and they complain about the food! "We detest this miserable food!" they shout at Moses. At least in Egypt they had places to sleep and a variety of foods to eat. But out here in the desert they were hungry and lost and waiting . . . for a very long time.

The story says that the Israelites were impatient, which is also easily identifiable to a modern reader. And when we are impatient, we are not necessarily our most thoughtful selves, are we? When getting ready to do something, my daughter has a consistent slow-down spot: socks. Every other piece of preparation can be smooth and quick, but for some reason she gets stuck on socks. Putting on socks is when she stops, gets lost in thought, slows down, gets distracted or wanders away. "Necesitas poner tus medias, por favor! Put on your socks, please!" is a constant refrain in our house—and in two languages. It is during these sock moments that I get consistently impatient and do the things that I feel bad about later. In my impatience I snap at her or threaten a consequence or walk away passively. I am not my best self when I am impatient. Are you?

There are consequences for us when we become impatient. The consequences can be mild like needing to apologize to your child when you snap over socks. Sometimes the consequences can be unforeseen and somewhat random like God sending snakes to bite the Ancient Israelites. Sometimes our impatience can result in more insidious things like acts of violence, greed or great abuses of power. Impatience is not thoughtful, it is reactive instead of responsive, and it usually searches for the easiest and most proximate answer. Impatience has been one ingredient in the greedy recipe that has brought unforgiveable acts of inhumanity: I need more land so I will just seize it; I need a cheap labor force so I will enslave it; I need more so I will just take it now. Instead of waiting to find ways to live in relationship with others and the

earth, our impatience has created crisis after crisis. Impatience has consequences, and sometimes they can grow to be huge and get out of hand. This is why author and philosopher Bayo Akomolafe says this, which has become one of my favorite quotes: “The times are urgent; we must slow down.”¹ We do not bring our best selves to any situation when we are impatient. Urgency requires our best selves.

This does not mean that impatience by itself is wrong. Impatience is natural and human and will always teach us something about ourselves. Impatience may tell you what is important to you. Apparently being on time is important to me, which explains my sock impatience. I am also impatient with many things that are broken in our world and I want fixed now. But my impatience will not fix anything. My impatience will just cause me to be reactive and reach for the easiest thing on hand. To solve problems we must be responsive and thoughtful.

In this story from Numbers, the Ancient Israelites’ impatience seemed to really frustrate God, who then punished them by sending poisonous serpents to bite the people. This seems a bit like a non sequitur of a response to me, but this is how the story tells it. These snakes frightened and hurt the people, who went to Moses and pleaded for him to intervene with God. So, Moses prayed for the people. And God told him what to do: make a serpent of bronze, and put it on a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live. The solution looks like the problem. The solution to poisonous snakes was to look at a replica of that snake, and then the one bitten would survive.

The solution was to look at the problem. Remember, this does not mean that the Israelites were asked to replicate the problem. They were not asked to bite the snakes back—although what a trickster God move that would have been! They were not asked to replicate the pain and violence back onto the problem, instead they were asked to look directly at the source of the fear and hurt in order to heal.

The Israelites’ impatience wrought a consequence that bit them, literally, and caused pain, fear, and death. So, too, has our impatience wrought situations of pain, fear, and death. Impatience has been complicit in greed, complicit in theft, complicit in violence. If our urgencies had instead slowed us down to thoughtfulness, we may not have built such systems of oppression, exploitation, and marginalization. Impatience is what makes us try to get rich by any means, to grow by any means, to satiate every want by any means. If it were not for impatience, we would maybe not kneel on the necks of others. Impatience is not responsive, impatience is reactive.

The consequences of our impatience can be huge, but the solution is not to turn away. The solution is not to bite back. The solution is to stare directly at the problem. We must look at the problem in order to heal from it. We cannot turn away from the consequence that is white supremacy. We cannot turn away from the consequence that is human-created climate change. We cannot turn away from patriarchy, needless poverty, houselessness, abuse, or neglect. We cannot turn away. We must look right at them to be healed.

What if I don’t want to? Why should I look at it? Looking at it may be uncomfortable or guilt-inducing or anxiety-producing. I would much rather look away. Why should I look at it?

Healing cannot occur without looking at the source of the hurt. We don’t replicate the hurt back, but we do need to acknowledge the source of the pain. Ignoring never solved much. We cannot work toward a solution about climate change, either technologically or adaptively, without staring at the problem. We cannot dismantle white supremacy without knowing the history that put it together. We cannot heal ourselves or our communities without looking directly at the sources of the pain. We must stare at the snake to be saved from the bite of the snake.

¹Bayo Akomolafe, “The Times are Urgent: Let’s Slow Down,” <https://bayoakomolafe.net/project/the-times-are-urgent-lets-slow-down> (accessed March 15, 2021).

Like most sermons, this is easier said than done. Many of us who sit in categories of dominance have had the privilege of being able to pretend that the snake just doesn't exist. Most others, those bit hardest, may find that staring at the snake can be re-traumatizing. Looking at the problem is not supposed to be easy. We must be gentle with each other as we look at the snakes together. We have all been bitten and we all need healing and we need to do this together. We cannot rely on only some of us looking at the snake while others choose to ignore it.

This is one reason why we have relationships and communities—to stand with each other as we do the hard work of healing, to hold each other accountable so we can't ignore it, and to hold each other up when looking at it feels overwhelming. We all breathe the same air, we all share the same history, we all are asked to look at the snake. Humanity's reactive impatience has wrought many biting snakes throughout history, many of which we are still needing to heal from. Today, one gift of this scripture is that we are reminded that healing comes from looking directly at the snakes. We are called not to bite back, not to inflict more pain, but to bind ourselves together in covenantal community and look directly at the problems. We may not want to, it may be easier to not look, but healing for each of us and all of us will only come from looking at the source of the hurt. To be saved from the snake we must look directly at the snake. And we must do it now. "The times are urgent, we must slow down." Together.