

THE SERPENT IN THE WILDERNESS

Sermon by Mark S. Aites

SCRIPTURE READING: NUMBERS 21:4-9

TEXT: JOHN 3:12-15

INTRODUCTION:

1. **Num. 20:1**
2. Beginning in **verse 14**, we read of Moses' petition to the king of Edom to permit passage of Israel through their land to go in the direction of the promised land.
3. The king refused passage (**Num. 20:21**).
4. As we look at our text, Israel became discouraged and lost patience because they were going the wrong way, actually the long way around Edom.
5. The original language, in **21:4**, lit. reads: *"the soul of the people was shortened"*, which stresses their impatience.
6. The situation led to four things, which will serve for our lesson.

DISCUSSION:

I. SIN.

- A. Their impatience led to murmuring (**Num. 21:5**).
- B. **1 Cor. 10:9-10**
- C. The sin of murmuring or complaining was characteristic of Israel following their departure from Egypt.
 1. On one occasion, when water was scarce, the people complained (**Exod. 15:24; cf. 17:3**).
- D. It was the sin of murmuring or complaining that that led them to wander 40 years in the wilderness (**Num. 14:34**).
- E. It was their murmuring that led Moses to sin.
 1. **Num. 20:4**
 2. Moses if you recall then was told to speak to the rock, but instead struck it with his staff, which led to his failure to enter the promised land.
- F. When Israel murmured about the report of the spies sent into the promised land, God responded to them with a plague (**Num. 14:37**).
- G. When Korah led the rebellion in **Num. 16**, people died for for the transgression, again facing a plague from God (**16:41ff**).
- H. In the New Testament, we are admonished ourselves not to be guilty of murmuring or complaining (**Phil. 2:14-15**). Many a congregation has been hurt with the discontent of the members; the murmuring, backbiting, and complaining.
 1. These things are not the fruit of the Spirit, but rather the fruit of Satan and his works.
 2. We would do well to remember Paul's words in **Phil. 4:11**.
- I. Another sin was ingratitude.
 1. Here again their history from their departure from Egypt was characterized by ingratitude.
 2. **Num. 20:5**
 3. Even with Israel's destruction of the Canaanites with God's help (**21:3**), they still were ungrateful.
 4. Despite their ingratitude, God did save Israel (**Psa. 106:7-8**).
- J. Even today, there are those who love themselves (**cf. 2 Tim. 3:1ff**).
 1. It is a "give me" and not a "let me give" generation.
 2. Once Jesus healed 10 lepers, but only one thanked God (**Luke 17:17-18**).
 3. **1 Thess. 5:18**
- L. Another sin was contempt.
 1. They held the precious manna from heaven in contempt and despised the gift of God.
 2. Their attitude was again like that of which we read back in **11:5-6**.

3. In **2 Tim. 3:3** Paul was speaking of the evil or perilous times to come, and referred to those who would be “*despisers of good.*”
4. Israel despised the good things which God had provided and on this occasion their sins led to punishment.

II. SUFFERING.

- A. **Num. 21:6.**
 1. The serpents (snakes) were fiery in that their bites contained venom which led to the burning pain and inflammation characteristic of poisonous snakes.
 2. The situation was serious enough that people were dying from these snake bites.
- B. All of this is a reminder to us that with sin comes the consequences of sin.
- C. Today we suffer from the first sins in the Garden of Eden.
 1. **Rom. 5:12** (physical death).
 2. In the life of Joseph, the jealousy and envy of his brothers led them to sell their brother into slavery and lie to their father.
 3. In the life of King David, his sin with Bathsheba led to the death of her husband Uriah the Hittite, the rape of David’s daughter, and the rebellion and subsequent death of Absalom.
 4. Even today, we find ourselves on occasion suffering and bearing the consequences of our sins.
 - 1) It is true we can be forgiven.
 - 2) There have been and are now Christians in prisons, forgiven, but still bearing the consequences of their sins.
 5. “...*be sure your sin will find you out*” (**Num. 32:23**).

III. SUPPLICATION.

- A. **Num. 21:7**
- B. The supplication of Israel involved a couple of key points:
 1. The confession of their sin (**Prov. 28:13; 1 John 1:8-9**). The admission of sin is a crucial step in the process of repentance.
 2. Their request for intercession.
 - 1) Their desire was for Moses to pray on their behalf.
 - 2) Today, Jesus is our intercessor (**Isa. 53:12; Rom. 8:34; 1 Tim. 2:5**).
 3. The prayer of Moses for forgiveness (cf. **James 5:16; Acts 8:22, 24**). Prayer is important in forgiveness.

IV. SUPPLICATION.

- A. **Num. 21:8-9**
- B. The prescription for their healing was to look at the bronze serpent. Only in this way could they live.
- C. All too often even today, people speak of salvation as though it were unconditional.
 1. They frequently cite **Eph. 2:8-9**.
 2. True, we are saved by grace; and true it is the precious gift of God (**Rom. 6:23**), but to receive the merits and blessings of God’s grace, we must act!
 3. To make it clear, notice the comparison between the serpent in our text, and that of Christ **John 3:14-15**).
- D. As we have already noted, the prescription for the healing of Israel involved the bronze serpent.
- F. If we are to be healed of our sins, it is not possible without Jesus (**Isa. 53:5**).
 1. Note the statement at the prophesy of His birth (**Matt. 1:21**).

3. **Rom. 5:8; John 14:6.**

- G. Again, obedience to Christ is a condition of our being healed of our sins (**John 14:15, Heb. 5:8-9, Matt. 7:21; Rev. 22:14**).
- H. When the children of Israel complied in obedience and looked upon the bronze serpent they were healed.
1. When we obey Christ our healing is complete (**Acts 3:19; 22:16; 1 Pet. 2:24**).
 2. The apostle John wrote of Jesus as one *“who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood”* (**Rev. 1:5**).
 3. Just as the children of Israel experienced the complete healing of their snake bites, so too we experience the complete healing of our sins.
 4. But it is conditional upon our willingness to turn from sin.
- I. The primary reason for Israel’s healing was their repentance.
1. Turning from sin and turning to God.
 2. Repentance involves a change of heart, mind, and will, which implies to resolve to not continue in that sin.
 3. It is the regret of that sin which drives us to seek God’s forgiveness.
 4. **2 Cor. 7:10**

CONCLUSION:

1. Like the bronze serpent, Jesus was lifted up for our sins (**John 12:32**).
2. If you have never been baptized into Christ, you have been “infected” with sin, and as such, you will die in your sins without Jesus (**cf. John 8:24**).
3. We encourage you this morning to step out on faith; come turning from a life of sin (**Luke 13:3**); confessing Jesus (**Acts 8:37**); and then being baptized into Christ (**Gal. 3:27**).