

THE SERPENT OF BRASS

Moses - Part 22

Numbers 21:1-9; John 3:14-15

Intro: My text this morning has two parts to it. The first part is altogether glorious, an account of a great victory that the Lord gave His people over one of the Canaanite nations. The second part is tragic in its beginning, but, shall I say, *gracious* in its ending – gracious because of the way the Lord delivered His people even after they had sinned so grievously against Him.

We need to remember that at this point in Israel's history, they were drawing near to the end of the forty years of wandering to which the Lord had subjected them after they refused to go into the land from Kadesh Barnea. But apparently all during those year the Canaanite nations had been on a constant state of alert, and had carefully monitored the travels of the children of Israel. When he heard that they "came by the way of the spies . . . he fought against Israel, and took some of them prisoners." Evidently the defeat of Israel when some of the people tried to enter the land even after the Lord told them not to, made the Canaanite nations believe that the Israelites were not invincible after all. "The way of the spies" means *the way that the spies had taken to enter the land*. So he thought that the Israelites were getting ready to invade Canaan.

At first it seemed that he would defeat the Israelites. However, the Israelites made a vow to the Lord ("vowed a vow" – expressing their desperation and how they implored the Lord to undertake for them) that if He would give them victory over Ara and his people, they, the Israelites, would destroy all of the enemies' cities.

The Lord heard them, and delivered the Canaanites into their hands, and the Israelites destroyed their cities. It was an amazing triumph, and it should have been greatly strengthening to the faith of the Israelites. It was a case of answered prayer. The Israelites had turned to the Lord knowing that the Lord was the only One Who could possibly help them. And He did! If we were graphing the experiences of the Israelites in their journey to Canaan, this was definitely one that went up and off of the chart. They should have seen that the Lord was with them. Such a victory should have kept them from ever rebelling against the Lord again.

But it didn't! It was only a short time until they were back to their old

ways of complaining against the Lord.

Now as we move into the main part of my text for this morning, verses 4 through 9, I want you to notice the first part of verse 4, down to the word “Edom.” Here we need to turn back to chapter 20 to read verses 14 through 21 so we will understand the difficulty which the children of Israel were facing.

(Read Ex. 20:14-21.)

It would have greatly shortened the journey of the Israelites if they had been able to go through the land of Edom instead of going around. And you would have thought that if anyone would have been partial to the Israelites, it would have been the Edomites because the Edomites were the descendants of Esau. So in Edom and Israel you have the descendants of the twin sons of Isaac: Esau and Jacob.

But, as you can see, that was not to be. The Edomites were ready to fight Israel if they even tried to go through their land. So Israel was forced to go around the land of Edom. That greatly added to Israel’s difficulties.

So we should not be surprised to read in verse 4 about:

I. THE TROUBLES OF THE ISRAELITES ((Num. 21:6).

It was but a short time from their elation over their victory to total discouragement about the way ahead. “The way” was farther. Traveling was difficult. The weather was hot. And the people became not only “discouraged,” but “much discouraged.”

That word “discouraged” in the Hebrew is an interesting word, and I am sure that all of us have at one time or another, possibly many times, experienced what it means. It means that their souls had been shortened. It did not take much more than they were experiencing to make them explode. We sometimes speak of a person who get angry very easily that he has a short fuse. The people were very impatient with each other. It did not take much to set them against each other. They had about all that they could take, and often more than they could take. The nation was ready to explode! And explode they did. I can hear some of them saying, “The Lord could have made the Edomites willing for us to travel through their land, but He didn’t? Why didn’t He? Have you ever been in such a

situation in your own life? I'll have to confess to you that I have been there many times. I often think of the leper who approached the Lord saying to Him, "Lord, if Thou wilt Thou canst make me clean." And the Lord Jesus responded by saying, "I will; be thou clean" (Matt. 8:3). And immediately he was cleansed of that terrible, incurable disease. But we know that there is nothing impossible with the Lord, and yet, although He doesn't say to us, "I won't," yet He doesn't do anything, and we are kept wondering *why*.

In the case of the Israelites we can see that they needed to settle down, to trust in the sufficiency of the Lord, and to wait to see what the Lord would do to help them. As I have often said, and I have to remind myself occasionally of this, we are inclined to tell the Lord what we want Him to do *for* us, but while He is concerned about this too, yet He may see that our greatest need is for Him to do a greater work *in* us.

Against Arad, the Lord heard their cry, and gave them victory. Against Edom, there is no evidence that they prayed, but the Lord was silent. It was what the Puritans used to speak of those times when it seems that the Lord has deserted us.

What did the people do?

II. THE PEOPLE'S REBELLION (Num. 21:5).

Now in our reading we know that the Lord was going to bring a terrible judgment upon them of poisonous snakes. But that judgment might be related to the behavior of the Israelites. Paul, in describing the sinful nature of man in Romans 3, said in verse 13, at the end of the verse, and quoting from Psalm 140:3, "the poison of asps is under their lips." The verse from which it is quoted in the OT calls it an adder, which can mean a viper.

This is not very complimentary of what can come out of man's mouth. If we get angry we can spue out poisonous venom on each other, *and even upon God!*

Numbers 21:5 is a good illustration of human venom. The word says that they spoke "against God and against Moses." And they did! But you can see that it was primarily against God! When you and I get angry, we will do ourselves and everyone else a great favor if we will just keep our

mouths *shut!* But see the poison they shot out. “Why did You bring us out of Egypt to die in a place like this? There isn’t any food here, and we don’t have any water. And we are just sick and tired of this manna. We hate it!” Look at their words. There just wasn’t anything that God had done for them that was good. I doubt if any of us can really understand how terrible Israel’s words were to God – and to Moses. It was enough to send Moses to his grave at that very moment. It is absolutely amazing that the Lord did not strike the whole nation dead at that very moment.

But He did judge them.

III. THE JUDGMENT OF GOD UPON ISRAEL (Num. 21:6).

When Moses in the book of Deuteronomy was reviewing how the Lord had led and cared for His people during all of the years of their wandering in the wilderness, he said this, speaking of the Lord:

15 Who led thee through that great and terrible wilderness [or desert], wherein were fiery serpents, and scorpions, and drougt ... (Deut. 8:15a).

Many commentators speak of that desert territory as being infested with poisonous snake and scorpions. And yet it is amazing that this is the first time in almost forty years that they had trouble with snakes. The Lord had held all of these varmints in check until He released them to strike and kill many of the Israelites. I couldn’t help but think how often the Lord must take care of us when we are completely unaware of what He is doing. For years the Lord has protected us from the terrorists, but we and every other nation on the face of the earth has rejected His Word, despising His will, and now we are beginning to reap the consequences. When are we going to wake up?

Those poisonous snakes had the ability to kill every Israelite in the desert. And many of them did die, so much so that the people came to Moses and pled with him to pray for them. Isn’t it interesting that the people could attack Moses mercilessly when things were not going there way, but when they got in trouble, he was the one they asked to pray for them.

IV. THE DISTRESSFUL CRY OF THE PEOPLE (Num. 21:7a).

Listen again to the what the people had to say to Moses. (Read the first part of verse 7.) What happened to all of their arrogance? What happened to all of their language in which they sought to degrade God?

Why should Moses pray for them, and why should the Lord take away the serpents? They had no right to ask for prayer, nor did they have any right to ask God to take the serpents away. Notice there is in their words the recognition that they had sinned, really sinned, sinned terribly, and that God is the One Who had sent the serpents to destroy them. People today would be inclined to look upon this as what happens to people when they go through the desert, that it was no big deal at all. Where are the voice today declaring that we have sinned, sinned terrible and constantly, against the Lord, and that is why we are overcome with problems for which there is no human answer? Have you heard any? Does the Lord have to beat us down with more problems until people begin to cry out, “We have sinned. We have sinned. Won’t somebody pray for us?”

How did Moses respond?

V. THE RESPONSE OF MOSES (Num. 21:7b).

We find it in our Bibles in six simple words: “And Moses prayed for the people.” And although it doesn’t say so in the Bible, I wouldn’t be a bit surprised to find out that as Moses prayed for them, he was on his face before the Lord where we have seen him so many times. We are not told what he said, just that he prayed. What he prayed was between him and the Lord.

What an illustration of our Lord’s words at a much later time, when He said,

44 But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you;

45 That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven . . . (Matt. 5:44-45a).

What Moses did demonstrated that he was a child of God because only a child of God would respond like he did.

How did the Lord respond? Did He hear Moses’ prayer? What does the Word tell us?

VI. THE LORD’S RESPONSE (Num . 21:8).

He told Moses to do a very strange thing. He told him to make a model of a fiery snake, a poisonous snake, put it up high on a pole where it could

seen from all over the camp, promising that whenever and whoever a person was bitten by a snake, he, or she, old or young, could look at that snake, and he or she would not die. That was the promise.

And now we come to:

VII. THE OUTCOME (Num. 21:9).

It can be pointed out in three statements:

- 1) Moses obeyed and made the brass serpent and put it high on a pole.
- 2) People who were bitten looked.
- 3) The Lord healed, and those who had looked healed.

And now let me point out, in conclusion, some of the messages of this event:

Concl: The first thing I would point out is that we have a vivid picture of the sinfulness of man. While we live in times when men try to deify man, to make man out as the very essence of goodness, we need to see how man is portrayed before God, a hopeless sinner, under the judgment of God, and utterly unable to do a single thing by himself to make himself right with God. We see every day evidence that man is not even concern-ed about God.

The second message of this incident is one in which we see the sovereignty of God. God was very displeased by what the people were saying about Him, but it didn't change Him in the least. And when He brought judgment upon the people, there was absolutely nothing that they could do about it. You talk about a problem for which there was no human solution, that is what the Israelites faced.

But we also learn in this story that while Moses and Aaron were just as helpless in themselves as the Israelites were, yet there was one thing that they could do which was tremendously effective. And that was to pray. I often get discouraged about prayer, but the fact remains that God wants us to pray, He hears when we pray, He delights when we look to Him for the help that we need, and He answers prayer. Our confidence in prayer, and the fact that we pray, is evidence in a God-less world that we are the children of God, that God is our Father through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. So let us pray for revival. Let us pray for the convicting work of the Spirit to be seen in the lives of people who do not give a thought to

God. It doesn't take long for the Holy Spirit to make a careless, pleasure-loving sinner, suddenly turn into one who will seek God with his whole heart.

And we see great evidence of the grace and mercy of God in this story. Did the Israelites deserve to be delivered from the snakes? No, they deserved just what they got. The fact that they were delivered does not show that they were worthy to be delivered, but it shows that while God is a Judge of all sin, yet because of the death of Christ on the Cross, He extends His mercy and grace in forgiving those sinners who turn from their sins to Him.

The greatest lesson in this whole story was pointed out by our Lord Jesus Christ when He was speaking to Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, who came at night to see and talk to the Lord, whose story is told in the Gospel of John, chapter 3. And this is in part what He said to Nicodemus:

14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up:

15 That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life (John 3:14-15).

Remember that last week I was talking about types – pictures or illustrations in the Bible of some of the great truths of Scripture. Well, here we have a type which was clearly identified by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. The Lord told Nicodemus that the serpent which Moses put on that pole and raised up for all people to see, was a type of the Lord Himself.

But you say, "Wait a minute! The Bible speaks of the Devil as a Serpent, not the Lord. The Devil appeared to Eve in the Garden of Eden as a serpent. In 2 Corinthians 11:3 the Apostle Paul referred to the temptation of Eve in these words, "As the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty." And in Revelation 12:9 the Apostle John spoke of the Devil in these words: "And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world . . ." How could a serpent possibly be a type, a picture, a representation of the Son of God? Serpents crawling on their bellies represent the Devil under the curse of God. And the Apostle Paul in writing to the Galatian churches made this statement in Galatians 3:13 and 14:

13 Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree:

14 That the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

And I would add to that the Apostle Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 5:21. I am reading now from the New King James which gives us the same words as in the original King James Version, but in a better order. This is what Paul said:

21 For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Cor. 5:21).

No one can adequately explain what it meant to Christ for Him to become a sacrifice, dying for the sins of His people. But the picture given to Israel, and to us, was of One suffering and dying under the curse, under the judgment of God, that we might be forgiven.

We are just as unworthy of salvation as the Israelites were to be forgiven by looking at the brazen serpent. They looked in faith believing that God would heal them, just as we are called upon to put our faith in a Savior Who died in our place so that we could be forgiven and have eternal life.

And let me remind you that there was just one remedy for the deadly bite of those snakes, by looking at the brass serpent on the pole. And there is only one way of salvation today, and that is through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ Who died taking our penalty upon Himself, that we might have eternal life. If you have never looked in faith to Jesus Christ, the One and only Savior, I trust that you will look to Him today that you might be saved.