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Lesson 16
The Fiery Serpents
Numbers 21:1-9

Israel in the wilderness is a lesson in what to do and what not to do for Christians. When the Israelites believed God, they were blessed, but when they failed to believe God, they were disciplined. Unfortunately they spent much of the time in unbelief and under the disciplinary hand

Numbers 21:1-9 has some tremendous ramifications for us on Christian morality and the simplicity of the gospel for weary, seeking souls. The fiery serpent incident is referred to in the New Testament so we know it is a type or symbol or illustration of Christ and His *“so great salvation”* (John 3:14-15).

DESTROYING THE ENEMY — Numbers 21:1-3

“When the Canaanite, the king of Arad, who lived in the Negev, heard that Israel was coming by the way of Atharim; then he fought against Israel, and took some of them captive.” A new generation of Jews had grown up. The entire adult Jews in the rebellion had died. Moses was still living and would continue to lead Israel to the border of Canaan, but God would not permit him to go into the land because of his own rebellion and unbelief. Moses, with Joshua and Caleb at his side, began to lead the people around Canaan to the eastern border of the Promised Land. On the way, the king of Arad, who lived in the south of Canaan, attacked the Israelites. This was the very first military encounter with the Canaanites, and in this initial skirmish, the Canaanites were victorious and took some of the Israelites captive. This surely gave the king and his armies’ confidence and perhaps they were ready to attempt an all-out attack on Israel.

If the king of Arad had left the people of God alone, his own people would have been permitted to live a while longer before being destroyed by God. Those who attack God’s people must be prepared not only to fight God’s people but to fight God Himself.

“So Israel made a vow to the LORD, and said, ‘If Thou wilt indeed deliver this people into my hand, then I will utterly destroy their cities.’” The Israelites made a solemn vow or promise to totally annihilate the southern Canaanites if God would give them the victory. Apparently the Israelites had promised to devote these destroyed cities and people unto God and take no spoil for their own use. The words “utterly destroy” mean, “devote to destruction.”

This was an act of belief by Israel, and God blessed this act of belief by giving a spiritual and military victory.

“And the LORD heard the voice of Israel, and delivered up the Canaanites; then they utterly destroyed them and their cities. Thus the name of the place was called Hormah.” God gave Israel the victory and the people, their animals, and their cities were totally destroyed. History tells us that this destruction of southern Canaan was so complete that it was not inhabited again for thousands of years. Hormah means, “devoted to destruction.”

Why would God require such a total destruction of a race of people, including women and children? It sounds so brutal, so heartless, so cruel, and so incompatible with a God of love. God is more than love, for He is holiness and righteousness; one who practices justice as well as love. God had a definite reason for destroying the Canaanites. They were a morally wicked, vile, and degenerate race of people. They were materialists through and through, and their society was filled with sexual perverts. The Canaanites had the same system of degeneracy as that of Sodom. Fornication (premarital sex), adultery (extra-marital sex), homosexuality, lesbianism, and bestiality were a lifestyle among these people. Also,

they had a very low concept of human life and child sacrifice was a basic part of their society. All this immorality was done in the name of religion. It was practiced as part of their concept of god. Of course, their god was the Devil as he disguised himself in the god Baal. This race was so wicked that God had to destroy it for the protection and preservation of the human race. Whenever a race of people, a nation, or an individual begins to violate God's moral law and deprecate God's divine institutions (government, marriage, work, etc.), there will be judgment. One of the best things that ever happened to the human race was the destruction of the Canaanites.

The destruction of the Canaanites may help us to understand that homosexuality is something learned and not inherited. The Canaanites were descendents of the white sons of Ham. Apparently Ham and Canaan (his grandson) were homosexuals (Gen. 9:18-27). These traits were accepted and taught to a whole nation as a legitimate lifestyle. Why? They rejected God and His moral law; therefore judgment would come upon them.

DISTRUSTING GOD - Numbers 21:4-5

“Then they set out from Mount Hor by the way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; . . .” Moses now led this new generation around Edom and away from Canaan, the Promised Land. The Edomites had specifically commanded the Israelites not to go through Edom (Num. 20:20, 21). Why did not Israel fight the Edomites? Because they were relatives through Esau even though they were unbelievers.

“...And the people became impatient because of the journey.” The people knew they had turned southward, moving back out into the desert, towards the Red Sea and their backs were to the Promised Land. They had limited supplies of water in a hot, dry desert, and they were bored with manna. They grew impatient and there was no contentment in their souls, so they began to gripe, complain, moan, and groan in unbelief of God's ability to meet their every need.

All Christians must learn to exercise patience, for without it they may well become negative Christians. One of the fruits of the Spirit is patience. ***“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law”*** (Gal 5:22-23).

Sometimes God works out circumstances so it looks like we are going backwards in our Christian lives, but this is just a test so we will believe God and go forward. Sometimes we have to take two steps backward in order to go three steps forward.

“And the people spoke against God and Moses, ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water...’” Everything was out of perspective for these Jews because they were personally out of fellowship with God. God was not going to kill them, but He intended to bless them by taking them into the Promised Land. Furthermore, there was bread, for they had manna, but they were not satisfied with this heavenly bread. When they got out of fellowship they blamed God and Moses for their problems.

“...And we loathe this miserable food.” Manna was from heaven; it was angel's food. It was the best bread ever given to man, full of rich vitamins and minerals, and it had a luscious taste. Yet they called this “light bread” unfit for human consumption. They were discontent with God's lot for their lives. Discontentment makes us unhappy with anything and everything because our souls are not at rest with God's will for our lives. Discontentment is due to unbelief in God's sovereign will for one's life, and God hates unbelief.

DISCIPLINE OF THE PEOPLE — Numbers 21:6-9

“And the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.” For their unbelief, griping, complaining and discontent, God brought Israel divine discipline. He disciplined them with physical death for their sin. This is called in the New Testament “the sin unto death” where a true believer loses his physical life because of sin but still is saved.

“If any one sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask and God will for him give life to those who commit sin not leading to death. There is a sin leading to death; I do not say that he should make request for this. All unrighteousness is sin, and there is a sin not leading to death” (1 John 5:16-17).

The means God used to bring about this discipline was fiery serpents. God brought multitudes of snakes into the camp of Israel, They are called fiery serpents because they were venomous snakes or because of the fiery red color of the snakes. We know that the Arabia even today does produce a poisonous viper with red spots arid wavy stripes. This was a horrible kind of discipline to be bitten by venomous vipers and to find a snake everywhere one turned. Sometimes God must use drastic discipline to get our attention.

“So the people came to Moses and said, ‘We have sinned, because we have spoken against the LORD and you; intercede with the LORD, that He may remove the serpents from us.’ And Moses interceded for the people.” Under the rod of God, the sons of Israel relented and repented. Unlike their fathers, this new generation was not so hardhearted and they truly saw that they had sinned against God and Moses, and they asked for forgiveness. This was true repentance because they saw clearly that they had sinned against Jehovah, their covenant God, and against His moral law. Sin will never be truly repented of until we see that sin is against God alone. ***“Against Thee, Thee only, I have sinned, and done what is evil in Thy sight...”*** (Psalm 51:4a).

We see also that when in trouble the people saw their need of Moses even though just a short while before they were complaining about him. Leadership, when doing a good job, is rarely appreciated.

“Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a standard; and it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he shall live.’ And Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on the standard, and it came about, that if a serpent bit any man, when he looked to the bronze serpent, he lived.” The moment the Israelites were truly repentant for their sins, God made a wonderful provision for them. He commanded Moses to make a bronze snake and place it up on a pole. Anyone who was bitten by a snake would be healed if he looked at the bronze serpent. This most assuredly was a miraculous cure. However, the healing power was not in the bronze serpent but in the power of God and the bronze serpent was just a means to the end. The Jews in their interpretation of this passage say that it was not the sight of the brazen serpent that cured them, but in looking up to it, they looked up to God as the Lord who healed them. When Israel murmured in unbelief, the viper’s bite of discipline was the answer. However, when the Israelites confessed their sin, God’s grace was the answer. God made a complete and sufficient remedy for their healing from the poisonous bite of the snakes. They were to look and live. They were not to look at themselves, nor at their wounds, nor at others about them, but directly and exclusively to the bronze serpent, God’s remedy. If the bitten Jew refused or neglected to look to the bronze serpent, there was nothing for him but death. To look anywhere else was to get nothing; to look at God’s provision was to get life. Each Jew had to look for himself in intense individuality. No one could look for another. Wherever the Jew was in the camp when bitten, he only had to glance at the bronze serpent and he was healed. The Jew did not have to have a full theoretical knowledge of why the bronze serpent healed him; he only had to look and be healed as God had commanded. The means to healing was a simple glance. The healing was immediate and complete because the bronze serpent was God’s only and all-sufficient means for healing.

What happened in Numbers 21 is directly related to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The fiery serpent was a type of Jesus Christ. ***“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son***

of Man be lifted up; that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:14, 15). The lifting up of Christ is a picture of His perfect, complete and all-sufficient death for sinners. It is through Christ’s death that men are drawn to Christ and saved. ***“And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself.’ But He was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which He was to die***” (John 12:32-33). As the serpent was lifted upon a pole (with the pole probably making a form of a cross with the serpent setting on the cross piece) so the Son of Man was lifted up on a piece of wood (the cross) to die. As the serpent was an all-sufficient remedy for a healing, so Christ is an all-sufficient remedy for sin. As the Jew received an immediate and complete physical healing from the poisonous snakebite by looking at the brazen serpent, so the sinner gets an immediate and complete spiritual deliverance by looking to Christ for healing. As the Jew was spared the judgment of physical death by looking to the bronze serpent, so the sinner who looks to Christ in genuine saving faith is spared the judgment of spiritual death. Just as the Jew only had to glance at the serpent to be healed, so the sinner only has to glance at Jesus in simple faith to be saved.

The implications for the declaring of the gospel are numerous when comparing Numbers 21:6-9 with John 3:14, 15. First, Jesus Christ alone can save. The sinner must look to Jesus, not the church, not the sacraments, not men, not angels, not parents, but to Christ and Christ alone, for He is the all-sufficient Savior. ***“And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved”*** (Acts 4:12). Second, for a sinner to come to Christ, he only has to glance in genuine faith. He does not have to understand all the theory behind the gospel. He only has to know he is a sinner and that Christ saves and then look to Christ in simple faith. ***“...Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved...”*** (Acts 16:31). Third, the gospel is for whoever believes in Christ. It is a simple, living, vital, and genuine faith in the resurrected Christ that saves a person and that salvation in Christ is available to all who will avail themselves of it. ***“Turn to Me, and be saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other”*** (Isa. 45:22).

In dealing with people about their need of Christ, make sure they understand that they are sinners, separated from God and under God’s wrath and judgment. Then tell them who Christ is and that He died and was resurrected so men could be saved from the guilt and penalty of sin. Finally, invite them to believe in Christ for salvation. Exhort and encourage them to simply glance at Christ who gives eternal life to all who truly believe. Do not make the gospel too complicated for the average person. He needs only the basic facts and a genuine commitment to Jesus Christ for salvation to take place.

CONCLUSION

Have you looked to Christ for salvation? Have you thought that Christ would not accept you until you cleaned up your life or worked your way into His favor? Have you thought you did not know enough about Christ and the Bible to be accepted by God? The Bible says to glance at Christ in genuine faith and be saved. Christ saves all who look to Him in real faith.

Do you know you have been bitten by the poisonous viper of sin and are in need of cleansing and healing lest you die and be judged for your sin? Do you know that Christ died for sinners that they might not face judgment? Do you believe Christ died for you and are you willing to bow to Him as Lord? If you can say “Yes” to these questions, then you are saved and you should move out in positive faith to conquer your promised land for Christ.