1-5-20

Numbers 21:1-9

At the time of this account, Israel had been wondering the wilderness for about thirty-eight years. Most of the generation that had originally left Egypt was now gone. The generation that was left had spent most or all their lives traveling the desert, following a column of cloud or a pillar of fire. Miriam was gone and Aaron had also passed away. They were almost ready to enter the Promised Land.

At this point in their journey, a Canaanite king decided that it was in his best interest to travel some distance and attack Israel. At this time, Israel showed some signs of progress in their obedience to the LORD. They spoke to the LORD first and asked Him to deliver the Canaanites over to them; this would be giving Him the glory for a victory. Next, they promised to devote the Canaanites and the cities of Arad to destruction. This means that there would be nothing left alive of people or animals and all their material goods would be utterly destroyed. In this way, the people of Israel would have no material gain for their efforts; it would all be irrevocably given to God.

God saw to it that the Israelites had the victory and they kept their word by destroying everything as they had said. This was the first victory the people of Israel had over the people of Canaan.

Israel was still not finished with its travels; they still had one more long trek to make around the nation of Edom. This must have been hard on them. They knew that they were close to the end of the forty years that God had told them they would wonder the desert. Now, they had just had a great victory against the people who inhabited the land that God had promised to give them. After the exhilarating defeat of their enemies, they now had to go back to slowly trudging along in the wilderness, driving their animals and carrying their belongings.

In our Christian lives, we sometimes have mountain top experiences. These are times where we feel very close to the Lord. These are times where there has been some great breakthrough in prayer and the Lord has provided a bountiful answer. These are the times when we feel good and we don’t want them to end. But because we are currently dwelling in this life, they do end. We go back to work or school or just to the regular routine of life. Perhaps we go directly into some situation that is worse than the one we were just delivered from.

When this happens, it is very easy for us to do exactly what the Israelites did; complain. It is easy for us to read these stories and point our finger at how the Israelites failed. But we do the same thing over and over. It doesn’t take much for us to forget the wonderful blessings we have received and focus on the bad or even just the mundane. Keep this in mind; like the Israelites, our journey through the wilderness is not over yet, we must still put up with evil and sin. But God will, through Jesus Christ, bring us into that promised land. He will sometimes bless us with a little foretaste here, but the fullness is still to come.

It is never a waste of time to consider the Old Testament in light of the New. Things in the Old Testament constantly turn out to be types or shadows of things that take place in the New Testament; often times, they point to Jesus. The part of todays Scripture that we have already looked at demonstrates a well-known concept of Christianity: perseverance. We are to persevere no matter how many times we fall off the mountain or how few times we get to the top. We are to cling to God through Jesus Christ. He who perseveres to the end will be saved. The next part of the Scripture Jesus makes it easy for us to find the connection; He points it out.

John 3:14-15

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.

Jesus made this statement while He was talking with Nicodemus, the Pharisee. Jesus had just told him that he must be born again; that his spirit must undergo rebirth. Nicodemus did not understand and this had been part of Jesus’ explanation. It would not be until after the crucifixion and the coming of the Holy Spirit, that Nicodemus, or anyone else, would be able to understand.

Back to our story in Numbers. The people start singing the same old song; ‘if only we could be back in Egypt where we had lots of different kinds of food. We are just going to die in this wilderness.’ They were on very thin ice here; it was this kind of complaining that had caused the forty-year wondering in the first place. They said that there was no food or water, although the LORD had provided them with both ever since they left Egypt. Then they complained about the food they did have, “we loath this miserable food”.

They were, of course, referring to the manna that God provided each morning. Just on the surface, they were complaining about God’s provision. It was obvious that they were entirely dependent on God for everything and God was entirely dependable. Yet, they weren’t happy with what He gave them. He provided them with bread from heaven; this bread kept them alive and so, it was the bread of life. From this, we can see that there was a much greater significance to this bread than just providing food. The Israelites would have had no way of knowing this deeper significance, but it shows why we must trust God even when we don’t understand why He does what He does.

Obviously, that bread of life pointed to Jesus. Specifically, in John 6:35,38, Jesus said ‘I am the bread of life’ and ‘I have come down from heaven’. The manna that the Jews complained about was the foreshadowing of the coming Saviour; the Son of God. God provided manna in the wilderness to give them life; but He was preparing them to receive His Son who would give them eternal life. The fact that they complained about the manna was a prophecy of their reaction to Jesus.

John 6:41

Therefore the Jews were grumbling about Him, because He said, “I am the bread that came down out of heaven.”

We also see this in John 1:11,

He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him.

Just as the Jews rejected the manna that God provided, they rejected His Messiah. They could not bring themselves to fully depend on God even though it was obvious that there was no other choice. And there continues today to be so many who reject God, who so lovingly and freely offers everlasting life to anyone who will accept Him. But we have to do things His way and trust Him; and this goes against our sinful rebellious nature.

To reject the LORD’s good provision is a sin; and sin brings God’s righteous wrath, His just punishment. To complain about the LORD’s provision is to complain about the LORD. In response to the complaining, God sent fiery serpents among the people. God sent a plague of venomous reptiles into the Israelite camp. Many people were bitten and the bite was fatal. Apparently, the bite from the snake burned like fire. The people were quick to get the message and turned to Moses, who was their intercessor.

The people confessed having sinned. They realized specifically what they had done wrong; they had spoken against God and against Moses, God’s official spokesman. They asked Moses to pray for them to have God take away the serpents. And the man of God did so.

Keep in mind that Moses said that God would raise up a prophet like him. We know that Jesus is the fulfillment of what Moses said. Jesus is the one we have that intercedes with the Father on our behalf. But even more, Jesus made it so that we can approach the Father ourselves and plead for mercy. We must daily make use of this wonderful gift that Jesus has won for us. As soon as we realize that we have sinned, we must not fear, but turn to the Father in confession and repentance. Don’t wait for Him to send a fiery serpent into your life, because He will. God wants to bring you back into fellowship with Himself.

It is important to understand what the LORD did in response to Moses’ prayer: He had mercy, He answered the prayer, but He didn’t answer it in the way the people asked. God didn’t remove the snakes; He made a way to deal with their effect, a way that preserved life. Now we can begin to tie this in more closely with what Jesus told Nicodemus.

First, Moses, the intercessor was obedient to God; just as Jesus, our intercessor was obedient to God in going to the cross. Moses fashioned a snake out of copper or bronze or brass; probably because it was easy to form quickly and would be durable. Perhaps it was the same color as the snakes. But the main thing was that he put it on a standard or pole to raise it up. As Jesus mentioned, He too, was raised up off the ground on the cross.

All the people had to do was to look at the bronze snake, and they would be healed. There was nothing magic about the snake; to look at it expecting healing was an act of faith in God’s word. It is the same for us; when we look to Jesus in faith, we are healed. We are healed of all of our spiritual death so that we may have eternal life. The Jews had a choice, they could have disbelieved God’s word and looked for some other way to be healed of their snake bite; and they would have died in their fiery pain. Likewise, many people refuse to look to Jesus for salvation and they die in their sins.

The snakes were still there; the people were still being bitten and suffering the terrible pain of the bite. When bitten, they still had to make their way to where they could see the bronze serpent. God did not remove the problem; He provided a solution if the people chose to accept it.

Christ came and died for our sins; but sin is still here. We must deal with it daily. As Christians, we ought to be trying to avoid sin just as much as we would try to avoid being bitten by a venomous snake. You can bet that the people of Israel were very careful once they realized how many of these snakes were around; we should be no less diligent about avoiding sin.

But sometimes we are bitten. Once that happens, we should waste no time heading for the cross. Once bitten by a serpent, the Israelites had to get to the bronze serpent quickly or they would die. For us, sin means a separation in fellowship with our Father. This is something that we don’t want. Sin causes grief to our loving God; we want to fix this as soon as we can.

Looking to the serpent in faith gave life for a while longer on this earth. Looking to Jesus in faith gives us eternal life and all of it will be a mountain top experience.

The bronze serpent makes one more appearance in 2 Kings 18. This is during the time when Hezekiah was king over Judah. Hezekiah was a good king who did his best to follow God and lead his people to do the same. Hezekiah destroyed lots of idols and high places that his predecessor had set up. It turns out that the bronze serpent that Moses had made was still around. Unfortunately, by this time, it had become an idol to the people and they were burning incense to it. Hezekiah broke the serpent to pieces, which is exactly what he should have done.

There can be no idols for God’s people. God will suffer nothing else to be worshiped. This is a perfect example of something good becoming an idol. We must be aware of these things in our own life.

How does this apply to Jesus? The cross is very important. We must always remember that Jesus hung on the cross and it became the alter for the perfect sacrifice to cleanse us of our sin. The cross is necessary to Christianity and we need to be mindful that Jesus was crucified there. But Jesus is no longer on the cross. He is risen and alive and seated at the right hand of the Father. He is coming back to earth to rule all the nations.

There are those who worship the cross, or supposed pieces of it. But the cross was the means used by God to bring life, just as the bronze serpent was the means used by God to bring life. God is the bringer of life and we worship the living Jesus who was on that cross.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, each time we celebrate the ordinance of Your supper, we remember You. We remember that You hung on that cross and that Your blood soaked the ground and that You died there. We remember that You endured the cruelty of the cross on our behalf. By looking up to You in faith, we are given life.

Lord God, Your amazing word glorifies You. You reveal mysteries that You hid for centuries and even before the beginning of time. It shows that You already had everything worked out. Your word shows that You are all-wise all-powerful God; and You condescended to come here as a man and die on a cross.

We worship You as the only true God; we worship You as the only true salvation. Glorious Lord, perfectly holy yet taking our sin upon Yourself. We owe You our eternal life and are forever grateful. Use us that we may be pleasing to You.

We pray these things in Jesus’ name

Amen