

Kadesh Barnea – what next?

The people were not happy at going back to the desert for 40 years. Suddenly they were ready to take on the giants of Canaan. But God had said no, and the disobedient returned a soundly defeated people.

Korah's rebellion

Had the generation of grumbles learnt their lesson? NO. In Numbers 16 Korah leads a rebellion with over 250 community leaders against Moses and Aaron.

Moses is accused of leading the children of God out of “a land flowing with milk and honey” (Num.16:13)

Egypt – where their baby sons were thrown into the Nile and the adult males suffered the whip until they died of exhaustion.

God deals with the situation miraculously by causing the earth to split open and swallow Korah and the leading protagonists with all their possessions. Then the 250 others are consumed by spontaneous fire.

The next day – the people grumble at Moses, Aaron and really God for killing the rebels. Moses and Aaron intercede for the people before God, standing between the living and the dead (Num.16:48) but a further 14,700 die as a result of a sudden plague among them.

To try and silence the grumbling each of the 12 tribes were to place a staff in the tent of Meeting. The one that sprouted was the one of God's choice to serve as priests before the Lord. 12 dead sticks placed before God and only one experienced resurrection. Aaron's staff not only sprouted but flowered and produced almonds.

Time passed by

About 38 years pass by between Numbers 20 and 21. The Hebrews are back at Kadesh Barnea. Miriam, Moses sister dies and is buried.

Meribah

Numbers 20:1-13

The people, the next generation grumble at a lack of food and water. The people do not clamour for the cucumbers and melons of Egypt but are impatient for the figs, grapes and pomegranates of Canaan. The most pressing need however is water. God graciously agrees to supply the peoples need. Moses need only speak to the rock and water will come forth.

For all his faith, steadfastness, obedience and persistence, Moses still had his old sin nature. The one that caused him to kill an Egyptian 80 years previously. He has been angry with the people before, but still interceded for them. His instructions were simple. Speak to the rock, but he chose to use the situation to speak to, or more likely scream at the people and in his anger struck the rock with his staff not once but twice. (See Psalm 106:32-33 especially in The Message) “They angered God again at Meribah springs; this time Moses got mixed up in their evil; Because they defied God yet again, Moses exploded and lost his temper.” He drew attention to himself instead of exalting the holiness of God. He effectively took credit for the miracle. He was supposed to be their shepherd not their judge.

Moses and Aaron are rebuked by God and loose their chance to enter the Promised Land. They had usurped God’s authority and as Jesus taught “From everyone who has been given much, much will be required” Luke 12:48

This also reminds us that no one is perfect and no one is indispensable. He may have missed out on Canaan, but he entered the heavenly Promised Land when he died, and eventually made it to Canaan with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration.

Self-control is a fruit of the spirit and the loss of it can cause us to suffer the consequences.

Aaron's death follows almost immediately and since the faithless generation had all but passed away it was time to draw near to Canaan.

Moses asks for permission to pass through Edom, but this is denied, and to avoid conflict Moses leads the people another way.

On the way in answer to prayer they experienced another military victory.

The bronze snake

Numbers 21:4-9

But the people complain again, impatient with God and detesting his seemingly unimaginative provision of food. It is so much easier to complain than to trust. Easier to question than believe. God had been pleased to meet all their needs, for food, water and military victory.

They accused God of deception and lying, to bring them out of Egypt only to die in the wilderness like their unbelieving parents. They accused him of breaking his promises, and as judge and jury they found God guilty! Such sin could not go unpunished.

God's response was to send venomous snakes amongst them, and many people died in excruciating pain.

The people have learnt one thing. "We have sinned" Repentance. No excuses, no blaming circumstances, other people, the weather or little green men in tin hats from Mars.

David confessed when challenged by Nathan.

The prodigal confessed his sin when he returned home penniless to his father.

Maybe all the revivalist meetings and evangelical crusades that achieve so little do so because of a lack of real repentance among God's people.

Moses was called upon to intercede for the people. Moses couldn't heal them any more than we could. But he could and did intercede. So should we for individuals and nations.

Moses didn't lecture them, or say that'll teach you for messing with me. He had learnt well the lesson of Meribah. He prayed and was given a solution – to put a bronze snake on pole. Instead of erasing the image from their minds it was to be ever before them. Anyone who was bitten could look at it and live. To look by faith, recognise sin and God's right to judge sin and his willingness to show mercy. There was nothing magical in the bronze snake. It was simply God's remedy. The intellectual, who reasoned and speculated that looking at a bronze snake on a pole could not heal one of snakebite, died in pain. It was ridiculous but it was their only hope of survival.

God made an unlimited offer; anyone could be saved from the bite of the snake. Everyone was equal, rich or poor, of high or low status the cure was the same for all. They were not told to fight off the snakes. The complete cure was also within the reach of all. No rocket science was needed, no eloquent prayers, no special offerings, no doctorate in theology, not even a promise never to be naughty like that again – just simple child like obedience. A man was healed not by what he saw, but by total obedience to God's terms and conditions. God has authority over life and death. No one could look on behalf of another.

Relieved, restored, healed. Deserving God's punishment the received God's grace.

The bronze serpent on a pole illustrates God's total triumph over the serpent, promised when Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden of Eden. Sadly this image rather than being a reminder of what God had done, became an object of worship in itself and generations later King Hezekiah had it broken up to prevent this idolatry.

People are more sensible today! It has been suggested that if all the pieces of the cross that are claimed to exist are put together, one could build a battleship. Relics are powerless, buildings but brick and stone, worship styles as diverse as our God are acceptable, and even Bible knowledge does not save.

Even if denominations were nationalised God would still be alive and well and living in His people who have faith in Him, His will and His ways.

Jesus was to refer to this incident as a picture of his saving work on the cross. (John 3:1-21)

It was to a well taught Pharisee who was seeking to know God's truth from the son of a carpenter. His name was Nicodemus. Jesus told him that salvation is not about counting good works, praying a certain number of times each day, or maintaining an appearance of purity, but from looking at Jesus on the cross and believing that the Son of God came, died, and rose again to pay the price in full for all who would believe. He did just that when he accompanied Joseph of Arimathea to collect his body and bury it in the tomb. (John. 19:38-42)

We can by faith look to the Christ of the cross to see our sin as God sees it, and to see and receive the same solution to that sin that God has provided.

It is ridiculous but is our only hope of survival, of eternal salvation from sin and hell. We can only come to God on his terms. His mercy is not open to negotiation. Just as many died of snake bite AFTER God's provision of healing, so today many die in sin AFTER God's provision of healing and forgiveness.

Conclusions

If we heed the exhortation of David to "Bless the lord O my soul and forget not all his benefits" Psalm 103:2 we are more likely to cultivate a spirit of gratefulness rather than one of complaining.

We began with failure and disobedience. We have ended with blessing.

Because Jesus was lifted up on the cross God is still offering undeserved and complete deliverance from the wiley serpent who deceived Adam and Eve into sinning. Remember - Whoever believes shall not perish but have everlasting life.

Blessing

John 12:32-33

Homework

What do we understand by intercession?

How do we do it?

Psalm 78

1. They didn't remember what god had done for them
2. They nagged God
3. Their repentance was usually phoney
4. They weren't grateful for what God had done for them

Our complaining is based on one of these attitudes. Phil.2:14