



SERPENT ON A POLE

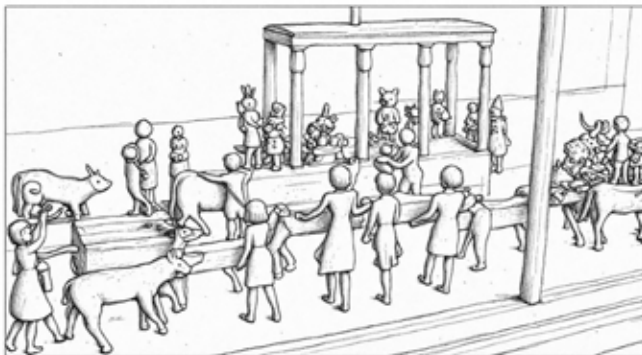
Numbers 20:1–21:9

Every generation must answer for their own response to the Lord. As the new generation in Israel neared the promised land, they were given living lessons on the importance of obedience, faith, and righteous living. These principles equally apply to us today.

After years of wandering, the nation Israel has now come full circle back to the region of Kadesh. This was the place where they had refused to enter the land, following the report of the twelve spies. And that refusal had led to forty years of wandering in the wilderness.

Here in Numbers chapter 20, we are told that the siblings of Moses die—Miriam, his sister, in verse 1; and Aaron his brother, in verse 28.

Now follow me here: Over in Numbers 33:38 we're told that Aaron dies in the fortieth year after Israel left Egypt. So, as we now arrive at Numbers chapter 20, which records Aaron's death, we know that Israel is nearing the end of their wandering. A new generation of Israelites are within sight of the promised land!



Drawing of a model of a livestock count

If you are like me, it's often at times when you're aware of God's blessing that you tend to slack off and maybe even drift away from where you should be. And as hard as it is to believe, that's exactly what happens to the people of Israel. Here in Numbers chapters 20 and 21, several events take place. And together, they become a powerful teacher of how to keep from drifting away from where we should be in our walk with God today.

Let's allow the nation of Israel to teach us four important lessons today.

Lesson number 1: Pride can have painful consequences.

We read here in verses 2-3:

Now there was no water for the congregation. . . . And the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Would that we had perished when our brothers perished before the LORD!"



This sounds familiar, doesn't it? The new generation sounds a lot like the old generation. Indeed, they're following that same old pattern of grumbling here.

In verse 8 the Lord speaks to Moses:

“Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and Aaron your brother, and tell the rock before their eyes to yield its water.”

Now note carefully what Moses says and Aaron does when they go before the people in verses 10-11:

Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and [Moses] said to them, “Hear now, you rebels: shall we bring water for you out of this rock?” And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice, and water came out abundantly.

Let me tell you, Moses is defying the word of God here. God told him to *speak* to the rock, and Moses *strikes* it—*two times!* Aaron goes along with it.

And the Lord pronounces judgment on both of them here in verse 12:

“Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them.”

Israel will enter the promised land without Moses and Aaron leading them.

Now this judgment might seem harsh unless you understand that what Moses did here was take credit for something only God could do. Notice, Moses said, “Shall *we* bring water for you out of this rock?” There was no *we* involved here—there was only God. All Moses had to do was speak to the rock, and God would have provided a miraculous fountain of water.

Moses was effectively stealing glory from God and striking the rock implied that it was according to his power that water came forth. With great pride, he acts as if he is manufacturing this miracle rather than it being by the power of God. And the tragic consequence of his pride is this judgment from God: He will not lead the people into the promised land.

Lesson number 2: Trust as you follow the Lord's timing.

Here's a positive lesson learned in verse 14. Moses sends messengers to the king of Edom, requesting permission to travel through his territory; and the answer he receives is, “Absolutely not!” So, with that denial, verse 21 says, “Israel turned away from [Edom].”

Now you might expect Moses to remind Edom that Israel is the chosen people of God and nobody is going to boss them around. But instead of doing that, Moses and the people of God trust the Lord's timing. This, by the way, means a long detour around Edom,

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but they trust the Lord's timing and take the detour.

Lesson number 3: Dependence on God should be daily.

Following the death of Aaron as chapter 20 comes to a close, chapter 21 opens by telling us, “The king



of Arad, who lived in the Negeb . . . fought against Israel, and took some of them captive.”

What he doesn't know is that this new generation of Israelites aren't about to ignore this. The nation cries out to God here in verses 2-3:

“If you will indeed give this people into my hand, then I will devote their cities to destruction.” And the LORD heeded the voice of Israel and gave over the Canaanites, and they devoted them and their cities to destruction.

The new generation isn't without fault, but when facing this enemy, they give themselves fully to the Lord. They trust Him in this battle; and let me tell you, beloved, this victory is going to become a foretaste of their conquest of Canaan.

Lesson number 4: The object of your faith is what matters.

Now on the heels of this great victory, Israel turns south to go around Edomite territory—and that old Israelite attitude resurfaces again in verse 4: “The people became impatient on the way. And the people spoke against God and against Moses.”

The Lord responds in verse 6, by sending poisonous snakes into the camp, and people start dying from the venomous snakebites. Now to their credit the nation immediately repents, and they say to Moses in verse 7, “We have sinned . . . Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us.”

Instead of removing the snakes, however, the Lord instructs Moses to make a bronze replica of a snake and put it on a pole and plant it where all the people can see it. Verse 9 explains, “If a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.”

Here's the cure: Whoever is bitten by a snake needs to *believe* the object being lifted up is God's cure. God wanted their deliverance to become a matter of faith; so, if the person bitten by a snake believed God and looked to that bronze serpent, he would be healed.

Did you know that over in John's Gospel, Jesus uses this Old Testament event to illustrate His own death, when He's going to be lifted up on a cross? Jesus said, “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3:14-15).

You and I have been fatally bitten by our sin, and death is certain. For all of us, death is just around the corner. So, what's the cure? Look to Jesus, the one who hung on the cross dying for us, the one who took the venom of sin on Himself. Believe in Him, and you will be saved from everlasting death and judgment and saved to everlasting life and joy in Him.

This is God's eternal cure. So, look to Jesus; trust in Jesus alone, and you will one day live with Him forever.

Why is trusting God's timing such a challenge? What must you assume about God in order to trust His timing? Why is it important to let your yet to be saved friends and family see you trusting God's timing?

Why is living out your dependence on God important for unbelievers to see and hear from you (Matthew 5:16)? Who has God placed in your life to watch your dependence on Him? In what ways is the LORD calling you to grow your faith and dependence on Him?

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