

June 1

Scriptures: Read Numbers 21

Key Verse: "...Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live." (Numbers 21:8)

Overview

Since the Israelites were not allowed to pass through Edom (20:21), their journey took them southward through a difficult territory full of enemies. One of these enemies, Arad the Canaanite, took some Israelites captive. This unexpected trial caused Israel to turn to God, indicate their dependence upon Him, and make a vow to Him. God honored them with a great victory, the first taste of victory for this new generation of Israelites.

Though they must have been encouraged with their first victory, the long, hard journey around Edom soon led to frustration and discouragement. In obedience to God, Moses had refused to allow the Israelites to pass through Edom and engage in battle with them, for God had given that land to Esau (Deut.2:4-9). Because of their first victory, they were probably confident in themselves of another. Had they forgotten that the victory over Arad was only because God had granted it, and that previously they had been defeated because of going into battle in disobedience to Him (14:41-45)? Impatient with Moses and the direction the Lord was leading, they, like their fathers, began complaining about being led into the wilderness to die, when actually God had been sustaining them. Their most bitter complaint, and a very serious offense, was despising the heavenly manna, thus spurning God's gracious provision.

Although God is longsuffering and patient, their complaints and contemptuous behavior provoked His wrath, resulting in the plague of poisonous snakes that caused many deaths. The Apostle Paul used this incident as a warning for us to learn from their example (1 Cor.10:9-11). Finally, in recognition of their sin, the people came to repentance (21:7), and God made a gracious provision for healing through the bronze serpent that Moses was to lift up. Two things were required for healing and life: (1) the serpent had to be looked upon in faith and belief that God could heal; (2) each individual bitten had to personally look upon it with his own eyes. This clearly fore-pictured salvation by faith, for likewise we can look to the cross of Jesus Christ and receive healing, salvation, and eternal life (John 3:14-16; Isa.53:4-5). For the Israelites, it was not the object itself that brought the healing; it was their faith in God. However, later in the history of Israel we see that the bronze serpent became an object of cultic worship which the godly king Hezekiah had to destroy to show that it was only faith and trust in God, not any object, that brought healing (2 Kings 18:4).

After seeing the Lord's salvation from the fatal snake bites, the Israelites moved under the guidance of the Lord in a north-easterly direction until they came to the plains of Moab. It must have thrilled Moses' heart to hear the people singing joyously as they traveled, instead of always complaining (21:17-18).

As with Edom, the Israelites sent a cordial message to Sihon, king of Ammon, asking permission to peacefully pass through their territory. Moses did not want to engage in war with those who

were descendants of Lot (Abraham's nephew), however, conflict was unavoidable, for Sihon attacked Israel but was defeated. How encouraged Israel must have been to defeat those who had defeated Moab. A similar victory was won over Og, the king of Bashan, after the Lord had told Moses not to fear him. With this victory, the region east of the Jordan was controlled by Israel. These victories caused the men of Jericho to fear the Israelites (Josh.2:10) who were greatly encouraged and praised God (Ps.135:9-12; 136:17-22). Similarly, every victory and spiritual success in the life of a believer should encourage him to walk even closer to God, being more confident in His strength and expecting greater things to come.

Prayer

O Lord, we praise You for Your mighty works. Grant us to faith to look to Jesus who was lifted up on the Cross. We claim Your promise that this looking unto Jesus will bring healing and deliverance.