

NUMBERS 19-22 INCIDENTS DURING THE LAST YEAR IN THE WILDERNESS

It is incredible to realize that after Korah's rebellion and its aftermath, on the second year of the Exodus, there is hardly anything else more recorded of the travels of the Israelites until the fortieth year. Why? Surely, there could have been endless stories recorded, but basically, the die had been cast for that first disobedient generation of Israelites. It would not serve any useful purpose to continue recording the same pattern of rebelliousness. Remember, what was recorded here was "as examples, and they were written *for our admonition*" (1 Corinthians 10:11). God sums it up, saying, "Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, in the day of trial in the wilderness. *Where your fathers tested Me, tried Me, and saw My works for forty years*" (Hebrews 3:8-9).

Since a plague had occurred after Korah's rebellion and many had died, God now gives instructions on a ceremony that would help them avoid spreading deadly infections. Remember, they didn't have antibiotics back then, and bacteria from plagues could easily devastate the whole camp.

So God designed a ritual to limit the spread of infection—the use of special, purifying water. We read the instructions in chapter 19.

They were to take a red heifer, sacrifice and incinerate it, and then use its ashes to make this special water. Anyone in the camp that was involved in taking care of dying persons (such as a nurse today) and prepared the dead body was not to participate in congregational functions for 7 days.

The Bible says, "He who touches the dead body of anyone shall be unclean seven days. He shall purify himself with the water on the third day and on the seventh day, then he will be clean...This is the law when a man dies in a tent. All who come into the tent and all who are in the tent shall be unclean seven days, and every open vessel, which has no cover fastened on it, is unclean" (19:11-15).

Notice here some modern sanitary principles that are applied today in hospitals. When a person dies of an infection in the hospital, all involved must wash thoroughly and any open containers in the room must be sterilized. God couldn't explain all the scientific and medical reasons for the measures, so He made it into a commanded ceremony. But the hygienic effects would be the same. As God had promised, "If you diligently heed

the voice of the Lord your God...and keep all His statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you which I have brought on the Egyptians" (Ex. 15:26).

Now, in chapter 20, we come to the fortieth year of the Exodus from Egypt. Had the Israelites changed very much during that time? This section shows the surviving members of that first generation had kept the same rebellious attitude.

Miriam died at this time in Kadesh. She is one of the great women of the Bible and although she was human and made mistakes, she showed faith, leadership and perseverance to the end.

It is amazing to read, after 40 years of miracles, that the first generation of Israelites continued longing for Egypt and complaining bitterly every time food or water became scarce. Logically, Moses was pretty fed up with their rebellious attitudes and lack of faith, but made a grievous mistake.

We read, "Now there was no water for the congregation; so they gathered together against Moses and Aaron. And the people contended with Moses...saying, 'If only we had died when our brethren died before the Lord! Why have you brought up the assembly of the Lord into this wilderness, that we and our animals should die here? And why have you made us come up out of Egypt, to bring us to this evil place? It is not a place [like Egypt] of grain or figs or vines or pomegranates; nor is there any water to drink.

"So Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly to the door of the tabernacle of meeting, and they fell on their faces. And the glory of the Lord appeared to them. Then the Lord spoke... 'Take the rod; you and your brother Aaron gather the congregation together. *Speak to the rock before their eyes, and it will yield its water*; thus you shall bring water for them out of the rock, and give drink to the congregation and their animals.'

"And Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock; and he said to them, 'Hear now, you rebels! Must *we* bring water for you out of this rock?' Then Moses lifted his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came out abundantly, and the congregation and their animals drank. Then the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, 'Because you did not believe Me, to hallow Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall

not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them” (20:2-12).

This is one of the tragedies in the Bible—faithful and humble Moses loses his composure because of the constant irritations of that first generation. He attributes to Aaron and himself the power to do miracles and doesn’t give God the glory. This is a ministerial principle--never take credit for what God does. It doesn’t matter what miracle takes place—whether it’s an amazing divine healing or water coming from a rock--never take the credit, but always give God the glory (Col. 3:17).

In effect, Moses was saying to the Israelites, “So you want to see how powerful we are and how insignificant you are? Now Aaron and I will show you the power we have—I will strike the rock and look! Out comes the water.

They became self-satisfied and left God out of the picture. Throughout history, ministers and members have fallen into that trap of insolence—of being powerfully used by God and then becoming vain, forgetting the true source of that power.

Now, to put things into proper perspective. Moses just slipped this once, and God forgave him, knowing the circumstances, but there was a price to pay—he couldn’t enter the Promised Land, but only see it from a distance. We read more about this in Psalms 106:32-33, “They angered Him also at the waters of strife, so that it went ill with Moses on account of them; because they rebelled against the Spirit, so that he spoke *rashly* with his lips.”

Still, Moses was one of the greatest servants of God, and knew the Promised Land he really wanted to enter was not Canaan but the Kingdom of God—and that he certainly will! He was a spiritual winner.

After this incident, the forty years are up and now this next generation is ready to enter Canaan—the Promised Land. They need a road to enter it and Moses asks the king of Edom for permission to go through their land to Canaan, by way of the King’s highway (20:17). This is an international highway going from Elat through Edom to Mesopotamia, and parts of it are still being used today—it also goes to Petra. Moses reminds the king they are next of kin, Edom being descended from Esau, Jacob’s brother.

The king disregards Moses’ pleas and refuses them entrance, threatening them with war. “Thus Edom refused to give Israel passage through his territory; so Israel turned away from him.” This would be the beginning of a hostile relationship of

Edom toward Israel. Throughout its history, it would never help Israel, and would continually conspire against him. God condemned Edom’s feud with his brother and would punish him time after time because of his profane and unconverted attitude, going back to Esau’s nature (Heb. 12:16).

Next comes Aaron’s death, and because he also was involved in the incident of not giving God the glory, he would not enter the Promised Land. God said, “Aaron shall be gathered to his people, for he shall not enter the land which I have given to the children of Israel, because *you rebelled against My word* at the waters of Meribah...and they went to Mount Hor...and Aaron died” (20:24-28).

As Israel moved northward, around the Edomite territory, they entered Arad territory, part of Canaan. “The site of biblical Arad is well identified with Tell ‘Arad, about twenty miles south of Hebron in the eastern Negev” (*Expositor’s Bible Commentary*). The king of Arad attacked them and won the first skirmish, but Israel pleaded with God for help and made a vow to obey Him. God heard them and they soundly defeated them. “The vow of the people to God speaks of their dependence on Him for their victory, as well as their determination to fulfill the vow by making a complete destruction of their cities. The verb translated ‘totally destroy’ is the verbal form related to the word *herem* meaning ‘to devote to the ban.’ The cup of iniquity of the people of the land was now full (see Gen 15:16); Israel was to be the instrument of the Lord’s judgment to cleanse the land of the people who had polluted it” (*Expositor’s*).

Israel was forced to go south and east, around Edom, and entered a dry and barren desert. Again they lacked food and water and began to complain, even disparaging the miraculous manna.

“With Moses’ determination not to engage Edom in battle, the people became impatient with him and with the direction the Lord was taking them. Flushed with victory, their confidence was in themselves. They forgot that their victory over the army of Arad was a victory granted to them by the Lord in response to their solemn pledge to Yahweh; now they were ready to rebel again” (*Expositor’s*).

They said, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread” (21:5). As punishment for their rebellious attitude, God allowed the poisonous serpents in the

area to attack them. They are called “fiery serpents,” in the Bible and the Hebrew terms mean, “the snakes that produce burning.” This refers to the stinging sensation of their venom as it kills.

Fearful, they quickly repent, saying, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you, pray to the Lord that He take away the serpents from us. So Moses prayed for the people. Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘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.’ So Moses made a bronze serpent and put it on a pole, and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived” (21:7-9).

This bronze serpent inadvertently became a source of idolatry later on. Some 800 years later God commanded King Hezekiah to destroy it (2 Kings 18:4). The raising up of a pole with a bronze serpent to gaze at and take away the effects of the Israelite’s sins became a symbol of salvation. Jesus Christ said, “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 everlasting life” (John 3:14-15).

Israel now heads northeast toward the land of the Amorites, between Moab and Ammon. Moses asks the king of the Amorites for permission to peacefully travel through his country by way of the King’s Highway to Canaan but is denied. Then the Amorite king attacks Israel but is soundly defeated. “So Israel took all these cities, and Israel dwelt in all the cities of the Amorites” (21:25). This is how the Amorite territory became part of Israel’s inheritance and it was part of God’s plan, as Dt. 2:30 says, “But Sihon, king of Heshbon would not let us pass through, for the Lord your God hardened his spirit and made his heart obstinate, that He might deliver him into your hand, as it is this day.”

Next, they go farther northward, east of the Lake of Galilee, to the land of Bashan, part of Ammon. There, they had to face a king who was a giant, King Og. Deut. 3:11 says, “For only Og king of Bashan remained of the remnant of the giants. Indeed his bedstead was an iron bedstead. (Is it not in Rabbah of the people of Ammon?) Nine cubits is its length and four cubits its width, according to the standard of the cubit.” The dimensions of the bed were about 12 ft by 5 ft! Apparently, he was so big and heavy the bed had to be reinforced with iron.

He was quite an awesome sight, and must have struck fear in the Israelite’s hearts. But God reassured them, saying, “Do not fear him, for I have delivered him into your had, with all his people and his land...So they defeated him, his sons, and all his people, until there was no survivor left him, and they took possession of the land. As a result, Og’s bed became a victory prize and a museum piece where Israelites would visit for the next centuries. Large, fancy bed frames have been found in Israel.

From there, the Israelites went south and camped in Moab, in front of the Canaanite fortress of Jericho. By this time, all the kings of the region were trembling with fear. King Balak of Moab was afraid to fight the Israelites, so he came up with another scheme to defeat them—through sorcery. He called the greatest sorcerer of the day—Balaam, son of Beor to curse Israel for a price.

“So the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian departed with *the diviner’s fee in their hand*, and they came to Balaam and spoke to him the words of Balak” (22:7). Balaam was so powerful, he had access to Satan’s powers, and through Satan would ask God permission to do his bidding. He is a type of the end-time false prophet (2 Thes. 2; Rev. 13).

God permits Satan certain leeway and said He would give Balaam a direct answer. So God prohibited Balaam from cursing Israel. Balaam said to them, “Go back to your land, for the Lord has refused to give me permission to go with you” (22:13). King Balak insisted, and sent more people and money to persuade Balaam. Balaam knew he couldn’t go against God’s will, but still, he tried again. This time, God permitted him to go with the Moabite party, but only to say what would be revealed. Yet, Balaam’s willingness aroused God’s anger, and God sent an angel to frighten him. Yet, only the donkey could see the angel and tried to dodge him. This angered Balaam until God spoke through the donkey. Balaam apologized, and God allowed him to arrive at Moab. In the next study, we will see what happens to Balaam, the Moabites, and the Israelites—it’s very interesting!