

TRAVELING WITH A HOLY GOD WHO GIVES HOPE TO THE HOPELESS

Numbers 21:1-20

INTRODUCTION

Abraham Lincoln wrote, during a time of great loss and disappointment in his life: “I am now the most miserable man living. If what I feel were equally distributed to the whole human family there would not be one cheerful face on earth. Whether I shall ever be better, I cannot tell; I awfully forebode I shall not. To remain as I am is impossible. I must die or be better it appears to me.” Despair and hopelessness had so gripped his heart that he could not imagine ever being happy again. Death seemed the only way out. Has the icy hand of despair ever gripped your heart like this? For some of us this anguish is a constant companion with no apparent cause. For many of us this agony is the result of some great loss or difficulty. For all of us despair is only an accident or a doctor’s visit or a phone call or a text message or a Facebook interaction away.

As we observed last week, we live in a world beset by despair inducing trouble. Chapter 20 recounted for us the trouble brought to us by the sins of others, by our own failures, by the faithlessness of leaders, by the hardheartedness of those who ought to care for us and by death. The death of Aaron, which ends chapter 20, and took place in the fifth month of the 40th year of Israel’s exodus from Egypt signals that the end of that older generation who God said would die in the wilderness is at hand. While the last of that generation will not die until chapter 25, yet it is clear that their time is coming to an end. That younger generation, all those who were 19 and under in Numbers 14 have been wandering in the wilderness, watching as their parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins die. For everyone under 40 this is the only life they have known. They have been told that one day they will live in a land gushing with milk and honey, they have daily seen the pillar of cloud and fire over the tabernacle, they have daily gathered and eaten the manna, but their lives have been lived in the wilderness, surrounded by death and disobedience. They have moved from camp to camp with no end in sight. If there ever was a group of people who might be tempted to despair, who might be in the position of having no confidence the future was going to be any better than the present, it would be this under 40 crowd among the people of Israel.

Chapter 21 is the beginning of the story of this younger generation. In it we see how God works to give them hope while they are forced to wait for the deaths of the final members of the older generation. Just as marathon runners need encouragement to not quit but to keep running in the final miles of the race, so those who have long endured trouble need help to keep enduring at the end. Here, in the last months of their wilderness journey God gives reasons for hope to these people who have been confronted with hopeless conditions for forty years. I remind you that hope, in the biblical sense is not wishing for something to be true as in, “I hope it doesn’t rain today.” Rather biblical hope, the hope that God aims for his people to have is a “confident expectation of future good.” It is that present eager anticipation of a certain, pleasing future. Conversely, hopelessness is certainty that the future will be no better than the present or even worse and thus a present experience of despondency and depression.

MAIN POINT

God gives hopeless people reasons to hope by...

I. Giving victory in the place of defeat (vv.1-3)

Immediately following the death of Aaron a Canaanite king, observing the mass of Israelites near his border musters his army and attacks. Whether by surprise or superior forces he defeats them and takes a number of Israelites captive. The place where this occurs is the same place where the people of Israel attacked Canaan in disobedience to the Lord and were defeated back at the end of Numbers 14. In other words, the same people who had defeated them some 39 years before defeat them again. Coming on the heels of Edom’s threatened

attack and Aaron's death it would appear things are going from bad to worse. They cannot simply leave as they did when Edom threatened them because some of their family members have been taken captive. So what Israel does is the most hopeful sign we have seen in their story since chapter 10 when the ordered and obedient people of God set out from Mt. Sinai to the land of Canaan. They pray, they vow a vow to the Lord, saying, "If you will indeed give this people into my hand, then I will devote their cities to destruction."

They know, based on God's instructions on Mt. Sinai that it is God's will that all the Canaanites be destroyed because of their wickedness and in order for Israel to be able to dwell safely in the land. They know, based upon God's instructions in the law that a vow to God is a legitimate expression of their faith and of their need for God's help. Unlike their first attack upon these people in Numbers 14 where they attacked in direct disobedience to God's command and unlike their dealings with Edom where they did not pray, here the people seek the Lord's help according to his promises and in keeping with his word. Their prayer is not simply an expression of their need which is to get back their family and friends from captivity but a prayer for God's will to be done. They are asking God to do something they know God wants done. They know they cannot do it. Their only hope of victory is if God acts and gives them the victory.

The Lord hears their prayer and he gives the Canaanites into the hand of the Israelites and they completely wipe out every man, woman and child and burn their cities, with all their livestock to the ground. The Israelites take no plunder, no captives. That is what the verb translated "devote to destruction" means. The whole population and all their possessions are treated as a burnt offering to the Lord and are completely consumed. It is an expression of God's just and good hostility towards the wicked Canaanites. This is the first victory of the people of Israel over any enemies since leaving Egypt some 40 years prior to this. This first victory happens here in the place of disobedience and defeat. What a hope giving experience this must have been for this younger generation as God answers their prayer and fulfills his promise to them at this place of previous defeat.

One of the things that create despair and hopelessness in our lives, especially if you are a Christian, is when we continue to do the same sins over and over again. Men and women, especially Christian men and women, who are regularly defeated by their sins are not happy people. Whether it's the person seeking to control their eating habits who eats the whole package of Oreos or the man who cannot stay away from the pornographic websites or the mom who begs God for the ability to discipline her children gently rather than to scream at them or the gossip who pledges to not talk about others but who can't keep the latest tidbit to himself, all of us know the discouragement and depression that sets in when we continually fail to do the right thing. It is our ongoing sins that cause us to question our salvation and to question the power of God. I have met so many people over the years who have given up on being a Christian because of the guilt and misery caused by sin's dominion in their lives.

The NT clearly teaches that we are in a war with sin. Paul writes in Romans 7:22-23, "For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members." Peter writes in his first letter, "Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul." And James writes (4:1), "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?" That war will not be finally won until Jesus returns and we are raised with him in resurrected bodies to live with him in the new heavens and the new earth. However, now, in this life, we experience victories over sin by God's grace through our faith. Paul writes in Romans 6:17-18, "But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness." While we still sin, sin is no longer our slave master. Therefore, in the life of every true child of God there are regular victories over sin. These victories increase our confident expectation of enjoying eternal life with Jesus. These victories, like the victory of Israel over the Canaanites serve to fuel our hope in that coming and final victory. These victories come in the same way Israel defeated the Canaanite king, we cry out to God to glorify his name by giving us victory over our sin and then we go fight and overcome and come back to thank God for giving us the victory.

What I have discovered in living with myself and talking with others is that one of the reasons we do not enjoy this increasing hope is because we do not see the victories because we are so aware of our defeats. That is where having good Christian friends who know you can help. As I talk with others I regularly hear them describe ways in which they are defeating sin even while they are lamenting to me how sinful they are. It is a great joy to me and a help to them to be able to draw attention to those places of victory while crying out with them and for them to have greater victory over sin. We should never get to the place where we are not aware of the sins we are committing and so stop crying out to the Lord to give us victory over our sins. We must never be proud when we overcome a sin because we didn't do it, God did it. We must never be complacent and act as if our sins are no big deal. However, we all need help in seeing the ways Jesus is delivering us from our sins now as a foreshadowing of that complete deliverance that will be ours when he comes again. As we see the Lord give victory in the place of defeat we will be filled with eager anticipation for that final day of salvation.

II. Giving a Savior from sin and wrath (vv.4-9)

While vv. 1-3 shows this new generation of Israelites depending on the Lord in ways not seen for decades, yet that defeat of the aggressive Canaanite king was not the beginning of the conquest of the land. It would not be time to enter the land until all the older generation was dead, including Moses, but excluding Joshua and Caleb. Therefore, the Lord sends them south, away from the land of Canaan, retracing steps they have traveled before. He is sending them the long way around the land of Edom. We are told that while on this long journey through land once traveled the people become impatient. Like children who cannot take another minute in the car they protest and complain. Like soldiers questioning the wisdom of their officers in sending them on a dangerous and worthless mission, they once again mutiny. The nation, led primarily now by the younger generation attacks God and Moses. They drag out the same old worn out accusations. God and Moses have brought them out of that beautiful land of slavery, out of Egypt in order to kill them in the desert. They complain about the lack of food and water and declare that they loathe, hate the manna that God has daily provided for them over the past 40 years.

This is the tenth and final recorded complaint of the Israelites since leaving Egypt until they enter the Land of Canaan (Exodus 14:11ff, 17:3, Numbers 11:1, 4-6, 12:1, 14:2-4, 16:1-14, 41, 20:3-5). We have noted that God's response to these complaints has varied. Prior to the giving of the law he responded without anger but with simply providing for the need. All the complaints since the giving of the law have been met with judgment and punishment except for the one recorded in chapter 20 where again he graciously provided the water they demanded. We are not surprised when God immediately reacts to their complaint by sending "fiery snakes" into the camp that bite and kill a number of Israelites. It is not accidental that the Lord sends snakes to punish the Israelites. Snakes are a well-known symbol of Egypt, the Pharaoh's crown having a cobra upon it. Thus, as the people want to be under the power of Egypt again God grants their wish by subjecting them to the power of the serpent. Also, as a reader of the Bible we know that the serpent is the form our great enemy, Satan took at the beginning. By rebellion against God humans are willingly submitting to and participating in his kingdom, his rule. That kingdom is a kingdom of death and thus it is more than appropriate that God sends the serpent to kill the people for their sins.

Unlike every other occasion of complaint and judgment, the Israelites actually, sincerely confess their sins. They acknowledge their wrongdoing and ask Moses, the great mediator, to ask God to take away the snakes. However, God does not take away the snakes. The snakes continue to overrun the camp and bite the people. Every night children are bitten while they sleep on the floor of their tents and every morning women are bitten while they gather manna and every afternoon men are bitten as they herd the animals. Snakes hide everywhere, lurking, waiting to strike. God continues to show his wrath against their sin by the ongoing presence of these deadly snakes. However, God does make provision for the deadly bite of the snake. He commands Moses to make a snake out of bronze and to put it upon a standard in the midst of the camp so that when an Israelite was justly bitten by a serpent he or she could look at the bronze snake lifted up on the pole in the midst of the camp and he or she would live.

Why is it that looking at a bronze snake on a pole can cure a person of snake bite? Looking at the snake heals and gives life because God says so. It is God's word that makes the looking effective, not the looking and not the bronze snake. The person who looks is trusting in the promise of God, not in any magical quality in the snake or any power in themselves. Their looking, their faith unites them to the power of God to heal; it is not the cause of the healing. It is just like going to the doctor when you don't feel well. The doctor does some tests and comes back with both a diagnosis and a prescription for getting well. If you trust the doctor then you do what he says and you get well. Your faith in the doctor didn't make you well. His diagnosis and correct prescription is what makes you well. Your faith merely receives the doctor's healing word.

This story is so important because, as you heard read for us earlier, Jesus uses this story in his confrontation with the Jewish religious leader named Nicodemus. He tells Nicodemus that just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert so the Son of Man must be lifted up so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. There are several ways that the work of Jesus fulfills the lifting up of the serpent on a pole. First, God says the snake had to be put on the pole because of the people's rebellion against him and God's just anger against each one for his or her rebellion. In the same way Jesus is lifted up on the cross because of the rebellion and sins of his people and God's just death penalty against each one. Second, just as the reason looking at the snake healed from snake bite is because of God's promise, so also, looking at Jesus on the cross gives eternal life because of the promise of God. Third, it was God's will the snake be on the pole and it is God's will that Jesus die. Thus the only way to be saved from snake bite is to look at the snake and the only way to be saved from hell is by looking at Jesus. Fourth, both the snake on the pole and Jesus on the cross are evidences of God's grace, his unmerited favor. It is the great love of God for sinners that motivated him to provide the bronze snake and it is his great love of sinners that motivated him to have his son lifted up on the cross. It is no accident that Jesus spoke the words of John 3:16 immediately following his use of this story. It is God's love for his sinful, believing people that motivated him to put his son on that pole. Fifth, looking at the snake is faith in God's promise, so also it is faith and nothing else that obtains the benefits secured by the death of Jesus. The bitten Israelite had only to look and he or she was healed and so we each who have been bitten by the serpent and are going to die for our sins have only to trust in Christ in order to gain eternal life. Sixth, when an Israelite saw the snake he not only saw the instrument of salvation but he also saw the instrument of God's wrath against him for his sin. When we look at Christ upon that cross we are reminded that what he suffered is what we ought to have suffered for our sins. Thus we are humbled by the reminder of our sins and God's hatred of us for our sins and we love him all the more for taking upon himself all that anger that was meant for us. Seventh, God never took away the snakes. They were always present biting the people and so it was always necessary to look at the bronze snake. So also, our sins always deserve death and so we always need to look at Christ. There will never be a day in this life where we will not need to look to Christ for our forgiveness.

No matter how bad things may be going for you. No matter how hopeless your situation may be. If you are looking at the crucified Son of Man, if you are trusting in the cursed and resurrected Christ, then you have eternal life. You have every reason to have hope. The worst thing that can ever happen to a human being, going to hell, will never happen to you and the best thing that can ever happen to a human being has happened to you: you are loved by God forever and will forever live with this one who has pledged himself to you in love. So friends, be full of hope. Your future is secure. There is nothing on this planet that can ever take away this amazing love because you are not loved because of who you are or what you have done but because of who Christ is and what he has done for you.

III. Giving reminders and refreshment in the desert (vv.10-20)

In vv. 10-20 we have a partial listing of the campsites of the people of Israel after they have gone around the land of Edom. All of these sites are located in the desert region southeast of the Dead Sea, on the border of the land of Moab and in the country of the Amorites. The listing of these sites points to the rapid movement of the people in this region and creates a sense of action and movement towards the land of Canaan. Something is

about to happen. They are still in the wilderness, outside the land. There is still some of the older generation that needs to die, yet the sense of anticipation is stirred in us as readers as we read this rapid fire list.

But in the midst of these lists are two poems. The first poem is taken from a document that no longer exists. The document title is “The Book of the Wars of Yahweh.” You will notice that in v. 14 the quote is introduced by the conjunction, “Wherefore.” Thus, the movement of the people on the border of the land of Moab is the reason that their movements are later recorded in the “Book of the Wars of Yahweh.” What do you suppose that a book with this title is about? Clearly it is about God’s fighting against his enemies. If the movements of Israel are recorded in that book it must be because God fights for them in this location. At the time that the Israelites are camping on the border of Moab they do not know about this book as it has not yet been written. This insertion is for us readers. It is a tip off that the wars are about to begin. It is a reminder to us that while Israel is still in the wilderness, God is about to act, to fight for his people. At the moment enemies stand between Israel and Canaan but you readers should know that God wins the war because there is a book written after these events which records his fighting. Dear Christian, at the moment enemies stand between you and heaven. Your sins, your lusts, Satan himself, this world system, suffering; all these stand against you. But you need to know that there is a book already written that has the story of how God fought for you and overcame all these enemies on your behalf. So don’t be afraid. Don’t lose heart. Don’t despair. Yes there are battles yet to be fought and you are still in the desert, but there is a “Book of the Wars of Yahweh” and it has the places where God fought for you and won written down already.

The second poem is a song that the people of Israel sang (v.17). They sang it at a well where God told Moses to gather the people so he could give them water (v.16). It is a song of praise for the well which God gave them by the hands of their leaders. God supplied for them what they needed to live, without any complaining and by the work of their leaders. It is also a song of desire for more water from that well. Both the OT and the NT regularly use water as a symbol for the cleansing and life giving power of the Holy Spirit (Isaiah 44:1-4, John 7:37-38). It is the work of the HS to unite the people of God and to empower the people of God and to refresh the people of God. In Ephesians 5 immediately after Paul exhorts us to always be filled with the HS he says that the result of this filling will be that we will be “...addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” So here in the midst of this wilderness world, we are refreshed by the mighty work of the Holy Spirit so that we joyfully sing praises for that refreshment and ask for more of it. We are singing, redeemed sinners traveling through the wilderness world reminded of God’s faithfulness to us and refreshed by his HS as we travel together. What sins and what wars the future holds we do not know but we do know that the one who goes with us loves us and fights for us and has provided a Savior for us so that we can travel full of hope and not in despair. He has gathered us together at the well in order to give to us the refreshing Holy Spirit so that we now sing for joy at the refreshing presence of God and we pray for more water.

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