

People on the Move: The Book of Numbers ***The Sin of Moses and Aaron***

Lesson #9 for November 28, 2009

Scriptures: Numbers 20; 21; John 3:14,15; James 4:4-15.

1. Thirty-nine years of wandering apparently passed between the end of Numbers 19 and the beginning of Numbers 20. In this lesson we will discuss the deaths of Miriam and Aaron as well as the sin of Moses and Aaron at the rock. We will also talk about the fiery serpents and what that has to do with our understanding of God.
2. Except for Ellen White's comments in *Patriarchs and Prophets* p. 410, we have no information about what happened for 39 years while they wandered in the desert.

During the entire forty years in the wilderness, the people were every week reminded of the sacred obligation of the Sabbath, by the miracle of the manna. Yet even this did not lead them to obedience. Though they did not venture upon so open and bold transgression as had received such signal punishment, [410] yet there was great laxness in the observance of the fourth commandment. God declares through His prophet, "My Sabbaths they greatly polluted." Ezekiel 20:13-24. And this is enumerated among the reasons for the exclusion of the first generation from the Promised Land. Yet their children did not learn the lesson. Such was their neglect of the Sabbath during the forty years' wandering, that though God did not prevent them from entering Canaan, He declared that they should be scattered among the heathen after the settlement in the Land of Promise. (*Patriarchs and Prophets* p. 409-410)

At that point in time, they had returned once again to the borders of the land of Canaan. After having been fed every day and having been given water every day and having their clothes and shoes preserved for all those years, etc., don't you think that the children of Israel should have learned complete trust in their heavenly Father? What do you suppose they did every day during those years? How many reasons do **we** have for trusting God?

3. Standing on the borders of Canaan and Edom, they could look over and see greenery in the land of Edom. That should have been sufficient reason for them to recognize that if they placed their trust in God, that in a few days, they could be in a well-watered area, and they would no longer need the miraculous water that came from the rock. But, they were still complaining because the water was not immediately available and they did not like the food! Finally, that complaining got to Moses and Aaron!
4. Notice these important points that Ellen White made in the story, but we often overlook:

[Read Deuteronomy 2:3-6] These directions should have been sufficient to explain why their supply of water had been cut off; they were about to pass through a well-watered, fertile country, in a direct course to the land of Canaan. God had promised them an unmolested passage through Edom, and an opportunity to purchase food, and also water sufficient to supply the host. The cessation of the miraculous flow of water should therefore have been a cause of rejoicing, a token that the wilderness wandering was ended. Had they not been blinded by their unbelief, they would have understood this. But that which should have been an evidence of the fulfillment of God's promise was made the occasion of doubt and murmuring. The people seemed to have given up all hope that God would bring them into possession of Canaan, and they clamored for the blessings of the wilderness. {*Patriarchs and Prophets* p. 413.4}

5. They began to complain—as their fathers had—that Moses and Aaron had taken them out into the desert to kill them. When this second generation of Israelites began complaining—saying that they should have gone back to Egypt or even have died with Korah, Dathan, and Abiram—did they really know what they were saying? Had these young people who were less than 20 years of age when they left Egypt really experienced slavery?
6. Read Numbers 20:1-13. This describes a very strange sequence of events. If God intended for Moses only to speak to the rock, why did He ask Moses to take Aaron's rod that had budded, blossomed, and produced almonds with him to address the rock? Did God intentionally place a temptation in the hands of Moses? Why did he need a stick in his hand when he was going to speak to the rock? Did the rod represent God's power? Didn't Moses have to go into the Most Holy Place to get that rod?

Why did God say, "You will bring water . . ." (Numbers 20:8) How much water would it take for that many people and their animals? The ancient system for writing numbers is sometimes very difficult to interpret. It is possible that we have not correctly understood those numbers.

7. Try to imagine what it would be like to be responsible for that many people. Then Moses said, "Listen, you rebels! Do **we** have to get water out of this rock for you?" (Numbers 20:10, *GNB*) Did that suggest that God might not honor His promise to provide for them?

His lack of patience and self-control was evident. Thus the people were given occasion to question whether his past course had been under the direction of God, and to excuse their own sins. Moses, as well as they, had offended God. His course, they said, had from the first been open to criticism and censure. **They had now found the pretext which they desired for rejecting all the preproofs that God had sent them through His servant.**

Wearied and disheartened, Moses and Aaron had made no effort to stem the current of popular feeling. Had they themselves manifested unwavering faith in God, they might have set the matter before the people in such a light as would have enabled them to bear this test. **By prompt, decisive exercise of the authority vested in them as magistrates, they might have quelled the murmuring.** It was their duty to put forth every effort in their power to bring about a better state of things before asking God to do the work for them. **Had the murmuring at Kadesh been promptly checked, what a train of evil might have been prevented!** (*Patriarchs and Prophets* 417.3-4)

As a result of this sin, instead of a short journey of some 20-30 miles through those well-watered lowlands of Edom to reach the Jordan River, they had to go back into the desert and travel several hundred miles around Edom, past Moab and Ammon, and then face the powerful nations under Og and Sihon. On the way, because of their murmuring and complaining, thousands died from the bites of those fiery serpents.

8. What really went wrong at the rock? Was that the first time in 40 years that Moses had become visibly upset? Did God set this experience up as a test for Moses and Aaron? What does the Bible say was their sin? Was it that they became angry? Was it that they struck the rock? Was it that they did not follow God's directions exactly? Why does the verse say, "Because you did not have enough **faith**"? (Numbers 20:12, *GNB*) They could see the green trees and pastures about twenty miles away. Instead of trusting God for those twenty miles, they demanded water immediately. Moses lost his patience and struck the rock.

Some say that Christ was only to die once. So, by hitting the rock a second time, Moses messed up that symbol. But what does that have to do with "faith"? Wasn't Moses God's

“mouthpiece” or God’s spokesman to the people? Didn’t Moses represent God to the people? At the rock did Moses misrepresent God to the people as being an angry God? Who was the first one to misrepresent God in such a way? Didn’t Lucifer misrepresent God to the angels, to the universe, and to Adam and Eve? Moses and Aaron moved from being good representatives of God to representing the Devil! Moses was unhappy and frustrated about having to deal with people who were acting like 2-year-olds. Moses was complaining about God’s treatment of him.

9. It is easy for us to look at their experience and ask, “With all those miracles surrounding them every day, why had they not learned to trust God?” But remember that Moses was just beginning to write the very first portions of Scripture. They had no Bible per se. Don’t we have more evidence than they had? Think of all the Scriptures that we have to refer to including the life experiences and the death of Jesus Himself. With all that evidence, is there any reason why we should be lacking in faith or complaining?
10. If the children of God, especially those who stand in positions of responsibility, can be led to take to themselves the glory that is due to God, Satan exults. He has gained a victory. It was thus that he fell. Thus he is most successful in tempting others to ruin. It is to place us on our guard against his devices that God has given in His word so many lessons teaching the danger of self-exaltation. {*Patriarchs and Prophets* 421.1}

It is natural for us to look at this experience from a human perspective. But, what if we should try seeing things from God’s perspective. God knew something that no one else knew at that point in time: He was planning to take Moses to heaven in a few months! What needed to be demonstrated to the universe in order for them to be ready to accept Moses? Remember that Enoch was already in heaven. (Genesis 5:24) But he had not died. He had been translated. God planned to take Moses into the heavenly Canaan. The angels needed to be assured that it was safe for him to be admitted. Remember that on several previous occasions, Moses had stood up for God’s reputation even when God had suggested that He should destroy all of the children of Israel and make a great nation out of Moses. (See Exodus 32:11-14) Satan claimed that Moses belonged to him after he died. (Jude 9) But God was going to resurrect him and then take him straight to heaven. Moses is the only person—other than Jesus—we know of by name that has died, been resurrected, and been taken to heaven. God places everything He does openly “in court” before His children to get their approval. (Romans 3:4) He must convince every one of His creatures that what He is doing is correct. (Philippians 2:10,11) When we have come to the place where we are completely convinced that God’s way is always the best way—which is exactly what Satan challenged in the beginning—then God can say to us, “Now you know the truth and the truth has set you free.” (John 8:31,32)

11. In what way was Aaron involved in the sin of Moses at the rock? He did not strike the rock. Was he just as upset and angry as Moses was? Miriam had apparently already died. Did that lead to a greater weakness and more frustration on the part of those two brothers?
12. Look at what the Scriptures say about the death of Miriam and Aaron. Was Miriam’s death a complete surprise? Why did God tell Moses to take Aaron to the top of a mountain and let him die there? What do you suppose Aaron and Moses talked about on the way up the mountain? What did Eleazar have to say to his father? What did Aaron have to say to his son? What would you have done or said if you had been there? Later, we are told that Moses had clear eyesight and the strength of a young man at the age of 120. Aaron was 123 when he died. Miriam was apparently 132. Is that a case for a healthy lifestyle? What was in that manna?

13. How would you feel if you were given instructions by God to escort your brother to his death? After ascending Mount Hor, Moses took the garments of the high priest off Aaron and placed them on Eleazar. Then, Aaron died and was buried by his brother and his son, and the two of them returned without him. Thirty days of mourning for Aaron followed.
14. If the children of Israel had been faithful to God and not murmured, God would have arranged for them to pass through the well-watered lowlands of Edom to the promised land. However, because they were murmuring and complaining and because Moses as a result struck the rock instead of speaking to it, they had to make the long journey around the land of Edom—all the way back to the Gulf of Aqaba and up the eastern side—and face the powerful armies of the Amorites before they could enter Canaan.
15. Notice that the second generation were making the same basic complaint against Moses that their parents had made 40 years earlier. Did they really think that Moses and Aaron were the ones who had been leading them—and not God? During those 40 years, did any of them become sick? (Deuteronomy 8:3,4; [compare Matthew 4:4] 29:5,6; Nehemiah 9:21; Psalm 105:37). If the whole generation of elders died, did they just die suddenly without showing any signs of approaching death—apparently like Aaron and Moses? Did all those who died in the wilderness live healthy lives until the end and then just die? They had a good diet and plenty of exercise!
16. Even though the children of Israel were living a very strange kind of life wandering the desert and drinking miraculous water and eating miraculous food, they had apparently come to regard that as a normal way to live—taking all those miracles for granted!
17. Do we sometimes take God’s blessings for granted? Don’t we need to thank God and praise Him for all that He has done for us every day? There are a number of psalms (songs) in the Bible discussing the travels of the children of Israel from Egypt to Canaan. Could you write such a psalm about your personal Christian experience? What about a psalm telling the story of the Seventh-day Adventist Church?
18. Both Kadesh and Mount Hor are on the borders of the land of Edom. However, since they were murmuring and complaining and the Edomites (the descendants of Esau) had repeatedly refused to allow them to travel through their territory, they had to begin the long journey around Edom. On that journey which was made necessary because of their complaining, they ran into fiery serpents! (Numbers 21:5-9) Was God punishing them with those serpents? What percentage of the people do you think were bitten? Nearly one person in every “tent” had been bitten. (*PP* 429.2) Is that another proof that Moses was not the one leading them? Aaron and Miriam were already dead, and then, just by looking to a brass serpent, people were being healed. There is no way Moses could have done that!

Many of the Israelites regarded the sacrificial service as having in itself virtue to set them free from sin. God desired to teach them that it had no more value than that serpent of brass. It was to lead their minds to the Saviour. Whether for the healing of their wounds or the pardon of their sins, they could do nothing for themselves but show their faith in the Gift of God. They were to look and live. {*Desire of Ages* 174.4}
19. Read Deuteronomy 8:14,15. Those are the words of Moses spoken a few months later after they had reached the borders of the land of Canaan. Notice that Moses clearly implied that those deadly snakes had been there all along. However, as long as they were faithful or even “half-faithful” to the Lord, He did not allow them to be bitten by those adders. When God’s protection was removed, the snakes were there waiting to bite them. There were probably scorpions as well. But doesn’t a brass snake seem a lot like an idol? Wasn’t that a risk that

God took? They carried that brass snake with them, and they kept it for hundreds of years. It was set up in the courtyard of Solomon's temple about 400 years later.

20. Why do you think God asked Moses to make a brass serpent and put it on a pole as a way of dealing with those who have been bitten? Was that a way of testing their faith to see if they would look?
21. Read John 3:14,15. Clearly, Jesus found an opportunity in that story to illustrate what was coming in His own life and death. Did Nicodemus understand the implications of Jesus' words?
22. Forty years earlier in defiance of God's directions, the children of Israel had tried on their own to conquer the Canaanites after God had told them to go back into the wilderness. They had been soundly defeated. But at the end of the forty years, those same Canaanites—perhaps thinking that they could have another victorious fight—attacked the Israelites. (Numbers 21:10-33) This time, under God's direction the Israelites destroyed the Canaanites. Then, the Israelites had to travel around Edom. As they were moving northward, God told them they could not attack the territories of Moab or Ammon. Those nations refused to allow them to travel through their territory. Finally, further north they met in battle Sihon and his nation and Og and his nation. With God's help, the Israelites destroyed both of those nations.

These nations on the borders of Canaan would have been spared, had they not stood, in defiance of God's word, to oppose the progress of Israel. The Lord had shown Himself to be long-suffering, of great kindness and tender pity, even to these heathen peoples. . . . Although the Amorites were idolaters, whose life was justly forfeited by their great wickedness, God spared them four hundred years to give them unmistakable evidence that He was the only true God, the Maker of heaven and earth. All His wonders in bringing Israel from Egypt were known to them. Sufficient evidence was given; they might have known the truth, had they been willing to turn from their idolatry and licentiousness. But they rejected the light and clung to their idols.—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 434.2.

23. After the Israelites had conquered the Amorite nations in Gilead, the way was wide open for them to approach Canaan. Think of all the delays that had taken place. What was the cause of each of those delays? In essence, what could have been a journey of a few weeks turned into an ordeal lasting 40 years. What is the cause of our delay in entering the "heavenly Canaan"? (2 Peter 3:10-12) Ellen White has told us repeatedly that we should have been in the kingdom of God long before this. The first such suggestion came in 1868! She said it more clearly in 1883. Why are we still delaying?
24. What was God trying to teach the children of Israel through the fiery serpent experience? Surely, they recognized that there was no miraculous power in that brass serpent. What does God want us to learn from those experiences? Even a little bit of trust-faith would have prevented so much trouble. What is our problem today?

© 2009, Kenneth Hart, MD, MA, MPH. Permission is hereby granted for any noncommercial use of these materials. Free distribution is encouraged. It is our goal to see them spread as widely and freely as possible. If you would like to use them for your class or even make copies of portions of them, feel free to do so. We always enjoy hearing about how you might be using the materials and we might even want to share good ideas with others, so let us know.

Info@theox.org

Last Modified: November 12, 2009

C:\WP\SS\TG-Hart\Numbers\SS-9-Numbers-2009_12_05-2009_10_03-Fin+.wpd