

Israel Spurned God's Gift

Bible Text: Numbers 21:4-9

Those who cannot remember the past are destined to repeat it. It happens every day. It seems that few of us ever learn the lessons from our past.

I am convinced, especially in spiritual history, that we have learned only one lesson from history: we have not learned from history. Therefore, history repeats itself.

The Children of Israel proved this statement repeatedly on their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. They constantly repeated the same sin, over and over again. Despite God's mercies and patience, they failed to believe His word to them.

So consistently did they doubt God, that the generation that left Egypt failed to enter the Promised Land because of their unbelief (see Hebrews 3:7-19).

For our study today, I call your attention to Numbers 21:4-9:

“And they journeyed from mount Hor by the way of the Red sea, to compass the land of Edom: and the soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way. {5} And the people spake against God, and against Moses, Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? for there is no bread, neither is there any water; and our soul loatheth this light bread. {6} And the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died. {7} Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD, and against thee; pray unto the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us. And Moses prayed for the people. {8} And the LORD said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live. {9} And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the of brass, he lived.”

No doubt you have heard of this story, particularly the emphasis upon the serpent of brass. It pictures Jesus Christ, Who reminded Nicodemus that He fulfilled this Old Testament picture (see John 3:14). It marked the 13th time that the Israelites expressed their unbelief in God. It occurred following the second time that God gave water from the rock.

From this passage, I want to examine with you some particular absolute truths about the sin of unbelief, its expression and its effects in life. I pray that the Holy Spirit will clarify the truth for you, convict you of its presence in your life, and correct you to bring about a spiritual reformation and revival in your life that will revolutionize your life.

Unbelief causes sorrow

At the end of verse 4, you will note that the people became discouraged. In its literal definition it means to grieve or to mourn. It carries the tone of sorrow. Sorrow can come for all sorts of reasons, some of them legitimate. For example, the loss of a loved one in death causes legitimate sorrow.

However, in this instance, the sorrow of the Children of Israel came not from legitimate causes. Instead, it spread through the camp because of their reaction to their conditions. Upon careful examination, you will see that the route from Mount Hor retraced their steps back around by the Red Sea.

They had covered this same territory previously. It reminded them of their lack of progress toward the Promised Land. They observed no change in their conditions and grew impatient with their way. Their circumstances arose for only one cause: their unbelief in God.

You will recall that in Numbers 14 they accepted the false report of the 10 spies and turned back from entering the Land. In unbelief they chose out a leader to take them back to Egypt. As a consequence of their unbelief in God, He passed judgment upon them. None of that generation entered the Land, and they wandered in the wilderness 40 years until that generation died.

In essence, their circumstances resulted from their unbelief. No change had occurred in their state of affairs. They saw no answered prayer. They walked around in circles, growing more and more impatient with each

passing day. They became discouraged, grieved, and mourned. It originated in their unbelief in God. Unbelief causes sorrow.

Unbelief blinds our eyes

In addition, unbelief blinds our eyes to the truth about God. Notice again the complaint of the Israelites in Numbers 21:5:

"And the people spake against God, and against Moses, Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? for there is no bread, neither is there any water; and our soul loatheth this light bread."

Taken at face value, their objection to their conditions completely left out God. They protested to Moses and blamed him for their plight. In reality, of course, they charged God. In so doing, they disdained God's revelation of Himself to them.

They doubted His power. They questioned His purpose for them. They distrusted His provision on their behalf. They discredited His providence in their lives.

Despite God's prior revelations of Himself, at least 23 by this period in their journey, the Children of Israel failed to believe God. Their unbelief blinded their eyes to the truth of God that came to them every day of their pilgrimage.

Instead, they feared death in the wilderness and complained about the lack of food. No amount of previous experiences appeased them. Unbelief had blinded their eyes to the truth of God. Sadly, they suffered the consequences of their doubt.

Unbelief allows the flesh to dominate our lives

From this episode, a third effect of unbelief arises. Because of unbelief, the fleshly desires of the Children of Israel dominated their lives. One brief statement in verse 5 reveals it. They loathed the light bread which God had given them to eat.

You will recall that God gave them manna every day of the week, except the 7th day. God provided this food for them for 40 years. It ceased when they entered into the Promised Land. The Bible gives a description of this bread in Psalms 78:24-25:

"And had rained down manna upon them to eat, and had given them of the corn of heaven. {25} Man did eat angels' food: he sent them meat to the full."

God provided bread from heaven to feed them. The Israelites ate angels' food. He gave them plenty of it, and it met their needs. The Scriptures later reveal in John 6 that this bread from heaven pictured the Bread of Life, Jesus Christ.

Yet the Children of Israel loathed it. They found it disgusting. They abhorred the manna, heaven's food. They found it unsatisfying to their pleasures. The Israelites spurned God's gift to them. Instead, they sought after that which would satisfy their personal pleasures, passions, and desires.

In clear tones, this reaction pictures the effect of unbelief. It allows the fleshly desires of mankind to dominate and control conduct. They chose to follow their heart's hungers and to gratify their fleshly appetites. In so doing, they put themselves at enmity with God.

The Scriptures confirm this truth and make it abundantly clear. Both in Romans 8.4-8 and Galatians 5.16-26, the Holy Spirit reveals several truths about the struggle between the flesh and the Spirit, which verify this incident in the wilderness.

The natural passions of the flesh and the heart struggle against God. The lusts and the desires of the flesh and the heart oppose the gifts of God. By their very nature, these cravings bring enmity against God. They cannot submit to God.

The actions of the Children of Israel in this setting prove the sad outcome of unbelief. They spurned God's

gifts to them. Instead, they followed the impulses of their human lusts and scorned heavenly food.

Therefore..

What does the Holy Spirit want these truths to accomplish in your life today? From this experience of the Israelites, He outlines Biblical truth about the sin of unbelief and its effects upon mankind. Unbelief does not exist in a vacuum. It affects conduct and leads to disobedience against God. These truths provide direction, then, to correct believers from error and to conform them to the truth.

Where has the Holy Spirit identified the presence of unbelief in your life today? In some fashion, does your life emulate that of the Children of Israel? Has your unbelief brought sorrow and discouragement into your life? Do you impatiently wander through life, mourning over a lack of progress?

Do you experience unanswered prayer?

Has unbelief blinded your eyes to see the truth of God's revelation of Himself in your life?

Have you failed to see His power, provision, and providence in your life?

Has unbelief caused you to choose to appease your fleshly desires instead of God's gifts to you?

Do you, like the Children of Israel, find God's provisions for you disgusting? Do you abhor the work of the Holy Spirit in your life?

What conclusions about your conduct and condition has the Holy Spirit revealed to you today? Has He found you believing or doubting? Approved or reproved? Innocent or guilty?

Sin always has consequences. It grieves the Holy Spirit and quenches His work in your life. You lack spiritual power and God's glorious presence. It robs God of the glory and honor that He rightly deserves. It degrades His character and nature and gives the flesh a foothold in your life. You suffer the results of sin. Note the warning in Job 4:8:

"Even as I have seen, they that plow iniquity, and sow wickedness, reap the same."

In addition, sin brings the reproof of God. He disapproves of unbelief and its resultant disobedience and punishes it. Sin causes you to experience God's judgment. Both believers and unbelievers are accountable to God for sin. Be sure your sin will find you out (Numbers 32:23).

Unbelief brings the removal of God's presence. Sin disrupts and interferes with fellowship with God. The Bible does not carry any more clear nor severe admonition about the results of sin than Isaiah 59:1-2:

"Behold, the LORD'S hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear: {2} But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear."

In the end, the Holy Spirit convicts of sin to bring correction from sin. This incident in the journey of the Israelites clearly identifies sinful practices to shun. God plainly condemned their unbelief and shows an example to avoid. Christians dare not center their Christian practice around self and personal gratification. Specifically, the Scriptures use this occurrence from the Israelites' journey as an express warning to believers in 1 Corinthians 10:9:

"Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents."

God wants His children to walk in the Spirit, not the flesh. When believers obey this command, they experience victory over the flesh and its passions and lusts. You can find comfort in that great promise in Galatians 5:16:

"This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh."

What changes does the Holy Spirit need to bring into your life today because of these truths? He has brought this sense of sin to you that you might recognize your true condition before God. Acknowledge your sin

without compromise and concealment. Confess it with humbleness and in detail.

The Holy Spirit reveals God's provision for sin in Jesus Christ. Jesus alone expresses the Father's grace and mercy for sinners. He is the only hope for relief from the judgment of sin. The Spirit brings sinners to the blood of Jesus Christ for relief and deliverance from sin.

I urge you to turn from your sin unto Jesus. He is the Advocate for believers and the Savior for unbelievers. He is the only hope for forgiveness from sin and cleansing unto spiritual revival.

I pray that you will experience the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit in your life today. I pray that He will open your eyes to see your true condition before God. I pray that He will bring you to repent of your sin. I pray that the Holy Spirit will apply these Biblical truths in your life and give relief through the blood of Jesus Christ. May the Holy Spirit come to you in grace and bring a spiritual transformation in your life today.