

Restoring Grace

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Date: 16 September 2018

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[0 : 00] Let's turn it back to the Old Testament and to the book of Numbers and chapter 21. And we can read at the end of verse 7.

Numbers 21 at the end of verse 7. So Moses prayed for the people.

And the Lord said to Moses, make a fiery serpent. And set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.

And so on. Now we know as we journey on through life that in many different ways it is quite clear we are on a journey.

We are going from one place to the next. Our lives are a journey from the day of our birth into the time of our departure from this world.

[0 : 59] And of course, like every other journey, the journey of faith is a journey that takes us to different places in different directions, but does so according to the plan of God.

When we look at this book of Numbers in the Old Testament, it is a story for us about the journey of the people of God from the most significant time in their lives as they journey on towards the promised land.

They left Mount Sinai, and they are journeying now on according to the promise of God to that land of promise. And as we read through this book, there are different stages to that journey.

They are travelling and they are stopping over. And we need to do that as we journey on. We need to stop over to rest and to reflect, and then continue on our journey.

And here in the section of the book, they are ready to move on to the plains of Moab in chapter 22, and continue their journey onto the promised land.

[2 : 06] We see at the beginning of the chapter that they are going to continue their journey against the background of victory. God has been good to them.

They were in difficulty, and they cried to God, and they promised God that if he did something for them, that they would be devoted to him, and God gave them a victory.

So it's a place of victory. The second thing I want us to notice as we go on to look at these verses is that here is a significant time in the life of the people of God.

One generation is vanishing, and a new generation is arising. Miriam has died. Aaron has died.

Moses is not going to go to the promised land. There is a new generation about to emerge. And the real question, as we look forward from this point in the book, the real question is this.

[3 : 11] Will the new generation, will there be better than the old? Will the new generation of the people of God, will there be anything like the generation that went before?

I want us to notice, first of all, that we see in the passage our rebellion. And we see the rebellion in the context of delay.

That's how we return from verse 4. From Mount Hor, they set out, by the way, to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. They are continuing their journey, but there is a journey which they did not expect.

They could have gone directly into the promised land, but instead of that, they're going southwards, and they're going back the long way around, and they're going to eventually arrive at the promised land.

It's like I'm in Stornoway, and I'm going to Newmarket. And somebody tells me, you have to go around the west side to get to Newmarket. I would say, what's wrong with you?

[4 : 38] That doesn't make sense. I can just go from here to there in minutes, and I'm there. It doesn't make sense. And that's something like the picture we have with regard to the children of Israel.

They are more or less with an eye shot of the promised land. And God is saying, no, you're not going that way. You're going another way. You're going to avoid the Edomites. They have refused to let them into the land before, and now God is saying, you are going to go the long way around to get to Mount Sinai. And there is, in that itself, there is a lesson for us. There is something that we need to stop and recognize, and that is this, that sometimes God sees an obstacle in our path to the promised salvation of God that we cannot see ourselves. And he guides us and he leads us in a path that we did not expect. We cannot see what he's seeing. He's looking down with that panoramic sense of all that is in our lives, and he sees the obstacle, and he's guiding us around it.

[5 : 43] And we cannot see it. And we wonder, what is God doing? Why is he sending me here? Why is he telling me to go there when I could just go there?

I cannot see the point. There are other times when the obstacle is quite clear. And when it is, then I understand.

This is why God doesn't want me to go there. He wants me to go around the obstacle. And if I do that, I will eventually get there. There is a delay.

And perhaps today, for yourself, you're wondering why God isn't giving to you what you pray for. Why God isn't giving to you the salvation that you are seeking.

You are wondering, why not? And you cannot see that the delay is for your own good. You cannot see that the delay is there because God has a plan.

[6 : 39] Because God has only one way for you to get from where you are to the salvation he has promised to you. You cannot understand the delay.

You cannot understand that at this time, that that is for your good. And one of the reasons we understand from the Bible why it is for our good for there to be a delay is that God does test our hearts.

And he's doing that under the ministry of his word today. He's testing our hearts. And he did that with the children of Israel so that they would learn what was in their hearts.

He knows what's in our hearts. But he wants us to learn our hearts for ourselves. Because it's only as we learn what's in our hearts that we will learn the preciousness of the grace of God.

And what do we learn about these people? Are they going to be better than the generation that went before? What do we learn? We learn that they have the same frustrations.

[7 : 48] They have the same complaints. They have the same errors. They make the same mistakes. They haven't changed at all. They haven't learned at all from what has gone before.

And that's how we read into verse 4. The people became impatient on the way. There was a tension in their hearts, in their minds, in their thinking.

They were impatient in the sense that they were running short of patience with God. But it's short also in the sense of being in a tension within themselves that caused them to cry out and to express themselves in their frustration.

And sometimes that's just how we react to what God is doing, to the way that God is taking us to the path that he sets out for us.

We cannot understand and so we get frustrated. And it's from their frustration that we see that they have not changed.

[8 : 55] And they have not changed because there are two particular sins that the previous generation were guilty of and they are guilty of the same. And the first of these we can say is that they are complaining about the life of the people of God.

Like for us today, we are complaining because of what the Christian life is turning out to be. In verse 5.

Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? They are dissatisfied with the journey of the people of God. And we read this sin from chapter 13 right through to chapter 16.

And in reality what they are saying is that we are not happy with the way that you have taken us. We wish we were back where we were. They are complaining about the life of the people of God.

And sometimes that's where our frustration comes to the fore. We are frustrated with where we are and we complain about the life of the Christian, the life of faith, the journey that we are on.

[10 : 09] And perhaps you're saying, I've never done that. That has never happened to me. I think the Bible makes it clear that it's something that the people of God are not only prone to, but from time to time they fall into.

If something goes wrong, there's a complaint about the life of the people of God. That this is not what we expected. This is not what we like.

And we would rather we were not here. Here. And the other side of the complaint is a complaint against the church itself.

That's the essence of what they are saying. The people spoke against God and against Moses. God is the problem.

Moses is the problem. And because God and Moses are the problem, I wish I wasn't here. I would rather be back where I was in the land of Egypt. And there is something about the way our mind works, that when things do go wrong, we find that the problem is outside of ourselves.

[11 : 23] The problem is the way that God has taken me, and the problem is with the church itself. I blame other people. And in a blame culture in which we live ourselves, in the society in which we live, it perhaps comes to the fore more than ever.

We complain about the life of the people of God. We want to change it. We wish it was different. We complain about the life of the church of God. We want to change it.

We wish it was different so that it would suit our personal preferences. And the result of that is something quite remarkable.

And the something is that they find no satisfaction and no attraction, and they have no appetite for the word of God and for God himself.

In verse 5, there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food. They had cried to God because they had no bread. God sent them manna from heaven, and they fed themselves on the manna from heaven.

[12 : 37] But now, they find the manna from heaven as something that's loathsome. It's light. It's worthless. You think nothing of it.

What are we here for? We can't survive on this. How much they have declined from the awesome sense of seeing the ground covered with the manna from heaven and thankfulness to God.

And now, because of the present frustration, they despise the very provision of God. And to put that in our own context, and in the context of the ministry of Jesus, what does he say?

He says, I am the bread of life. This is the bread that came down from heaven, that you may eat of it and live. And what are they doing? They're despising him. They're rubbishing his claims as to who he was.

They're despising his word. They're rejecting everything that he says. And yet, he is the true bread of life. He's what the manna spoke to and spoke about. And when he's come, they cannot find any place for him in their lives.

[13 : 50] And again, perhaps you will say that that could never happen to you.

That you could never lose an appetite for the word of God. That you could never lose an appetite for the oppression of Jesus. That you could never lose your desire to have Jesus as your savior, as your lord, as your king, to satisfy yourself in him.

That you could never lose that. All the Bible says different. It says that it is not only possible, but that from time to time, it does happen.

And as we move on today, I want us all to think seriously of what we think of the word of God. What we think of the person of the Lord Jesus.

Is he precious to us? Is he like the manna from heaven to us? Or has our own frustration not only clouded a sense of his beauty, but so affected our hearts that we can manage without him.

[15 : 06] And we can live our lives without religion, but we can live our lives without the Lord Jesus. It's a serious question. It's one that reflects the condition of our hearts as we journey on towards God.

And in passages like the book of Hebrews, there is that sense given of the way in which people can, in chapter 10, they have trogged under foot the Son of God, they have despised, counted the blood of the current and unholy thing.

What do you think today of all that God has done in the magnificence of the passion of his Son and in the glory of the darkness of his cross? What do you think?

Are you unmoved by it? Is it unattractive to you? Because other things have not only clouded your thinking, but robbed you of the focus and you've become distracted.

And he's just not on your horizon anymore. And you can be in the church of God and you can be filled with a sense of all the things that you are doing.

[16:19] But the central piece in the jigsaw might be missing. The rebellion. But God, we know, is a God of grace.

And from rebellion, we want to think of reconnection. Was it not today that God reconnects with us, we would never reconnect with God?

And that simply highlights the grace of God, the unfailing nature of it. And here, in this reconnection, he does so by bringing about a situation for them where in their frustration they are felt, they are made to feel the pain of the very place in which they find themselves.

Then the Lord, in verse 6, sent fiery serpents among the people. What did they want to do? They wished they were back in Egypt.

They have no time for Moses. They have no time for God. How does God reconnect with them? He sends them fiery serpents. If I go to Egypt in the days of Moses, I find that the serpent is a symbol of power, he's a symbol of sovereignty, he's a symbol of God.

[17:50] And I go to Pharaoh's crown and I see a zebra woven into his crown to show that this Pharaoh is the Pharaoh who gives protection because he has the power.

The serpent is a real connection with what they have been taken from. It's kind of God saying to them, be careful what you wish for. You wish you were back there.

Well, let me remind you what Egypt is all about. Here is Egypt, the serpent, that in all its power and in all its sovereignty and in all its claims to be God cast you and found you and put you into bondage, into suppression and you cry to me from there.

Let yourself go back there in your mind and your thinking and understand now what it's like. And of course, at the same time, if the serpent connects them with the land of Egypt from which they came out, the serpent also connects them with our ultimate enemy.

The serpent that was in the garden of Eden. The serpent that we find in Revelation 20. The serpent that's so crafty that he deceived Eve and she ate.

[19:05] The serpent was so crafty that sin came into the world and death because of sin. And here are the connections. God, in the mystery of the way in which he visits them, he connects their whole thinking with the problem of their sin and the problem of their bondage in Egypt.

isn't God good? He doesn't let them go on in their thinking. He points the finger, puts his finger on the very place where they have gone so wrong.

And he does so in such a way that when the serpents come, sent by him with his authority, when they come, they put the people so that many people of Israel died.

It's like death row on this journey to the promised land. It doesn't make sense. They're going to the place of promised life and the whole generation of these people are on death row because of the rebellion against God and because God has sent this fiery serpent.

And we cannot think of what God has done to reconnect with them without imagining in some way the pain of fire going through every tissue of their bodies as their lives begin to come to an end and as they reflect in their minds on everything that has happened and their complaints against God.

[20:41] It is the judgment of God and through the judgment of God that God reconnects this people to himself.

And today don't be surprised that when God wants to win you back for himself and he wants you to take into his embrace don't be surprised if it means pain.

It seems to me to be inevitable because God is a God who is our father he is a God who chastens us and he does so for our good. And that chastisement so often brings pain but it is in order to bring us back to himself to recover us and to restore us.

We can expect a painful reconnection but we need to remind ourselves that in that painful reconnection there is the love of God the heart of God moving toward us to recover us for himself.

And if you want a commentary on that you can read Jeremiah chapter 31 later on and you can see the way in which God is wrestling with Ephraim is saying with regard to him is he not my dear son is he not my darling child as often as I speak against him I do remember him still there is frustration and turmoil in the hearts of those who are complaining against God and there is a corresponding turmoil if I can use these words in the heart of God himself because he loves and at the same time he sends his judgment therefore he says in verse 20 in that chapter therefore my heart yearns for him isn't God good we can expect judgment we can expect pain because that's what sinning against

[22 : 57] God brings it exposes us to his judgment but here it's a judgment that comes to recover and to reconnect today would you welcome that kind of reconnection is the Lord Jesus in that sense absent from you is he absent from you as someone who was with you is he absent from you as someone that you have never known and today would you welcome the finger of God touching your life to bring about the pain that will cause you to think of everything that has gone wrong between yourself and him that's a mercy that's something that we all need as God from time to time recovers us for himself and of course it works

God knows what he's doing and everything that he does works he doesn't have a strategy that fails it always works and as soon as all of this happens it stirs up this people to confess their very sin they are at death's door they know they're dying and God is the God who has brought them here and they know that the only answer to their problem is in God and that's where we come to verse 7 the people came to Moses and said we have sinned they have come way short of the mark they have failed to trust in God they have broken the law of God they have failed to show that they are the people of God they have broken the covenant with God if you obey my voice and keep my covenant you will be my people indeed but they are doing exactly what the previous generation did they have sinned against

God and the first step towards the reconnection working is the embrace of their personal sin it takes away the blame culture it takes away blaming the church it takes away blaming the Christian life it takes away blaming everyone else it leaves me and my God and my sin we have sinned against Moses and against God do you see where God wants you to come today a painful journey the best place the second best place you could ever come to is to say to God that you have sinned we have sinned for we have spoken against the Lord and against you pray to the Lord there is only one answer the God whom they had excluded is the only God who can help them and so they ask Moses who is the intercessor who goes up to God for them and backs down from God to them go up to God and pray to God and tell him to take away these serpents we know that he sent them we know why he sent them and pray that in his mercy he would take them away the prayer is not just a prayer that is offered directly in the sense of not having someone else involved there is a higher authority between themselves and their prayer reaching God and today that's where your pain and your sin must take you and me to the place where our prayer goes up to God through the higher authority of the passion of the Son of God who I know is at God's right hand for his people and I'm praying and reaching out to him because I know there is no other solution there is no other cure I know that I'm going to die in my sin unless something happens at the throne of God between the Son of God who is my Savior and the God who is on the throne something must happen there pray to God that he will take the serpents away it's an emergency situation it's a crisis it's a call for help it's a matter of life and death Moses you do this or else we're going to die and that's where God wants to take us all today whoever we are to come face to face with that kind of reality of relationship with him so that whether we're believers or not that we will embrace our sinnership and cry out to God through the saviourhood of the Lord Jesus that he will come and save us the reconnection it's in

[28 : 27] God good the pain that caused me to cry out to him because I know that only he can help me and that brings me finally to the restoration that's God's goal it's not what they deserve but this is God's goal the restoration and we see that the restoration is through God making something new no surprise there our salvation is because God can create new things and in this case he gives Moses a command in verse 8 make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole make something to represent the plague that has visited the people make something to represent the power of Pharaoh make something to represent the power of

Satan form something that can be used in this case for the people of God for those who are in need for turning to me so that they might live create something that isn't there but that corresponds to what is there and that immediately triggers a switch in my thinking that leads me to the marvelous thing that God has done in sending his son he was never before an infant he was never before a lad in the temple he was never before a preacher on the earth he was never before someone like me but God in his wisdom in the marvel of his provision he creates something new but not through Moses he does it himself Moses creates the serpent and God prepares a body for a son and I find a correspondence between what

Moses is doing with the serpent and the child Jesus in the manger at Bethlehem and the correspondence goes further everything that God does for the work of my salvation it corresponds

to my need in the Old Testament the sacrifice were there and I was connected to them because the sacrifice was bearing my sin there was that connection and everything that happened to the sacrifice it related to God but it also related to me and so the serpent is the same and that's the marvel of the new thing that God did in the passion of his son he bore the sins of the world my sins were laid upon him and he wasn't stained in the least the correspondence is that he is like me and as he walks the face of the earth there is no distinction between him and those who are around him and in his likeness he is unique he is bearing my sin he is bearing the sins of the world that's something new and that's something marvelous and if there is a marvel in the provision that God asks Moses to make here in this crisis on this journey to the promised land small in comparison to the new thing that God has done in the person of Jesus the serpent that corresponds to the bondage in Egypt that corresponds to their sin and the Jesus who bears the sin of his people and who goes where is this new creation going to go set it on a pole it's the place in Egypt where the power of Pharaoh was known it's the rallying point for people in the time of crisis they will go to the pole so as they did this in Egypt they are now to rally round this pole on which this bronze serpent that represents that sin and the rebellion is found it's lifeless it cannot bite them it's a brass serpent but it does represent all that had gone wrong and I go to the life of the Lord Jesus and I follow his journey and as Jesus himself said as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness so must the son of man be lifted up and I go to Golgotha and I see there my sin and I see its power removed I see the power of sin lifeless in the cross of Jesus I see the new creation beyond it in his resurrection but on the cross at Calvary he suffered for my sin the penalty of my sin it's come to an end when Jesus says it is finished so is the power of sin so is my relationship with sin it is terminated and at the same time when I go to [34 : 26] Golgotha and I see Jesus there bearing my sin I also remember that he said to his disciples in John chapter 12 now is the prince of this world cast out he is fighting the greatest battle of all he is destroying in Hebrews chapter 2 the one who has the power of death that is the devil and in Colossians 2 he is the one who destroyed overcame principalities and made an open show of them on that cross I go to Golgotha and I find the son of God suspended between heaven and earth and I see all that pains me and troubles me in my relationship with God I see it nullified I see it terminated

I see it coming to an end and when he sees it shall live if a serpent bit anyone he would look at the bronze serpent and live looking at the cross of Jesus look unto me all the ends of the earth and be saved for I am God and there is no one else the restoration the frustration that comes God reconnects with us in his own way and he does so for one simple reason because he wants our whole thinking to come to be focused on what he has achieved in the lifting up of his son on the cross of Calvary and he wants our minds to be fixed there and once we see that the power of sin has gone the attraction of our past life has gone and we are ready to go on our journey with God wherever he takes us whatever the obstacles are we are on our way with God had they changed were they different to the previous generation no had God changed no God had not changed and because God had not changed God was able to forgive and bring them to the place where they embraced his provision and where they went on their way with him and that's the glory of the gospel for you and for me that God has not changed and no matter how much you and I change the gospel comes knocking at the door of our hearts because God does want his children to know the peace and the security of his salvation and of all that he has provided in Christ Jesus his son may God bless his word to his latest pray