

Lesson 7. FORTY YEARS WANDERING IN THE WILDERNESS

READING: Numbers 16, 17, 20 and 21:4-9.

AIM: To consider how Israel experienced in the wilderness the "goodness and severity" of God, whose sovereign will and purpose stand firm against all opposition.

1. BACKGROUND

Turned away from the Land of Promise, Israel was condemned to spend 40 years (from the time they left Egypt) in the wilderness until the generations that were numbered at the Exodus perished (Num.14: 29-30; 26:63-65). During this time God did not leave them but continued to communicate with them through Moses (Num.15:1, 17, 35). He gave the manna each day, supplied water for the people and preserved their raiment (Deut. 8: 2-6). However, the people continued to disobey God, breaking many of the laws they were given and persisting with idolatrous practices (1 Cor.10: 7). The unrest mounted, and the disappointment of the people at not being able to enter the Promised Land, their general murmuring and disturbed state of mind at the prospect of many years in the wilderness, became a fruitful ground for rebellion to develop.

2. REBELLION BY KORAH, DATHAN AND ABIRAM. Num.16 and 26:7-11

The opportunity was seized by Korah, Dathan and Abiram to rebel against the order of priesthood which had been ordained by God at Sinai. Before the appointment of Aaron and his sons to the priesthood, the first-born or head of each family conducted the worship and made sacrifices for his family.

Korah, a first cousin of Moses and Aaron, was jealous, no doubt, that Aaron should be High Priest. Korah, of the tribe of Levi, was a grandson of Kohath whose descendants held the privileged position of transporting the Tabernacle furniture. Korah was dissatisfied with this high honour and, together with Dathan and Abiram of the tribe of Reuben, and 250 princes rose up in rebellion against Moses and Aaron and accused them of taking too much upon themselves.

This was the second challenge to the leadership of Moses and Aaron in only a short while. On the last occasion the people wanted to return to Egypt under a new captain (Num.14: 4). Moses confidently told them that God would show who He chose. Korah, with the 250 princes, came as directed to the Tabernacle carrying censers with fire in them. Dathan and Abiram, with their families, stood at their tents. However, Korah's children obeyed the command to stand aside from their father and the rest of the rebels (Num. 16:26-27; 26: 11).

God sent fire and an earthquake that completely destroyed the arch-rebels and their followers. The brass censers were beaten into a covering for the altar as a memorial that only Aaron's seed was appointed to the priesthood and Tabernacle services.

3. THE AUTHORITY OF AARON. Num. 17.

Even these remarkable happenings did not humble Israel. Again they rebelled and complained to Moses, whereupon God smote the people with a plague. Once more Moses mediated for them and Aaron made atonement for their sins. 14,700 perished, however. This was a grave warning to Israel. Events followed which were a further testimony "against the rebels" to stop "all murmuring" against the authority of Aaron. God instructed each tribe to select a rod and write on it the name of the leader of the tribe. These were placed before the Testimony in the Tabernacle. The next day it was seen that Aaron's rod had budded, brought forth blossoms, and yielded almonds. This demonstrated conclusively that he was appointed by God, that he acted with divine authority, and that he was the only avenue of approach to God.

The High Priest's position, then, was one of divine appointment. The symbol of Aaron's appointment was the budding of an apparently dead rod (which testified of resurrection). We are reminded here of Christ, whose divine election was shown beyond all doubt by his resurrection (Rom. 1: 3-4). This is proof that God has appointed him to be leader, and none other. We must listen to him, follow him, and seek God through him, otherwise we, too, will die.

By the power of the Gospel message, God is choosing people to become kings and priests with the Lord Jesus in His Kingdom. The rulers of that Kingdom will not be appointed by the voice of the people, but by divine election (1 Thess.1: 4).

4. MOSES SPEAKS "UNADVISEDLY". Num. 20: 1-13

For 38 years Israel wandered between Kadesh on the borders of Canaan and Elath 100 miles south in the wilderness of Zin. In Kadesh, Miriam died and was buried (Num. 20:1). The "first month" mentioned in this verse commenced their 40th year since leaving Egypt. The people again lacked water and complained to Moses. They blamed Moses for bringing them from a land of plenty to this wilderness. Moses and Aaron sought God's help and God commanded Moses to take his rod and "speak ye unto the rock before their eyes: and it shall give forth his water" (Num. 20: 8). Moses, provoked by Israel, not only struck the rock twice, but also said. "Must we fetch water out of the rock". He spoke "unadvisedly" (Psa. 106: 32-33) because he failed to sanctify God and give Him the honour. The Lord's reproof to Moses revealed His displeasure, "Because ye believed me not to sanctify me in the eyes of the children of Israel; ye shall not bring this congregation into the land" (Num. 20:12). Moses led Israel right to the threshold of the land and though he was not permitted to enter Canaan, he was mercifully allowed to see it (Deut.32:52).

5. THE DEATH OF AARON. Num. 20:14-29

From Kadesh, Israel journeyed northward along the borders of the land of Edom to Gilead, the territory on the eastern side of the River Jordan. The Edomites, descendants of Esau, would not allow them to pass through their land. The subsequent detour on a southerly route took them past Mt. Hor, where Aaron died (Num.20: 23-29). His priestly garments were given to Eleazar, his son, and there on the top of Mt. Hor, Aaron was buried. Israel mourned for Aaron for 30 days.

6. FIERY SERPENTS IN THE WILDERNESS. Num. 21: 4-9

Israel journeyed from Mt. Hor by way of the Red Sea, in the intensely hot, desolate and rough depression of the Arabah. The people were "much discouraged because of the way" and again spoke against God and against Moses. They feared they would perish in the wilderness, as their fathers had done. They faced starvation, they feared their enemies, they were tired of manna.

God punished them by sending serpents, which bit the people and caused many to die. The people recognised this as a punishment from God. "We have sinned" they told Moses and asked that he would pray for them and intercede on their behalf. Moses did so. He was told by God to make a serpent of brass and put it on a pole. It was an evidence of God's love to sinners. Those who looked upon it when they were bitten were healed on account of their obedience and faith.

Many years later, Jesus Christ referred to this incident as foreshadowing his death: "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up" (John 3: 14-15). We have been "bitten" because of our sins. We must look to Christ, the greatest expression of God's love, who was crucified and, because he knew no sin, bruised "the serpent's head". Through faith in his power to save and heal us, and putting on his name in baptism, we can be victorious over the sting of death (I Cor.15: 54-57).

7. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The Children of Israel looked back instead of forward. In looking back, they overlooked the power of their God who had delivered them from the Pharaoh of Egypt. In Phil. 13-15, Paul shows us the way:

"... This one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded.."

Like Israel we have difficulties to overcome. If we forget God, we also suffer, but if we do our part in faith He will never forsake us. "As truly as I live, all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord" (Num 14: 21).

REFERENCE LIBRARY

"The Visible Hand of God", chapter 18.

"Moses, My Servant", chapter 7.

"Witness for Christ", part 3, chapter 6.

QUESTIONS

1. What caused the rebellion of Korah, Dathan and Abiram in Israel?
2. What lessons do we learn from Moses striking the rock at Kadesh-barnea?
3. How can we relate Jesus to the "brazen serpent" in the Wilderness?