

Sin Is Pernicious and Persistent

In the Book of Numbers we have witnessed Israel spurn God's grace and providential care. With fear exceeding their faith, they opted to return to slavery rather than risk entering the land that God had promised to their father Abraham. God's patience with them was fully exhausted and He issued a death sentence for their rebellion (Num. 14:11-2). Moses interceded with a plea for mercy and God, true to His character, manifesting both justice and mercy, spared Israel, momentarily. All of Israel who were twenty years or older would live for the moment, but they would "be shepherds in the wilderness forty years... according to the number of the days in which you spied out the land... [For] each day you shall bear your guilt one year (14:33-34)." By the end of the forty year period, all of that generation would be dead and only their children, along with Joshua and Caleb, the two faithful spies, would enter into God's promise.

As we ponder the litany of rebellious acts recorded in the Book of Numbers, we are bewildered by Israel's relentless folly. The day after the whole nation refuses to enter Canaan, Israel, convicted of their rash and foolish deed, proceeded to rally their forces to take the land. Warned by Moses to "not go up, lest you be defeated by your enemies, for the Lord is not among you (14:42)," Israel, nevertheless, marched forth. As predicted, they were soundly defeated (14:45). If their behavior was not admirable, it was at least consistent. God said "Do," Israel did not. God said "Do not," Israel did.

As with incorrigible children, no amount of chastising seemed sufficient for Israel to submit to God. The few incidents recorded during the forty years of wilderness wandering are primarily rebellions. In chapter 16, Korah, a Levite, in conjunction with Dathan and Abiram, descendants of Reuben, challenged the authority of Moses and Aaron. Forgetting all the examples of God's grand works that were wrought through Moses, these men challenged his leadership only to be destroyed. The earth opened up and swallowed the rebel leaders along with their families, and fire destroyed two hundred and fifty men who stood with them (16:31-35). This should have silenced the nation for a time, but "on the next day all the congregation... of Israel complained against Moses (16:41)," blaming him for the death of those the day before. Again God sent a plague that destroyed fourteen thousand seven hundred, a number limited only by Moses once again making intercession for the people (14:44-50).

In chapter 20, somewhere in the midst of their forty year wanderings, we find Israel in the Wilderness of Zin. Again they are without water and again they complain against Moses and Aaron, yearning that they "had died when our brethren died before the Lord (20:3)!" As before, the Lord brings water from the rock, but not before Moses, long burdened with the sins of this incorrigible mob, also succumbs to sin (20:6-13). While Scripture attests forever to the faithfulness of Moses, he nevertheless suffered consequences for speaking, probably carelessly, not for God, but as God (20:10). He would die before Israel entered the Promised Land.

Israel's thankless hearts continued unabated in chapter 21. Following a complete and utter victory over the Canaanites at Hormah, they grumble about the food, declaring "our soul loathes this worthless bread (21:4)." God sent deadly, fiery serpents among them "and many of the people of Israel died (21:6)." Recognizing their sin, they came to Moses for intercession. God directed that a bronze replica of a serpent be placed upon a pole where the people, if bitten, could look upon it and live (21:7-9).

Israel experiences a series of conquests among their enemies in the territories surrounding the land to which they journeyed. Moab and their king, Balak, were "exceedingly afraid of [Israel]" and sent for the pagan prophet, Balaam, asking that he pronounce a curse upon their perceived enemy. But God, revealing Himself to this pagan seer, instead directed Balaam to pronounce a blessing. Balak tried repeatedly to entice Balaam to pronounce a curse until, after three attempts resulted in three blessings, he sent the prophet away (22:1 – 23:25). God had again demonstrated His providential care to Israel only to see them run after false gods and sexual immorality with the people of Moab. Failing to gain an advantage over Israel through sorcery, the Moabites lured Israel into "harlotry with the women of Moab," inviting "the people to the sacrifices of their gods (25:1-2)." Having joined themselves with false Gods, the anger of the Lord was again aroused against Israel and, before the evil was purged from them, over 24,000 died (25:4; 9).

As one considers the previous book, Leviticus, one can hardly fail to observe the dullness of the record. Full of ceremonial cleansings and animal sacrifices, it appears to have no relevance to ourselves. It must have appeared the same for this generation of Israel, for they could not make a connection with the sacrifices for sin and the sin in their lives. The Book of Numbers, if it does nothing else, should illustrate to the reader that once sin gets into the human heart, it is not an easy thing to purge out. The animal sacrifices may have rolled over, as it were, the sins of the people to another day, but it certainly did not take them away. It neither took away the sins, nor the propensity to repeat them with a predictable regularity. A theme that emerges from the Book of Numbers is that sin, as illustrated by Israel, is exceedingly pernicious and persistent.