

Lifted Up
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Numbers 21:4-9
John 3:14-21

A minister ascended the stairs of the pulpit, delivered his sermon, and was immediately struck by lightning and killed.

That was one of the more memorable openings to a book that I had read in a long time, and in the years since I read that story, I have never forgotten the impact it had on me.

The author of the book said that he wished it was always that easy to identify sin and to see the effects of sin, and the punishment for sin.

His argument was that if sin always had such an immediate consequences people would find it easier to keep from sinning.

When I read the passage from the book of Numbers, I saw the same type of immediate connection of action and consequence.

The sin of the Israelites brought forth the immediate reaction of God. God sent the serpents, the serpents bit the people, the people died.

Not that you could really blame God for taking some sort of action against the people. They were far from blameless, in fact, there were plenty of reasons for God to act against the people:

One day the Israelites were promising to be faithful, the next day they were building a golden calf.

One day the people complained that there was no water, and so God gave the people water out of a rock.

The next day the people complained again, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.”

“This miserable food” (as they called it) was the manna that came from heaven each morning from God. What once had been salvation, what once had been a miracle of God’s provision, was now seen as tiresome and boring.

The book of Numbers gives us an interesting view of God and the people of God. Not only do we have the people grumbling, we have some actions from God which are shocking to our 21st century minds.

For example, earlier in chapter 11, the people were again complaining about the food. They were tired of the manna and wanted meat.

God replied, “The people want meat? Fine, I’ll give them meat, and not for just a day or two, but for a month, in fact, they’ll have so much meat that it will be coming out of their nostrils.”

The people had very short memories.

- They forgot that God had freed them from slavery.
- They forgot that their sinfulness was the cause of their enslavement in the first place
- They forgot what it was like to live in Egypt and work from morning until night.
- They forgot that God had been good to them and had provided for all their needs

And instead of responding with great joy, they instead complained.

(Now I should mention that I don’t think that we should consider ourselves any better, because we don’t know how we would have responded if we had been wandering in the desert all those years.)

For the most part, when the people complained to Moses, he took their complaint to God and God responded. The people needed water, God gave them water. The people needed to cross the sea, God parted the waters.

But on this particular day when they complained, God sent poisonous serpents and they bit the people, and the people died.

There’s no elaboration, no further comment, nothing there to soften the blow of God’s actions, it just says that God sent the serpents, they bit the people, and many of the people died.

Those who didn’t die went to Moses (the same Moses they had been complaining to) and asked him to pray to God.

Then the story takes a strange turn, in the form of the “cure” that God sent to the people. You might expect that God would send them to wash, or have Moses extend his hands over the people.

Or perhaps God would just declare that the people who had been bitten would be healed.

Instead, God commanded Moses to make an idol out of the very thing which had brought judgement upon them. “Make a poisonous serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.”

There is another interesting detail to the story. Listen again to the last verse, verse nine:

“So Moses made a serpent of bronze and put it upon a pole, and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent and live.”

Apparently the serpents that God had sent did not leave when God decided to give the people a cure for the effects of the snake bites. Why not send the serpents away? No reason is given.

This might have otherwise just been an obscure Old Testament story except that Jesus compared the serpent on the pole and the cross he was to suffer on Good Friday.

Jesus’ followers would have known the story of the serpents, they would have understood the people’s sin and the punishment, and perhaps they would have liked the story. We sometimes like to think that people who sin will be punished, and if that punishment is immediate, where no one can doubt the reason for it, how much more gratifying. (Now again I should point out that few people hope to see their own sins punished in such precise manner).

When Jesus was lifted up on the cross, it brought salvation from death just as the bronze serpent that Moses made, and so we can understand the comparison between the two events.

But even after the cross, we are not freed from all negative effects from sin. We no longer fear the curse of eternal damnation for our sins, but nonetheless sin always has a sting consequences and costs

The Apostle Paul knew this. That’s one reason why when he was talking about our freedom and the grace of God he never suggested that we should consider that we were now free to sin. In fact he used strong words to reply to the questions, “Should we go on sinning?” Of course not, but it was a good question to ask. After all, if sin no longer carries the weight of death, then why worry about it?

This question is more than academic, because I think it goes quite heavily on how we talk about grace. Very often we seem to be afraid of talking too much about the grace of God that forgives all our sins, as if people will respond by saying, “Well, if all of my sins are forgiven, I don’t need to worry about whether or not I sin.”

If we understand that eternal damnation for sins and consequences for sins are two different issues, I think we can avoid that potential pitfall.

We have been freed from death, but sin still plagues us whenever we find ourselves acting against the will of God That’s because sin always leads to suffering, and God wants us to avoid that suffering, and therefore wants us to avoid sin....

Not so that we can avoid eternal damnation, but rather because avoiding sin is what is good for us to do. It helps our relationships with one another, with God, and with ourselves.

One of the most difficult things for us to realize is that our sin is never a private matter. In most cases, our sin involves at least one other person, and how we act with one another was a major theme in the message of Jesus. We are supposed to love not just our friends (which everyone does), but also our enemies. And loving our enemies means not sinning against them, but in fact helping them wherever we can.

Sin is not a private matter because Jesus was lifted on the cross for our sins. At that point we lost the ability to claim that any of our sins were private.

As for the story of the minister struck down by lightning, I'm not sure that was judgment delivered by God, perhaps there are other explanations. For one thing, God tends to give us a chance to realize our sins and repent from them. And that is still our responsibility today.

We often fail to do what is right, even when we know the right thing to do. The ultimate penalty has been paid by Jesus lifted on the cross, but sin still has its sting. It continues to hurt us and those around us. Our call throughout our life, but especially during Lent, is to remember the sacrifice made on our behalf, to call to mind our sin -- not to continually punish ourselves for our sins, but to continually try to do better than we have done. To fix our eyes on the cross that brought us freedom from death, and to remember the empty tomb on Easter Sunday that brought us new life.