

Look Up, Look Up

Text: Numbers 21:4-9

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Numbers 21: 4-9 (NIV)

^{NU 21:4} They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; ⁵ they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!"

^{NU 21:6} Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. ⁷ The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed for the people.

^{NU 21:8} The LORD said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." ⁹ So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived.

Sermon Statement

Only by looking up at Christ on the Cross do we receive the grace to be saved, strengthened, comforted and healed.

Introduction

A few years ago, I was privileged to be invited to speak at a conference organised by the Fellowship of Evangelical Students (FES). The conference was themed "Professionals of Tomorrow" (POTs) and attended by medical, law and teaching students from universities from around the country. Medical students which included those studying in healthcare disciplines are called "Healthcarers of Tomorrow" (HOTs), law students (LOTs) and teachers (TOTs).

In the sessions we deal with the state of the various disciplines and conditions in Malaysia and the students were very vocal in their complaints. I was actually quite surprised because I thought students were only concerned with passing exams and their playstations. I was wrong. They are very concerned with the country they are living in. Initially the atmosphere was subdued as they were given more and more room to voice their concern. Then suddenly the atmosphere changed at about the third day when they realise that the

answer to their complaints has already being given. The conference ended with a rousing recommitment to their task ahead.

In this sermon I will like to deal with complaints and what to do about it.

Text Exposition (Num 21: 4-9)

1. Avoiding Edom (v. 4a)

^{NU 21:4} They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom.

People have to turn south from Mt. Hor (Num 20: 20-21), avoiding Edom because the Edomites refused allow them to pass through their territory. Why did the Edomites refuse them passage? Possible explanations include;

- (a) they do not trust them to allow them into their territories
- (b) Edomites are the descendent of Esau and there has always been enmity between Esau and Jacob and now their descendents. The other eastern neighbours of ancient Israel are the Amalek (descended from a son of Esau), Moab and Ammon (both descended from sons of Lot).

2. Complaints (v. 4b-5)

But the people grew impatient on the way; ⁵ they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!"

The word *qāsār* means that the lost heart or impatient. The people are becoming discouraged because they have to make a detour and they complained.

The complaints are similar to others (Ex. 14:11-12; 17:3; Num. 11: 4-35; 14: 2-4; 16: 13-14; 20: 4-5):

- (a) the objects of their complaints are Yahweh and Moses
- (b) the cause of their complaints are food and water
 - a. lack of water
 - b. acceptable food. If the complaint is against the manna, it is a direct rejection of God's providence.
 - c. Compare. Wishing for the good old days.

3. The Desert Snakes (v. 6)

^{NU 21:6} Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died.

Unlike similar episodes of complaints in the past, there is no verbal response from Yahweh or Moses, just action.

4. The People's Repentance (v. 7)

⁷ The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed for the people.

- (a) confession
- (b) request for intercession
- (c) record of intercession

5. Yahweh's Response (v. 8-9)

^{NU 21:8} The LORD said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." ⁹ So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived.

Both God's command (v.8) and its fulfillments (v.9) demands an obedience i.e. look up at the object. The words used for the two verses are different. It is not simply to take a glance but to gaze one's eyes upon the bronze snake.

This is not the beginning of a bronze snake cult nor does the bronze snake have magical powers. Unfortunately there is a tendency for people to turn everything into a magical cure. Hence in 2 Kings 18: 4

⁴ He (King Hezekiah) removed the high places, smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles. He broke into pieces the bronze snake Moses had made, for up to that time the Israelites had been burning incense to it. (It was called Nehushtan.)

The association of desert snakes with bronze is an attempt to relate desert objects with the temple.

Lessons for us

1. Life is change

a. A flowing stream

Heraclitus, an Ephesian who lived out his life in his native town, was in his prime between the years 504 and 501 B.C. He is famous for his quotation "You cannot step twice into the same river; for fresh waters are continually flowing on." (Fr. 91,12). Such is the constantly changing world we live in. Globalisation has flatted the world. Not only is the world changing every second, we ourselves are also changing constantly.

b. We cannot resist change

The recent economic crisis shows us how rapidly the world is changing and just how unstable the world is at any moment in time.

In Malaysia, the euphoria of neo-politics of March 2008 has evaporated and now in the state of Perak, we have a state assembly meeting under a rain tree because its members are barred from entering the State Assembly building. There are at present, two Menteri Besars (Chief Minister), two State Assemblies and two of everything in the state, each one claiming legitimacy.

Changes come to us personally in terms of

- Children growing up and leaving home
- New births
- Deaths
- Diseases
- Ageing
- Economic insecurities
- Rising crime rates
- Forced to live a less lavish lifestyle

2. How to complain

It is okay to complain. Just do it right. The Bible is full of people's complaints. Read the Psalms, lamentations and the prophets and you will get the idea. Job said

JOB 7:11 "Therefore I will not keep silent;
I will speak out in the anguish of my spirit,
I will complain in the bitterness of my soul.

Just be careful that you are complaining about the situation and not against God. The ancient Israelite in Numbers made the mistake of complaining against God and was punished for their complaints. When they refer to the manna from Yahweh as 'miserable' food, they are in trouble.

In our relationship with God, in our prayers it is okay to complain as David and others did in the Psalms. We need to be open about our feelings. However we need to be clear about our reasons for complaining.

a. The squeaky wheel gets the grease

Some people complain because they know the louder is their complaint, the quicker you get a response.

- Patients who complained loudly in the waiting room get to be seen earlier.
- Patients who has been hospitalised who complain knows that they will get a discount.

- Passengers who complain during the flight either get an upgrade or a voucher.

The service paradigm of “the customer is always right” has made complaining into a fine art.

Complain as an action to stimulate the right action. Then do it loudly.

b. Complain but don't enjoy it too much

The problem with many of us is that we love to complain. It is enjoyable to voice out that the whole does not revolve around us. It is a social activity where we can all sit around and spend out time complaining loudly to each other about how unjust the world is.

Lamentations is written when the Israelites are in exile. If anyone has reasons to complain, they have. Thousands of miles from home, exiled, homesick, terrified, their national identity and the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC. Yet one of the writers of Lamentations wrote,

LA 3:38 Is it not from the mouth of the Most High
that both calamities and good things come?

LA 3:39 Why should any living man complain
when punished for his sins?

LA 3:40 Let us examine our ways and test them,
and let us return to the LORD.

Complain if you have legitimate reasons to but do not indulge in self-pity

c. Don't play the “what if” game

Playing the “what if “ games will give us lots of reasons to complain. It is always easy to know and judge everything with hindsight.

What if ...

- I have married A instead of B
- I have listened to my father's advice
- C has been nicer to me
- D is not such a donkey

And it goes on and on.

Playing the ‘what if ‘ game never solves anything. It just create more discontent and create reasons for complaints.

d. Don't live in the Good Old Days

Living in the past is not helpful. The older folks love to say, "In my days..." as if the past is the Good Old Days or Golden Age. Actually the past is the same as today. There was also a Great Depression in the past. It just happens that our minds selectively remember the good times and conveniently forget the bad. So the past looks good. It is not. By comparing your present situation to the 'rosy' past will only make you more unhappy and generate more complaints.

Live in the present and not the past. Let the past remain in the past.

How to complain? You complain by looking up.

3. Look up, look up

a. You must be down to look up

Moses was instructed to raise the bronze snake high on a pole. The people have to look up to see it.

In order for us to look up, we must be down. Sometimes we may be lying on the ground. Suffering is part of human life, whether we like it or not. I am not a big fan of suffering and I try to avoid it if I can. However suffering may be redemptive and helps us to know God. Paul notes in Rom 5: 3-5

³ Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴ perseverance, character; and character, hope. ⁵ And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

So the circumstances of our lives knock us down. So what do we do? We complain. Maybe we should look up.

b. It's all about grace

The apostle John explains the significance of the bronze snake,

John 3: 14-15

¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

John 8: 27-29

^{JN 8:27} They did not understand that he was telling them about his Father. ²⁸ So Jesus said, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am the one I claim to be

and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. ²⁹ The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him."

This is all about Jesus dying on the cross. It is about the finished work of Christ on the cross. All that has been accomplished 2000 years ago. By dying on the cross, Jesus has paid for our sins with his suffering and his body. He has atoned for our sin. By his atonement, we have been made righteous with God. By his atonement, God justice has been satisfied. We have been justified.

We do not have to do anything. Everything has been done for us. This is grace.

c. Let go and let God

But like the ancient Israelites, we have to look up. We have to look at the source of our salvation. The ancient Israelites receive bodily healing. As we know, they eventually all die. The book of Numbers may be divided into three main sections:

- (1) Preparing the Old Generation (1:1 -10:10)
- (2) Postponement for Unbelief (10:11-25: 18)
- (3) Preparing the New Generation (26-36)

For us, we only have to look up to Christ on the cross. Actually we are looking at an empty cross because Christ has ascended. Christ is the author and finisher of our faith. Not only has he gone ahead to prepare a place for us, he has sent us the Holy Spirit who will help us here on earth.

Complain if you have to but do not sin against God in your complaining.

- Remember what God has done for you in the past
- Remember God loves you and will care for you in the past, present and future
- Remember God will look after you
- Trust

Conclusion

Just before you complain, remember what Jesus says,

Matt 6: 25-34

^{MT 6:25} "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? ²⁷ Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?"

MT 6:28 "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. ²⁹ Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ³⁰ If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? ³¹ So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' ³² For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴ Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Soli Deo Gloria

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