

Anyone who looks at the snake...

Numbers 17:1 – 25:18

Key verse 21:8;9

„ 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.” 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.”

Thank God that in this unpredictable (fairweather) month of April he allows us to study the book of Numbers, even if some suffer from allergies or colds. We thank God for teaching us how to live as a holy people of God on pilgrimage to the Promised Land. Last week we were admonished that habitual grumbling and unbelief in God's power have serious consequences so that the Israelites could not enter the Promised Land. We have learned to look at all the challenges we may face like Caleb with the eyes of faith and to believe absolutely in the fulfillment of God's promise. By faith may we see the promise of God and conquer our promised land.

Today's lesson is about the Israelites' long journey through the desert as a result of their unbelief and about the change of generations. During this time, a whole generation of fighters died and a new generation grew up. We learn that God seriously punished the sin of his people, but that he also forgave them and led them faithfully to safety and fulfilled His promise in spite of all murmurs and rebellion. We learn through this lesson that God himself opened the way of salvation for the Israelites by looking by obedient faith upon the bronze snake that God had raised as the sign of salvation. It is a picture of the way of salvation in the New Testament, that is, to look at the sign of Jesus on the cross. Let us today learn God's work of salvation and look with trust upon God's sign of salvation.

1. God's spiritual order and guidance in the desert (17:1 – 20:13)

In chapter 16 we learned about the rebellion of Korah's group, who refused to recognize Aaron as a priest, wanting themselves to be priests. God had severely punished their arrogant undertaking by killing the rebels by fire and a hole in the ground. Now God wanted to clarify the problem of spiritual order once and for all, so

that the Israelites would not die because of their grumbling. Moses collected the staffs of all 12 tribal leaders, including the staff of Aaron, and left them in the sanctuary overnight. Read 17:8: "The next day Moses entered the Tent of the Testimony and saw that Aaron's staff, which represented the house of Levi, had not only sprouted but had budded, blossomed and produced almonds." The next morning Aaron's staff had not only sprouted but had budded, blossomed and produced almonds. This showed that God alone had chosen Aaron and his descendants as priests. Aaron's staff was no better or different from the staffs of the tribal rulers. But it greened through the living power of God.

Have you ever seen a dry staff bud and flower? It was a sign of the resurrection and the living power of God. It was like Jesus, who had died but rose again on the third day. Only the living God can make a dry staff blossom overnight. This living God chose Aaron, who was like a dry staff, and made him spiritually alive to be used as his holy priest. Aaron was no better nor more righteous than the others, but he was called by God and chosen by God. This vocation does not come from worldly ambition or human ability, but from God's sovereignty and power. It is very important that we acknowledge the spiritual order of God and submit to God's servants called and empowered by God.

Chapter 18 teaches us the ministry, right, and reward received by priests and Levites. Aaron and his sons were to serve at the altar and in the tabernacle, and the rest of the Levites were to work for them. Unlike the rest of the Israelites, they were not to receive any worldly possessions in Canaan, because God alone was to be their inheritance. The Levites were to live on the tithe offering of the people, and the priests on the tithe offering of the Levites. The priests had a great privilege, but also a great responsibility to fulfill the sacred task properly. In the

same way, may we fulfill the sacred task as shepherds and Bible teachers with holy fear of God.

Chapter 19 deals with the cleansing water, which was produced with the ashes of a red cow. This water was used for ritual cleansing when one had become unclean by touching a dead person. God cannot be with unclean people, so they absolutely need purification. But how can people who are continuously defiled become clean? God himself created a way for purification. This is clearly comparable to repentance, because repentance ever-needed for our renewed cleansing. Jesus himself taught his disciples that they must wash each other's dirty feet again and again. Let us claim this privilege of cleansing.

Let's look at chapter 20:1: "In the first month the whole Israelite community arrived at the Desert of Zin, and they stayed at Kadesh. There Miriam died and was buried." Even though the book of Numbers does not contain any exact dates here, we are now in the 40th year of their wandering in the desert. 38 years earlier in Kadesh, they had grumbled against the idea of conquering the land and fell into disbelief and fear. For this reason, they had to spend 38 more years in the desert. During this time all the men who were 20 years or more died, except for Joshua and Caleb. The time in the desert seems to be lost time. This wandering in the desert was on the one hand God's training, so that they learned to trust him completely. It also shows God's absolute faithfulness to his people, who – in spite of their repeated grumbling – did not abandon them, but faithfully fulfilled his promise. Now a new generation had grown up to conquer the land.

The good news is that God is faithful: he does not judge his people according to the law, but keeps his Promise to the end. We praise God for his grace, who, despite all our repeated sins, did not judge us, but accepted us as his people. He also did not judge Germany according to the sin that we have heaped upon ourselves during the two world wars. After 40 years of separation, he granted us a peaceful reunification so that we might be used in his hope as a royal

priesthood for world mission. This faithful God wants to raise our Next Generation through the GLE-Forum as disciple makers and message trainers. This faithful God will complete the good work that He has begun in each one of us until the day of Christ Jesus.

Let us read 20:2,3: "Now there was no water for the community, and the people gathered in opposition to Moses and Aaron. They quarreled with Moses and said, "If only we had died when our brothers fell dead before the Lord!" We can see here that the Israelites grumbled yet again because they had no water and were dissatisfied with the food. With every little difficulty they forgot the grace of God and fell into ingratitude and grumbling. They could even grumble about the heavenly manna. God commanded Moses to speak to the rock and give water to the Israelites. But Moses also had his limits, and this time he was angry and unrestrained. He said to the people: "You rebels" and struck the rock twice with the staff, until water came out. Moses had solved the people's problem, but God was not glorified. Later Moses could not enter the Promised Land because of this event. God is holy. A spiritual leader must be on God's side and glorify God. Moses was the good shepherd of his people, who led them out of slavery, shepherded them for 40 years in the desert, and brought them to the Promised Land. He was glorified by God so that he could appear to Jesus together with Elia on the Mount of Transfiguration. But because he did not glorify God this time, even Moses was not allowed to enter the promised land. This gives us a clear warning that a spiritual leader must glorify God under all circumstances.

2. God changed the curse into a blessing (20:14 – 25:18)

Now the Israelites set out for the Promised Land. But the Edomites refused to allow the Israelites to pass through their country, despite their repeated requests. The Israelites avoided a quarrel by making a long detour, wandering all around Edom, and then heading east toward the Jordan. Then came God's time for Aaron,

the priest. He went up to Mount Hor with Moses and Eleazar his son, where he died. Eleazar received the priestly garments and was appointed the next high priest.

Let's look at chapter 21. First, the Israelites experienced an important victory over the Canaanites. 38 years earlier, they had suffered a bitter defeat against the Canaanites because of their disobedience. But this time, they put all their trust in God. When they were attacked by the Canaanites, they made a vow to God. God gave them the victory. This happened in Hormah, at the same place where they had been attacked for the first time. God showed them that he would compensate their defeats and bring them to the Promised Land. This teaches us that God compensates our defeats caused by our own sins when we come to him by faith and repentance and that he gives us the new victorious beginning.

Let's look at 21:4-9. Despite the victory God had given them, the Israelites grew impatient again on the way. It was again because of the food. Their grumbling was like a bad habit that they could not overcome. This time God sent venomous snakes to the camp to punish them. Then the Israelites recognized their sin and repented and asked Moses to pray for them. What did God do? Let us read 21:8,9: "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. 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." God did not remove the venomous snakes. Instead, he had Moses erect a bronze snake on a pole. If someone had been bitten, he would look at the bronze snake and live. Medically we cannot give a good explanation for this kind of healing. God did not give them an antidote, nor was the venom sucked out of the wound. Instead, they were to have faith in God and simply look at the bronze snake. When they looked up to the bronze snake by faith and obedience, the venom in their body lost its toxic effect, and they became healthy.

Jesus mentioned this event in John's gospel to explain the meaning of his death on the cross. Satan is like a venomous snake that bites us again and again. We are helpless against the venom of sin that circulates in our bodies. Instinctively we deal by ourselves with the venom of sin and try either to improve ourselves or fall into despair. But Jesus was raised up on the

cross and shed his holy blood. When Jesus died on the cross, he defeated the devil and sin and opened the way to salvation for us. Although we have sinned, may we look at the cross of Jesus by faith. Sin is alive and strong. But when we look at Jesus in obedience, he saves us from sin and its venom loses its effect. We receive a new life in Jesus. John 3:14-16 say: „Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. „For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.“ (John 3:16)

These days we experience various venomous snake bites of sin. As a result, rebellion, lust or gambling addiction circulate like venom in our body, making us powerless and helpless, and finally leading us to death. But in the cross of Jesus, there is victory over sin and Satan. The cross of Jesus has the power to heal us completely from all the consequences of the venomous snake bites. We do not need to remain and die as slaves of sin, but can live and even be changed into Bible teachers and spiritual leaders. „There is pow'r, pow'r, wonderworking pow'r in the blood, in the blood.“

A young man was very promising. But when he was pierced by the power of evil desires of youth, he became very helpless and powerless. Although he seemed, externally, to be living a life of faith, the venomous evil desires of youth circulated within him, making him miserable. But when he came to Jesus' cross by believing in Luke 23:34, and obeyed Deuteronomy 6:5, he was able to experience freedom from sin. Jesus' blood defeated the venom of sin and made him into a new creature. Now he can joyfully and powerfully serve God and even be used as a blessing for the mobilization of next generations.

By looking at Jesus, our next generations may also experience the perfect victory of Jesus over sin and Satan and grow as a holy nation and a royal priesthood for this generation. May God bless the GLE Forum this summer and raise our next generations as excellent disciple makers and messenger trainers for this generation.

God gave the Israelites further victories over Sihon and Og, the two kings in the

East Bank. Actually, the Israelites did not want to fight with them, because the promised land was west of the Jordan. But these kings attacked the Israelites for no reason and were beaten to death. These victories gave the Israelites confidence that they could conquer the land of Canaan with the help of God.

Chapters 22 through 24 contain the story of the prophet Balaam. Balak was the king of the Moabites. He too was afraid of Israel. He recognized that they were not to be defeated in a military manner. For this he needed a spiritual power. He enticed the prophet Balaam, promising him a great deal of money if he would put a curse on the Israelites. Balaam was blinded by money and heeded more the king than God. Yet he could not curse the Israelites. Every time when he prayed to curse them, only words of blessing came out of his mouth. This shows that God is sovereign and that he even changed an intended curse into blessing to protect his people.

God even used the unjust prophet to give the promise of the Messiah, namely to announce the "star of Jacob". This is why Paul testified in Romans 8:28: „And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. “ When it was not possible to curse them, the Moabites tried an even more cunning strategy. Let's read 25:1,2: "While Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate and bowed down before these gods." It was a devilish strategy. They acted as if they were good neighbors and invited the Israelites to their sacrificial feasts. The young women twisted the heads of the Israelites and led them to fornication. In this way the Israelites lost their identity and purity, and worshipped the Baal of Peor, becoming subject to the wrath of God.

25:6-8 "Then an Israelite man brought to his family a Midianite woman right before the eyes of Moses and the whole assembly of

Israel while they were weeping at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. When Phinehas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest, saw this, he left the assembly, took a spear in his hand and followed the Israelite into the tent. He drove the spear through both of them-through the Israelite and into the woman's body. Then the plague against the Israelites was stopped." When the plague of God came upon Israel and while Moses and some of the leaders prayed weeping in front of the tabernacle, one of the leaders named Zimri came to the camp with a Moabite woman and led her into his tent.

It was a public sin of fornication and an outrageous affront to God's patience. But Phineas, Eleazar's son, did not remain passive. He stood up, followed the two with a skewer in his hand and stabbed them through their bodies at the same time. God was very pleased with his zeal. He could not bear sin and fought for the purity of the people of God. Because of Phineas, God ended the plague that had already killed 24,000 people.

One person who stands resolutely on God's side and consistently fights against sin is very important. Instead of ignoring sin and remaining helpless, may we fight resolutely against it. The humanistic thought says that sin is a private matter and that everyone should be given their freedom. We think everything is OK as long as you don't hurt anyone else. But sin is not a private matter. Sin also has nothing to do with human freedom, but is a conscious rebellion against God.

Israel was about to be swamped by the worship of Peor and fornication and to lose its identity as God's holy people. The Simri and Kosbi affair would have legitimized every kind of fornication among the people. But when Phineas punished the public sinners in holy wrath, the plague was ended. God was very pleased with Phineas' zeal and gave him an eternal covenant of peace. Let us, like Phineas, stand on God's side at the

crucial moment, clearly condemning sin and thus protecting the church of God.

Today we have come to know God's faithfulness to a grumbling and slavish people of Israel. God led his people through the desert for 40 years and did not relinquish his promise. Despite their repeated grumbling, God opened a way of salvation. May we, too, take God's way of salvation through faith alone, looking at the cross of Jesus, which heals us from all the power of sin and Satan, and gives us new life. May God give each one of us faith in the power of the blood of Jesus to heal us completely and let us live as God's people.