

Sunday March 15, 2020  
Lesson 3: The Israelites in the Wilderness  
Scripture: Numbers 21: 4-9

**Context:**

Any series on the wilderness would not be complete without meeting a group of people who spent a lot of time there. In this case, the Israelites are experts at the setting of the wilderness as they spent forty years roaming around. Their time in the wilderness was less than ideal though as they encountered setback after setback, most of which came from their own behavior.

During their forty years in the wilderness, the Israelites became proficient at whining and complaining as well as repenting. The episode in chapter twenty-one of Numbers describes one of these encounters where they learned about the dangers of complaining. After God gives them manna to eat, the people complain about the “miserable food” and continue to moan about leaving Egypt and being in the wilderness.

Like a parent who has had enough with a child who continuously whines, God gives them an answer. God sends “poisonous serpents” into the camp and the people are bitten. The serpents bite and hundreds of Israelites die.

The people wake up and realize the error they have made. They go to Moses confessing their sin and ask Moses to intercede before God. Moses prays to God and God gives instruction to Moses. Moses is to make a “seraph” and to place it on a pole so the people may look upon it and live.<sup>1</sup> The bronze snake becomes a sympathetic magic to prevent death by snakebite, similar to the golden mice and tumors the Philistines made to protect themselves from the plague caused by Yahweh after they had captured the ark of the covenant.<sup>2</sup> The sick people look upon the pole and live.

The bronze serpent on the pole plays a role throughout Israelite history. These “poisonous snakes” are also known as seraphim, winged cobras represented in Egyptian art.<sup>3</sup> This bronze serpent on a pole stayed a part of the Israelite story and became known as Nehushtan with incense being offered to it in the Temple constructed by Solomon in Jerusalem.<sup>4</sup> However, Nehushtan became a problem as people began to worship it. It was destroyed in the late eighth century BCE by the Judean King Hezekiah during his religious reforms.<sup>5</sup> Once again, the Israelites had found themselves in the wilderness looking for God in the wrong places.

<sup>1</sup> Michael D. Coogan, *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*, (Oxford: University Press, 2011), 169.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

### **Application:**

I once had a colleague who confessed that their most frustrating moments in ministry didn't have to deal with a broken air conditioner in the parsonage or how the Easter lilies gave them the sneezing fits on Easter Sunday. Their most frustrating moments in ministry involve dealing with people who wanted to whine and complain as if it was a full time job. Whenever they are given a chance to talk, all they do is complain or whine about everything on their list. They never praise or give credit where credit is due. Nothing is ever good enough for them. They are draining to be around and they even make a sunny day feel as if its not enough.

This story of the wilderness isn't just about poisonous snakes and the bronze serpent on the pole. This wilderness story is about how we as a people do an excellent job of being self-centered and complaining. We do it to one another and if we are honest with ourselves, we do it to God as well.

Complaining is one of those habits which can be just as infectious as viruses and the flu. When we start complaining or hanging around people who complain constantly, the disease spreads and the results can be awful. There is a difference between complaining and venting. Venting often involves us processing how we feel with someone who is safe with the understanding they may correct us if we are in the wrong or support us if we have been hurt. Complaining is often desiring something and then voicing it loudly without listening to another person. Venting usually has an outcome that hopefully allows for resolution. Complaining does not have an outcome and is usually chronic of deeper issues associated with someone.

Some of the deeper issues associated with complaining involve our understanding of obedience and self-awareness. Obedience to God is a topic where many people may struggle as we think about what it means to surrender our life to Jesus as our Lord. Many of us like the idea of Jesus being our Savior; we enjoy the warm fuzzies of thinking how he delivered us from slavery to sin and death. Yet the idea of Lord complicates the warm fuzzies. When we profess Jesus as our Lord, we are reminded that lords demand the serfs to give them their lives. This means responding to Jesus with our time, money, behavior, and resources. As we do those things, we surrender to God all the things we think will make us happy and give us whatever we want in life.

Complaining also involves us to do some self-examination. Usually people who whine or complain make up excuses about why people don't want to be around them. They believe the avoidance may be tied to some past transgression or error. They even may blame the other person for not responding to their every complaint or whine. They create their own wilderness as they look for people to hear them moan and whine even if they've been sent every care package available. Perhaps some day they will either figure out their whining will cost them or they will have someone who challenges them to come out of the wilderness.

How do you respond in obedience to Jesus as your Lord? Why is obedience hard for us as humans? Why do you think people think complaining is not a sin? What are ways you can be more constructive when you feel resentment or slighted? Who are the people who can help you process when you feel like venting or figuring things out? How can you come out of the wilderness of complaining and whining? What things can you

thank God for to give you a different perspective?

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