

Christ – The Serpent Lifted Up

Christian author, Max Lucado, for reasons unknown, trained and participated in a half-triathlon. But after the 1.2 mile swim and the 56 mile bike ride, he said he wasn't sure if he had the energy for the 13.1 mile run. As he began, he asked the guy next to him how he was doing.

The man said, "This stinks. This race is the dumbest decision I've ever made." Max said he went on and on with more complaints than a taxpayer at the IRS. So, Max put some distance between he and that guy because he said that if he kept listening to that complaining, he was afraid he'd start agreeing with him!

He caught up with a 66-year-old grandmother. Her tone was completely different. She said to Max, "It's hot, but at least it's not raining. One step at a time... don't forget to hydrate... stay in there. You'll finish this." Max said that running next to her, his heart was lifted and even his legs stopped aching. Then 'Gramma' said, "Well, I've got to pick up my pace" and waved as she moved on.¹

Today's portrait of Christ is found in Israel's Biathlon from Egypt to the Promised Land. Though they didn't actually swim, they did pass through water and then marched for forty years! And along the way, they did no small amount of complaining. Which is where we see our portrait of Jesus today. He comes as a remedy for complainers. Do you have any chronic complainers in your life? Then listen up! This will be good news for you. First, we need to see...

I. The Root of the Tree of Complaint

Even if you're not a gardener, if you live in a house with even a small patch of grass, you know that you can't get rid of a weed by just pulling off the leaves. If you do that with a dandelion, what happens? It grows right back because you didn't get the root. The same is true with the complaints of a complainer.

According to the text, Moses had quite a few 'complainers' in his oversized tour group. Let me first clarify the historical setting. The events of Numbers 21 happen AFTER the debacle with the 'ten spies' on the border of the Promised Land. Remember that? Joshua and Caleb gave a good report but the people accepted the bad report of the other 10 'complaining' spies. "Oh no," they said, "we can't go in there. The cities are fortified, and the people are giants. Oh, why, why, why Moses did you bring us here? We're all going to die!!!"

So, God said, "Okay, here's the deal. If you don't want to go in, then you don't have to go in. In fact, none of you will be entering the Promised Land. Instead, you'll be going to the desert and I'll try again with your children in, oh let's say, 40 YEARS!!!"

And what did the complainers say to that? Well, for one thing, the ten spies who gave the bad report all dropped dead. That may have influenced their response. They said, "Oh! Okay! Well, you know what? Moses, I think we're all ready to go in now. So, let's go!" And Moses said, "Listen, people, it's too late. God's not going with us now. Don't even think about going without God." But some went anyway and were roundly defeated in battle.

So Moses, as directed by God, takes the people away from the southern border of the land of Promise and their forty years of wandering in the desert begins. And by the time we come to Num. 21, there has been a massive breakthrough. In obedience to God, they defeated a Canaanite army that attacked them. Ironically, this was the same army that had defeated the disobedient

Israelites when they tried to go into the Land of Promise without God's blessing. So, this was their first military victory since leaving Egypt (not including God's miraculous defeat of the Egyptian army at the Red Sea, of course). So, that was a major victory.

But the 'complainers' were not all completely reformed. Just a few miles down the road, at a place called Mt. Hor, guess what happened? (Num. 21:4-5)

From Mt. Hor they set out by the way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient (their soul was discouraged) on the way. And the people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food."

The 'worthless food' they're talking about is the manna. Now, many jokes have been made by preacher's like me about this 'bread from heaven.' The name manna, literally means, "What is it?" Any food named 'what is it?' probably isn't going to have great taste. But, to call it worthless is patently false. For example, it must've been incredibly nutritious. Why do I say that? Because Neh. 9:21 says that for forty years the people's *'feet did not swell.'* For that not to happen meant that the manna and quail supplied by God had all the nutrition necessary to prevent disease in their bodies. It might not have tasted great, but it was far from 'worthless.'

Nevertheless, the complainer's narrative won the day and the majority of the people joined in their accusations. And who exactly were they accusing? And of what? Verse 5 says:

And the people spoke against God and against Moses... (Num. 21:5a)

Since leaving Egypt, this was not the first time God had been '*spoken against.*' It happened at Marah, at Rephidim and at Kadesh as well. In each place their complaint was about lack of water. And these weren't mild complaints. At Rephidim, it technically became a legal suit. The people were formally suing God for damages and pressing the charge of treason against Moses as His representative on earth. The penalty for treason was death by stoning. Listen to Moses as he confirms this:

But the people thirsted there for water, and the people grumbled against Moses... So Moses cried to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." (Exodus 17:3-4)

What is the root of this tree of complaint? Is this just about lack of water or is there something more? And why would God NOT provide water immediately and abundantly?

Dr. Edmund Clowney, in his book *The Unfolding Mystery: Discovering Christ in the Old Testament*, writes this:

God had brought Israel into the desert to make His covenant with them. He led them in order to teach them; testing was part of the training process. At the end of the journey, Moses would eventually say to them: (Deut. 8:2-3)

² And you shall remember the whole way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. ³ And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. ²

The root of the tree of Complaint is the root of disobedience, of rebellion against God. The fruit of this tree does not provide a healthy diet, but instead brings spiritual disease. So, secondly we must ask; if we eat this fruit of the tree of Complaint and we get sick...

II. From Where Can We Find Healing?

If you've ever played a musical instrument or played on a sports team, why did you practice? And some of you are saying, "Yes! Good question! Practice is boring and time consuming and HARD! I was always in favor of practicing very little and doing more concerts or games." Well, if that was your attitude, then you probably didn't play very well or win many games because practice is what makes you proficient and skilled.

When God tested Israel, if they failed the test (because they hadn't practiced what He taught), He repeated the test until they could pass it. So, with regards to their lack of water, they failed that test four times before the test we read of in Num. 21. There the test became more severe. After they complained and accused Moses and God for the fifth time, God took action:

Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. (Num. 21:6)

This wasn't the first time people died in one of God's tests. But it was the time they immediately realized that it was they, not God, who was on trial. The next verse says:

And the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us." (Num. 21:7)

How long does it generally take you to see who's on trial? In 2007 a state senator in Nebraska sued God. His complaint stated that God is the cause of "untold death and horror" in the form of "fearsome floods... hurricanes and tornadoes." Furthermore, God has wrought "widespread death and destruction" and terrorized "millions upon millions of the Earth's inhabitants." ³ Maybe you haven't gone so far as to sue God, but is there something really bad that happened in your life and you can't help but blame God for it? Or is there something good that you really wanted and you think that He prevented it from happening, so you demand to know the reason why? Do have God in the witness stand? Job did that. He demanded to know why God had allowed his family, his wealth, his health to all be taken from him. Job cried out:

Oh, that I had one to hear me!

(Here is my signature! Let the Almighty answer me!) (Job 31:35)

If you could, would you bring a lawsuit against God?

Listen to me; God will not resist your false accusation. In the Old Testament, we see multiple portraits of this, especially on this topic of providing water for a thirsty nation. If you remember, on two occasions when the people cried out for water, God instructed Moses to strike or speak to a rock and water would flow out. Remember that? But let's look deeper into those stories. In the incident at Rephidim, where they literally tried to sue God, God said to Moses:

Pass on before the people... and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock...

Have you seen this before? God told Moses to strike the rock that HE was standing on!

...and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink. (Exodus 17:5-6)

Dr. Clowney writes:

The rod of Moses was unique in power and authority, for it represented the judgment of God Himself... "Before the face" of Moses the judge, with his rod uplifted, stands the God of Israel. The Lord stands in the prisoner's dock... Is God, then, guilty? No it is the people who are guilty. In rebellion they have refused to trust the faithfulness of God. Yet God, the Judge, bears the judgment; He receives the blow that their rebellion deserves. The law must be satisfied: if God's people are to be spared, He must bear their

punishment... Through the Old Testament there flows a stream of mercy that has its source at the throne of God. When Moses struck the rock, a stream of life-giving water poured out into the desert. ⁴

An old Welsh hymn rightly combines this portrait of God on the rock with that of Christ on the cross:

*On the mount of crucifixion
Fountains opened deep and wide,
Through the floodgates of God's mercy
Flowed a vast and gracious tide.
Grace and love, like mighty rivers
Poured incessant from above
And heaven's peace and perfect justice
Kissed a guilty world in love.*

Oh friends, Jesus, the One who takes the place of sinners, is everywhere in the Old Testament!

Now look at this other portrait of Christ as the means of healing. In Num. 21, the guilty have recognized their guilt, they've confessed it and asked Moses to pray for them.

So Moses prayed for the people. And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live. So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live. (Num. 21:7b-9)

And that really happened! If anyone was bitten and they looked at the serpent, they lived. This is what Jesus was urging Nicodemus to do when He met with him as recorded in John 3:

...as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. (John 3:14-15)

To look at Jesus means that you believe that He is who and what you've always been looking for. If you've been bitten by the snake of sin, healing is available. You just have to admit that you've been bit! Once you become that honest, all that is needed is for you to look and live.

Charles Spurgeon has been called by some the 'greatest preacher in the English language.' When he was a young teenager, he'd heard the gospel, he'd attended church with his family and he even knew that evil was in his heart. But he wasn't clear on what to do about it.

On one winter's evening, he was walking home in a bad snowstorm and he ducked into a Methodist meetinghouse just to get out of the cold for a few minutes. A service was going on. Listen to his description of what happened next...

In that chapel there may have been a dozen or fifteen people. I had heard of the Primitive Methodists, how they sang so loudly that they made people's heads ache; but that didn't matter to me... The minister did not come because of the storm, I suppose. At last, a very thin-looking man – went into the pulpit to preach... He was obliged to stick to his text, for the simple reason that he had little else to say. The text was: "look unto me, and be saved, all ye ends of the earth." (Is. 45:22) He did not even pronounce the words rightly, but that did not matter... He began: "My dear friends... It says, 'Look!; Now, lookin' don't take a deal of pains. It ain't liftin' your foot or your finger; it is just, 'Look'. Well, a man needn't go to college to learn to look... Anyone can look, even a child can look. But then the text says, 'Look unto *me*,' ay!" said he, in broad Essex [accent], "many on ye are lookin' to yourselves, but it's no use lookin' there. You'll never find any comfort in yourselves... No, look to Him... Jesus Christ says, 'Look unto ME!'

Then the good man looked at me under the gallery, and I dare say, with so few present, he knew me to be a stranger. Just fixing his eyes on me, as if he knew all my heart, he said, “Young man, you look very miserable.” Well, I did: but I had not been accustomed to have remarks made from the pulpit regarding my personal appearance. However, it was a good blow, struck right home.

He continued, “And you always will be miserable – miserable in life, miserable in death – if you don’t obey my text; but if you obey now, this moment, you will be saved.” Then lifting his hands, he shouted as only a Primitive Methodist could do, “Young man, look to Jesus Christ. Look! Look! Look! You have nothin’ to do but to look and live.” I saw at once the way of salvation.⁵

Jesus Christ told Nicodemus that He was the “snake on a pole” of Num. 21. Do you need life today? Do you need spiritual healing? You don’t have to prove your worth or walk across hot coals to prove your sincerity. You just need to look. “Ay, anyone can look. Even a child can look.” Look today and live. Let’s pray...

¹ Max Lucado, *Facing Your Giants* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2006), p. 65

² Dr. Edmund P. Clowney, *The Unfolding Mystery: discovering Christ in the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2013), p. 125

³ <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2007/october/2102907.html>

⁴ Dr. Edmund P. Clowney, *The Unfolding Mystery: discovering Christ in the Old Testament*, p.127, 128, 129

⁵ David Otis Fuller, D.D., *C. H. Spurgeon’s Autobiography* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1946), p.39-41