

## ALL CHANGE: NUMBERS 20-21

Hope Church, 17 July 2011

### INTRODUCTION

*“Previously in Numbers...”*

Last week Steve R spoke on Numbers 13-14. Where did he leave us?

- Israelites on brink of entering Canaan, sent 12 spies into land for 40 days, discouraged from entering by ten spies, ignored encouragement from two (Caleb & Joshua)
- God’s judgement: No-one will enter Canaan except C&J, everyone else from this generation will die in wilderness during next 40 years (1 year for each day of spying)
- Israelites tried to enter Canaan anyway, but were defeated by Amalekites and Canaanites

Where did this happen? Kadesh (N 13:26)

When did this happen? Within 2 years from start of Exodus (note that census in N 1:1 and Passover at Mt Sinai in N 9:1 are both dated at start of second year)

*“This week in Numbers...”*

Now move on to N 20-21.

- Where are we now? Kadesh (N 20:1) – Israelites have come full circle
- When does this happen? 38 years later. How do we know? This passage describes the death of Aaron (N 20:22-29), dated in N 33:37-39 as 40 years after Exodus.
- During this time all the fighting men died in the desert (Dt 2:14-18), over 600,000 men (N 2:32). It’s likely that many others also died, probably not many left from original generation. Maybe a million people died in 38 years. But still about 600,000 fighting men from new generation (N 26:51).

Israel now has a second chance to enter Canaan. How did they feel coming back to Kadesh? A place of failure and curse. How will they respond this time? What will happen?

### PASSAGE STRUCTURE

Instead of reading it all, give quick outline of narrative, then come back to some themes and major events:

20:1	Miriam dies
20:2-13	God provides water from the rock at Meribah, Aaron & Moses judged by God, will not enter Canaan
20:14-21	Edom refuses to let Israel pass through to Canaan
20:22-29	Aaron dies
21:1-3	Israelites defeat Arad (Canaanites in Negeb)
21:4-9	People complain, God sends poisonous snakes, healing via metal snake on pole
21:10-20	Journey to Moab
21:21-31	Israelites defeat Sihon (king of Amorites)
21:32-35	Israelites defeat Og (king of Bashan)

## ALL CHANGE

This passage marks the end of the beginning and the beginning of the end. Transition point.

[Churchill 1942 quote: *“Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.”*]

After their first arrival at Kadesh and failure to enter Canaan, God says they will wander in the desert for 40 years and die.

Now they're back at Kadesh 38 years later, and after this point we find them moving towards Canaan, defeating Canaanites and others, not there yet but on the way.

Let's look in detail at two of the major events in our passage of N 20-21, and see how they mark this transition point, and see what lessons we can learn for our own lives today:

1. Water from the rock (again) – N 20:1-13
2. The problem with snakes – N 21:4-9

### FOCUS 1 – WATER FROM THE ROCK (AGAIN) [N 20:1-13]

The first thing recorded here is the death of Miriam (v1).

Exodus/Numbers seems to describe a shared leadership, with Moses, Aaron and Miriam each taking different roles. When God pronounced judgement on Israel after they refused to enter Canaan first time, he said they would all die in the wilderness except Caleb & Joshua. Over the next 38 years, most of the people clearly did die, but Moses, Aaron and Miriam were still alive at this point. Perhaps they were tempted to think that maybe God's judgement didn't apply to them? The death of Miriam shows not. Leaders are people, members of the body, part of the community, and God's standards and judgements apply equally to them.

So Miriam died. But what about Moses and Aaron? The answer comes at the end of the next event.

Once again the people complain about lack of water (vv 2-5). This has been a recurring theme throughout Exodus/Numbers, complaining about food and water, and every time so far God has provided for his people:

- Ex 15 at Marah – God provided water
- Ex 16 at desert of Zin – God provided quail and manna
- Ex 17 at Massah – God provided water (again)
- N 11 at Kib'roth-hatta'avah – God provided quail (again)
- N 20 at Meribah

No water, so Moses & Aaron ask God for help (v6). He gives very clear instructions (vv 7-8):

- Take staff, gather people, speak to rock

But Moses & Aaron did something different (vv 9-11):

- Took staff, gathered people, spoke to people, struck rock twice with staff

Water came out of the rock, enough for people and cattle, but God was displeased and judged Moses & Aaron (v12), he said:

- “You did not trust me enough to honour me as holy in the sight of the people”
- “You will not bring this community into the land I give them”

What did they do wrong? It worked, they got the water, God provided. But there was clearly a problem according to God. What?

God had given clear and precise instructions but they did something different. Spoke to people and struck the rock. In previous instances the Bible emphasises how Moses & Aaron did exactly as God had commanded them, e.g. Ex 7:6 (plagues in Egypt), Ex 40:16 (building tabernacle). But not this time. What did they do differently? (May be some challenges here for people leading churches?)

- Spoke harshly to the people, v10 “Listen you rebels...”. Psalm 106:32-33 says “his spirit was bitter and he spoke words that were rash”. He seemed to express anger and frustration towards God’s people.
- Put themselves in God’s place as provider, v10 “...must we bring water for you out of this rock?” Failed to give God the honour and recognition, pointed to self as source instead of God.
- Struck the rock twice, v11. This had worked once before (Ex 17:6), perhaps they thought they’d try it again. But God told them only to speak to the rock, exercise authority, then it would clearly be a miracle of God’s provision. Twice = frustration?

The problem was both their actions and their attitudes. Moses & Aaron called the people “rebels”, but instead God said “...both of you rebelled against my command” (v24) Not obeying precisely what he said was the same as rebellion, even though it got the right result.

God said they “did not trust in him enough to honour him as holy in the sight of the people”. He is the provider (Jehovah-Jireh), but God says Moses & Aaron didn’t trust him to provide, tried to do it in their own strength, followed their own good ideas, added to what God had told them to do.

God’s judgement on Moses & Aaron was to include them in the general judgement on the rest of the Israelites, i.e. not entering Canaan (v12). This happened sooner for Aaron (vv 22-29), and later for Moses (Dt 34:1-8). But they both died in the desert, and what God said came true – only Caleb & Joshua entered Canaan.

What was the result of this event? v13 “God showed himself to be holy among them”. Moses & Aaron did not honour God as holy, so he did it himself. But the people were ultimately left in no doubt: God was serious, when he said something they should do it, precisely and fully, not missing anything and not adding anything, full obedience. Even Moses & Aaron were not exempt from this, and they paid the ultimate price for getting it wrong.

This passage tells us that Moses, Aaron and Miriam would suffer the same fate as the rest of the first generation of Israelites, and die in the desert. This really is the end of the beginning – the first phase of the Exodus/Numbers story that began with Moses and his older brother and sister is now coming to a close with their deaths.

## LESSON FOR US – 1

Just as God required Moses & Aaron to trust him, obey him precisely, and honour him as holy, it’s the same for us. The holiness of God is not just a theological principle, it’s a central part of his character.

In fact this theme of holiness is hidden throughout this passage in the Hebrew words. The place-name Kadesh means Holy, it was the entry-point into the promised land, the place where the Israelites had to reach in order to get into Canaan. The first time they failed to trust God and take the land, so they wandered in the desert for 38 years, until eventually they came back to Kadesh, to the place of holiness. And here God challenged Moses & Aaron to honour him as holy in the sight of the people. when they failed to do so, he showed himself to be holy at Kadesh. Now they are ready to move forward, knowing the holy God who they serve – they are ready to start the journey into Canaan.

Similarly we will never get anywhere until we come to terms with the holiness of God and the implications for our own lives. 1 Peter 1:14-16 “You shall be holy for I am holy.” Honouring and recognising that God is holy demands practical daily obedience from us = discipleship.

Several places in the Bible also draw wider lessons from these events for us. For example (briefly):

- Hebrews 3:7 – 4:13 (quoting Psalm 95). Some key verses:
  - v12. Take care brothers lest there be in any of you an evil unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.
  - vv 9-11. So then there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God ... let us therefore strive to enter into that rest, that no-one fall by the same sort of disobedience
- Psalm 78. A review psalm, covers much of the story of the exodus. Verses 2-8 say that we should teach these events to our children for two reasons:
  1. So that they should set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God but keep his commandments
  2. And that they should not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation, whose heart was not steadfast, whose spirit was not faithful to God.

We can tut at the Israelites when they failed to go straight into Canaan first time round, or when they kept complaining about their situation, or when they refused to believe God’s promises or honour him or trust him or obey him.

But we are just like them, flawed people, likely to make the same mistakes. Let’s “not be like our fathers”, but instead be trusting, faithful, obedient, giving honour to God.

## FOCUS 2 – THE PROBLEM WITH SNAKES [N 21:4-9]

But there is another challenge for God’s people almost immediately after this pivotal moment in their history. And it starts in the same old way – complaining (again). Impatient, no food, no water, they don’t like manna (vv 4-5).

God punishes their complaining (again). This time he sends poisonous snakes that bite the people and many die (v6).

“Fiery snakes” – may refer to effect, perhaps causing inflammation. Or possibly to colour, maybe they were reddish. Seem to be a particular species, referred to just as “fiery” later, so could have been a well-known type.

The people repent (v7) – at least they recognise their sin and ask for deliverance. (Probably not real repentance if you only do it when you get caught out and need help.)

God gives Moses an unusual solution (v8) – make a model snake from metal, put on a pole, anyone who is bitten can “look and live”. This would clearly be a miracle requiring faith – no physical contact, just looking would be enough. And it worked (v9).

Why did God choose this particular method? We don’t know of course, but possibly related to principle of sacrifice = inversion. A death for a life, blood for cleansing. The normally polluting unclean thing can purify. Similarly the image of a poisonous snake can bring healing.

Note that in Canaanite society, amulets were worn for protection, wear the symbol to protect against the reality – including snakes. In fact during a recent archaeological excavation of a Midianite tent-shrine at Timna, a 5” copper snake was found, dating to 1100-1300BC. Timna is about 15 miles NE of Eilat, in region of Edom. [Note Hebrew word in N 21:9 usually translated “bronze” could also mean copper – reddish colour may have matched actual snakes.

Obviously this is not the actual metal snake from this story – not big enough! But another more important reason – see 2 Kings 18:1-5. “[King Hezekiah] broke in pieces the copper snake that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had burned incense to it, and called it Nehush’tan.” Note human tendency to worship the thing instead of God, worship the means of deliverance instead of the Deliverer = basis of religion and idolatry.

## LESSON FOR US – 2

This story has particular importance for Christians because Jesus mentioned it several times, and gave it a new deeper meaning:

- John 3:14-15 “As Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”
- Jn 12:31-33 “...and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.’ He said this to show by what death he was to die.”

The metal snake in the desert is a prior hint of the cross of Jesus, an image that Jesus says reflects something about his death. (Note this is a valid interpretation, because Jesus said it, not a super-spiritualisation of an OT event!) What does this event tell us about the death of Jesus on the cross?

- People bitten by a snake would die, and people who didn’t look at the metal snake died, but the metal snake cured the fatal condition for those who looked at it. Sin is a terminal condition resulting in eternal separation from God, but Jesus said that those who believe in him will have eternal life.
- Being healed by looking at the metal snake was a clear miracle, only God could do it. Only God can save sinful people, and he chooses to do it through the death of Jesus on the cross.
- The Israelites in the desert couldn’t touch the metal snake, didn’t need to, just “look and live”. Their healing required faith. We can’t touch the cross, we just have to look to Jesus in faith for forgiveness and salvation.
- The metal snake was an image of an actual snake, it substituted for the real thing, the deadly thing became an instrument of healing. On the cross Jesus did something far greater: “For our sake [God] made [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21); “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us” (Gal 3:13).
- The metal snake didn’t stop anyone being bitten, but it brought healing for those who were bitten and looked at it. The cross of Jesus doesn’t stop us sinning, but it offers forgiveness and redemption to anyone who looks to Jesus.

We’ve all been bitten by sin, and the inevitable consequences await us – unless we “look and live”.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

N 20-21 marks a turning point in the story of the nation of Israel. After 40 years they are finally on their way to Canaan, about to enter the land God promised to them. But none of the original generation that left Egypt will enter, not even Moses, Aaron or Miriam. Why? Because of disobedience.

We need to learn the lesson. God is holy and we must take him seriously. 1 Peter 1:14-16 is either a command or a promise, but we can’t ignore it.

And the metal snake teaches us that in the midst of judgement God provides a way of salvation. We’ve not been bitten by poisonous snakes, our problem is far more serious than that. But the death of Jesus on the cross offers an answer to sin, if we will “look and live.”