

The Sin of Moses *and* Aaron



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Numbers 20; 21; John 3:14, 15; James 4:4–15.*

Memory Text: “Get thee up into the top of Pisgah, and lift up thine eyes westward, and northward, and southward, and eastward, and behold it with thine eyes: for thou shalt not go over this Jordan” (*Deuteronomy 3:27*).

After years of wandering in the wilderness, Israel finally reached Kadesh-Barnea, on the southern border of the Promised Land. After all that they had gone through, all the hard lessons the Lord had sought to teach them, all the powerful judgments issued upon those who openly rebelled, one would have thought that these people, once and for all, finally would have been ready for the Lord to use them to their fullest potential. As we know, that wasn't quite how it happened.

This week we'll study what is a perennial theme all through the Bible: the mercy and grace of God in contrast to the faithlessness, sin, and ingratitude of His people. From Adam and Eve in Eden to the Laodicean church today (*Rev. 3:14–18*), again and again we see God's mercy and grace in dealing with those who more often than not failed to claim the promises of victory, faith, and holiness that He offers. At the same time, we can see His willingness to forgive those who stumble and fall, even those who should have known better, such as the great Moses himself, who, in a moment of weakness and impatience, lost sight of the God who had done so much for him. Thus, if even Moses can fall, what about the rest of us?

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 28.*

When Giants Fall

When the water ceased to flow at Israel's encampment at Kadesh-Barnea, a grand opportunity presented itself for Israel to look to God for help. He always had provided for them in the past, so why should it be any different now? However, they quickly forgot the past and turned on Moses and Aaron with their old complaints.

Read Numbers 20:1–13. What did the Lord command Moses to do, and what did he do instead? Why do you think that this meek, faithful, and devoted servant of God showed such an uncharacteristic lack of faith and trust?

On one level, it's easy to understand Moses' frustration. First, he just had buried his sister and no doubt was feeling pain over that. And then to hear these people utter, basically, the same complaint that their forefathers had made years ago? Nevertheless, in the Lord's eyes, none of this excused his behavior.

“The water gushed forth in abundance to satisfy the host. But a great wrong had been done. Moses had spoken from irritated feeling. . . . When he took it upon himself to accuse them, he grieved the Spirit of God and wrought only harm to the people. His lack of patience and self-control was evident. Thus the people were given occasion to question whether his past course had been under the direction of God, and to excuse their own sins. Moses, as well as they, had offended God. His course, they said, had from the first been open to criticism and censure. They had now found the pretext which they desired for rejecting all the reproofs that God had sent them through His servant.”
—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 417.

Even the most faithful and diligent servants of the Lord need to be careful. What makes this sin even worse was that it was done by someone who had been given great privileges. Think of all that Moses had seen of God's power; think of all the incredible revelations of the Lord that he had, again and again, witnessed. And yet, even with all that, he allowed self to rise up and dominate? What a warning this should be for the rest of us.

Think of a time when you felt pushed over the edge and did something rash and sinful. How often did you wish you could have turned back the clock and undone the damage? What lessons have you learned from this incident that, ideally, could help prevent you from doing the same thing again?

Death of Aaron

Read Numbers 20:23–29. What points seem pertinent here in the depiction of the death of Aaron? What lessons can we take away from this for ourselves and whatever work we are doing for the Lord?

Chapter 20 opened with the death of Miriam and ended with the death of Aaron. It's clear that the older generation was passing on, and the new one was to take up where they had left off. We see the same thing in our church today. One generation goes, and a new one arises to pick up the mantle. The crucial question remains: How much will the new generation learn from the mistakes, as well as the successes, of the older one?

Notice the difference in the accounts of the deaths of Miriam and Aaron. Her death was mentioned in just one short verse. It's almost as if her death came suddenly and unexpectedly. What a contrast to Aaron's, which is clearly foretold.

Before Aaron's death, Aaron, Moses, and Aaron's son, Eleazar, go to the top of Mount Hor, where in the sight of the congregation Moses takes off his brother's priestly garments and puts them on his nephew, Eleazar, a powerful symbol of the transference of the role of one generation to another. Though Aaron was soon to be "gathered unto his people," the work of the high priest must go on. In other words, the work and mission of the church is greater than any one man or woman. If we choose, we can do our duty faithfully, but sooner or later we pass from the scene, and others pick up where we have left off.

It's hard to imagine just how emotional this incident must have been for everyone involved. Moses, knowing that soon his death surely would follow, strips his brother of the sacred garments and places them on his nephew, Aaron's son; Aaron, no doubt remorseful over some of his failures, knows that he is soon to die; and Eleazar, standing before his father, who will soon die, now bears the heavy responsibility of the high priest. Meanwhile, down below, the children of Israel watch the whole thing unfold.

If you were to die tomorrow, what legacy would you leave? What have you done for the Lord's work? How can you better use the little time that you, as do any of us (*James 4:13–15*), have left?

The Sin of Ingratitude

Because the nation of Edom (descendants of Esau) refused to let Israel pass through its borders, it was necessary to go around it. (See *Num. 20:14–21*.) The Edomites occupied the territory extending south from the Dead Sea to the Gulf of Aqabah.

Read Numbers 21:1–5. What were the people’s complaints? Think about all that had happened to them and all that they had gone through. Could there have been some justification for their complaints?

However much they might have thought that they had reason to grumble, the Lord obviously didn’t agree. After all, every day of their travels they had been kept by a miracle of divine mercy. They had all the water they needed, even in a desert; they had bread from heaven to eat, angels’ food (*Ps. 78:25*); and they had peace and safety under the shadowy cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. There was not a feeble one in all their ranks. Their feet had not swelled on their long journeys, neither had their clothes “waxed . . . old” (*Deut. 8:3, 4; Ps. 105:37*). No doubt, they had their struggles, their problems, their fears, as we all do. But apparently, focusing only on those problems, they forgot the divine blessings that had been theirs for so long. Indeed, perhaps that might have been their problem: so used to God’s mercy, grace, and provision, they started to take it for granted. And once we take things for granted, it’s very easy to forget about them.

What are some things that you take for granted in your life? Why is that such a foolish thing to do?

The only cure for this is to day by day thank the Lord for what He has given us. This is why praise is so important. God doesn’t need our praise; we need to praise the Lord as much as we can, for this serves as a constant reminder to us of just how much we have to be thankful for to the Lord.

Write out your own psalm of praise. Put in it all things that you have to be thankful for. Imagine if you were to sing it every day. How could this help you from falling into the sin of ingratitude and the dangerous traps it can lead to?

The Fiery Serpents

However much the people thought that they had valid things to complain about, it's clear the Lord wasn't sympathetic to their grievances. After all these years in the desert, all these years of seeing God working among them, what do they do but regurgitate the same old complaint about having been brought into the desert in order to be killed? No wonder the Lord wasn't sympathetic. What made their complaints even worse was that they just had experienced a victory over the Canaanites.

Read Numbers 21:5–9. How again do we see Moses in the role of intercessor? Why, especially now, did the people need an intercessor?

There are about 35 different species of snakes in Palestine. Some are extremely poisonous. The poisonous serpents that infested the wilderness were called “fiery serpents,” on account of the terrible effects produced by their sting. As the protecting hand of God was removed from Israel, great numbers of the people were attacked by these venomous creatures. In other words, it wasn't that God sent them upon the Israelites; rather, the Lord took His protection away from them, and they then suffered the consequences.

Read John 3:14, 15. How does Jesus relate the incident with the serpents to the plan of salvation? In what sense have we all been bitten by fiery serpents?

The existence of the bronze serpent on the pole wasn't enough to stop the bites from killing people. They had to look; they had to make the choice to obey and then receive the benefits of the provision made in their behalf. In the same way, the death of Jesus itself automatically doesn't bring salvation to the world. His death provided the means of salvation, but just as the people in the wilderness needed to look, we have to look to Jesus and believe in order to receive what He so freely and graciously offers.

How have you known in your own life the healing power of Christ, even now? What other hurts do you need to bring to Him for consolation, healing, and strength to move on despite what seems like insurmountable pain?

Early Conquests

Nearly forty years earlier Israel attempted to attack the Canaanites in this same area and were beaten badly (*Num. 14:40–45*). That generation now had died during the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness and a new one now was prepared to pick up where the older one had left off.

Read Numbers 21:10–33 and answer the following questions:

• **What promises did the Hebrews make to the pagan king Sihon? What was offered in those promises?**

• **Who attacked whom? *Vs.* 23.**

• **What difference was there between how the Israelites responded to King Sihon and King Og?**

“These nations on the borders of Canaan would have been spared, had they not stood, in defiance of God’s word, to oppose the progress of Israel. . . . Although the Amorites were idolaters, whose life was justly forfeited by their great wickedness, God spared them four hundred years. . . . All His wonders in bringing Israel from Egypt were known to them. Sufficient evidence was given.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 434.

Note the difference in strategy in regard to the two kingdoms. No courteous request is made to pass peacefully through Og’s land. Rather, the Lord drew the king and his armies away from their cities that “were fenced with high walls, gates, and bars” (*Deut. 3:5*). Away from their defenses, Israel—under the guidance and promises of God through Moses—was able to defeat King Og and his Amorite army in the field.

The victory over Sihon and Og—the kings of the Amorites in Transjordan—was immortalized forever in song (*Pss. 135:10–12, 136:18–26*) and in the national memory (*Judg. 11:18–22*).

Forty years later the children of Israel finally were entering the Promised Land. Look at all the time wasted, all due to their own lack of faith and trust, despite all the evidence that they had of God’s leading. How much precious time are you wasting, not moving ahead on faith? How can you better learn to trust in God’s promises and then to act on those promises now instead of wasting time?

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “The Smitten Rock,” pp. 411–421; “The Journey Around Edom,” pp. 422–432; “The Conquest of Bashan,” pp. 433–437, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

“Nicodemus was being drawn to Christ. As the Saviour explained to him concerning the new birth, he longed to have this change wrought in himself. By what means could it be accomplished? Jesus answered the unspoken question: ‘As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.’

“Here was ground with which Nicodemus was familiar. The symbol of the uplifted serpent made plain to him the Saviour’s mission. When the people of Israel were dying from the sting of the fiery serpents, God directed Moses to make a serpent of brass, and place it on high in the midst of the congregation. Then the word was sounded throughout the encampment that all who would look upon the serpent should live. The people well knew that in itself the serpent had no power to help them. It was a symbol of Christ. As the image made in the likeness of the destroying serpents was lifted up for their healing, so One made ‘in the likeness of sinful flesh’ was to be their Redeemer. . . . Whether for the healing of their wounds or the pardon of their sins, they could do nothing for themselves but show their faith in the Gift of God. They were to look and live.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 174, 175.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Think about the story of the fiery serpents. Talk about having to act on faith. That is, just by looking at the brazen serpent, the Israelites were promised to be spared what would otherwise have been a certain death. There was no natural explanation; their life depended upon a supernatural act on their behalf. How does that reflect the plan of salvation, as well? What should this tell us about just how helpless we are on our own, apart from God, for eternal life? How should this reality keep us humble?
- 2 In what ways might we, either as individuals or as a church, be making some of the same mistakes as the children of Israel made? Why is it always so hard to see our own spiritual weak points?

Summary: This segment of the book of Numbers focuses on the close of the 40 years of wandering. Grieving over the death of their sister Miriam, Moses and Aaron, in a state of anger, sin against the Lord. Later, the grumbling congregation, bitten by death-dealing snakes, found physical and spiritual healing by faith when they looked upon a bronze serpent the Lord commanded Moses to make and place before them. Following this humbling experience, the Lord enabled Israel to conquer the Amorites of Transjordan and to seize their territories.

Poured Out and Running Over: Part 2

by JOANNE W. LAFEVER

It looked as if our little mission school in Taiwan would close. Most of the missionaries who had sent their children here were gone. Then God showed us that He had other plans for our school. He transformed it into a real mission school—a school for children whose parents wanted an American—and a Christian—education.

With God's blessings the school enrollment increased. We have grown from four classrooms to eight, from 50 students to more than 125. We are bursting at the seams. We have remodeled the school and made major improvements to our facility and our academic program. I'm sure that at least some of these blessings have been the result of faithfully tithing our increase.

Nearly every student comes from a non-Adventist home, and our teachers take seriously their commission to win souls for Jesus. Every year children make decisions for Jesus as a result of studying at Taipei Adventist American School and coming into contact with God's message of love.

Over the years many parents have told us that they wished we had a Christian high school where their children could study when they complete eighth grade. They didn't want their children to have to travel to the United States at such an early age just to continue their international education. Taipei has three high schools that serve foreign students, but they are quite secular. We wanted to see our students who had come to know Jesus continue their education in an Adventist Christian academic environment.

So in 2004 we stepped out in faith and established an Adventist high school for foreign students. Starting with just 18 students, the enrollment has grown to more than 100. The school is providing a strong academic program in a Christian setting, and it regularly places its students in Adventist high schools and colleges in the United States. Not one of these children is from an Adventist family, but they are learning about Jesus and His love for them.

Our name, Taipei Adventist American School, reflects our mission and our faith. It has been exciting to see how God has opened the "windows of heaven" and poured out blessings on our school as a result of taking Him at His word. We know that as He has led us in the past, He will continue to bless us if we take Him at His word. We have proved Him. He has abundantly fulfilled His promises!

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