

The Purpose of the Cross

Sermon March 14, 2021 - Numbers 21:4-9

The books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, which can be called the books of Moses, tell the history of the people of Israel as they were rescued by God from Egypt and how they wandered for forty years from Egypt to the land of Israel, which was given to them. As you know, this distance was so short that, in a regular way, they could have reached their destination in 2-3 weeks. But it took 40 years for them because they had a hard time to accept God as their Heavenly Father, to obey Him, to learn to listen to Him, and to love God with their whole heart, mind, and spirit.

God showed them innumerable times that He is a living and powerful God, and there is no God but Him. But the people of Israel, the human beings, many times rebelled against God and, for this, God led them slowly on their journey, until they learned what they had to learn.

In just a few verses before our well-known story, we see that God brought His people through a victory, and they witnessed again what an awesome God they have, and how marvelous their God is, who is leading them. And in the next verse, we read that *“but the people became impatient on the way.”* Numbers 21:4

We all have the potential of impatience.

Impatience is usually defined as irritation with anything that causes delay, or a restless desire for change and excitement.

I would say we are impatient when we want something else or more NOW!

Impatience has some similarity to the emotion of anger. Animals and people alike become enraged if something doesn't go according to their will. They want something else, as better as possible, and as quickly as possible.

“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 detest this miserable food.’” Numbers 21:5

Are you a patient or an impatient person? I was talking to somebody during counselling. He pointed out his frustration at home, at work, and even with his best friend. He realized that impatience was initially a complete blind spot for him. He thought people called him impatient just because they wanted to criticize him. He said that he did not know how impatient he was until it was pointed out to him in counselling. There are various giveaway signs, such as constant jaw-clenching and teeth-grinding, swearing at the slightest frustration, and constant high blood pressure. Most people who are diagnosed with hypertension also are impatient.

Impatience can come from constant fear, a sense of insecurity, and as a strategy to protect the self. Some people are frustrated because they always want to be in power, dominating the situations, or having to try to hide their frustration. Other times, they feel they are left out of something and they go against everybody.

There would be two ways to handle impatience: to respect and obey the other person, or to slide to the positive side, to see what you have and be happy with it.

Amongst the people of Israel, in the beginning, there was ONE person, who became impatient. It was enough to influence those with a weak personality to start complaining as well. They created a small group to complain against Moses and God. This group grew until the whole Israel was set up against Moses and God. This is what we read: *“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 detest this miserable food.’”* Numbers 21:5

It is so sad that there were no people amongst them who would stop this behaviour. There was no one whose conscience would say to these rebels: **MAN, STOP!** You are totally wrong. You cannot accuse Moses of this situation. We have an awesome God and a powerful leader, and they provide for us the very best. As we say, one rotten apple can spoil the bunch.

What would you do if, in a family, at work, in a group or in a congregation, you would hear a voice of a rebellion, and you would be convinced that the person is not right? I hope you would approach them with love and patience, asking them to look at the situation differently and to count on God, who can witness everything. I hope you would not allow these rebellions to do their divisive work and to destroy the peace and love. I hope you would not allow the devil to destroy a family, a marriage, a friendship, a group, or a congregation, and you would stand up in the name of our God to create peace.

It is so sad to read that, after the people of Israel got so many things from God, they started to speak against Moses and God.

How do you think God felt about this? And how did Moses feel? I think Moses was very sad. When most of the people or all the people started to speak against God, I think Moses became very sad and disappointed. He would ask questions like: Are you God’s people? Are you those who are fed for free, protected by God day and night, experiencing victories? Is this really happening between God and His people? Is this how thankful we are for what we received so far from God?

As we know the story, God became very upset. For this, *“the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people so that many Israelites died.”* Numbers 21:6

Our question at this point is: Why do we not obey God?_Why do we upset Him? Why do we force God to punish us with problems, accidents, sickness or tragedies?

Why can we not realize that He is good? Why can we not realize that everything we have comes from His grace? Our homes, our family members, our health, our joy - everything is a gift. Everything comes from His free grace.

Why did the people of Israel force God to send snakes upon them? Why did they call on death against themselves through their impatience and disobedience? Why...?

Do you think that God was happy when He saw that those who were bitten by poisoned snakes just died? Do you think that God enjoyed seeing thousand people collapsing and dying because of their disobedience? I don't think so.

Do you remember those moments when your children did something very bad, and you punished them because that was the only way to teach them? You sent them away from you, into the next room, to think about what they did or said. They felt being pushed away from your love. They missed your love, and they cried in their rooms, being punished, and you cried at the other side of the door, as you were listening to their crying. But you knew that they have to learn their lesson. You knew what Jesus said that *"Every branch that bears fruit, he prunes to make it bear more fruit."* John 15:2b

Then we read that *"The people came to Moses and said, 'We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us.'*" Numbers 21:7

The people came to Moses. We don't know when, how many hours or days after the snakes appeared. We don't know how many died before the people recognized that they made a big mistake and disappointed God. We read that *"many Israelites died."* It is so sad that we, as God's people, push God's patience to the edge. It is so sad that, with our behaviour, we can force God to act like this.

As people died, I am sure God, as a father, cried.

In Ezekiel, God says: *"Now you, mortal, say to the house of Israel. Thus you have said: 'Our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live?' Say to them, 'As I live, says the LORD God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?'"* Ezekiel 33:10-11

The turning point was not the moment when the people realized they sinned against Moses and God. That was just the wake up moment. It is not enough, dear beloved, to realize that we sin, that often we are wrong and do wrong things.

I sadly heard people saying: **Yes, I know that I was wrong. And now what???**

We have to go to see God face to face. We have to tell Him what we did wrong. We have to acknowledge that we were breaking the rules. We have to admit with a humble heart that we sinned AND we have to ask for forgiveness. “Lord, please forgive me for my sins...”

Moses had a very special role. He was the connection between God and His people. For this, the people came to see him with their penitence. They asked Moses to pray for them.

Please note that they did not just ask God to take the poisoned snakes away. First, they confessed to God that they sinned, they did and said something very hurtful to God. THEN, and only THEN, they asked God to take the poisonous snakes away.

It is very interesting that God did NOT take the snakes away.

Why? Because the people would forget quickly what they did, and what the consequences of their actions were.

But God found another solution. *“And the LORD said to Moses, ‘Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.’ So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.”*
Numbers 21:8-9

People still saw the serpents, the result of their sin, but if they were bitten, they had a chance to look up on the serpent, and they were saved.

The symbolism of the serpent on a pole was taken up by Jesus. *“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave His one and only Son so that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him.”* John 3:14-17

The person who was bitten must look up on serpent. If your child was bitten, you could not look up on Jesus instead of your child. He has to look up. He has to trust in Christ. He has to ask for help and grace. This is why we have to teach our children and grandchildren to look up on Jesus to be saved.

Whatever we face, good times or bad, our hope is in Christ alone. **If we look up on Jesus, we will live.** We will be saved, we will have a lovely life with Him, and we will live with Him in His eternity. Look up on Jesus, so you shall live.