

St. Paul: On The Same page

Devotions on the upcoming lessons, 03.15.15 Lent 4b

Day One: Numbers 21:4-9

But the people grew impatient along the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert?"

People grumble and complain all the time, don't they? We complain about the weather if it's a bit too hot or a bit too cool. Right now we'd be thrilled if the temperatures were above freezing, for a few days. Then we'd start wishing for them to be even warmer. But it will only be a few months before you hear the first complaint about the heat.

My favorite complaint is this: studies report that people want their web pages to open in less than a second.

Anything longer than one second is **TOO SLOW!!**

We don't take such whining very seriously – so why does God punish it so severely? Well, look closely. Because of a small thing like food they speak against God. They even suggest that he wronged them by bringing

them out of Egypt. Do you remember what price God paid to bring them out of slavery?

You maybe haven't thought about God paying a price to free the Israelites. But he did. God caused the death of many Egyptians during the plagues, and especially at the 10th plague. These were enemies of the Israelites, but they were people whom God desired to be his own. In fact, he made Abraham's family into a nation for just this reason, to show people like the Egyptians who the true God is.

God sacrificed the lives of people whom he loved in order to rescue these Israelites who were now complaining about him.

What do you complain about? Most likely it is very small. But God's love for you is very, very much greater. And God's pain is much more than yours.

Prayer: *Heavenly Father, I owe everything to you. Forgive me for my complaints. Help me be thankful, not just for my food, but even for the challenges you permit in my life which you have promised to use for my good. Amen.*

Day Two: Ephesians 2:1-10

As for you, you were dead...

You used to be dead. That's a pretty crazy thing to say, isn't it? Do you think Paul is exaggerating?

We all know that a person can die – your heart and breathing stop – and yet still be revived. Several members of our congregation have experienced that!

And we understand that a person can have a heartbeat and respiration, and yet their brain function has stopped. That's much worse.

But what if your heart and lungs and brain are all working, but your spirit is dead? What if the doctor would say that you are alive and healthy, and yet your spirit, which we cannot see or measure, is dead to God who created it?

That's the worst of all kinds of death. Paul says that's what REAL death is. If you did not have faith in God's Son, then you really were dead. Like a body trapped in a grave, you were trapped in sin and corruption.

But what are you now? If you woke from a coma, how could we tell? We would know

that you have “come back” to us because you'd open your eyes and start talking to us again. And everyone gathered around your bed would cheer.

If God awakened your spirit, what would be the signs? If you were dead, and now you are alive, how could we tell?

Perhaps your eyes would at last be open to the things you didn't see before. You would finally see the love and mercy of God, and you would not only begin to speak about his love for you, but you would want to talk to God himself. If you were spiritually dead, and now you are alive, you might be weak at first, but your spiritual health would gain day by day as you grow in faith.

“As for you, you were dead...” Paul said. And when you came to life, Jesus said, all the angels in heaven were cheering and praising God that his lost child was restored.

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, I was dead, and I could not dig myself up, but you gave me life. Now please fill me with a renewed spirit of life, and a desire to serve you and all those you love. Amen.*

Day Three: John 3:14-21

“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”

Everyone knows John 3:16 (“For God so loved the world...”). It is probably one of the friendliest verses in the Bible. It’s been held up on signs at baseball games. It’s been painted on the back of busses and written with smoke in the sky. It’s even been written on the eyelids of football players.

Nobody takes offense at this Bible verse because it just talks about how much God loves everybody. So maybe it seems strange that this is the sentence right before it. “As Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up.”

The most popular verse about the love of God is preceded by a reference to the story of God sending a plague of poisonous serpents! In the Old Testament story God was angry with his people because they rejected his plan for them and rebelled. He sent snakes to them as a punishment. And yet, look at how they could be

saved. It wasn’t some terribly difficult thing. They didn’t have to make a great sacrifice or pay a great price. They only needed to turn toward the sign that God lifted up among them, the bronze serpent held up on a pole.

The people of Israel were punished because they rebelled against God’s plan for them. Nicodemus is also rebelling against God’s plan. He admits that Jesus must have been sent from God, and yet he’s uncomfortable with Jesus’ teaching. People today object to God’s plan, that salvation would be only through Jesus.

But Jesus says that he must be just like the bronze snake. And people who are desperate to be rescued need only look to him. The bronze snake cost God nothing, but this sacrifice would cost the Father everything. How can we keep our eyes on Jesus who was lifted up for us?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, you were lifted up in pain because of my sin. Now let me lift you up in glory in my life. Amen.*

Day Four: Psalm 107:1-9

Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever! ... Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to a city to dwell in; hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress.

There is an old saying, “hunger is the best sauce.” There might be many things I would prefer not to eat. If I look over a lengthy menu of good food, I can afford to be picky and choose only that which I like the best. But when I have been without food all day – or for two days, or even three days – then my point of view would change. Depending on how hungry I was, I would gladly eat whatever was put in front of me! And I would be thankful for it too!

Unfortunately, God has blessed us with such an abundance of material gifts that we often don’t even sense our spiritual hunger. We don’t realize that we have been wandering in a desert, searching for a city, for a home, for a place of safety and fellowship.

Many people around us are unhappy. They can’t quite put their finger on the problem, but they are sad, or frustrated, or lonely. Their friendships seem shallow and unsatisfying. They hunger for something, but don’t know quite what they need.

The psalmist knew that God’s people had been wandering in a desert. Not just the literal desert in the years they spent between Egypt and Israel – he knew that God’s people had often been lost. During times when they had turned away from God to worship idols, everything went wrong, and their nation declined.

But at last God delivered them. When they cried out to God, he answered their prayer.

Where are we? Where is our country – our church – your family? Where are you? If you are hungry, you need only cry out to God. You need only turn to Jesus who was lifted up for you. And the answer to your prayers is waiting for you.

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, help me to know my hunger so that I may know the blessing you hold out to me. Fill me with your presence, and satisfy me with new life. Amen.*