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Reading Together
The Golden Thread—The Story of Jesus

March 27 – Numbers 20: 1 – 13

This is the second account where the people of Israel are without water as they wandered in the desert wilderness. Just like the first time, they begin to grumble against Moses and they wish out loud that Moses would have left them alone and let them stay in Egypt. The first time this happened was early in the journey and Moses was very patient as he dealt with their complaining. But by this time, you can imagine Moses' nerves are frayed, and he has had enough of these people and their complaining. In his frustration, Moses disobeys God and rather than speaking to the rock, as God had told him to do, Moses strikes the rock with his staff, not once but twice. Because of Moses' disobedience, God tells Moses that he will not be allowed to enter the Promised Land (verse 12). On the surface, this seems to be a very harsh penalty that God gives to Moses. The question is why? There are several reasons that are quickly evident as we look at the text. First, Moses acted in anger and in pride. Look at verse 10. Moses is taking the place of God; first in judging the people calling them rebels, and then in thinking that he is the one with the power to perform the miracle with the words, "Must we bring water out of the rock?" But Moses was excluded from the Promised Land for more than just anger and pride, look at verse 12. The real issue is that Moses did not fully trust God, because Moses, rather than speaking to the rock, struck it with the staff twice.

The bottom line is this—Moses did not take God as His word; he didn't have faith in what God had told him. Moses took it upon himself to strike the rock after God had told him to simply speak to it. When all of this happened Moses was probably thinking back to the first time this happened in Exodus 17. The first time God had Moses bring water out of the rock, God did tell Moses to strike the rock, but this time God only told Moses to speak to the rock. Why the difference? If we understand the difference then we can begin to understand why God was so angry with Moses for striking the rock twice. When we came to the first account of Moses bringing water out of the rock in Exodus 17, we looked at Paul's words in:

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1 Corinthians 10:2-4 *They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. ³ They all ate the same spiritual food ⁴ and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.*

Now stop and think about this for just a moment. Paul tells us that Jesus was the rock that accompanied the Israelites on their journey out of Egypt. Jesus was the rock from which living water flowed. The first time Israel needed water, God allowed Moses to strike the rock (Jesus) so that life giving water could flow from it. But this time God instructed Moses simply to speak to the rock. God would not allow his son to be struck again. Is it any wonder God became angry with Moses, and would not allow Moses to enter the Promised Land for striking the rock, his son, again and again? Jesus has died once for sin. God allowed his son to be struck once for us. His sacrifice was once and for all. Jesus cannot be struck again. We must accept his sacrifice, and drink from it daily.

Hebrews 6:4-6 *It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, ⁵ who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, ⁶ if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.*

March 28 – Numbers 21: 4 – 9

The Israelites once again have grown impatient with God, and with their journey, and once again they begin to complain against God. This seems to be just a side note (although, as I think about it maybe it's more than that), but as you read through the account of the exodus and the wilderness wanderings it becomes clear that the Israelites wanted the Promised Land more than they wanted God. In other words, they really didn't delight in being in God's presence day in and day out; they just wanted the benefits that God could give to them. How often are we like that? Do we really want to be in the presence of God day in and day out? It seems like if we did we wouldn't care so much about the circumstances of our lives. I think we are more like the Israelites than we might like to imagine we are.

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I think we desire the good things that God promises to us, more than we desire God. This is a dangerous way for us to think. Look what happens to Israel as a result of this kind of thinking. God brings discipline, in the form of poisonous snakes to purge the camp of its misplaced desires.

As these snakes begin to bite the people of Israel, people begin to die, there is nothing they can do to save themselves. Moses cries out to the only one who can save them, and in his grace and mercy, God makes a way for the rebellious who are dying to find mercy and life. God tells Moses to fashion a bronze serpent, place it on a pole and hold it high in the air. God tells Moses that anyone who looks at it will be healed from the venomous bites and will live. What is really fascinating in all of this is that God does not do what the people ask him to do. Look what the people prayed for in verse 7; that God would take the snakes away. God did not answer their prayer the way that they desired. Instead of driving the snakes away, God provided a way for healing to come after a poisonous bite had been inflicted. We have no idea how long the snakes continued to remain in the camp, but as long as they did, God provided a way for people live. Often times we wish God would just take away sin and drive it out of our lives and out of our world. But we are sinful people, who live in a sinful world. Like those snakes, sin is everywhere and bites us constantly, but God provides a way for us to live.

John 3:14-17 *Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.*

As we look in faith to Jesus we are healed from the deadly bites of sin. Sin is still all around us, but its power is gone because of Jesus.

1 Corinthians 15:55-57 *"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" ⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

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As we look to Jesus lifted up on the cross for us, we are healed from the deadly bite of sin. Sin is still all around us, but its sting and power is gone.

March 29 – Numbers 24: 16 - 19

In Numbers chapters 22-25, we find the account of Balak, King of Moab, who wants a curse to be placed on Israel. He is afraid of the Israelites, and he summons a soothsayer named Balaam to come and curse Israel. But God has other plans and through divine intervention, God makes it so that Balaam can only bless the Israelites. A very small part of that blessing is found in today's reading. It is a blessing and a prophecy concerning a future ruler who will rise out of the nation of Israel, and lead them by defeating all of their enemies. But notice the wording of the prophecy. This future ruler is a ruler who is far out on the horizon: "I see him, but not now; I behold him but not near." That wording indicates that Balaam's vision concerns something that is far in the future—years away from happening. Now look at the rest of what Balaam says about this ruler in verses 17-19. This future ruler will defeat those who are standing opposed to Moses and Israel today. In 2 Samuel 8: 2 – 14, David rises up out of Jacob, takes the ruler's scepter, and crushes the very people who are trying to call curses down on Moses and Israel—the Moabites, and the Edomites.

2 Samuel 8:2-14 *David also defeated the Moabites... So the Moabites became subject to David and brought tribute....* ¹³ *And David became famous after he returned from striking down eighteen thousand Edomites in the Valley of Salt.* ¹⁴ *He put garrisons throughout Edom, and all the Edomites became subject to David. The LORD gave David victory wherever he went.*

The star that Balaam saw rising out of Jacob in the distant future is clearly King David, but as with many Biblical prophecies there is more to this prophecy than meets the eye. Christ, the bright and shining morning star, the great king, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords will rise from the line of Jacob, and the line of David, and crush all of our enemies.

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Colossians 2:15 *And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.*

Revelation 19:11 - 20:14 *I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. ¹² His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. ¹³ He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. ¹⁴ The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. ¹⁵ Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron scepter." He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. ¹⁶ On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS....¹⁹ Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to make war against the rider on the horse and his army. ²⁰ But the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who had performed the miraculous signs on his behalf. With these signs he had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshiped his image. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur. ²¹ The rest of them were killed with the sword that came out of the mouth of the rider on the horse, and all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh. ^{NIV} **Revelation 20:1** *And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. ² He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. ³ He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time.... ⁷ When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison ⁸ and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth-- Gog and Magog-- to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore. ⁹ They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God's people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them. ¹⁰ And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever. ¹¹ Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. ¹² And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. ¹³ The sea gave**

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up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. ¹⁴ Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death.

Ultimately, the great ruler that Balaam saw that day on the plains of Moab is Jesus, and the great message of all Biblical prophecy is very simply this: Jesus is going to be victorious!

March 30 – Deuteronomy 1: 19 – 46

The Book of Deuteronomy was written right before the Israelites entered the Promised Land. It was written to call the Israelites to be faithful to the covenant that God had made with them. Much of the Book of Deuteronomy is a restating of the law from the Book of Exodus, but Moses opens the book of Deuteronomy by reminding the Israelites of the lack of faithfulness that their fathers had when it was their time to enter the Promised Land. The original account of their failure takes place in Numbers 13. You may remember what occurred. It had been about one year since Israel had left Egypt, and now they were on the edge of the Promised Land. In fact, they were so close to it that Moses sent men from each of the tribes of Israel to explore the land and report back on what they found. They found that the land was everything that God had promised to them, but they also found that the Canaanites who lived in the land were very powerful. Ten of the spies said that even though the land was good, it would be impossible to take it.

Numbers 13:27-33 *They gave Moses this account: "We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit. ²⁸ But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large... the men who had gone up with him said, "We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are." ³² And they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored. They said, "The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size..... We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them."*

Of the twelve spies Moses sent out, only Caleb and Joshua believed that God would give them the land by driving out the powerful people

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who lived there. In this retelling of the story in the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses reminds the people of what happened as a result of their lack of faith and their failure to trust God and take Him at His word. God barred them from entering the land. For forty years they have been forced by God to wander in the desert wilderness until the whole generation who had refused to trust God had passed away. Only Caleb and Joshua would be permitted by God to enter the Promised Land, the rest of that generation died in the desert and never entered the Promised Land because of their lack of faith. The bottom line is this: to enter the land and take possession of it required faith in God to do what they could not do for themselves. The enemies in the land were too powerful for them to defeat in their own strength, but as we will see in the Book of Joshua, they were no match for God. If they had been willing to act by faith and trust God, they would have been able to enjoy the Promised Land and the rest that it offered to them, but because of their lack of faith God turned them away and refused them entry.

The writer of Hebrews draws a parallel between the people of Israel needing faith to enter the Promised Land and ourselves needing faith to enter the eternal rest that God has promised us through Jesus Christ.

Hebrews 3:7 - 4:2 *So, as the Holy Spirit says: "Today, if you hear his voice, ⁸ do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert, ⁹ where your fathers tested and tried me and for forty years saw what I did. ¹⁰ That is why I was angry with that generation, and I said, 'Their hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways.' ¹¹ So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.'" ¹² See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. ¹³ But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. ¹⁴ We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first. ¹⁵ As has just been said: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion." ¹⁶ Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? ¹⁷ And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the desert? ¹⁸ And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to*

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*those who disobeyed? ¹⁹ So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief. ^{NIV} **Hebrews 4:1** Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. ² For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith.*

It is easy for us to fall into the trap of thinking our salvation depends on us, and become discouraged and want to give up because we know we do not measure up. It is easy for us to believe that our enemies of Satan, sin and death can overwhelm us and defeat us, if we take our eyes off of Jesus. We must combine what we know about Jesus with faith to trust him alone for victory and our eternal rest.

March 31 – Deuteronomy 6: 3 – 12

In today's reading Moses calls the people of Israel to live in absolute faithfulness to God. In verse 5, Moses tells the Israelites that God deserves the totality of their lives—every aspect of their lives should be bound up in loving God, worshipping God and serving God. Then in verses 6-9, Moses tells the Israelites that they must be faithful to obey completely the commands that God has given to them, and not only that, they must also be sure to teach those commands to their children. As you read these verses, Moses makes it clear that obeying God, loving God and serving God isn't a part time, once a week thing, but an every day thing. God's word was to be part of their everyday lives—sewn into their garments, painted on the doorframe of their house and talked about throughout the day. That is a really tall order. What right did God have to demand such devotion and obedience? Let's go back to where God first gave the commandments to Israel, and we will find out.

Exodus 20:2 *"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.*

As God gives Israel the law, He lays the foundation for their obedience by reminding them that He is the one who has brought them out of slavery in Egypt. Here in Deuteronomy 6, God reminds the Israelites that He is the one who is bringing them into the

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Promised Land. He is the one who will give them the land and defeat all of their enemies. The basis for obedience to the law by the people of Israel is the free grace that God has already shown to them. How could you not love a God who has done all of this for you? How could you not serve a God who has done all of this for you?

It is easy for us to shake our heads at the Israelites and wonder how could they have forgotten God? How could they refuse to serve God? How could they worship idols? Before we judge Israel, let's take a moment and look at our own lives. How are we doing loving God with all of our heart, soul, and strength? How are we doing obeying God? How much is God a part of our daily lives? Why do we worship at the altars of idols of our own lives—money, success, approval, etc? If Israel should have loved and served God because of what God had done for them bringing them out slavery in Egypt and into the Promised Land, how much more should we love and obey God for bringing us out of our slavery to sin and bondage to death through Christ's death on the cross?

So often we get things all wrong in our lives. We forget what God has done for us, or we minimize it, and we struggle to try to love God and obey God in our own strength. Is it any wonder that we so often fail? When it comes to God, obedience and love always follow His grace. It was true for Israel and it is true for us as well.

Ephesians 2:8-10 *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰ For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

Instead of trying to make yourself love God more, or trying harder to obey, take some time to remember and think about the grace he has shown to you. The more you see your sin, the more you will see God's grace, which will make you love Him and want to serve Him more. Seeing what God has done for you through Jesus is the key to loving and serving God with all of your heart, soul and strength.

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April 1 – Deuteronomy 7: 17 – 24

In today's reading, God answers questions before they are asked. Look at verse 17. That is the very question the first generation of Israel asked when they became too afraid to enter the land the first time. God tells them that they will not possess the land in their own strength, but by His hand. God reminds them of all he has done for them bringing them out of Egypt. God reminds them of all of the miracles that they have witnessed, and tells them that there are more to come. The writer of Hebrews tells us that, "faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see" (Hebrews 11:1). But most of the time God doesn't call us to blind faith. Most of the time God gives us reason to believe. Think of the chain of events that led to Israel coming to the edge of the Promised Land. Moses had faith, but it was God who first showed up in the burning bush (Exodus 3). That was the starting point for Moses' faith, and then as Moses continued to walk in faith, God performed more and more miracles, so that not just Moses believed but the people of Israel believed and put their hope in God.

It does take faith to believe that Jesus died on the cross for our sins, and it does take faith for us to believe that we have an eternal home because of what Jesus has done for us on the cross, but God does not call us to blind faith. There is reason for our faith and reason for our hope in Christ.

1 Peter 3:15 *in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.*

What is the reason for the hope we have in Christ?

1 Corinthians 15:17-23 *if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. ¹⁹ If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. ²⁰ But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹ For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. ²² For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. ²³ But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.*

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The firstfruits are the evidence or proof of what is to come in the harvest. Paul is telling us that Jesus is the firstfruit of the resurrection. The faith and hope that we have is because of what we already know has happened with Jesus. There is ample evidence for us to believe and have faith.

1 Corinthians 15:3-8 *For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. ⁶ After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸ and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.*

There were lots of witnesses to the fact that Jesus had indeed been raised from the dead. We are not called to a blind faith. God has already shown up and proven to us that the dead can live again. The question is not whether God can do it, the only question is will God do it for me? That is where faith comes in—claiming the promises for your own life.

2 Corinthians 1:18-20 *But as surely as God is faithful, our message to you is not "Yes" and "No." ¹⁹ For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by me and Silas and Timothy, was not "Yes" and "No," but in him it has always been "Yes." ²⁰ For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ*

April 2 – Deuteronomy 9: 1 – 6

Over and over again in these verses, God reminds the Israelites that He did not choose them because of how wonderful they were. The point God is making is that what God is about to do for Israel, doesn't depend on Israel. What God is about to do for Israel is purely a work of His grace and power. Make no mistake about it, God does call Israel to be righteous as they enter the land He is about to give them, but their righteousness and obedience flows out of God's work on their behalf. God didn't choose them or save them because of who

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they were, but now that God has chosen them, He calls them to complete obedience.

The same is true for us. God doesn't choose to save us because of how wonderful we are.

1 Corinthians 1:26-31 *Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. ²⁸ He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things-- and the things that are not-- to nullify the things that are, ²⁹ so that no one may boast before him. ³⁰ It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God-- that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. ³¹ Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."*

As God begins to work in our lives it is really easy for us to fall into the trap of thinking that God is saving us and doing what He is doing in our lives because of how wonderful we are. But that is not the case at all. Just like Israel, God chooses to save us in spite of who we are. Think about what Paul writes in Ephesians 2.

Ephesians 2:1-5 *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ² in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. ³ All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. ⁴ But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions-- it is by grace you have been saved.*

Paul compares us to dead people. There is nothing attractive about a corpse. Left to itself a corpse will start to smell, and then rot and then turn to dust. A corpse is absolutely helpless, until God steps in. Israel had no right to boast about themselves. Without God they were nothing. The same is true for us. Without God's mercy and grace, without Jesus, we would be nothing.