

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Numbers 21:4-9

^{21:4} From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. ⁵ 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." ⁶ Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. ⁷ 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." So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸ 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." ⁹ 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.

Commentary

Numbers tells the story of a generational transition. It begins with the Exodus generation of Hebrews in the Sinai wilderness. Freed from bondage, they are in the midst of a forty-year (the biblical number of years in a generation) sojourn, having been transformed from slaves to nomadic tribes. Near the end of their wandering, when most of the Exodus generation had died, a new breed replaced them who were casting envious eyes on the lush lands of Canaan. They sacked the towns, and credit for the victory was ascribed to God, who now had become a war god in their eyes similar to the gods of other peoples in the region. The belief was that victory went to the tribe with the mightiest god. The remaining member continued grumbling, and though God sent serpents, the fashioned bronze serpent became a symbol of healing and salvation for the people. By Numbers 25, all of the older generation had died. A new generation of hope, born in the wilderness, stood at the Eastern edge of the Jordan, looking toward to a new venture rather than back to the time of slavery.

Reflection

When have you wandered in a wilderness (felt forlorn and deserted)? Did you complain? How was God present to you? How did you ultimately respond?

Ephesians 2:1-10

^{2:1} You were dead through the trespasses and sins ² in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. ³ All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. ⁴ But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵ even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved – ⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – ⁹ not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

Commentary

At first glance, this New Testament letter appears to have been written by Paul to one or more Gentile churches somewhere in his mission field. However, several important literary and theological characteristics of the letter lead most scholars to believe that it was written by a later writer, perhaps a disciple of Paul. Pseudonymous writing was typical and respectable in the ancient world. This letter may give us a glimpse of second-generation Christianity, written perhaps at the same time as the Gospel of John. What new situation did the Ephesians face that caused the writer of this letter to reinterpret Paul? They had shifted their world-view. They no longer lived in the temporal tension between the time of Jesus' death and the time of Christ's return. With this in mind, the writer reinterprets Paul by claiming that by God's grace believers have been saved; however salvation is not yet complete. Believers live in the "already here but not yet" reality of God's saving action in Christ.

Reflection

What does God's grace (unmerited favor) mean to you personally?

John 3:14-21

^{3:14} And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷ "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For all who do evil

hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹ But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

Commentary

This passage must be understood not only as Jesus' statement but also as a confession of faith for John and his community. Like the writer of Ephesians, John also faced new situations and provided his community with new interpretations of Jesus' death and resurrection. John proclaimed that Jesus' appearance had drastically altered the world. Now there could only be new believers that had new life from above and unbelievers who were spiritually dead. Jesus' appearance in the world had given life to those who believed. But his appearance, according to their perspective, also had become a judgment on those who did not. There was no middle ground.

Reflection

How do we gain spiritual vision in order to see the things of God?

Responsive Reading

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

^{107:1} O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures forever.

² **Let the redeemed of the LORD say so,
those he redeemed from trouble**

³ **and gathered in from the lands,
from the east and from the west,
from the north and from the south.**

^{107:17} Some were sick through their sinful ways,
and because of their iniquities endured affliction;

¹⁸ **they loathed any kind of food,
and they drew near to the gates of death.**

¹⁹ Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,
and he saved them from their distress;

²⁰ **he sent out his word and healed them,
and delivered them from destruction.**

²¹ Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love,
for his wonderful works to humankind.

²² **And let them offer thanksgiving sacrifices,
and tell of his deeds with songs of joy.**

Closing Prayer

Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.