

Speaking Through Tragedy

Numbers 21:4-9

Numbers 21:4-9 (NASB)

⁴“Then they set out from Mount Hor by the way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the people became impatient because of the journey.

⁵The people spoke against God and 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 loathe this miserable food."

⁶The LORD sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.

⁷So the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned, because we have spoken against the LORD and you; intercede with the LORD, that He may remove the serpents from us." And Moses interceded for the people.

⁸Then the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery *serpent*, and set it on a standard; and it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he will live."

⁹And Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on the standard; and it came about, that if a serpent bit any man, when he looked to the bronze serpent, he lived.”

Although we never like to admit it, God will at times use hardships, such as tragedy, to shake us out of self-centeredness and other misguided attitudes. Unexpected hardship is often accompanied by a season of intense clarity. The Lord uses it to strip away distractions in order to teach us something meaningful and refocus our minds on Him.

We see this clearly in today’s passage. Here, we find the Israelites complaining. God had directed them to take the long way out of Mount Hor to avoid the Edomites. However, the people became impatient because of the lengthier journey and then began to grumble and complain about Moses and God Himself. They had turned their minds away from the Lord, who therefore needed to capture their attention once again.

It is interesting that God decided not to do so through blessing or a great miraculous sign. After all, the Israelites had seen Him move in this way time and time again. Instead, God sent poisonous snakes into the camp, causing the death of many.

What was the response of those who witnessed this? They immediately confessed their sin and asked Moses to intercede for them to the Lord. Though it was a costly lesson for their community, this act got their attention.

Speaking through tragedy is an intensely personal way in which God communicates with His people. While we cannot presume to know what He’s trying to tell others through their heartaches, we should meet our own hardships by looking for His divine purpose and instruction.