

Numbers 20:1-13 & 21:1-9 • Two Types of Christ

Introduction

The New Testament specifically identifies these events unequivocally as teachings of the work and ministry of Christ. As with everything in the Old Testament, they are shadows of the fulfillment to come in Christ, either at His first coming or His return. What might be of particular note in these illustrations is that in spite of the fact that the Israelites have been given the Tabernacle, the associated rituals and the priesthood, none of those things come into play in these events. The true nature and working of God's salvation which would become so much clearer in the New Testament was actually visible in the Old. These are just a few of the many examples given in Scripture that salvation comes by grace through faith.

¹Then all the congregation of the sons of Israel journeyed by stages from the wilderness of Sin, according to the command of the LORD, and camped at Rephidim, and there was no water for the people to drink. ²Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water that we may drink."

And Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?"

³But the people thirsted there for water; and they grumbled against Moses and said, "Why, now, have you brought us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?"

⁴So Moses cried out to the LORD, saying, "What shall I do to this people? A little more and they will stone me."

⁵Then the LORD said to Moses, "Pass before the people and take with you some of the elders of Israel; and take in your hand your staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb; and you shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it, that the people may drink." And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷He named the place Massah and Meribah because of the quarrel of the sons of Israel, and because they tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us, or not?"

[Read & Review Ex. 17:1-7]

Q: Where did Israel camp during the first incident concerning water?

A: "Rephidim", which can basically be translated as meaning "a resting place".

Q: How do we know that this is at least as much about a lack of faith as anything else?

A: In v.1 it specifically states that they have come to this specific location "according to the command of the Lord". They were in exactly the right spot according to God's will and leading.

Application: Have you ever followed the Lord's leading only to find yourself in a place or situation you did not expect to be led to? Have you ever read how a missionary arrives at the place they believe God has been leading them to only to find it harsh and difficult? How might this be applied to our self?

Q: What does Moses do that the people do not?

A: In an hour of trial, Moses turns to the Lord and asks for guidance, something akin to when David often first "inquired of the Lord".

Q: How do we know that the rock here represents Christ?

*For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea; and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; and all ate the same spiritual food; and all drank the same spiritual drink, **for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ.** Nevertheless, with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness.*

— 1 Corinthians 10:1-5

Q: So what is the greater spiritual meaning of what Moses does with Christ the Rock?

A: The rock is Christ, the smiting of the rock illustrates Christ's death on the cross where He felt the rod of the curse of the Law, and the water coming forth is a symbol of the Holy Spirit, given after Christ is glorified.

Now on the last day, the great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.'" But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive; for the Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

— John 7:37-39

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But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out.
— John 19:34

In Exodus 16 we have the manna which illustrates Christ's first coming to preach the Word, in Exodus 17 we have the smiting of the rock which illustrates His death on the cross, and the water symbolizes the giving of the Holy Spirit, all reflecting the order of Christ's earthly ministry.

Q: What might be ironic about the renaming of this place?

A: "Meribah" means "contention". It was supposed to be "a resting place" but was turned into a place of "contention".

Point: *The first time it was an illustration of the work of Christ on the cross.*

[Read Num. 20:1-13]

Q: Where did Israel camp during the second event concerning water?

A: "Kadesh", which means "consecrated" or "set apart for a purpose".

Point: *Whereas the previous event took place at "a resting place", the name of the second location might hint that spiritual maturity and experience should have come into play.*

Q: What might be ironic about the statement in v.3 that, "The people contended with Moses"?

A: They renamed the location of the first event to "contention" because of their contention with the Lord, now they are doing the same with Moses.

Q: How do we know there is a greater issue involved than just the water?

A: Their complaint in v.5 is amended to include, "It is not a place of grain or figs or vines or pomegranates", which really has nothing to do with a thirst for water, but a thirst for the old life in Egypt.

Q: What does water repeatedly represent throughout Scripture?

A: Different types of liquid typify different aspects of the Holy Spirit. Water for drinking is the Holy Spirit who comes within and satisfies one's spiritual thirst; water for washing is cleansing by the Word of God.

Jesus answered and said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again; but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life."

— John 4:13-14

"You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you.

— John 15:3

so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word,

— Ephesians 5:26

Q: What is specifically different in the Lord's instructions here from those of the previous incident?

A: In the first incident the Lord's instructions were, "...take in your hand your staff...**strike** the rock..." (Ex. 17:5-6) Here God instructs, "Take the rod...and **speak** to the rock..." (v.8)

¹Then the sons of Israel, the whole congregation, came to the wilderness of Zin in the first month; and the people stayed at Kadesh. Now Miriam died there and was buried there.

²There was no water for the congregation, and they assembled themselves against Moses and Aaron.

³The people thus contended with Moses and spoke, saying, "If only we had perished when our brothers perished before the LORD! ⁴Why then have you brought the LORD'S assembly into this wilderness, for us and our beasts to die here? ⁵Why have you made us come up from Egypt, to bring us in to this wretched place? It is not a place of grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, nor is there water to drink."

⁶Then Moses and Aaron came in from the presence of the assembly to the doorway of the tent of meeting and fell on their faces. Then the glory of the LORD appeared to them; ⁷and the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ⁸"Take the rod; and you and your brother Aaron assemble the congregation and speak to the rock before their eyes, that it may yield its water. You shall thus bring forth water for them out of the rock and let the congregation and their beasts drink."

⁹So Moses took the rod from before the LORD, just as He had commanded him; ¹⁰and Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly before the rock. And he said to them, "Listen now, you rebels; shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?" ¹¹Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation and their beasts drank.

¹²But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you have not believed

Me, to treat Me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them.”

¹³Those were the waters of Meribah, because the sons of Israel contended with the LORD, and He proved Himself holy among them.

Q: Given that the rock represents Christ, what is the greater spiritual problem of Moses striking “the rock twice with his rod” rather than simply speaking to it as instructed?

A: Striking the rock the second time instead of speaking to it represents crucifying Christ over and over again. Christ died but once and gave us the Holy Spirit. A person does not need to be saved over and over again, nor does the gift of the Holy Spirit have to be repeated.

Point: *We receive the Holy Spirit once when we come to faith in Christ but receive fillings of the Spirit many times as we come to Him and ask.*

Q: With whom are they contending now?

A: Whereas the first event was characterized as contention between the people and the Lord, here it ultimately comes down to contention between Moses and the Lord.

Q: What is God’s main point of contention with Moses?

A: Moses exalted himself and failed to glorify God. (v.12) Moses’ pride is described by God as unbelief.

Q: Why might this be surprising considering Moses’ character to date?

A: In Num. 12:3 Moses is described as, “very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth”.

Q: How might this sound familiar in terms of a New Testament parallel to another spiritual leader who failed spectacularly?

A: It sounds a lot like Peter, noted for usually being the first to stand up for the Lord, and yet failed in that very thing when He denied Christ.

Application: *Unless we glorify the Lord in everything we do, God will deal with us and we may miss the blessings we would have otherwise experienced.*

Q: What is ironic about the new name assigned to this second place?

A: It is the same as the previous event: “contention”.

Point: *The second time it was an illustration against those who try to repeatedly crucify Christ.*

¹When the Canaanite, the king of Arad, who lived in the Negev, heard that Israel was coming by the way of Atharim, then he fought against Israel and took some of them captive. ²So Israel made a vow to the LORD and said, “If You will indeed deliver this people into my hand, then I will utterly destroy their cities.” ³The LORD heard the voice of Israel and delivered up the Canaanites; then they utterly destroyed them and their cities. Thus the name of the place was called Hormah.

⁴Then 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

[Read Num. 21:1-9]

Q: What does “Hormah” literally mean?

A: “Devoted to destruction”.

Q: How might this be an ironic foundation for what is about to come?

A: Whereas the king of Arad was devoted to destruction because of sin, so the Israelites find themselves in a similar spiritual situation because of their own sin.

Q: What was the two-fold sin committed by the people?

A: “The people spoke against God and Moses”. (v.5) This reflects the two aspects of God’s Law: our behavior toward God and our behavior toward others.

Q: How do the serpents reflect the greater work of sin in the world?

A: Every person past and present has been born into a fallen world, bitten by the fiery serpent of sin and destined to die.

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.

Q: How do we see God’s grace at work here?

A: They deserved to die for their sin, but God provides a remedy in His love and grace.

Q: How does Moses mirror the role and work of Christ?

A: Just as Moses interceded with the Lord on behalf of the people (v.7), Christ intercedes on behalf of everyone.

But Jesus was saying, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”

— Luke 23:34a

Q: How do we know for sure that the bronze serpent on the standard is a representation of Christ?

*“As Moses **lifted up** the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be **lifted up**; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.*

— John 3:14-15

*So Jesus said, “When you **lift up** the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He, and I do nothing on My own initiative, but I speak these things as the Father taught Me.*

— John 8:28

*Jesus answered and said, “This voice has not come for My sake, but for your sakes. Now judgment is upon this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out. And I, if I am **lifted up** from the earth, will draw all men to Myself.” But He was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which He was to die.*

— John 12:30-33

Q: Why is it significant that the serpent be made of bronze?

A: This is the metal associated with repentance of sin. All the items in the outer court of the Tabernacle where sin was atoned for were made of bronze.

Q: Why might it be important to note that the bronze serpent was not effective in Moses’ hand or perhaps on a shelf somewhere?

A: It had to be “lifted up”. In other words, Christ had to be crucified.

Q: How is this event an illustration that salvation comes exclusively by faith?

A: Salvation from the serpents came about by looking by faith where the bronze serpent was erected in the center of the camp. It had no connection in any way with the Tabernacle or the ritual sacrifices.

*“Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth;
For I am God, and there is no other.*

I have sworn by Myself,

The word has gone forth from My mouth in righteousness

And will not turn back,

That to Me every knee will bow, every tongue will swear allegiance.

— Isaiah 45:22-23

Q: How does this event speak to the availability and accessibility of Christ?

A: Again, it was not erected in the Tabernacle or some hidden corner, but in the center of the camp where everyone could see it and live. Christ is never far away and available to all.

The Spirit and the bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost.

— Revelation 22:17

Q: How does this event speak to the cost of salvation?

A: Salvation is free. It did not cost these dying sinners anything to look and live.

Q: How does this event speak to the fact that salvation through Christ is sufficient once and for all?

A: The dying were not saved by looking at the serpent **AND THEN** keeping the law, nor looking **AND THEN** bringing a sacrifice, nor looking **AND THEN** making some kind of promise to do better, but saved by faith alone.

Application: *Christ alone is sufficient for our salvation.*

Q: How does this event reveal something about how the salvation process deals with sin?

A: We are not saved a little bit at a time, but instantly and completely when the sinner looks to Christ by faith.

Q: How does this event show us that salvation through Christ is the one and only remedy for everyone?

A: There was only one way to be saved in the camp of Israel just as there is only one way today.

Application: *Unless a sinner looks to Christ by faith they are lost forever.*

"And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved."

— Acts 4:12

Q: How does this event show the double assurance for salvation provided by God through Christ?

A: The first assurance that was given was the Word of God; if anyone would simply look, they would live. The second assurance was that they could see others around them being rescued from death to life by faith in God's Word.

Q: But how was this ultimately an act of faith?

A: Each person had to act on what God promised in spite of their feelings and in light of what they witnessed personally.

Q: How might this event be a testimony against the solutions manufactured by man?

A: Every remedy man has created—reformation, education, legal systems, religion—have all failed because such cannot remedy people dying in their sin. The only solution is the uplifted Savior.

Q: What would ultimately happen to the bronze serpent created by Moses?

He removed the high places and broke down the sacred pillars and cut down the Asherah. He also broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the sons of Israel burned incense to it; and it was called Nehushtan.

— 2 Kings 18:4

It became a source of idolatry wherein the created thing was given a higher priority than its creator. (Rom. 1:25) Hezekiah broke it into pieces and named it “Nehushtan”—“a piece of brass”. It is a vivid illustration of how something authentically spiritual can be institutionalized and marginalized away.

Application: *This third event was a literal picture of the working of salvation through Christ on the cross.*

Overall Application

The first generation who was ultimately denied entrance into the Promised Land are repeatedly shown to be an Old Testament illustration of what it means to contend with, and ultimately walk away from the salvation of God. Some want to argue about whether someone can “lose” their salvation, something which sounds accidental or out of one’s control. The repeated example here is of someone who originally accepts and enters into a covenant relationship and then repeatedly chooses to walk away from it.

Just as the Tabernacle and the priesthood and rituals associated with it were given as shadows teaching of the substance in Christ to come, so even in the Old Testament we repeatedly see the free gift of salvation through God’s grace illustrated through such things as the rock and the bronze serpent. The free gift of salvation is readily available to those who will follow through the confession of their mouth with a changed life that proves it so.

Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called “Today,” so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end, while it is said, “TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS, AS WHEN THEY PROVOKED ME.” For who provoked Him when they had heard? Indeed, did not all those who came out of Egypt led by Moses? And with whom was He angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient? So we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief.

— Hebrews 3:12-19