

"OK, Focus Now!"

Numbers 21:4-9 & John 3:14-21

March 26, 2006

Walk out in front of the altar and look up at the ceiling as though there is something of interest up there {note how many people begin to look up}. Did you ever notice how easily we are distracted? Ever notice how quickly forget the important things in life and turn our attention to those things that are not the point or not even important?

Moses is leading the people of Israel out of the oppressive bondage of the slavery that they had been living through in Egypt. God has demonstrated such great power and love that it would seem from our perspective that it would be tough to lose sight of it. But time after time the people have proved that that was not the case - they could forget what was important in a heart beat. It would seem to me that what was important was that God had rescued them and they were going to a 'promised land flowing with milk and honey'. But that seemed to escape their attention. [walk over and pick up some little piece of paper in the aisle - again note who looks at what I am doing]. OK - Focus now! What is important.

I read about an interview in which the lead singer of a Christian band named 'Homeland', was asked about an observation in which he had noted the large number of congregations that seemed to be experiencing difficulties. The interviewer asked if the singer had any sense of why that might be true. His response was quite simple - he said, "It sees as though those churches have forgotten what they are there for." I really liked one of the lines in that article. The author used a quote that said: "The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing!"

The Israelites had come through a great ordeal – and God had always provided. Now as they traveled they encounter an army of the Canaanite's [verses 1-3 immediately before our Old Testament text]. And they pray for God to deliver them and make vows to God if He does. Not so amazingly - God delivers them. But within the next two verses, they are complaining again. Why would they be out there suffering in the desert. There is no water - no food {which obviously was not the case because the next line is a complaint about how detestable the food was}. In fact, God was so clearly providing for their needs every step of the way. How easily we get distracted. I could imagine both God and Moses taken a-back and saying; 'Come on now folks - think for a minute. Has God ever failed you? Did you forget that we are going to a promised land? Focus now!'

I am reminded of the story of a young man who entered a very strict monastic order. It was so strict that members took vows of silence and were permitted to speak only two words per year to the abbot. At the end of his first year, this

young man appeared before the abbot and spoke his two words, "bad food." At the end of the second year the young man appeared before the abbot and spoke two more words, "hard bed". At the end of year three he came to the abbot and spoke his last two words, "I quit." The abbot responded, "Well it is about time. Complain, complain, complain - that's all you've done since you came here."

To read the Old Testament text one can easily lose sight of the point. The point is that God always provided and cares for His people. It would be easy to get lost in the images of snakes who's bites left the people with an infection that burned and a poison that proved deadly to many. The snakes helped to make the people aware of their constant complaining . They did turn the people's thoughts back to a God who provided as they asked Moses to pray on their behalf for God's deliverance. They recognized that it was God who healed, not some bronze snake wound around a pole. It was God that would deliver them. - - - But even this they would soon forget. It was not too long before they began to worship the bronze snake and finally Hezekiah [one of the Kings of Judah], had to destroy that object to remind the people that it was God that we worship, it is God who heals and delivers, not a bronze snake.

"Jesus said; Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave " Do we forget? Do we get wrapped up in so many other things that we loose sight of this main thing? God loves His world and provides for us - provides everything from daily bread to life eternal. Do we forget? Do we lose our focus?

We do live incredibly amazing lives. We are richly blessed. We have been rescued from the darkness of sin and been written into the Book of Life. We have been called to faith and been given the name 'Child of God'. We have lived in a prosperous land and enjoyed the blessings of freedom. And God leads us through the wilderness toward a promised land where we will enjoy eternity in His presence where there is no more hunger or thirst, no more crying or pain. Do we remember that? Or do we join the wandering Israelites in complaining about the detestable food? Is the judgement mentioned in the Gospel text true? Do we actually prefer the darkness to the light?

I was interested to read an article that talked about a survey that suggested that 'for Americans with household incomes under \$25,000, it would take \$54,000 a year to fulfill the American dream. Those who make \$100,000 plus crave an average of \$192,000. In other words, the American Dream usually lies nearly twice the distance away. Another article mentioned the fact that a typical supermarket in the United States in 1976 stocked 9,000 articles; today it carries 30,000. That article added a quote from Benjamin Franklin that said: "Being content makes poor men rich; discontent makes rich men poor."

Do we focus in our lives? Do we remember the main thing? Or have we become so focused on so many things - so much stuff that we have replace the main thing with a lot of other distractions and chosen the darkness over the light? The main thing that shapes our understanding of life, our relationships with others and with the stuff of life all stem from central core beliefs. What is the main things for you? God loves and calls us to love and light. God provides both now and for eternity. Focus on that.

AMEN