

How to Save a Generation

Jeff Deck was walking to downtown Hanover, NH, where he lived when he saw that maddening sign again in front of the vacant lot...

No Trespassing

That extra “s” just drove him crazy! As a young man who took pride in careful grammatical correctness, signs like this were like needles in his hide. He thought for the hundredth time, “Why doesn’t somebody DO something about this?” Then his very next thought was, “[Maybe] I could be the one? What if I were to step forward and do something?”

Over the next several months, he enlisted his friend Benjamin Herson and, together, they made a plan to do their small part to rid the public of errant quotation marks, misspelled words and unnecessary apostrophes. They used their summer vacation to travel the entire perimeter of America armed with black Sharpie pens, bottles of White-Out, chalk, crayons and pens – in search of sign typos! In 2 ½ months they found 437 typos and were given permission to correct half of them - which they did.

Most of us are really good at pointing out all that’s wrong with the world. We have a nose for trouble! Jeff and Ben are not like most of us. They found one problem and they did all that they could to correct it. ⁱ

Now we head into the last third of the book of Numbers. The first two-thirds is mostly about the First Generation of Israelites who left Egypt. We journeyed with them from Mount Sinai to the Desert of Zin. Now, the story shifts to the Next Generation of Israel. In our study last week, we saw that the Next Generation didn’t look that different from the First Generation. Their leaders, Moses and Aaron, made a huge mistake in dealing with their sinful behavior. Helping sinners grow up ain’t easy, especially when you’re one yourself! (Any parents here say “Amen” to that?)

But in Num. 21, in one chapter, we see a veritable revival taking place. The Next Generation suddenly begins to “get it.” How does this happen? What did Moses do to “save this generation”? That’s the lesson God wants us to learn this week. And in one chapter, God gives us three steps.

I. Step One: Teach Them to Repent.

As you may remember from last week, the Next Generation got to Kadesh and sinned in the same way their fathers and mothers had sinned – they refused to trust in God. Moses lost his temper, screamed at the people, called them names, hit the rock with his staff and the people got their water, but they didn’t repent.

Parents, have you noticed that losing your temper with your kids doesn’t always produce your desired results? Managers, have you noticed that pointing out your employees’ faults at the top of your lungs might get their attention but it doesn’t always change their behavior?

Dr. James Dobson uses the illustration of a Highway Patrol officer. Dr. Dobson says, "If you're pulled over for speeding, what does the officer do? Does he come up to you and throw himself on the hood of your car and start screaming, "Why? Why? Why were you speeding? Can't you see how much it hurts me when you speed? I never, ever, ever want to see you do this again!!! Do you hear me?"

Is that what the Officer does? No. He comes to your car calmly. First, he verifies your identity and your legal right to exist. "Could I see your license and registration, please?" (Parents – this might be a good way to begin with a disobedient child, "Are you my son? Is this my son who's behaving this way?")

Then, calmly, the Patrol Officer makes sure that you know what you've done wrong. "Did you see the sign that says 35 miles per hour? Do you know how fast you were going?" He clarifies reality for you. And lastly, he takes his ticket book and calmly gives you the appropriate consequence for your misbehavior – a ticket. No screaming, no stomping of feet, no pounding of the hood.

Moses tried the yelling, screaming, try-to-scare-them-into-repentance method and he didn't get his desired results. They didn't repent. In fact, they repeated the same sin of disrespect and lack of trust in God. Verses 4 and 5:

But the people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!" (Numbers 21:4b, 5)

Several weeks ago, we saw the wrath of God and we saw that sin, like the rebellion of Korah, stirs up the wrath of God – not always immediately, in fact, it's seldom immediately. Korah's rebellion was the sixth contemptuous action before God's wrath was stirred. But we also saw that God's wrath, unlike our anger, was not "all words and no action." In fact, it was just the opposite. God calmly told Moses to have the people move away from Korah and his followers and then the consequences of sin were visited upon them. The earth swallowed them up.

In our passage this week, it's the same thing; we see no emotion on God's part, just the application of consequences.

Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. (Num. 21:6)

Now, someone here might say, "Pastor, how could God do that? And don't tell me that it was 'good.'" Well, I'm sorry, but it was good, and if you don't understand how it could be good, it's because you don't understand sin. The rightful consequence of every sin, big or little, is death. Every time you or I sin, if justice were done, we would be ushered off this planet immediately. That's what would be fair. That's what justice demands. The fact that you think it's unfair to die when you sin is because you have become so accustomed to God's patience with you, His grace and mercy that you now think that you DESERVE mercy when you don't!

When the Next Generation of Israelites saw the rightful consequences of their actions beginning to be administered by God, what happened? They repented!

The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed for the people. (Num. 21:7)

Please note: Moses is not administering the ultimate consequence of sin. He is not given the authority to do that. He does what he is authorized to do, he prays.

And the LORD hears, stops the judgment and provides the means of rescue from the consequences of sin for those who repent. The bronze snake on a pole, the symbol of the medical profession today, is a proclamation that healing comes from the LORD. This is a major turning point in the life of this Next Generation of Israel. It's the day they learned to repent. Repentance is the first step toward spiritual maturity.

No generation of any country or culture can be saved until they take this step. Repentance is not just saying, "I'm sorry." It's good to do that, but that's not full repentance. Repentance is changed behavior. That's what the biblical word means, "to turn around and go in the other direction." If you have ever sinned the same sin twice, like this generation of Israelites did, you know this; "I need help to change!" Which is exactly what this Next Generation asks for. They say to Moses: (Num. 21:7)

We sinned... Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us.

Until you ask for help, you don't have a repentant heart. Until you offer to help someone change, you aren't cooperating with God to save the next generation.

Which brings us to the second step in saving a generation...

II. Step Two: Teach Them to Follow the Path of God.

In Num. 21:10 – 20 we see this whole Next Generation prove that their repentance is real. How? They prove it by following without complaining. They visit ten different locations. The phrase that we see repeated between each location is this, "They moved on and camped... they moved on and camped... they moved on and camped..." Ten different places! You know what? This is pretty good educational philosophy. I have my PhD in educational philosophy and this is about as good an illustration of how people learn new stuff as any out there.

Pick any topic, anything you want to learn. Do you want to learn how to cook? How do you learn it? You move on from where you are (living in total ignorance of the difference between a sauce pan and spatula) and you "camp," you "hang out" with someone who can teach you the basics of cookware. This is not a "drive-through" experience; you camp there! You live there until you can pick up the right cooking tool in the dark!

Then, you move on from there and "camp" at the next place of discovery and learning. Real, solid, life-changing learning is not a journey! People love to say, "Life is a journey!" NO! No, it's not! People who just journey are tourists. Tourists don't stop, they just keep moving. They have no intention of changing. American tourists have no intention of changing their eating habits or dressing habits or language or anything else. In fact, American tourists are offended when they're in another country and people don't speak English. Right? That's a tourist.

Christians are not tourists. Christians are disciples! The word disciple means "learner." It means someone who is changing continually. But you won't change by being a "drive-through" learner. You've got to camp. You've got to move on and then stop and set up your tent and live in that "Learning Town" until you know the language, until you enjoy the food, dress like the locals and stop referring to them as "they" and start referring to them as "us." My German teacher, Herr Kauls, said that

we didn't "know" German until we dreamed in German. You don't know Christianity until you dream Christianity.

So, what kind of a Christian are you? Are you a Tourist or a Disciple? Tourists take photos to show their friends "where they've been." Disciples take photos to show their friends "where they live." The Next Generation of Israel is following Moses not because they think Moses is so great. They're following Moses because they KNOW that Moses is following God. If you want to save a generation, the second step after teaching them to repent is to be sure that you are a genuine disciple yourself. Tell them your story, show them your photos, speak to them in your new language, let them taste your new food, wear your new clothes. And the first time they ask, "Where did you learn to speak like that?" you smile and say, "Come on! I'll show you!"

The last thing that God shows us for how to save a generation is this...

III. Step Three: Teach Them the Things Worth Fighting For.

Besides God's judgments, the other big thing that makes people nervous about the Old Testament is all the fighting. And it's true, there is a lot of fighting. Now, I don't want to get into a full-blown theology of warfare, but is it the Bible that offends our theological sensitivities or is it our suburban theological naiveté that offends the Bible? We live in the third "safest" community in the country. Did you know that? So, anyplace else in the entire country has more crime than Avon, CT. Is it possible that our view of how violent real life is might be a bit skewed?

When I see suburbanites marching with signs that say, "End All War Now!" I want to ask them, "What world are you from?" I want to ask that because in this world there is great evil which is not going to be removed until Christ returns. So, the only way to end all war would be for everyone to surrender to evil. If you grow up in suburbia, you can be blinded to the reality of how much violent evil there is in the world and so you can become naïve and believe that if we stopped resisting evil, the evil would just leave us alone. But if you believe the Bible, you know that the evil in this world will NOT leave you alone.

The warfare we see in the Old Testament is based on the critical truth that evil in this world will not leave us alone. On top of that is the reality that Israel was a theocracy, which means that God was literally the political ruler of their country. No country will be able to make that claim again until Jesus returns.

In Numbers 21 Israel needed to pass through the land of the Amorites. They asked permission and promised not to eat any food or drink any water along the way. But King Sihon of the Amorites not only refused them passage but sent his army out to attack them. So, Israel defended itself by fighting rather than be taken as slaves by the Amorites. They were defending themselves against evil that would not leave them alone. And what was the result? Verse 35:

And they took possession of his land.

So, what about our day? Well, we're not living in a theocracy with God as our political leader. That doesn't mean that Christians shouldn't serve as soldiers. It does mean that Christian soldiers must recognize that obedience to human commanders must be in the context of their personal "chain of command," so that their actions in obedience to a human commander must not violate the higher authority of God's commands.

But the New Testament makes it clear that geo-political warfare is the lesser warfare. As Christians we are engaged in a spiritual war. So Paul says:

Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. (Eph. 6:11, 12)

Consider these facts: On Oct. 14, 1857, the banking system of this country collapsed. Since we've all lived through a similar experience, we know the emotional turmoil that can produce. But just one month before the crash, a New York businessman, Jeremiah Lanphier, 48 years old, felt directed by God to start a noon-time prayer meeting in a building at the corner of Fulton and William Streets. The first week just six men attended. The day of the crash, over 100 people showed up to pray. By mid-November, two rooms had to be used because hundreds of businessmen were "confessing sin, getting saved, and praying for revival."

On March 20, 1858, the New York Times ran an article about what had become a nation-wide phenomenon:

"The great wave of religious excitement which is now sweeping over this nation, is one of the most remarkable movements since the Reformation... In this City, we have beheld a sight which not the most enthusiastic fanatic for church observances could ever have hoped to look upon; we have seen in the business quarter of the City, in the busiest hours, assemblies of merchants, clerks and working-men, to the number of some 5,000 gathered day after day for a simple and solemn worship. Similar assemblies we find in other portions of the City; a theatre is turned into a chapel; churches of all sects are open and crowded by day and night." ⁱⁱ

Other revivals in this nation's history were started by the clergy - Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, Charles Finney. But this was a layman's revival. Working men used their lunch hour to pray for God to come in power upon our nation. The results? At its peak, there was an estimated 50,000 conversions to Christ per week! During the two-year period, 1857-1858, 10,000 people were joining local churches weekly. Businessmen began to pay off debts, gambling dens and taverns closed by the hundreds. And there was a huge inflow of volunteers into ministries that served the poor, the destitute and the needy.

And consider this: within two years, Abraham Lincoln was elected President. He was elected as a known opponent of slavery, not a popular platform in over half the country. After the election, the Civil War broke out, a war that, though it was the bloodiest in American history, brought to an end the evil institution of slavery.

So, what was the tipping point that motivated a generation to elect Lincoln? I would argue, it was not politics, but a national revival that produced over a million conversions in less than two years and changed the heart of America. How do you save a generation? You teach them to repent, teach them to follow God's path and you teach them the things worth fighting for - things found in His Word. We believe God is calling Valley to save our generation. How will you join us? Let's pray...

ⁱ Jeff Deck and Benjamin D. Herson, *The Great Typo Hunt: Two Friends Changing the World, One Correction At A Time* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2010)

ⁱⁱ “The Religious Revival,” *The New York Times*, 20 March 1858. (no author listed)