



"The essence of God's action in wrath is to give people what they choose, in all its implications."

—J.I. Packer

21-Aug-20

Is God Fair?

The church has long taught, and rightly so, that [God](#) is fair. When meting out punishments, He expects us to be fair also. Under the Old Covenant, He set out the principle of "life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth" ([Exodus 21:23-24](#)). However, notice [Numbers 21:5-7](#):

And 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 our soul loathes this worthless bread." So the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died. Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD that He take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people.

The people received the death penalty because they became mouthy and reproachful against God and Moses. Is that fair? To most people, it would seem to be a touch heavy-handed. But perhaps there is more to the story.

Consider the context of this passage. The Israelites had been trudging across the desert for forty years, and they were still traveling. [Numbers 21:4](#) informs us, "Then they journeyed from Mount Hor by the Way of the Red Sea." This log entry of this leg of their travels may not sound very interesting, but there is more to it than meets the eye. A look at a map confirms that the Red Sea lies to the south of Mount Hor, but the Promised Land—their destination—stands to the north. This geographical reality means they were traveling in the wrong direction!

Why were they going backwards? Moses tells us in [Numbers 20:21-22](#): "Thus [Edom](#) refused to give Israel passage through his territory; so Israel turned away from him. And the children of Israel, the whole congregation, journeyed from Kadesh and came to Mount Hor." They were skirting the land of Edom. The most direct route to the Promised Land would have taken them northward through Edomite territory. But when the Israelites had requested permission to travel through it, the Edomite king had refused, forcing them to walk the long way around.

So, "they journeyed from Mount Hor by the Way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the soul of the people became very discouraged on the way." "Discouraged" is translated from *Strong's Concordance* #7114, *qar*. According to *The Complete Word Study Dictionary* [Old Testament](#), a better translation might have been "impatient," "anxious," or "annoyed."

The Israelites had been traveling through the wilderness for forty years, and they could just about taste the Promised Land and all the promise that it held for them. Just a straight-line march through the land of Edom, and they would be there! But, no, they had to backtrack.

When the Israelites chided God and Moses, it rose from deep frustration. They had long chafed at being under God's thumb and subject to His providence, and it wore on them. When they made it to Canaan, they thought, they could ignore Him. They would dig their own wells and bake their own bread. They could not wait to bite into a piece of homemade, crusty bread!

Note their complaint: "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread" ([Numbers 21:5](#)). "Worthless" translates *Strong's* #7052, *q^e lql*, which *The Complete Word Study Dictionary Old Testament* defines as "worthless, miserable. It describes food that is unappetizing, unattractive, barely edible." Apparently, after forty years, manna had lost its novelty.

So, how does God react to their whining? Seeming to jump the rails, He sends poisonous snakes to kill them. The death penalty for complaining about the food? Is that a proportionate punishment? Is that fair? Of course not. There must be a better rationale for God's reaction.

We must see how Moses describes His response in [Numbers 21:6](#): "So the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died." A poor translation of one word, "sent" (*Strong's* #7971), has skewed readers' understanding of God's justice for centuries. The Hebrew word, *šlah*, does mean "sent," but referring to animals, it suggests "loosed," "released," or "let go." God did not send the snakes in and command them to attack the people. He loosed them from restraint, released them, or let them go.

This meaning implies that the snakes were there all along. Notice [Deuteronomy 8:14-15](#):

. . . when your heart is lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage; who led you through that great and terrible wilderness, in which were fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty land where there was no water; who brought water for you out of the flinty rock; . . .

The snakes were native to the desert—in fact, it was filled with them—and the only reason the Israelites had not encountered and fallen victim to venomous serpents over nearly forty years is because God had been actively protecting them. He had been holding back the snakes! As part of His providence, He had protected them from those dangers and more.

But why did God remove His protection from them here? By this time, God knew their hearts, as He says in [Deuteronomy 8:2](#): "And you shall remember that the LORD your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not."

He also knew where their disobedient hearts would lead them. At first glance, their complaint would appear to be just a problem of food and water, but He knew the real reason:

. . . and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and your gold are multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied; when your heart is lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage; . . . then you say in your heart, "My power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth." ([Deuteronomy 8:13-14](#), 17)

God saw their pride, self-sufficiency, and independence. The Israelites never considered that He had provided them with more than food and water, and He would do so in the Promised Land as well. They could not see that self-sufficiency is an egotistical illusion. Humans are blind to most of what God provides, and without His care, all would die in their next breath. They vastly and ungratefully underestimated their need of Him.

So, God gave them and their descendants—and us!—an object-lesson designed to make us sit up and consider what He provides. And when we think it through, He expects us to send overflowing gratitude His way and follow Him with greater humility.

The Israelites committed a terrible [sin](#) of [ingratitude](#) and blindness to the saving work of God. For forty years, they essentially blasphemed God as insufficient to their needs. In releasing the serpents from His restraints upon them, He showed the Israelites just how bad it would be without Him. Yes, God is fair!

- Mike Fuhrer

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

God's Sense of Justice

by John W. Ritenbaugh

God's sense of justice comes into question in the minds of men when they read of His judgments in the Bible and see His acts in history. His judgments seem unfair because man can never please God on his own since God's standards are higher than he can achieve. Yet He has made it clear that even the smallest infraction of His law merits the death penalty. Everyone is guilty! God, then, is absolutely justified in what He decides regarding the judgment and punishment of us all (conversely, He always rewards righteousness). Moreover, we do not know all the circumstances and reasons for His judgments, so our opinions of God's decisions are at best ill-informed. Of all judges, only God is absolutely fair and incorruptible. And when He shows mercy it manifests His lovingkindness and grace.

From the Archives: Featured Article

It's Not Fair!

by Geoff Preston

"Fairness" is a major buzzword in these times. Special interest groups complain and sometimes agitate because they feel that society is not treating them fairly. Geoff Preston approaches the subject more personally, showing that our discontent over perceived mistreatment pales in comparison to what others have endured.

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