

## OT LESSON 15

# “LOOK TO GOD AND LIVE”

by Ted L. Gibbons

**INTRODUCTION:** If you have the time and the inclination, review the following scriptures: Ex. 14:1-4; 16:2,3; 17:1-4; Num. 11:4-6, 18-20; 14:1-4; 20:3-5; 21:5. In each of these verses Israel longs for the good things of Egypt, for an opportunity to return her slime pits. You with young children might have experienced something like this. I know I made life miserable for my parents on a couple of occasions when they took me to visit distant relatives and I did not want to go. My constant complaining and incessant review of the things I was missing at home must have filled them with indignation. The Lord seems to have had some of those same feelings about the children of Israel during their backward-looking journey to the Promised Land.

This lesson will review some of their experiences and rebellions in the wilderness. It will focus on several things the Lord provided to help them focus their attention on the future and the blessings he hoped to give them.

### 1. THE PILLAR OF FIRE AND THE CLOUD

The wilderness journey of the Israelites was directed by the Lord. His concern and presence were manifested by a pillar of fire and a cloud.

And on the day that the tabernacle was reared up the cloud covered the tabernacle, namely, the tent of the testimony: and at even there was upon the tabernacle as it were the appearance of fire, until the morning. So it was alway: the cloud covered it by day, and the appearance of fire by night (Num. 9:15,16).

Exodus teaches about the pillar of fire in this way:

And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of a cloud, to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light; to go by day and night: He took not away the pillar of the cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, from before the people (Ex. 13:21,22).

The Lord's willingness to guide these covenant people on their way is indicative of his character. He has provided guides for us as well—guides to keep us on the path to our own promised land in the Celestial Kingdom. There are at least five of these guides:

- A. *THE HOLY GHOST*: In a “wheat and tares” world, how unusually blessed faithful members are to have the precious and constant gift of the Holy Ghost with reminders of what is right and of the covenants we have made. “For behold, ... the Holy Ghost ... will show unto you all things what ye should do.” (2 Ne. 32:5.) Whatever the decibels of decadence, these need not overwhelm the still, small voice! Some of the best sermons we will ever hear will be thus prompted from the pulpit of memory—to an audience of one! (Neal A. Maxwell, “Behold, the Enemy Is Combined,” *Ensign*, May 1993, 78).
- B. *CONSCIENCE*: You must realize that you have something like the compass, like the Liahona, in your own system. Every child is given it. When he is eight years of age, he knows good from evil, if his parents have been teaching him well. If he ignores the Liahona that he has in his own makeup, he eventually may not have it whispering to him. But if we will remember that everyone of us has the thing that will direct him aright, our ship will not get on the wrong course and suffering will not happen and bows will not break and families will not cry for food—if we listen to the dictates of our own Liahona, which we call the conscience (Spencer W. Kimball, “Our Own Liahona,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1976, 79).
- C. *PATRIARCHAL BLESSING*: The same Lord who provided a Liahona for Lehi provides for you and for me today a rare and valuable gift to give direction to our lives, to mark the hazards to our safety, and to chart the way, even a safe passage—not to a promised land, but to our heavenly home. The gift to which I refer is known as a patriarchal blessing. Every worthy member of the Church is entitled to receive such a precious and priceless personal treasure (Thomas S. Monson, “Preparation Precedes Performance,” *Ensign*, Sept. 1993, 71).
- D. *THE SCRIPTURES*: If [you] are acquainted with the revelations, there is no question—personal or social or political or occupational—that need go unanswered. Therein is contained the fulness of the

everlasting gospel. Therein we find principles of truth that will resolve every confusion and every problem and every dilemma that will face the human family or any individual in it (Boyd K. Packer, *Charge to Religious Educators*, "Teach the Scriptures.")

- E. *THE PRIESTHOOD*: On one occasion, Karl G. Maeser was leading a party of young missionaries across the Alps. As they reached the summit, he looked back and saw a row of sticks thrust into the snow to mark the one safe path across the otherwise treacherous glacier.

Halting the company of missionaries, he gestured toward the sticks and said, "Brethren, there stands the priesthood [of God]. They are just common sticks like the rest of us, ... but the position they hold makes them what they are to us. If we step aside from the path they mark, we are lost." (Boyd K. Packer, "From Such Turn Away," *Ensign*, May 1985, 35; the citation is in Alma P. Burton, *Karl G. Maeser, Mormon Educator*, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1953, p. 22.)

What excuses will we be able to make on judgement day if we lose our way? Alma must have been thinking of such guides when he said to his son,

O my son, do not let us be slothful because of the easiness of the way; for so was it with our fathers; for so was it prepared for them, that if they would look they might live; even so it is with us. The way is prepared, and if we will look we may live forever (alma 37:46).

## **2. THE PLAN: DO IT THE LORD'S WAY**

The Lord had a plan for feeding Israel in a place where there wasn't much food. The major component of this food was manna. As you know, Israel lived on this stuff for about 40 years, and they were not always very happy about it.

And the mixt multitude that was among them fell a lusting: and the children of Israel also wept again, and said, Who shall give us flesh to eat? We remember the fish, which we did eat in

Egypt freely; the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlick: But now our soul is dried away: there is nothing at all, beside this manna, before our eyes (Num.11:4-6)

The had learned fairly quickly that there are only so many ways to prepare manna in the desert.

And the manna was as coriander seed, and the colour thereof as the colour of bdellium. And the people went about, and gathered it, and ground it in mills, or beat it in a mortar, and baked it in pans, and made cakes of it: and the taste of it was as the taste of fresh oil (Num. 11:77,8).

And so they wept “throughout their families, every man in the door of his tent” (Num.11:11). Their question? “Who shall give us flesh to eat?” (Num. 11:4).

They got flesh all right.

And there went forth a wind from the LORD, and brought quails from the sea, and let them fall by the camp, as it were a day's journey on this side, and as it were a day's journey on the other side, round about the camp, and as it were two cubits high upon the face of the earth (Num. 11:31).

Well, this would be a nice break from the “manna for every meal” routine.

And the people stood up all that day, and all that night, and all the next day, and they gathered the quails.

We even get a hint about how many they gathered. “He that gathered least gathered ten homers: and they spread them all abroad for themselves round about the camp.” The Bible Dictionary heading “**Weights and Measures**” tells us that a homer is about 6-1/2 U.S. bushels. That would be 65 bushels each for those who gathered the least amount of quail. Sixty-five bushels!

Remember that these are people who have rebelled at eating the food provided by the Lord. Since they did not want what the Lord wanted, he gave them what they wanted.

And while the flesh was yet between their teeth, ere it was chewed, the wrath of the LORD was kindled against the people, and the LORD smote the people with a very great plague (Num.11:33)

The 78<sup>th</sup> Psalm gives us more detail about this affair:

He caused an east wind to blow in the heaven: and by his power he brought in the south wind. He rained flesh also upon them as dust, and feathered fowls like as the sand of the sea: And he let it fall in the midst of their camp, round about their habitations. So they did eat, and were well filled: for he gave them their own desire; hey were not estranged from their lust. But while their meat was yet in their mouths, he wrath of God came upon them, and slew the fattest of them, and smote down the chosen men of Israel (vss. 26-31)

Notice the name given to this place. The footnote offers an interpretation: *The graves of lust*. Other translations of this verse offer the words *craving* or *desire* in place of lust. Can you see how an insistence on the satisfaction of your own lusts or cravings or desires could estrange you from the will of God. If we mean to complete our journey “across that everlasting gulf of misery which is prepared to engulf the wicked—And land [our] souls, yea, their immortal souls, at the right hand of God in the kingdom of heaven, to sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and with Jacob, and with all our holy fathers, to go no more out”, we must travel according to the will and the plan of the Father and the Son.

### **3. THE PROPHET**

“Miriam and Aaron spake against Moses . . .” They had a question for him: “Hath the LORD indeed spoken only by Moses? hath he not spoken also by us?” (Num 12:1,2). The Lord heard this and immediately (“suddenly”—12:4) responded. He directed Moses, Aaron, and Miriam to go to the tabernacle. When there were there, the Lord appeared in a cloud and spoke of the greatness of Moses to them.

And he said, Hear now my words: If there be a prophet among you, I the LORD will make myself known unto him in a vision, and will speak unto him in a dream. My servant Moses is not so,

who is faithful in all mine house. With him will I speak mouth to mouth, even apparently, and not in dark speeches; and the similitude of the LORD shall he behold: wherefore then were ye not afraid to speak against my servant Moses? (Num 12:6-8).

The Lord explained to them how important Moses was. *I generally speak to prophets in dreams and visions, but with Moses I speak mouth to mouth and face to face ( the similitude of the LORD shall he behold). How did you dare to speak against him?*

Miriam was stricken with leprosy for seven days as a reminder to her and a lesson to Israel of the need to support those whom the Lord has chosen to lead his people.

#### **4. THE PRIESTHOOD**

In Numbers 16, members of the tribes of Levi and Reuben, along with “250 princes of the assembly” (Num. 16:1,2) rose up against Moses and Aaron, and therefore “against the Lord” (Num. 16:11). They complained,

Ye take too much upon you, seeing all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them: wherefore then lift ye up yourselves above the congregation of the LORD? (Num 16:3)

What they wanted is explained later in the chapter:

And Moses said unto Korah, Hear, I pray you, ye sons of Levi: Seemeth it but a small thing unto you, that the God of Israel hath separated you from the congregation of Israel, to bring you near to himself to do the service of the tabernacle of the LORD, and to stand before the congregation to minister unto them? And he hath brought thee near to him, and all thy brethren the sons of Levi with thee: and seek ye the *high* priesthood also? (Num. 16:8-10, JST) emphasis added).

These men, even the sons of Levi who possessed the lesser priesthood, wanted the “high priesthood” as well, a priesthood the Lord had taken out of

their midst because of the rebellion at Mt. Sinai (see D&C 84:25) Only the leaders—Moses and Aaron—possessed this higher priesthood. Aaron was the Presiding Bishop.

The office of Presiding Bishop of the Church is the same as the office which was held by Aaron. It is the highest office, holding the presidency in the Aaronic Priesthood. It was this office which came to John the Baptist, and it was by virtue of the fact that he held the keys of this power and ministry that he was sent to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery to restore that Priesthood, May 15, 1829 (Joseph Fielding Smith, *Church History and Modern Revelation*, Vol. II, Lesson 50).

The Lord said he would show Israel whom he had chosen for this work and this office.

Even to morrow the LORD will shew who are his, and who is holy; and will cause him to come near unto him: even him whom he hath chosen will he cause to come near unto him (Num. 16:5)

The next day, the adversaries of Moses and Aaron were gathered at the door of the tabernacle (vs. 19), along with “all the congregation.” The language Moses used to warn members of the congregation away from the influence of the original rebels is powerful:

And he spake unto the congregation, saying, Depart, I pray you, from the tents of these wicked men, and touch nothing of theirs, lest ye be consumed in all their sins (Num 16:26).

What a powerful lesson about undue association with unworthy people. *Depart from the tents of wicked men and women; there is grave danger of your being overwhelmed by their sins!*

The lesson the Lord taught next should have created a spirit of repentance in every Israelite who ever heard of it.

And the earth opened her mouth, and swallowed them up, and their houses, and all the men that appertained unto Korah, and

all their goods. They, and all that appertained to them, went down alive into the pit, and the earth closed upon them: and they perished from among the congregation. And all Israel that were round about them fled at the cry of them: for they said, Lest the earth swallow us up also. And there came out a fire from the LORD, and consumed the two hundred and fifty men that offered incense (Num. 16:32-35).

In spite of their fear and flight at this divine display of displeasure, the Israelites were not entirely subdued. “But on the morrow all the congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moses and against Aaron, saying, Ye have killed the people of the LORD . . . the congregation was gathered against Moses and against Aaron” (Num. 16:41,42).

Paul explained clearly the principle taught here: “And no man taketh this honour [the priesthood] unto himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron” (Heb. 5:4).

The Lord taught a postscript to this lesson. He demonstrated to his covenant people that he had in fact chosen the tribe of Levi to be his representatives holding the lesser priesthood.

Speak unto the children of Israel, and take of every one of them a rod according to the house of their fathers, of all their princes according to the house of their fathers twelve rods: write thou every man's name upon his rod. And thou shalt write Aaron's name upon the rod of Levi: for one rod shall be for the head of the house of their fathers (Num. 17:2,3).

Twelve rods were placed in the tabernacle overnight.

And it came to pass, that on the morrow Moses went into the tabernacle of witness; and, behold, the rod of Aaron for the house of Levi was budded, and brought forth buds, and bloomed blossoms, and yielded almonds (Num. 17:8).

When Moses brought the rods out to the congregation in the morning, they must have had an increased awareness of the importance of a divinely appointed, *living* priesthood.

## 5. THE PROMISED LAND

When Israel arrived at the southern borders of Canaan, 12 men representing the tribes were selected and directed to spy out the land (Num 13:1-20). They returned with a horrifying report.

We came unto the land whither thou sentest us, and surely it floweth with milk and honey; and this is the fruit of it. Nevertheless the people be strong that dwell in the land, and the cities are walled, and very great: and moreover we saw the children of Anak there. The Amalekites dwell in the land of the south: and the Hittites, and the Jebusites, and the Amorites, dwell in the mountains: and the Canaanites dwell by the sea, and by the coast of Jordan . . . But the men that went up with him said, We be not able to go up against the people; for they are stronger than we. And they brought up an evil report of the land which they had searched unto the children of Israel, saying, The land, through which we have gone to search it, is a land that eateth up the inhabitants thereof; and all the people that we saw in it are men of a great stature. And there we saw the giants, the sons of Anak, which come of the giants: and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight (Num. 13:27-29, 31-33)

According to Numbers 14:1-4, how did the people respond to this message?

The Lord's response was to take Israel into the wilderness until a new generation—one more likely to obey and trust him—could be prepared for the conquest of Canaan.

Because all those men which have seen my glory, and my miracles, which I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and have tempted me now these ten times, and have not hearkened to my voice; Surely they shall not see the land which I swore unto their fathers, neither shall any of them that provoked me see it . . . Your carcasses shall fall in this wilderness; and all that were numbered of you, according to your whole number, from twenty years old and upward, which have murmured against me, Doubtless ye shall not come into the land, concerning which I

sware to make you dwell therein . . . But your little ones, which ye said should be a prey, them will I bring in, and they shall know the land which ye have despised. But as for you, your carcasses, they shall fall in this wilderness. And your children shall wander in the wilderness forty years, and bear your whoredoms, until your carcasses be wasted in the wilderness.(Num. 14:22,23,29-33).

Israel had once again condemned herself by looking backward to Egypt rather than forward to the Promised Land.

## **6. THE PROMISED MESSIAH**

Israel, wandering in the desert under the leadership of Moses, was once again unhappy. This time they were near Edom. They had been refused passage through the land of Edom (20:17-21) and were forced to compass (go around) the land.

And the people spake against God, and against Moses, Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? for there is no bread, neither is there any water; and our soul loatheth this light bread [manna].

And the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people died. (Numbers 21:5-6.)

As a matter of survival, the Israelites had become proficient at instant repentance. The Lord consistently informed them with firmness (sometimes with fire) when He was displeased. This time was no exception. The serpents brought them into awareness of their error.

Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord, and against thee; pray unto the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us. (Numbers 21:7.)

"Take away the serpents from us," they pled. But apparently the Lord did not, even when Moses prayed about it, because the serpents were not the problem. The real problem was lack of faith and an attitude that caused the

Israelites to complain constantly, and to blame God and Moses for every difficulty. If the Israelites had gone to Moses and said, "Pray unto the Lord, that He might take away our rotten attitudes from us," this story might have a different ending. But to them, bad attitude was not the problem. Snakes were the problem.

The Lord's response was to have Moses make a brass snake and place it on a pole where people could find it and look at it. With the sculpted serpent came the promise: "Everyone that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live." (Numbers 21:8.) The number of fiery serpents did not diminish at all. They remained in all their poisonous plenty to remind Israel about the genuine issue. As we would expect, the Lord's response dealt with the real problem, and attempted to teach trust, faith, and gratitude.

He sent fiery flying serpents among them; and after they were bitten he prepared a way that they might be healed, and the labor they had to perform was to look; and because of the simpleness of the way, or because of the easiness of it, there were many who perished. (1 Nephi 17:41.)

This brass serpent was a symbol of Christ. John 3:14-16 tells us that

as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

Alma said it this way;

Behold, he was spoken of by Moses; yea, and behold a type was raised up in the wilderness, that whosoever would look upon it might live. And many did look and live. But few understood the meaning of those things, and this because of the hardness of their hearts. But there were many who were so hardened that they would not look, therefore they perished. Now the reason they would not look is because they did not believe that it would heal them. O my brethren, if ye could be healed by merely casting about your eyes that ye might be healed, would ye not

behold quickly, or would ye rather harden your hearts in unbelief, and be slothful, that ye would not cast about your eyes, that ye might perish? If so, wo shall come upon you; but if not so, then cast about your eyes and begin to believe in the Son of God, that he will come to redeem his people, and that he shall suffer and die to atone for their sins; and that he shall rise again from the dead, which shall bring to pass the resurrection, that all men shall stand before him, to be judged at the last and judgment day, according to their works (Alma 33:19-22).

**CONCLUSION:** These chapters in the beginning of Numbers teach a powerful principle, a principle I call the **BCWYW** principle. The acronym means **BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WANT**. Someone once said, “Be careful what you want because you might get it.” Alma said this: “I know that [the Lord] granteth unto men according to their desire” (Alma 29:4). In a commentary on the invasion of the quails in Numbers 11, the psalmist wrote, “he gave them their own desire” (Ps. 78:29).

The Israelites got water when they wanted it and food when they wanted it and a cure for snakebite when they wanted it. Other things they wanted but did not receive, but they always got more than they wanted. God often spoke to them in the only way they seemed to understand. The graves of lust (Kibroth-Haattavah) were located *throughout* the Sinai peninsula. Psalm 78 explains,

When he slew them, then they sought him: and they returned and enquired early after God. And they remembered that God was their rock, and the high God their redeemer. Nevertheless they did flatter him with their mouth, and they lied unto him with their tongues. For their heart was not right with him, neither were they stedfast in his covenant. But he, being full of compassion, forgave their iniquity, and destroyed them not: yea, many a time turned he his anger away, and did not stir up all his wrath. For he remembered that they were but flesh; a wind that passeth away, and cometh not again (Psalm 78:34-39).

What happened to Israel physically can happen to us spiritually. When we insist on our own way, our own destinations, our own will, we may find ourselves left behind in places we do not want to be.

With thoughtless and impatient hands  
We tangle up the plans  
The Lord hath wrought.  
And when we cry in pain He saith,  
'Be quiet, man, while I untie the knot.'  
(Anonymous) (cited by Boyd K. Packer, "Prayers and Answers,"  
Ensign, Nov. 1979, 21)

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