

November 15, 2020

The Bronze Serpent

Numbers 20-21

Focus Passage: Numbers 21:1-9

Cross Reference: 1 Corinthians 10-1-13

BIBLE IN A YEAR READING PLAN

Nov 8	John 9-10	Nov 12	John 19-21
Nov 9	John 11-12	Nov 13	Acts 1-3
Nov 10	John 13-15	Nov 14	Acts 4-6
Nov 11	John 16-18	Nov 15	Acts 7-8

Overview of Numbers 20-21

Numbers 20

- Death of Miriam
- The Waters of Meribah – Moses' Angry Sin
- Death of Aaron – Transfer of Priesthood

Numbers 21

- First military victory
- The Bronze Serpent
- Listing of the Journeys of Israel

Foundational Truths from this Lesson:

- God's people should cry out to Him for victory and deliverance.
- God's people should not complain when God does things differently than they desire.
- God can use any of His creations to bring judgment upon sinners.
- Faith is crucial when praying for healing.
- Salvation only comes by grace through faith in the uplifted Son of God, Jesus Christ our Lord.
- The events in the Old Testament serve to teach us how to walk with the Lord in everyday life.

Lesson Idea: We should be grateful and obedient to the Lord and not grumble against His plans. We look to Jesus Christ for salvation.

Background: As the time in the wilderness was drawing to a close, Numbers 20 tells about the

deaths of Miriam and Aaron, Moses' sister and brother. According to Numbers 33:38, Aaron died in the fortieth year after the exodus from Egypt; so this gives us a time stamp for the rest of Numbers. Apparently all of the rest of Numbers takes place during the last couple of years of the 40 year wanderings.

Following the death of Miriam (Numbers 20:1), the people started complaining again about their lack of water and blaming Moses for bringing them out into the barren wilderness (Numbers 20:2-5). Moses angrily lashed out at the people and did not follow the instructions of the Lord for bringing them water (Numbers 20:6-11). His disobedience cost him the opportunity to lead the next generation into the Promised Land. In Numbers 20:12-13, God shared His disappointment with Moses and Aaron.

¹² But 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." ¹³ Those were the waters of Meribah, because the sons of Israel contended with the Lord, and He proved Himself holy among them.

Sin always has consequences, even for great leaders like Moses and Aaron.

Today's lesson will focus on Numbers 21, and in particular, the incident that led to the making of a bronze serpent. The Israelites experienced a military victory in their march towards their new homeland, but they still struggled with trusting and honoring the Lord. When they complained about the Lord's plan, He sent fiery serpents as a judgment against them. But He also provided a means of healing and restoration.

Numbers 21:1-3 Arad Conquered

Questions to Ponder:

- Why did the king of Arad fight against Israel?
- What does v 2-3 indicate about this new generation of Israelites?
- How did the Lord hearing their voice (v 3) matter in the outcome?

Numbers 21:1-3

¹ *When 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.* ² **So 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.”** ³ *The 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.*

NOTES:

The Canaanite king of Arad sought to prevent Israel from encroaching on his territory and so he fought against them. He was victorious enough to take some of the Israelites captive. But verses 2-3 show that this generation determined to trust the Lord by calling out to Him with a vow. They asked God to deliver the victory and promised to destroy the city completely and not take any of the spoils for themselves.

The name “Hormah” actually means “destruction.” **Deuteronomy 7:4** states the reason behind Israel’s total destruction of the towns they conquered. It was also the reason they were not supposed to intermingle the people in the land of Canaan:

⁴ *For they will turn your sons away from following Me to serve other gods; then the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you and He will quickly destroy you.”*

Gordon Wenham in the *Tyndale Commentary on Numbers* explains how this victory actually should have been the first victory that the former generation would have had forty years earlier had they been willing to trust God.

Victory at Hormah (21:1–3). This brief notice records Israel’s first victory over the Canaanites and heralds the dawn of a new era. The long delay in the fulfilment of the promises is nearly over. It was at Hormah that an abortive attempt was made to enter Canaan after the spies returned from their mission (14:45). It was there nearly forty years later that they triumphed for the first time, a pledge of the conquest of the land that was soon to begin (cf. Eph. 1:13–14). Arad was a

large town in the northern Negev, about 17 miles (27 km) south of Hebron. (Wenham, *Numbers*)

Verse 3 indicates that the Lord heard Israel and “delivered up the Canaanites.” That is precisely what He had offered to do 40 years earlier, but the Israelites were unwilling to trust Him. God’s people today still need to learn to call out to God and trust Him to deliver what He promises.

Numbers 21:4-5 The People Complained**Questions to Ponder**

- **Why did the people become impatient?**
- **How did they express their impatience?**

Numbers 21:4-5

⁴ *Then 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.* ⁵ **The people spoke against God and Moses,** “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this miserable food.”

NOTES:

The people became impatient and complained about the length of the journey. Numbers 20:14-22 explains that the inhabitants of Edom had not allowed the people of Israel to pass through their land. God did not direct Israel to attack Edom. So Moses led the people on a detour which made for a longer path towards the Promised Land. Apparently the people did not like it.

Verse 3 says that the people did not just speak against Moses, but they spoke against God. They questioned whether they were supposed to die in the wilderness without food and water. God had nourished them throughout the 40 years in the wilderness by providing daily bread in the form of manna. But they expressed their ingratitude by saying they “loathed” it. They sounded like spoiled brats not getting what they want to eat for dinner! They did not appreciate the miracle of the manna—something no other generation ever experienced before or after that time.

Wenham in the *Tyndale Commentary on Numbers* explains:

Verses 5–6. This is the last recorded occasion that Israel grumbled about their food (cf. 11:4ff.; Exod. 16) and yearned for the delicacies of Egypt. They describe the manna as *worthless food*. The term *worthless* (*qəlōqəl*) is found only here... it is a disparaging comment on the *bread of heaven* (Psalms. 78:24–25; 105:40; cf. John 6:31). As on the previous occasion, it provoked God’s anger (cf. 11:33), this time in the form of *fiery serpents*, whose bite was lethal. It seems likely that the inflammation caused by this bite prompted them to be called *fiery*.

God takes grumbling personally, when it is directed at His will and ways. But God always takes grumbling seriously, and He directs His church to avoid it. **Philippians 2:14-16** reminds believers...

¹⁴ *Do all things without complaining or arguments;* ¹⁵ *so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world,* ¹⁶ *holding firmly the word of life. . .*

Numbers 21:6-9 The Bronze Serpent

Questions to Ponder:

- How did God respond to their complaints?
- How did the people respond to the snake problem?
- How did Moses respond to their request?
- What did the Lord instruct Moses to do and why?

Numbers 21:6-9

⁶ *The Lord sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.* ⁷ *So 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.*** ⁸ *Then 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.**”* ⁹ *And*

*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.***

NOTES:

God responded to the complaints of the people by sending deadly serpents into the camp and many people died. All throughout God’s Word, sin always carried consequences. The people confessed their sin of speaking against the Lord and against Moses, and they begged Moses to intercede for them.

Moses could have responded in a fleshly manner out of hurt feelings and told them they were getting exactly what they deserved; instead, Moses entreated the Lord for grace and mercy. Again, this demonstrates to us the importance and power of intercessory prayer. This is a reminder we need during this time of unrest and upheaval in our nation. As believers, we need to call out to Almighty God to bring mercy and wisdom.

God’s instructions to Moses seem out of character. He almost seems to instruct them to break the second commandment of **Exodus 20:4-6**:

⁴ *“You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath, or in the water under the earth.”* ⁵ *You shall not worship them nor serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, inflicting the punishment of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me,* ⁶ *but showing favor to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.*

But note that God does not tell them to **worship** the bronze serpent. Instead, it was to be used as an **object of faith**. Looking at a bronze serpent had no natural healing power, but God promised to bring healing to those who would obediently gaze upon it.

Later in Israel’s history, during the reign of Hezekiah, the bronze serpent had to be destroyed because it became an object of worship causing the people to stumble into idolatry. **2 Kings 18:4** describes what Hezekiah did:

⁴ *He removed the high places and smashed the memorial stones to pieces, and cut down the*

Asherah. He also **crushed to pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the sons of Israel had been burning incense to it; and it was called Nehushtan...**

In the New Testament, Jesus explained that the bronze serpent was a foreshadowing of His sacrificial work on the cross. In **John 3:13-16**, He told Nicodemus:

*13 No one has ascended into heaven, except He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man. 14 And **just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 so that everyone who believes will have eternal life in Him.** 16 "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.*

It was not looking at the cross that would bring salvation, but faith in the Father's grace and mercy through belief in the saving work of the Son. The same was true in Numbers 21... the bronze serpent did not save anyone from the poisonous snakes; rather, it was faith in the power of God to perform miraculous healing that cause the afflicted to look to it. God honored their faith by saving them from the venomous death.

Besides the reference by Jesus about salvation, one other passage from the New Testament speaks about the lessons that believers should learn from this and other incidents throughout the wilderness wanderings.

1 Corinthians 10:1-13 instructs us to learn a lesson from the past experiences of Israel:

¹ For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our fathers were all under the cloud and they all passed through the sea; ² and they all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; ³ and they all ate the same spiritual food, ⁴ and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ. ⁵ Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased; for their dead bodies were spread out in the wilderness.

⁶ Now these things happened as examples for us, so that we would not crave evil things as they indeed

*craved them. ⁷ Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: "The people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play." ⁸ Nor are we to commit sexual immorality, as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in one day. ⁹ **Nor are we to put the Lord to the test, as some of them did, and were killed by the snakes.** ¹⁰ **Nor grumble, as some of them did, and were killed by the destroyer.** ¹¹ **Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.** ¹² Therefore let the one who thinks he stands watch out that he does not fall. ¹³ No temptation has overtaken you except something common to mankind; and God is faithful, so He will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.*

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