

Message #22**Numbers 21:1-20**

What does it take to get God's people to get serious about God and His Word? What does it take to get God's people to stop fooling around and wandering around? If someone you love dies, will that cause people to get serious about God and His Word? Well both Miriam and Aaron died and it didn't do it for Israel. How about some major change of plans in life? You are heading in a direction and God changes it. Will that do it? Well Israel had a change of plans and redirection of route and that didn't do it either.

It must take quite a bit to get people serious about God and His Word and never is that point more evident than when you come to Numbers 21.

You would logically think that by this point in time, Israel would have really been focused on God's Word and will that they would be laser-focused. They had seen miracles and signs and they had seen God's leading and they had experienced God's judgment. They saw God bring forth water out of a rock. You would think this would have caused Israel to stop complaining and sinning and start trusting and obeying.

You would think that by this time in their lives they should have known there are serious consequences to rebellion and disobedience. When God's people drift away from God, there will be consequences. There is a price to pay.

You would think we would understand the same thing. By now you would think that we would know if we do not trust God and obey Him, there will be some negative chastising consequences. God can cause our world to fall apart. That is what happened to Israel. That is exactly what God did.

EVEN IN THE MIDST OF ALL THE WONDERFUL THINGS GOD'S PEOPLE HAD EXPERIENCED, THEY WERE STILL REBELLING AND STILL DISOBEYING AND STILL SUFFERING THE CONSEQUENCES; BUT WHEN THEY FINALLY TURN FROM THEIR SIN, GOD BLESSES THEM.

That point is very clear from Numbers 21.

In this chapter there are three structured units concerning national Israel that God reveals that communicate this thesis:

STRUCTURED UNIT #1 – God's gives His people victory at Hormah. 21:1-3

There was a Canaanite King of Arad, who lived in the Negev in southern Canaan that was just a short distance northwest of Mount Hor.

This King got wind of the fact that Israel was approaching and he decided to attack Israel. At first glimpse, when he attacked, he appeared to be successful. He was able to capture some prisoners (**verse 1**).

This is an important point for any believer to see. As Israel got near the Promised Land, the warfare intensified. The closer we get to the ultimate blessings of God, the more intense the battle becomes. Satan does not want God's people victorious, so he will bring warfare difficulties and trials to try to prevent it.

According to **verse 2**, this caused Israel to make a vow of city extermination. Their promise was if God would be willing to give Israel victory and they could get back their captives, they promised God that they would completely obliterate them and their cities.

It does not appear as though God demanded they make this vow and commitment to destroy all of the cities, but this was something that national Israel wanted to do for God. They were not interested in getting nice homes for themselves outside the Promised Land, they wanted to destroy them.

Now this was a good moment for Israel. She was rededicating herself to doing God's business and she had a "fighting spirit" and "determination" that you need for victory. If God's people are going to have victory, they will need to fight a good fight in warfare. They need a sanctified determination. This is true in any dispensation.

According to **verse 3**, God heard the voice of Israel and he delivered up the Canaanites and they utterly destroyed them and their cities. The name of the place was called "Hormah" which means place of total "destruction" or "devoted to destruction."

STRUCTURED UNIT #2 – God sends fiery serpents to destroy His own people. **21:4-9**

Now you would naturally think that God's people would be excited about obeying God and experiencing more victories. This should have prompted a major recommitment to God's Word and will. But that is not quite what happened.

According to **verse 4**, the people moved out from Mt. Hor and started moving back south-west in the direction of the Red Sea so they could go around the Edomite land and avoid military conflict. This is interesting because they could have said, we just saw God give us victory over these Canaanites, so let's go back to Edom and ask God for victory there. But they did not do that. They continued on their south-west route to a north-east land.

Well the people became "impatient" with this travel route. According to **verse 5**, the people started speaking against God and Moses and they started complaining again. Their complaining against Moses is a complaint against God. Keep in mind, Miriam and Aaron are dead so their big target now is Moses. This protest was blatant rebellion.

They make a series of negative complaints:

- 1) They complain about the fact they had to leave Egypt. **21:5a**
- 2) They allege that God and Moses have brought them out there to die. **21:5b**
- 3) They claim they have no food. **21:5c**
- 4) They claim they have no water. **21:5d**
- 5) They don't like the miserable food they just claimed they did not have. **21:5e**

It is a deadly serious thing to complain about what God has given to us. It is a deadly serious thing not to be thankful for what God has given. This is the final major complaining episode for the children of Israel and she is finally about to learn her lesson.

God was getting fed up with these people and according to **verse 6**, He sent fiery serpents (nehashim hassera-pim) among the people to bite them and kill them. The term "fiery" (nehashim) may refer to its color, which would be a copper or bronze color or it may refer to the burning that the venom produces. This kind of viper is found in great numbers in Africa. These snakes can grow up to about two feet in length and their venom is lethal. This wilderness area is known to have these deadly serpents (Deut. 8:15).

Now these serpents were sent by God as a judgment against His own people for speaking out against Him and Moses. God sent an extraordinary number of these deadly snakes to bite and kill His own people. God did not need to create new snakes; He just ordered the snakes to form a deadly group to attack, assault and kill His own people.

We may recall when we went through the book of Amos that Amos wrote, "From there I will command the serpent and it will bite them" (Amos 9:3). **What God does here is remove His divine protection.** God's people need to realize that God can remove His protection from His people who consistently disobey His Word. He can remove His protection from His people for the sin of grumbling, murmuring and complaining.

God's people knew they had sinned and they knew they were being punished for their sin.

Verse 7 says the people knew what was going on so they went to Moses with two messages:

(Message #1) - We have sinned against God and you by speaking against you.

This is where a true relationship with God begins. It does not begin with joining a church. It does not begin with promising to be good and nice. In fact, these people haven't done any good works. It begins by admitting "we have sinned."

(Message #2) - Please intercede for us that God will remove these serpents.

Now this does make us pause to wonder how many people of God have actually died because they refused to admit their sin. We know from James 5:14-15 and I John 5:16 that there is a New Testament application to this very issue.

When God is chastising one of His own people for their rebellion, they will sense it and know it and they need to face it, confess it and turn from it.

At the end of **verse 7**, we read that Moses interceded in behalf of the people and according to **verse 8**, God told Moses to make a bronze serpent erected upon a pole or banner staff. It was to be held up so that if any person would look at it, it would completely heal any person. All one needed to do to be saved was look at the banner staff. This was God's remedy for the serpentine death sentence.

You did not have to promise anything. You did not have to give anything. You did not have to pledge anything. You did not have to pray anything. All you needed to do to be saved was by faith look at that standard. If you did not look at that standard you would not be saved, no matter how religious or good or moral you thought you were.

Now this is profound because Jesus Christ will use this very story concerning Himself and the cross (John 3:14). All one needs to do to be saved is look at Jesus Christ on that cross to save. That is it.

You do not have to promise anything. You do not have to do any works. You do not have to get involved in religion. What you must do is to look at that cross. One look by faith will save you (John 3:14-16). **This is what this comes down to - you either look to Jesus Christ as your Savior because you know you are a sinner, or you look to something else that cannot save you.**

According to **verse 9**, Moses made the bronze serpent and put it on a pole and it was lifted up and any person who looked at it lived.

It is interesting that years later, King Hezekiah destroyed this serpent on the pole because the children of Israel were worshipping it (II Kings 18:4). Israel kept this as a memento for years and then fell into the trap of worshipping the memento and not the God who delivered them.

STRUCTURED UNIT #3 – God's people start moving toward Moab. 21:10-20

After Israel got back on track, they next traveled to Oboth, which is a city on the way to Moab. It was apparently some sort of oasis that was known for its water because the name Oboth means water skins (v. 10). **Here is a good lesson to learn, once we have dealt with our rebellion, move forward again and God will revive with fresh water.**

Then Israel moved to Iye-abarim and camped there in the wilderness opposite Moab to the east (v. 11). This was mountainous country and from the high peak of Mount Nebo, Moses could see the Promised Land. From there they moved out and went to Wadi Zered and camped there (v. 12). This area was typically dry but when the rain fell, it quickly replenished tributaries and springs which feed an oasis.

From there they camped on the other side of the Arnon (**v. 13**). This was a deep gorge that ran across the plateau of Moab and as R. K. Harrison said, “forming a natural frontier of an imposing nature between Moabite and Amorite territory” (*Numbers*, p. 280).

Now according to **verses 14-15**, there was a book called “the Book of the Wars of the LORD,” which we do not have today. Apparently in this book there were descriptions of military exploits and victories and poetic things that are not mentioned in Scripture. It was a non-inspired book that apparently contained some accurate history. This is much like Josephus, which is a non-inspired Jewish history that contains accurate history.

From what we gather, there were two places, Waheb and Suphah, which were places Israel apparently traveled through on their way to the Promised Land. This was located near Arnon and the deep gorge.

From there they went to Beer (meaning “well), where God graciously spoke to Moses and supplied water that came up from some underground source (**v. 16**).

According to **verses 17-18**, Israel sang a song of thanks and joy to the Lord for the well and springs of water. Now we will admit this is a different attitude. What a transformation. They had been complaining and murmuring and now they are singing. They are actually thanking God and praising God.

The people had done their part to produce the well and God had blessed their work. The Lord led them to the spot to dig, and out flowed water. To get God’s blessings we must do what we can do.

According to **verses 19-20**, Israel traveled to Mattanah to Hanaliel, to Bamoth to the Moabite Valley at the top of Pisgah that overlooks the Promised Land.

The Pisgah peak gives an excellent view of the wilderness areas on the north west, north and north east sides of the Dead Sea. This would be the place where Moses would see the land before he died.

Good things are starting to happen for Israel because she finally faced her sin.