

Tonight we are looking at a very refreshing passage.

So often, when we think about the book of Numbers,  
we think of rebellion, grumbling, and death.

But tonight, we are looking at victory, repentance, *and Beer*  
(be'er means “well” in Hebrew).

Tonight’s story reminds us that whenever God takes you down a long and difficult road,  
there is *refreshment* at the end –  
there is *victory* – there is peace (*shalom*)

*for those who repent.*

Sometimes the road can be 40 years long.  
Sometimes it can take 40 years until you learn your lesson – *and repent!*

But – yes, there is a warning here –  
not everyone repents!

And so as we go through our passage tonight,  
let us learn to *repent* and believe the gospel!

### **1. Hormah: The Destruction of the Canaanites Foreshadowed (v1-3)**

*When the Canaanite, the king of Arad, who lived in the Negeb, heard that Israel was coming by the way of Atharim, he fought against Israel, and took some of them captive. <sup>2</sup> And Israel vowed a vow to the LORD and said, “If you will indeed give this people into my hand, then I will devote their cities to destruction.”<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>3</sup> And the LORD heeded the voice of Israel and gave over the Canaanites, and they devoted them and their cities to destruction. So the name of the place was called Hormah.<sup>[b]</sup>*

The geography seems a little odd.

Arad is north of Edom along the west side of the Dead Sea.

There is around 30 miles of wilderness in between Arad and Israel’s route.

If they are heading south to go around Edom

then many have wondered how this episode fits here.

There are two likely solutions:

First, there is no reason to believe that Moses is giving us a *purely* chronological account. In the gospel accounts, we often find the evangelists organizing the events around themes. Likewise, the book of Numbers wants to show certain connections.

So this encounter with the king of Arad could have happened *before* the death of Aaron, indeed, it might have happened many years before!

The second is that the king of Arad was not just engaged in defensive action. He may have seen the Israelite migration as a way to add extra territory to the south. But the problem with this explanation is that Israel is now *leaving*. Israel has been camped near his borders for 40 years –  
but only as they *leave* he attacks?  
And then they utterly destroy the cities – and then leave?

So I am inclined to see this as something that happened *during* the 40 years –  
but is only recorded here as Moses starts to tell us of the *victories* of Israel.

## **2. The Bronze Serpent: the People Repent! (v4-9)**

<sup>4</sup> *From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way.*

At last!

The final grumble!  
There will be one more rebellion –  
but this is the last of the grumbling against Moses!

Verse 4 sets up the reason why.

They have to go around Edom.  
That's an extra 200 miles of walking!

It's true that they had to walk further from Sinai to Kadesh –  
but that was 40 years ago!  
For the last 40 years, they haven't gone very far!  
Perhaps many of them had gotten somewhat settled around Kadesh.  
Many of the young people would have been born there,  
and did not remember the journey out of Egypt!

200 miles on foot – with flocks and herds – will take a long time.

And so they start grumbling again...

<sup>5</sup> *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 we loathe this worthless food."*

This time, there is no reference to Moses' falling on his face before the LORD.

God's reply seems swift and sudden:

<sup>6</sup> *Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.*

Serpents are regularly seen in the Bible as a sign of judgment (ever since Eden!).  
In Exodus 7, Moses cast down his rod, and it became a serpent –  
and it swallowed up the serpent-rods of Pharaoh’s magicians.  
And later in the prophets, Pharaoh will be compared to a great sea serpent.

So the judgment of serpents is fitting.  
You want to be under the “serpent-rule” of Pharaoh?  
Fine – enjoy!

Israel has succumbed to the same deception as Eve in the garden.  
Think of how Jesus endures the Tempter in the wilderness –  
recapitulating Israel’s temptations in the desert.  
But where Israel falls – Jesus stands!

And then comes the most amazing moment in the book of Numbers:

*<sup>7</sup> And 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.*

What has been missing from the last 6 rebellions?  
Repentance!

Moses and Aaron have interceded for Israel –  
but Israel never confessed their sin!  
Israel never repented!

Now Israel repents.  
This is a great model of repentance:  
“We have sinned.” There are no excuses offered –  
just an acknowledgement of guilt.  
And then the sin is clearly identified:  
“we have spoken against the LORD and against you.”  
Hey, this is exciting!  
Israel has learned their lesson!

Brothers and sisters, do you realize how exciting this is?  
The death of Aaron *symbolized* the transition –  
but here we have the *substance* of the change!  
Without repentance the cycles of sin and death will just go on forever!

Own up to your sin.

And *call it sin!*

If you keep trying to excuse and justify yourself – you will remain in the wilderness.  
You are not good enough to get into the Promised Land by your own merits!

It's Paul's brilliant way of saying it in Romans 3:23

*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*

All have sinned (it's the perfect tense –  
which refers to a past action with ongoing consequences for the present)  
and fall short (that's the present tense –  
this is the ongoing consequence of our past sins).

*All have sinned* and so therefore *are falling short* of the glory of God.

So – what do we do?

Repent!

Confess your sins!

And ask God to forgive you.

*And ask others to forgive you!*

Notice that Israel comes to Moses.

We have sinned against you!

There is nothing in the text that suggests that people were coming to Moses and complaining.  
Rather, it appears that people were grumbling behind his back.

But notice the next part:

“Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us.”

They recognize that they have sinned against the LORD's anointed.

And they realize that *he* is the only one who can intercede for them.

Numbers 21 is *not* just saying, “you need to ask *people* to forgive you.”

Numbers 21 is saying, that when you sin against God,  
you are sinning against Jesus.

And Jesus is the only one who can intercede for us.

<sup>8</sup> *And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.”* <sup>9</sup> *So Moses made a bronze<sup>[c]</sup> serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.*

The bronze serpent is a sign of judgment – but it is also a sign of triumph –  
because God is more powerful than the serpent!

And when you turn and look to the serpent on the pole,  
you are acknowledging that you have sinned – and you need God's mighty power.

Jesus himself said that this passage was about him.

In John 3:14-15 says,

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,  
so must the Son of Man be lifted up,  
that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

As Jesus goes on to say in John 8:28 –

“When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he,  
and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me”

And again in John 12:32 –

“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”  
He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die.

On the cross, Jesus was lifted up –

so that whoever looks to the Son of Man and believes in him, may have eternal life.

As you can see, there are all sorts of sacramental objects in the book of Numbers:

Aaron’s rod that blossomed  
the manna that they ate  
the spiritual rock that followed them  
the bronze serpent

This bronze serpent remained a sign for hundreds of years.

We are told that in Hezekiah’s day it was finally broken,  
because the people of Israel were making offerings to it.

This is a reminder to us that good things – even things that God himself appointed –  
can be turned to idolatry, and thus need to be destroyed.

I’ve commented before about various practices from the early church that had good roots:

the relics of the martyrs were originally prized  
because of the Christian doctrine of the resurrection.  
They believed that because this person had died for the gospel of Christ,  
therefore they could be certain that these bones were holy –  
because *this body* belongs to Jesus.

I have no problem with how it started.

The problem developed over time, as people began to venerate the bones.

If King Hezekiah destroyed the bronze serpent that *God commanded* Moses to make,  
how much more should we be willing to destroy the works of our own hands,  
when they become a stumbling block to true piety and worship!

### 3. The Waters of Beer: The Song of the Well (v10-20)

Part three of our text tonight takes us to the waters of Beer (b'er would be more accurate!).

*<sup>10</sup> And the people of Israel set out and camped in Oboth. <sup>11</sup> And they set out from Oboth and camped at Iye-abarim, in the wilderness that is opposite Moab, toward the sunrise. <sup>12</sup> From there they set out and camped in the Valley of Zered. <sup>13</sup> From there they set out and camped on the other side of the Arnon, which is in the wilderness that extends from the border of the Amorites, for the Arnon is the border of Moab, between Moab and the Amorites.*

Verses 10-13 describe their journey around Edom  
and their arrival at the northern border of Moab.

Verses 14-15 quote from an ancient book – “the Book of the Wars of Yahweh”:

*<sup>14</sup> Therefore it is said in the Book of the Wars of the LORD,  
“Waheb in Suphah, and the valleys of the Arnon,  
<sup>15</sup> and the slope of the valleys  
that extends to the seat of Ar,  
and leans to the border of Moab.”*

We don't know anything about this book – other than this reference here –  
and a couple of references in Samuel.

But it is a reminder that there were other ancient texts –  
and that not all ancient texts were deemed *scripture*.

But then verses 16-18 describe a very important event:

*<sup>16</sup> And from there they continued to Beer;<sup>[d]</sup> that is the well of which the LORD said to Moses,  
“Gather the people together, so that I may give them water.” <sup>17</sup> Then Israel sang this song:  
“Spring up, O well!—Sing to it!—  
<sup>18</sup> the well that the princes made,  
that the nobles of the people dug,  
with the scepter and with their staffs.”*

It may seem odd that they are able to dig a well with a scepter and staffs –  
but it was a common practice of the nomads  
to cover wells with sand, in order to hide them from strangers.  
It may be that this refers to the princes tapping on the ground with their staffs  
and uncovering a well in that way.

So, when Israel gets to Beer, they are doing very well.  
(Be'er means “well” in Hebrew).

Why is this so important?

Last week, we saw Israel grumble,  
and Moses struck the rock with his staff,  
and water came out of the rock.  
So, when Israel grumbles, they get miraculous water –  
but now, when Israel repents, God gives them ordinary water from a well.

If you need miraculous signs – you are not doing well!  
Israel is now living faithfully before God – and so Israel is doing well!  
So well, that they get their water from a well!

To put it simply, with miraculous signs, usually *someone* winds up dead.  
All through Exodus and Numbers, miracles are associated with death.  
The signs in Egypt.  
The crossing of the Red Sea.  
The judgments in the wilderness.

It makes you wonder: do I *really* want to see miracles?  
After all, what happens when Jesus comes?  
The cross – (“if I am lifted up...”)  
We sometimes forget that all of the miraculous signs that Jesus did  
had the singular point of showing that Jesus was the one  
who would take the cursed death that we deserved for our grumbling!  
And the apostles do signs and wonders –  
and most (if not all) of them were martyred,  
sharing in the sufferings of Christ, that they might also be conformed to his glory.

*And from the wilderness they went on to Mattanah,<sup>19</sup> and from Mattanah to Nahaliel, and from Nahaliel to Bamoth,<sup>20</sup> and from Bamoth to the valley lying in the region of Moab by the top of Pisgah that looks down on the desert.<sup>[e]</sup>*

Verses 19-20 make clear that they have now arrived at the plains of Moab.  
Here they will remain for a few months until Moses dies,  
and Joshua leads them into the land.  
All the events of the last 15 chapters of Numbers –  
and the sermons of the book of Deuteronomy –  
happen here on the plains of Moab.

And the first thing that happens is conflict.

#### **4. Sihon and Og: the Defeat of the Amorites (v21-35)**

I accidentally said, “the defeat of the Sons of Lot” in your outline in the bulletin.

It would be more accurate to say, “the humiliation of the Sons of Lot” –  
or “the defeat of those who defeated the Sons of Lot,”  
since Israel does not fight with the Moabites or the Ammonites –  
but instead overthrows the Amorite kings who had pushed Lot back from the Jordan.

*<sup>21</sup> Then Israel sent messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites, saying, <sup>22</sup> “Let me pass through your land. We will not turn aside into field or vineyard. We will not drink the water of a well. We will go by the King's Highway until we have passed through your territory.”*

Israel sends a similar message to Sihon that they had sent to Edom.

The chief difference is that Israel makes no claim to brotherhood.

Israel will not pick a fight with Edom, Moab, or Ammon – their distant cousins.

But Israel *will* pick a fight with the Amorites!

So when Sihon comes out to fight,

Israel does not turn aside!

*<sup>23</sup> But Sihon would not allow Israel to pass through his territory. He gathered all his people together and went out against Israel to the wilderness and came to Jahaz and fought against Israel. <sup>24</sup> And Israel defeated him with the edge of the sword and took possession of his land from the Arnon to the Jabbok, as far as to the Ammonites, for the border of the Ammonites was strong. <sup>25</sup> And Israel took all these cities, and Israel settled in all the cities of the Amorites, in Heshbon, and in all its villages. <sup>26</sup> For Heshbon was the city of Sihon the king of the Amorites, who had fought against the former king of Moab and taken all his land out of his hand, as far as the Arnon.*

And Numbers quotes “the ballad singers” as saying:

*<sup>27</sup> Therefore the ballad singers say,  
“Come to Heshbon, let it be built;  
let the city of Sihon be established.  
<sup>28</sup> For fire came out from Heshbon,  
flame from the city of Sihon.  
It devoured Ar of Moab,  
and swallowed<sup>[f]</sup> the heights of the Arnon.  
<sup>29</sup> Woe to you, O Moab!  
You are undone, O people of Chemosh!  
He has made his sons fugitives,  
and his daughters captives,  
to an Amorite king, Sihon.  
<sup>30</sup> So we overthrew them;*



*Heshbon, as far as Dibon, perished;  
and we laid waste as far as Nophah;  
fire spread as far as Medeba.*<sup>[g]</sup>

This is mocking the sons of Lot, by saying in effect,

“We overthrew those who overthrew you” – so you had better not mess with us!

Notice that while Israel takes vengeance on the persecutors of Moab,

Israel does not offer to return the land to Moab.

Instead, they take possession of the land themselves.

*<sup>31</sup> Thus Israel lived in the land of the Amorites. <sup>32</sup> And Moses sent to spy out Jazer, and they captured its villages and dispossessed the Amorites who were there. <sup>33</sup> Then they turned and went up by the way to Bashan. And Og the king of Bashan came out against them, he and all his people, to battle at Edrei. <sup>34</sup> But the LORD said to Moses, “Do not fear him, for I have given him into your hand, and all his people, and his land. And you shall do to him as you did to Sihon king of the Amorites, who lived at Heshbon.” <sup>35</sup> So they defeated him and his sons and all his people, until he had no survivor left. And they possessed his land.*

In Deuteronomy we will hear Moses’ sermons explaining how Israel was to conduct battle.

Against the Canaanites, the Amorites, and the rest of the 7 nations of Canaan,

Israel is to wage a war of utter annihilation.

Genocide is the right word for it.

They are to eliminate these peoples from the face of the earth.

That may sound shocking.

And it is shocking.

But, as God said to Pharaoh, through Moses,

Israel is my son, my firstborn.

Israel, as the firstborn son of God,

is called to bring God’s final judgment against these 7 nations

as a sign of the coming eschatological judgment

that the Son of God (our Lord Jesus Christ) will bring.

The wages of sin is death.

All peoples deserve death and judgment.

Og and Sihon were probably not the worst kings who ever lived.

They were probably fairly ordinary middle eastern princes.

But just as Sodom and Gomorrah were not necessarily the most wicked cities ever –

so also Og and Sihon were not the most wicked princes ever.

Rather, they were ordinary rulers who did not listen to what God says –  
and mistreated God's people.

And when ordinary rulers do not listen to what God says,  
and mistreat God's people,  
then death and judgment will come upon them.

I want you to listen to Revelation 18 in the light of Numbers 21.

Because the judgment upon Og and Sihon  
is simply the judgment upon Babylon – the city of man that ignores God,  
and mistreats God's people.

(Read 18:1-19:6 –

Do you hear the roar of many waters?!)