

The Conquest Begins
Numbers chapters 21 – 24 \ Lesson 15
By Dellen Ludwig

Our country has just experienced a change of power as a new president was inaugurated. In the age of the Exodus, a kingdom was usually transferred father to son, or to a conquering king through war. During this week's lesson, the children of Israel were still traveling in their last year of wandering through the wilderness, approaching the Promised Land. Naturally the kings already possessing that land were understandably worried as this nation of people came nearer. The sheer number unnerved them. Also, they worried about the "coming transition of power" knowing that many kingdoms would be displaced if Israel took possession of the land.

In this lecture today, our lesson will see how Moses and the people of Israel had to address five different kings. In each confrontation, we will see the preparation of Israel to possess the land, Israel's fear and faith, and God's faithfulness through it all.

We pick up Israel's story as they approach the Promised Land from the south. They had been turned back by the king of Edom and then had mourned Aaron's death for 30 days. Now they retraced their steps and were moving along the road to Atharim, and would face the Canaanite king, Arad.

The main city of Arad's kingdom was north of Israel's position, in the hills east of the Dead Sea. He probably viewed their movement back and forth along this caravan road as if they were positioning themselves to sweep into his territory. Perhaps Arad also remembered the Amalekite victory 40 years prior to this attack in the same area. Therefore, Arad decided that a preemptive, sneak attack would be better than a declared war. Numbers 21:1 stated that his raid resulted in his capturing some of the Israelites.

We studied in lesson 12 that Israel now had a standing army. However, this army was untried and unsure about what they should do. So, their first inclination to fight back was tempered by first turning to the Lord. Verse 2 explained, "Then Israel made this vow to the Lord: 'If you will deliver these people into our hands, we will totally destroy their cities.'"

The Lord heard Israel's plea, and helped them in their counter attack. He gave Israel an outstanding victory. They completely destroyed Arad's army and continued on to destroy all of the cities and towns in his kingdom. Thereby, Israel learned they should always ask God first, before going to war. And God showed them that He would help them be victorious; He was for them; He would faithfully lead them to occupy this Promised Land.

Now we might think that the “high” of this victory would stay with the people of Israel for a very long time, carrying them through the days of their journey around Edom’s land. However, the next verses demonstrate that not all of the critical attitudes of Israel had died in the wilderness.

Numbers 21, verse 4 explains, “They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way;” The people had a tasted victory, but instead of heading north into the Promised Land, they were traveling south to go around Edom and a murmur of discontent began to rumble in their ranks.

As they followed this route toward the Red Sea, tramping through the loose gravel and dry, barren wilderness, the murmur became audible. “They spoke against God and against Moses, and said, ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!’” [Numbers 21:5]

Now in case you’ve lost track, this is the eighth (and last) time these people grumbled against God: 1) Ex. 15:24-no water at Marah, 2) Ex 16:2-no food, 3) Ex. 17:3-no water, 4) Num. 11:1-their hardships, 5)Num. 14:27-against Moses, 6)Num. 20:3-no water, 7)Num. 21:3- no water, 8)Num. 21:4 impatient with Moses/no bread/hate mana.

Just as He had heard their vow to destroy Arad, God heard their complaint now. “Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many died.” [Numbers 21:6] The poisonous snakes in this area had been there for the last 40 years and are still in the Sinai Peninsula today. But until this moment, God’s presence had protected Israel from the slithering attacks. So, in response to this unfounded complaint, God lifted His protection and people began to die from their venom.

“The people came to Moses and said, ‘We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us.’ So, Moses prayed for the people.” [Numbers 21:7] However, God didn’t take away the snakes, in answer to Moses’ prayer. Often, we must face the consequences of our actions, even though God has forgiven us. So, this time, God offered another means of help.

“The Lord said to Moses, ‘Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.’” [verse 8] And Moses made this bronze snake and raised it up on a tall pole, like the poles for the banners of the 12 tribes. And anyone who was bitten by the poisonous snakes needed only to look at the bronze snake on the pole in faith, from anywhere in the camp, and they would survive.

But why didn’t God just remove the snakes? Why did He break His own commandment by ordering this “graven image” for the salvation of His people?

Before we shake our heads and call this choice inconsistent, we should examine it in light of God's nature revealed in Scripture. God is unchanging, but He does not work among men always in the exact same way. God commanded in Exodus 20:4 and 5a, "You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God". God consistently warned Israel not to worship any man-made idol.

He did not ask Israel to worship this bronze snake, He granted it as a means to demonstrate His willingness to forgive any who looked at it in faith. His character as a merciful God was demonstrated by this emblem. The need for faith on the part of the people was also demonstrated. If they looked, they lived; if they would not look, they would die. In answer to their cries for help, God gave a means of healing.

Even though King Hezekiah of Israel, found the need to destroy the bronze snake during the latter days of his rule, because the people kept offering incense to it, God had a future plan for the symbolism it represented. When Nicodemus came as a Pharisee to ask questions of Jesus in John chapter 3, Jesus used this bronze snake to explain how He, as Messiah must be crucified.

"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him." [John 3:14,15] God in His omniscient wisdom planned this very illustration in Israel's history, to symbolize Jesus' work of redemption for all mankind. He said that the bronze snake was a symbol of Himself, lifted up on the cross, so that the religious leaders of His day would understand that His death was a process in God's redemption for all people. It was planned from before the foundation of the world, so that by His wounds, we might be healed from the deathly bite of sin – if by faith we would look up and see Him, and live.

Nicodemus believed Jesus was truly the Messiah, because of this conversation. Millions of people down through the ages also have understood Jesus' act of redemption as they understood Jesus' continued explanation to Nicodemus: John 3:16 and 17 goes on to say, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."

Therefore, God used poisonous snakes to root out the critical attitudes of His people. They were now ready to turn northwest at the gulf, and begin heading

around the territory of Edom, occupied by Esau's descendants, to approach the territory of Moab, a nation from Lot's descendants. In Deuteronomy 2:9 God also forbade any attack on Moab. "Do not harass the Moabites or provoke them to

war, for I will not give you any part of their land. I have given Ar to the descendants of Lot as a possession.”

So, the people moved on north, along the mountains. They passed the Arnon river, that was half-way up the west side of the Dead Sea forming the barrier between Edom and Moab. They traveled on until they came to Beer. The name Beer means “well” because here God gave the people a well, as a much-needed source of water.

The people of Israel knew God had given them water in the driest part of the wilderness even calling it out of rocks. Although they had just traveled past a river, you can only carry so much water with you. So, without any complaints or crying out for water, God instructed the elders to bring their staffs to a certain spot. As each man stuck his staff into the ground, water began to ooze out and a well was found.

Why was this incident, in song form, so important? It was part of a transition that was now commencing; from God's miraculous provision for all their needs to His provision soon from the Promised Land they would possess. They would now find water in their natural surroundings. The manna would continue only until they crossed into their new land.

Benson, in his commentary explained another reason. “Before they prayed, God granted, and presented them with the blessings of goodness. And as the brazen serpent was the figure of Christ, so is this well a figure of the Spirit, who is poured forth for our comfort and from him flow rivers of living waters.” God never wastes an opportunity to pour forth His love and mercy, or to show us a glimpse of Himself.

The people journeyed on, until they left the highlands, and came to the valley of Moab. The mountain range that cut through Edom and Moab broke north of Mt. Nebo into a valley, whose rivers led them straight to the Jordan river to the west, towards the northern end of the Dead Sea. This land had once belonged to Moab, but had been conquered by the Amorite king named Sihon, our second king Israel was to encounter.

Moses knew that this was the direction the Lord wanted Israel to take. It was no longer possessed by Moab; however, he wanted to give King Sihon an opportunity for a peaceful passage by Israel. So, Moses sent a message, similar to the one he had sent to Edom's king:

“Let us pass through your country. We will not turn aside into any field or vineyard, or drink water from any well. We will travel along the King's Highway until we have passed through your territory.” [Numbers 21:22] But like Edom, Sihon's answer to the request was “No”. Then Sihon “mustered his entire army and marched out into the wilderness against Israel.” [Numbers 21:23]

King Sihon attacked Israel, making him the aggressor. Israel fought this battle, and defeated the Amorite King. But by calling out his entire army, every city and village in his kingdom was left unprotected and Israel utterly destroyed them. They conquered his entire territory that ranged from the Arnon river that flowed midway into the Dead Sea, to the Jabbok River, which flowed into the Jordan River, about 24 miles north of the Dead Sea. They did not pursue further east, because a different people, the Ammonites, who were also descendants of Lot, had heavy fortifications there and God had forbidden fighting them. (Deut. 2:19) Israel now occupied this whole valley, and settled in these cities, using them as a staging area for pressing further into Amorite territories.

The third king they encountered was named Og who was the king of Bashan. He was also an Amorite, that had joined with Sihon and taken this area from Moab. But as Moses sent in spies, they discovered he was a descendant of the Anakites (also called Rephaites) who were very tall and considered to be giants.

Upon receiving this news, Moses and his army must have begun to worry. These were the giants that had frightened Israel so much the first time they had spied out the land, that God turned them back into the wilderness for 40 years! But God reassured them: "The Lord spoke to Moses, 'Do not be afraid of him, for I have delivered him into your hands, along with his whole army and his land. Do to him what you did to Sihon king of the Amorites, who reigned in Heshbon.'" [Numbers 21:34]

With this encouragement, the Israelite army marched into battle against the entire army of King Og, and won again, leaving no survivors. Knowing God's presence went with them, they fought bravely, through every village, and cities fortified with barred gates, and conquered them all. Now, the entire Amorite kingdom was in Israel's possession.

As the nation realized the great victories God had given them, they again composed songs of thanksgiving that endure even to our time. Psalm 135 and 136 both were memorial songs, giving thanks to God for all He had done. Psalm 136: 17 – 21 sang:

"to Him who struck down great kings, *His love endures forever.*
And killed mighty kings - *His love endures forever.*
Sihon king of the Amorites *His love endures forever.*
And Og king of Bashan – *His love endures forever.*
And gave their land as an inheritance, *His love endures forever.*
An inheritance to his servant Israel. *His love endures forever.*"

Mighty battles are remembered, and victories build up our confidence. God knew His people needed to follow Him to victory so that these conquests would stay not only in their minds through songs of their history, but also remind them that their faith in Him was all they needed to succeed.

We also need to be reminded of all God has done in our lives. He not only gave us life, but has drawn us to faith in Him, saved us from the destructive power of sin, and given us daily victories over our enemies. Yes, we are fighting a battle too. Daily we are faced with the enemies of our soul. Sin and disobedience, fear and discouragement, worry and despair line up to do battle against us. Their captain, Satan, desires to defeat us and steal away our testimony for Christ.

The writer of Romans put into words the rally cry we can shout out when we face our enemy: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: 'For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." [Romans 8:35-37]

Moses led the army to win more victories and then occupied the land east of the Jordan. But while his army healed from their battle wounds, the news of their victory was being spread to all of the surrounding kingdoms. Moab had lost this portion of their lands to the Amorites. Now, the conquerors had been conquered by a huge number of people! The fourth king in these passages, Balak, king of Moab was now panicked that his kingdom would be next. He had no idea that God would keep His promise to his ancestor Lot, and had warned Israel not to disturb Balak's kingdom.

But Balak was so disturbed, that he called a conference with allied princes from Midian. The Midianites were descendants of Abraham and his second wife, Keturah. They shared his worries. "This horde is going to lick up everything around us, as an ox licks up the grass of the field." [Numbers 22:4] So, while they kept watch on the invading nation down in the valley, it was decided they needed to be proactive in their plan for protection.

Remember, Lot had lived with his uncle Abraham for several years. He had followed him from Ur and worked side by side as Abraham traveled all around the land called Canaan, until he settled in Sodom. He heard Abraham speak of Adonai, the Almighty God. He witnessed how God blessed him and gave him a heritage promise. So, Lot's descendants would know that God did speak to people. Balak heard of a soothsayer named Balaam that had a reputation of accurately telling things that would happen in the future.

Balaam was from the same area where Abraham had been born, and Balak thought, surely he would know the right curse to take away all of the advantages this army would have in an attack of Moab and Midian. So Balak sent messengers up to the town of Pethor, near the Euphrates River, to request that Balaam come to Moab and divine a curse against Israel for a profit.

Now the exact state of Balaam's faith is unsure; however, the fact that he was said to tell futures was very accurate. He also refers to God by the name

Jehovah, translated LORD. He even asked for sacrifices just like the patriarchs offered to the Lord, so he had some acquaintance with the One true God. He asked God for permission to return with these messengers, and waited the night, for God's answering vision. And he turned down Balak's request because the Lord told him in his vision that he couldn't curse this people whom God had blessed.

However, Balaam didn't pass on the whole message he had received. He only told the messengers, "Go back to your own country, for the Lord has refused to let me go with you." He neglected to inform them that God had already blessed this people and that was the real reason why he was forbidden to curse them. Balaam must have been tempted by the promised rewards, because he asked God a second time when Balak sent a larger, more prestigious group that included princes, to request him to reconsider this job for a very great prize of riches.

Most of the commentaries I researched felt Balaam had fallen into using his "gift" for profit, and therefore was known as a soothsayer and diviner rather than a prophet. Scripture defines his part in this narrative as unsavory. Peter used Balaam as an example of a false prophet, saying, "They have left the straight away and wandered off to follow the way of Balaam, son of Bezer, who loved the wages of wickedness." [2 Peter 2:15]

Whatever his motivation, Balaam was persuaded to ask permission of God a second time. Perhaps Balak took his first refusal as a ploy to get a higher price. Again, that night God answered him- "That night God came to Balaam and said, 'Since these men have come to summon you, go with them, but do only what I tell you.'" [Numbers 23:20]

The next morning, Balaam loaded his bag and hopped up on his donkey to begin the journey south, toward Moab. However, verse 22 states, "But God was very angry when he went, and the angel of the Lord stood in the road to oppose him." Balaam was going with God's permission. But now, God was angry that he went. Did God change his mind? God himself answered that question in Balaam's second pronouncement, recorded in Numbers 23:19. "God is not human, that he should lie, not a human being, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?"

Therefore, it was not God who changed his mind. It was apparently Balaam. As he rode toward the fortune of his dreams, he must have begun to try and figure out how he might twist the words God might like him to say, so that he could actually earn that money, and somehow curse Israel. But God became very angry at him and sent a warrior angel to strike him down if necessary.

Three times the angel with a sword stood in his way. Three times the donkey was the only one whose eyes could see the danger. First, the donkey left the road off into a field. Next, he scooted as close as possible up against a mud wall, scraping Balaam's foot. Balaam became angry and hit the donkey both times.

The third time, the donkey had no way of escape, so he just stopped and sat down, with Balaam on his back.

Balaam became so angry that he jumped off and began to beat the donkey with his staff! Now, the prophet was not getting the message. He was still seeing dollar signs rather than danger signs. So, God opened the donkey's mouth to challenge this wayward prophet. "What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?" [verse 28]

Now, I don't know which was more amazing – that the donkey talked, or that Balaam conversed with her! Then the Lord opened Balaam's eyes too, and he noticed how close he had come to being killed by the angel of the Lord. Finally, Balaam bowed down and fell on his face, admitting that he had sinned.

God gave him permission to continue on to see Balak, but this attitude adjustment only lasted a brief time. Balaam attempted to curse the people of Israel three times. But each time he was only able to reveal how God would bless them. In his first prophecy, he exclaimed that God had blessed them in number and that they were righteous. In his second prophecy, Balaam revealed the superiority of their God. He had promised that these descendants of Jacob not only would become a mighty nation, but would bring forth a mighty king.

Balak was so upset with these blessings he was about to give up on Balaam. But Balaam wanted to try one more time. In his third prophecy, he spoke from God's perspective as to the beauty of all those people. God would not only keep Balaam from cursing His people, but He would bless them and make them prosper far beyond any other kingdom as they would proceed to conquer the land, as a lion and lioness captures their prey.

Although this third attempt angered Balak so much that he told Balaam just to stop all these blessings and go home, God was not through. Balaam proceeded to curse all the nations that Israel needed to conquer, including Moab, Edom, Amalek, the Kenites and Ashur and Eber, prophesying even a deliverer for Israel, far in the future.

We should note, in Numbers 31:8 Balaam was living in Moab when Moses led Israel to take vengeance on the Midianites. Moses chastized the men in the army because they wanted to save the women of Moab. But Moses said, "Have you allowed all the women to live?" he asked them. "They were the ones who followed Balaam's advice and enticed the Israelites to be unfaithful to the Lord in the Peor incident, so that a plague struck the Lord's people." [Numbers 31:15,16] Balaam died in the battle. We will study this incident further in lesson seventeen.

As Balak and Balaam go their ways, I want to conclude this lecture with consideration of the fifth king in this passage. This king was symbolized by the bronze serpent and prophesied by Balaam. During the stress of venomous snakes and the challenges of combat, God promised One who would be Israel's King of

Kings. Balaam prophesied that this promised One would be coming “not now” and “not near.” “A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel.” Although initially David came as the king who destroyed Moab and Edom, ultimately it was Jesus Christ who would come to deliver this fledgling nation, once and for all.

And just as Jesus came to be lifted up, once on the cross to give the world salvation, He will one day finally be lifted up as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. We may be in just as intense a spiritual fight as Israel was in a physical one. But our hope for victory lies in the same Lord of Lords they trusted. Our “God is not human, that he should lie, not a human being, that he should change his mind.” [Numbers 23:19] He is the same yesterday, today and forever.

Let's be listening for the sound of the King's return. We anticipate He is coming soon! Then we will join His army in the sky! But until then we watch and wait, knowing: “The Lord their God is with them; the shout of the King is among them.” [Numbers 23:21b]

Let's pray: Dear Lord, thank You for Your guidance, deliverance, salvation and Your promise to be with us always. Sometimes we tire of this fight against the evil around us. But just as you promised victory to Israel, You promise that You have overcome the evil one in our day. Encourage us with this, with Your Word. And give us the strength through your Spirit to await Your return bravely. In Your precious Name, we pray. Amen