

"Look Up"

Numbers 21

Before we cover Ch. 21, we have to tie these events to the beginning of the book. The first 10 Chapters of Numbers were all about organizing the people to prepare for war in Canaan. In Ch. 1 they took a census of all the eligible fighting men aged 20 and over. Ch. 2 was all about how they would set up according to tribal rank which was also how they would march out. In Ch.'s 3-4 we are told that the tribes surrounded the priests and Levites who protected the Tabernacle, which was always in the center of the camp. All this organizing took place around 1 year after they left Egypt.

Question: how much battle experience did they have? Almost nothing. Why? Because when the 12 spies went to check out the land, 10 of them convinced the people that if they were to go in and fight those "giants", they would get destroyed. They said in 14:3,

³ Why is the Lord bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn't it be better for us to go back to Egypt?" ⁴ And they said to each other, "We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt."

As punishment for their deliberate disobedience and failure to trust God, God gave them a fitting judgment:

^{14:28} So tell them, 'As surely as I live, declares the Lord, I will do to you the very things I heard you say: ²⁹ In this desert your bodies will fall—every one of you twenty years old or more who was counted in the census and who has grumbled against me. ³⁰ Not one of you will enter the land I swore with uplifted hand to make your home, except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun. ³¹ As for your children that you said would be taken as plunder, I will bring them in to enjoy the land you have rejected. ³² But you—your bodies will fall in this desert. ³³ Your children will be shepherds here for forty years, suffering for your unfaithfulness, until the last of your bodies lies in the desert. ³⁴ For forty years—one year for each of the forty days you explored the land—you will suffer for your sins and know what it is like to have me against you.'

Here in Ch. 21, the nation has slowly watched these men die over the last 38+ years. The children are now grown up and are the new army who will go into the land and will need to trust God to get them to where God wants to take them. We saw some signs of better things for the next generation in Ch. 20. There are signs of spiritual maturing and here in Ch. 21 we see more evidence of spiritual growth. We see Israel looking up to God more, seeking His guidance to get them to where God wanted to take them. And so they needed to look up all the time to receive the blessings God wanted to give them.

That hasn't changed for us, the people of God today. God is still leading us to where he wants to take us. Ultimately, we know the final goal is in eternity with Him, but in His plan to make us more like His Son Jesus, He is going to put us in challenging situations where we need to look up for help and keep our minds on things above if we're going to grow spiritually and experience the blessings God wants us to have in this life as well as the next. So in Num. 21, we see four situations the people of God found themselves in where they needed to look up and seek God for His assistance. We can learn from these four examples how to look up to God ourselves so we can grow in Christlikeness and experience the blessings God wants us to have.

After Edom rejected Israel's request to travel peacefully through their land, Israel was forced south and then east to go towards Canaan in the north. However, they encounter a Canaanite king

who has command of land in the Negev (north), the king of Arad. What is most encouraging, especially when you recall they have had almost no fighting experiences, they understand God's plan and instead of grumbling as before, the new generation of God's people go to God when they face a challenge. What about us? What do we do?

When We Face Challenges, Pray and Look Up! **(21:1-3)**

Israel was attacked by some Canaanites and some of them were taken captive. So we read 'Israel grumbled against the Lord and Moses, ...' – no, we don't! We actually read something very surprising,

² Then Israel made this vow to the Lord: "If you will deliver these people into our hands, we will totally destroy their cities."

This is a proactive choice to trust God by praying to Him, asking Him to give them victory. Why? Because God had promised them this very thing all along. They are praying God's words back to God, a great practice we should be always doing. The vow was a great step of faith. What they meant was, if God gave them victory over their oppressors, they would not take any of the spoil of war. The word for 'destruction' is the root word for dedicate to God – harem – or under the ban. That means we get none of it, it all goes to God. God enables them to have victory over a Canaanite king and people, which gives them a sample of what He will do for them when they get to Canaan. And they name this place 'Hormah'; dedicated; intentionally as a reminder back to 14:45 when they chose to ignore Moses' warnings not to attack the Canaanites because God was not with them since they listened to the 10 spies' lies.

⁴⁴ Nevertheless, in their presumption they went up toward the high hill country, though neither Moses nor the ark of the Lord's covenant moved from the camp. ⁴⁵ Then the Amalekites and Canaanites who lived in that hill country came down and attacked them and beat them down all the way to Hormah.

Hormah no longer stands as a reminder of failure but of trust. When they experienced a difficult challenge, they prayed and looked to God for help. And He answered their prayer.

As we mentioned last week, spiritual progress is sometimes three steps forward, two steps back. In vv.4-10, the Israelites grumble again, saying:

⁴ They travelled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; ⁵ they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!"

Because they had to take the long way around Edom, the people were impatient. And when we're impatient we have a tendency to say things out loud which shouldn't be said out loud! They just had a victory. God had provided many times in the past. They need water, okay. They want bread even though they had manna, which they said to God '*We detest this miserable food You graciously give to us every day.*'

God doesn't even give Moses a chance to hit the ground on his knees and He sends 'fiery serpents' or venomous snakes (depending on your translation), resulting in some dying for this. And yet, the people do something they hadn't done before; they confessed their sin and ask for forgiveness. Good point number two for all of us:

When We Sin, Turn and Look Up! **(21:4-9)**

The people readily confess they had sinned against the Lord and against Moses, and pray for God to remove the snakes. Before we look at gospel as explained by Jesus through this, let's ask why snakes. The people grew impatient because the trip was longer than expected. God knew all this. All part of His plan. God had promised to provide for them and protect them along the way. Listen to what Moses said to this generation a few months later, as they can see the promised land from the east side of the Jordan:

Deut. 8:10 When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord your God for the good land he has given you. ¹¹ Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. ¹² Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, ¹³ and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, ¹⁴ then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. ¹⁵ He led you through the vast and dreadful desert, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions. He brought you water out of hard rock. ¹⁶ He gave you manna to eat in the desert, something your fathers had never known, to humble and to test you so that in the end it might go well with you. ¹⁷ You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." ¹⁸ But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today

The people failed to acknowledge that God had protected them from enemies and venomous snakes and other hardships. Earlier, he reminded them that their sandals and clothing never wore out in all those years. How often do we thank God for all the terrible things that He shields us from, only to complain about it that one time something hard happens? Maybe we deserved it? When was the last time you confessed specific sins to God and to the person you hurt? Perhaps we were sorry but never confessed it as sin. Or asked God for forgiveness but not from the person we hurt. Confession involves turning away from self and turning to God in repentance.

But since when in the bible is a snake a positive message or a sign of strength? A snake was the first sign that God showed to Israel and Egypt who He was and what He could. Remember when Moses and Aaron first approached Pharaoh, and God told Moses to lay down his staff, and it turned into a snake? Pharaoh said, 'That's cute. Watch my magicians do the same thing, which they did. But what happened next? God's snake ate all the others.

God answers their prayer by telling Moses to make a bronze snake and put it on a pole so that when someone gets bitten, they only have to turn and look up and receive healing. You don't have to crawl to the pole, or touch the pole or say some words to the pole. You only have to turn and look up, believing that obeying God's words alone can heal you. And Jesus takes this as a picture of Himself, bearing the curse of sin brought into the world through the Satan-indwelt-serpent, explaining to Nicodemus that all one has to do to be born again and enter God's kingdom is turn from your sin and look to the Son of God, believing in Him (apart from any effort of your own) that you will have forgiveness of sins.

John 3:12 I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. ¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

Jesus conquers the serpent of old by living a sinless life, and dying not because of His own sin (because the wages of sin is death) but for the sins of all of us, so we who turn from our sinful self and look to Jesus, who alone can forgive sins and promise everlasting life. And we too receive victory over the serpent/Satan through faith in believing God's promise of eternal life.

Vv. 11-20 is an itinerary of where Israel travelled next. Words like 'journeyed', camped' and 'set out' recur a few times. But there is one key event that happens in v.16-17.

¹⁶ From there they continued on to Beer, the well where the Lord said to Moses, "Gather the people together and I will give them water." ¹⁷ Then Israel sang this song: "Spring up, O well! Sing about it, ¹⁸ about the well that the princes dug, that the nobles of the people sank— the nobles with scepters and staffs."

The people had complained a few times about a lack of water but here God proactively provides. It's not reactionary because the people complained; He just provided for their journey. And if they travelled for 40 years in the wilderness and people need water everyday, how often had God actually come through for the people in meeting their needs? A lot. How often do you and I recognize and thank God for providing for our needs or giving us direction without fanfare or us complaining?

When God Provides, Look Up and Thank Him! **(21:10-20)**

God tells Moses to get the people together and He will provide water for them. And they sing a song to mark the time when God met their needs. What's interesting here is, it wasn't a miracle. God led them to a spot where they had to dig it for themselves. I've never dug a well but I can imagine that using a staff or a sceptre to dig a hole would take a while. God led them there. Told them this is a good spot. The people had to do the work themselves and we can see their Growing spiritually because they thanked God for directing them to the place.

Sometimes I think, we think that God has to do everything for us. Like the Christian who prays for God to meet their needs but doesn't work. Or the Christian that's asking God for direction in their life – but makes no effort to open any doors themselves to see if this is the way to go. Who of us if we broke a leg would stay at home praying for God to heal our leg? God provides resources and people around us to help us meet our needs and find direction. There needs to be a healthy balance of prayer and trusting the resources and people God has placed around us. But when God meets our need, miraculously or through people, thank Him every time. Because a thankful attitude keeps our hearts soft. Notice how often Paul adds being thankful in these 3 verses:

Col. 3:¹⁵ Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

When we say thank you Lord, it means we are paying attention to His gracious hand on our life. When we say thank you to those around us for how they've helped us, we again show we are paying attention to God's gracious hand on our life as He has met our needs through people.

In vv.21-35, Israel encounters another foe. As they did with the Edomites, they ask permission to pass through the land of the Amorites, again promising to do so peaceably and promising not to eat from their fields or drink from their wells. Their request is denied. They are then attacked but God gives them victory over Sihon and the Amorites and Og king of Bashan. These events took place on

the east side of the Dead Sea as they were making their way to Canaan. Here's a fourth time we see spiritual maturity among God's people because they are looking up to God.

When We are Opposed, Seek Peace First While Looking Up for Strength! (21:21-35)

Moses and Israel chose a path of peace first, but they also know from the recent past that it might not happen. So they are also prepared for a battle if necessary, encouraged by God's help against the King of Arad in vv.1-3. They are now finally understanding how God will help them defeat their enemies. But first, they strive for peace rather than conflict.

I think that's always a good path to pursue, even with those we know oppose us; sometimes they are looking for a fight. Asking God to strengthen us for verbal battles is wise as we seek to reply peaceably. The apostle Paul tells us in

Rom. 12:14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

Paul says avoid attack mode and if its possible be at peace. Sometimes it isn't possible and we get attacked and then we need to defend our beliefs in as gracious a manner as possible.

Unfortunately, here in Num. 21, Israel was attacked and had to defend itself from being wiped out. Strengthened by God's promises to be with them, they rout the Amorites. Moses then sends spies into the area where Og, king of Bashan ruled, who also turns on Israel. God promises Moses He will help them and states they will do to them what they did to the others. And with God's help they succeed. The key point here for Israel is found in

²⁵ Israel captured all the cities of the Amorites and occupied them, including Heshbon and all its surrounding settlements. ³¹ So Israel settled in the land of the Amorites. ³⁵ And they took possession of his land

Even though they were east of the Jordan, they are realizing the promises of God coming true because they are learning to look up and rely on Him.

And that's a sign we are growing spiritually too if we are looking up to God more than looking at our opponents or looking within and seeing weakness or looking to others who also will let us down. What are we facing today? An unexpected challenge? Look up and pray. Need to confess sin to God and to someone, ask for forgiveness looking up in thanks. Need direction or needs? Look up in trust, opening doors along the way, watching how God will direct. Facing opposition? Seek peace but also ask God for strength in case you need to stand up for the Lord.

Col. 3:1 Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. ³ For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Present strength is anchored in future hope. If God is for us, who can be against us?

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If you have any comments or questions about this message please
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