

Dependence Upon the Lord in the Christian Journey

Numbers 21

June 27, 2021

Pastor Trent Eastman — New Baptist Church, Huntington, WV

The Setting of Numbers 21

This morning we come to Numbers 21. The book of Numbers spans the forty years the people of Israel lived in the wilderness. It begins with them at Mount Sinai and ends forty years later at Mount Nebo, on the eastern side of the Jordan River. Numbers 21 represents the final stretch of travel for the Israelites. The chapter begins at Mount Hor, but rather than proceeding directly across to Mount Nebo, the people must first travel south toward the Red Sea in order to move around a mountain range controlled by Edom, and then back up along its eastern side — roughly a hundred and fifty miles in all. Because of that distance, a great deal happens in this chapter. Battles are fought and won, songs are sung at wells, and there is a very strange encounter with fiery serpents.

This journey begins at Mount Hor, the place where Aaron has died and where Eleazar his son has taken up the office of High Priest. It seems that while the people were still in mourning for Aaron, a Canaanite king began raiding groups of Israelites and taking captives. Those captives were recovered, and we read in verse 2 that the cities of Arad were devoted to destruction — meaning nothing could be kept: no loot, no plunder, no taking of anything. Everything in those cities was destroyed.

Discouragement and the Serpents

As the people move south, away from the promised land, they become deeply discouraged. We read in verse 4:

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.

That last phrase is better rendered literally: their souls were discouraged. And we can understand why. They were just a few miles from Edom, looking in at a strong and established

civilization. They were so close to where they would be entering the land. Two of their leaders — Miriam and Aaron — had died. And now they had turned around and were moving in the wrong direction. There must have been a creeping fear that they were not going to enter the land at all. They had done this before: come to the edge of the land and then turned back.

Out of these discouragements came a complaint. Notice what they say in verse 5:

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.”

“We loathe this worthless food.” Who provided the food? God did. What they are essentially saying is that they loathe what God has given them — that God is doing nothing good for them, that what he gives is worthless. They have taken for granted the daily blessings of the Lord. And so we read in verse 6:

Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.

In the book of Numbers, the way God punishes the people for their sins is to give them what they want. In Numbers 11, the people complain that they want meat. God says, fine — here is your meat, but it is going to make you sick, and they eat quail for a month. In Numbers 14, the people say they would rather die in the wilderness than enter the promised land. God says, then that first generation will die in the wilderness. In Numbers 16, Korah and two hundred fifty others approach God declaring that they are holy. God says, come then into my presence and we will see how holy you are — and they are consumed by fire. And now, in our passage today, the people curse what God has given them. They say they loathe this worthless food, and in doing so they are telling God they do not want what he provides. God responds: if you do not want what I do for you, I will stop doing it. The Lord withdraws his hand and ceases to protect the people from the dangers of the wilderness. That withdrawal is what releases the fiery serpents into the camp, bringing pain and death to many.

I base my understanding of this passage on two things. First, there is a strong argument made by Hebrew scholars that the word translated “sent” in verse 6 — *the LORD sent fiery serpents* — should more precisely be rendered “released”: *the LORD released the fiery serpents*. That shift in translation moves the meaning of God’s action from causing the serpents to attack the people to allowing them to do harm. The people have taken for granted what God was doing, and so God ceases to do it. That is how I understand this story.

Second, and I think more importantly, my understanding of this passage is consistent with Deuteronomy 8, where Moses himself reflects on this very event. The book of Deuteronomy is Moses’ last sermon to the people at Mount Nebo. In chapter 8, he is warning them of perhaps the greatest danger they will face when they enter the promised land — not military

opposition, but forgetfulness. The danger is that when they enter a land of such beauty and prosperity and goodness, they will forget God. And in forgetting God, they will fail to remember that they live every day in dependence upon him — that every day the Lord is at work, and it is by his strength and power that they succeed.

Moses begins chapter 8 by reminding the people how the Lord provided for them and protected them through the wilderness: giving them manna to eat, keeping their clothing from wearing out, preserving their health, providing them water from the rock. And then, in verse 15, he adds this to the list: the Lord protected you from fiery serpents and scorpions. The fiery serpents appear here as one of the things the Lord was shielding the people from throughout their wilderness journey. Which means the serpents were always there — but God was holding them back.

Moses then goes on in Deuteronomy 8 to describe the beauty of the land they are about to inherit:

For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing out in the valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper. And you shall eat and be full, and you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land he has given you.

But this is Moses' justifiable fear: because the land is so good, the people will be tempted to say, as verse 17 warns, *"My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth."* Moses says, beware of that. Instead: *"You shall remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your fathers."* In other words, the people are to live dependent upon the Lord not only in the wilderness, but also in the promised land. Just as the Lord provided and protected them in the wilderness by his power, so he will continue to do when they enter the land. Their success is dependent upon his strength, not their own. And when they live in that dependence, his power is revealed through them. That is the point of Deuteronomy 8, and it is the point of Numbers 21. These two texts carry the same message.

The Bronze Serpent

Let us return to Numbers 21. The people complain that they do not need God. God steps back. And now, in verse 7, the people say — to put it plainly — *perhaps we were wrong:*

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.

Notice what the Lord does next. He does not take away the serpents. He does not answer the prayer as the people asked it. Instead:

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.” So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

As strange and striking as this is, the whole point of God’s instruction is this: the bronze serpent is the image of the people’s need, their weakness, their powerlessness, and their sin — and the only way they will overcome death is by depending upon God’s strength. They are saved not through their own hands, but through the power of God. This is why the only instruction given is simply to look at the bronze serpent. Any greater demand would suggest that they are healed through the work of their own hands rather than by the Lord’s power.

Reading on through Numbers 21, the people continue their journey through the desert, around Edom, and northward up the eastern side of the range toward Moab. Along the way, the Lord again provides for the people. Verse 16:

And from there they continued to Beer; that is the well of which the LORD said to Moses, “Gather the people together, so that I may give them water.”

Notice again who acts. It is God who provides for the people. And how do the people respond? They break into song: *“Spring up, O well! — Sing to it!”*

As they continue north and begin to near the land of Moab, they start encountering opposition. The Amorites refuse them passage and bring an army against them — but Israel defeats them and takes possession of their cities. Then another king comes out to meet them: Og, king of Bashan, apparently a formidable military power. But the Lord says to the Israelites in verse 34:

“Do not fear him, for I have given him into your hand, and all his people, and his land.”

And so they defeated him, his sons, and all his people, and took possession of his land. Notice the pattern throughout this entire chapter: it is the Lord who acts, the Lord who provides, the Lord who fights. Everything in Numbers 21 is about living dependent upon God’s strength and power — trusting the Lord in our weakness.

The Christian Journey

So what does this mean for us? I want you to think of Numbers 21 as an analogy for the Christian life. Your life as a follower of Jesus is going to resemble this wilderness journey. What does it look like to follow Jesus on this side of heaven? Numbers 21 is a fitting description. There are three things in this chapter that every follower of Jesus will encounter.

First, you will be attacked because of your faith. Three times in this passage the Israelites were attacked — by King Arad the Canaanite, by King Sihon of the Amorites, and by King Og of Bashan. The first attack came as a surprise and cost them people, though those people were eventually recovered. In every instance, the Israelites sought peace — they wanted only safe passage, or simply to be left alone — but were attacked regardless. And in every instance, they sought the Lord and depended upon him, and the Lord protected them.

The same is true for you and me. Jesus said in John 15:18–20:

“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.”

As a servant of Jesus, the world will attack you. Those attacks may be personal — directed at you, meant to harm or discourage you — or they may be more general: cultural attacks against people of faith at large. But the Lord’s word to Moses stands for us as well: *Do not be afraid. I have this.* We live in this world dependent upon the Lord’s protection in the midst of those who seek to do us harm.

Second, as a follower of Jesus, you will drink deeply from the well of the Lord. Your soul will be refreshed. You will know joy, you will know peace, you will discover a contentment that those who do not know him will never find. Just as the Lord called the people to drink at the well of Beer, so Jesus calls us to drink of him. He says in John 7:37–38:

“If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’”

To me, this is an image of what it means to be truly content in the Lord. Contentment is not about lowering your expectations of joy, peace, and happiness — as though you might finally be satisfied if you simply want less. Rather, it is about the Lord filling your soul so full of his Spirit that you overflow, his joy and peace spilling out of you into the world around you. Drink deeply from his well.

Third, the Lord is going to allow fiery serpents to bite you. I want to spend some time on this, because it is where the passage cuts deepest. The fiery serpents I am talking about are those things in our lives that are not of God but are nonetheless allowed by God. There are two categories of such things, and every follower of Jesus will encounter both: suffering and sin.

The kind of suffering I am talking about is not the ordinary difficulty of a hard workout or a long road trip. The suffering that functions as a fiery serpent is suffering that seems to have no meaning, no purpose, no benefit — the kind that produces anger toward God, that makes people shake their fist at heaven and demand to know why. Why does he allow horrible things to happen to children? Why does he allow cancer to invade the bodies of people who love him? Why does he allow heinous crimes, tragic accidents, devastating losses? The Lord does not cause suffering for suffering's sake. He does not delight in evil. But he allows it. He allows these things to happen even to those who call upon his name. And I feel confident in telling you that this kind of suffering — suffering without obvious meaning or purpose — either has already come to you, is with you now, or will be. You will suffer the death of someone you love, the betrayal of a friend or a spouse, some injustice, some serious illness, some tragedy you did not see coming. And when it comes, you will rightly pray, *Lord, remove this. Change this. Heal this.* That is the right prayer. Suffering is the first form of the fiery serpent.

The second form is our own personal sin. As followers of Jesus, we are called to holiness — to seek moral purity, to become in practice the righteousness we have already been declared in Christ. And yet, even as we pursue sanctification in the power of God's Spirit, there continues to be sin that marks our lives on this side of heaven.

During the fourth century AD, men and women moved into the desert of Sinai to do battle against their personal sin. We know them as the desert monks. These men and women observed and catalogued human sinfulness with great care, and their reflections have been handed down to us in what we call the seven deadly sins. That list does not appear in Scripture, but I have found it genuinely useful in personal reflection and in teaching, because the seven deadly sins are precisely the sins that never quite go away on this side of heaven: lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy, and pride — which the desert fathers considered the root of all the others. These categories of sin reside deep within us, driving dishonesty and cruelty and countless other wrongs. And any person who is growing in Christ, whose soul longs for transformation, will find themselves praying the same prayer Israel prayed in the wilderness: *Remove this from me.*

Near the end of 2 Corinthians 12, Paul writes about something he calls a thorn in the flesh — a messenger of Satan, not sent by God but allowed by God. We do not know what it was: a physical condition, perhaps, or a recurring sin that caused harm to him and to others. Whatever it was, Paul hated it and prayed urgently that the Lord would remove it. His prayer echoes the Israelites' prayer almost exactly:

| *Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.*

Compare that to Numbers 21:7 — *“Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us.”* It is the same prayer, centuries apart, from the same people of God.

And just as the Lord did not remove the serpents on demand in Numbers 21, he did not remove Paul’s thorn either. The same may be true for you. The Lord may not take away your grief. He may not take away your illness. He may not take away the thing you have struggled against for years and prayed over a thousand times.

This does not mean the Lord lacks power, or that he is unaware, or that he does not care. It means something harder and more important than any of those things. When the Lord allows you to continue suffering, or to continue struggling against a sin you despise, he is calling you to depend upon him all the more. This is precisely what he says to Paul when he declines to remove the thorn:

| *“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”*

We are to live this life as daily recipients of God’s grace — dependent upon him, knowing that it is he who gives us the power to endure, to persevere, to succeed. This is why Paul can write in the very next verse:

| *For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

Do you hear what he is saying? He is saying that it is only when he is depending upon the Lord in the midst of his struggles and sufferings that he is truly strong — and that it is then, only then, that God is glorified. This is why God told Moses to put the bronze serpent on a pole and lift it up in the sight of the whole camp. The bronze serpent was an image of everything that is wrong — hardship, suffering, persecution, calamity. Yet it is in the midst of those very things that God’s power is most clearly revealed.

The Cross

In the New Testament there is a man who was a Pharisee — a person who believed that the only people who would see heaven were people like himself: those who by their own strength and discipline made the law perfect in themselves. His name was Nicodemus.

Then there came another man, whose name was Jesus. And Jesus preached that the kingdom of God is open not to those who depend upon their own strength — not to those who say, as Deuteronomy 8 warns against, *“By the power and the might of my hand I have gotten this wealth”* — but rather to those who are weak, who fail to keep the law, who are nobodies in the

eyes of the world. To a Pharisee, this was heresy. To a Pharisee, the kingdom of heaven belonged to those who seized it by the power of their own hand.

Jesus says to Nicodemus: you will not see heaven that way. The only ones who will enter are those who are born again. John 3:3:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Nicodemus responds exactly as any sensible person would: a person cannot be born again. It is impossible. Which is precisely the point Jesus is making. It is impossible for you to know life without the power of God. It is impossible to find strength in trials, joy amid suffering, contentment in want — impossible to see heaven — when you are depending upon yourself.

Nicodemus then asks the right question: how? How does one be born again? How does the impossible become possible? How does a person begin to depend upon God? Jesus answers by doing a brief Bible study in Numbers 21. He says in John 3:14–16:

“Just 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. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

How does a person who is suffering, stuck in sin, and overwhelmed by the things of this world find healing, discover joy, and receive life? By looking to the cross. Jesus Christ, lifted up — that is the power of God given for our salvation. He is the answer to the fiery serpents. He is the answer to the sin we cannot shed and the suffering we cannot escape.

Depend upon the Lord daily. Depend upon his strength and power today. Look to the cross.