

BIBLE BRIEFING

“Battles & Brass”

NUMBERS 20 - 21

Introduction

The generation of those who had refused to enter the Promised Land were almost all dead. Their children were being led by Moses to the border. The next several chapters describe the last part of their journey before entering the land. They encountered nations hostile to their progress.

There are enemies all along your way – not just when you are in the middle of serving or doing a work for God. You really can't afford to relax. If you compare your walk to a soldier at war... *There is no weekend pass!* It's interesting that the military calls time-off "liberty." The Bible uses the word "liberty" to discuss gray areas – things that are not unlawful for you, but might be questionable. Be careful taking too much liberty; remember, you're a soldier in a war and there are not too many places (if any) that are not war zones.

We left off in verse fourteen of Chapter Twenty. The children of Israel were marching North to the plains of Moab, where Moses intended to prepare *Generation W* (Wilderness) to enter the land. The quickest route was through the land controlled by the Edomites, so Moses asked permission to pass.

Numbers 20:14 Now Moses sent messengers from Kadesh to the king of Edom.

“Thus says your brother Israel: ‘You know all the hardship that has befallen us, Numbers 20:15 how our fathers went down to Egypt, and we dwelt in Egypt a long time, and the Egyptians afflicted us and our fathers.

Numbers 20:16 When we cried out to the Lord, He heard our voice and sent the Angel and brought us up out of Egypt; now here we are in Kadesh, a city on the edge of your border.

Numbers 20:17 Please let us pass through your country. We will not pass through fields or vineyards, nor will we drink water from wells; we will go along the King's Highway; we will not turn aside to the right hand or to the left until we have passed through your territory.”

The Edomites were descended from Esau, Jacob's brother; they

were brothers to the Israelites. Still, Moses assumed nothing and proceeded with caution. Nothing wrong with some thoughtfulness!

Numbers 20:18 Then Edom said to him, "You shall not pass through my *land*, lest I come out against you with the sword."

Numbers 20:19 So the children of Israel said to him, "We will go by the Highway, and if I or my livestock drink any of your water, then I will pay for it; let me only pass through on foot, nothing *more*."

Numbers 20:20 Then he said, "You shall not pass through." So Edom came out against them with many men and with a strong hand.

Numbers 20:21 Thus Edom refused to give Israel passage through his territory; so Israel turned away from him.

Though terribly inconvenienced; though treated badly; though God was with them; Moses retreated. He would not initiate the attack on their own brothers!

People still needed to die. Aaron, Moses' brother and the High Priest, was next.

Numbers 20:22 Now the children of Israel, the whole congregation, journeyed from Kadesh and came to Mount Hor.

Numbers 20:23 And the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron in Mount Hor by the border of the land of Edom, saying:

Numbers 20:24 "Aaron shall be gathered to his people, for he shall not enter the land which I have given to the children of Israel, because you rebelled against My word at the water of Meribah.

Numbers 20:25 Take Aaron and Eleazar his son, and bring them up to Mount Hor;

Numbers 20:26 and strip Aaron of his garments and put them on Eleazar his son; for Aaron shall be gathered *to his people* and die there."

Numbers 20:27 So Moses did just as the Lord commanded, and they went up to Mount Hor in the sight of all the congregation.

Numbers 20:28 Moses stripped Aaron of his garments and put them on Eleazar his son; and Aaron died there on the top of the mountain. Then Moses and Eleazar came down from the mountain.

Numbers 20:29 Now when all the congregation saw that Aaron was dead, all the house of Israel mourned for Aaron thirty days.

Both Moses and Aaron had been involved in striking the rock twice back at Meribah; both were restricted from ever entering the land. Aaron was 123 years old. Moses would say goodbye to his brother; Eleazar, to his dad. John Wesley once said, "God buries His workmen, but the work goes on."

Moses has experienced two family funerals, two confrontations with critics in the camp, and a personal failure at Kadesh; yet he picks up his rod and goes right back to work. Victorious Christian service, like the victorious Christian life, is a series of new beginnings. No matter what mistakes we've made, it's always too soon to quit.

Moving on after thirty days of mourning, the children of Israel are going to begin to encounter some enemies.

Numbers 21:1 The king of Arad, the Canaanite, who dwelt in the South, heard that Israel was coming on the road to Atharim. Then he fought against Israel and took *some* of them prisoners.

Numbers 21:2 So Israel made a vow to the Lord, and said, "If You will indeed deliver this people into my hand, then I will utterly destroy their cities."

Numbers 21:3 And the Lord listened to the voice of Israel and delivered up the Canaanites, and they utterly destroyed them and their cities. So the name of that place was called Hormah.

The new generation of Israelites was facing its first conflict with the Canaanites. The Jewish army would spend at least seven years conquering the nations in the Promised Land, so God gave them some military training.

You learn as you go in the Christian life. (Compare my first funeral...).

Interesting: They didn't take the spoil, but dedicated the cities to God by utterly destroying them.

It was at Hormah that Israel was defeated in their ill-advised attempt to enter the Promised Land by force after rejecting it by faith. Now God has brought them back to the same place, and given them the victory. A real turning point for the nation!

This first victory certainly encouraged the Israelites, but it's one thing to "mount up with wings like eagles" and quite something else to "walk and not faint." Courage in the battle must be followed by endurance in the race. Because the Edomites wouldn't give Israel right-of-way through their land, Moses had to lead the people east of Edom and then north through difficult terrain. They were headed away from Canaan, back toward the wilderness.

They had a reason to be discouraged, but not an excuse.

It didn't take long before the difficulty of the march made the people impatient, and they started complaining again. It's easy for us to win the battle but lose the victory.

Numbers 21:4 Then they journeyed from Mount Hor by the Way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the soul of the people became very discouraged on the way.

Numbers 21:5 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 our soul loathes this worthless bread."

Ooh. That comment about the bread is going to be a problem.

According to John Six, the manna was much more than daily food for Israel: it was a type of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the "Bread of Life."

When the Jews despised the manna, they were actually despising the Son of God. Once more, God had tested His people, and they had failed the test.

Numbers 21:6 So the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died.

In the past, when Israel had sinned, the glory of the Lord would usually appear and the judgment of the Lord would follow. But this time, there was no warning. The judgment came immediately as the Lord sent poisonous snakes among the people. They had rejected God's gift of life and health from heaven, so God sent them suffering and death from the earth, and many of the people died.

"Fiery" doesn't describe the appearance of the serpents but the inflammation and pain caused by their venom. Those bitten died quickly and apparently their death wasn't an easy one.

Numbers 21:7 Therefore 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.

Israel had complained and rebelled many times, and once before had admitted, "We have sinned," but this is the first time it seems to be sincere. In the past, Moses had fallen on his face before the Lord

and interceded for the people, but now the people begged him to pray for them. It shows a different heart in this new generation.

Numbers 21:8 Then the Lord said to Moses, "Make a fiery *serpent*, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live."
Numbers 21:9 So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived.

Moses did pray for the people, but the Lord didn't answer in the way the people might have expected. Instead of immediately removing the serpents and healing the people who had been bitten, God instructed Moses to make a serpent of brass and put it on a pole where all the people could see it. If those who had been bitten looked at the serpent, they would be instantly healed.

Jesus used the bronze serpent to illustrate His own death on the cross.

John 3:14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up:

John 3:15 That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

John 3:16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

"Lifted up" was a phrase used in that day to refer to crucifixion. The comparisons between the bronze serpent in Moses' day and the Cross of Christ help us better understand the meaning of God's grace in salvation:

1. The human race was, in a sense, bitten by the ultimate fiery serpent when Adam and Eve listened to Satan's lies. All people have been infected by sin and will one day die and face judgment, but if they look by faith to Christ, He will save them and give them eternal life.
2. Looking to the bronze serpent saved people from physical death, but looking to Christ saves us from eternal death.
3. Moses didn't stick the pole inside the tabernacle or even in the tabernacle court, because nobody is saved by keeping the Law.

4. The uplifted serpent was the only cure in the camp, just as Jesus Christ is the only Savior of sinners in the world.
5. Nobody could look at the bronze serpent for another person; each dying sinner had to look for himself or herself. The salvation Christ offers is personal and individual, and each of us must look to Christ by faith.
6. No matter how hard they tried, no dying Jew could save himself or herself. The only salvation available was what God had graciously provided, and if you rejected it, you died.

But why should Moses make a model of *a serpent*, the very creature that was causing the people to die? Because on the cross, Jesus **became** sin for us - the very thing that condemns people - and bore in His body that which brings spiritual death

Imagine the joy in the camp of Israel when the word got out that there was a cure available for everybody! The only people who couldn't be delivered from death were those who for some reason wouldn't look by faith, *or those who didn't know that a remedy was available*. How important it is for us to get the good news out that "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners."

Sadly, the Jews would make an idol out of the brass serpent. In the reforms of King Hezekiah, he "broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made; for until those days the children of Israel burned incense to it, and called it Nehushtan" (2 Kings 18:4).

Numbers 21:10 Now the children of Israel moved on and camped in Oboth.
Numbers 21:11 And they journeyed from Oboth and camped at Ije Abarim, in the wilderness which *is* east of Moab, toward the sunrise.
Numbers 21:12 From there they moved and camped in the Valley of Zered.
Numbers 21:13 From there they moved 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.
Numbers 21:14 Therefore it is said in the Book of the Wars of the Lord: "Waheb in Suphah, the brooks of the Arnon,
Numbers 21:15 And the slope of the brooks that reaches to the dwelling of Ar, and lies on the border of Moab."

We have a description of the area, taken from an ancient record called *The Book of the Wars of the Lord*. This lost book was

apparently a compendium of detailed information about the travels and the battles of Israel.

This gives me a chance to discuss a current hot topic. People are all freaked-out about *The DaVinci Code*. Have you heard of it? It's a fictional thriller that has captured the coveted number one sales ranking at amazon.com, camped out for weeks on the *New York Times* Best-Seller List, and inspired a one-hour ABC News special. Along the way, it has sparked debates about the legitimacy of Western and Christian history. A major motion picture is in the works, produced by Columbia Pictures, and the author is working on a sequel to the book due out sometime in 2005.

It's the story of a Harvard professor of symbology and art history who is called to help investigate a murder at the Louvre - a murder that includes left-behind clues from the works of Leonardo Da Vinci. As he sorts through the unfolding clues, he stumbles on an even greater mystery involving secret religious societies, bizarre sex rites, and the Holy Grail. All of which date back, according to the author, to an effort by the early church to wipe out evidence of sacred beliefs and rituals centering around Mary Magdalene. He believes, in fact, that Jesus was simply a man who was married to Mary Magdalene.

Regardless it being fiction, there are those who believe it to be insightful. Specifically, they point to other writings from the first century that they say were excluded from the Bible by the Church hierarchy because they couldn't handle the truth about Jesus being a mere married man.

We have a novel that's claiming that the divine Jesus was only a human Jesus. It tries to reduce Jesus to a great religious figure, one among many, rather than being a unique figure who is God and man. It appeals to our fascination with conspiracy theories, and to spurious documents.

The author claims that there are 80 known 'gospels.' Scholars know of only about a dozen or so supposed 'gospels' that are alluded to in the early church writings. By the end of the 2nd century, the four Gospels in your Bible were recognized by believers as authentic – not dozens, certainly not eighty. That's a good 125 years before the

Council of Nicea which is when the novel claims the sinister decision was made.

According to the novel, the issue of Jesus' divinity is something that also was voted on in the 4th century. In other words, everyone knew Jesus was only human, and married, until some Church conspiracy declared Him God for their own power-play. Then they suppressed other writings that contradicted them.

The idea that Jesus' divinity was determined in the 4th century is preposterous. Jesus' divinity was something that was central to the Christian faith, virtually from any document we can get our hands on. We have extra-biblical testimony from Roman historians who talk about going into Christian groups that worship Jesus like a God and sing hymns to him. So the idea that this is some type of subsequent development of the Christian faith is one of the worst claims of the book.

Listen: Of course there is other literature from the 1st century! That's not the point. The point is, you can study how we got our Bibles and be confident that God determined and ordained the books that comprise the Scriptures – not some conspiratorial council trying to invent a different Jesus.

If you want to know more... pick-up a copy of, *"Breaking the Da Vinci Code,"* by Darrell Bock (Dallas Theological Seminary).

Numbers 21:16 From there *they went* to Beer, which *is* the well where the Lord said to Moses, "Gather the people together, and I will give them water."

Numbers 21:17 Then Israel sang this song:

"Spring up, O well!

All of you sing to it -

Numbers 21:18 The well the leaders sank,

Dug by the nation's nobles,

By the lawgiver, with their staves."

And from the wilderness *they went* to Mattanah,

Numbers 21:19 from Mattanah to Nahaliel, from Nahaliel to Bamoth,

Numbers 21:20 and from Bamoth, *in* the valley that *is* in the country of Moab, to the top of Pisgah which looks down on the wasteland.

On this occasion, the people didn't complain. Instead, *they sang a song!* As far as the record is concerned, this is the first time we find Israel singing since God delivered them from Egypt forty years before.

"The Song of the Well" celebrated the Lord's provision of water for the people in the wilderness. It's not likely that the leaders of Israel actually dug the well with their staffs (NIV), because in the sandy wasteland they would have needed much better tools. Since this is a song, we must leave room for poetic expression. What may have happened is that God showed Moses where the water was located, the leaders all thrust their staffs into the ground around that place, and the well opened up and the water gushed out.

Lots of Jesus so far! We've seen Him in the manna as the Bread of Life, and now in the well He's the giver of the living water. In the Bible, water for drinking is a picture of the Spirit of God, while water for washing is a type of the Word of God . But before Jesus could send the Spirit, He had to die on the cross, which leads us to the uplifted serpent. The manna emphasizes His incarnation, the serpent His crucifixion, and the water His ascension and the outpouring of the Spirit.

As the Jews continued their journey, they arrived at the country of the Amorites.

Numbers 21:21 Then Israel sent messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites, saying,

Numbers 21:22 "Let me pass through your land. We will not turn aside into fields or vineyards; we will not drink water from wells. We will go by the King's Highway until we have passed through your territory."

Numbers 21:23 But Sihon would not allow Israel to pass through his territory. So Sihon gathered all his people together and went out against Israel in the wilderness, and he came to Jahaz and fought against Israel.

Numbers 21:24 Then Israel defeated him with the edge of the sword, and took possession of his land from the Arnon to the Jabbok, as far as the people of Ammon; for the border of the people of Ammon was fortified.

Numbers 21:25 So Israel took all these cities, and Israel dwelt in all the cities of the Amorites, in Heshbon and in all its villages.

Numbers 21:26 For Heshbon was the city of Sihon king of the Amorites, who had fought against the former king of Moab, and had taken all his land from his hand as far as the Arnon.

Numbers 21:27 Therefore those who speak in proverbs say:
“Come to Heshbon, let it be built;
Let the city of Sihon be repaired.
Numbers 21:28 “For fire went out from Heshbon,
A flame from the city of Sihon;
It consumed Ar of Moab,
The lords of the heights of the Arnon.
Numbers 21:29 Woe to you, Moab!
You have perished, O people of Chemosh!
He has given his sons as fugitives,
And his daughters into captivity,
To Sihon king of the Amorites.
Numbers 21:30 “But we have shot at them;
Heshbon has perished as far as Dibon.
Then we laid waste as far as Nophah,
Which *reaches* to Medeba.”
Numbers 21:31 Thus Israel dwelt in the land of the Amorites.
Numbers 21:32 Then Moses sent to spy out Jazer; and they took its villages and
drove out the Amorites who *were* there.

Moses quoted an Amorite “war song” and applied it to the people of Israel. The song originally celebrated a great Amorite victory when Sihon defeated Moab and took their cities and their people captive. But now it’s Sihon and the Amorites who are the losers. Sihon had defeated Chemosh, the god of the Moabites; but Jehovah had defeated the gods of the Amorites!

Moses was led by the Holy Spirit to record this song and apply it to Israel. In fact, the Prophet Jeremiah also quoted part of this song in his prophecy concerning the judgment of Moab (Jeremiah 48). Still, we must be careful ‘borrowing’ from the world – especially it’s lyrics.

Numbers 21:31 Thus Israel dwelt in the land of the Amorites.
Numbers 21:32 Then Moses sent to spy out Jazer; and they took its villages and
drove out the Amorites who *were* there.
Numbers 21:33 And they turned and went up by the way to Bashan. So Og king
of Bashan went out against them, he and all his people, to battle at Edrei.
Numbers 21:34 Then the Lord said to Moses, “Do not fear him, for I have
delivered him into your hand, with all his people and his land; and you shall do to
him as you did to Sihon king of the Amorites, who dwelt at Heshbon.”
Numbers 21:35 So they defeated him, his sons, and all his people, until there
was no survivor left him; and they took possession of his land.

According to Joshua 2:10, the news of this victory spread to Jericho

and brought fear to the hearts of the inhabitants. Og had his capital in Ashtaroth and ruled over sixty cities, all of which Israel captured and destroyed, leaving no survivors.

In their conquest of Canaan, Israel followed the pattern described here. Joshua would send out spies to get the lay of the land. Then he would seek God's special instructions for each attack, obey God's orders by faith, and win the victory. The two times that Joshua didn't follow this pattern, he was defeated.

Conclusion

No army could withstand the children of Israel as they were led by God. They seemed invincible!

However, Israel would next confront the Moabites who would adopt a subtle strategy that would bring death to 24,000 Jews. The Moabites went among the Israelites – that is, they sent their prostitutes among them – and the Israelite men fell into sin with them.

Their enemies could not defeat them; **but they would defeat themselves** as they embraced immorality and idolatry.

