

Numbers Chapter 21 – The Bronze Serpent

Read Numbers 21:1-3

This is the first military victory since Israel fought Amalek during the first march from crossing the Red Sea. Notice that they did not initiate the battle. That will consistently be true of the battles fought on the way to the Promised Land; only upon entering the land do the Israelites attack. God clearly gave them the victory. They promised to “devote their cities to destruction” (v. 2). Canaanite cities that resist Israel are to be totally destroyed, according to Deut. 20:16–18. Hormah was the place this policy was first implemented, and its name, “Destruction,” commemorates this (Num. 21:3).

Read Numbers 21:4-5

After the battle and the decision by Edom in Ch. 20, the Israelites must go the long route, around the land of Edom, and they become discouraged. This is the seventh time the people complain about being brought out of Egypt or the manna God provided (Ex 14, 16, 17; Nu 11, 14, 20). It is also the last.

Their criticism of the manna is also very foolish. Recall that God gave them manna as a test of their obedience. Exodus 16:4; Deut 8:3. They were to receive it as the gracious gift of a loving God and a promise of the good things to come. As God will remind them in Deuteronomy, during all their wandering their feet did not swell – swollen feet being a sign of poor nutrition. And they have just won a military victory. They should not be complaining that the food God has been providing them is anything but strengthening!

The people were complaining about God’s blessings, the way we still do today. We should remember that God takes our complaining and grumbling seriously, and views it as a sin.

Read Numbers 21:6-7

“We have sinned.” The people are ready to admit they have sinned, and ask for Moses to intercede for them. Repentance is the only way to begin with God. We cannot come to God with our good works, because we have none. If we cannot call ourselves sinners, then Christ is not for us. Read Matthew 9:12-13

Read Numbers 21:8-9

The people were not saved by anything they did, but by simply looking to the bronze serpent in faith and obedience. They had to trust that something as seemingly foolish as looking at serpent would be sufficient to save them, and surely, some perished because they thought it too foolish to do such a thing. Look up: 1 Corinthians 1:18-19

The word translated bronze may also mean copper, which was to be found in the land east of the Dead Sea. The red color of the metal was a reminder of atonement, because of the animal sacrifices. But why an image of a serpent? Why not an image of a mongoose or of the bronze altar in the tabernacle? What did the bronze serpent represent?

Jesus compared himself to the bronze serpent. John 3:14-15. What is the double meaning of the phrase “lifted up”? How is looking to the cross similar to an Israelite looking at the bronze serpent after being bitten and dying?

The lesson of the bronze serpent is simple. It represented the sin of the sinner and the judgment of God. It represented the faith required in accepting that those who looked to it were saved, and those who didn’t would die. It’s just the same with Jesus. It doesn’t matter what we say or do—not even if we say we believe in Jesus and are baptized and begin serving in the church. Only those willing to acknowledge that they are a sinner in need of saving from death, and who look to Jesus’ death on the cross for their salvation, will be saved. Read 1 John 1:8-10; Acts 4:12

Read Numbers 21:13, 16

The Israelites move on, continuing the march to the Promised Land. God anticipates their needs, and gives water.

Read Numbers 21:17-20

This is the first song of praise from the people since leaving Egypt. They did not grumble again.

Read Numbers 21:21-25, 33-35

The people of Israel are marching now! They are singing praises to God and He is giving them victory over their enemies!