

Numbers Chapter 21 v 1 - 35

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[0 : 00] Please turn in your Bibles back to Numbers and chapter 21. Thank you, Joel.

We're going to look at almost the whole of this chapter together this evening. As Joel said last week, we picked out the event, which is the bronze snake or the bronze serpent. We saw there how that points us to the wonderful gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. But what do we make of the rest of this chapter? There's a lot going on, isn't there? Lots of to-ing and fro-ing and battles and so on. I wonder if you've had that experience of déjà vu.

I'm sure you have at some point in your life where you just happen to be somewhere and something triggers a memory. It makes you feel as if I've been here before. I've had this conversation before or I've met this person before, whatever it may be. And there's many things that can bring about that sort of déjà vu, that second view of life. It usually lasts just a split second or at the most just a matter of seconds. It may be a song that we hear or even a smell that reminds us or a conversation that we have or a particular situation in which we find ourselves. Well, at the very start of Numbers chapter 21, I wonder whether any of God's people had a sense of déjà vu. And the reason they may have done so is because of where they were. They were in a place named Hormah, as we're told there. And in that place at Hormah, they were attacked by the Canaanites under their king Arad. And to a certain degree, to begin with, they had some losses. People were taken captive. We're not sure how many.

We're not told of any being killed, but certainly taken captive. And Hormah would have reminded them of something that happened some time before. In fact, nearly 40 years before. If you turn back a few pages to Numbers 14, Numbers 14, verse 45, then the Amalekites and the Canaanites who lived in that hill country came down and attacked them and beat them all the way to Hormah, the same place. Back then they suffered that defeat because they had been disobedient to God. If you remember the situation, it came to the very borders of the promised land. God had said, go over and take the land. And bad reports from some of the spies came back saying, oh, the people there are giants and we certainly will be destroyed and we can't trust God really in that sense to do it. And so they were punished for their disobedience because they took it in their own minds to go ahead without the Lord. But this time there was an unprovoked attack. It seems they were simply journeying as they were along the road to Atherim when these Canaanites attacked some of them, attacked some of the party, this great convoy of two million people or so, and some were taken away.

This was the very first hostility that they were going to face as they drew near to the promised land, but it was not going to be the last. In fact, it was really the first battle they'd had since that terrible defeat those 40 years before. But as we go through the chapter, we find that they have more battles to face. And though we took a little bit of a diversion off the route last week, we're back on the road again as God's people draw closer and closer to the promised land.

[3 : 56] By the time we get to the beginning of chapter 2, verse 1, there we read, the Israelites traveled to the plains of Moab, camped along the Jordan, that's the border, isn't it? The river that was the border to the promised land, and opposite Jericho. Well, that rings a bell, doesn't it? We know where Jericho is. Jericho is over the river in the promised land.

And as we've gone through this book of Numbers, as we've gone through some of the goings and comings of God's people through their travelings and through their ups and their downs and so on, we've recognized ourselves in them. They were God's people. We are God's people.

The experiences that they went through, though very different in lots of ways, had lots of similarities too, particularly in the spiritual lessons that we learnt.

We are their descendants by faith. And so we too, likewise, are travelers in this world. We are journeying to our homeland that God has promised us, where all the blessings, all the promises will find their fulfillment. We are only pilgrims in this world and travelers.

Peter makes a point of that. Paul reminds the Christians in Philippi, our citizenship is in heaven. We're not firstly UK citizens or British citizens. We are heaven's citizens. And he goes on to say, we eagerly await a savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.

[5 : 28] So once again, I want us hopefully to draw some encouragement from what we read here about God's dealings with his people and therefore his dealings with us. But just for a moment, I want to take a little bit of an aside to consider just how unique this chapter really is. And it is quite unique because we are told of the sources Moses drew upon to write these events or to back up in one sense, the events that we have here. Do you notice there are three different sources outside of scripture that Moses turns to and quotes from? First of all, in verse 14, this is what the book of the wars of the Lord says. That's the only place it's mentioned. But clearly, there's an historic record that was drawn up concerning the conflicts and the wars that God's people were engaged in. And though it's lost to us, Moses knew it. Those who was writing, those who are with him and he was writing this record up knew about it as well. So there's a historic record. Often when you hear folk who have no confidence in the Bible as the word of God, they will say things, well, these are just stories and myths that have been passed on here and there.

There's no actual evidence. There's no record. There's no way we can know these things are true. Well, I think that we have a good reason to because here we have a book quoted. Then we have a song as well, which is quoted in verse 17. Then Israel sang this song. It was almost certainly an oral song passed on from one generation to another. Perhaps it was something of a workman's song.

It wasn't, it isn't all that long ago that men would sing while they work, not just whistle while you work, but they would sing when they worked in the fields or in the mines or whatever, as it were, to do them along. So this was a song they sang as they dug the well and it's recorded there for us. It's again, evidence to show that this was a real historic event that took place.

And then last of all, we have this poem, verse 27. That is why the poets say, And once again, we have Moses telling us about some record, whether oral or written from another tradition. It seems for most commentators that the first three verses, verses 27, 28 and 29, were actually poems written by the Amorites under King Sion about their victory over the Moabites.

Many songs were written in that way about victories and battles and so on. And if you read it there, you can see that Sion, whose fortifications and his city were Heshbon, they applauded, as it were, that they have consumed the Moabites and destroyed them and their cities and so on. But most, again, commentators would say that verse 30 is where there's a postscript added by God's people, the Israelites. So whereby Sion is praised about his conquering up to verse 29, verse 30. But we have overthrown them, who? Sion, king of the Amorites, and destroyed Heshbon, his stronghold, and so on. So there's a poem, a song in one sense. A little like the victory song that Moses and others sang when they crossed the Red Sea. Now, the insertion of these writings and these sayings support our conviction that what we have in our hands is an accurate and authoritative record in which we can have full confidence. It's not just some made-up myths and stories, but that which is truly real history happened and happened as it is recorded with God intervening and working in the lives of his people. So with that in mind, let's look at these events. Let's look at the historic events and see how they echo with us today, because I think that they do. First of all, what we learn from this chapter is this, that we must keep moving. We must keep moving. And we have these two sections, particularly verses 10 to 13, and then verses 16 and 18, where we've got they camped and they moved.

[9 : 57] So verse 10, the Israelites moved on and came to Oboth. Then they set out from Oboth and camped in Lie-Abarim in the wilderness that faces Moab towards the sunrise. From there they moved on and camped at the Zerud Valley. Now, I don't know if you have done a lot of camping. If it's just you or a couple of folk, it's not too difficult. Take your tent and put it up. But if you've got two million people living in tents and you've got to take them down and move thousands of cattle and sheep and other things as well and people and cars and the tabernacle, it had to be taken and moved down. So we don't know how long this all took, but it was a bit of a rigmarole to say the least.

Our Christian life, dear friends, is to be one of constantly moving forwards. Moving forwards to one of our final destination, which of course is the promised land, heaven.

And that's why, of course, when you turn to the New Testament over and over again, you'll read about how the Christian life is likened to a walk, likened to a race, and likened to following a path.

And we sang that there even in the hymn just now about keep us walking on that pathway, following the Lord Jesus Christ. God's will is that we do not stay stationary for long.

Why would that be? Why would God want us to keep moving, keep moving forward? Because otherwise what happens is that we become very comfortable where we are and we become stagnant.

[11 : 29] Stagnant in our faith. And I'm not talking about how we have to move house. You understand what I'm getting at. Spiritually and in the journey of faith, we are to keep on progressing.

We are to keep on moving. We are to keep on changing. And even our own natural bodies tell us that. I don't know whether it's just my age or not, but I know that if I sit down too long in one place, when I come to get up, it's a bit of a creak and a groan and a bit of stiffness, isn't it?

Our bodies need to keep moving. I know some of us go into the care homes or some of you go to the care homes, but I know that in the care homes, they not only they have daily sessions of light exercise to keep the body moving, to keep the limbs free.

Well, that happens to us spiritually as well. We can as Christians become so comfortable where we are that actually what happens is our faith becomes stagnant, stagnant becomes, well, dying, unhealthy, stiff, so that when God comes to move us along or something happens, we don't want to change.

We don't want to move. We don't want things to be different. Change is not just for change's sake, because what we see here, what we remember is, of course, that the Israelites only moved when the pillar of God moved, that pillar of cloud in the day and fire at night.

[12 : 54] We're told earlier on in chapter nine that it was when the pillar moved and came from the temple that the people went with it. So in chapter nine, we can read there from verse 17.

Whenever the cloud lifted from above the tent, the Israelites set out. Wherever the cloud settled, the Israelites set up camp. And so here is the Lord. They're not just moving around because they like moving around.

In fact, as as we we recognized last week, they didn't like moving around. In fact, we're told that verse 21 and and verse for the people grew impatient on the way.

They wanted to be settled in their homeland. They want to be settled in that place where they could plant crops and fields and so on and so forth, build houses. But God kept them moving.

I wonder, dear friends, can you look back over the past 12 months and see progress in your walk with the Lord?

[14 : 02] Can you look back over the last five years and see change? See that there has been a growing closer to the Lord, a development, a deepening of faith?

Or is it, dear friends, perhaps as we look back over 12 months or five years, we see very little change? We see ourselves just as we were then.

There hasn't been movement. There hasn't been stretching. There hasn't been change. There hasn't been growth. That shouldn't be so, should it? God's word, if we are reading it, will always move us.

When we're in fellowship with God's people in the local church, we'll find ourselves being shunted from time to time. A challenged. There must be movement.

Yes, life can feel like a treadmill, particularly if you're still in work or even at school. Time rushing by. Another month.

[15 : 06] Another year. But if we are part of God's people, then we will, even on the treadmill, actually feel there is progress. And there was progress here amongst God's people.

Secondly, we see very clearly, we've made point of that already, that along the way, as God takes us forward, we will inevitably have battles to face and battles to fight.

And so we have three here, don't we? We have, first of all, the Canaanite king of Arad and the battle that ensued there. We have the battle with Sihon, king of the Amorites.

And then near the end, Og, king of Bashan. And it's clear the Israelites didn't go looking for a fight. They weren't out picking a fight.

It was because they were following the Lord, because they were obedient to his leading, that they found that those around about them rose up and attacked them.

[16 : 08] And throughout our Christian life, if we go on with Christ, if we are following him, then we too will face battles. And we know they can come in all sorts of forms.

They can come in very physical and practical forms, maybe in the losing of our job, maybe in times of sorrow or grief. They can come in times of trouble with our health and so on.

But the battles that we're talking about here are specifically the battles that come because we are obedient to the Lord, because we are God's people, because we are Christ's disciples.

And, dear friends, in our own nation, we are extremely comfortable. But we know that our brothers and sisters in Christ, even today around the world, are experiencing real physical assault and opposition and attacks.

Even today, there will be those who have been put to death simply because they love Jesus and they follow him. But we too, dear friends, will have very real spiritual battles.

[17 : 14] I'll read this familiar passage. We know it's Ephesians 6. And we need to recognize as well that even back here in Numbers 21, the battles that were, they were made.

They were engaged with, they were engaged with, they were engaged with, were actually because of spiritual matters. In verse 29, Wotu Moab, you are destroyed people of Chemosh.

Chemosh was their God, the Amorite, sorry, the Moabite God. He comes up later on in the time of the kings. One of the local gods, the idols that these people worshipped.

They each had their own territorial God. And when Sion attacked Moab, it was as if he was saying, our God is stronger than your God.

This is a spiritual battle. We're showing that our God is mightier than yours. There were spiritual battles. And we face spiritual battles.

[18 : 36] And that's what I want us particularly to bear in mind in the rest of our time together. So, what should we be thinking? What should we bear in mind?

What should we learn here about our own spiritual conflicts in light of what we see? Primarily, above all, dear friends, I would say this to you.

We are to be, first of all, peacemakers. We are to be, first of all, peacemakers in the battles that we face. And we see that there in verse 22, where Moses sends a message to Sion saying, Let us pass through the country.

We'll not turn to the right or the left, etc., etc., etc. It's what he'd sent, if you remember, earlier on to the Edomites as well. But they had said, No, you can't pass. And they had got to go a different way.

What do we see here? We see here that God's people were striving for peace. They were striving for peace. And, dear friends, that is exactly how we must be in this world.

[19 : 45] Peacemakers. Paul writes to the Christians at Rome. It's one of many places where he says something very similar. He says, If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

Jesus makes it very clear, doesn't it, that people will oppose us because we follow the Lord Jesus Christ. The governments and the nations in which we live will make laws which may place restraints upon us as we seek to please Christ and follow him, or laws which are contrary to his word, which are antagonistic, as it were, to the gospel.

Now, we must be very careful that we do not turn upon them with words of malice, or with hatred, or with insult, or with retaliation.

Why? Because, again, we are Christ's people who follow his example. And Peter, writing to the Christians who themselves at that time had much opposition from the authorities, the Roman authorities, he says of Jesus.

When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate. When he suffered, he made no threats. Surely the most powerful way that we can counter our enemies, the most powerful way that we can stand against that which is evil, or seeks to oppose us, is to love.

[21 : 20] I mentioned very briefly this morning that Jesus says this in Luke chapter 6. Love your enemies. He goes on to explain how we do that. Do good to those who hate you.

Through that passage, he ultimately says, And you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. We are to be men and women of peace, so that when the world attacks, when people accuse, when governments oppose, our attitude is to be love.

It's very tempting, of course, because we are humans to want to retaliate, or to speak against them, or to insult and to throw back in their faces what they throw at us.

But dear friends, we are to be those who seek peace. And the reality is this, that even as we seek to be men and women of peace, as our Lord Jesus was, then we shall find that battles will still come.

Just because we seek peace doesn't mean that we'll have peace. Even as we seek peace, we shall still be attacked, as we see here, particularly with Sion. Even though Israel sent a peaceful message, let us pass through, and there will be no trouble, Sion comes out with all of his entire army to attack them.

[22 : 42] But one of the things that is key, and that comes out particularly in our Ephesians passage that I read earlier on in chapter 6, is this. We must remember who is behind these things.

That if it be a man or a woman or a government or a parliament or whoever it may be, or a law that is made, let us remember that it is not people that we are fighting against.

Our battle is not with them, but with the spiritual forces, with Satan himself. So, as Paul wrote there in Ephesians 6 verse 12, our battle is not against flesh and blood.

No, there's people. And it can become very personal as Christians that this person is against us and this MP is against us, or this person in our street, or wherever it may be, or our school is against us.

No, we're not struggling against them, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

[23 : 46] We must keep our, as it were, heavenly spiritual eyes open and not find ourselves pulled under into an earthly, fleshly battle.

And so, dear friends, what are we to do then? What encouragement is there for us in the fact that we will be embattled and attacked? There's great encouragement, and this is what I want us to see as well.

Great encouragement because here in Numbers we see that we have a mighty helper in the Lord our God, or a mighty fighter, we might even say, in the Lord our God. At verse 3, The Lord listened to the Israel's plea and gave the Canaanites over to them.

Although not as plain, but it's clearly the same later on with Sion and King Og, that it was down to the Lord's involvement that the victory was won. There in verse 34, God's people of old have gained victory against their enemies, not because they were the best army, the strongest army, the most well-equipped army, because the Lord was their helper.

And yet, and I just want to pass, I don't want us to pass by this fact, back in verse 1, we realised that there were times of loss, there were casualties in battle.

[25 : 16] For when the Canaanite king, Arad, attacked the people on the road, we're told the Israelites are captured, some of them. Captured, some of them.

There will be battles that, as Christians, we face, which we feel that we've lost. We may feel that's the sense in our own nation at this time. We've lost the battle over marriage, or we've lost the battle over Sunday, or we've lost the battle over our schools, or whatever it may be.

We may feel that there are casualties in the battle which may discourage us. But let us remember, and learn from here as well as elsewhere, that one battle does not make a war.

And the loss of one battle is no reason for us to doubt that the war will be won. We know that. The Lord is on our side.

We know that Christ will come to conquer. We know that. And so let us not become too easily discouraged in thinking that perhaps, though we may feel we've lost a battle, that that's the end of it.

[26 : 19] We need to remember that we're playing the long game. We are in it to the very end of the age, not just for our generation, not just for this time.

And therefore, dear friends, we need to be encouraged by God's word here, that when we face opposition and attacks, and even when we feel ourselves to be overwhelmed, that we need not be afraid.

Notice God's word to his people in verse 34. The Lord said to Moses, do not be afraid of him. That's King Og. They've just defeated Sion, king of the Amorites.

Why aren't they full of boldness? Why aren't they full of confidence? Because they're human. Like we are human. It is only natural for them and us to be afraid at times.

Remember that King Og comes out, doesn't he, with his entire army to meet them in battle. It would have been a fearful and terrifying sight, no doubt, in spite of the victory that they've known.

[27 : 22] And we can at times perhaps go through seasons when things are good and we feel as if we've conquered sin or we've overcome certain trials and difficulties.

But inevitably, when the next one comes, fear will be there on our shoulder to discourage, to bring us down. And dear friends, we must remember that that is very human.

But faith is not a human quality. Faith is a God-given gift. And faith is what we need to overcome all fears.

For faith doesn't look at the situation or the size of the army or the overwhelming odds. It looks at our Heavenly Father.

It looks at our mighty God. It looks at our risen Lord Jesus Christ, our Saviour and King. We need to not be afraid.

[28 : 22] And the only way really to deal with fear is to look heavenwards in prayer. So we don't just look to God, say, yes, God is great, he's mighty, he's wonderful.

Those things certainly will help us in our fear. But we also need to take action. And that is prayer. We have it really only in one verse here, in verse 2. After this loss in battle, after this defeat, and there's an interesting question, is it why did the Lord allow some of the Israelites to be captured?

Why did he allow the Canaanites to have the upper hand? Well, it would seem to me the reason he did that was to move God's people to pray. Because out of that defeat, they cry out to God, don't they?

If you'll deliver these people into our hands, we will totally destroy their cities. It's a vow that they make to God. And perhaps if you've got the NIV, there's a little footnote about this phrase, we will totally destroy.

It's one word in the Hebrew. It means to devote everything to God. It means to make a total dedication of the enemy to God.

[29 : 29] They wouldn't take any of them as slaves, as it were, for themselves. They wouldn't keep any of their plunder or treasures. This is going to come out later when we get into the book of Joshua and the triumphs in the promised land there.

Why do we feel assaulted? Why do we get discouraged? Why does it seem at times, as it may even in our own land, that the enemy is winning and that God's word is being trampled on the foot and the church is diminishing?

Why has God allowed that? Could it be to stir us to pray more? Could it be to stir us to cry upon to him more? Could it be that he might desire for us to seek his face much more than we do?

To seek his glory much more than we do? Because let's be honest, dear friends. There are times when our prayers can be tainted with selfish motives.

Think about it. Why do we want a godly society? Why do we want laws that are in keeping with God's word? Is it so that life could be so much easier?

[30 : 36] It would be so much easier, wouldn't it, if we didn't have all these laws about transgender and same-sex marriage and the other things that go on which are contrary to God's word. It could simply be, we want an easier life, Lord, rather than one where we feel at odds with society.

That can be selfish prayer. Why do we want people to come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and be converted? Could it be so that we could feel proud about our church and the number of converts that we have?

Could it be that we want people converted and saved so they can do some of the jobs that we've been doing for so long and it's time that we handed them over? Could it be that we even just want more money in the pot to spend on our building and the nice things that we would have?

Dear friends, we've got to test our motives. Here God's people, foolish and sinful as we know they could be, prayed, ultimately, Lord, deliver us so that everything may be given over to you and dedicated to you so that you may receive the glory.

When we pray, and we certainly must pray, why are we praying? And thirdly, here, dear friends, we see that as we should not be afraid, as we must pray, so we find again and again God providing for all our needs.

[32 : 05] And not only in battle, we've seen how he fought for his people in battle, but we have this lovely little snippet, don't we, in verses 16 to 18 about God providing for them water.

Not water from the rock this time, but water from a well and how it's all about the Lord's promise, isn't it? From there, they continue to bear the well where the Lord said to Moses, gather the people together and I'll give them water.

And they sang this song as they seem to have dug this well in the place that God called them to go. They're always moaning about lack of water, weren't they?

Here they don't even have to ask and God provides. In the midst of the wilderness, he gives to them all that they need. In the battle, in the journey, in the times of fear, in prayer, the Lord is the one who meets our needs.

In one sense, the supply lines are kept open to sustain us in every situation. We love that wonderful promise, don't we, in Philippians 4.19.

[33 : 16] My God, says Paul, will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus. In other words, it's a bit like saying, my God will meet all your financial needs with all the money in the Bank of England.

Except, of course, the riches of glory in Christ are even greater than them. They can never run dry. They can never depreciate. They can never be exhausted. What is it?

What is it that you and I need in the Christian life? What is it that you need in the present battle that you are facing?

Patience, Lord. Endurance, Lord. Faith, Lord. Hope. Love. Forgiveness.

God. God. Whatever it is, our God meets our need. This was the first of many battles God's people were to fight before they would enter the promised land that God had promised them.

[34 : 27] But the reality is that even when they entered that promised land, throughout their history, they continued to experience hostility and war.

Read 1 and 2 Kings. Read the Prophets and 1 and 2 Chronicles. And you'll see that the only times they knew peace were short periods, as it were, of rest that God gave them before the next attack.

Dear friends, in this world in which we live, we must expect that we shall constantly be on the move and that even though God gives us temporary times of peace and rest, they are so that we might fight again and face the battles that are before us.

In this world, there is no peace. However, we have a solid and a sure and certain hope of our land.

a land of peace and rest which has been won for us by the victorious champion who is our Lord Jesus Christ.

[35 : 41] And so we look to that day. We keep on in the Christian walk until that day when we hear this loud voice from heaven.

Look, God's dwelling place is now among the people and he will dwell with them. They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God.

He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain for the old order of things has passed away and he who was seated on the throne said, I am making everything new.

Let's pray together. Father, we thank you that when we read your word we read reality not fairy story or myth.

We read of real people facing real battles struggling in real fights. we thank you that this is the experience of your people in the past in the present and in the days to come in this world.

[37 : 04] Lord, forgive us that we forget that. Forgive us that we become easily disheartened and discouraged when we face opposition of all sorts and kinds.

Help us, O Lord, to ever be mindful of the fact that in this world as Jesus promised us we shall have tribulation. But be of good cheer, he told his disciples, for I have overcome the world.

And we know, O Lord, that that day is coming when you shall return in glory and power and judgment when all walls will cease and all tears will be dried when your people shall enter into the promised rest that you won for us at the cross and guaranteed by your resurrection from the dead.

Lord, let us not become weary in well-doing. Let us not become tired and impatient in the journey. Help us, Lord, to be men and women of action, of prayer particularly, of those who make peace and proclaim him who is the prince of peace, to a world which is crying out for peace.

And we ask that many may truly bow the knee to him, may submit their swords and their shields to him. May, O Lord, acknowledge him as their true master and king.

[38 : 38] Help us then in this great, marvellous work to be faithful to the end, for we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.

Since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate and the hope of salvation as a helmet.

For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath, but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.

Therefore, encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, the one who calls you is faithful.

And he will do it. Amen.