

What's the Message – Lesson 36

Today we continue our study of the Book of Numbers with “Lessons in the Wilderness” Part Three.

Greetings in the name of Jesus, Our Savior. As we continue with our study of our spiritual forefathers, hearing of the lessons that God is teaching them, we pray that God would enable us to learn these same lessons also, since they still apply to us in our day. Amen.

Last time we saw how three more examples boiled down to one lesson, the lesson of obedience. Today we continue with Israel's struggles in the wilderness and see how God used this time and different situations to instruct them further.

Our first example is given in Numbers chapter 21, verses 4 through 9, where we read: *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. 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.”*

Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. 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. 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 any man, he would look on at the bronze serpent and live.

After this, they continued their progress northward around the territories of Edom and Moab and came to the territory of the Amorites, which was on the east side of the Jordan River, opposite the city of Jericho. Then in chapter 21, beginning at verse 21, we read: *Then Israel sent messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites, saying, "Let me pass through your land; we will not turn aside into field or vineyard; we will not drink the water of a well; we will go by the King's Highway, until we have passed through your territory."*

But Sihon would not allow Israel to pass through his territory. He gathered all his men together, and went out against Israel to the wilderness, and came to Jahaz, and fought against Israel.

This time they were not the bunch of fearful cowards that Moses had first brought to the edge of the Promised Land some 40 years earlier. This time they were a hardened group of fighters confident that the Lord was leading them, and they were victorious. Then they continued north, to the land of Bashan, on the east side of the Sea of Galilee. In verse 33 we read: ... *and Og the king of Bashan came out against them, he and all his people, to battle at Ed're-i. But the Lord said to Moses, "Do not fear him; for I have given him into your hand, and all his people, and his land; and you shall do to him as you did to Sihon king of the Amorites."*

Again, Israel was victorious. And there, in brief, we have two more illustrations of life in the desert with the people of Israel. Two stories that in themselves are interesting, but do they have any relevance to us? Teacher, just what is the message in these stories for us today?

Once again we see the Israelites complaining about the food, the manna, that God had provided them. In the translation you have used, it was called "worthless". Other translations use the word "miserable". The Hebrew word used here may be related to another Hebrew word meaning "cursed". But manna was food given by God to the Israelites out of His mercy, and was a blessing. So in cursing the manna, they were also cursing God, who had graciously provided it. This was a serious rejection of a gift of God and it called for

punishment. And that punishment was an abundance of venomous snakes that bit and killed many people. It didn't take long before they were putting two-plus-two together and they cried out to Moses: *we have sinned against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us.* Moses did just that, and was told to make a snake and put it on a pole, and everyone who had been bitten could look on that image and live.

Was there magic in the bronze serpent that Moses had made? Of course not. The power was, as always, in God's promise. And believing in that promise brought relief and life to the Israelites. And we have a similar situation, do we not? We face death because of the sin of Adam, but God has promised that if we believe His promise, we will be saved from the eternal consequences of sin, and be rejoined with Him in heaven. That is why, over a thousand years later, Jesus would say: *Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life.*

Your second example is of the two kings that came out to battle the Israelites as they were on their way to the Promised Land. Forty years previously their parents had faced the same obstacle, that of having to battle their way into what God had declared would be their home.

This time they were ready to trust in God's promise and power. And the lesson they learned was that no matter what the obstacle in their life was . . . if God had made it clear this was what He wanted done . . . they would be successful. It wasn't a case of God being on my side. It was a case of them being on God's side. And that is something we need to learn also. No matter what might confront me or stand as an obstacle in my life, if this is something God wants me to do, I will be able to accomplish it. Because I do not rely on my power alone, and God is with me, then as St. Paul says in his letter to the Philippians: *I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.*

Next time we will read the story of the talking donkey and conclude our study of the Book of Numbers.