

CHAPTER 21

The armies of Israel now begin to emerge out of the wilderness, and to come into a land inhabited, to enter upon action, and take possession of the frontiers of the land of promise. A glorious campaign this chapter gives us the history of, especially in the latter part of it. Here is,

I. The defeat of Arad the Canaanite (v. 1-3).

II. The chastisement of the people with fiery serpents for their murmurings, and the relief granted them upon their submission by a brazen serpent (v. 4-9).

III. Several marches forward, and some occurrences by the way (v. 10-20).

IV. The celebrated conquest of Sihon king of the Amorites (v. 21-32), and of Og king of Bashan (v. 33-35), and possession taken of their land.

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ARAD SUBDUED

Here is,

1. The descent which Arad the Canaanite made upon the camp of Israel, hearing that they came *by the way of the spies*; for, though the spies which Moses had sent thirty-eight years before then passed and repassed unobserved, yet their coming, and their errand, it is likely, were afterwards known to the Canaanites, gave them an alarm, and induced them to keep an eye upon Israel and get intelligence of all their motions. Now, when they understood that they were facing about towards Canaan, this Arad, thinking it policy to keep the war at a distance, made an onset upon them and fought with them. But it proved that he meddled to his own hurt; had he sat still, his people might have been last destroyed of all the Canaanites, but now they were the first. Thus those that are *overmuch wicked die before their time*, ~~2007~~ Ecclesiastes 7:17.

2. His success at first in this attempt. His advance-guards picked up some straggling Israelites, and took them prisoners, v. 1. This, no doubt, puffed him up, and he began to thin that he should have the honour of crushing this formidable body, and saving his country from the ruin which it threatened. It was likewise a trial to the faith of the Israelites and a check to them for their distrusts and discontents.

3. Israel's humble address to God upon this occasion, v. 2. It was a temptation to them to murmur as their fathers did, and to despair of getting possession of Canaan; but God, who thus tried them by his providence, enabled them by his grace to quit themselves well in the trial, and to trust in him for relief against this fierce and powerful assailant. They, by their elders, in prayer for success, *vowed a vow*. Noe, When we are desiring and expecting mercy from God we should bind our souls with a bond that we will faithfully do our duty to him, particularly that we will honour him with the mercy we are in the pursuit of. Thus Israel here promised to destroy the cities of these Canaanites, as devoted to God, and not to take the spoil of them to their own use. If God would give them victory, he should have all the praise, and they would not make a gain of it to themselves. When we are in this frame we are prepared to receive mercy.

4. The victory which the Israelites obtained over the Canaanites, v. 3. A strong party was sent out, probably under the command of Joshua, which not only drove back these Canaanites, but followed them to their cities, which probably lay on the edge of the wilderness, and utterly destroyed them, and so returned to the camp. *Vincimur in praelie, sed non in bello* — *We lose a battle, but we finally triumph*. What is said of the tribe of God is true of all God's Israel, a troop may overcome them, but they shall overcome at the last. The place was called *Hormah*, as a memorial of the destruction, for the terror of the Canaanites, and probably for warning to posterity not to attempt the rebuilding of these cities, which were destroyed as devoted to God and sacrifices to divine justice. And it appears from the instance of Jericho that the law concerning such cities was that they should never be rebuilt. There seems to be an allusion to this name in the prophecy of the fall of the New Testament Babylon (~~1996~~ Revelation 16:16), where its forces are said to be gathered together to a place called *Armageddon* — *the destruction of a troop*.

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THE BRAZEN SERPENT

Here is,

I. The fatigue of Israel by a long march round the land of Edom, because they could not obtain passage through it the nearest way: *The soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way*, v. 4. Perhaps the way was rough and uneven, or foul and dirty; or it fretted them to go far about, and that they were not permitted to force their passage through the Edomites' country. Those that are of a fretful discontented spirit will always find something or other to make them uneasy.

II. Their unbelief and murmuring upon this occasion, v. 5. Though they had just now obtained a glorious victory over the Canaanites, and were going on conquering and to conquer, yet they speak very discontentedly of what God had done for them and distrustfully of what he would do, vexed that they were brought out of Egypt, that they had not bread and water as other people had by their own care and industry, but by miracle, they knew not how. They have *bread enough and to spare*; and yet they complain *there is no bread*, because, though they eat angels' food, yet they are weary of it; manna itself is loathed, and called *light bread*, fit for children, not for men and soldiers. What will those be pleased with whom manna will not please? Those that are disposed to quarrel will find fault where there is no fault to be found. Thus those who have long enjoyed the means of grace are apt to surfeit even on the heavenly manna, and to call it light bread. But let not the contempt which some cast upon the word of God cause us to value it the less: it is the bread of life, substantial bread, and will nourish those who by faith feed upon it to eternal life, whoever calls it light bread.

III. The righteous judgment which God brought upon them for their murmuring, v. 6. He sent *fiery serpents among them*, which bit or stung many of them to death. The wilderness through which they had passed was all along infested with those fiery serpents, as appears, ~~CRIS~~ Deuteronomy 8:15. but hitherto God had wonderfully preserved his people from receiving hurt by them, till now that they murmured, to chastise them for which these animals, which hitherto had shunned their camp, now invade

it. Justly are those made to feel God's judgments that are not thankful for his mercies. These serpents are called *fiery*, from their colour, or from their rage, or from the effects of their bitings, inflaming the body, putting it immediately into a high fever, scorching it with an insatiable thirst. They had unjustly complained for want of water (v. 5), to chastise them for which God sends upon them this thirst, which no water would quench. Those that cry without cause have justly cause given them to cry out. They distrustfully concluded that they must *die in the wilderness*, and God took them at their word, chose their delusions, and brought their unbelieving fears upon them; many of them did die. They had impudently flown in the face of God himself, and the *poison of asps was under their lips*, and now these fiery serpents (which, it should seem, were flying serpents, ~~239~~ Isaiah 14:29) flew in their faces and poisoned them. They in their pride had lifted themselves up against God and Moses, and now God humbled and mortified them, by making these despicable animals a plague to them. That artillery is now turned against them which had formerly been made use of in their defence against the Egyptians. He that brought quails to feast them let them know that he could bring serpents to bite them; the whole creation is at war with those that are in arms against God.

IV. Their repentance and supplication to God under this judgment, v. 7. They confess their fault: *We have sinned*. They are particular in their confession: *We have spoken against the Lord, and against thee*. It is to be feared that they would not have owned the sin if they had not felt the smart; but they relent under the rod; *when he slew them, then they sought him*. They beg the prayers of Moses for them, as conscious to themselves of their own unworthiness to be heard, and convinced of the great interest which Moses had in heaven. How soon is their tone altered! Those who had just before quarrelled with him as their worst enemy now make their court to him as their best friend, and choose him for their advocate with God. Afflictions often change men's sentiments concerning God's people, and teach them to value those prayers which, at a former period, they had scorned. Moses, to show that he had heartily forgiven them, blesses those who had cursed him, and *prays for those who had despitefully used him*. Herein he was a type of Christ, who interceded for his persecutors, and a pattern to us to go and do likewise, and thus to show that we *love our enemies*.

V. The wonderful provision which God made for their relief. He did not employ Moses in summoning the judgment, but, that he might recommend him to the good affection of the people, he made him instrumental in their relief, v. 8, 9. God ordered Moses to make the representation of a fiery serpent, which he did, in brass, and set it up on a very long pole, so that it might be seen from all parts of the camp, and every one that was stung with a fiery serpent was healed by looking up to this serpent of brass. The people prayed that God would *take away the serpents from them* (v. 7), but God saw fit not to do this: for he gives effectual relief in the best way, though not in our way. Thus those who did not die for their murmuring were yet made to smart for it, that they might the more feelingly repent and humble themselves for it; they were likewise made to receive their cure from God, by the hand of Moses, that they might be taught, if possible, never again to speak against God and Moses. This method of cure was altogether miraculous, and the more wonderful if what some naturalists say be true, that looking upon bright and burnished brass is hurtful to those that are stung with fiery serpents. God can bring about his purposes by contrary means. The Jews themselves say that it was not the sight of the brazen serpent that cured them, but, in looking up to it, they looked up to God as the Lord that healed them. But there was much of gospel in this appointment. Our Saviour has told us so (~~4084~~ John 3:14, 15), that *as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness so the Son of man must be lifted up, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish*. Observe then a resemblance,

1. Between their disease and ours. The devil is the old serpent, a fiery serpent, hence he appears (~~4078~~ Revelation 12:3) as a *great red dragon*. Sin is the biting of this fiery serpent; it is painful to the startled conscience, and poisonous to the seared conscience. Satan's temptations are called his *fiery darts*, ~~4086~~ Ephesians 6:16. Lust and passion inflame the soul, so do the terrors of the Almighty, when they *set themselves in array*. At the last, sin *bites like a serpent* and *stings like an adder*; and even its sweets are turned into the gall of asps.

2. Between their remedy and ours.

(1.) It was God himself that devised and prescribed this antidote against the fiery serpents; so our salvation by Christ was the contrivance of Infinite Wisdom; God himself has found the ransom.

(2.) It was a very unlikely method of cure; so our salvation by the death of Christ is *to the Jews a stumbling-block and to the Greeks foolishness*. It was Moses that *lifted up the serpent in the wilderness*, so the law is a schoolmaster to bring us to Christ, and Moses wrote of him, ^{<B56>}John 5:46. Christ was lifted up by the rulers of the Jews, who were the successors of Moses.

(3.) That which cured was shaped in the likeness of that which wounded. So Christ, though perfectly free from sin himself, yet was *made in the likeness of sinful flesh* (^{<B8B>}Romans 8:3), so like that it was taken for granted that this man was a sinner, ^{<B92>}John 9:24.

(4.) The brazen serpent was lifted up; so was Christ. He was lifted up upon the cross (^{<B23>}John 12:33, 34), for his was made a spectacle to the world. He was lifted up by the preaching of the gospel. The word here used for a *pole* signifies a *banner*, or *ensign*, for Christ crucified *stands for an ensign of the people*, ^{<B10>}Isaiah 11:10. Some make the lifting up of the serpent to be a figure of Christ's triumphing over Satan, the old serpent, whose head he bruised, when in his cross he made an open show of the principalities and powers which he had spoiled and destroyed, ^{<B15>}Colossians 2:15.

3. Between the application of their remedy and ours. They looked and lived, and we, if we believe, shall not perish; it is by faith that we look unto Jesus, ^{<B12>}Hebrews 12:2. *Look unto me, and be you saved*, ^{<B22>}Isaiah 45:22. We must be sensible of our wound and of our danger by it, receive the record which God has given concerning his Son, and rely upon the assurance he has given us that we shall be healed and saved by him if we resign ourselves to his direction. The brazen serpent's being lifted up would not cure if it was not looked upon. If any pored on their wound, and would not look up to the brazen serpent, they inevitably died. If they slighted this method of cure, and had recourse to natural medicines, and trusted to them, they justly perished; so if sinners either despise Christ's righteousness or despair of benefit by it their wound will, without doubt, be fatal. But whoever looked up to this healing sign, though from the outmost part of the camp, though with a weak and weeping eye, was certainly healed; so whosoever believes in Christ, though as yet but weak in faith, shall not perish. There are weak brethren *for whom Christ died*. Perhaps for some time after the serpent was set up the camp of Israel was molested by the fiery serpents; and it is the probable conjecture of some that they carried this brazen serpent along with them through the rest of

their journey, and set it up wherever they encamped, and, when they settled in Canaan, fixed it somewhere within the borders of the land; for it is not likely that the children of Israel went so far off as this was into the wilderness to burn incense to it, as we find they did, ~~(2Kings)~~ 2 Kings 18:4. Even those that are delivered from the eternal death which is the wages of sin must expect to feel the pain and smart of it as long as they are here in this world; but, if it be not our own fault, we may have the brazen serpent to accompany us, to be still looked up to upon all occasions, by bearing about with us continually the dying of the Lord Jesus.

~~(GEN)~~ NUMBERS 21:10-20

THE REMOVAL OF THE CAMP

We have here an account of the several stages and removals of the children of Israel, till they came into the plains of Moab, out of which they at length passed over Jordan into Canaan, as we read in the beginning of Joshua. Natural motions are quicker the nearer they are to their centre. The Israelites were now drawing near to the promised rest, and now they *set forward*, as the expression is, v. 10. It were well if we would do thus in our way to heaven, rid ground in the latter end of our journey, and the nearer we come to heaven be so much the more active and abundant in the work of the Lord. Two things especially are observable in the brief account here given of these removals: —

1. The wonderful success which God blessed his people with, near the brooks of Arnon, v. 13-15. They had now compassed the land of Edom (which they were not to invade, nor so much as to disturb, ~~(DEUT)~~ Deuteronomy 2:4, 5), and had come to the border of Moab. It is well that there are more ways than one to Canaan. The enemies of God's people may retard their passage, but cannot prevent their entrance into the promised rest. Care is taken to let us know that the Israelites in their march religiously observed the orders which God gave them to use no hostility against the Moabites (~~(DEUT)~~ Deuteronomy 2:9), because they were the posterity of righteous Lot; therefore they pitched on the other side of Arnon (v. 13), that side which was now in the possession of the Amorites, one of the devoted nations, though formerly it had belonged to Moab, as appears here, v. 26, 27. This care of theirs not to offer violence to the

Moabites is pleaded by Jephtha long afterwards, in his remonstrance against the Ammonites (^{<0115>}Judges 11:15, etc.), and turned to them for a testimony. What their achievements were, now that they pitched on the banks of the river Arnon, we are not particularly told, but are referred to the *book of the wars of the Lord*, perhaps that book which was begun with the history of the war with the Amalekites, ^{<0174>}Exodus 17:14. *Write it* (said God) *for a memorial in a book*, to which were added all the other battles which Israel fought, in order, and, among the rest, their actions on the river Arnon, at *Vaheb* in *Suphah* (as our margin reads it) and other places on that river. Or, *it shall be said* (as some read it) *in the rehearsal*, or commemoration, *of the wars of the Lord, what he did in the Red Sea*, when he brought Israel out of Egypt, and what he did *in the brooks of Arnon*, just before he brought them into Canaan. Note, In celebrating the memorials of God's favours to us, it is good to observe the series of them, and how divine goodness and mercy have constantly followed us, even from the Red Sea to the brooks of Arnon. In every stage of our lives, nay, in every step, we should take notice of what God has wrought for us; what he did at such a time, and what in such a place, ought to be distinctly remembered.

2. The wonderful supply which God blessed his people with at *Beer* (v. 16), which signifies the *well* or *fountain*. It is said (v. 10) they pitched in *Oboth*, which signifies *bottles*, so called perhaps because there they filled their bottles with water, which should last them for some time; but by this time, we may suppose, it was with them as it was with Hagar (^{<0215>}Genesis 21:15), *The water was spent in the bottle*; yet we do not find that they murmured, and therefore God, in compassion to them, brought them to a well of water, to encourage them to wait on him in humble silence and expectation and to believe that he would graciously take cognizance of their wants, though they did not complain of them. In this world, we do at the best but pitch in *Oboth*, where our comforts lie in close and scanty vessels; when we come to heaven we shall remove to *Beer*, the well of life, the fountain of living waters. Hitherto we have found, when they were supplied with water, they asked it in unjust discontent, and God gave it in just displeasure; but here we find,

(1.) That God gave it in love (v. 16): *Gather the people together*, to be witnesses of the wonder, and joint-sharers in the favour, *and I will give them water*. Before they prayed, God granted, and anticipated them with the blessings of his goodness.

(2.) That they received it with joy and thankfulness, which made the mercy doubly sweet to them, v. 17. Then they sang this song, to the glory of God and the encouragement of one another, *Spring up, O well!* Thus they pray that it may spring up, for promised mercies must be fetched in by prayer; they triumph that it does spring up, and meet it with their joyful acclamations. With joy must we *draw water out of the wells of salvation*, ^{<2117>}Isaiah 11:3. As the brazen serpent was a figure of Christ, who is lifted up for our cure, so is this well a figure of the Spirit, who is poured forth for our comfort, and from whom flow to us *rivers of living waters*, ^{<4178>}John 7:38. Does this well spring up in our souls? We should sing to it; take the comfort to ourselves, and give the glory to God; stir up this gift, sing to it, *Spring up, O well!* thou *fountain of gardens*, to water my soul (^{<2145>}Song of Solomon 4:15), plead the promise, which perhaps alludes to this story (^{<2117>}Isaiah 41:17, 18), *I will make the wilderness wells of water*.

(3.) That whereas before the remembrance of the miracle was perpetuated in the names given to the places, which signified the people's strife and murmuring, now it was perpetuated in a song of praise, which preserved on record the manner in which it was done (v. 18): *The princes digged the well*, the seventy elders, it is probable, *by direction of the lawgiver* (that is, Moses, under God) *with their staves*; that is, with their staves they made holes in the soft and sandy ground, and God caused the water miraculously to spring up in the holes which they made. Thus the pious Israelites long afterwards, *passing through the valley of Baca*, a dry and thirsty place, made wells, and God by rain from heaven filled the pools, ^{<1346>}Psalms 84:6. Observe,

[1.] God promised to give them water, but they must open the ground to receive it, and give it vent. God's favours must be expected in the use of such means as lie within our power, but still the excellency of the power is of God.

[2.] The nobles of Israel were forward to set their hands to this work, and used their staves, probable those that were the ensigns of their honour and power, for the public service, and it is upon record to their honour. And we may suppose that it was a great confirmation to them in their offices, and a great comfort to the people, that they were made use of by the divine power as instruments to this miraculous supply. By this it appeared that the spirit of Moses, who must shortly die, rested in some measure upon the nobles of Israel. Moses did not strike the ground himself, as formerly the

rock, but gave them direction to do it, that their staves might share in the honour of his rod, and they might comfortably hope that when he should leave them yet God would not, but that they also in their generation should be public blessings, and might expect the divine presence with them as long as they acted by the direction of the lawgiver. For comfort must be looked for only in the way of duty; and, if we would share in divine joys, we must carefully follow the divine direction.

NUMBERS 21:21-35

SIHON AND OG OVERTHROWN

We have here an account of the victories obtained by Israel over Sihon and Og, which must be distinctly considered, not only because they are here distinctly related, but because long afterwards the memorial of them is distinctly celebrated, and they are severally assigned as instances of everlasting mercy. He slew *Sihon king of the Amorites, for his mercy endureth for ever, and Og the king of Bashan, for his mercy endureth for ever*, ⁽¹¹⁶⁾Psalm 136:19, 20.

I. Israel sent a peaceable message to Sihon king of the Amorites (v. 21), but received an unpeaceable return, worse than that of the Edomites to the like message, ⁽¹¹⁸⁾Numbers 20:18, 20. For the Edomites only refused them a passage, and stood upon their own defence to keep them out; but Sihon went out with his forces *against Israel in the wilderness*, out of his own borders, without any provocation given him (v. 23), and so ran himself upon his own ruin. Jephtha intimates that he was prompted by his politics to do this (⁽¹¹¹⁾Judges 11:20), *Sihon trusted not Israel to pass through his coast*; but his politics deceived him, for Moses says, *God hardened his spirit and made his heart obstinate, that he might deliver him into the hand of Israel*, ⁽¹²⁰⁾Deuteronomy 2:30. The enemies of God's church are often infatuated in those very counsels which they think most wisely taken. Sihon's army was routed, and not only so, but all his country came into the possession of Israel, v. 24, 25. This seizure is justified, 1. Against the Amorites themselves, for they were the aggressors, and provoked the Israelites to battle; and yet, perhaps, that would not have been sufficient to entitle Israel to their land, but that God himself, the King of nations, the Lord of the whole earth, had given them a grant of it. The Amorites

formed one of the devoted nations whose land God had promised to Abraham and his seed, which promise should be performed when the iniquity of the Amorites should be full, ^{<0156>}Genesis 15:16. Jephtha insists upon this grant as their title, ^{<0123>}Judges 11:23, 24. The victory which God gave them over the Amorites put them in possession, and then, the promise made to their fathers having given them a right, by virtue of that they kept possession.

2. Against the Moabites, who had formerly been the lords-proprietors of this country. If they should ever lay claim to it, and should plead that God himself had provided that *none of their land should be given to Israel for a possession* (^{<0109>}Deuteronomy 2:9), Moses here furnishes posterity with a replication to their plea, and Jephtha makes use of it against the Amorites 260 years afterwards, when Israel's title to this country was questioned.

(1.) The justification itself is that though it was true this country had belonged to the Moabites, yet the Amorites had taken it from them some time before, and were now in full and quiet possession of it, v. 26. The Israelites did not take it out of the hands of the Moabites, they had before lost it to the Amorites, and were constrained to give up their pretensions to it; and, when Israel had taken it from the Amorites, they were under no obligation to restore it to the Moabites, whose title to it was long since extinguished. See here the uncertainty of worldly possessions, how often they change their owners, and how soon we may be deprived of them, even when we think ourselves most sure of them; *they make themselves wings*. It is our wisdom therefore to secure the good part which cannot be taken away from us. See also the wisdom of the divine Providence and its perfect foresight, by which preparation is made long before for the accomplishment of all God's purposes in their season. This country being designed in due time for Israel, it is beforehand put into the hand of the Amorites, who little think that they have it but as trustees till Israel come of age, and then must surrender it. We understand not the vast reaches of Providence, but known unto God are all his works, as appears in this instance, that he *set the bounds of the people according to the number of the children of Israel*, ^{<0518>}Deuteronomy 32:8. All that land which he intended for his chosen people he put into the possession of the devoted nations, that were to be driven out.

(2.) For proof of the allegation, he refers to the authentic records of the country, for so their proverbs or songs were, one of which he quotes some

passages out of (v. 27-30), which sufficiently proves what is vouched for, namely,

[1.] That such and such places that are here named, though they had been in the possession of the Moabites, had by right of war become the dominion of Sihon king of the Amorites. Heshbon had become his city, and he obtained such a quiet possession of it that it was built and prepared for him (v. 27), and the country to Dibon and Nophah was likewise subdued, and annexed to the kingdom of the Amorites, v. 30,

[2.] That the Moabites were utterly disabled ever to regain the possession. Even Ar of Moab, though not taken or attempted by Sihon, but still remaining the metropolis of Moab, yet was so wasted by this loss that it would never be able to make head, v. 28. The Moabites were undone, and even Chemosh their god had given them up, as unable to rescue them out of the hands of Sihon, v. 29. By all this it appears that the Moabites' claim to this country was barred for ever. There may be a further reason for inserting this Amorite poem, namely, to show that the triumphing of the wicked is short. Those that had conquered the Moabites, and insulted over them, were now themselves conquered and insulted over by the Israel of God. It is very probable that the same Sihon, king of the Amorites, that had got this country from the Moabites, now lost it to the Israelites; for, though it is said to be taken from a former king of Moab (v. 26), yet not by a former king of the Amorites; and then it shows how sometimes justice makes men to see the loss of that which they got by violence, and were puffed up with the gain of. They are *exalted but for a little while*, ~~Job~~ Job 24:24.

II. Og king of Bashan, instead of being warned by the fate of his neighbours to make peace with Israel, is instigated by it to make war with them, which proves in like manner to be his destruction. Og was also an Amorite, and therefore perhaps thought himself better able to deal with Israel than his neighbours were, and more likely to prevail, because of his own gigantic strength and stature, which Moses takes notice of, ~~Deuteronomy~~ Deuteronomy 3:11, where he gives a more full account of this story. Here observe,

1. That the Amorite begins the war (v. 33): He *went out to battle against Israel*. His country was very rich and pleasant. Bashan was famous for the best timber (witness the oaks of Bashan), and the best breed of cattle,

witness the bulls and kine of Bashan, and the lambs and rams of that country, which are celebrated, ^{
}Deuteronomy 32:14. Wicked men do their utmost to secure themselves and their possessions against the judgments of God, but all in vain, when their day comes, on which they must fall.

2. That God interests himself in the cause, bids Israel not to fear this threatening force, and promises a complete victory: “*I have delivered him into thy hand* (v. 34); the thing is as good as done already, it is all thy own, enter and take possession.” Giants are but worms before God's power.

3. That Israel is more than a conqueror, not only routs the enemies' army, but gains the enemies' country, which afterwards was part of the inheritance of the two tribes and a half that were first seated on the other side Jordan. God gave Israel these successes, while Moses was yet with them, both for his comfort (that he might see the beginning of that glorious work, which he must not live to see the finishing of) and for the encouragement of the people in the war of Canaan under Joshua. Though this was to them in comparison but as the day of small things, yet it was an earnest of great things.