

THE FIRST MILITARY VICTORIES AND THE BRONZE SNAKE: A PICTURE OF UNBELIEF AND OF CHRIST THE SAVIOUR NUMBERS 21:01–09

Introduction

When facing a desperate crisis, people often make vows. They promise to do certain things if God will only deliver them through the crisis. The crisis may be created by...

- war
- accident
- unfaithfulness
- unwanted pregnancy
- abuse
- mismanagement by self or others
- financial problems
- drugs
- disease
- unemployment
- alcohol

Crises are serious matters to God. God expects us to fulfil the vows and promises we make during crises. But making vows is only one picture seen in the events of this Scripture. There are two others:

=> the picture of Christ the Saviour

=> the picture of God's protection and victory against the enemies that attack His dear people as they march to the promised land

This is a passage that speaks to the deepest needs of man, a passage that needs to be heeded by us all. This is: *The First Military Victories and the Bronze Snake: A Picture of Desperate Vows and of Christ the Saviour*, Numbers 21:1-9.

I. The first military victory: a picture of making and fulfilling vows (vv. 1-3).

II. The bronze snake: a picture of unbelief and of Christ the Saviour (vv. 4-9).

I. Numbers 21:01–03 The First Military Victory of Israel

There was the first military victory of Israel, a victory over the Canaanite king of Arad. This is a clear picture of making vows to God and fulfilling the vows. This was the launch of a new day in the history of Israel. After wandering about in the wilderness for forty years, they experienced their very first military victory, a victory over one of the Canaanite nations. Remember, the Canaanite nations were so savage, evil and corrupt that they were beyond repair or repentance (see Gen 15:16; see outline and note, pt. 4 d, Gen 15:7-21). Forty years earlier, from this same area, Israel had attempted to enter the promised land. This was right after the spies had returned from their mission of spying out the land. But as we have seen, because of the terrible unbelief of the spies and the people, the march into the promised land had to be aborted. The people were condemned to spend forty years wandering about in the wilderness until the entire first generation of faithless believers had died. For forty years the people of God had been wandering about in the wilderness of this world. They were defeated, disappointed, frustrated, beaten

down — all because of unbelief, grumbling and murmuring against God and His dear servant Moses. They had failed to lay hold of the promises of God, that He would give them victory over the pitfalls and enemies of this life. As a result, they were unable to enter the promised land. But now their children, the second generation, were about ready to enter. The new day was dawning; here they were on the threshold of claiming the great promise of God, the hope of the promised land. Here is the very first military victory, a victory over a formidable enemy, an enemy that was set on destroying them. Note the Scripture and outline:

1. The Canaanite king of Arad heard that Israel was traveling close by (v. 1). For some reason, he launched a savage, secret attack against the Israelites. He apparently attacked some of the Israelites on the outskirts of the camp-site. His armed forces were apparently not large enough to launch an all-out attack against the military of Israel. Whatever the case, he captured some of the Israelites and took them back to the capital of Arad.
2. Note the reaction of Israel: a courageous determination and faith (vv. 2-3). They made a vow to the Lord that if God would give them victory, they would totally destroy the Arads. God heard the prayer of their vow and He gave them victory. Note the total obedience of the people in fulfilling their vow: they completely destroyed the savage, evil Canaanites (v. 3) (see *Judgement and Destruction of Evil Nations*, Num 21:2-3).

Thought 1. Making vows is a serious matter. When we make a vow, God expects us to keep the vow. He expects us to fulfil what we promise. This was true with Israelites, and it is true with us. We must fulfil our vows, the promises we make to the Lord.

Num 30:2 When a man makes a vow to the Lord or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he must not break his word but must do everything he said.

Deu 23:21-23 If you make a vow to the Lord your God, do not be slow to pay it, for the Lord your God will certainly demand it of you and you will be guilty of sin. But if you refrain from making a vow, you will not be guilty. Whatever your lips utter you must be sure to do, because you made your vow freely to the LORD your God with your own mouth.

Job 22:27 You will pray to him, and he will hear you, and you will fulfil your vows.

Psa 50:14 Sacrifice thank offerings to God, fulfil your vows to the Most High.

Psa 76:11 Make vows to the Lord your God and fulfil them; let all the neighbouring lands bring gifts to the One to be feared.

Eccl 5:4-6 When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfil your vow. It is better not to make a vow than to make one and not fulfil it. Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And do not protest to the temple messenger, "My vow was a mistake." Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands?

NUMBERS 21: 01 CITY OF ARAD

Arad was located in the Negev in the southern extreme of Judah's territory. Arad was a Canaanite city about eleven miles west southwest of Beersheba. It was also the headquarters of the Canaanite king of Arad and the scene of Israel's first military victory.

=> See other Scripture references for study: Num 33:40; Jos 12:14; Jdg 1:16. □

NUMBERS 21:02–03 JUDGMENT AND DESTRUCTION OF EVIL NATIONS

The words “utterly, totally, completely destroy” (harami or charam) mean to annihilate, exterminate, eliminate or abolish. The word is related to the Hebrew *herem* which means “to devote to the ban.” (*The Expositor's Bible Commentary*. Frank E. Gaebelin. Editor, p. 874). Once something had been promised or devoted to God, it was placed under the ban: it could not be removed. If it was a gift, it had to be given to God. If it was the promise to do something, then it had to be done. If it was a vow to devote something to destruction, then it had to be destroyed or exterminated. In ancient days, this was known as the *herem principal or law*. Once a person or thing had been *devoted* to the LORD, it could not be removed. It went to the LORD.

In the present case, Israel made a promise to God: if God would give them victory over the savage Canaanites, they would totally destroy the Canaanite cities. (See note, pt. 4, d, Gen 15:7-21.)

The very idea that God and moral people would be set on the total destruction of a people is offensive to some persons. How could God and moral people possibly endorse such an act? In looking at this, certain factors need to be kept in mind:

1. People can become so savage, evil and corrupt that they are beyond repair or repentance, beyond hope or correction. This is what is known as the “cup of iniquity being full” — filled to the point that it overflows and continues to overflow with...

- savagery
- lawlessness
- corruption
- violence
- abuse
- evil
- brutality
- cruelty
- immorality
- slavery
- atrocities
- injustice
- ruthlessness
- barbarism

History has shown that such behaviour can be true of both individuals and nations. A person's or a nation's “cup of iniquity” can become full — well beyond repair or repentance, well beyond hope or correction. God declares this fact time and again as the Scriptures below show (Gen 15:16).

God wants justice executed against these people. Scripture is clear about this fact: this is the very purpose for the judgment of God.

Gen 15:16 *In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.*

Lev 18:24-25 *Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled. Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants.*

Lev 20:23 *You must not live according to the customs of the nations I am going to drive out before you. Because they did all these things, I abhorred them.*

Deu 9:4-5 *After the LORD your God has driven them out before you, do not say to yourself, "The LORD has brought me here to take possession of this land because of my righteousness." No, it is on account of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is going to drive them out before you. It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity that you are going in to take possession of their land; but on account of the wickedness of these nations, the LORD your God will drive them out before you, to accomplish what he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.*

2 Kng 21:2 *He did evil in the eyes of the LORD, following the detestable practices of the nations the LORD had driven out before the Israelites.*

2 Chr 28:3 *He burned sacrifices in the Valley of Ben Hinnom and sacrificed his children in the fire, engaging in the detestable practices of the nations the LORD had driven out before the Israelites.*

2 Chr 33:2 *He did evil in the eyes of the LORD, following the detestable practices of the nations the LORD had driven out before the Israelites.*

Psa 106:38 *They shed innocent blood, the blood of their sons and daughters, whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan, and the land was desecrated by their blood.*

Isa 24:5 *The earth is defiled by its people; they have disobeyed the laws, violated the statutes and broken the everlasting covenant.*

Jer 3:2 *...You have defiled the land with your prostitution and wickedness.*

Jer 16:18 *I will repay them double for their wickedness and their sin, because they have defiled my land with the lifeless forms of their vile images and have filled my inheritance with their detestable idols.*

2. God is a just God as well as a God of love. God loves all people — every individual and all the people of every nation upon earth. His love continually flows out to everyone. But God is also a just God, the Sovereign Lord who

executes justice upon the earth. God is not an *indulgent grandfather* type of person who pampers the evil and savage of this world. To allow injustice to go unpunished, He would be a God of evil, a God who showed partiality and favouritism. He Would be favouring the evil of the earth by allowing them to go unpunished and showing injustice to the moral of the earth by allowing them to continue to suffer under the injustices of evil people.

When the “cup of iniquity” becomes full — well beyond repair or repentance, well beyond hope or correction — that person or people are to be judged. Justice is to be executed upon them. God wants justice executed against such persons. This is the reason He has appointed a day in which He will judge the world.

Mat 16:27 *“For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done.”*

Mat 25:31-33 *“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.*

Acts 17:31 *For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.*

Rom 2:16 *This will take place on the day when God will judge men’s secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.*

2 Tim 4:1 *In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge:*

Heb 9:27 *Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment,*

2 Pet 2:9 *If this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment, while continuing their punishment.*

2 Pet 3:9 *The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*

Jude 1:14-15 *Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied about these men: “See, the Lord is coming with thousands upon thousands of his holy ones to judge everyone, and to convict all the ungodly of all the ungodly acts they have done in the ungodly way, and of all the harsh words ungodly sinners have spoken against him.”*

Rev 20:12 *And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books.*

3. Israel was used by God as His instrument of justice and judgment against the nations of Canaan. The Israelites did not receive the promised land of Canaan because of some merit or value within themselves nor because of their own strength or power. Injustice and judgment, God Himself destroyed the Canaanites, and it was because of their wickedness that He destroyed them.

Again, it is critical to note this fact: Israel as a people did not receive the promised land because of their merit or value nor because of some righteousness they possessed. The Canaanites were destroyed because they were evil and their “cup of iniquity” had been filled to the brim. They reached the point of no repentance; they were beyond correction. Moses himself declared to the Israelites:

- a. “It is not because of any personal righteousness within you, not because you have pure hearts, that you inherit the promised land (Deu 9:5). The enemies of the land are to be conquered and destroyed for two reasons:

=> Because of their wickedness and because they are an evil people; their ‘cup of iniquity’ is full.

=> Because God is faithful; He fulfils His promise to the forefathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God has promised to give the promised land to their descendants, to all those down through the centuries who believe His Word, His promises.”

- b. “Understand this warning: it is not because of your righteousness that God gives you the promised land. On the contrary, you are a stiff-necked, stubborn people (Deu 9:6). You are a sinful people. You have no righteousness within yourselves that merits God’s favour. Your hearts are not upright nor pure enough to make God accept you and give you the victory over the enemies of the promised land. You are a stiff-necked, stubborn people.”

Deu 9:5-6 It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity that you are going in to take possession of their land; but on account of the wickedness of these nations, the LORD your God will drive them out before you, to accomplish what he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Understand, then, that it is not because of your righteousness that the LORD your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people.

Thought 1. James Philip makes an excellent statement on the justice and judgment of God that is well worth quoting in full.

God was using His people as the rod of His anger against peoples whose cup of iniquity was full to over-flowing. They were being judged for their sins and their depravities. This is, of course, stated explicitly more than once in the Old Testament itself (cf. Gen 15:16 and Lev 18:24-30). The time of their destruction was ripe. This is why they were thus dealt with, and it was no arbitrary act of

*injustice that drove them out of their land. They had forfeited the right to live as nations in Canaan by the extremes of their debauchery and depravity, just as Sodom and Gomorrah had done (Gen 19), and just as the Cainite civilization as a whole had done, bringing upon itself the judgment of the Flood (Gen 6). Furthermore, it should be remembered that God dealt with His own people in similar fashion when they proved themselves unworthy to life in the land of promise, and He brought them into the captivity of Babylon in 586 B.C. To understand God's burning passion for righteousness in His creatures is to understand the basic reason for these judgments upon men and nations that refused to be righteous, and who rendered themselves incapable of being so by their continued sin. (James Philip. *The Preachers' Commentary on Numbers* p. 31). □*

II. *Numbers 21:04–09 The Bronze Snake*

The bronze snake is a picture of unbelief and of Christ the Saviour. Marching out in the wilderness was hard and difficult. At the end of each day, the people were bound to be tired, exhausted and bone-weary. This passage shows how fatigue and exhaustion got to the people, how they had become so bone-weary that they lapsed back into their grumbling and unbelief. They began once again to attack God and His dear servant. The Scripture and outline clearly paint the picture:

1. Note the tragic situation: the people had to bypass or detour around Edom. This was a long distance out of the way (vv. 4-5). Remember, Moses had sent two diplomatic letters to the king of Edom asking permission to pass through their land. The king had rejected the appeal and had even gone so far as to threaten attack against the Israelites. Therefore, Moses had to lead the people on a detour around the land of Edom. As stated, this was a long distance out of the way for the people to travel. Fatigue and exhaustion set in, and they grew impatient. They began to grumble and murmur against God and against Moses:
 - => They asked why they had been led out of Egypt into the desert wilderness to die: there was no bread and no water in the desert wilderness.
 - => They stated that they detested the “worthless manna.” Remember that the manna was the bread from heaven, the bread that God Himself had provided to feed the people through their wilderness wanderings. The word the people used to describe the “manna” was *ballehem haqqeloqel*. This means “contemptible, worthless bread”; it means miserable, wretched, despicable, cheap bread. It even has the idea of cursing the heavenly bread, the bread that had been provided by God Himself. (*The Expositor's Bible Commentary*. Frank E. Gaebelin. Editor, p. 879). The people had constantly grumbled about God's gracious provision during their 40 year wilderness

wandering, but this time it was different. They actually stated that they detested the *manna*, and they cursed it. It was despicable, worthless, at best *junk food*. This time, the people had gone too far. God had no choice but to judge and chastise them and to do so severely.

2. Note the judgment, the chastisement of the Lord: He sent snakes among them, and many of them died (v. 6). They were “fiery serpents,” that is, *poisonous snakes*. The poison was obviously strong, very potent — the kind of venom that causes a horrible, agonizing death. This is indicated by the fact that many of the people subsequently died.
3. Note the confession and repentance of the people: they confessed their sin and asked Moses to pray for them, asking God to take away the snakes (v. 7). This Moses did. He was the servant of God, so he once again forgave them for their attacks against him and the Lord. As their minister, he loved them, so he again became their intercessor and mediator before God. No doubt, he begged God to forgive the sin of the people and to have mercy upon them.
4. Note the surprising answer of the Lord (v. 8): the Lord told Moses to make a replica of a snake and hang it on a high pole. Then God spelled out a condition for deliverance and healing: a person had to look at the snake hanging upon the pole. If he looked, he would be healed and would live.

This is one of the great symbols of Jesus Christ in the Scripture — His being hung upon the cross for the sins of the world. This is exactly what Christ Himself said:

John 3:14-16 “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up. That everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

5. Now, note the obedience of Moses: he hung a bronze snake on a pole just as instructed by God (v. 9).
6. The people were delivered, but only some. Only those who looked at the snake and believed the promise of God lived (v. 9). Keep in mind, this is a picture of deliverance by looking at (believing in) the cross of Jesus Christ (Jn. 3:14-15).

Thought 1. There are three significant lessons in this point for us.

- (1) Jesus Christ is the manna, the bread from heaven. God has given Jesus Christ to feed the souls of people. People hunger and crave for the food of purpose, meaning and significance in life. Christ and Christ alone can meet the hunger of the human soul. Jesus Christ is the Bread of Life.

Mat 6:33 *But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*

John 6:32-35 *Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it was my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." "Sir," they said, "from now on give us this bread." Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.*

John 6:48-51 *"I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life. I am the bread of life. Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."*

John 6:58 *This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your ancestors ate manna and died, but whoever feeds on this bread will live forever."*

Rev 2:7 *Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.*

Isa 55:2 *Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labour on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare.*

(2) The Israelites cursed the bread of God which was a symbol of Jesus Christ. Any person who curses Jesus Christ will be judged by God, severely judged. Any person who looks upon Jesus Christ as contemptible, worthless, wretched — as being useless — is going to face the wrath of God, a judgment beyond comprehension.

John 3:36 *"Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him."*

Rom 1:18 *The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness.*

Rom 2:8 *But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger.*

Eph 5:1-6 *Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children. And live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person — such a man is an idolater — has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient.*

2 Th 1:7-8 *And give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.*

2 Pet 2:9 *If this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment, while continuing their punishment.*

2 Pet 3:7 *By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.*

Jude 1:14-15 *“See, the Lord is coming with thousands upon thousands of his holy ones to judge everyone, and to convict all the ungodly of all the ungodly acts they have done in the ungodly way, and of all the harsh words ungodly sinners have spoken against him.”*

Rev 1:7 *Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen.*

Psa 2:12 *Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way, for his wrath can flare up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.*

(3) Jesus Christ has been lifted up as the Saviour of the world. God lifted up Christ just as the serpent was lifted up, as a symbol of deliverance. Any person who looks upon Christ and believes in Him will be delivered, that is, saved.

John 3:14-16 *“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up. That everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”*

John 5:24 *“Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life”*

John 11:25 *Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies.”*

John 12:46 *“I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness.”*

John 20:31 *But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*

Rom 10:9-10 *That if you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. ■*