

TRAVELING WITH A HOLY GOD WHO PROVES HIS FAITHFULNESS

Numbers 21:21-35

INTRODUCTION

Worry can turn a beautiful day into a lonely, cold and stormy night. Fear of future harm can make your present experience almost unbearable. The experience of fear, like the experience of pain, ranges from sharp, overwhelming panic to that low grade, persistent anxiety that shrouds your whole life and keeps out all light. God gave us the emotion of fear because there truly is danger in the world. Fear is meant to keep us from doing foolish things that endanger our lives or the lives of others. Fearing car accidents should motivate us to drive defensively, obey the traffic laws, wear our seatbelts and put our children in car seats. When we do these things, then fear of car accidents is reduced and even eliminated. But even if we live prudently in the world we all know that there are forces beyond our control which can at any moment bring harm to us and those we love. Therefore, everyone experiences fear of these uncontrollable forces on occasion and many of us live with relentless fear over these potential problems.

One of the reasons that the people of Israel did not obey God and go into the land of Promise back in Numbers 14 was fear of being killed by the Canaanites. They feared the power of their enemies and thus refused to trust God and to do what God commanded them to do. It is the same in our lives. Our fear often keeps us from trusting and obeying God. Some refuse to give money or to give all that God asks them to give because they fear not having enough money for their own needs and wants. Some fear losing friendships and so participate in sinful activities with their friends or refuse to tell their friends the gospel. Some fear being rejected or fear conflict and so refuse to have the hard conversations. Some fear the disapproval of others and so do not confess their own sins or expose the sins of family members to others who could help them. Some fear the loss of the comforts of a middle class life in the USA and so will not consider the fact God may be calling them to serve as missionaries in another land. Fear is a great inhibitor of faith-filled, godly living.

Anyone who has read even a little bit of the Bible knows that one of the most common things that God says to people is, "do not be afraid." The main reason God gives as to why we should not fear is because he is a faithful God. The antidote to fear is the faithfulness of God. God always keeps his promises to his people. God proves to us that he is a faithful God so that we will not fear but courageously trust and obey him. He aims for us to live our lives without fear but joyfully doing his will. In the second half of Numbers 21 God aims to prove to his people that he is faithful and thus can be trusted.

MAIN POINT

God proves his faithfulness by...

I. Doing what he promises (vv.21-25)

Almost 600 years prior to the events recorded in this passage God made a promise to an old, childless guy who was a nomad in the land of Canaan. He promised Abram two things. First, that he was going to have as many descendants as there were stars in the heavens. Second, the Lord promised him that his descendants were going to take possession of the land of Canaan. Listen to what the Lord told Abram (Genesis 15:13-18), "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be slaves there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve.... And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.' ... On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates..."

Notice the promise to Abram includes the promise of slavery in Egypt for 400 years, deliverance from that slavery and then the descendants of Abram were going to take the land of the Amorites. The story of the Bible

from Genesis 15 to this place in Numbers 21 is the story of how God has kept the promise he made to Abram. The king they defeat in vv.21-25 is Sihon, king of the Amorites. They destroy all the Amorites and take their cities and villages and, as v. 25 says, they settle in this land. This is the first mention of Israel taking possession of any piece of property and settling in any towns. Thus this is the first step in the fulfillment of God's promise that they are going to take over the entire land from the River of Egypt to the Euphrates.

The story that is recorded in the first four books of the Bible is a story that is full of human choices and human rebellion and human drama. However it is chiefly the story of God's faithfulness. It is the most amazing story of how God has ruled in and through and over all these human choices to accomplish his perfect will. How is God able to make sure that his rebellious people take over this land filled with enemies determined to destroy them? This is an important question for us to answer because God has made promises to us. How is it that he is able to make all things work together for our good? How is it that nothing is able to separate us who believe in Christ from his love? In view of our sin and in view of the opposition of this fallen world and our great enemy the devil, what confidence do we have that God is able to keep his promises and everything will be OK?

Some of you know this but for those of you who do not, many of the events that we have read about in Exodus and Numbers are repeated by Moses and recorded in the book of Deuteronomy. The entire book of Deuteronomy is spoken and written down during the 11th month of the 40th year of Israel's exodus from Egypt. In other words, Deuteronomy is spoken by Moses about 12-18 months after their defeat of Sihon while they are camped on the plains of Moab on the eastern shore of the Jordan River, which is where they are at in 22:1. The reason I tell you this is because Moses gives us a more detailed description, a "behind the scenes" perspective of this victory that helps us understand how it is that God keeps his promises in spite of human opposition.

In Deuteronomy 2 Moses explains why Sihon refused to let Israel pass through their land but rather came out to fight against them. Listen to what Moses says in Deuteronomy 2:30 (remember, he is talking to Israel following these events), "But Sihon the king of Heshbon would not let us pass by him, for the LORD your God hardened his spirit and made his heart obstinate, that he might give him into your hand, as he is this day." Sihon refused Israel's reasonable request for safe passage and came out to fight against Israel and thus was defeated by Israel because the Lord "hardened his spirit and made his heart obstinate." Did Sihon attack Israel against his will? Was he saying to himself, "I don't want to attack Israel but I can't help myself? Some force outside of me is making me do what I do not want to do?" Do you remember what God told Abram as to why he was not going to give him the land of the Amorites in Genesis 15 but wait for hundreds of years to do so? He said the reason for the wait was "because the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete." In other words, the Amorites were not as wicked as they were going to become. God waited some 600 years for the crimes of the Amorites to become overwhelmingly obvious and had Moses send the messengers asking for safe passage to make it clear that the Amorites deserved to be destroyed. It was perfectly just for God to send Israel to wipe out the Amorites because they were full of evil. It was perfectly just for God to act in such a way that insured that Sihon did what Sihon wanted to do, attack Israel. In other words, they did exactly what they wanted to do and in doing evil they did exactly what the Lord wanted them to do. They willingly did evil and are justly punished for the evil they did and yet the evil they did perfectly fulfilled God's purposes to destroy them and give Israel the land.

This is not some isolated verse. We have seen this same thing on many occasions as we've worked our way through the first four books of the Bible. God hardened Pharaoh's heart and his army's heart in the same way so he could destroy Egypt with plagues and the army in the Red Sea. Joseph said to his evil brothers that all the evil they did to him they did in order to harm him and yet they did exactly what God wanted them to do in order to save many people from starvation and to bring Israel to Egypt. And we are told about the greatest act of evil ever performed in this world, the crucifixion of Jesus that Pilate and the Jewish leaders and the Roman soldiers who tortured and killed Jesus did everything God's hand and his plan predestined to take place.

We do not live in a world where men and demons are free to act and God cannot do anything about the evil they do because he has to respect their "free will." We live in a world where "all things are working out according to the purposes of his will." We live in a world where God "causes all things to work together for the good of

those who love God and are called according to his purposes.” “All things” includes all evil things, as well as all good things. We live in a world where the sovereign Lord rules over every human choice and every demonic strategy so that all things serve God’s purposes. God never does evil, nor does he tempt anyone to evil but all the evil that is done in this world is done according to his plan and purposes. Thus, you can be sure that every promise that God makes, he will perform. There is no one who can successfully resist God’s purposes. His word and his purposes always stand and his promises always come true because he is the sovereign Lord over all things. Thus if you are trusting in Jesus you have nothing to fear for nothing and no one can harm you and remove you from the safety of God’s unfailing love. All the evil that is done to you and all the evil you do is ordained by God for his eternal glory and your eternal joy. **And** all the evil done to you and all the evil you do will be justly punished by God; either in the suffering and death of Jesus or in the God-sent afflictions of this life or in the God-sent afflictions of hell.

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- *Doing what he promises*
- *And by...*

II. Vanquishing all his and our enemies (vv.26-31)

In v. 26, after informing us of the victory of Israel over Sihon the narrator informs us that Heshbon was the capital city of the Amorites where their king, Sihon lived. That information is immediately followed by another piece of information: the land over which Sihon ruled and in which the Amorites lived used to belong to the king of Moab and his people. However, Sihon and his people had conquered Moab and taken all the land north of the river Arnon and east of the Dead Sea and the Jordan River from Moab. Then Moses, as he narrates this story tells us that it is because of Israel’s victory over Sihon and the victory of Sihon over Moab that the ballad singers sing a song. Then in vv. 27-30 we have the song. Now what we have is really two songs made into one. The first two lines of the song, in v. 27 and the last four lines of the song, in v. 30 are written from the point of view of Israel having conquered Sihon and Heshbon and all the Amorites. Those first two lines are a call for Israel to come to Heshbon and to its villages in order to rebuild them and establish them as Jewish communities. They must be built because they were destroyed in the war of Israel against the Amorites. You can see that is what is happening in the last four lines. “We”, that is Israel overthrew the ones who overthrew Moab. “We”, the people of Jacob laid waste all the villages and people of the Amorites. “We” were like fire spreading throughout the whole land. Thus the song sings the victory of Israel and calls for Israel to take over and establish the land.

However, the middle two verses are written to recount the victory of Sihon over Moab. Just as Israel burned like a fire throughout the Amorite territory so the Amorites had burned like a fire through the territory of Moab. The ballad singers declare woe upon Moab and the people of Chemosh. “Woe,” in the bible is always a declaration of God’s judgment upon someone for their sins. So Sihon’s victory over Moab was an act of God’s judgment upon Moab and a precursor of future judgment. Chemosh is the god of the Moabites. Notice the mockery at the end of v. 29: Chemosh the god of the Moabites has made his sons fugitives and his daughters captives of Sihon. In other words the ballad singers mock the Moabite god and call him a traitor for turning over his people to Sihon. Why are we told about the victory of Sihon over the Moabites and why are we given this song which recounts the victory of Israel over the people who had victory over Moab?

There are at least these two reasons for telling us this. The first and most immediate reason is because of what happens in Numbers 22-25. These chapters are a description of how the king of Moab, a guy by the name of Balak, seeks to destroy Israel by trying to get a pagan prophet named Balaam to curse Israel. Balaam is most famous for having a talking donkey. So before we hear a word about Moab’s hostility and attempts to destroy Israel we are told that Moab was beaten by Sihon whom Israel has beaten. Thus, the logic is that if we beat the guys who beat Moab, then we don’t need to be afraid of Moab, no matter what plots Balak and his prophet Balaam hatch. The second reason and one that looks into the future is that Moab is a thorn in Israel’s side throughout their entire history. They are one of the nations that God sends to punish them in the time of the

Judges; they are one of the enemies that Saul and then David has to conquer; they are one of the nations who then rebel and cause all the kings from Solomon to the end trouble. Moab is a stereotypical enemy of Israel, like the Philistines and the Syrians. Right at the beginning of Israel's history in the Promised Land they are told that Moab is not an enemy to be feared. If they will trust God, Moab will never have any power over the people of God. It is only when the people of God rebel against God that Moab is able to conquer them.

Just as God displays his power over Moab by Israel's conquering of Sihon so God has displayed his power over all our enemies in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Listen to these statements in the NT declaring God's vanquishing of our great enemies: sin, the world, death as God's punishment for sin and the devil. 1 John 3:8, "Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil." Colossians 2:13-15, "When you were dead in your sins..., God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross." Romans 6:9, "We know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him." John 16:33, "I (Jesus) have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

Everything that can harm us has been conquered by Christ. Thus, we have nothing to fear. While all our enemies still remain in the land, like Moab, yet they cannot harm us. The worse that can be done to us is that we may be killed but even that cannot separate us from the love of God. For all who are in Christ we will never feel the sting of death which is sin. God has vanquished all our enemies in Christ and so we can be courageous and confident no matter what happens.

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III. Reminding of past victories to give us present courage (vv.32-35)

Shortly after destroying Sihon and his people and then more Amorites at Jazer, the people of Israel marched north along the eastern bank of the Jordan River. As they marched north Og, king of Bashan came out with his army to attack Israel. Moses and the people knew about Og, that he was one of the remnants of the race of giants as Moses tells us in Deuteronomy. In fact, based on the size of his bed, which was kept as a museum piece in Ammon after this battle, he was at least 14 feet tall. Thus in this battle Israel is facing one of those giants that the 10 spies told the people of Israel they would have to fight. It is no wonder then that God, as the massive forces of Bashan come out to meet them, led by their giant king that the Lord said to Moses and through him to the people: "Do not be afraid of him, for I have handed him over to you, with his whole army and his land. Do to him what you did to Sihon king of the Amorites, who reigned in Heshbon."

Here Israel is actually faced with some of the very people they feared before and which fear provoked them to rebel against God. So God promises them that he will give the giant, Og and his army and his land into their hands. They will do to him just what they did to Sihon. So God adds to his promise of victory over Og the reminder of what he just did to the Amorites. If you are at all familiar with the Bible you know that God does this all the time. When he promises his people something he often adds to the promise a reminder of what he has done in the past so that we will trust him to be faithful in the present. In fact, God uses these two victories over Sihon king of the Amorites and Og, king of Bashan as a continual reminder to Israel of what he is going to do to the rest of the Canaanites. At the end of Deuteronomy, just prior to Moses' death and their crossing of the Jordan River God says to Israel, (Deuteronomy 31:3-6) "The LORD your God himself will cross over ahead of you. He will destroy these nations before you, and you will take possession of their land... And the LORD will

do to them what he did to Sihon and Og, the kings of the Amorites, whom he destroyed along with their land. The LORD will deliver them to you... Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.”

On what grounds can you and I be confident that God will provide us with everything we need to come safely into his heavenly kingdom? The assurance that God will keep me and bring me to heaven is to be found in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This is the exact argument that Paul uses in Romans 8:31-39. Please turn there, page 944. In v. 31 Paul says, “If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also, along with him, freely give us all things?” I want you to think about these two questions: If God is for you, who can be against you? I can think of a lot of persons who can be against you. Parents, children, spouses, co-workers, bosses, fellow church members, neighbors, your government, not to mention Satan and his demons, all these can be against you. So what does Paul mean by his question? What he means is this: who can successfully be against you if God is for you? What is Paul’s main assurance that no one and nothing can successfully oppose you? That is in the second question: if God gave his son for our sins he will most certainly give us everything we need so that no opposition will be able to ultimately harm us. We can be sure of God’s present and future provision and protection for one reason and one reason only: he sent Jesus to pay the penalty for our sins.

If you look at vv. 35-36 you can see that Paul doesn’t mean nothing bad will happen to you because God gave Jesus for you. Trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, poverty, danger and violent death may await you but none of these things can separate you from the love of Christ. No matter what happens, even if the worst you can imagine happens, you cannot be harmed because nothing will remove you from the love of God. It is because God gave Christ for your sins that you can be sure that he will give you everything you need to persevere in faith in Jesus to the end of your days and so enjoy the love of God forever. This is the antidote to worry: contrary to every expectation God loved you and gave Jesus for you and has pledged his love to you forever and is therefore at work to preserve you to eternal life. As Paul says at the end of his life you can always say, because God gave Jesus for you, “He will rescue me from every evil deed and bring safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever.”

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