

Christ Lifted Up

Numbers 21:1-9; John 3:14-15



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FOCAL 1 Read Responsively Numbers 21:1-9 And when king Arad the Canaanite, which dwelt in the south, heard tell that Israel came by the way of the spies; then he fought against Israel, and took some of them prisoners. {2} And Israel vowed a vow unto the LORD, and said, If thou wilt indeed deliver this people into my hand, then I will utterly destroy their cities. {3} And the LORD hearkened to the voice of Israel, and delivered up the Canaanites; and they utterly destroyed them and their cities: and he called the name of the place Hormah. {4} And they journeyed from mount Hor by the way of the Red sea, to compass the land of Edom: and the soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way. {5} And the people spoke against God, and against Moses, Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? for there is no bread, neither is there any water; and our soul loatheth this light bread. {6} **And the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died.** {7} Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD, and against thee; pray unto the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us. And Moses prayed for the people. {8} **And the LORD said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live.** {9} And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived.

FOCAL 2 John 3:14-15 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of

man be lifted up: {15} That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

The word “**wilderness**” occurs 294 times in the King James Version of our Holy Bible. When we hear that word - “**wilderness**” - it conjures up thoughts of vast and open spaces untouched by man's hand. We call places where mankind lives “cities”, “towns”, “villages”, and “homes”, but never “wilderness”. A wilderness is a wild place, a place where dangerous animals and dangerous people lurk. It is a inhospitable place. When **Abraham** cast his mistress **Hagar** and his son **Ishmael** out of his house he sent her into the wilderness (**Genesis 21:14**). When **Joseph**, whose daddy gave him a multicolored coat, was cast into a pit by his jealous brothers, it was their intention to abandon him in the wilderness (**Genesis 37:22**). When **David** ran away from the King of Israel because Saul wanted to kill him, he ran into the wilderness (**1 Samuel 23:14**). When the **Prophet Elijah**, was frightened and depressed because the evil woman **Jezebel** threatened his life, the Bible says “**he went a day's journey into the wilderness, and sat down under a juniper tree**” (**1 Kings 19:4**). When the dear saint **Job** lost his whole family it was because “**a great wind came from the wilderness, striking the house so that it fell on his children**” (**Job 1:19**). Humans like to be comfortable, we like things to follow a certain order and a certain way. **Jesus Christ** was tempted by the **devil** in the wilderness. We do not like the wilderness.

Yet we need to understand that the wilderness is not a place to be feared if we have placed our trust in God. A

potted plant's roots will soon become crowded and bound if it is not put in a larger holder. Once the roots become bound the plant plateaus, withers, then dies. The gardener who loves the plant will stress it by transplanting it into a larger pot – a wilderness – so it can continue to grow. The vine that has never felt the Master's shears wastes its life wandering uselessly through other shrubbery. The trials of this life and the wildernesses are not events to be fretted over. They are times and places where God gives us opportunity to draw closer to Him.

Hagar weeping in the wilderness heard God's promise that her son **Ishmael** would not only live, but he would be the father of a great nation (**Genesis 21:18**). **Joseph** sold to a slave trader in the wilderness trusted God. Though dishonored by his brothers Joseph honored the Lord - and God raised him up to sit on the right hand of the **Egyptian Pharaoh** (**Genesis 41:42**). The boy who would be King **David** turned his eyes – not on **Saul** who sought his life – but on the Lord he so loved. Rather than despair David prayed in the **wilderness of Judah**:

Psalms 63:1-4 “... O God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee: my soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is; {2} To see thy power and thy glory, so as I have seen thee in the sanctuary. {3} Because thy lovingkindness is better than life, my lips shall praise thee. {4} Thus will I bless thee while I live: I will lift up my hands in thy name.”

When the **Prophet Elijah** stopped feeling sorry for

himself he went to the **mountain of God** and there the Lord, in loving kindness, asked that dear man **“What doest thou here Elijah?”** Why are you here, so despondent, My friend? (**1 Kings 19:13**). God comforted **Elijah** in the wilderness, and took him from this earth in wondrous rapture in the wilderness (**2 Kings 2:11**). Job lost his family because of the wilderness, but in the end **“the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before”** (**Job 42:10**). Why? Because Job looked upward to God, trusting the Lord his Savior no matter what the wilderness brought.

The God of the great is also the God of the small. The God of this earth certainly has control of its wildernesses. As the Bible says:

Psalms 74:12-16 For God is my King of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth. {13} Thou didst divide the sea by thy strength: thou didst break the heads of the dragons in the waters. {14} Thou didst break the heads of leviathan in pieces, and gavest him to be meat to the people inhabiting the wilderness. {15} Thou didst cleave the fountain and the flood: thou driedst up mighty rivers. {16} The day is thine, the night also is thine: thou hast prepared the light and the sun.

Our God is the God of the day and of the night. When the night comes, when the wilderness gathers round about your lives, do not fret nor fear. Turn your eyes upon Jesus. Trust Him, believe on Him, and He shall give you rest. Like Joseph, when you are in the bottom of a pit, look up! When you are in the deepest of pits you

can still see His stars in the Heavens. Like David, look away from those who persecute you and look toward Jesus. He has promised to bless your life. God is faithful – He will do as He said. He is stronger than Jezebel, stronger than Saul, stronger than the desert, stronger than any wilderness. Come unto Jesus and He shall give you rest (**Matthew 11:28**).

1. What Must I Do When I Find Myself In The Wilderness?

I have heard of cars that go from zero to sixty in five seconds. I've never owned one, but I've heard of them. Man can make a car that can go from zero to sixty in five seconds. That's amazing. What is equally amazing is that man can also go from a successful and victorious life to the garbage heap in even less time.

That's the story of Israel.

As we come into Numbers chapter 21 we see the children of Israel confronted with *two wildernesses*. In the first wilderness they responded in the right way to the trial. In the second wilderness they responded in unbelief, in murmuring, and brought destruction on themselves. Let's look at our text:

FOCAL 1 Numbers 21:1 And when king Arad the Canaanite, which dwelt in the south, heard tell that Israel came by the way of the spies; then he fought against Israel, and took some of them prisoners.

The **Canaanite King of Arad** (see **Joshua 12:14**;

Judges 1:16) had placed **spies** or guards around his kingdom. When **Israel came by the way of the spies** the King of Arad was ready. The Bible says “**he fought against Israel, and took some of them prisoner**”. Israel was no threat to Arad at this time. She had been wandering in the wilderness for *thirty eight years*, and would have to wander still for two more years before she could enter the Promised Land of Canaan. But Arad wanted to protect its territory, and what better way to make the first strike against these strange people called “Israel”?

The Canaanites were a ferocious people, many of whom had departed so far away from the true and living God that they had deteriorated into *child sacrifice*. God warned His people against following the ways of the unbeliever. He told Israel to avoid *adultery*:

Leviticus 18:20 Moreover **thou shalt not lie carnally with thy neighbor's wife, to defile thyself with her.**

And to avoid *child sacrifice*:

Leviticus 18:21 And **thou shalt not let any of thy seed pass through the fire to Molech, neither shalt thou profane the name of thy God: I am the LORD.**

And to avoid *homosexuality*:

Leviticus 18:22 **Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination.**

And to avoid *bestiality*:

Leviticus 18:23 **Neither shalt thou lie with any beast to defile thyself therewith: neither shall any woman stand before a beast to lie down thereto: it is confusion.**

Sexual sins and child sacrifice were common among the Canaanites. The Lord told His people:

Leviticus 18:24 **Defile not ye yourselves in any of these things: for in all these the nations are defiled which I cast out before you:**

The Canaanites would be cast out of the Promised Land as Israel took it. Why?

The Canaanite nations and its people would lose their homes because they wandered into the wilderness of gross sin, and blasphemed the Only True God by their misplaced faith.

The Canaanites – because of their hedonistic lifestyle and their cavalier approach to God – were a fierce and destructive people. Like a whirlwind from the wilderness these people reached out and struck at the children of God. They were successful too, because we read:

FOCAL 1 Numbers 21:1 {Arad} ... fought against Israel, and took some of them prisoners.

The wilderness – the lost – the unbelieving **took some of them prisoners**. Listen dear Ones, those of you who are

saved by faith in Christ. Do you not have loved ones who have been taken by unbelief? Do you not have family and friends that are inhabitants of Canaan, who love Canaan's slavish ways, who wallow in Canaan's mud pits of sin? Do you not know parents and grandparents who, because they have bowed the knee to Canaan and to Arad, are allowing their children to pass through the fires of false gods and goddesses? Hear this, O Church.

You cannot defeat Canaan, you cannot overthrow the heart surrendered to the wilderness of sin. But God in Christ can. Follow the example of Israel who cried unto the Lord.

What did Israel do when defeated by Arad? They cried unto the Lord. Look at our text:

FOCAL 1 Numbers 21:2 **And Israel vowed a vow unto the LORD, and said, If thou wilt indeed deliver this people into my hand, then I will utterly destroy their cities.**

Look at this text carefully. Israel first of all **cried unto the Lord, vowing a vow unto Him.** They promised God that they would move forward in faith to do *what they did not do 38 years before.* This is still the first generation of Israel, the generation that was forced to wander in the wilderness because they refused to cross the Jordan into the Promised Land. This is the remnant of Israel of whom God warned through the Psalmist:

Psalms 95:8-11 Harden not your heart, as in the

provocation, and as in the day of temptation in the wilderness: {9} When your fathers tempted me, proved me, and saw my work. {10} Forty years long was I grieved with this generation, and said, It is a people that do err in their heart, and they have not known my ways: {11} Unto whom I swore in my wrath that they should not enter into my rest.

This was a people whose heart had previously *been a wilderness* – but who now turned to God with truly repentant hearts. Their loved ones were entrapped by Arad. The bloodthirsty Canaanites had seized their people. So Israel turned unto God. Look at the text again:

FOCAL 1 Numbers 21:2 **And Israel vowed a vow unto the LORD, and said, If thou wilt indeed deliver this people into MY HAND, then I will utterly destroy their cities.**

This was a *unified Israel.* It wasn't like it was before when ten spies gave an evil report, and two spies – Joshua and Caleb – told them to take the land. This Israel cried unto the Lord as *one person.* They were in *one accord* because of the wilderness about them, because the devil attacked through Arad, because their only hope was the Lord.

If God's people will stand in one accord, worshiping Him in the wildernesses of life then the Lord will help us to overcome.

God will not bless us in disunity, nor will He bless us in compromise.

Look at the text once more:

FOCAL 1 Numbers 21:2 And **Israel vowed a vow unto the LORD**, and said, If thou wilt indeed deliver this people into my hand, then **I will utterly destroy their cities**.

Entirely too many people and too many local Churches have made *deals with the Canaanites* in order to survive. I have heard it said “**if you give a mouse a cookie, he'll want a glass of milk**”. So it is with Satan. If you give **Satan an inch, He'll want to be the ruler**. If you **let the devil ride, in time he'll be driving the cart or the car**. The Bible tells us that Jesus Christ is:

John 1:29 ... the Lamb of God, which TAKETH AWAY¹ the sin of the world.

Jesus Christ did not come to save people in their sins, He came to save them from their sins. He is the Lamb of God Who takes away sin.

¹ Present Active Participle of G142, αἶρω, airō, *ah'ee-ro*, A primary verb; to *lift*; by implication to *take up* or *away*; figuratively to *raise* (the voice), *keep in suspense* (the mind); specifically to *sail away* (that is, *weigh anchor*); by Hebraism (compare [H5375]) to *expiate sin*: - away with, bear (up), carry, lift up, loose, make to doubt, put away, remove, take (away, up).

ILLUSTRATE A wonderful illustration of this great principle is not just our text today, but also the illustration of *the scapegoat*. Two goats were to be brought to the High Priest to be offered as payment for the sin of the people. One goat, the Bible tells us, was to be **offered for a sin offering**. The other goat, the **scapegoat**, was not killed, but was **released into the wilderness far away from God's people**. The illustration shows us a perfect picture of our Christ. Like the goat of the **sin offering (Leviticus 16:8)** He bore the penalty for our sins.

Hebrews 9:28 So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many ...

and as Peter tells us:

1 Peter 2:24 Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, ...

He bore our sins in His own precious Body on the tree. He

Hebrews 7:27 ... offered up himself.

For you and for me. But He also, as John the Baptist said, “**taketh away our sin**”. Like the Scapegoat Jesus was **taken out into the wilderness**. As He hung on that Cross He bore our sins, but He also promised to *take our sins away*. What does the Scripture say? God has:

Colossians 1:13 ... delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of

his dear Son:

and Peter echoes:

1 Peter 2:24 Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that **we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness:** by whose stripes ye were healed.

God's people are no longer inhabitants of Canaan, but we are alive because of Jesus. The **Kingdom of Arad must die**, and does die, where God's people march in one accord. What does the Bible tell us about Israel?

FOCAL 1 Numbers 21:3 ... **the LORD hearkened to the VOICE of Israel, and delivered up the Canaanites; and they utterly destroyed them and their cities: and he called the name of the place Hormah.**

The land can be taken for God – we can see our brothers and sisters, our fathers and mothers saved. We can see this nation turned back to God. But we must be in one accord, lifting up the Name of Jesus. We must stand united proclaiming Him to be **the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14:6)**. We must shun the ways of Canaan *in God's power, not in our own*, and magnify His Name with one voice.

Jesus is able!

2. What Must I Do When I Put Myself In The Wilderness?

Israel looked unto God in the midst of the wilderness and was blessed. But when Israel turned her eyes from Jesus and back on to herself she began to murmur and complain. We read:

FOCAL 1 Numbers 21:4 And they **journeyed from mount Hor by the way of the Red sea, to compass the land of Edom:** and the soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way.

Look at where the Lord led His Israel. They **journeyed from Mount Hor**. This was the place where they defeated the **King of Arad and his evil forces**. They went by the **way of the Red Sea**, again, a place of great victory. It was here that their great enemy **Egypt** was destroyed. They went around the **land of Edom**, the land that was given to Abraham's son **Esau** because of God's great grace (**Deuteronomy 2:5**).

Israel was traveling – not down a trail of tears, but along a carefully planned route that highlighted the graciousness of God's blessings.

Furthermore, Israel was being blessed even as they traveled. Daily they ate *manna* or the Bread of Heaven, and they were fed *wild quail* for their meat. May I say that often the greatest trial is *no trial at all*. It is in the seasons of greatest blessing that often we turn our eyes away from God and lust for more than is better for us. Perhaps Israel thought that now this generation could enter the Promised Land. Perhaps she thought it unfair of God that she continue to wander after “doing so well

against Arad”. These are dog and rabbit trails in the forest of life, paths that look inviting but – in the end – lead us away from the Way that is Christ. C.H. Spurgeon said:

“While we are hard at work for the Lord, watching against temptation, striving against sin, or bravely enduring trial, we behave ourselves well; but, full often, when we are engaged in what ought to be mere child’s play, getting rid of self-inverted and unreasonable fears, we stumble and fall, and bring disgrace upon ourselves and upon our Christian profession. I think that, if a Christian is to grow to the full stature of a man in Christ, he must be subjected to the strong winds of trial and temptation.”

There are times in my life when I look back on trials – even the crushing of my left leg – and praise God fervently for it. The trials of our faith are things to rejoice over. Praise Jesus when Canaan threatens. Praise God when sickness, disease, death, or sin threaten. Know that

1 Peter 1:7 ... the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ:

Israel with trials looked to Jesus. Israel *without trials* looked to herself. The One Voice once vowed unto God **“If You’ll deliver this people into my hands, I will destroy their cities”** now **“spoke against God and**

against Moses”. What did they say? Look at the text:

FOCAL 1 Numbers 21:5 ... Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? for there is no bread, neither is there any water; and our soul loatheth this light bread.

Israel walked along **“Blessing Way”** and mocked the blessing of God.

“Why have You brought us out of Egypt to this wilderness?”

“My Child, have I not kept My Word? Have I ever left you or forsaken you? Have I **“not come unto You” (John 14:8) as I have promised?**

“There is no bread here”.

“Dear Ones, have I not given you Bread. **“I am the Living Bread Who came out of Heaven. You live because of My provision. (John 6:51)”**

“And we are so sick of this plain old 'light bread'. We want more.”

Oh Israel, I offered you the Promised Land, I offered you more, but you would not take it. You would not believe My Word:

Jeremiah 17:7 Blessed is the man that trusteth in the LORD, and whose hope the LORD is.

What could the Lord do? The people were focused on themselves, on their greed, on their wants and desires. So the Bible says:

FOCAL 1 Numbers 21:6 the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died.

God sent a trial.

Sometimes the greatest gift God can give us is a trial, for trials bend our knees and make us look upward to God.

Some of you pray frequently that your trials be removed, and there's nothing wrong with praying and seeking His face in the midst of the trial. But Beloved, what the Lord often wants of us in the midst of the trial is that *we look to Him and Him alone*. Fiery serpents came into the camp and began biting people. Like sin and sinful murmuring the serpents made no distinction. **They bit the people**. They bit the old people. They bit the middle aged people. They bit the young people. They bit the little bitty babies. *Then the voice of the people changed*. They mocked God no more, but turned in one accord toward God. **“We have sinned. Make it better”**. God told His people:

FOCAL 1 Numbers 21:8 ... Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh

upon it, shall live.

What is the solution for the wilderness of the heart?
Look upon that which you hate. Look upon your sin.
See it poured out on the Body of the Christ.

What did God tell Israel? **Make a serpent of brass, and put it on a pole. When the people LOOK UP AT IT they will be healed.** We understand this text better when we turn to our New Testament text which states:

FOCAL 2 John 3:14-15 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: {15} That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

The solution to the wilderness of the heart is Jesus. The solution to the life – dead and dying under the venom of sin – is **Jesus. Look upon Him and live**. Look upon Him hanging on that tree for you. Look at what the serpents have done to Him. Look at the lash marks on His precious flesh. Look at the punctures the fangs of the nails have made as they were driven into hands that never did wrong. Look at the panes of judgment that mocking hang above His head, saying “The King of the Jews”. Look at the Blood that runs down, dripping to the ground, unheeded by the cruel Roman guards who cast lots for His clothes.

Look on Him and know this. He has died that you might have life. **Whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.** Are you a believer

who has wandered from the fold? Has personal sin and your surrender to Canaan poisoned your life? Look unto Jesus. Have trials like vipers consumed you, poisoning you with bitterness and disquiet. Look unto Jesus. Do as He has commanded:

Micah 7:7 Therefore I will look unto the LORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation: my God will hear me.

Are you an unbeliever that has tried living outside of the fold in your own power? Look unto Jesus. LOOK unto Jesus. Nothing else will save you. Look not unto your pastor, nor to a priest, but to Him Who died for you and rose again. Look unto Jesus.

May God touch your hearts with His Word.



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