

Trials for Transformation Numbers 20-21

Most of us have gone through various trials in our lives and they're the things that no one wants to go through. They aren't part of our plan. They're painful. They can be life-changing and disorienting and leave us in a situation we'd rather not be in. Our natural response is to hate and try to avoid them or get out of them as quickly as possible. If that doesn't happen we can easily complain and feel bitter and sorry for ourselves.

They can also wreak havoc on our relationship with God because we assume pain and hardship shouldn't really stay in our lives once we've committed ourselves to him. I think we just expect God to protect or deliver us from most trials and when he doesn't, it can create doubt, confusion and bitterness toward him.

But there's a way the Bible teaches us about trials that's much different than that and it's a critical truth we need to learn as early as possible in our Christian lives to help us endure and press on in faith. Some of you have learned this truth but some of you are still on your way, and I hope this sermon will help.

We're in Numbers 20-21 this morning and these chapters mark a major turning point in the book. The years of wandering in the wilderness are coming to an end and now it's finally time to move forward and take possession of the Promised Land. Most of the rebellious Israelites had died and this was the next generation. They were the ones who would carry out the conquest of Canaan and settle in the land to be a kingdom of priests and a light and revelation of God to the surrounding world.

But they were not ready to do that yet. This was a new generation, but they had the same sinful tendencies as their parents – sins that prevented their parents from going into Canaan, and God needed to change that. The kingdoms they would come up against had large populations, large armies, fortified cities, and some even had unusually large warriors. And their parents had reacted to that with faithlessness, fear, and rebellion. What was going to keep this next generation from doing the same thing?

We're going to see God bring about a major transformation during their journey from Kadesh to the entrance of Canaan – a journey that took several months to complete. And the way he brought about that transformation was through a series of trials they encountered. God used those trials to uproot habitual sin and bring about deeper trust and obedience, which is the same thing he uses trials for in our lives today.

The first trial they encountered happened as soon as they assembled at Kadesh to begin their journey.

Read Numbers 20:2-5.

²Now there was no water for the congregation. And they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron. ³And the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Would that we had perished when our brothers perished before the Lord! ⁴Why have you brought the assembly of the Lord into this wilderness, that we should die here, both we and our cattle? ⁵And why have you made us come up out of Egypt to bring us to this evil place? It is no place for grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, and there is no water to drink."

So the first trial they encountered was that there was not enough water in Kadesh to sustain them or their livestock. This was very similar to something their parents went through, and unfortunately they did exactly the same thing their parents did. They reacted in despair and anger and grumbled against God and against Moses and Aaron. So the trial exposed their sinfulness and brought it to the surface. How would God respond?

Numbers 20:6-9.

⁶Then Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly to the entrance of the tent of meeting and fell on their faces. And the glory of the Lord appeared to them, ⁷and the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ⁸"Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and Aaron your brother, and tell the rock before their eyes to yield its water. So you shall bring water out of the rock for them and give drink to the congregation and their cattle." ⁹And Moses took the staff from before the Lord, as he commanded him.

God was gracious and merciful with this new generation and didn't respond to their sin with judgment. Even though they didn't seek him or ask him for help, he chose to provide water. I think he wanted to demonstrate his power, faithfulness, and kindness to teach them he would be faithful and they could depend on him to meet their needs.

It appears his gracious response was unexpected and made Moses and Aaron quite upset, because rather than carrying out God's directive and telling the rock to yield its water, Moses spoke to the Israelites instead. We read this in Numbers 20:10-12: *"Then Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, "Hear now, you rebels: shall we bring water for you out of this rock?"¹¹ And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice, and water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their livestock.¹² And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them."*

Moses and Aaron were God's representatives before the people, and instead of representing his mercy and kindness in that situation as he commanded, they showed harshness and anger instead. And because of their misrepresentation of God and their sin against him before the assembly, they were forbidden to enter the Promised Land.

So the first trial exposed Israel's deep-rooted sin and God responded with mercy. The second trial came while they were still in that area and this time it appears they may have actually learned something from the first.

Read Numbers 21:1-3.

When the Canaanite, the king of Arad, who lived in the Negeb, heard that Israel was coming by the way of Atharim, he fought against Israel, and took some of them captive.² And Israel vowed a vow to the Lord and said, "If you will indeed give this people into my hand, then I will devote their cities to destruction."³ And the Lord heeded the voice of Israel and gave over the Canaanites, and they devoted them and their cities to destruction. So the name of the place was called Hormah.

So this time, the people of Israel actually turned to the Lord for help. When they were attacked by the army of the Canaanite king and some of them taken captive, they cried out to the Lord and made a vow before him and he answered and brought them victory. This was a significant victory because it marked the first battle they won in 40 years. It showed that the time of judgment in the wilderness was coming to an end. God was with them and for them and would fulfill his promises to bring them into Canaan and drive out their enemies.

Well, unfortunately this high point of victory was short lived, because it was followed by another trial in which they failed miserably, similar to the first, but this time even more serious. Before leaving Kadesh, Moses had sent messengers to the king of Edom, which was to the east, and stood right between where they were and where they needed to go. (Map) Moses was asking permission to pass through his country. They would not cross any fields or vineyards but would go right along a route called the King's Highway. And if they needed any water, they would pay for it.

Edom was not part of the Promised Land. It belonged to the descendants of Esau, and the Lord would not give any of that land to the people of Israel. Moses knew that and only wanted to pass through. But the king of Edom refused. He even brought out a large army to block the way and not allow Israel to pass.

So this was another trial because Edom extended all the way north to the Dead Sea, which meant the only way around was to the south and that meant the whole congregation would have to take a very long detour back toward Mount Sinai in order to go around the southern end of Edom before heading back toward Canaan again. Imagine going on a long trip and coming up to those dreaded "Detour" signs and instead of just sending you to another crossroad a few miles down the road you had to turn around and go 100 miles in the wrong direction. That's what the Israelites were looking at, only they had to do it on foot.

So after the victory over the Canaanite king, they were forced to begin their long detour. It was another trial that would bring their sin to the surface.

Numbers 21:4-5.

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. ⁵ And the people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.”

So they responded like they and their parents had often done before – bitterness and complaining – only this time they went even further and made insults against God. They vomited their hatred for the manna God was giving to sustain them. This time God responded with discipline and judgment.

Read Numbers 21:6.

Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.

Poisonous snakes started coming out of the ground, rocks and cracks throughout the camp and striking the people. And if you know anything about deadly venom, it’s an agonizing way to die. The congregation was suffering because of their sin and I want you to see how they responded because you can see how God was using this trial and painful discipline to bring them to repentance.

Read Numbers 21:7-9.

And the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸ And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” ⁹ So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

The response of the Israelites is very significant. Notice that they didn’t harden their hearts or stiffen their necks against God, even though they knew that the snakes had come from him. What did they do? They actually acknowledged their sin and confessed it to Moses. They asked him to pray for them that God might show mercy. This is a remarkable change.

And God responded to their confession and prayer with mercy. He had Moses form a serpent and put it on a pole. If the people would trust the Lord and look upon that serpent, they would be healed and live. (a powerful foreshadow of the cross) God was using trials and painful discipline to uproot their bitterness, faithlessness, and rebellious tendencies and bring about humility, trust, and dependence on him. That was actually the last time Israel complained in their journey to Canaan. I think that means transformation was happening.

After completing that detour and getting close to the end of that stage of their journey, Numbers 21 records that they faced two more trials, both from enemy armies east of Canaan that came out to try to destroy them. In these trials they no longer cried out against God or Moses in despair like they had done before. It appears that they trusted the Lord instead. And God gave them victory. Israel defeated both armies and took possession of their land, east of the Jordan – which later became the inheritance of two of the tribes of Israel.

So as you look at their journey from Kadesh to the eastern border of Canaan, you see that transformation had taken place – much needed transformation that was really, really good for them, and that God had used trials to bring it about. I don't think it would have happened any other way. They needed those trials for God to do his good work in them.

And we do too. The truth about trials that we read in Scripture is that God uses them to bring about transformation and growth. Someone who has been through a lot of trials said to me this week: “None of our sufferings are wasted.” And that's the truth.

James 1:2-4 “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”

1 Peter 4:12-13 “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.”

Romans 5:3-4 “Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.”

Some of you have learned these things by going through trials and seeing what God has done through them. And if you haven't faced many trials yet, I encourage you to arm yourself with this way of thinking so that when they come, you will trust the Lord and patiently endure.