

1. My title is the expression, "Two steps forward and one step back". If you are unfamiliar with that phrase, it usually refers to our maturity. The idea is that our lives improve in steps and we often make mistakes as we grow up. The idea is we will take two steps in the right direction and we will often then take one step back in the wrong direction.
  - a) That title refers to what I see the Israelites doing at this point in the book of Numbers. The focus is now on the second generation of the Israelites that came out of Egypt. This generation is starting to mature the way God wants them to mature. They are acting better than their parents but at the same time, still make mistakes.
  - b) The lesson for us is about how we mature as individuals and as a society. One of the best principals I have ever learned about the issue of maturity is, "If we can repeat only half of our parents mistakes, we will do well in life." For example, if our parents yelled at us a lot or if they had a specific bad habit, if we only repeat it half as badly, we will do well.
    - i) I got that concept from Dennis Prager, a popular radio commentator.
2. With that stated, let me give some specific's of what is happening at this point and that should explain why I picked this specific title.
  - a) The Israelites have in a sense come full circle. They are at the same location where their parent's generation first battled the residents of the Promised Land. That last time such a battle happened, the Israelites lost badly. Here they win their first victory battle. That is their first step forward in this chapter.
  - b) After this, the Israelites started grumbling about their situation again. That bad habit of their parent's generation is returning here at this point. At this point we have a strange story about them being bitten by snakes. The cure for the snake bites involved looking at a pole, with a brass snake being placed on that pole. Then they were miraculously cured of their snake poison by looking at this brass snake on a pole.
    - i) Jesus compared Himself to being lifted up in a manner like this metal snake on a pole. The point being that this snake on a pole is going to be somewhat similar to how Jesus was raised up for our sins. The point is just as we look to Jesus death to give us our new life, so the Israelites must look to this snake in order for them to have life again. This is from the Gospel of John Chapter 3, Verses 13-15.
    - ii) This story was their step backward and God showing them how to move forward.
  - c) Then we read of the Israelites on the move again. Moses is still leading them. Here we have the leader of the previous generation leading the next generation to do what their parents failed to do: Move toward the Promised Land with the goal of conquering it. In effect this is another step forward. Two more battles are fought in this chapter.
    - i) This chapter also talks about Moses providing water for the Israelites and a song is sung in appreciation for the water that came out of a well. Earlier in the chapter, they grumbled about a lack of water. My point is one can see the maturity taking place as the Israelites improve from grumbling to gratitude.
      - a) In effect, that is another step forward in life.
    - ii) As I said, there are more battles fought here outside of Israel. The remainder of the chapter does not discuss the battles as much as it talks about a "victory song". This song appears to be one their enemy of that moment sang. The Israelites made that song their own. The lesson is about dedicating to God what we have learned. We may be surprised to learn how many classical Christian hymns were originally secular tunes that were then used as hymns. That is in effect what we have here. It is another example of a step forward in drawing closer to God by giving Him gratitude for what we have acquired and learned in life.

3. OK, it's time for me to explain how all of this is relevant to us. Obviously the simple point of this chapter is that the Israelites are maturing by trusting God with their lives.
  - a) They are growing. They are doing the classical "take two steps forward and take one step backwards" growth step that one can observe by watching people over their lifetimes.
  - b) Even if I accept that is true, why should I study this chapter? What am I to get out of learning all of this ancient history about the Israelites? The answer is that it teaches us steps about how to practically draw closer to God. Remember what is the goal here, to get those Israelites and us, to trust Him to guide every step of their and our lives.
    - i) When the Israelites got their focus off of God, they started grumbling once again.
    - ii) When the Israelites got their focus on Him, they were either conquering over other nations (symbolic of conquering over our fears in life) or they were singing praise songs to God for their victories. To put it another way, they were growing in joy just by putting their focus on Him no matter what is happening in their lives.
    - iii) A great lesson to learn in life is how gratitude makes us more joyful people. I am convinced that being appreciative of what we do have in life gives us joy. We are going to read here of the Israelites full of joy because they are full of gratitude.
      - a) Hopefully that gratitude will become contagious for all of us here and hopefully that is another thing we can get out of studying this chapter.
  - c) In summary I would like all of us to read this chapter not to learn ancient history, but to help each of grow and "take two steps closer to God" and realize that we will still have to take our own "one step backwards" as we become more dependant upon Him in order to live the type of life that He desires of each of us.
    - i) With that somewhat happy thought stated, it is time for Verse 1 of this chapter.
4. Chapter 21, Verse 1: When the Canaanite king of Arad, who lived in the Negev, heard that Israel was coming along the road to Atharim, he attacked the Israelites and captured some of them.
  - a) It would probably be good here to state a few things about the Canaanite's here.
    - i) That term is a generic word to describe anyone who lived in the land of Israel at that time. It also describes some specific tribes of people who lived in that area.
    - ii) The closest comparison I can think of would be a country called Canaanite and a capital city with the same name. Depending upon the context of the sentence one could be talking about a resident of the capital city or a resident of the country.
    - iii) A point here is that while the Israelites were not yet conquering residents of the land of Israel, they were starting to deal with Canaanites outside of that land.
  - b) The second thing that is not easy to notice unless one studies their bible carefully is that the Israelites are now at the same location where their parents' generation failed.
    - i) Let me explain. After the Israelites believed the report of the bad spies and they found out they had to wander in the wilderness for forty years. Some of them rebelled and said in effect, "Let's ignore that forty year prediction and go conquer the land." At that point they attempted to enter Israel and well, lost badly. This was from the final verses of Chapter 14 in the book of Numbers.
    - ii) My point is the same location where their parents failed to obey God and lost their first military battle is the same place where the Israelites would win here.
  - c) With that said, one has to notice how this battle actually took place. The Israelites at this point were traveling around the land of the Edomites (see the last chapter) and now were about to face the king of a city called Arad. This king attacked the Israelites as they were marching through the desert. Some of the Israelites were captured in this battle.
    - i) The thing to catch, coming up in the next verse, is that the parents' generation ran away when the fighting got bad. This next generation said in effect, "God said we would make it to the Promised Land and we would conquer it. Therefore, we are not afraid of what this one king can do to us. We will fight and win."
    - ii) With that stated, we are now ready for Verse 2.

5. Verse 2: Then Israel made this vow to the LORD: "If you will deliver these people into our hands, we will totally destroy their cities." <sup>3</sup> The LORD listened to Israel's plea and gave the Canaanites over to them. They completely destroyed them and their towns; so the place was named Hormah.
- a) My loose translation of these verses, "The Israelites lost some of their own people when this king attacked them. The Israelites then looked to God and said in effect, "If you give us victory over these people, we promise to completely destroy them and their cities".
  - b) I would say requires a bit of an explanation. Even if they felt the need to conquer these people, why would they have to completely destroy their cities? Why did they ask God in the first place? Also, why did God agree to let the Israelites do all of this destruction?
    - i) To explain, we have to come back to "Two steps forward and one step backwards". The big goal here was to get the Israelites to enter the Promised Land and to put it simply, conquer the residents there. In effect, God is training them by giving them this victory on the way there.
    - ii) One also has to understand why God wanted the Israelites to completely wipe out these people. Over 400 years earlier, God told Abraham, the common ancestor of all the Jewish people that "the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full". That refers to the residents of the nation of Israel. Apparently those who lived in the land of Israel prior to them actually conquering it were guilty of offering up their children as sacrifices to their gods, as well as other things equally as horrible to think about.
      - a) God in effect said to Abraham, I'm giving these people 400 years to repent. Then if they don't do it by then, I'm going to allow your descendants to perform a mercy killing on them. (This is based on Genesis 15:16.)
    - iii) In order for the Israelites to do all of that, they first had to learn to trust God in order to wipe out a nation bigger and more powerful than they were.
    - iv) Even if all of that is true, why completely destroy these people? Yes they are part of that same nation and probably had those same bad habits. Remember that God did not call the Israelites to wipe out all nonbelievers. He just used them as His instruments for a specific judgment. Again, to perform a mercy killing the same way one might kill a horse as that is more merciful than living through its pain.
    - v) Still, why complete destruction? Besides the concept that this nation was beyond help (again, the mercy killing) think of it in terms of dedicating the first of what we have to God. The same way the Israelites were required to give first 10% of what they earned to God, this is the first of ten nations the Israelites were about to conquer. It is a way of saying, we give the first of what we earn and the first of even what we conquer to You (God) as we trust You to provide for our future.
  - c) Still confused? Let me explain it another way: God allowed them to conquer this nation as a test to prove their loyalty to Him. This other nation (city-state) was being destroyed due to a multi-generation practice based on child sacrifice and a lot of deviant sexual sins.
    - i) Archeologists have confirmed the practice of the people living there at that time.
    - ii) Finally, the complete destruction of this place was a sign for the Israelites to trust God to provide for their future, as they couldn't keep any spoils of war. They were called to destroy what God wanted destroyed and did it completely.
    - iii) Bottom line is the Israelites did do this. They conquered this group of people and completely destroyed their towns, the people and the animals.
    - iv) This also sent a message to the other residents of the area that says in effect, "The Day of Judgment is upon you and we are the one's bringing that judgment."
    - v) The related lesson for us first of all is a warning to all generations that God has no tolerance of sin and a day of judgment is coming for all people. We may look at some of the horrible practices that people do, but in the end, evil always loses.
    - vi) If all of this seems to horrible to contemplate, well, it gets better. The next section is another fairly famous story of "snake bites and the miracle of the bite cure".

6. Verse 4: They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; <sup>5</sup> they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!"
- a) Like I said, this chapter is all about "two steps forward and one step backwards". Here we have that "classical hit tune": Life is so miserable for us. We are going to die here in this wilderness. We have no bread and all we have is this horrible manna to eat.
    - i) Remember I said that if we can only be "half as bad as our parents in terms of their bad habits, we will do well in life?" This second generation of Israelites has picked up their parents "hit tune" of grumbling here and is starting to sound like them.
    - ii) The good news is that God will cure them of this bad habit real fast in this section. In effect, God has no tolerance for this grumbling and that is why the snake bite story is coming up later in this chapter.
  - b) I read something interesting about "manna": This is the food the Israelites ate for the last forty years. Exodus 16:4 says that that this stuff fell from the sky. Every day the Israelites had to collect it. Deuteronomy 8:4 says, "Their feet did not swell up for the forty years in the wilderness". A foot doctor will tell you that the most common reason feet swell up are due to a lack of a balanced diet. My point is whatever manna was, know that somehow it provided a proper diet for those Israelites.
    - i) Therefore, even though they complained about that food, God did provide them with what they need in order to survive.
    - ii) Meanwhile, we are about to read how God handles their complaining.
7. Verse 6: Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. <sup>7</sup> The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed for the people.
- a) My first thought reading this was "who died?" We will read near the end of the book of Numbers that the total number of Israelites at the end of this journey was about equal to the number of people at the start of their journey.
    - i) My point is I suspect that the many who died were of the previous generation that were used to grumbling and God said they would die off in the desert. Even if the many who died did refer to this second generation as well, note that by the end of this book, their ranks are about the same as when they started.
  - b) The next thing to consider is the fact the Israelites associated the snakebites with the idea of being punished by God. It was not, "Oh, lots of snakes around here and lots of people getting hurt by them. We need a remedy." The positive news is that they recognized the fact that their problems require them to get their focus on God. They realized that their problems were somehow the result of some sinful practice in our lives.
    - i) That does not mean that every problem in our life is due to some sin issue. It does mean that when problems occur and "God has got our attention", we should take a moment and examine our lives and ask Him in effect, "Is there some issue in my life that You want me to be aware of that is affecting what I am going through?"
  - c) Meanwhile, the Israelites realized here that their complaining about their situation and their specific grumbling against Moses was somehow wrong. Notice that the Israelites did not challenge Moses' leadership like their parents did. This second generation was took one step in the right direction as they did realize they sinned. They did ask Moses to pray for them. The idea is that they knew Moses had a close relationship with God. They thought that maybe God work through Moses to help them with these snakebites.
    - i) So who helps us to pray? Romans 8:26 says the Spirit of God helps us to know what to pray about and for our solutions. Romans 8:34 says that Jesus is the one who "makes intercession" for us between God the Father and ourselves.

- d) At this point let me say a few words about the snakes themselves. The NIV translation says that they were venomous snakes. The King James Version says "fiery" snakes. Some believe that term refers to the color of the snakes. Others say it refers to the snakebite that was so bad that it caused people lots of pain and many died from those snakebites.
  - i) Now think of this in terms of what the Israelites have just gone through. They just fought a war and destroyed a "kingdom", which was probably a city and whatever other towns are associated with that city. Now after getting that great victory and completing that great destruction, they are marching through the desert again, and all of sudden a lot of them are being bitten and killed by snakes.
  - ii) Imagine thinking, we have lived through all of these years in the wilderness. We have survived through this war with the Canaanites. Yet, these snakes are killing us. The fact that these Israelites have trusted God to this point, has gotten them to learn that "OK, we are living for God and somehow whatever is happening to us must have something to do with our relationship with Him. Therefore, let us look to Him to help us deal with this problem."
    - a) Does that mean if a snake bites us we shouldn't try medicine? Of course not. It just means that when problems occur, one should focus on our relationship with Him and see if there is anything He wants us to learn.
  - iii) As a Christian, one needs to keep one's focus on God and ask in effect, "OK, You have my attention by this problem. What do You want me to do in this situation?"
    - a) That is the question the Israelites faced and that is an issue all of us need to consider when things are going wrong.
    - b) It is as if God is saying, "I haven't heard from you (us) in awhile. Here, let me do something to get your attention so you can focus on Me again."
  - iv) Meanwhile, back to the Israelites and their own snake problems.
- 8. Verse 8: The LORD said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." <sup>9</sup> So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived.
  - a) The first thing we have to admit is that this is a strange cure for snakebites. I would have thought Moses might say, "Here rub this stuff on the bite and it will cure it."
  - b) Instead, Moses is to take a pole (I visualize a wood flag pole) and put a bronze snake on that pole. When people look to the snake, they will feel better. Come on, we all have to admit, that is crazy and lacks common sense. I could see a lot of people saying, "That is stupid. I won't do it." Then those people refused to do this simple thing and died.
    - i) Let me comment on why it is "bronze". Throughout the bible, bronze is associated with God's judgment. Just as bronze is shaped through hot fire, think of that fire as God bringing His judgment on these people.
  - c) If one reads the Jewish commentaries on this verse, they are confused by it. They have all sorts of explanations for it. They are interesting theories, but they are just that.
    - i) The good news is that Jesus Himself explains why this text is here. Jesus said, "No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, (referring to this event) so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." The Gospel of John, 3:13-15, NIV.
      - a) The point is just as the Israelites had to look to this snake on a pole to be healthy again, so we as Christians have to look to Him for our lives.
    - ii) It may help to remember another famous verse about Jesus here. 2nd Corinthians 5:21 says that Jesus literally became sin for us. The cure for our sins is that He took all of our sins upon Himself and He literally became sin. The way the Israelites were cured of snake poison was the "snake on the stick" in effect took away that pain. That snake became their substitute for their sin of lack of trust in God.

- d) The other good news about the snakebite story is that it came to an end. Notice the lack of any transition from Verse 9 to Verse 10. There are no everyone is now miraculously cured type of comments. It is as if the snake on the pole worked, and that was that.
  - e) Let me comment on the "idol factor" before I move on. One of the 10 Commandments is that the Israelites were not to make an idol of any thing. Let's be honest, having a snake on a stick could be thought of as an idol. Since God commanded it, so one can argue that He made an exception. Another argument is because Jesus Himself pointed out this story as a model of what He did for us by becoming sin. More importantly, one should look at this snake on a stick story and remember that the Israelites were dealing with sin.
    - i) God is effectively saying to us, "We are all guilty of sin, but I Myself will take the penalty that we do deserve for our sins." Just look at sin being judged on that stick or in our case look at sin being judged on that cross.
    - ii) Many centuries later, that bronze snake on a stick was still around and did become an idol. An Israelite king named Hezekiah finally destroyed it as he realized the Israelites made it into an idol and looked to "it" and not God. I suspect that for that stick to last that long, the Israelites bronzed the whole thing to preserve it, but that is speculation. That episode comes from 2nd Kings 18:4, if interested.
  - f) OK enough lecturing here. It is time to move on to the rest of the chapter.
9. Verse 10: The Israelites moved on and camped at Oboth. <sup>11</sup> Then they set out from Oboth and camped in Iye Abarim, in the desert that faces Moab toward the sunrise. <sup>12</sup> From there they moved on and camped in the Zered Valley. <sup>13</sup> They set out from there and camped alongside the Arnon, which is in the desert extending into Amorite territory. The Arnon is the border of Moab, between Moab and the Amorites.
- a) From Verses 10-13 we have a "travel log". It appears like a bored Moses is mentioning the facts that the Israelites went from "Point A to Point B to Point C" here. Of course I believe nothing is here by accident and there is a reason for these comments. Let me explain:
    - i) To understand the comments, we have to know a little about the local geography. Remember that the Israelites traveled around the land of Edom. I discussed that issue in the last chapter. The land of Edom was in effect the "land of a relative" of the Israelites. Therefore, they didn't want to conquer that land, just go through it. However, the king of Edom didn't let them pass, so they went around it.
    - ii) If you know anything about the geography of Israel, you know that there is a body of water called the Dead Sea. The weather there is very hot. There is no sea outlet, and that water disappears by evaporating. I mention that because the Israelites were now traveling around the Dead Sea to the east of it. The west side of that sea is part of the land that we associate with the ancient and modern land of Israel.
  - b) The point is Moses is leading this large group of people towards the land of Israel the long way around the Dead Sea. By the start of the book of Joshua, the Israelites will enter the land of Israel by crossing over the Jordan River that feeds into the Dead Sea. In terms of a time line, that event is probably only a month or two away. The Book of Deuteronomy, which follows this one and comes before Joshua, is essentially one big speech by Moses to both review their history and teach them about life in the "Promised Land".
    - i) After 40 years of wandering in the desert, the Israelites are almost there. They still have two more battles they have to fight before they enter the land of Israel. Those two battles are coming up later in this chapter.
    - ii) This text here is guiding us to explain why the Israelites had to fight two more battles before they could actually enter this Promised Land.
  - c) OK, and I should care about this because? Let's be honest, in life we find ourselves going down paths we didn't expect to take. This is God saying, "Trust Me, even if He is taking us down a path in life we didn't expect to take." In effect, this is another step forward for this generation of Israelites. With that, let's read onward.

10. Verse 14: That is why the Book of the Wars of the LORD says: "... Waheb in Suphah and the ravines, the Arnon <sup>15</sup> and the slopes of the ravines that lead to the site of Ar and lie along the border of Moab."
- a) One of the great speculations in the Old Testament is what is meant by the specific phrase, "The Books of the Wars of the LORD". To state the obvious, if God wanted to preserve that other book for us to study, He would have made it possible. Because this book no longer exists, scholars have pondered for millennia what it means.
    - i) To state what is here, it appears to be a "travel log" and records the battles that the local people have fought in, and some key points about those battles.
  - b) OK, John it is time once again for one of your "why should I care speeches here": First we need to understand what this text is describing: The local geography. Maybe this book is just something written at that time that Moses was using it as a geography guide. To put it another way, many scholars worry way too much about what this book was, and miss the point that it is describing the borders of specific lands in that area.
    - i) To put it another way, the Israelites are traveling along a main road in that part of the world that was known (translated) as the "King's Highway". They needed to know whom they were going to deal with as they traveled that way and this book gave Moses some clues about the geography and the people there.
    - ii) I suppose that was interesting if I was walking through that area a few thousand years ago. Why should I care? It shows that if Moses could consult another book, it is acceptable for Christians to use outside sources in order to learn things, even to learn about the bible itself.
      - a) My point is it is acceptable to read books other than the bible as long as He is the central focus of our lives. I believe that is what Moses is doing here.
      - b) It's not just about possibly preparing for warfare, but about not going into a situation blindly. It is about using whatever resources we have in order to help us make the best decisions possible. Was Moses still trusting God at this point? Of course. Until Moses hears from God, it is acceptable to look to other sources to help him and us.
      - c) As I like to say, God gave us a mind and He expects us to use it. Do we have to pray every morning about whether or not to get out of bed? Of course not. We use our minds to make the right decision. That is what is happening in effect here. Moses using his mind and his resources at hand in order to make good decisions for this large multitude he is leading.
11. Verse 16: From there they continued on to Beer, the well where the LORD said to Moses, "Gather the people together and I will give them water."
- a) To understand this verse, one has to recall some facts from recent chapters in Numbers. The Israelites spent a lot of time worried about where their next source of water would come from. Given the fact that this area is a hot desert, that would be a natural concern.
  - b) As the Israelites traveled following the eastern coastline of the Dead Sea. This sea is salt water and therefore, the Israelites were concerned about drinking water.
    - i) Before they could grumble out loud, God said to Moses, "Get everyone together here at this spot and I will provide them water." I don't know if this was a natural spring at this location or a specific miracle that God performed. Either way, the Israelites came to a place that would provide enough water for all of them here.
    - ii) The key point coming up in the next verse is that the Israelites showed gratitude for this water and we will read a "praise song" for this water in the next verse.
    - iii) I suppose if God magically provided for my needs, I would show gratitude too. The point is He does. I can't explain how God has always provided for me all the years of my life, but I know that He does and I am very aware of that fact. The point is we too need to pause every so often and express some gratitude to Him.

12. Verse 17: Then Israel sang this song: "Spring up, O well! Sing about it,<sup>18</sup> about the well that the princes dug, that the nobles of the people sank-- the nobles with scepters and staffs."
  - a) OK, the Israelites needed water and got it. So the Israelites sang a song to show gratitude for that water. Why should I care? The point is not this bit of historical trivia. The point for us is about gratitude. Singing praise songs is one way of showing gratitude. A reason most churches have music as part of the service is for us to show our gratitude to God.
    - i) Ever wonder why there is singing in church? It is not to hear the pretty choir sing. It is for us collectively express our gratitude to God for our lives. If it is the desire of us to have a joy filled life, then we need to regularly show gratitude. Not just to God but to other people around us.
  - b) Meanwhile, the leaders of the Israelites dug up this well, and for everyone to "keep busy", they sang this song while the leaders used their staffs to do the digging. The focus is not so much on the physical labor, but on the joy expressed from showing gratitude.
13. Verse 18 (cont.): Then they went from the desert to Mattanah,<sup>19</sup> from Mattanah to Nahaliel, from Nahaliel to Bamoth,<sup>20</sup> and from Bamoth to the valley in Moab where the top of Pisgah overlooks the wasteland.
  - a) OK, time for some more "travel log" entries in the bible. For those of us who don't care about the local geography, the point is the Israelites then traveled from the border of one nation to another nation. This is the border between a group called the Moabites and a separate group called the Amorites. The Moabites existed for many centuries after this time and the "Amorites" is one of the nations that God called the Israelites to eliminate.
  - b) Notice in the text the words "desert" and "wasteland". Even without further study about those words, one gets the idea that this is not a hospitable place to live. Consider how God is miraculously providing water for them as they are traveling through this place.
    - i) Think about this in terms of our own journeys in life. When we go through our own wilderness times or our own "deserts" know that God is still there with us during our travels and still providing for our needs.
    - ii) The point for us is that God never says our lives will be easy. I have always liked the analogy that God provides the "rope" to pull us through our troubles, but He still allows us to go through troubles for some ultimate purpose of His.
    - iii) Meanwhile, the Israelites are working their way through their own desert as God is leading them to their own Promised Land. As God is leading, they are taking another "step forward" even as they have to travel through this difficult place.
14. Verse 21: Israel sent messengers to say to Sihon king of the Amorites: "Let us pass through your country. We will not turn aside into any field or vineyard, or drink water from any well. We will travel along the king's highway until we have passed through your territory."
  - a) You may recall from the last lesson, when the Israelites wanted to pass through the land of the Edomites, Moses sent a message to them that said in effect, "Let us pass through your land. We won't take anything without paying for it and we promise to stay along the main highway." The king of the Edomites said in effect, "no" and that is the main reason why the Israelites had to go a long way around the Edomite territory. That is one reason for the travel logs of this chapter.
  - b) Now here are the Israelites at the border of another king and once again, Moses is saying to their leader via a messenger, let our large group pass through your territory. We will pay for anything we take here and we promise to stay along the main highway.
  - c) I can see from the perspective of the Amorites that they would fear such a large group that was coming through their territory. You would think that for the sake of making a profit they would consider them passing through the area. However, the fear of having two million people travel through one's territory is greater concern than the profit motive.
  - d) The goal is God wanted the Israelites to conquer this group and this step was necessary before any battle can take place. Speaking of a battle, time for the next set of verses.



15. Verse 23: But Sihon would not let Israel pass through his territory. He mustered his entire army and marched out into the desert against Israel. When he reached Jahaz, he fought with Israel. <sup>24</sup>Israel, however, put him to the sword and took over his land from the Arnon to the Jabbok, but only as far as the Ammonites, because their border was fortified. <sup>25</sup> Israel captured all the cities of the Amorites and occupied them, including Heshbon and all its surrounding settlements.
- a) For those of you who don't care about all of these ancient battles, let me summarize all of this fairly quickly and simply: This group of people called the Amorites would not let the Israelites pass through their territory. The Amorites sent an army to greet the Israelites in order to make the point that they are not welcome here.
    - i) This leads to another step forward by the Israelites. Instead of saying, "woe is me, I can't travel here", or instead of saying, "We can't defeat these people so we have to accept our own defeat", they trusted God and won the battle. My point comes back to my lesson title of "two steps forward and one step back".
  - b) It would help to see this in context of the big picture of God's plan for them. The goal was to get the Israelites into the Promised Land. In order for the Israelites to have that land, they had to conquer the local residents, who were greater in number and probably had better weapons. This does not mean that God called on them to kill everyone in sight.
    - i) Remember again that this was a specific judgment by God against several nations whose lifestyle was so bad that the most merciful thing He could do is wipe them out. As I stated earlier in this lesson, these groups were guilty of sacrificing their own children to their false gods and some pretty disgusting sexual deviancies that go against common sense about what should and should not be allowed in society.
    - ii) My point is that God never calls on Christians to take the lives of nonbelievers. There have been times in history where He has allowed one group to completely wipe out another one. If we can, we will have to ask Him one day in heaven why He allowed so many such things to occur.
    - iii) All of that leads me back to these Israelites. God is training them for warfare. The Amorites were among the people that engaged in those types of really disgusting practices that I just mentioned. To put it another way, it sounds terrible that the Israelites conquered them because they were in the way. If one knew the types of sins that this nation did for many generations with no possible change in site, one would then wonder, why did God take so long to judge them?
    - iv) For what it is worth, there is archeology evidence that supported the arguments of what these nations were like and what they practiced. I remember reading from "Halley's Bible Handbook" many years ago. I remember the summary comment in effect that asked the question, "why did God take so long to judge them?"
  - c) This leads back to you and me. With God judging these people, it does not mean that God calls on us to kill or even eternally judge other people. The simple point is that God used the Israelites to judge a specific group of people who were doing some pretty bad things. Many centuries later, God used the Babylonians to judge the Israelites as they were doing many of the same sins that these other nations were engaged in at this time.
    - i) Does this mean we should live in fear of judgment? Remember that all people will be judged, including believers. Christians will be judged in heaven based on how we have used our time and our lives as believers. It is not a sin judgment, but will be a time for rewards based on what we did or didn't do. The book of Revelation speaks of a separate judgment for nonbelievers essentially based on what they did or didn't do with what information they were given about God in the first place.
    - ii) Do I believe we should judge actions? Of course. If you think about, we judge people's behavior all the time. However, to judge a persons' salvation is in effect God's business and not ours. That is the main point I'm making here.
    - iii) Meanwhile, it is time to return to the Israelites back in the wilderness.

16. Verse 26: Heshbon was the city of Sihon king of the Amorites, who had fought against the former king of Moab and had taken from him all his land as far as the Arnon.
  - a) To understand this, know that even from the time frame of those Israelites, this verse is a historical fact to them. The area that the Israelites just obtained by defeating the Amorites once belonged to the Moabites.
  - b) Assuming all of that is true, tell me why I should care: The idea is in effect a taunt. The Israelites conquered one group of people. Now they are warning another group of people near by. It would be like saying, "Hey, these guys conquered you at one time and now we just conquered them. Therefore, who should you Moabites really fear?"
  - c) The point is this verse, along with the next four were an ancient poem that was read or sung by the group the Israelites just conquered. It is as if the Israelites read this poem or maybe it was something that they just heard the Amorites recite as they battled them.
    - i) This poem was the Amorites way of saying out loud, "this is the land that we got by conquering the Moabites". Now the Israelites are taking that same poem or that same song, and are making it their own song.
  - d) With that said, let me list the next four verses, and understand that they are a poem.
17. Verse 27: That is why the poets say: "Come to Heshbon and let it be rebuilt; let Sihon's city be restored. <sup>28</sup> "Fire went out from Heshbon, a blaze from the city of Sihon. It consumed Ar of Moab, the citizens of Arnon's heights. <sup>29</sup> Woe to you, O Moab! You are destroyed, O people of Chemosh! He has given up his sons as fugitives and his daughters as captives to Sihon king of the Amorites. <sup>30</sup> "But we have overthrown them; Heshbon is destroyed all the way to Dibon. We have demolished them as far as Nophah, which extends to Medeba."
  - a) Before you say anything else, tell me why I should care about any of this ancient history: The idea is we can "make our own" what was once someone else's. Let me explain:
    - i) This song (or poem) was written by the nation the Israelites just conquered. The song describes how the Amorites conquered over Moabite territory. The Moabites still existed as a nation. The Israelites are singing it in effect to say to the Moabites, "You are next. You lost this land to the Amorites and the Amorites just lost this land to us. Therefore, you Moabites, think about whom you should really fear?"
    - ii) Again assuming all of this is true, why should we care? The issue is not to learn about ancient history. The point is that we can take poems and songs that were originally written for other purposes and dedicate them to God.
    - iii) Let me put it this way: Many classical Christian hymns were originally songs that were secular. The words were changed to make them hymns. Yes many of those hymns were original lyrics, but popular music of that time was also common. My point is we can take something secular and use it for God's purpose.
      - a) No, we can't violate copyright laws, but that is another issue.
    - iv) Therefore, I really don't care whether or not one wants to learn about some of this history about "Group A conquering Group B". If you want to learn some of those details, I am sure there are some interesting facts to be studied. I believe what God wants us to know is that we can use things of this world for His glory.
    - v) As an example, it is acceptable to sing non-Christian songs and adopt them for His use. That is what has been done historically and assuming there are no copyright violations, I don't have a problem with people doing that today. I know of some wonderful children's ministries that adopt popular songs and change them so that they can be used for God's use.
  - b) Meanwhile, the bible wants us to know that the Israelites did conquer over this area. It also wants us to know that the Israelites adopted the poetry of the Amorites in order to give warnings to the Moabites and other nations in the area, "God's judgment is coming and there is nothing you can do to stop it just as the Amorites couldn't stop us." It was in effect, another big step forward for those Israelites and for us to learn about.

18. Verse 31: So Israel settled in the land of the Amorites.
  - a) John's translation: The Israelites took a breather. ☺ It just means that after they won this battle against the Amorites, the two million people temporarily settled in that land.
    - i) Even with that said, Moses and the Israelites understood that this land was not the Promised Land and soon it would be time for them to get moving again.
  - b) Therefore, the story continues.
19. Verse 32: After Moses had sent spies to Jazer, the Israelites captured its surrounding settlements and drove out the Amorites who were there.
  - a) I have to admit, if I was in charge of this group, I would be nervous about the concept of sending out spies. After all, it was the parents generation that failed because they trusted in the report of the bad spies.
  - b) Yet, these were the children of that generation that failed. Give them credit as they have learned from their parents mistakes. The spies brought back reports to the Israelites about how these towns were laid out and the population of these towns and the Israelites did what God commanded them to do and drove out the Amorites who lived there.
    - i) Did they kill every last one? Don't know. I suspect that a lot of Amorites died here, but we don't know the particulars about their fate.
    - ii) What we do know is that these Israelites were now trusting God to guide their lives. They were being obedient to Him. They were conquering over people that their parents were afraid to conquer.
  - c) Let me deviate for a moment and explain how this is relevant to us. Let us assume for the moment we are not literally soldiers in the middle of a war. How we do relate to this?
    - i) Think of these wars as our own fears. Think of things we are afraid to face. Think of issues that are too big for us to handle on our own. God is teaching us that if something is His will, we can win over issues that are too big for us to face.
    - ii) So how do I know if something is His will? Start by asking Him.
    - iii) Some of the greatest stories in the bible are about ordinary people who were willing to take a risk to make a difference for God. Once we take that risk, God is more than willing to guide us in order to make that difference for Him.
    - iv) I am in no way suggesting that we are to say, go kill people who disagree with us. I am just saying we can overcome whatever fears we have in life by trusting God to guide us through whatever issues we are dealing with at that moment. I have found that when we do trust Him, our problems are never as big as our fears.
    - v) Meanwhile, the Israelites have one more battle to fight in this chapter.
20. Verse 33: Then they turned and went up along the road toward Bashan, and Og king of Bashan and his whole army marched out to meet them in battle at Edrei.
  - a) Speaking of facing one's fears, after the Israelites won this second battle (previous verse), now a king named Og (who names these people anyway) and a kingdom or city called Bashan comes out with assumedly a large army to go battle the Israelites.
  - b) Now think in terms of facing our fears. My guess is that this was a large, prepared army coming to attack those Israelites. The fact that God has to encourage them to go forward tells me that fear was a real part of the Israelites life at that moment.
21. Verse 34: The LORD said to Moses, "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." <sup>35</sup> So they struck him down, together with his sons and his whole army, leaving them no survivors. And they took possession of his land.
  - a) The short version is the Israelites won this battle. They struck down the entire army. The Israelites left no survivors and they took possession of this land.
  - b) This verse also teaches us that just as they wiped out all of the Amorites in the previous two battles, so they wiped out everyone here. Think of this in terms of overcome our own fears. God gives us the power to completely overcome whatever it is we fear in life.

- c) For those of you who hate all of this war stuff, the good news is there are no more battle issues coming up for many chapters. It is the end of the war section of this book in terms of actual fighting.
  - i) Yes the Israelites are still going to have problems to deal with. Like life itself, there are always going to be problems to deal with. The lesson is about learning to trust God in order to have victory over whatever it is we have to face in life.
  - ii) I should also add one more "war comment" that may be significant as one works their way through the entire bible: There are three nations that the Israelites did conquer outside of "Israel proper" and seven other nations that the Israelites do conquer when they actually get into Israel. Those other battles are not part of this book. They are described in the book of Joshua.
    - a) My point is when one studies the antichrist in the book of Revelation, he is described as having seven heads (crowns) and ten horns. That refers to ten kingdoms that he will rule over.
    - b) Some believe there is a connection between the fact that the Israelites did conquer ten nations (three outside and seven inside) with the end time concept of "seven and ten" as described in Revelation 12 and 13.
    - c) My point is some see a connection of conquering over "ten nations" here and the fact that the Antichrist does a similar type of conquering. I am not saying Israel is the antichrist. I am saying that whoever this beast is, He likes to "imitate God" and work in a similar fashion.
    - d) OK, no more weird stuff. Time to end the lesson.
- 22. The far more important thing to catch out of this lesson is the growth of the Israelites as they did trust in God to overcome their fears and conquer over the nations that opposed them. The point for us is that God wants us to overcome our own fears in life and we do that by trusting Him to guide us through whatever it is we have to deal with in life. If we get that concept, we get the main purpose of this lesson, to trust Him to guide us through what we have to deal with in life.
- 23. Heavenly Father, in life all of us have to face issues and "armies" that are too big for us to handle. We too, need to look to You to guide us through such times. We thank You that You became sin so we don't have to worry about the eternal consequences of our sins. At the same time, it should be our desire to please You with our lives. Guide us to live the type of life that You desire that we do, so that we can use the most valuable asset we have, our time, to make that difference for You in this world. We ask this in Jesus name. Amen.