

## INTRODUCTION

It is redundant to say that God's wisdom is immeasurably higher than ours. Agree? But how come we often resort to our limited knowledge when we say that we trust God? We convince ourselves that only what we can see and feel are real. Every now and then God has to surprise us with a "wow" moment to help us realize that He is always at work in our lives. I attended the International Night of Worship at the Trinity Baptist Church a few weeks ago. I strongly encourage you to go to the event next time. It was so cool to see people of different ethnic background worship in their native tongues. There were reading of the Scripture, singing and prayer in different languages. I had no idea what they were saying. But it gave me a glimpse of heaven when people from all nations will gather before the throne of God to worship Him. One particular presentation caught my attention that evening. When some Hispanic brothers and sisters were singing, a young man drew a picture on the podium. He brushed and splashed water colors on a black piece of paper. The audiences were trying to make sense of what he was painting. As soon as the group was done with their songs, the young person turned the paper upside-down. It was a picture of Christ wearing a crown of thorns. The congregation exclaimed with "wow!" Doesn't God always amaze us like that? We are stuck in a bottleneck situation. We wonder how God is going to lead us through the mess. But God is teaching us to see things from His perspective. In the book of Numbers, the Israelites were following God's guidance into Canaan. God put them in a training course of faith. There would be new obstacles. They had to rely on God to overcome those difficulties. The lesson for them and for us is this: stepping upon the foundation of faith motivates us to step out in faith.

## EXPLANATION

### 1. 新敵人 A New Enemy

The Israelites met a new enemy. The passage tells us that they were now in the Negev. The name refers to the region outside the southern border of where the tribe of Judah would be allotted in the future. A Canaanite king of Arad led his army to attack the Israelites. Some of God's people were captured as a result. At that time, most people were nomads. This and many Canaanite kings we will see later had their own territories. But they might not live in a fortified city same as Jericho. They were more like guerrillas similar to some Afghanistan or the Middle East tribal armies. Now the Israelites had to deal with Arad's troop. There would be many more confrontations in the future. God's people knew that they had to rely on God. Look at **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." We can learn a few things from this verse. First, God's people made a pledge to God. We shall see soon that they prayed according to God's will. Therefore, God gladly granted their wish. We as Christians should have confidence that when our prayers are based on God's will, then He will answer us in His time accordingly. God's general will is written in the Bible. For example, God wants more people to know Him, and God wants us to live for His glory. Therefore, we should constantly pray for the salvation of our non-believing family members and friends. We can also ask God to help us reflect His glory in our career and

family life. In our story, the Israelites asked God to deliver the enemy into their hands. This expression appears many times in the Old Testament. The idea is that if God gives your adversary into your hand, that means it will be a sure-win. The Israelites said that if God would give them victory, they would completely destroy their enemy. Here, the word “destroy” bears the meaning of “dedicated for extermination.” It was as if the people and properties of Arad were to be offered to God like a burnt offering. God would receive 100% of everything and nothing should remain. God gave His people the same order when they fought against other Canaanites in future battles. For instance, Joshua told the Israelites that they had to wipe out everything in the city of Jericho. No one should keep anything as a plunder. God’s people triumphed over Jericho. However, they lost in their very next battle at the city of Ai. Joshua the commander was stunned. God explained to Joshua that it was because one person, Achan, seized what belonged to God. God said in **Joshua 7:12** – “That is why the Israelites cannot stand against their enemies; they turn their backs and run because they have been made liable to destruction. I will not be with you anymore unless you destroy whatever among you is devoted to destruction.” One person sinned and the whole Israel suffered. We know the lesson well. More than likely the mistakes and sins you commit will impact your family, work-place or the whole church. God told Joshua that the Israelites were defeated because they did not get rid of something that was supposed to be destroyed. It is like you have some stinky trash in the kitchen. The bad odor circulates to the whole house through the air ducts. The smell pollutes the air. Before long, it will attract flies and germs. The problems will end when you take the trash outside your house. Here God told the Israelites to completely destroy everything – properties, animals and humans. We can understand that in a war either you die or your opponent dies. But killing little kids, old people and women who cannot protect themselves sounds very cruel. We wonder: isn’t God full of love and mercy? We and our non-believing friends are bothered by such a command from God. We need to bear in mind that this order of destroying everything only happened during the Canaan conquest. In **Deuteronomy 7:2-4**, Moses explained to the Israelites: 2 “And when the Lord your God has delivered them over to you and you have defeated them, then you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy. 3 Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, 4 for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the Lord’s anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you.” In the subsequent verses, Moses also told them to totally smash the religious objects of the Canaan people. The Old Testament specifies what kind of rituals the Canaanites practiced. They include bowing down to carved objects, sexual immorality and infant sacrifice. God did not want His people to imitate any of those customs. God called them to be His holy people. From now on, their new enemies were not only some foreign fighters. The real enemies were the Canaanite false gods that would compromise the faith of God’s people. That was why God asked them to utterly destroy their enemies. The same is true for us when we look at sin. God rescues us from the dark domain and brings us into the Kingdom of Light. By God’s grace, we must separate ourselves from sins. Paul put it this way in **Colossians 3:2-3** – 2 Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. 3 For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When we received Christ into our hearts, it was as if we died with Him on the cross. As a result, we became new beings. We now belong to God. When we rely on God, we can overcome whatever sins that enslaved us in the past. Paul continued to encourage us in **verse 5**: Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Then skip down to **verse 8**: But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage,

malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. We indulged in some of these or other sins before we knew Christ. But now we pledge allegiance to God. Therefore, Satan became our new enemy. He will try every means to lure us into sinning. We have to sever any former partnership with the devil. God gives us spiritual weapons to defend ourselves. We read the Bible to enrich our knowledge of God. We pray any time for wisdom to discern Satan's tactics, and for strength to walk away from temptations. The Holy Spirit in us will also constantly alert us to any danger. We cannot fight this spiritual battle alone. God puts brothers and sisters around us for us to encourage each other. Our small group meetings are more than Bible education. Through testimonies, we remind each other that God is working in our lives. We pray for each other's needs. We challenge each other to put what we have learned into daily practice. We overcome this new enemy as one people.

## 2. 老毛病 An Old Enmity

The Israelites asked God for help to fight a new enemy. God gave them a victory. We may think that they should be united with one heart and ready to engage in future battles. Not so fast! They soon fell back to their old enmity. They grumbled again when they faced troubles. The passage says the Israelites got impatient. This time they complained to both God and Moses. Read **verse 5**: ... "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!" There was nothing new in their grievance. They questioned why they were here, and they worried about water and food. Many of those Israelites were born during the past 40 years of wilderness wandering. But they complained about the same issues their parents did. It is just like an old idiom that says: an apple does not fall too far from the tree. It means that more or less, children will inherit some traits from their parents. Dear parents: before you rebuke your kids for their bad behaviors, check and see if they received the traits from you. Of course, some of you will shift the blame to your spouse or your parents! If grumbling is not stopped in time, it will be like a contagious disease that spreads throughout a faith community. In the previous grumbling incidents, God resolved the problems but He might also discipline His people in the process. This time God did both. The passage says God sent venomous snakes to bite the Israelites. Many people died as a result. And just like what they did before, they went to Moses for help. Moses in turn prayed to God. God told Moses the solution in **verse 8**: ... "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." Moses followed God's instructions. Those who gazed at the snake were healed. It was that simple. God did not need to explain the medical or scientific mechanism behind the procedures. God did not tell the Israelites how manna fell from the sky or how water came out from a rock either. Those were God's chosen means to minister His grace. The lesson was that if Moses and the rest of the Israelites truly believed in what God said, then they would obey His commands. The result would be healing. Belief has to do with the mind; and obedience leads to actions. Isn't that how faith should work? We see tons of examples in the Bible. I will just quote one story to illustrate the point. In 2 Kings chapter 5 the commander of Aram by the name Naaman contracted leprosy. At that time, Aram was a threat to Israel. Naaman told his boss that there might be treatment in Israel. The Aram king thus took a diplomatic route to help his servant. He wrote to the king of Israel, telling him to find a way to cure Naaman. The Israel king got nervous. He thought Aram was looking for an excuse to attack Israel if he could not heal Naaman. The prophet Elisha told the king not to worry, and asked him to send Naaman to his home. Elisha then dispatched a messenger to tell Naaman the remedy in **2 Kings 5:10** – ... "Go,

wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed.” Naaman responded: “Sure! I’ll do as you say.” No, Naaman was upset that Elisha did not come out to greet him. He assumed Elisha would at least perform some religious tricks in front of him. Naaman wondered how dipping into the river Jordan could cure the disease. If washing was all that was needed, then there was better water in his home country. One wise servant advised Naaman. He said Naaman would have followed the instructions if Elisha asked him to go through more complicated steps. Why didn’t he just try it if it was as simple as bathing in the Jordan? Naaman agreed. He obeyed what Elisha said and he was finally healed. God did not need to explain why it worked. The simple reason was because He said so. Likewise, those Israelites bitten by snakes were relieved by looking at the bronze snake. This symbolism of healing was passed down to the modern age. The logos of many government and private health agencies show one and sometimes two snakes whirling around a pole. Some of you know that the bronze snake also depicts a biblical prophecy. It foretold that over a thousand years later, God would send His Son to be held on a cross. Jesus quoted the story about the snake when Nicodemus came to see Him at night and asked about the way to eternal life. Jesus said in [John 3:14-15](#) – 14 “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.” Jesus was lifted up on a cross. He was nailed there to bear our sins. The only way to receive healing from the penalty of sins is to believe in Jesus. It is like gazing at the cross, trusting God’s salvation grace. I learned from Wikipedia about how an antidote to snake poison works. The same process is also used to derive cure for bites caused by spiders and scorpions. Venom from the animals is first collected. The poison is then injected into a domestic animal such as a sheep. The animal will then produce antibodies to neutralize the toxin. Next, blood will be drawn from the animal, and the antibody is extracted. A victim who is bitten has to receive an antivenom injection as soon as possible to minimize further damage caused by the poison. The perfect Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, took up the sins of the whole mankind on the cross. With His blood, Jesus neutralized the curse of sins. Those who receive Jesus by faith into their lives will be healed. There is cleansing power in the blood of Jesus. It is the only way God ordained to save us. Dear friends: do you want be healed from the condemnation of sin? You have to look up to the cross. Come to Jesus, confess your sins and accept Him into your heart by faith as your Savior and Lord. Those who are in Christ have become new beings. God gives us immunity toward the damage of sin. Next time temptation comes, think of the cross again. Pray to Him: “Lord, I would fail if I rely on myself. But by Your power in me, I can have victory over sin.” Say no to Satan, turn and walk away from sin.

## CONCLUSION

We learn from our passage today that stepping upon the foundation of faith motivates us to step out in faith. There is a prayer in each of the two separate stories. The Israelites prayed for a rescue from opponents in a war, and they pleaded for healing from a fatal disease. There is a common moral: there would be deliverance when the Israelites obeyed God. The same is true for us. If we believe in God’s Word in the Bible, then we will follow His instructions accordingly. Walking by faith can be a scary thing, because we do not know what lies ahead. But since we cannot predict what will happen tomorrow, we have to trust the Lord of the future. Just like the picture we looked at earlier, we need God’s help to look at things from His perspective before we can understand His plan.