

**STORY**

8/17/04

The Bronze Serpent in the Wilderness - Numbers 20:14 - 21:9 (and Deut. 2:1-9)

TEACHER PRAYER

Dear Lord, I am ready and willing to teach again today. In Your loving kindness bring blessing to me and my class as we study Your holy Word. May the meditation of my heart and the words of my mouth be acceptable to You. Amen.

VOCABULARY

Brazen serpent (KJV) - *bronze serpent* (NKJV) Bronze is a metal alloy composed chiefly of copper and tin melted together; this was cast into a serpentine form in a soil/sand mold.

Edom - the land of Idumea, named after the descendants of Esau who were regarded in the Mosaic Law as brothers to the Israelites.

Mt. Hor - the mountain on the east side of Arabah, halfway between the Dead Sea and the Gulf of Akaba; highest and wildest of the whole Edomite range.

OUTER AIM (various options and angles here are usable)

When Israel broke its bond with God by its sinful thoughts, words, and deeds, the Lord brought them back with His tough love. OR: God cured snakebite in a most miraculous way.

INNER AIM

Though God deals severely with sinfulness, He also deals generously with repentant sinners; and the brass serpent on the pole represents Christ on the cross.

BACKGROUND

(Rupprecht Bible History References, Vol. 1, pp. 220-221)

Forty years of nomadic wandering had passed; a new generation had grown up that had seen neither Egypt nor Canaan, but only nomadic campgrounds. These children had opportunity to start over in a life that their parents had messed up for themselves. Nonetheless, this new generation proved to have the same spiritual DNA as their parents and grandparents had. (A personality is not easily altered, and only God can do a complete overhaul.)

Ch. 20, vs. 14-21

This can be treated without much explanation, for the events are simple enough. Israel was at Kadesh, at the south end of Canaan. Moses asked permission for safe passage (not an invasion) through the homeland of their "cousins." Though Moses repeatedly pledged to be most careful not to impact on Edom's countryside and resources, the king of Edom stubbornly denied them access or passage. When conditions began to take on the look of a military confrontation, Moses/Israel backed off, realizing it would mean another detour and delay before arriving safely in Canaan.

vs. 22-29

At Mt. Hor the Lord replaced Aaron with Eleazar as chief priest. A one-month delay followed to mourn over their loss of such a great man.

Ch. 21, vs. 1-4

In a border clash, the defending Canaanites gained a small victory. It seems that Israel was continually testing the Lord, and He was training them to realize that they needed to depend on Him rather than on their own resources.

vs. 4

From Mt. Hor they went southward toward the tip of the Gulf of Akaba (also called “Red Sea”) in order to back away from the land of Edom. If the king of Edom had let them pass through his country, Israel could have approached Canaan more readily; but since he had refused to do so, that resulted in some detours and delays, which evidently became rather frustrating. Although the Lord was thus sparing them a bloody conflict with their kin, they did not perceive the advantage.

vs. 5

The new generation had learned to complain as they parents had often done (ten times in all!). Unable to see their blessings, they attacked Moses as the cause of their unhappy condition.

vs.6

This turn of events was a swift departure from the usual M.O. (complaint registered, Moses interceding, the LORD relenting, partial penalties, then going forward again). These were *fiery serpents* either because their venom produced a burning sensation or because the snakes had a vivid coloration. God sent them on purpose; they were aggressive and lethal.

vs.7

The people realized the connection between their complaining and the plague. We give them the benefit of any doubt as to the sincerity of their confession of sin. They acknowledged their sinful thoughts, words, and deeds against both the LORD and Moses. Their public apology to Moses, however, did not come until *many of the people of Israel died*. Moses serves as a type of the Messiah in that he prayed for them--and his prayer was answered.

vs. 8

It remained to be seen, however, how deep their feelings ran. God’s remedy for snakebite would seem as foolishness to anyone whose heart was not bonded to the LORD as Savior. If this was not a medically approved cure nor a recognized treatment for snakebite, so be it! The LORD had sent the snakes and the LORD had a cure for the punishment they deserved. God’s directions were simple enough: using one’s eyes is not a difficult task, for there is no labor involved. But we appreciate how it would separate the repentant believer from impenitent unbeliever. For who would surrender to this unreasonable device unless his heart had first been brought to kneel before the LORD? It’s very improbability as a cure was enough to make the unbeliever turn his heart and eyes away in disdain--to his own death, of course.

vs.9

Moses did as directed: It may have taken a good part of a day to smelt pot-metal, gouge a rough- hewn channel in the sandy soil, pour the molten metal into the trough, let it cool, then shape and bend the metal so it would drape over a cross-arm on a pole. One can picture the congregation standing by, either patiently or impatiently, during the whole procedure, even as some of them throbbed with painful swelling, fever, then heart/diaphragm/muscle failure...and death. So we ask: Why devise a cure that took hours to perform? Why not an instantaneous miracle? Perhaps because sinners need to learn to wait on the LORD. It reminds us of Gal. 4:4 in that God also delayed sending His Son until “the fullness of the time had come” for His sin-cure to be presented to the world. But in God’s good time and in His own good way, **it worked**. Of course, it worked! Our God always makes all things work together for the good of His children.

STUDENT PRAYER

Create in me a new heart, Lord, that gladly I obey Thy Word and naught but what Thou wilt desire; with such new life my soul inspire. Amen.

PRESENTATION

Read aloud the more provocative verses thoughtfully, avoiding monotonal presentation. This episode was a “hands-on” lesson that God is not a lecturer, and that true religion is not like listening to a lecture and then being quizzed.

The case of the Israelites was simple:

- a) they were rebellious in heart, sinfully insulting to God; so
- b) God taught them a hard lesson about being mean-tempered and unloving to Him.
- c) He also is willing to lay aside His punishing anger, and He prepares His cure;
- d) To receive His cure we need a repentant attitude; then to take God at His word. What an object lesson for learning to depend on God for solving the horrible fix of sinfulness! Decide in advance whether to use John 3:14-16 as introduction, as conclusion, or as both.

Additional Teaching Approach

Introduction:

Bring some pictures of snakes (such as from World Book Encyclopedia). Discuss with the children how some are harmless and some can kill you with their poison. Let the children express their delight or fear of snakes. In today's lesson we are going to learn how God used snakes to teach His people two very important lessons.

1. Sin brings death.
2. In God's mercy and love He gives life when people come with repentance and faith.

Presentation:

Fill a dish pan or cake pan with sand (or dirt). Color Popsicle sticks to represent the people. Use chenille wire (pipe cleaners), cut into pieces, to be the snakes. Also make a cross out of Popsicle sticks.

The Story:

See student's leaflet for narration of the story.

Review:

Why were the people of Israel getting discouraged? (It was such a long walk to the Promised Land, they couldn't take the short cut.)

What did the people start to do? (By their grumbling and complaining they were really showing rebellion against God who was directing and leading their lives.)

Why was this a sin? (They weren't trusting God or thanking Him for their blessings.)

What can happen if we go on sinning and we aren't sorry for our sin? (We can lose our faith and eternal life.)

How did God show the people that their sin was very serious? (He sent poisonous snakes to bite them.)

What would happen to the people who were bitten by snakes? (They would die.)

Sin brings death. It is very serious.

Did the snakes help the people understand how bad their sin was? (Yes)

How do we know? (They told Moses they were sorry for their sin and asked Moses to pray for them.)

Was there anything the people could do to save themselves from the snake bites? (No)

Who was the only one who could save them? (God)

Why did God want to save them? (Because He loved them.)

What was God's plan to save the people from the poisonous snakes? (Put a snake on a pole.)

What would happen when the people looked at the snake on the pole? (They would be saved and live.)

Did God forgive their sins? (Yes)

What was God's plan to save them from their sins? (Jesus would die on the cross to take their sins away.)

Application:

Do we ever sin by grumbling and complaining? (Most kids will complain at times about the food they are served, or about having to clean up their rooms or do other chores.)

Why is this a sin? (Disobeying parents is really disobeying God – 4th commandment.)

Is this sin serious? (“The wages (payment for) of sin is death.”)

What do we deserve because of our sins? (Hell)

Is there anything we can do to save ourselves from sin and hell? (No)

What was God’s plan to save us from our sins? (He would send His Son, Jesus, to live a perfect life for us and to pay the punishment for our sins on the cross. John 3:14-16 may be discussed here. Make sure the children understand verse 14, “so the Son of Man must be lifted up” means Jesus was lifted up on the cross to pay for our sins. Emphasize God’s love that He would send His Son to suffer and die for us sinners.)

Why did God send His Son to die for us? (Because He loves us.)

We trust only in God to wash away our sins and forgive us.

What joy becomes ours because Jesus took away our sins? (The joy of eternal life with God in heaven.)

Closing Prayer:

Dear Father in heaven, we admit that we sin against you every day when we complain and don’t obey our parents and teachers. We are sorry for our sins and ask that You forgive us for Jesus’ sake. We know that You will save us because You love us. We pray that You will help us to always trust that Jesus paid for all our sins on the cross. Help us to trust in your promise of eternal life. We thank you for your love and mercy. Amen.

APPLICATION

1. How marvelous that Jesus (the vehicle for the Cure for sin) was placed into the form of a man (the vehicle of the curse); and that all who look to Him in their desperate need are given life! And Jesus his elevated position on the “accursed tree” counterbalances the degraded position of those below Him. How strange the symbolism: bitten by snakes and dying, the victim receives God’s salvation in the form of a snake! What are we to make of it? Why not a symbol more divine-looking (like an angel, or a halo)? Because we should expect God to choose the improbable, the unlikely, and with it He does the impossible.
2. God does His work in the most amazing ways! He sent His own Son (not an angel or a sinner) to put Himself in the shoes of humankind, to bare his heel to the serpent of Eden, to absorb the venom of Satan’s attack (suffer and die), then crush Satan’s head by rising from the grave. The worldling reels in astonishment at such a doctrine (it’s too illogical, too irrational to attract anyone with good sense); yet there is no Cure but in the cross of Christ.
3. And when in the reign of Caesar Augustus the time was ripe for God’s plan and the embodiment of His Craftsmanship was finished, Jesus did not appear all that special. “He came unto His own (people and race), but His own received Him not.” Thus the Cross and our preaching of the Cross (whether by Moses or by us) will be foolishness to them that are perishing (from Satan’s poison); but unto those who look in faith to the Cross of Christ, well, to them it is “the wisdom of God and the power of God” (cf. 1 Cor. chs. 1 and 2).
4. So *faith* is basically an attitude toward God--the attitude that takes God at His word (no matter how illogical) and reaps the blessing that God channels through such unquestioning trust. *Unbelief* is basically the attitude that if it “doesn’t make sense,” then whatever the Bible (God) says is unacceptable.
5. One part of our soul looks askance and stands aloof from the way God acts and speaks--so His ways are “supernatural”. Each Israelite had the struggle. “Shall I take a peek at that brass serpent? Shall I abandon my reservations, my doubts, my scientific good sense; shall I fight this thing on my own and die on my own terms? Or shall I take a peek and see what happens? I certainly have better things to do than stare at that stupid cross-draped dumb-looking piece of fakery that others find so compelling....etc., etc.” The other part of our soul looks squarely at Jesus and reaches out to the Lord God who acts and speaks so wonderfully to us, after all. One learns to appreciate what Jesus saw in Nathanael: “Look, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile.” Nathanael wasn’t trying to outsmart Satan and God too.
6. Of course, it’s the kind of looking that’s done in FAITH, for looking in disdain would be of no help, as

Jesus so clearly presents the crux of it: “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” (Jn.3:14-16)

PASSAGES

These passages can be assigned as memory work or simply discussed in class as to how they fit the lesson.

Lower

John 3: 14-16 “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

John 12:32 - And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself.

I Peter 2:24 - who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree.

Middle any of the above and...

I Cor. 1:18 - For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are saved it is the power of God. v.25 - Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

Lamentations. 3:22-33 - Through the Lord’s mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. “The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I hope in Him.”

Upper any of the above and...

1 Cor. 10:5-11 (Use your Bible here for the text.)

HYMN CHOICES

“My Faith Looks Up To Thee” (TLH #394)

“I Am Trusting Thee, Lord Jesus” (TLH #428 1-4))

“Upon the Cross Extended” (TLH #171, choice of verses)

“How Firm A Foundation, Ye Saints Of The Lord” (TLH #427 3,5)