



Unit .07

Session .02

The Promise of God's Provision

Scripture



**Numbers 21:4-9;
John 3:14-15**

4 Then they set out from Mount Hor by way of the Red Sea to bypass the land of Edom, but the people became impatient because of the journey. **5** The people spoke against God and Moses: “Why have you led us up from Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread or water, and we detest this wretched food!” **6** Then the LORD sent poisonous snakes among the people, and they bit them so that many Israelites died. **7** The people then came to Moses and said, “We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you. Intercede with the LORD so that he will take

the snakes away from us.” And Moses interceded for the people. **8** Then the LORD said to Moses, “Make a snake image and mount it on a pole. When anyone who is bitten looks at it, he will recover.” **9** So Moses made a bronze snake and mounted it on a pole. Whenever someone was bitten, and he looked at the bronze snake, he recovered. . . . **14** “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, **15** so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”

Intro Options

Main Point:

The bronze serpent points to both God's punishment of sin and His salvation through Jesus.

Option 1

Imagine a person who is determined he can swim from the coast of San Diego to Japan, a journey of roughly 5,600 miles. Believing nothing to be impossible, he sets a date and begins training harder than he's ever trained before. He alters his diet and begins taking extra care of his body. He maps out the easiest route and makes plans for a support team to follow along in a boat to provide food and water during the trek.

The big day finally arrives and the ambitious swimmer makes his way to the beach where a large crowd has gathered to cheer him on. He wades into the water and then begins his swim. He pushes forward, but at the 139.7 mile mark, he succumbs to fatigue, the cold, and increasingly choppy waters and signals for the support boat.

The reason behind his lack of ability was due to what he placed his faith in—a human body, not meant to complete the task set out to complete. People aren't designed to swim 5,600 miles at a time. But, on the other hand, had he placed his faith in the right thing—such as a boat to carry him across the ocean—he would have likely made the journey. Boats are designed to traverse oceans.

In Jesus, God has provided a way for us to be saved from our sin. He alone must be the object of saving faith, because He alone is worthy of such faith. Trusting in anything else only leads to death.

- **What things do people in our world today put their faith in hoping that everything turns out well for them in the end?**

Option 2

Invite students to call out events they look forward to. Some might be yearly events. Some might be once-in-a-lifetime moments. As students share, write their responses on the board or a large piece of paper. (For example: Super Bowl®, Academy Awards®, season finales, holidays, graduation day, etc.)

Share the following information about The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe (Disney, 2005): Narnia is introduced as a land locked in an endless winter and ruled by the evil White Witch. Aslan, Narnia's good leader, has been absent from the land for many years. The people look forward to Aslan's return, when the curse of winter will be lifted and the land will begin to thaw.

- **What were the Narnians hopeful for? What did they anticipate, even in the midst of their frozen, broken world?**
- **What were the Israelites hopeful for as they wandered in the desert?**

TEACHING PLAN

In this session, we see how the Israelites became ungrateful and impatient during their time of wandering, complaining about things like the food and the scarcity of water. But as we already know, there are consequences for unrepentant and persistent sins.

Read Numbers 21:4-7a



The Israelites had repeatedly sinned against God during their journey through the wilderness. And yet, even through all of their complaining and faithlessness, God had continued to be faithful and provide for His people. But here, in Numbers 21, we see once again the hearts of the Israelites on full display as they complain and sin against God.

Activity

Break students into groups and have them come up with a list of things they frequently complain and grumble about (homework, healthy food, relationships, etc.). After they create their lists, have them circle the complaints that actually aren't bad (as in the examples mentioned) and list the reason as to why it isn't bad next to it. After you come back as a group, discuss why we typically complain and grumble about good things in our lives.

- **When have you been impatient with God? Did your impatience cause you to grumble about what He had or had not done? Explain.**

If we focus on the Israelites' offense, we might not understand what follows. But if we focus on the One offended instead, we will be more apt to understand God's response. In response to the Israelites' rebellion, He punished them. It was the type of punishment that would strike fear into the heart of any person. Suddenly, poisonous snakes showed up in the camp. Biting. Infecting. Killing. The people's break of their trust in God was a serious offense. The Lord would not take it lightly. When they spoke out against their circumstances, they were speaking directly against God's character.

- **What does the Israelites' punishment communicate about the seriousness of sin?**

As we've already seen, all sin deserves death—physical and spiritual separation from God. Most often, physical death is not an immediate consequence of sin, but there are times when it is. In Numbers 21, we see one of those times. Because of the Israelites' offense against God, He sent snakes into the camp to bite them and many people died. They had treated God and His provisions with contempt, so God responded by giving them what they wanted. They had implied that it would be better for them to be back in Egypt, so like the way God sent plagues into Egypt, he sent snakes into the Israelite camp.



The snakes that God sent brought about His desired result—repentance. The people went to Moses and confessed that they had sinned against God and him. Then they asked Moses to intercede on their behalf. We can learn much of what *not* to do from the Israelites, but here we are provided an example of what we *should* do when we sin.

- **When you realize you've sinned against God, what is your immediate response usually?**

Main Point:

The bronze serpent points to both God's punishment of sin and His salvation through Jesus.

COMMENTARY

Numbers 21

4-7a. The Israelites' words revealed the posture of their hearts (see Mark. 7:14-23), and their heart posture was one to impugn the character of God and to spurn His goodness and kindness to them. Their words were a direct attack on holy God; that is why this sin was so serious. So God showed the Israelites the magnitude of their offense against Him by sending snakes, whose bite killed the Israelites, into the camp.

When we read this account and filter God's action through the proper lens of how the Israelites had sinned against holy God, we find it easier to see that God's judgment was just. The Israelites had no right to be impatient with God. He had revealed His goodness to them numerous times. They were only in the wilderness because they had spurned God's provision of the land. And if nothing else, they crossed the line by calling God's provision wretched. The Israelites had rejected God and didn't deserve Him, or the life He provides.

But understanding how God's response was just in Numbers 21 only gets us halfway to where we need to go. The critical question we must ask next is, "Do I see my sin the same way I see theirs?" And for many of us, much of the time, we have to answer, "No. No, I don't." The reason is because many of us plunge into the trap we may have fallen into as we began reading this passage—we focus on our sins and fail to consider the One we have sinned against. We seek to make excuses for our sins. We justify ourselves by comparing our sins against the sins committed by others ("But at least I am not like them!"). We abuse God's grace. We tend to think of some sins as greater than others because sins might have different immediate consequences. Or we see sin through our culture's lens, instead of through a gospel lens. And all the while, we fail to remember that all of our sins—even the "small" ones that don't seem to harm anyone—are acts of rebellion against our Creator. We fail to understand that what is deemed culturally appropriate changes from generation to generation, but God's Word remains unchanging.

99 Essential Doctrines (p. 16, DDG)

Sin and Death

The ultimate consequence for sin is death—physical death, spiritual death, and eternal death (Rom. 6:23). God was clear to Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden that if they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they would surely die (Gen. 2:17). The type of death that would result from the fall in the garden of Eden wasn't only physical death but spiritual death as well, the separation of a person from God. Spiritual death continues in a permanent state when someone dies apart from the reconciling work of Christ, who defeated death through His own death on the cross and subsequent resurrection.

TEACHING PLAN

Read Numbers 21:7b-9

Once God heard the people's penitent cry, He provided a way of restoration through their faith. In an act of divine irony, God instructed Moses to make a serpent of bronze and place it on a pole. If those bitten by the snakes on the ground would look to the snake that had been lifted up, they would be healed.

The word for "look" in Hebrew does not mean a casual gaze or a quick glance. Rather, it indicates fixing your gaze upon something or to look intently. The idea is that the Israelites would have to concentrate their mind's attention and heart's affection.

▪ What is the significance of God's command for the people to gaze at the snake? What were the people to consider as they looked upon it?

People in the camp listened to the Lord's word through Moses. As they suffered from their injuries, they looked to the bronze serpent fixed on the pole. As they gazed upon it intently, recovery occurred. Doubtless, it was a mystery to them. It is a mystery to us. But, in that moment, God chose the symbol of their sin as the instrument of His mercy.

Read John 3:14-15



Though God desires for no one to be separated from Him, He is a just God and will not allow sin to go unpunished (2 Pet. 3:9). But, through Jesus, God has made a way people can be saved from sin. God provided Jesus to pay the punishment deserved because of sin. Through the cross, God shows us how wretched our sin is. Jesus was pierced, crushed, and wounded instead of us (Isa. 53:5). He was separated from the Father so that we wouldn't have to be (Matt. 27:46). He took the shame we deserved upon Himself (Heb. 12:2). Jesus' death was an act of God's grace, but salvation is only experienced through faith (Eph. 2:9). Salvation from death was available for the Israelites in the wilderness—the snake on the pole was right there but it was not effective until they looked up in faith. The same is true for us.

Faith begins with believing what God says about salvation, that we need it because of our sin, and He provides it in Christ alone. And that faith is manifested when we look up to Christ, raised up on the cross, and trust in His completed work alone for our salvation.

▪ What does your attitude about your sin indicate what you believe about God?

Belief always leads to action. To believe what Jesus has done leads to trusting that the work necessary for salvation is finished. Jesus has done everything needed for us to be saved, so we show that we trust in His finished work by living the way He has called us to live.



▪ How does the completed work of Jesus motivate you as you seek to live for Him?

COMMENTARY

Numbers 21

Main Point:

The bronze serpent points to both God's punishment of sin and His salvation through Jesus.

7b-8. God's plan for Moses from the start was for Moses to be His intermediary. Moses spoke to Pharaoh what God told him to speak. Moses performed acts God told him to perform. And at times, Moses interceded on behalf of the people when they sinned, such as when they fashioned the golden calf.

In Numbers 21, Moses had yet another opportunity to intercede on behalf of God's people. At times, Moses had done this apparently on his own, but here the people asked him to intercede for them. They knew they had sinned. They recognized God's judgment. And they understood that Moses was able to plead for grace and mercy on their behalf. Though Moses' words of intercession are not quoted in this passage, we might assume that he interceded for the people like he had in the past, drawing on the promises of God and the importance of preserving the glory of God among all nations.

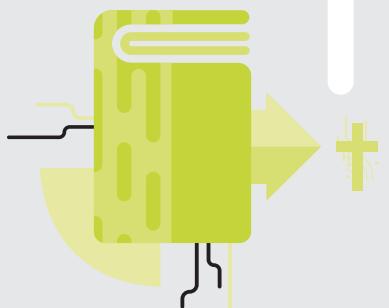
God gave the Israelites Moses not only to deliver them from Egypt and lead them into the promised land, but also to be their ongoing intermediary. Whether it was a promise of salvation, laws to follow, or a message of condemnation, God spoke to His people through Moses often during their journey. But, this was not a one-way conversation. Moses also spoke to God on behalf of the people, whether it was asking for provision or for the forgiveness of sin.

8-9. This incident looks back on two biblical narratives involving serpents. In Eden, God promised Satan (who had taken on the serpent's form) that he would one day be defeated (Gen. 3:15). The snake image lifted high by Moses was a reminder of this promise. Also, when Moses and Aaron confronted Pharaoh's priests, Aaron's staff turned into a serpent and devoured the priests' staff-serpents, a foretaste of the ultimate defeat of all false religions (Ex. 7:8-13).

Unfortunately, however, things God uses for good can become misused. Several centuries after the Numbers 21 episode, Hezekiah became king over Israel. He was a righteous king who destroyed the objects of idolatry in the kingdom. One item was the bronze serpent that Moses used in the desert. For all these years, the Israelites had kept it. At the time of Hezekiah taking the throne, "the Israelites burned incense to it" (2 Kings 18:4). The item that God used in one generation as His instrument of deliverance had become the object of worship in another generation. The people had forgotten God as the true deliverer and, as we commonly do, substituted an idol in His place.

(p. 17, DDG) Christ Connection

Just as the Israelites looked upon the bronze serpent lifted high on the pole and were healed, so also we look with faith upon Jesus Christ lifted high on the cross and are saved from the punishment of our sin.



Our Mission

God's Story has always been designed to connect with our story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own. Suggested answers to these questions can be found on the right-hand side of the page for leaders.

Head



What are some parallels between the Israelites' sin here and the sin of Adam and Even in the garden?

Why is it so important to trust God for guidance instead of jumping in and doing things on our own?

Heart



What does your attitude toward your sin say what you believe about Jesus?

How does a right perspective of Jesus' sacrifice give us a right perspective on the seriousness of our sin?

Hands



What lesson can we learn from the Israelites' response when they recognized their sin?

What are some current sins in our own lives we need to repent from?



Main Point:

The bronze serpent points to both God's punishment of sin and His salvation through Jesus.



Head

The fact that there are serpents in this narrative is no coincidence. By reading about the biting serpents and the bronze serpent, our thinking should automatically go back to the beginning of Adam and Eve's story when they were tempted by a serpent. Once we do that, we can see many parallels. In fact, there in the wilderness the people were reliving Adam and Eve's sin in the garden. Eve gave in to the temptation to doubt God's truthfulness. Furthermore, she doubted that the Lord had her best interests in mind. The Israelites put themselves in the same position. Their impatience revealed a lack of trust in God's goodness, thinking that they knew best, which was the same for Adam and Eve. And if we are honest with ourselves, it is the same impatience we struggle with also. But if there is anything these narratives tell us time and time again, it is that things go seriously wrong both for us and those around us when we trust in ourselves instead of in the grace and goodness of God and His Word.



Heart

All sin is serious and deserves the punishment of death and because of our sin, each one of us is separated from God. But as potent as sin is, God's grace is more powerful. God provided a way—the one and only way—for us to be saved from the penalty of sin in Jesus Christ. Jesus lived the life of obedience we were called to live but could not because of our sin. And Jesus was lifted up on the cross to pay the punishment of death we were condemned to pay.

When we place our faith in the finished work of Jesus, we not only believe in our need for salvation, but we trust that the need has been fulfilled by Him. In light of all that Jesus has done, we take sin seriously, repent of sin immediately, and trust in the faithfulness of God completely.



Hands

Like the Israelites, the first thing we do when we repent of sin is to confess that we have sinned against God. We go to God and confess all of our sin. We don't need to try to hide anything from Him. We can't anyway; He already knows what we have done. Instead, we lay bare before Him what we have done and why we have done it. Our sin is not merely about our conduct, but about our damaged hearts behind that conduct as well.

The problem is that for many of us, when we see that we've sinned, we try to cover it up and hope it goes unnoticed by others and by God. Or, worse, we try to fix it ourselves. Sometimes we will offer a halfhearted apology to God, and walk away unchanged. But true repentance begins by agreeing with God that we've sinned and that it is serious. We have to own our sin, to take responsibility for it, while simultaneously resting secure in God's grace, knowing all our sin has been forgiven in Christ.