

Serpent on a Pole

(Numbers 20:14 – 21:9)

Introduction

Suppose you were going on a trip to someplace you had never been before. Someone who knows how to get there gives you very simple instructions: “It’s not hard! Just follow this road and look for the sign. You can’t miss it.” But then you think, “I don’t know if I can believe this! After all, it sounds much too easy! I’m sure there must be another way.” And so you decide to go your own way, taking many different roads and becoming completely lost. Does that sound like a foolish thing to do?

God has told us in His Word, the Bible, that there is only one way to get to heaven to have eternal life with Him. But many people hear what that way is and they say, “Oh, that can’t be right. It’s too easy. Surely there must be some other way.” And so they live their whole lives trying to get to God some other way, and they end up being lost from God forever. How sad! God has made His way clear and simple for us to follow. Do you know what that way is?

Today we’ll learn about something unusual that happened to the people of Israel in the wilderness that can help us understand God’s way for us to have eternal life.

Opening Prayer

Father, You have given us Your word, the holy Bible. In it You have given us everything we need to know about life and godliness. It is a light to our feet as we walk in a dark world. Help us to listen to Your voice and to trust and obey You. We want to live our lives in a way that is pleasing to You. In Jesus’ name, I pray. Amen.

Memory Verse

And as Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. (John 3:14-15)

Lesson

The forty years that the children of Israel were to wander in the wilderness was almost over. They were getting really close to the time they could finally enter into the Promised Land. Moses was planning the way for them to take and the shortest way to get there was through Edom. But the king of Edom would not allow the children of Israel to pass through his country.

Numbers 20:17

Please let us travel through your land. We will be careful not to go through your fields and vineyards. We won’t even drink water from your wells. We will stay on the king’s road and never leave it until we have passed through your territory.

Moses promised the king of Edom that the children of Israel wouldn’t disrupt anything in his land if he would just let them take the short cut into the Promised Land. But the king of Edom refused to let them come into his land.

Numbers 20:18

But the king of Edom said, “Stay out of my land, or I will meet you with an army!”

The king of Edom told Moses if they came into his land he would mobilize his army and come out against them.

Numbers 20:21

Because Edom refused to allow Israel to pass through their country, Israel was forced to turn around.

So the children of Israel had to go all the way around Edom and that was so discouraging that they started to bitterly complain again.

Numbers 21:4-5

Then the people of Israel set out from Mount Hor, taking the road to the Red Sea to go around the land of Edom. But the people grew impatient with the long journey, and they began to speak against God and Moses. “Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die here in the wilderness?” they complained. “There is nothing to eat here and nothing to drink. And we hate this horrible manna!”

The people complained against God and Moses. They were sick and tired of wandering through the wilderness. They were sick and tired of always having to search for water to drink. And, they were sick and tired of having nothing but manna to eat.

They didn't appreciate the fact that God Himself provided the Manna – this special bread from heaven – for them every day.

Ask: Do you ever complain about things when they aren't the way you would like?

God calls complaining sin. Sin is anything you do, say, or think that displeases God.

Ask: Have you ever complained about the meals you are given at home?

God wants you to be grateful to your mom and dad for providing food for you to eat!

Complaining about anything is sin. God hates our sin and he hated the sin of the Israelites as they complained about the food and water God was miraculously providing for them in the wilderness.

Ask: Do you think that God had to punish them for their sin?

Let's see...

Numbers 21:6

So the LORD sent poisonous snakes among the people, and many were bitten and died.

God sent thousands of poisonous snakes among the people. Wow! That would have been scary, don't you think? These snakes began to bite the people and many of the people died. So they quickly ran to Moses for help.

Numbers 21:7

Then the people came to Moses and cried out, "We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take away the snakes." So Moses prayed for the people.

They confessed their sin of complaining. So Moses asked God for help. God told Moses to do a strange thing. He didn't tell him how to get rid of the serpents, but how to make the people well.

Numbers 21:8

Then the LORD told him, "Make a replica of a poisonous snake and attach it to a pole. All who are bitten will live if they simply look at it!"

Even though the people had sinned, God still loved them. Although God is holy and hates your sin, He still loves you. God makes a way for us to have fellowship again with Him even though we are sinners.

God told Moses to make a brass serpent and put it on a pole. When the people looked at it, they would get well. They had to believe God in order to be healed.

Numbers 21:9

So Moses made a snake out of bronze and attached it to a pole. Then anyone who was bitten by a snake could look at the bronze snake and be healed!

[Teacher, display a stick with a rubber snake wrapped around it.]

Ask: How do you think the people responded when Moses told them if they wanted to be healed of their snake bites they had to look at a carved snake on a pole?

I can imagine there were many people who thought this sounds pretty silly, "I don't see how looking at a brass serpent could make me well." But if they didn't look, they died. They *had* to trust and obey God, even if it didn't make sense to them.

God made a really simple way for them to be healed and live! All they needed to do was look at the brass snake on the pole.

Some people may have thought it seemed too simple. But God only gave them one way to be healed and live.

The Israelites had admitted their sin. Now all they needed to do was to trust God by looking at the serpent of bronze lifted high on a pole and believe. Then their bodies could be healed of the poisonous snakebites.

That serpent of bronze placed on a pole was a picture of what God would do years later in providing the only way for our sins to be forgiven. If you look up at the Lord Jesus who willingly died on the cross for your sins, you can be saved from a life of spiritual death.

Years later, when Nicodemus came to see Jesus at night, Jesus told him,

John 3:14-15 [Verse for today...]

And as Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life.

How glad the Israelites must have been that God had provided a way for them to be healed and that He had made that way so simple that even the children were able to look at the serpent of bronze and live! God's way for your sin to be forgiven is simple, too. You need to admit to God that you have sinned and that your sin keeps you apart from Him. You need to believe that the Lord Jesus took the punishment for your sin when He died on the cross. It's the only way God has given you to be healed of the poison of sin.

Closing Prayer

Father, thank You that you have made a way for us to live with you forever in heaven. We look forward to that day that we can see you face-to-face. While we wait for that day, help us to always want to

trust and obey You no matter what You ask us to do. Even when it seems silly to us, remind us by the power of the Holy Spirit that Your way is always right. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

Learning Activities

Game Center

Serpent on the Pole Quiz

Give half the children "Question" cards and the other half the "Answer" cards. On "GO", the kids must find each other. When everybody has found their mate, each pair will ask their question to the class. Give treats to everyone at the end.

"Snake, Rattle, and Roll" Freeze Dance Game.

Create a Snake on a Stick visual aid. Perhaps you can attach a rubber snake to a broom stick.

Have students dance in ridiculous patterns, acting as though "dying" from snake bites. Hold up the snake stick as a signal for all the dying dancers to "freeze" in place. Touch the frozen dancers with the snake stick to unfreeze them. Any frozen dancers who move before they are touched by the snake on the stick are "out".

Or use the following review questions in another game:

1. Why did the children of Israel have to wander in the wilderness for 40 years? (They didn't trust and obey God.)
2. Why did Moses want to take the people through the land of Edom? (It was the shortest way into the Promised Land.)
3. When the king of Edom wouldn't let them cross through his land, what did the Israelites do? (They started to grumble and complain.)

4. What did the people complain about? (The food and water.)
5. Do you ever complain about the meals that you are given at home? What does God want you to do instead of complaining? (To be grateful that you have something to eat.)
6. What did God do to punish the people for complaining? (He sent poisonous snakes that bit the people.)
7. Did God tell Moses how to get rid of the snakes? What did God tell Moses to do? (God told Moses to make a brass serpent and put it on a pole.)
8. If you had been one of those people getting bitten by all those snakes what would you have thought when you heard Moses tell you to look at the brass serpent on a pole?
9. What does that brass serpent on a pole remind you of? Why? (Jesus hung on a cross.)
10. What is the only way you can be healed of the poison of sin in your life? (By believing in what Jesus did on the cross.)

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