

The Bronze Serpent

NUMBERS 21:4-9

MARCH 10, 2024

MEMORY VERSE

WHENEVER SOMEONE WAS BITTEN, AND HE LOOKED AT THE BRONZE SNAKE, HE RECOVERED. - NUMBERS 21:9, CSB

THEOLOGICAL THEME

When the children of Israel are tested by the hardship of their circumstances, they suffer the sting of being bitten by poisonous snakes. God instructs Moses to create a bronze snake to hold up: for the people to live, they had to look at the remedy God provided. We, too, have all been bitten with the deadly poison of sin and the only remedy for us is to respond in faith to Jesus, who was lifted up on a cross for us.

CALL TO ACTION

Medical mission is a great way to create evangelistic opportunities. If your group does not already have a mission partner, consider reaching out to your missions minister to learn about local and global opportunities to engage.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

What is the sickest you have ever been? Did someone help you get better? Who?

How did you feel about yourself when you were well again? Had your perspective on life changed? If so, how?

How did you feel toward the person who helped you get better?

When talking about His mission on earth, Jesus said, “The healthy don’t need a doctor, but the sick do. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:31-32). As the Great Physician, Jesus offers the solution to our spiritual sickness: His forgiveness and grace. At the same time, Jesus cares for the total person, as evidenced by His healing of the sick in the Gospels. Many years earlier, Moses’ actions in the desert pointed toward the healing power Jesus would bring.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

| READ NUMBERS 21:4-9.

What complaint did the Israelites raise against God and Moses?

Read Psalm 78:8-11. From this psalm, what do we learn were the root issues with Israel, beyond just their dislike of the manna God provided?

The Israelites openly expressed their dissatisfaction to God and Moses about the monotonous diet of manna they had been eating and the lack of water during this lengthy journey through the deserts. They described their food supply as “miserable,” thereby deploring and degrading that which God had so graciously given to them for some forty years. The psalmist described this generation of Israelites as “stubborn and rebellious . . . a generation whose heart was not loyal and whose spirit was not faithful to God.” The problem was not that the Israelites didn’t like the food God gave them; the problem was that they failed to trust and obey Him.

What is the warning for us from this moment in Israel’s history, when we think about our own relationship with God?

When a person’s heart is intent on rebellion and full of discontentment, even the best of gifts from the Lord can lose their savor; nothing will fully satisfy until the heart is made right. In response to the people’s uprising, the Lord sent forth “fiery serpents,” whose poisonous venom soon resulted in death to the many who were bitten.

Verses 6-9 describe God’s response to the people and the people’s eventual repentance of their sin. What surprises you or stands out to you from God’s initial response and his conditions?

What role did Moses play in this exchange?

Unlike previous rebellion accounts, the Israelites respond with repentant hearts, confessing their sinfulness in speaking out against God and Moses. Though driven in part by the desperate circumstances of facing death by snake bite, they seem to have realized genuinely the seriousness of their sin. Having experienced several times through their history in the wilderness that the prayer of a righteous man like Moses holds great power, they appealed to their divinely appointed leader to intercede with God on their behalf. Moses responded to their pleas with an equally humble heart and prayed on behalf of the people. The Lord graciously responded to the pleas of Moses and the people by giving instructions for preparing an antidote for the snakes’ venom. That antidote had much more significance than the people could have ever known.

Read John 3:14-16. In these verses, Jesus helps us understand the greater significance of the bronze snake on the pole. What did the snake on the pole ultimately represent?

With both the snake on the pole and Jesus on the cross, how do God’s people experience healing?

In the New Testament, Jesus used the imagery of the copper serpent to demonstrate that He must be lifted up on the cross in order to accomplish the salvation of humanity.

The words “lifted up” do not refer to Jesus’ ascension to heaven but to His enemies who lifted Him up on the cross just as Moses lifted up the snake on the pole (Num. 21:4-9). Just as the people in the wilderness looked with faith upon an uplifted serpent so that they might live, so through the death and resurrection of Jesus, those who believe in Him should not perish but have eternal life.

In addition to the physical healing of Moses’ day and the spiritual healing Jesus brings, how else did Moses imitate Jesus in the Numbers 21 reading? Read Romans 8:34 to help you answer.

One of Moses’ responsibilities as spiritual leader of the people of Israel was to represent them before God. Throughout Moses’ story, we often read about him approaching God with Israel’s sins, asking God to show mercy, and communicated God’s judgments back to the people. In much the same way, Jesus intercedes on our behalf before God the Father. Romas 8:34 tells us, “Who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is the One who died, but even more, has been raised; He also is at the right hand of God and intercedes for us.” Because of Christ, we can confess our sins before God and know with confidence that Jesus is interceding on our behalf.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

Read Hebrews 12:2. How do our readings and discussion help you understand what you need from Jesus and how you are to approach Him today?

How do you feel when you think about the spiritual healing made available to you through the death and resurrection of Jesus? What perspective does that give you to your sins and your need for repentance?

As a group, what are some ways we can remind each other that Jesus is our Great Physician, and that all He asks for us is trust and obedience?

What could our group do together to meet people’s healing needs and bring them to Jesus?

PRAYER

Close in prayer, thanking God that He cares about the whole person: physical and spiritual. Pray for any specific healing needs your group may have. Pray that even today God would impress upon your group members’ hearts to get involved in the needs of others.

COMMENTARY

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21:4. The trade route referred to as the way of the Red Sea extended from Elath on the eastern finger of the Red Sea in the Gulf of Aqaba northward through the Arabah to the Dead Sea. Hence the desert route would have the Israelites approaching the northern end of the Arabah from the southwest, and then crossing the Arabah between Tamar and Zalmonah.

21:5. For the seventh time, the people spoke against God and Moses. Their words were the same monotonous complaint about food and water.

21:6-7. God's judgment against the people came in the form of poisonous snakes, likely the carpet viper.

21:8-9. The Lord directed Moses to make a snake image and mount it on a pole as an antidote for those who had been bitten by these snakes. Those who looked at this snake image would be healed by faith in God's provision, not by faith in the graven serpent. Because it was God who graciously did the healing, it was neither idolatry nor magic. John's Gospel cited Jesus' use of this imagery as a metaphor for His crucifixion. Just as those in Moses' time looked upon this snake and were healed, those who look in faith to the Christ who was lifted up on the cross will be healed of their sins. Those who looked upon Him and believed in Him would have eternal life (John 3:14-16).