

LESSON 9



DEATH BY FIERY SERPENTS

Scripture Texts: Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-16

In our lesson today, Israel is yet outside of Canaan. Aaron has died. God would not allow him to enter the Promised Land because of his sin at the rock. Soon Moses will be gone too. But now the people are still suffering the difficulties and tasting the bitterness of their disobedience and unbelief.

The way was hard. Enemies harassed Israel. It was dry, barren land with small resources. But there was no justification for their complaining. God did not excuse them. Complaining grew into accusations of God and Moses. Faultfinding usually draws one into other sins. A faultfinding spirit never looks heavenward. It always looks earthward. There is a better way to solve problems than by complaining. Salvation is consistent with praise and thanksgiving, a much better way.

MEMORY VERSE: *And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up.* —John 3:14

The People Complain

Numbers 21:4-5 They journeyed from mount Hor. They had to **compass**, or go around, **Edom** because they were not allowed to cross it (Numbers 20:21). **The people was much discouraged because of the way.** It was a way of hostile people and of a hostile nature, a desert land with enemies all about who were determined not to let the Israelites enter Canaan. Here we find a good type of the individual's spiritual fight to obtain that experience which God has for him through Jesus Christ. It is indeed a hard way until the love of God takes away the drudgery of facing the enemy. We can't do it in our own strength. **The people spake against God**—against the One who had helped them miraculously many times and would now if they allowed Him. **And against Moses**, who was not responsible for conditions and who desired to have them turn to God for help. As often before, their desires turned back to Egypt. They despised **this light bread**—God's gift of manna—and complained of lack of bread and water. They had forgotten God's miraculous provision in the past.

Again and again, the children of Israel had been severely punished for the sin of complaining. Why did they not stop it? It was their human nature, their carnal mind, which is not subject to the law of God, that controlled them (Romans 8:7). They needed not only a lesson from the outside, but a change on the inside. They had God's Law. They had witnessed good examples. They had experienced the handiwork of God. These did not give them the needed strength. They did not have the Savior yet. They had types of Him. They had the promise of Him. God was showing them their need of Him. They needed a new nature, **the divine nature** (2 Peter 1:4). Are we like them? Do we complain and fail to trust God? We have more than they to aid us. We will not be excused for failing to use the provision God has given us.

Punishment From God

Numbers 21:6-7 The Lord sent fiery serpents . . . much people of Israel died of the poisonous bites. It took a drastic move on the part of God to bring a response, but here again, we see signs of true repentance. **We have**

sinned—owned their sin and named it—we **have spoken against the Lord, and . . . thee; pray unto the Lord**—they asked for prayer. Their spoken request was for removal of the punishment rather than of their guilt, but the unspoken request for forgiveness must have been strong in their hearts, because Moses prayed and God heard and answered.

God Prescribes a Remedy

Numbers 21:8-9 **The Lord said . . . Make thee a fiery serpent**—a representation of the source of the punishment. **Set it upon a pole**, make it visible to all the people who care to look upon it. **Every one that is bitten, when he looketh . . . shall live**. This was not a material remedy. The serpent was not applied to the stricken one. Healing was obtained by faith and obedience. Every bitten one who **beheld**—really saw—**the serpent of brass, he lived**. This is a type of a greater healing.

God used the brazen serpent as a symbol. No power rested in it. God was not reached through it but by faith in His Word and obedience to it. The brazen serpent was not to be trusted in, prayed to, or worshiped. But the children of Israel did make an idol of it for many years by burning incense to it. King Hezekiah destroyed it along with other idols (2 Kings 18:4). Israel's action here shows us a tendency of human nature that is still the same today.

Christ, the Remedy for Sin

John 3:14-16 Centuries later, God sent a greater Remedy to heal a more serious curse. As the serpent bite took physical life, so sin takes spiritual life. Christ came and was lifted up in death on the Cross—**as Moses lifted up the serpent**. (Christ's "lifting up" was not honor and exaltation. It was shame and sacrifice. It was His Crucifixion. See John 12:32-33.) **As Moses lifted up the serpent . . . even so must the Son of man be lifted up**. As the brazen serpent represented the poisonous serpents, so Christ took upon Himself the poison of sin which afflicts mankind—He was made **sin for us** (2 Corinthians 5:21). As the sin of the Israelites brought physical death, so the sin of us all brings spiritual death (Romans 6:23). As looking at the serpent on the pole brought physical life, so **whosoever believeth in him**—Christ—shall **have eternal life**—spiritual life continuing forever. As beholding the brazen serpent was the only way to escape the effect of the serpent's bite, so trusting in Jesus is the only way to escape damnation and obtain spiritual life (Acts 4:12). No other way has been given to be free from the curse of sin.

When Jesus gave Himself to die in our stead, He fully took upon Himself the guilt for which He was dying. In doing so, He yielded Himself to die on the Cross and thus, became a curse for us (Deuteronomy 21:23). Since He actually took our sins and suffered the punishment for them, we can go free if we accept Him as our Substitute and take Him into our hearts. How? By following the steps pictured in the type in our lesson today—1. confession of ourselves as sinners, 2. repentance, 3. looking to Jesus, 4. putting faith in Him, and 5. praying to the Lord to take away our sins. The serpent's bite is a type of sin. The brazen serpent is a type of Christ made sin for us. Lifting the serpent on a pole is a type of Christ crucified on the Cross. Looking on the brazen serpent is a type of faith in Christ's atonement. Healing of their bodies is a type of salvation from sin.

JUST A THOUGHT

**Many opinions that are expressed should
have gone by slow freight.**

This lesson is adapted from a lesson by Mary Lehmann.
It is revised and posted here with written permission from
(c) Bible Paths Publications, PO Box 299, Keithville, LA 71047