

# THE BRAZEN SERPENT

**BIBLE TEXT** : Numbers 20:14-21; 21:1-9; John 3:14-16

LESSON 108 Senior Course

**MEMORY VERSE:** "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:14, 15).

## **BIBLE TEXT in King James Version**

### **Numbers 20:14-21 (KJV)**

<sup>14</sup> And Moses sent messengers from Kadesh unto the king of Edom, Thus saith thy brother Israel, Thou knowest all the travail that hath befallen us:

<sup>15</sup> How our fathers went down into Egypt, and we have dwelt in Egypt a long time; and the Egyptians vexed us, and our fathers:

<sup>16</sup> And when we cried unto the LORD, he heard our voice, and sent an angel, and hath brought us forth out of Egypt: and, behold, we *are* in Kadesh, a city in the uttermost of thy border:

<sup>17</sup> Let us pass, I pray thee, through thy country: we will not pass through the fields, or through the vineyards, neither will we drink *of* the water of the wells: we will go by the king's *high way*, we will not turn to the right hand nor to the left, until we have passed thy borders.

<sup>18</sup> And Edom said unto him, Thou shalt not pass by me, lest I come out against thee with the sword.

<sup>19</sup> And the children of Israel said unto him, We will go by the high way: and if I and my cattle drink of thy water, then I will pay for it: I will only, without *doing* any thing *else*, go through on my feet.

<sup>20</sup> And he said, Thou shalt not go through. And Edom came out against him with much people, and with a strong hand.

<sup>21</sup> Thus Edom refused to give Israel passage through his border: wherefore Israel turned away from him.

## **BIBLE REFERENCES:**

### **I Israel Prohibited from Passing Through Edom**

1 Moses sent messengers to the king; they reminded him that they were brothers, and recounted their hardships in Egypt, Numbers 20:14-16

2 Their request to pass through Edom, the short route to the Promised Land, was summarily rejected, Numbers 20:17, 18

3 Disregarding their brethren, Edom came against Israel; and they turned away, Numbers 20:19-21;

#### **Obadiah 1:10 (KJV)**

<sup>10</sup> For *thy* violence against thy brother Jacob shame shall cover thee, and thou shalt be cut off for ever.

### **II The Canaanites in the South Discomfited**

1 King Arad the Canaanite, who dwelt in the south, came out and fought them, Numbers 21:1

2 Israel, realizing their need of help, vowed a vow to the Lord to destroy their cities, Numbers 21:2

3 The Lord hearkened and delivered up the Canaanites, and their **cities** were destroyed, Numbers 21:3;

#### **2 Chronicles 20:15 (KJV)**

<sup>15</sup> And he said, Hearken ye, all Judah, and ye inhabitants of Jerusalem, and thou king Jehoshaphat, Thus saith the LORD unto you, Be not afraid nor dismayed by reason of this great multitude; for the battle *is* not yours, but God's.

### **III Israel's Sin and God's Punishment**

1 They became discouraged because of the long route through barren land in compassing Edom, Numbers 21:4

2 They spoke against God and against Moses, and loathed the manna God gave them, Numbers 21:5;

#### **John 6:32-33 (KJV)**

<sup>32</sup> Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Moses gave you not that bread from heaven; but my Father giveth you the true bread from heaven.

<sup>33</sup> For the bread of God is he which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world.

#### **John 6:63 (KJV)**

<sup>63</sup> It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, *they* are spirit, and *they* are life.

3 The Lord sent fiery serpents to bite them, and much people of Israel died, Numbers 21:6;

#### **1 Corinthians 10:9-11 (KJV)**

<sup>9</sup> Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents.

<sup>10</sup> Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer.

<sup>11</sup> Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come.

### **IV Israel's Repentance and God's Deliverance**

1 They confessed, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD, and against thee," and again Moses

## Numbers 21:1-9 (KJV)

<sup>1</sup> And *when* king Arad the Canaanite, which dwelt in the south, heard tell that Israel came by the way of the spies; then he fought against Israel, and took *some* of them prisoners.

<sup>2</sup> And Israel vowed a vow unto the LORD, and said, If thou wilt indeed deliver this people into my hand, then I will utterly destroy their cities.

<sup>3</sup> And the LORD hearkened to the voice of Israel, and delivered up the Canaanites; and they utterly destroyed them and their cities: and he called the name of the place Hormah.

<sup>4</sup> And they journeyed from mount Hor by the way of the Red sea, to compass the land of Edom: and the soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way.

<sup>5</sup> And the people spake against God, and against Moses, Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? for *there is* no bread, neither *is there any* water; and our soul loatheth this light bread.

<sup>6</sup> And the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died.

<sup>7</sup> Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD, and against thee; pray unto the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us. And Moses prayed for the people.

<sup>8</sup> And the LORD said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live.

<sup>9</sup> And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he

interceded for Israel, Numbers 21:7;

## 1 John 1:9 (KJV)

<sup>9</sup> If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

2 Moses was commanded to make a fiery serpent, and "every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live" Numbers 21:8

3 He placed the brazen serpent, which he made, upon a pole; and when he that was bitten looked, he lived, Numbers 21:9;

## Isaiah 45:22 (KJV)

<sup>22</sup> Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I *am* God, and *there is* none else.

### V The Brazen Serpent a Type of Jesus' Crucifixion

1 As the serpent was placed upon a pole, so Jesus was raised upon the cross, John 3:14

2 All who believe in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life, John 3:15;

## John 12:32 (KJV)

<sup>32</sup> And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all *men* unto me.

3 "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life," John 3:16

### NOTES:

The Children of Israel at this time were nearing the Promised Land, for their forty-years' wanderings in the wilderness were drawing to a close. They encamped at Kadesh on the border of Edom, and Moses sent messengers to the king of Edom, who besought him for a passage through their land, as that was a short route to Canaan. Now the Edomites were brethren of the Children of Israel, for they were descendants of Esau, the brother of Jacob. And of this kinship the messengers reminded the king when they greeted him, "Thus saith thy brother Israel" (Numbers 20:14). But nevertheless he abruptly and discourteously refused them passage and went out against them.

A little later, Arad, king of the Canaanites in the south, came out and fought against Israel and took some of them prisoners. And when Israel vowed a vow to the Lord to destroy their cities, if He would give them victory, the Lord hearkened; victory was given them, and their cities were utterly destroyed. But the Children of Israel were not permitted to fight against their brethren, the Edomites. Nevertheless God marked the cruel act of the king and his people, and the time came when the Edomites paid the price for their cruelty. In the Book of Obadiah it is written, "For thy violence against thy brother Jacob shame shall cover thee, and thou shalt be cut off for ever" (Obadiah 10).

### The Sin of Israel in Sight of the Promised Land

Having been rebuffed by their brother Edom, the Children of Israel turned back, and compassed the land of Edom by a long and arduous route to the south, by way of the Red Sea. There was nothing here inviting to the eye. It was a mountainous, desert country that only added to the fatigue of their marches. "And the soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way" (Numbers 21:4). But discouragement is a dangerous thing. It is one of the devices of the devil to lead a child of God into worse evils. When discouragement enters, faith **in** God

lived.

### **John 3:14-16 (KJV)**

<sup>14</sup> And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up:

<sup>15</sup> That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

<sup>16</sup> For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

begins to ebb; and the next step is murmuring, as frequently happened with the Israelites. And this younger generation which was nearing the border of the Promised Land, into which God had promised to bring them, might have profited by the failure of their parents who perished in the wilderness as a result of their sins. But they did not. On the contrary, they, like their parents, rebelled and "spoke against God, and against Moses, Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?" They also might have remembered God's faithfulness to Israel during their forty years in the wilderness. It was a desert waste reflecting the burning heat of a tropic sun, but God sent them the pillar of cloud to protect them by day, and the pillar of fire to guide them by night. It was a barren land where sometimes they found no water, but God brought them water out of the rock. There were no wheat fields here and no bread to maintain them, but God sent them manna from Heaven (angels' food). Their marches were frequent and fatiguing, and their shoes never wore out. But no, they forgot all this. They complained, "There is no bread, neither is there any water; and our soul loatheth this light bread." An early evangelist, in commenting upon this verse, remarked, "It was lonesome and longsome, but still it was God's way, and therefore nothing should have been loathsome."

### **God's Punishment Sent upon Israel**

God marked this conduct of His people and He heard their murmurings. It is not a light thing for God's people to complain about His dealings with them and to forget His blessings. Especially was it a great sin to loathe the bread He sent them. "He had commanded the clouds from above, and opened the doors of heaven, and had rained down manna upon them to eat, and had given them of the corn of heaven. Man did eat angels' food: he sent them meat to the full" (Psalm 78:23-25). And they called it "this light bread." And that term "light" is an expression of ridicule in the Hebrew. Also, Israel was nearing the end of their pilgrimage, when no longer would they have the hardships of the wilderness to endure, but was about to be ushered into a land flowing with milk and honey. But they had lost the vision, and "where there is no vision, the people perish" (Proverbs 29:18).

The Lord's righteous anger was incurred when Israel rebelled, and swift punishment was visited upon them. He "sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died." There are certain preachers in these days who have much to say about God's love, but there is no place in their theology for a God of judgment. The Children of Israel, however, found, on more than one occasion, that they were not serving an indulgent father. God chose Israel as His own and revealed to them His great love, when He heard their groaning, and their cry came up unto God, as they labored under the lash of their taskmasters; and with a high and mighty hand He led them out of Egyptian bondage. But they also found that He will not tolerate sin in any manner, shape, or form.

We are living, it is true, in the Dispensation of Grace, but God's attitude toward sin has not changed in the least degree. The Apostle Paul reminds us that even Christians may profit by the example which Israel has left: "Now these things were our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted. Neither be ye idolaters, as were some of them; as it is written, The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play. Neither let us commit fornication, as some of them committed, and fell in one day three and twenty thousand.

Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents. Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer. Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come" (I Corinthians 10:6-11).

### **Israel's Confession and Repentance**

One thing, however, can be said to Israel's credit. When they saw their brethren suffering from the poison of the fiery serpents and great numbers dying, they realized the seriousness of the situation. They awoke to the fact that judgment was being visited upon them, and that something had to be done about it. It takes desperate means sometimes to make a backslidden people realize their danger. And God is just merciful enough even to bring such a people face to face with death, if perchance in their despair they will call upon Him. In His Word it is written, "Offer unto God thanksgiving; and pay thy vows unto the most High: and call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me" (Psalm 50:14, 15). For once the Children of Israel came to their senses, and saw that they had highly offended the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And they also saw that the God who had delivered them out of Egyptian bondage was their only hope of a deliverance out of their present distress. "Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD, and against thee; pray unto the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us."

And again Moses, Israel's intercessor in every time of trouble, interceded in their behalf and prayed for the people. Herein was Moses like the promised Messiah. Jesus is today our great Intercessor. The mercy seat which covered the Ark was a type of Christ. And it is only because of His intercession in the Holiest of All, "not made with hands," that the hand of vengeance has been stayed.

### **The Remedy God Provided for Israel**

Moses' prayer in behalf of the people was not recorded on this occasion; but "the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much," and we know that Moses' prayer reached the Throne, for immediately the answer came, and the Lord told Moses what to do: "Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live." This is indicative also that the confession which the Children of Israel made Was accepted. It came from their hearts. A wonderful promise for sinners is found in His Word: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (I John 1:9). A beautiful lesson is revealed in this provision that God made for Israel in the wilderness. They had sinned terribly against the Most High. But they took a step in the right direction. They did what every sinner must do, if he is to escape the judgment of God. They went to Him whom they had wronged and sought His forgiveness, and also the deliverance which He alone could give. And when Moses interceded, the God of mercy came to their rescue. "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool" (Isaiah 1:18).

Moses did as the Lord instructed him. He "made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived." Death had reigned in the camp, and great

### QUESTIONS

- 1 Why were the Israelites not permitted to pass through the land of Edom?
- 2 What effect did their compassing the land of Edom have upon their route to Canaan?
  - 3 What effect did this change of route have upon the people themselves?
    - 4 What did their discouragement because of the way lead them into?
- 5 This was the younger generation. What might they have remembered to keep them out of sin?
- 6 What punishment was visited upon them in the wilderness because **of** their sin?
- 7 What did they do about it, when they saw their brethren dying?
- 8 What remedy did God provide for the Israelites when they confessed their sin?
- 9 In what respect was the lifting up **of the brazen serpent like Jesus'** being raised upon the cross?

numbers still were in agony. With the virus of the fiery serpents in their veins, their fevered bodies were filled with pain, and they knew the end was near. But there in the midst of the camp hung the brazen serpent. And when any man suffering with pain turned his languid eyes toward that sight, and beheld the brazen serpent, he lived! What a wonderful provision God had made! A life for a look! It brings to our minds the words of the prophet, "Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else" (Isaiah 45:22).

### **The Brazen Serpent a Type of Jesus' Crucifixion**

Jesus, in His conversation with Nicodemus, revealed that the episode of the serpents in the wilderness was more than just a historical event. Like many other events and the types and shadows of the Old Testament, this incident also pointed to Jesus. In the course of His conversation He said, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:14, 15).

There is a striking analogy between what happened to the Children of Israel on this occasion and what has happened to the world. The Israelites committed a grievous sin and became rebels against God, forgetting His goodness and despising His rule over them. And as a result of their evil conduct fiery serpents attacked and bit them. And much people of Israel died.

Likewise the whole world has fallen into sin and rebelled against the living God. "That old serpent, which is the Devil," the archenemy of mankind, has bitten sinners, injected his deadly virus, and they are spiritually dead in trespasses and sins. Today "the whole world lieth in wickedness." In these last days there is a prevalent "teaching" abroad that sin is not the serious matter that some preachers proclaim it to be. But this effort to minimize sin does not alter in the least degree what the Bible teaches concerning sin, nor the evil effects which sin has had upon the world. The deadly effect which the virus of those fiery serpents had upon the mortal bodies of the Israelites is only a type of the deadly effect of sin upon the immortal soul. "The soul that sinneth, it shall die."

### **God's Great Remedy for Sin**

A disease that has caused death in spite of the known remedies applied is entirely beyond the skill of the ablest physicians of this world. When death sets in, it is time to look to God. The Israelites were awakened to their need of God when they saw their brethren dying and fever was raging in their own stricken bodies. And God came to their *rescue*. A brazen serpent on a pole was raised in the midst of the camp. "And it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived."

God also has come to the rescue of this poor stricken world. He has raised up the only Remedy for sin, "and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live." That Remedy is the Lord Jesus Christ. He was raised up upon the cross; and let the man who is languishing in sin look in faith to Him, and he, like the dying thief, shall live!

**"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."**