

"Pray to the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. (Numbers 21:7)

Patient Father, you see our disobedience and our desire to be in control of our own lives. Forgive us, we pray, for all the times we worship false gods, including our idolatry of self. Help us to cling to you and your promises, that we would never stray from your company. Thank you for your gift of forgiveness when we fail. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Introduction

God had saved his people from slavery in Egypt and had brought them through the Red Sea and into the wilderness, where he took care of their daily needs. But the people still murmured and complained. God responded to their sin in a unique and powerful way.

Read: Numbers 21:4-9

On reading these verses, what are some of your initial impressions and questions? What stands out to you?

The Biblical Context

The first five books of the Bible are called the **Torah** (meaning "teaching" or "instruction"). This word is often translated as "the Law." These books do contain many legal regulations and ordinances, but they also teach God's requirements through narrative "case studies."

The time period of the Wilderness Wanderings follows the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt. It was a time of disobedience and rebelliousness. It was in the wilderness that God gave his people the Law as the unifying center for their identity as Israelites.

In the very first of the Ten Commandments, God told his people that they were to "have no other gods before me." Ironically, even as God was fulfilling his promise to them, the people were turning away from him by giving credit for salvation to a graven image.

Discussion Questions

1. By this point in the story of the Exodus, what miraculous things had God done for the Israelites? List here as many as you can:
2. Why were the Israelites grumbling? What didn't they like about the wilderness? Why do you think they were not more thankful for all God had already done for them? Have you ever been like that?
3. The word the Bible uses to describe the serpents is *Seraph*, which is translated "fiery." This can simply indicate that the snakes were poisonous. But how might the word *Seraph* indicate there was something more supernatural at work here? (Read Isaiah 6:1-7.)
4. What did the Israelites do after the snakes appeared? Did they continue complaining?
5. What did God tell Moses to make? What did this object symbolize? What did looking at this object force the Israelites to reckon with?
6. Compare what is said about Jesus in John 3:11-21. In reference to Jesus, what does it mean that he would be "lifted up"? What does seeing Jesus in this way force us to reckon with?
7. Does it seem strange that a sign of human sin and punishment could be used by God as a means of salvation and healing? Compare what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:18 about our Christian faith.
8. In a spiritual sense, is grumbling a useful way to handle frustration and disappointment? What happens when we "look to Christ" in times of struggle and hardship?