

Numbers 21:1-9

Aim of lesson

To show that God is like a father to his people, blessing those who do as he instructs and punishing the disobedient and rebellious, but that he never compels anyone to come to him. Everyone is free to obey or disobey him.

Background study

Numbers 20:14-21; 2 Kings 18:4; John 3:14-16.

Suggested outline of lesson

Maps, photographs and pictures will help to remind the children of the journey of the Israelites so far, and show the kind of terrain through which they were passing when the incident of the bronze serpent took place. Help the children to imagine the situation by reminding them of the rocky landscape, the dust, heat and lack of shade - which made the people tired, hot, thirsty and dispirited. In such a situation it takes only one or two people to start grumbling and rebelling for discontent to grow and spread rapidly. This is what happened in Edom.

No through road

Not long before, God had shown his power by subduing the Canaanites and giving his people victory in response to their pleading. At that time they were not far from the land of promise. However, since the king of Edom had refused to allow them passage through his territory, the people were forced to take a prolonged circuitous route, which gave rise to impatience and frustration. They spoke bitterly against Moses and against God. Unjustly they blamed God's appointed leader for all their privations, for he had given himself wholly to guiding them and mediating for them. Rebelliously they complained about the miraculous God-given manna, railing against the Almighty who in his wisdom and mercy had rescued them from slavery, constantly provided for them and who had promised them great blessings and favours if they trusted and obeyed him. They had received ample evidence of God's providence in the past and should, therefore, have been confident of his future provision, but they were preoccupied with their immediate discomfort and frustration. You might paraphrase the grumbles and complaints with which the people bombarded Moses, by using modern idiom and mimicking their tone of voice and persistence. God was deeply displeased with Israel's ingratitude and lack of faith; they had still not learned obedience.

Fiery serpents

God's punishment was swift and deadly. The children may have seen poisonous snakes in captivity and will be ready to talk about their sudden strike and fatal bite. Such snakes are not uncommon in hot countries where they are a source of terror. Once bitten the victims

were doomed to die - nothing could save them. The people immediately recognized God's reproach and regretted their sin in speaking against him. Realizing that they were powerless to effect a cure, and that they were wholly dependent on God's mercy, they approached Moses, confessed their guilt and asked Moses to pray to God for them.

Salvation

In answer to his prayer, God first required Moses to carry out his instructions and cast a visual symbol of the cause of death and erect it for everyone to see. This was something new, and different from the provisions under the law for the forgiveness of sins, but Moses obeyed without question. Then he explained to the people what they must do to be saved. God had wisely put the responsibility for their cure on to the people themselves. Those who listened, who accepted the assurance that it would work and who did as they were told, were made well. Any who ignored Moses and who persisted in despising God's provision, died. Convey the reality of the scene and the experiences of the people, as the suffering ones, some probably needing assistance, hurried to view the serpent. It was a simple act but it required faith and conviction. The relief felt by those who were healed, and witnessed by everyone, would once more bring the Israelites to the realization that God was their saviour, that they needed him and that they owed him gratitude and praise.

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness

It will be sufficient, with children of this age, merely to introduce them to the way in which Jesus took up this incident and related it to himself. He was lifted up on the cross in order to save people from death and from the sin that causes it, and only those who come to him believing in him will be given everlasting life.

Relevance to the children's lives

God loves us and gives us everything we need. Do you agree? Why, then, do we all tend to grumble? What do we find to grumble about? Do we really have cause to complain? How can we overcome the human tendency to take the things God has given us for granted?

Worksheets

The jumbled words read (top to bottom, left to right): food, water, desert, bit, bitten, killed, Moses, live, poisonous, bread, bronze, Egypt, pole, sorry, snakes, prayed.

Prayer

Dear Lord God, we know that you give us all things. We thank you for all your gifts. Teach us how to be grateful and not to grumble. Amen.

Memory verse

"As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (John 3:14-15).