Bronze Snake on a Pole

Scripture Reference: Numbers 21:4-9

Suggested Theme: God provides for us. We can be grateful for what God gives us and that He wants to heal us.

Memory Verse: “I am telling you this, but it is not because I need anything. I have learned to be satisfied with the things I have and with everything that happens.” Philippians 4:11, ICB

Story Overview:

When Israel camped in the wilderness, the Lord continually provided the people with manna and quail to eat. Even though He provided for their needs, their impatience and discontentment caused them to reject the food that God had provided. As a lesson for all to see, the Lord sent venomous snakes among the people so that many of them were bitten, became sick, and subsequently died. The people realised their sin and told Moses they were sorry for their actions. The Lord told Moses to mount a bronze snake on a pole. Anyone bitten by the poisonous snakes could look at the bronze snake and be healed.

Background Study:

This lesson speaks to us today. Our children are barraged with countless reminders that they should not be satisfied with what they have. Television, newspapers, sporting events, and magazines are filled with advertisements to make people feel that they need the advertised product. The difference between need and desire is often blurred.

Just before the events of today’s lesson, Aaron passed his responsibilities as High Priest on to his son, Eleazer (Numbers 20:22-29). After this, Aaron died.

This is the last “complaint story” we read about in Numbers. As the people continued to wander in the wilderness, they became “impatient.” They must have known that the forty years were almost complete. It was as if the time was getting so close that the people thought more and more about their situation. What might have begun as simple comparisons grew into grumbling and finally into a need to place blame.

The people were “speaking against God.” Moses was the leader the Lord had chosen, so they rejected Him, too. The Lord had consistently provided manna and quail, yet the people called it “miserable.”

Anyone who has spent time and effort producing a special meal for someone knows how devastating it would feel if the recipient rejected it and showed disgust. The rejection would not be a simple rejection of the food but of the person who prepared it. In the same way, the Israelites were rejecting the Lord. They were saying He did not know how to care for them. They felt they knew better than He what they needed.

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The Lord sent venomous snakes among the people. Some versions describe the snakes as “fiery.” This could refer to the burning pain they caused or even their colour. Forty years earlier, the Lord had told the Israelites that no one who was older than twenty at that time would enter the Promised Land (Numbers 14:26-35). Perhaps some of those people died at this time from the snake bites.

The Israelites knew that they had been wrong. They came to Moses and confessed the sins they had committed against him and against the Lord. Sometimes, we confess to the Lord but fail to ask for the forgiveness of others we might sin against.

Moses inquires of the Lord and is instructed to mount a bronze snake on a pole. Interestingly, the Lord chose this symbol because the snake or serpent was associated with evil.

Those who had been bitten were to look upon the bronze serpent and be healed. Instead of stopping at a general group admission of responsibility, each individual had to look at the snake before being healed. The snakes must have continued to be a problem because the Israelites kept the pole, and it seems that it continued to be used (Numbers 21:9).

The bronze serpent is not mentioned again for many years. Sadly, it seems that the pole was eventually used in idol worship. King Hezekiah broke it into pieces because the people were wrongly burning incense to it (2 Kings 18:1-4).

Jesus later parallels Himself to the bronze serpent on a pole (John 3:14). Just as the serpent was lifted up on the pole, Jesus would be lifted on a cross. Anyone who “looks to Him” will be saved.

Another note of interest is that many modern medical associations use the symbol of a serpent on a pole to symbolize healing.

Way to Introduce the Story:

“Raise your hand if you have ever been to a restaurant. What was it like? (Let them describe the menu, service, cost, etc.) Did you ever eat food that you didn’t like? (Let them describe or share your own experience) Did you know that when the Israelites travelled around in the desert, God gave them good food to eat every day? Every day He gave them manna (sweet honey-tasting flakes) and meat to eat (quail). It was like eating at a restaurant every day and not having to pay anything! Raise your hand if you would like that. Do you think the people were happy with what God gave them?”

The Story:

Every day, the Israelites were getting closer and closer to when they could enter the land that God had promised them. The Lord always cared for them and gave them delicious manna and quail. He wanted them to be happy.

Some of the people became very impatient. They were tired of waiting. They started complaining to Moses. They didn’t like the food. They wanted more water. Then they started complaining about God. They said that He didn’t give them good bread to eat. They said that He gave them miserable food. The Israelites said that they wished that they were back in Egypt!

The Lord was upset with His people. He had given them good food to eat and provided them with water. He always cared for and protected them from the wild animals and snakes in the desert. They should be content. “Content” means being happy with what you have or how your life is without always being unhappy and thinking that you should have more. The Israelites were not content. The people did not thank Him for what He did. They always thought they should have more!

The Lord decided to teach the Israelites that He was the only one who could save them. He sent poisonous snakes into the camp. The snakes bit the people, and many of them got sick and died. Now, the people

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knew that they needed the Lord to protect them. They knew they had been wrong to complain about how the Lord cared for them. They told Moses that they were very sorry for all of their complaints.

Moses prayed to the Lord about the snakes. He told the Lord how sorry the people were. The Lord answered Moses' prayer. The Lord did not take the poisonous snakes away from the camp, but He did something to help the Israelites remember that they should always look to Him for help. He told Moses to make a snake from a shiny metal called "bronze." Moses was to put the bronze snake on a pole so all the people could see it. If a poisonous snake bit anyone, they could look at the bronze snake and be made well. This would help them remember that God would take care of them.

Many of the Israelites who had been bitten by the snakes looked at the bronze snake on the pole and were made well. They remembered that God takes care of His people. Only God could make them well. They learned to be happy and content with what the Lord gave them. They learned not to complain about the Lord's gifts!

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Ways to Tell the Story:

This story can be told using various methods. Always remain true to the facts found in the Bible but help children connect to its meaning by using drama, visual aids, voice inflection or other group participation.

Be selective. Each teacher is unique, so only use the illustrations that best relate to how YOU tell the story in THIS lesson. Too many illustrations can be confusing, so eliminate any that cover other stories or details you do not wish to emphasise in this lesson.

Click here for visual aids and more storytelling methods.

View this slideshow and download it from the original source:
http://www.freebibleimages.org/illustrations/moses-serpent/

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Review and Reflection Questions:

Review questions help children remember and know the facts of a story. Reflection questions encourage them to internalise the meaning and implications for their lives. Asking at least one of each type of question can help strengthen a child's spiritual development and help them connect to God. Click here to learn more about review and reflection questions.

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Review:

- What did the Israelites complain about? (God didn't give them good food.)
- What did God send into the camp where the Israelites lived? (Poisonous snakes)
- Why did God send the poisonous snakes into the Israelites' camp?
- Why did God provide a way for the people to be healed from the snake bites? (Because Moses prayed for the people when they repented, and he asked God to take the snakes away)
- How were the people healed from snake bites? (When they looked at a bronze snake on a pole, God healed them)

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- What does it mean to be content? (To be happy with what you have or how your life is without thinking you should have more)
- What did you learn about God from this story?

Reflection:

- What do you think it felt like to be bitten by a poisonous snake?
- What do you imagine the snakes looked like?
- Many people considered the sign of a snake on a pole evil. Why do you think God asked Moses to make this sign for the people to look at to be healed?
- How do you think God felt when the people complained that the food He gave them was terrible?
- Have you ever done something sinful? How do you feel after you've sinned/done something wrong?
- After you've done something wrong, it is good to tell the person you've sinned against and God that you are sorry and ask them to forgive you (called confession). Is doing this easy or hard for you? Have you done this before? Tell us about it if you like.

Prayer:

It is important to guide children in learning how to pray. In prayer, children can connect with God and learn that He hears and answers them. God can become a life-long friend who is with them every moment of their lives. Try using a variety of prayer methods from time to time so that the children can learn to connect with God in different ways. Note that you can pray at any time throughout your lesson. A variety of prayer methods are found here.

Song Suggestions:

- My God is So Big Song
- Refer to the Song Page on this website for more song options.

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Activities and Crafts:

- How to choose the best learning activities for my teaching situation.
- Visit the activities and songs pages for additional activities and crafts.

Activities:

- Have play-dough ready so you and the children can practice making "snakes" when they first arrive. Here's a link to a few dough recipes from teachnet.com.
- Find pictures of snakes in books.
- Look up colourful advertisements in magazines or newspapers and discuss how they try to make consumers feel they need to buy the product.
- Find photos of genuinely needy people and compare them to some of our "needs."
- Older children can read and discuss the parallel between this story and Jesus's crucifixion (John 3:14).

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- Role-play opening gifts at a birthday party and talk about how to show thanks for the thoughtfulness and not complain if we get something we don't want.
- Have older children read Philippians 4:11-12 and put it in their own words as if Paul was writing in our current times.
- Say a chain prayer thanking the Lord for the things He has given us. Be sure to lead the children in expressing appreciation to God for His gifts.
- Write the words of the memory verse on separate pieces of paper. Mix up the papers and let the children take turns racing to put the words in the correct order.
- Discuss ways that we can show gratitude for things that people give us. This might include food that our mums cook, clothes our parents buy or birthday and Christmas gifts.

Invite the children to respond to this story using the adaptable "God's Story" printable reflection page. Free printables for this story.

Crafts:

- Write "Numbers 21:4-9" on a craft stick. Help children to wrap a chenille wire (pipe cleaner) around the stick as a snake. Ensure the children understand that the snake was a reminder that God gives us what we need.
- Make a collage with pictures of things that the Lord blesses us with.

Print and use these free bookmarks, trading cards or timelines. Free printables for this story.

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Other Online Resources:

- Colouring page The bronze serpent & puzzle worksheets (Calvary Curriculum)
- Craft: Printable paper snake (DLTK)
- Craft: Snake made out of a man's tie (Make and Takes)
- Craft: Simple origami snake (Origami-Instructions)
- Game: 'Journey to the Promised Land' activities (Christian Crafters)

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