

Overcoming A Fiery Serpent

Introduction:

How many of you are scared by snakes? I am petrified of snakes. Therefore, **Numbers 21:6-9** makes a real impression on me. I can imagine the Israelites' panic and their relief when God gave them the means to overcome. This story is parallel to our own attack from a fiery serpent, the devil (**Revelation 12:9**). However, God has given us the ability to overcome this fiery serpent. Take note of four parallels between the Israelites' situation and our own.

Discussion:

- I. The serpent's bite kills.
 - A. In **Numbers 21:6**, the fiery serpents killed "many people of Israel."
 - B. The same is true for us. Satan's bites have killed us all.
 1. **I Peter 5:8** claims Satan's desire is to devour us. He does this by shooting "flaming arrows" of temptation (**Ephesians 6:16**).
 2. According to **James 1:14-16**, temptation comes from our own desires. Note the outcome. Our desires entice us, drawing us away from the path of God, giving birth to sin and bringing about our death.
 3. **Romans 3:23; 6:23** explain that all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. "The wages of sin are death." Just as the Israelites died from the bites of the fiery serpents in the wilderness, so do we die from the fiery darts of the serpent of old.
- II. God did not remove the serpents. He provided a remedy.
 - A. In **Numbers 21:7-8**, the Israelites realized they were being punished for sin. They asked Moses to intercede so God would remove the serpents. However, God did not give what was requested. Instead, He provided a remedy for the bites.
 - B. It is no different for us. When the serpent of old (**Revelation 12:9**) first "bit" Adam and Eve, tempting them to bite the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, God did not punish the serpent by annihilating him (**Genesis 3**). In fact, God promised there would be continued strife between man and the serpent. However, God did not just promise continued strife. He promised a remedy to the serpent's bite. In **Genesis 3:15**, God, alluding to the coming Messiah, promised that the seed of woman would crush the serpent's head.
 - C. After Paul had proclaimed that we have all been bitten by the serpent, having fallen short of God's glory (**Romans 3:23**), he taught the Romans about the remedy for sin. In **Romans 3:24-26**, Paul said we can be justified by God's grace through the redemption found in Christ Jesus. The children of Israel had to look to the uplifted bronze serpent when the fiery serpents bit them. Today, we must look to the uplifted Savior when the serpent of old bites us (**John 12:32**).
- III. The remedy was conditional and unmerited.
 - A. God told Moses to build a bronze serpent and then essentially said, "He who has believed and has looked upon the serpent will be healed. He who has disbelieved will die" (**cf. Mark 16:16**). **Numbers 21:9** tells us when Moses had built the serpent the people who looked were healed, just as promised. We must note two principles of this salvation from the fiery serpents.
 1. The Israelites did not deserve healing. They had not merited healing. The healing was given to them by grace through faith (**cf. Ephesians 2:8**).
 2. While the healing was unmerited, it was conditional. Only those who looked upon the serpent were healed. The others would die. Despite this condition, everyone knows God was the one who by grace healed the Israelites.
 - B. Despite the modern religious rhetoric to convince us otherwise, our salvation is no different. It is conditional, yet unmerited. Jesus said, "He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved" (**Mark 16:16**). **Luke 24:47** says "repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed." **Acts 2:38** says, "Repent and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of your sins." **Acts 22:16** says, "Arise, be baptized and wash away your sins." **Romans 10:9** says, "If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved." **Colossians 1:22-23** says Jesus will "present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach – if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel."
 1. We do not deserve this salvation. We cannot merit the forgiveness of sins. Our salvation is completely by grace through faith (**Ephesians 2:8**).

2. While our salvation is unmerited, it is conditional. Only those who believe God's word, confess their faith, repent of their sins, are baptized for the remission of those sins and live faithfully until death will be saved. All others will be condemned, without exception.
3. Can you imagine the arguments among the religious world if God sent fiery serpents among us based on the arguments about baptism?
 - a. Some would argue that since the healing is by grace, we do not have to do anything. Whoever God chose to be healed would be healed, the rest would die.
 - b. Some would argue we could be healed by faith only, we don't have to look. Looking at the serpent is an outward display of the inward healing. Granted, they would question the healing experience of anyone who would not look at the serpent. But, they would condemn anyone who said you had to look at the serpent as teaching works healing.
 - c. Others would say we had to do exactly what God said. Of course, after some time, some would split from this group, not wanting to appear too judgmental or critical. They would try to ride the fence saying they believe looking at the serpent is scriptural. However, because God can do what He wants, "who are we to say He won't heal others in a manner different from what He said? Therefore, we need to be more ecumenical and allow others their right to be wrong about the doctrinal issue of looking at the serpent."
 - d. Some would try to pacify the others by saying our differences didn't matter as long as Jehovah was Lord. "We will all be healed, but in different ways."
 - e. Do you know how long these debates would last? Until everyone who argued that they didn't have to look at the bronze serpent died. Regrettably, that is how long the arguments about baptism will last, until all those who argue against baptism are dead and facing the judgment. At that point though, it will be too late.

IV. It was not "judgmental" to tell the Israelites they must look at the bronze serpent to be healed.

- A. Imagine for a moment that you and I were Israelites. I was bitten by one of the serpents. You then said to me, "Edwin you need to go look at the bronze serpent which Moses made. God said if you look at it you will live. Edwin, if you don't go look at it you will die." What would you think if I told you, "You are so judgmental. You think you are the only one that is right. You bronze serpent lookers think you are the only ones who will be healed." What would happen to me? I would die. Are you being judgmental simply by telling me what God said? Are you being hateful or unloving because you demand others believe and look at the bronze serpent if they are going to be healed. Of course not. In fact, we recognize it is exactly the opposite. You are demonstrating love and compassion when you tell me I must look at the serpent.
- B. Today is no different. I am amazed that people consider Christians judgmental when we insist people do what the Bible says in order to be saved. The response is often, "I don't think God will send me to hell just because I wasn't baptized." Could you imagine the debates among the Israelites? "I don't think God will let the serpent bite kill me just because I did not look at the bronze serpent." In both situations we must understand it is not about what we think or feel, it is about what God said. God told the Israelites, "Look at the bronze serpent and you will live." God tells us, "Believe and be baptized and you will be saved." It is not judgmental, unloving or cruel to insist people do what the Bible says. Therefore, we should be no more ashamed to tell people they must believe, confess their faith, repent of their sins and be baptized for the remission of their sins than Moses was to tell the Israelites they must look at the bronze serpent.

Conclusion:

Just as God gave the Israelites the ability to overcome the fiery serpents of the desert, He has given us the ability to overcome Satan, the serpent of old. The question is, will we obey God or will we argue against God's word believing we can be saved in some other way. The Israelites could not be healed unless they looked at the bronze serpent. We cannot be saved unless we obey the gospel. That is, believe in Jesus, confess our faith, repent of our sins and be baptized for the remission of our sins.