

## LESSON 6

# The Bronze Serpent

Numbers 21:4–9

*Then the Lord said to Moses, “Make a snake image and mount it on a pole. When anyone who is bitten looks at it, he will recover.” So Moses made a bronze snake and mounted it on a pole. Whenever someone was bitten, and he looked at the bronze snake, he recovered.*

Numbers 21:8–9

**Class Overview:** The wilderness journey exposes a sobering pattern: even after God’s repeated acts of grace, His people continued to struggle with trust. In Numbers 21, Israel once again grumbles against God and His leadership, and this time the consequences are immediate and severe. Yet during judgment, God provides an unexpected means of healing; not by removing the danger instantly, but by calling the people to look in faith.

This lesson explores the strange and powerful episode of the bronze serpent and what it reveals about sin, judgment, faith, and God’s mercy. Healing did not come through effort, merit, or understanding—it came through obedience and trust in God’s provision. As Jesus later explained, this moment in Israel’s history pointed beyond itself to God’s ultimate act of salvation. Faith is often as simple, and as difficult, as looking to God and trusting Him to save.

**Class Objectives:** By the end of this class, you should be able to:

1. Identify the pattern of unbelief and complaint that led to God’s judgment in the wilderness, recognizing how persistent distrust damages the relationship between God and His people.
2. Understand God’s judgment as purposeful rather than arbitrary, seeing it as a response to sin that still leaves room for mercy and restoration.

3. Explain how God provided healing through a simple act of obedient faith, emphasizing that deliverance did not come through human effort but through trusting God's provision.
4. Recognize the symbolic and theological significance of the bronze serpent, understanding how it pointed forward to God's ultimate provision of salvation.
5. Apply the lesson of faith-filled obedience to daily life, choosing to trust God's word and look to Him for healing, forgiveness, and renewal.

## Introduction

BY THE TIME ISRAEL REACHED THIS POINT IN THE WILDERNESS JOURNEY, the story had become painfully familiar. God had delivered them, provided for them, forgiven them, and guided them, yet once again, the people grew impatient and spoke against the Lord. The wilderness had exposed not just moments of weakness, but a persistent struggle to trust God when the road was hard and the destination felt distant.

What follows in Numbers 21 is one of the most unusual scenes in all of Scripture. God responds to Israel's rebellion with judgment, but He also provides a means of healing that seems unexpected, even strange. A bronze serpent lifted on a pole becomes the instrument through which life is restored. The solution is neither complicated nor dramatic, and it is not earned. It requires only one thing: faith expressed through obedience.

This lesson challenges us to face an uncomfortable truth: sometimes God's provision does not look as we expect. Healing did not come through effort, explanation, or understanding, but through trusting what God said and responding accordingly. As we study this passage, we are invited to consider how often pride, familiarity, or skepticism keep us from simply trusting God. Faith is not always complex, but it is always humbling, and God's mercy is often found where obedience meets trust.

## **Persistent Grumbling Reveals Deep Unbelief (Numbers 21:4–5)**

As Israel continued their journey, the terrain grew more difficult, and the people's patience grew thinner. What might have seemed like a minor complaint was actually the resurfacing of a deeper, more dangerous issue, unbelief that refused to be corrected by past grace. Numbers 21 opens with Israel growing impatient "because of the journey." Their frustration spilled out in words that revealed the condition of their hearts. They spoke against both God and Moses, questioning God's goodness, despising His provision, and longing for an imagined past that no longer existed. What once had been gratitude for manna now became contempt: "We detest this miserable food" (Numbers 21:5).

This was not merely discouragement; it was a rejection of God's care. Persistent grumbling showed that Israel no longer trusted God's purposes or presence. The people minimized God's past deliverance and fixated on present discomfort. Familiar blessings became sources of resentment. Persistent complaint is not harmless venting; it is evidence of a heart drifting away from trust. What makes this moment especially sobering is that Israel had already received abundant evidence of God's faithfulness. Repeated grace did not guarantee lasting faith. Spiritual maturity requires more than memory; it requires ongoing trust and humility.

What about our own responses to difficulty? When hardship lingers, do we interpret it as abandonment or discipline? Do we view God's provision as insufficient simply because it is familiar? Persistent grumbling reveals not just frustration with circumstances, but a deeper struggle to believe that God is good and present.

## **God's Judgment Confronts Sin Without Abandoning His People (Numbers 21:6)**

Israel's words did not fall into a void. God heard them. And in response, He acted, not with indifference, but with judgment. Yet even this

judgment reveals something important about God's character and His ongoing commitment to His people. Numbers 21:6 records a sobering moment: the Lord sent venomous snakes among the people, and many were bitten and died. This response can feel severe, but it must be understood in context. God's judgment was not arbitrary or cruel. Instead, it directly confronted the seriousness of Israel's sin. Persistent unbelief, contempt for God's provision, and rejection of His leadership could not be ignored. The judgment matched the offense. Israel had despised what God had given them; now they faced the consequences of rejecting His care. God allowed the danger they feared to become real, exposing the seriousness of their rebellion. This was not abandonment; it was discipline meant to awaken repentance.

God disciplines those He loves. The New Testament teaches us that discipline is painful, but purposeful, producing repentance and renewed faith (Hebrews 12:6–11). God's response in the wilderness was intended to bring Israel to their senses, not to wipe them out. Importantly, God did not withdraw His presence or revoke His covenant. Even in judgment, He remained engaged with His people. The crisis moved the people to confession: "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you" (Numbers 21:7). Judgment accomplished what gentle correction had not; it brought honesty and repentance.

Grace does not mean God ignores sin. Love sometimes confronts sharply. Yet judgment is never God's final word. His discipline is always aimed at restoration, not destruction. When God confronts sin, it is because He refuses to abandon His people to it.

## **Healing Through Faith-Filled Obedience (Numbers 21:7–9)**

God's judgment accomplished its purpose. The people were humbled, honest, and repentant. Now the question became clear: *How would God restore them?* What follows is one of the most unexpected acts of mercy in the wilderness journey. When the people confessed their sin, God did not immediately remove the serpents. Instead, He provided

a means of healing that required trust. Moses was instructed to make a bronze serpent and lift it on a pole. Anyone who had been bitten could live, but only by looking at what God had provided. This instruction must have seemed strange. There was no medicine, no explanation, no visible logic. Healing came through obedience rooted in faith. The people had to believe that God's word was sufficient and respond accordingly. Looking was simple, but it was not automatic. Pride, skepticism, or stubbornness could still refuse the provision.

The power was not in the bronze serpent itself. It was in God's promise attached to it. Salvation came not through understanding *how* it worked, but through trusting *who* spoke. Faith expressed itself in obedience, and obedience opened the way to life. The New Testament directly connects this event to Christ. Jesus said, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life" (John 3:14–15). The bronze serpent pointed forward to the cross. Just as Israel was healed by looking in faith, sinners are saved by looking to Christ in trust.

God's mercy is always provided, but it must be received. Healing is not earned; it is accepted. Faith does not complicate salvation; it humbles us enough to receive it on God's terms. Are we truly willing to trust God's provision? Are we looking to Him in faith, or are we waiting for something that feels more reasonable or familiar? Life is found not in resistance or explanation, but in obedient trust in what God has provided.

## For Application

**Recognize How Familiar Blessings Can Breed Discontent.** Israel did not lack provision; they despised what God had already given. Familiar grace can quietly lose its value if trust fades. This lesson calls us to guard against contempt for what God faithfully supplies day after day.

**Take God's Discipline Seriously Without Despair.** God's judgment was real and painful, but it was never meant to destroy His people.

Discipline is not abandonment; it is a sign that God still cares enough to correct and restore.

**Look Where God Directs, Not Where You Prefer.** Israel was not free to design their own remedy. Life came only by trusting God's chosen means. In the same way, salvation and healing today come by looking to Christ as God has revealed Him, not on our own terms.

**Live Daily by Faith-Filled Obedience.** Faith is not a one-time decision, but a daily stance. God calls His people to keep looking to Him for forgiveness, renewal, strength, and life, long after the crisis has passed.

## Memory Verse/Weekly Challenge

### Memory Verse:

*"Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Make a snake image and mount it on a pole. When anyone who is bitten looks at it, he will recover.'"* — Numbers 21:8 (CSB)

### Weekly Challenge:

This week, identify one ongoing struggle or temptation to complain; something familiar that has worn on your trust. Each day, consciously look to God in that moment through prayer and obedience. Instead of venting or controlling the outcome, choose one concrete act that reflects trust (gratitude, restraint, prayer, or obedience). At week's end, reflect on how looking to God reshaped your response.

## For Discussion

1. Why do you think Israel's grumbling continued even after so many experiences of God's faithfulness? What does this reveal about the nature of unbelief?

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2. How does God's response in Numbers 21 help us understand the relationship between discipline and mercy? Why is it important to hold both together?

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3. What do you find most challenging about the simplicity of God's command to look at the bronze serpent for healing? How does this relate to faith today?

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4. Jesus connected this event to His own crucifixion (John 3:14–15). How does that connection deepen your understanding of salvation and trust in Christ?

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5. What are practical ways we can "look to God" in faith when frustration, fear, or weariness sets in during our own wilderness moments?

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