

Adult Teaching Resources

March 11, 2018



Lent: Keeping Faith (February 18-March 25)

Exodus 20:1-17 – “A Covenant Nation”

Numbers 21:4-9 – “Covenant Breaking”

Psalm 51 (RCL 51:1-12) – “Covenant Renewal”

Psalm 40:1-17 (RCL 40:5-10) – “Covenant Celebration”

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Covenant Breaking

Numbers 21:4-9

FIT Teaching Guide

by David Woody

This adult teaching outline is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

Bible Background

“So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.” Numbers 21:9

Snakes evoke strong emotions from us. We either love them or we hate them. There is not much middle ground when it comes to these slithery creatures.

The snake is as much a part of our story as any creature. The snake was in the garden, in the beginning, with Adam and Eve. Snakes appear out of nowhere and scare us in movies or when walking in our neighborhoods. We watch videos of snakes crawling up walls or in houses or in swimming pools. We are fascinated that snakes can swallow an entire animal.

Today, our lesson is one of the many stories about snakes, God’s people, and Moses. It’s a fascinating story, and one that adds to long list of biblical snake stories.

Opening

After everyone has arrived, ask each person to share one of their snake stories. More than likely, everyone has a snake story. It could be a time when they had a pet snake, a time they were asked (begged) to kill the snake in the back yard, a walk with their dog when they came across a snake, etc.

Give time for everyone to share and take an informal poll to see how many in your class are snake-friendly and how many are snake-hating.

Reading the Bible

How did God’s people react to their travels during the Exodus? (they became impatient)

Who did God’s people turn to with their anger? (God and Moses) What did God’s people say to them? (Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die? There is no food or water. We detest this miserable food)

How did God respond to their sharp words? (God sent poisonous serpents among the people, the serpents bit the people, some people died)

What did the people do after the serpents arrived? (they went to Moses and told Moses they sinned against God and him, they asked Moses to pray to God to take the serpents away)

Reading the Bible *continued*

What did Moses do for God's people? (he prayed for the people)

How did God respond to Moses' prayer? (God told Moses what to do to heal those who had been bitten)

What did Moses do after praying and listening to God? (he made the poisonous serpent, set it on the pole for the afflicted to see)

Making Connections

What causes you to grow impatient? How do you act and/or react when you get impatient? Who is generally to blame for your impatience? How do you handle or cope or get through periods of impatience?

Have you ever been impatient with God? When was it? What caused your impatience? What ultimately happened? How did that experience affect your relationship with God?

When have you experienced a pain or discomfort so intense that you were willing to do anything to have it go away? What helped the pain to go away? What did you learn from that situation?

When, in difficult times, do you turn to God: a) before things get bad; b) while the bad stuff is happening; c) when the bad is so intense there seems to be no hope? What do you say when you turn to God? How does your response and your words affect your relationship with God?

Share a time when you are certain God heard your prayer and gave you comfort and relief.

Our Lesson Writer states, "Now here's an interesting thing. The people had prayed for Yahweh to get rid of the snakes, but that didn't happen. Instead, God offered a means of healing for those who were snake-bitten." What does our Lesson Writer say about God's response? What do you say about God's response?

So What?

Ask your class to form smaller groups of 3-4 in each group. Have each group consider this question:

How are we, as people trying to live faithfully, to live with "snakes" and other sinful traps sprinkled all around us?

Give each group time to discuss the question and share their answers. Then, ask each group to share their ideas with the larger group.

Remind your group we are in a relationship with God. Relationships are give and take – from both parties in the relationship. We have as much responsibility in the relationship as God does.

The Challenge

This week, name your metaphorical “snake” or sinful trap that you need God to help you with. Then, all week, pay attention to the times the snake raises its head and tries to bite you. When those moments happen, stop what you are doing and pray for God’s help.

Prayer

Loving God, you call us into relationship with you. Forgive us for not always understanding your purpose and desires. Work within us so that we might be more faithful as we follow you. When we are tempted, give us the courage to stand strong in our faith and keep us focused on you. Amen.

Digging Deeper

by Tony Cartlege

Digging Deeper is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. Watch for the “shovel” icon in the THE BIBLE LESSON, and then reference that item in this Digging Deeper resource. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

Under the ban—The Hebrew verb translated as “utterly destroy” or “put under the ban” is *haram*. It is used in Israel’s making of the vow (v. 2), and in describing their action in putting the enemy towns under the ban. This is reflected in the name they gave to the area: “Hormah” is from the same root.

Edom—When the traveling horde of Israelites came near the territory known as Edom, they ran into an obstacle: though the Edomites were reportedly descended from Jacob’s brother Esau, they did not trust their distant cousins:

Moses sent messengers from Kadesh to the king of Edom: “Thus says your brother Israel: ‘You know all the hardships we have experienced, how our ancestors went down into Egypt, and we lived in Egypt a long time, and the Egyptians treated us and our ancestors badly. So when we cried to the LORD, he heard our voice and sent a messenger, and has brought us up out of Egypt. Now we are here in Kadesh, a town on the edge of your country. Please let us pass through your country. We will not pass through the fields or through the vineyards, nor will we drink water from any well. We will go by the King’s Highway; we will not turn to the right or the left until we have passed through your region.’”

But Edom said to him, “You will not pass through me, or I will come out against you with the sword.” Then the Israelites said to him, “We will go along the highway, and if we or our cattle drink any of your water, we will pay for it. We will only pass through on our feet, without doing anything else.”

But he said, “You may not pass through.” Then Edom came out against them with a large and powerful force. So Edom refused to give Israel passage through his border; therefore Israel turned away from him. (Num. 20:14-21, NET)

Nehushtan—The common word for serpent is *nahash*, while the basic word for copper or bronze (copper alloyed with a small amount of tin) is *nehoshet*. The adjectival form is *nahush*, as in “bronze pillar.” The name *Nahushtan* recalled both the bronze and serpentine aspects of the image, and was probably considered to be a divine name.

Digging Deeper *continued*

Again, or above?—In John 3:3, the Greek word behind the familiar King James translation “born again” can also mean “from above.” The word, *anōthen*, is an adverb that can have either meaning. It is used five times in the Fourth Gospel (3:3, 7, 31; 19:11, 23). In 3:31, 19:11, and 19:23, context shows that the intended meaning is “above,” and that is almost certainly the author’s intent in 3:3 and 3:7.

While Jesus meant “from above,” however, Nicodemus must have took it to mean “again,” otherwise he would not have asked “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” (John 3:4).

The “misunderstood question” is one of John’s favorite techniques in showing how Jesus taught: when someone misunderstood something, it gave him an opportunity to explain it more clearly.

The Hardest Question

by Tony Cartlege

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Why were snakes so significant?

Numbers 21:4-9 is a particularly interesting story for a variety of reasons, one being the historical and cultural context: we should be aware that serpent gods were often worshiped in the ancient world. The Canaanites worshiped a serpent goddess who appeared on sacred plaques with a serpent coiled about her neck. Images of serpent gods have been found at Debir, Shechem, Hazor, and Gezer, along with several from the temples at Beth Shan.

The stand at left, probably an incense burner, was found at Beth She'an, and dates to about 1500 BCE.



The symbolic image of Asclepius at right marked the way to an infirmary in ancient Ephesus.

In Greek mythology, serpents were closely associated with healing, and there was an entire cult surrounding the worship of Asclepias, the serpent god. Even today, the most common symbol of the medical profession portrays two snakes wrapped around a pole. It is called a Caduceus, and it originated from the ancient belief that serpents were associated with healing.

Snakes do not appear often in the Bible, but when they show up, they are usually significant. The serpent of Genesis 3 quickly comes to mind, an ancient story of a beautiful and clever creature whose smooth speech persuaded Eve that God was holding out on humans by preserving secrets in the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. She and Adam disobeyed God by eating the tree's fruit, even though God had warned that it would mean death. Thus, the first biblical image of a serpent is one that results in rebellion and death – and in punishment for the serpent. The curse placed upon it, that “upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life” (Gen. 3:14) suggests a belief that the serpent originally had legs.

A serpent also appears in Exodus, where Moses meets God in a fiery, burning bush, and hears God's call to deliver his people from Egypt. When Moses asked for a sign to prove that God had sent him, the Lord gave Moses the ability to turn his shepherd's staff into a formidable snake, and back again (Exod. 4:1-5). Moses passed the staff-to-serpent demonstration on to Aaron.

The Hardest Question *continued*

When they performed it before the Pharaoh, the text says, royal sorcerers were able to perform a similar trick, but Aaron's snake swallowed theirs (Exod. 7:8-12).

Serpents appear often in the prophets as a symbol of evil or danger. Amos spoke of a judgement so sure that it would be like a man who escaped from a lion and a bear, only to be bitten by a snake (Amos. 5:19).

In the New Testament, snakes also appear as a sign of danger and potential harm: parents would not give their children a snake instead of a fish (Matt. 7:10, Luke 11:11). In the Apocalypse, the term "serpent" is synonymous with "dragon" as a metaphor for Satan (Rev. 12:9, 14, 15; 20:2).