

The Story of Hope #10

Serpents and Sacrifices

Exodus 40:17-34, Leviticus 1:1-4, Numbers 21:4-9

Story of Hope Section 17-18

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The law has been given. God has established in very clear terms what He expects from His chosen people. These 613 laws govern how Israel is supposed to behave toward God, toward one another, and even toward animals and other creation. God gives these laws and expects Israel to follow them, yet God knows that they will fail regularly, so He includes laws for that, or more precisely, He formalizes the sacrifice system. This is a way that the Israelites can show that they understand they have failed to obey the law (sinned) and express remorse, as well as have their sins covered through the death of an innocent animal. As we saw in the last lesson, this system anticipated something greater, something that would be able to completely repair the broken relationship with God. Somehow, the promised rescuer would repair this brokenness once and for all. Now the people will be led around the wilderness as God prepares and tests His people, and reveals the condition of their hearts.

From the moment God created mankind, it was apparent that God desires to dwell with His most precious creation. He created mankind to be in relationship with Him, in the garden, but one of the results of man's first sin was that the perfect relationship between God and man was broken. Separation had entered into that relationship. It was not what God desired, and in His great rescue plan, God knew how to fix it. In the formalizing of the sacrificial system, God began to further reveal just how He was going to fix it. We will see two aspects of God's rescue plan unfold in these sections as we look at the **Tabernacle** and the **Bronze Serpent**. In this section we see the themes of **God, Man, Sin, Death, Christ, Cross, Faith and Life**.

The first thing we will look at is found in Exodus 40. God instructs Moses to have the "tabernacle" constructed. This was basically a mobile temple that would be set up and taken down as Israel moved through the wilderness and later until the temple was built. Since the garden, there hadn't been a single "place" where God had met with His people. Now there would be! But unlike the garden, there was a specific room where the Glory of God would dwell, the most holy place, or the Holy of Holies, and God's people were most certainly NOT allowed into that place. Sin made entry impossible. There was a curtain the barred entry to anyone, except the High Priest one day a year. God established the "day of atonement" where the High Priest would be able to enter the Holy of Holies and make purification for the sins of the people of Israel. This had to happen every year to cover for the sins of the past year. This served as a constant reminder that God's relationship with man still needed repair, as well as a constant reminder that death was the requirement for sin. The presence of God was still visible to all of Israel through the pillar of fire and cloud, but they recognized fully that they weren't allowed to be with God. They could enter the courtyard, but not inside.

The account of the **Bronze Serpent**, is found in Numbers 21:4-9. It is a relatively short passage but it illustrates some large ideas and truths. The nation of Israel is just coming off their massive failure at Kadesh Barnea (Numbers chapter 13 -14) and they have become impatient and grumbly again. They complain about the water and food, as a result, God sends serpent into their encampment to punish them. These serpent begin to bite the Israelites and many people begin dying.

The people recognize they are being punished and cry out to Moses and God, confessing their sin. In His mercy, God directs Moses to make a bronze serpent and lift it up so that “everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live” (Num. 21:8) Moses does so, and as God had said, anyone who looks at the serpent is healed. This short story is going to be used later in our story as an illustration of God raising someone else up, so that all who believe and look on him, will have life. Let’s take a minute to consider what God is revealing in these sections.

God hates and punishes sin. We have heard this idea so many times it is easy to become numb to it. Let us take a sober look at what these stories reveal to us. God loved and rescued the people of Israel, yet He doesn’t shake off their sin like it’s no big deal. He hates it! The doubt and discontentment of the wilderness generation results in their being barred from entering the promised land, and dying in the wilderness. The grumbling of those same people results in God sending serpents to bite and kill them! God is loving and merciful and patient, and He also hates sin and punishes it justly. We see all these attributes of God in full display in these stories.

Someone has to intercede for sinners. In setting up the tabernacle, God made a place where His people could get close to Him, and make sacrifice for their sins. But the nation wasn’t allowed to just approach God and deal with Him directly, because they were unrighteous and sinful. They had to rely upon the High Priest to make the sacrifice for them, to intercede on their behalf. God was preparing them for a rescuer who would one day make a way for man to approach God directly. One day people would no longer need to have priests intercede for them. They would be able to deal with God directly, once their sins had been paid for, and they are righteous.

Have faith in what God provides. What an odd way to provide for those who were bitten by the serpents. A bronze snake lifted on a pole? And all one had to do was look at it to live? While initially this seems like a rather odd provision, God was revealing two powerful ideas that are going to be seen again later in our story. First, that it is by responding in faith alone that brings the healing. A person simply needed to believe and look and they were saved. They didn’t have to wash, or clean the bite, or take medicine. Just look. Secondly, God is later going to do this type of thing again. There is going to be something else lifted up on a piece of wood. There is going to be a multitude of men and women who are dying, and all that they have to do is to look with faith on what God has provided, and they will be rescued. The sickness will be different, the object on the wood different, and the rescue will be different, but the principle is the same. Have faith in what God provides and you will live!