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## SESSION TWO

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# The Bronze Serpent

### SESSION SUMMARY

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In this session, we see how the Israelites became ungrateful and impatient during their time of wandering, complaining about things like the food and the scarcity of water. Consequently, God sent poisonous snakes into their camp, and many of the people died. In response to their pleas for mercy, God commanded Moses to lift a bronze serpent on a staff. Whenever someone who had been bitten looked at the bronze serpent, they were healed. Jesus later claimed this story pointed forward to His being lifted high on the cross. By trusting in His identification with sinners, we are given eternal life and are called to be His ambassadors.

### SCRIPTURE

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Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-15; 2 Corinthians 5:20-21

# THE POINT

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**The bronze serpent points to both God's punishment of sin and His salvation through Jesus.**

## INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

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### Option 1

Invite students to call out events they look forward to. Some might be yearly events. Some might be once-in-a-lifetime moments. As students share, write their responses on the board or a large piece of paper. (For example: Super Bowl®, Academy Awards®, season finales, holidays, graduation day, etc.)

Share the following information about *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (Disney, 2005): Narnia is introduced as a land locked in an endless winter and ruled by the evil White Witch. Aslan, Narnia's good leader, has been absent from the land for many years. The people look forward to Aslan's return, when the curse of winter will be lifted and the land will begin to thaw.

- **What were the Narnians hopeful for? What did they anticipate, even in the midst of their frozen, broken world?**
- **What were the Israelites hopeful for as they wandered in the desert?**
- **What event do God's people remain hopeful for today?**

### Option 2

Provide blindfolds for students and obtain one long rope, tying the ends together. Instruct students to stand in a circle, grab a part of the rope, and put the blindfolds over their eyes. Call out different shapes for the group to form with the rope. Begin with easy shapes like a square or triangle, then move to more difficult shapes like a star. After each shape, encourage students to remove their blindfolds and see how well they did at forming the shape.

- **How was this activity a challenge? What would have made it easier?**

Because you were blindfolded, you couldn't watch and understand how the shape was coming together. You had to be patient, work together, and see how it came together at the end.

- **How is this similar to the situation the Israelites faced in the wilderness? How is this similar to our lives today?**
- **Why do you think God would allow us to wonder what's going on without giving us answers when we expect them?**
- **What are we supposed to do as we wait for God's guidance?**

# HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

## THE POINT

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**The bronze serpent points to both God's punishment of sin and His salvation through Jesus.**

## CHARACTERS

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- **The Triune God:** Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- **Moses:** chosen by God to lead His people out of captivity and to the promised land

## PLOT

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In the previous session, we saw how the Israelites refused the opportunity to enter the promised land because of a discouraging report brought by some Israelite spies. As a result, God's people had been condemned to wander in the desert for forty years.

In this session, we see how the Israelites became ungrateful and impatient during their time of wandering, complaining about things like the food and the scarcity of water. Consequently, God sent poisonous snakes into their camp, and many of the people died. In response to their pleas for mercy, God commanded Moses to lift a bronze serpent on a staff. Whenever someone who had been bitten looked at the bronze serpent, they were healed.

Jesus later claimed this story pointed forward to His being lifted high on the cross. By trusting in His identification with sinners, we are given eternal life and are called to be His ambassadors.

## TIMELINE

### THE BRONZE SERPENT

*The people look and are healed.*

### THE PARTING OF THE JORDAN

*God calls Joshua to lead His people.*

### THE BATTLE OF JERICHO

*Rahab helps the Israelites in their conquest of Jericho.*

## THE ISRAELITES SIN AND ARE PUNISHED

The Israelite people had left slavery behind them. But due to their unbelieving hearts, they still had hardships before them. It was God's heart for them to enter into the land that seemed to flow with milk and honey. But the Israelites were more focused on the overwhelming circumstances of the moment than on the sovereign God who guided them. We saw this play out in the last session, when the people chose to fear the "giants" in the promised land rather than put their trust in the God who promised the land.

In the next scene, we come upon the Israelites as they are traveling toward the promised land. Along the way, God has provided everything they need. Yet, we will see how they spurn the Lord's provisions and affections by grumbling.

**From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. And the people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food." Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. And the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live." So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live. (Num. 21:4-9)**

The people's rebellion in this instance shows up in a very simple word: impatient. The group of people who had been miraculously delivered, fed, and clothed by God now turned on Him. In essence, they threw a preschooler-like fit before God because they didn't like the food He provided.

The people went far beyond doubt. They accused God and Moses of treachery. They imagined God had intentionally led them out of Egypt for the express purpose of killing them in the desert. It was a rebellion of epic proportions. By stating such a claim, the people showed they doubted God's character and His Word.

- **When have you become impatient with God? Did your impatience cause you to grumble about what He had or had not done? Explain.**  
(p. 16, PSG)

In response to the Israelites' rebellion, God acted quickly. He punished them. It was the type of punishment that would strike fear into the heart of any person. Suddenly, poisonous snakes showed up in the camp. Biting. Infecting. Killing. The people's break in their trust of God was a serious offense. The Lord would not take it lightly. When they spoke out against their circumstances, they were speaking directly against God's character.

Today, we may find it difficult to read about the punishment delivered against sin, but Scripture is clear: Because God is committed to redeeming and restoring all things, sin must be punished and wiped out. Events like this remind us of the costly nature of sin. The Israelites had to once again learn that sin leads to death.

As the rebellious people began to die, they cried out to Moses for help. The man whom they accused of being in league with a God who had deceived them would once again become their advocate. I wonder how Moses reacted at first. Did he shake his head? Roll his eyes? Perhaps he simply wept over their continuous rebellion. Regardless, what we do know is that Moses was willing to plead the case of the guilty before the Lord.

Once God heard the people's penitent cry, He provided a way of restoration through their faith. In an act of divine irony, God instructed Moses to make a serpent of bronze and place it on a pole. If those bitten by the snakes on the ground would look to the snake that had been lifted up, they would be healed.

The word for "look" in Hebrew does not mean a casual gaze or a quick glance. Rather, it indicates fixing your gaze upon something or to look intently. The idea is that the Israelites would have to concentrate their mind's attention and heart's affection.

People in the camp listened to the Lord's word through Moses. As they suffered from poisonous injuries, they looked to the bronze serpent fixed on

## **GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY**

This incident looks back on two biblical narratives involving serpents. In Eden, God promised Satan (who had taken on the serpent's form) that he would one day be defeated (Genesis 3:15). The snake image lifted high by Moses was a reminder of this promise. Also, when Moses and Aaron confronted Pharaoh's priests, Aaron's staff turned into a serpent and devoured the priests' staff-serpents, a foretaste of the ultimate defeat of all false religions (Exodus 7:8-13).

Unfortunately, however, things God uses for good can become misused. Several centuries after the Numbers 21 episode, Hezekiah became king over Israel. He was a righteous king who destroyed the objects of idolatry in the kingdom. One item was the bronze serpent that Moses used in the desert. For all these years, the Israelites had kept it. At the time of Hezekiah taking the throne, "the Israelites burned incense to it" (2 Kings 18:4). The item that God used in one generation as His instrument of deliverance had become the object of worship in another generation. The people had forgotten God as the true deliverer and, as we are common to do, substituted an idol in His place.

the pole. As they gazed upon it intently, recovery occurred. Doubtless, it was a mystery to them. It is a mystery to us. But, in that moment, God chose the symbol of their sin as the instrument of His mercy.

## CHRIST CONNECTION

The story of the Israelites' lack of faith, punishment, and recovery is not one that stands on its own in biblical history. Jesus Himself referenced the story. In John 3, we read of Jesus's nighttime meeting with Nicodemus, a Pharisee and ruler of the Jews during the Roman Empire's occupation of Israel.

Jesus told Nicodemus that a person must be born again in order to enter the kingdom of God. Nicodemus was perplexed. What did being "born again" mean? Was it physical? Was it spiritual? What would it mean to a man who relies on his Jewish heritage? In answer to Nicodemus' question, Jesus pointed back to Numbers 21 and explained how the Son of Man (a reference to Jesus Himself) must be lifted up just like the bronze serpent.

**And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. (John 3:14-15)**

Packed into these two verses are several important ideas. First, we see how the original story is a foreshadowing of what Jesus would accomplish several thousand years later. When Moses lifted up the bronze serpent for the people to see, he was providing a remedy for all who would look. Now, Jesus is going to be lifted up for a much broader-reaching recovery. The work done through the bronze serpent was temporary. Jesus' work would be permanent.

Second, the word that is used in the Greek language for "lifted up" is not the pedestrian idea of simply holding something up to view. Rather, the Gospel writer employs a word that means to exalt something. Just a few years after this encounter with Nicodemus, Jesus would be hanging on the cross. While there, He would fulfill the Old Testament prophecies of the divine Son of God, who is fully human, serving as the payment for our sins. Christ would be exalted before the nations, and all who look to Him can live.

Jesus, as He planned to go to the cross, would not become just one more "thing" for the history books. His body hanging upon the cross is not a relic for us to drag around or consider lightly. The bronze serpent offered temporary recovery. Everyone who was healed from the poison of the serpents eventually still died. Jesus was interested in a greater goal. Verse 15 tells us that everyone who believes in Jesus will gain eternal life.

"Everyone" is a powerful word. With it, there are no exceptions. Every single person who believes in Jesus is included in the promise that follows. There are no other requirements. Good grades, good behavior, or popularity status hold no importance. Rather, every person who will believe will be given eternal life.

## TIMELINE

### CONQUEST OF AI

*How one man's sin can negatively affect everyone around him.*

### THE CHARGE TO ISRAEL

*The people must make a choice: worship God alone or follow after false idols.*

### THE JUDGES CYCLE

*Because Israel follows after false idols, God delivers them over to their enemies.*

## 99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

### Sin as Transgression

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*The word transgression means “to cross over” or “to pass by” and is often used in reference to transgressing God’s explicit commands. When God gives a specific command, as He did with Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, and when that command is disobeyed, transgression has taken place (Rom. 5:14; 1 Tim. 2:14). In this sense, sin is law-breaking.*

When you believe in Jesus, you will gain eternal life. In His high priestly prayer (John 17), Jesus defined eternal life this way: “And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (v. 3). As Christians, we are given an eternal relationship with the God who serves as the payment for sin. The God who wants to save us and be known by us is the One who is willing to be hung like a snake upon a pole.

# YOUR STORY 10-15 MINUTES

## GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **In what ways can you see your own heart reflected in the attitude of the Israelites?** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **What does the Israelites' punishment communicate about the seriousness of sin? How does this change the way we view sin in our own lives?** *At the very least, this story communicates once again the weightiness of sin and how all sin is deserving of death. Not only that, but anything less than the deserved punishment of death is mercy and grace.*
- **What is the significance of God's command to the people to gaze at the snake? What truths were the people to consider?** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **How encouraging is it to you personally that everyone who believes in Jesus receives salvation? How might this truth impact the way you share the gospel with others?** *Answers to this question will vary.*

### HIS STORY

*God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.*

### YOUR STORY

*Where your story meets His.*



# YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES



## HEAD

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There in the wilderness the people were replaying Adam and Eve's sin in the garden. Eve gave in to the temptation to doubt God's truthfulness. Furthermore, she doubted that the Lord had her best interests in mind. The Israelites put themselves in the same position. Their impatience revealed a lack of trust in God's goodness.

- **How did the Israelites' impatience reveal their lack of trust in God?** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **Why is it so important to trust God for guidance instead of jumping in and doing things on our own?** *Answers to this question will vary.*



## HEART

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This session highlights the importance of seeing sin for what it is—an act of transgression deserving of punishment. There are many who do not see sin for what it is, and because of that, feel no remorse to sin's presence in their lives. It is only when we begin to see sin for what it truly is that we will be able to grieve over our sin deeply. When we see it as a direct offense to God, our hearts will be more sensitive to the presence of sin in our lives, fighting against it through the power of the Spirit at work within us.

- **Have you ever thought, *Well, I'm not too bad. I don't do too many bad things. I'm basically a pretty good person?* Before today's session, how did your view of sin compare to God's?** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **How will seeing sin as a direct offense to God affect your approach to temptation and sin from now on?** *Answers to this question will vary.*



## HANDS

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Christians are to represent Christ to those around them, directing attention to Jesus, the One to whom we look and are healed. Whenever a Christian says to a friend or enemy, "Look to Christ and live," it is so much more than what they could imagine. We are inviting the lost to be found, the dying to be saved, the sinner to be made righteous by the very mercy of God.

- **What are some ways we can invite others to look to Christ this week?** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **How effective can we be in sharing our faith if we are like the Israelites and show a lack of trust and patience with God? What can we do to be sure that doesn't happen?** *Answers to this question will vary.*

## ► ADDITIONAL INFO

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### **LEADER PACK**

For this session, point out item #5, which is an artistic poster of the bronze serpent.

### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to [lifeway.com/TGPJoshSPR16](http://lifeway.com/TGPJoshSPR16))**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at

**[GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources](http://GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources)**

And for ***free online training*** on how to lead a group visit

**[MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject](http://MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject)**