

His way is always best. (1) It was a *moral discipline* most necessary to those who were about to enter upon a long and arduous campaign against the heathen. (2) It was a *physical training* in the soldierly virtues. (3) It made the rest in Canaan all the sweeter at last.

5. **Spake against God**—(Ps. 78: 19). In 1 Cor. 10: 9 their action is called a tempting of Christ. Men are said to tempt God when they put his patience, fidelity or power to the test (Acts 5: 9; Matt. 4: 7; Heb. 3: 9). We are apt to blame God for the misfortunes of life, although these may really be the necessary adjuncts of the course He has marked out for us. There is little excuse for unbelief in view of numberless past mercies and fulfilled promises. Ingratitude forgets that the blessings already received are pledges of continued goodness. Discontent belittles the good things in hand, though they be priceless, because something else is withheld which is by no means essential to life, or well-being. Who amongst us can cast the first stone at Israel. **Against Moses**—Their words were directed to Moses, but really arraigned God. The same complaints had been uttered on former occasions (Ex. 16: 3; 17: 3). This light bread—"Bread without substance or nutritious quality. The refutation of this calumny appears in the fact, that on the strength of this food they performed for forty years so many and toilsome journeys" (J. F. & B.) Num. 11: 7, 8. In Ps. 78: 25 manna is called "angel's food." A thankful spirit would have approached God differently (Phil. 4: 6, 7).

II. **THE PUNISHMENT.** 6. **The Lord sent**—This does not imply that the serpents were previously absent from that locality, much less that they were specially created for the occasion, but that God made use of them as the agents of his discipline. Probably their numbers were unusually great and their venom especially fatal. We might similarly say that God sent storms to defeat the Spanish armada and Russian cold to break the power of Napoleon. Compare the destruction of Sodom and the plagues of Egypt. **Fiery serpents**—So called either from their color or from the effects of their bite. The portion of the desert in which the Israelites then were abounds in venomous reptiles of various kinds, particularly lizards and scorpions. As the people wore no covering upon their feet and legs, they were peculiarly exposed to their attack. "Captain Fraser tells us that 'all the Arabs say there are flying serpents here, three feet long, very venomous, their bite deadly; they have no wings, but make great springs.' Mr. Churton, when south-west of the dead sea, fell in with a large red-colored serpent, which came out of a hollow tree, and was declared by the Arabs to be poisonous. Bruckhardt writes: 'the sand showed everywhere tracks of these reptiles. My guide told me they were very numerous in these parts, and the fishermen were in such dread of them that they put out their fire each night before going to sleep, lest it

should attract them'" (Geikie). There is nothing to support the very common opinion that these were *flying* serpents. Isaiah (14: 29; 30: 6) speaks of such, but not in reference to this plague. The flying lizard (*Draco volens*) which has a membrane between its fore and hind legs, like the flying squirrel, is quite harmless, and is not found in the region in question. Satan, our arch-enemy is called a serpent (Rev. 12: 9; 2 Cor. 11: 3). **Much people of Israel died**—"In the front upper jaw of venomous snakes are two teeth, much longer than the rest, called fangs, at the root of these are glands in which poison is secreted. When the snake is enraged, these fangs, which at other times fold back upon the roof of the mouth, are projected downwards. A groove extending from root to point, conducts the venom from the glands into the wound. Mixing there with the blood it soon circulates and causes death" (Class and Desk). The serpent, lithe and subtle, scarcely seen in the twilight, creeping into the tent at night, quick at any moment, without provocation, to use its poisoned fangs, has appeared the hereditary enemy of mankind. As the instrument of the Tempter it was connected with the origin of human misery; it appeared the embodied evil which from the very dust sprang forth to seek the evil-doer. The serpents that lurked in the Israelites' way and darted suddenly upon them are always felt to be the analogues of the subtle sins that spring on man and poison his life. No herb or balm to be found in the gardens or fields of earth is an antidote to this poison; nor can the surgeon excise the tainted flesh, or destroy the virus by any brand of penance (Watson). "The true, peculiar, pernicious, fiery serpents were their murmuring disposition and complaints against Jehovah" (Lange).

7. **We have sinned**—The terrible punishment shewed how deeply they had offended God (Ps. 78: 34; Isa. 26: 16; Hos. 5: 15). "The evil effects of sin made them feel conscious of their sin and its greatness. The real evil is the sin, not the punishment. But it is only by the punishment that men realize the evil of sin itself. We cannot help measuring the judgment of any people as to the evil of sin by the severity or lightness of the punishment they inflict on various sins. And the only way in which God can impress upon men the awful evil of sin is by its correspondingly awful punishment. Therefore he shows us hell." (Peloubet). Only when we sincerely repent can we venture to pray for forgiveness (Lev. 26: 40-42; Prov. 28: 13; Isa. 55: 6, 7; Ezek. 33: 11, 12; 1 John 1: 9). **Pray unto the Lord**—Other instances of sinners requesting the prayers of godly men, Ex. 8: 28; 1 Sam. 12: 19, 23; 1 Kings 13: 6; Acts 8: 24. For the duty see Job 42: 8; Jas. 5: 16; 1 John 5: 16. Moses was ever glad to respond to this request.

III. **THE CURE.** 8. **A fiery serpent**—An image of those that had bitten them. **A pole**—R. V. "a standard." So that it might be seen from all parts of the camp. It is not