

Sermon for March 15, 2015 – Lent 4

Numbers 21:4-9 (NIV84)

Theme: **Lord, grant us a faith . . .**

- 1) *That doesn't complain.*
- 2) *That's willing to repent*
- 3) *That trusts in your promise of salvation.*

<sup>4</sup> Then they journeyed from Mount Hor by the Way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the soul of the people became very discouraged on the way. <sup>5</sup> 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 our soul loathes this worthless bread." <sup>6</sup> So the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died. <sup>7</sup> Therefore 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. <sup>8</sup> Then the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live." <sup>9</sup> So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived.

Do you really trust God to deliver you safely to heaven?

The reason I ask is because our journey on this earth often seems long and difficult. We don't always like the things God allows in our life. We don't always agree with the direction He takes. The devil seizes these opportunities to tempt us to question whether or not God really knows what's best for us; whether or not he really cares. And if we don't immediately nip these thoughts in the bud, they blossom into a flower of complaining that reeks of unbelief.

This is what happened to Israel in our sermon text. This is also what will happen to us if we let the weeds of self-pity grow unchecked in our hearts by not using the means of grace to be reminded of God's promise of salvation, which is centered in Christ.

With the example of Israel as our guide, let us learn to pray: **Lord, grant us a faith . . .** 1) *That doesn't complain.* 2) *That's willing to repent.* 3) *That trusts in your promise of salvation.*

Part One: That doesn't complain.

Our sermon text takes place near the end of Israel's forty year wandering in the desert, which was caused by their refusal to trust that God would give them Canaan as He promised. Israel seemed to be on the last leg of this journey – just needing to pass through Edom. But the King of Edom refused. Israel had to turn back in order to take a long and difficult detour around Edom.

And so, as Israel went back into the rugged, dry, stony desert from which they just came, *the soul of the people became very discouraged on the way.*

The word translated as "discourage" literally means "short." They were short on patience and, humanly speaking, could you blame them? They thought they were done with the desert. This detour was a huge

blow to their morale. But no matter how disappointed and impatient they felt, it doesn't excuse what happened next.

We read that *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 our soul loathes this worthless bread."*

Granted, things were tough for the Israelites. God purposely kept their food and water at a minimum in order to test them for their good – leaving them no other recourse than to place their complete trust in Him for daily bread. But God provided that bread. He provided their water. He made miraculously sure that they had both the strength and supplies needed for their journey. With the Lord leading, they simply needed to call on him in faith, and all their needs would certainly be provided.

But they didn't. Instead of seeing God's gracious providence, all they saw was desert. And so they complained.

Their complaint was ugly. It made God out to be a sadistic monster – a first degree murderer who was plotting to destroy them all along. They even railed against God's miraculous manna – insinuating that God was using it to starve them because it repulsed them to such a degree that they could no longer eat it.

How could they complain so much, having experienced such wonderful grace from God? Didn't they see all the miraculous ways the LORD served them? Didn't they perceive the obvious love God had for them?

We could ask ourselves the same questions. Why do we complain against God in our hearts when trial or difficulty comes our way? Don't we believe his promises? Don't we perceive His love? You see, we often let far lesser things than lack of food, water and home cause us to complain.

If we truly trusted God as we ought, we would always be confident that God will keep his promise to work in all things for our eternal good, just as He has consistently done in the past. In other words, we would never complain! But when we let the seeds of discouragement and self-pity germinate into the weeds of doubt and unbelief – we become like the Israelites: we fail to see God's love. We accuse God of being a monster.

Recognizing this truth should lead us to pray: Lord, grant me a faith that doesn't complain, but one that is willing to both repent and use your means of grace to be reassured of your love.

Part Two: That's willing to repent.

How did God take Israel's complaint? We read:

*So the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died.*

The serpents are called fiery because of the orangish, burning mark their poisonous bite left on their victims - and these snakes had plenty of victims to choose from. Why? Because of the Israelites own words.

Since they accused God of intending to kill them in the desert, God let them have a taste of what their charge meant if it were true. He let the Israelites feel what it would be like if he withdrew his grace and mercy from them. As severe as this punishment may have been, God did it for a most gracious purpose: that the people might see how sinful and disgusting their rebellious complaints against him were and repent – and this is exactly what happened.

*Therefore 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."*

God's discipline brought about its desired effect. The people repented, and the way they did it serves as a model for us. Notice that they don't try to justify themselves – using the weariness of their journey as an excuse for their complaining. Neither do they complain that God's discipline is too harsh for their sin. No they take full responsibility for their actions – making specific confession of what they did. They confess that they were wrong and, trusting that the LORD is merciful, they ask Moses to intercede for them so their lives might be spared.

Proper repentance, then, is first of all recognizing our sin against the LORD and confessing it to God (neither offering any excuse nor complaint), sorry that we have gone against His good and gracious will. The second part of confession is a firm faith that God is merciful and will forgive us for Christ sake - regardless of how grievously we have sinned against Him.

And what will happen when we do this? Just as Moses prayed for the people, Jesus will intercede to God the Father on our behalf. This is why we ask the LORD to grant us faith that is ever willing to repent of our sin and trust in Christ's promise of salvation.

Part Three: That trusts in your promise of salvation.

Now, the LORD could have said "no" to Moses' request and let the Israelites die, according to their own complaint against him. Or, He could have said "yes" and had all the snakes die or disappear in an instant. But instead of doing either one of those two things, He does something marvelously different: Not only does the LORD provide a way for the people to be saved from the poison that was affecting their bodies, he also finds a way to counteract the poison of sin and unbelief affecting their souls.

We read: *then the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live."*

Did the Israelites hear the LORD correctly? Would a bronze snake on a pole rescue the people from their sins and death? Well yes and no: Yes, the people would be forgiven and saved from death, but it would not be the snake on the pole itself that would accomplish this. God's promise connected with the snake on the pole would be the cause of their deliverance – a deliverance that could only be received through faith in what God says.

And such a faith does not disappoint, as we read: *So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived.*

God wanted the Israelites to trust His promised grace and mercy. Those who did would not merely be delivered from earthly danger and death, but would also be saved eternally – remembering the Messiah who would take away the sins of the world.

In our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus pointed to this event and said: *as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.* (John 3:14-15, NKJV).

In other words, this real, historical event of Israel's past has ongoing significance for believers of all time. God wants us to think about our salvation from sin whenever we hear this account. He wants us to remember his Son's sacrifice on the cross.

You see, ever since Adam and Eve believed the devil over the LORD, mankind has been infected with the poison of sin and doomed to everlasting destruction in hell. We all have been bitten by the serpent of sin and, just as there was no way for the Israelites to save themselves from the poison of the fiery snakes in the wilderness, so there is also no way for us to save ourselves from the guilt of our sin.

But knowing from Scripture that the LORD is merciful, we willingly confess our sins and (just as the Israelites did through Moses) ask Jesus to intercede before God the Father on our behalf - something Jesus does willingly.

And what was God's response? Did God merely snap his finger and make our sins go "poof" and disappear? No, because the LORD our God is a just God, he couldn't just "forget" about our sin without them being paid for. So what did God do? He asked Jesus to take up the cross on our behalf and, placing all of our sins on Jesus to such a degree that seemed as if He himself were sin personified, Jesus suffered and died for them all - thereby winning the righteousness and forgiveness we need to stand before God, as the Scriptures say: *[God] made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.* (2 Corinthians 5:21 NKJV)

"But," someone might protest, "How can we be sure that Jesus' death forgives our sins? Humanly speaking, trusting in the cross for our forgiveness makes about as much sense as looking at a snake on a pole to be rescued from poisonous venom. How can it save us?" It is not merely the cross itself that saves us, but the LORD's promises and work associated with it. If God said that His Son's perfect life and innocent death is sufficient to rescue us from sin, death and the power of the devil, then we should believe it - for God does not lie. And to give us even greater assurance, God raised Jesus from the dead - proving beyond any shadow of a doubt that our sins have been paid for in full! He did this so that *whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.* (John 3:15 NKJV).

And so, seeing this wonderful news of God's grace - revealed to us in Holy Scripture, may we be led to pray: "**Lord, grant us a faith:** *that doesn't complain about how you lead us through life, that recognizes our sin and is always moved to repent, and that trusts in your promise of salvation which is found in Christ alone.* Amen."