

Sermon for March 10, 2024 – Lent 4

Numbers 21:4-9 (EHV)

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.

⁴They set out from Mount Hor along the road to the Red Sea to go around the land of Edom, but the people became very impatient along the way. ⁵The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? Look, there is no food! There is no water! And we are disgusted by this worthless food!"

⁶The LORD sent venomous snakes among the people, and the snakes bit the people. As a result many people from Israel died. ⁷The people went to Moses and said, "We have sinned, because we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD to take the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed on behalf of the people.

⁸The LORD said to Moses, "Make a venomous snake and put it on a pole. If anyone who is bitten looks at it, he will live." ⁹Moses made a bronze snake and put it on the pole. If a snake had bitten anyone, if that person looked at the bronze snake, he lived.

Introduction

Do you really trust God to deliver you safely through life home to heaven?

I ask because we don't always like the direction God takes us through life. Unexpected trials and tribulations that can linger from months to years often pop up. The devil seizes the opportunity to tempt us to question whether God is really doing what's best for us. And if we don't immediately nip these thoughts in the bud, they blossom into full-blown complaints that reek of unbelief. That happened to Israel in our sermon text and will happen to us if we let the weeds of self-pity grow unchecked in our hearts.

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: Lord, grant us a faith that doesn't complain.

Our sermon text occurs near the end of Israel's forty-year wandering in the wilderness. Why were they wandering? Because their forefathers rebelled against the LORD's command to take Canaan – claiming that God was just trying to get them killed instead of blessing them.¹ Yes, sinful complaining and unbelief got Israel in the trouble they were in, but now the time God set for their discipline was coming to an end. They were on the homestretch, so to speak, just needing to pass through the small country of Edom. But because Edom's king refused to let them pass, Israel had to turn around to take a long and difficult detour.

And so, as Israel returned to the rugged, dry, stony desert they had just come from, *the people became very impatient along the way.*

We can only imagine how frustrating the situation was for them. God himself led the Israelites to Edom, only to have them turn back the way they came after being so close to finishing their journey. Nevertheless, that was no excuse for what they did next.

⁵The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? Look, there is no food! There is no water! And we are disgusted by this worthless food!"

Yes, times were tough for the Israelites, but the LORD graciously provided for them through it all. No, he didn't necessarily give them what they wanted, but what they needed. Remember, God didn't owe them anything. The whole reason they wandered so long in the desert was because their forefathers sinfully complained against him. God was using this time to test them – training them to rely on his gracious promises, regardless of the circumstances.

But instead of trusting, they complained, and their complaint was ugly. They made God out to be a sadistic monster - a first-degree murderer who was plotting to destroy them. They even railed against His miraculous manna – insinuating that God was using it to starve them.

How could they complain so much after all the miraculous ways the LORD graciously provided for and protected them? Didn't they perceive God's evident love?

We could ask ourselves the same questions. Why do we grumble against God in our hearts when difficulties come 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 genuinely trusted the LORD as we ought, we would always be confident that God will keep his promise to work in all things for our everlasting good, just as He has consistently done for us in the past. We would never complain! But when we let the seeds of discouragement and self-pity germinate into weeds of doubt and unbelief, we become like the Israelites: blinded to His love. We start entertaining the thought that God wants us to suffer. And that, dear friends, is the devil convincing us that God is no better than he.

Recognizing this truth should lead us to pray: "Lord, grant us a faith that doesn't complain, but one that is willing to both repent and look to your promises for us in Christ to be reassured that everything you do, you do out of love."

Part Two: Lord, grant us a faith that is willing to repent.

How did the LORD respond to Israel's complaint? We read:

⁶The LORD sent venomous snakes among the people, and the snakes bit the people. As a result many people from Israel died.

Since the Israelites accused the LORD of intending to kill them in the desert, He let them experience precisely what their accusation meant if it were true - allowing them to feel what it would be like if he withdrew his mercy from them. As severe as this discipline may have seemed, the LORD did it for a most gracious purpose: that the people might see how sinfully rebellious their grumbling was and that they might repent. And that is precisely what happened. We read:

⁷The people went to Moses and said, "We have sinned, because we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD to take the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed on behalf of the people.

The LORD's discipline brought about its desired effect. The people repented, and how they did it is a model for us. Notice that they didn't try to justify themselves – using the weariness of their journey as an excuse for their complaining – nor did they claim that God's discipline was too harsh or unjust. No, they took full responsibility for their actions – making specific confession of what they did and

admitting they were wrong. Then, trusting the LORD's promised mercy, they asked Moses to intercede so their lives might be spared.

Proper repentance, therefore, consists of this: 1) Recognizing and admitting our sins against God - offering neither any excuse nor complaint as we do so, but taking responsibility for our actions. 2) Trusting that the LORD is merciful and will forgive us for Christ's sake - regardless of how grievously we have sinned against Him.

And what is God's response when we turn to him in such repentance? Just as Moses prayed for the people, Jesus will intercede with God the Father on our behalf. That is why we ask the LORD to grant us a faith that is ever willing to admit our sins and trust in Christ's promise of salvation.

Part Three: Lord, grant us a faith that trusts in your promise of salvation.

Now, the LORD could have said "no" to Moses' request to spare the Israelites and let them die. Alternatively, he could have said "yes" and had all the snakes disappear instantly. But instead of doing either of those two things, He does something marvellously different: not only does the LORD provide a way for the people to be saved from the poison affecting their bodies, but he also finds a way to counteract the poison of unbelief affecting their souls.

⁸The LORD said to Moses, "Make a venomous snake and put it on a pole. If anyone who is bitten looks at it, he will live."

Did the Israelites hear the LORD correctly: would a snake on a pole rescue the people from the death they deserved because of their sin? 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 that. Instead, God's promise connected with the snake on the pole would cause their deliverance — a deliverance that could only be received through faith in what God says.

Such faith would not disappoint, as we read: *⁹Moses made a bronze snake and put it on the pole. If a snake had bitten anyone, if that person looked at the bronze snake, he lived.*

The LORD wanted the Israelites to trust His promised mercy – not just for physical healing but also for spiritual healing. Those who believed and looked at the snake for healing would not merely be delivered from earthly death; they would also be

inclined to remember and trust God's promise of the Messiah, who would take away the world's sins.

In our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus pointed to our sermon text and said: *“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”*ⁱⁱ

In other words, this actual 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 - remembering his Son's sacrifice on the cross.

You see, ever since Adam and Eve believed the devil's lie instead of the LORD's warning, humanity has been infected with the poison of sin and doomed to everlasting destruction in hell. And just as there was no way for the Israelites to save themselves from the venom of the snakes in the wilderness, there is also no way for us to save ourselves from the guilt of our sin.

But knowing from the Bible that the LORD is merciful, we willingly confess our sins and ask Jesus to intercede before God the Father on our behalf. And Jesus is more than willing to intercede for us. Why? Because he loves us. And God the Father listens to his Son because he shares Jesus' love for us.

But the LORD couldn't just forget about our sins and pretend they never happened. No, because he is perfectly just, our sins had to be punished. So, what did God the Father do to solve this dilemma? He asked his Son to take up the cross on our behalf. After placing all our sins on Jesus to such a degree that it seemed as if He were sin personified, Jesus suffered and died for them all – being cursed for them in our place, as the Bible says: *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. As it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.”*ⁱⁱⁱ Furthermore, Jesus offers us his righteousness in exchange for our sins so that, through faith in him, we might stand perfectly holy in God's sight, as the Bible says: *God made him, who did not know sin, to become sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.*^{iv}

“But,” someone might ask, “how does focusing on Christ's cross forgive my sins?” It is not the cross that saves you, but the LORD's promises associated with Jesus' sacrifice. If God said that His Son's perfect life and innocent death are sufficient to rescue you from sin, death, and the power of the devil, then you should believe it because God cannot lie. And to give you even greater assurance that your sins are

forgiven through faith in Christ, God raised Jesus from the dead – proving beyond any doubt that your sins have been paid for in full! He did that *so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*^v

Brothers and sisters in Christ, believe God's promised, saving love for you in Christ regardless of what twists and turns your life might take. Yes, irrespective of the triumphs or trials and joys or sorrows you might face, focus on God's Gospel promises, ever praying: "LORD, grant me a faith that doesn't complain, that's always willing to repent, and that always trusts in your promise of salvation through faith in Christ Jesus alone." Amen.

ⁱ Cf. Numbers 14

ⁱⁱ John 3:14-15, EHV

ⁱⁱⁱ Galatians 3 :13 EHV

^{iv} 2 Corinthians 5:21, EHV

^v John 3:15, EHV