



[Rev. Steven S. Billings](#)

Sermon for Lent 4

March 10, 2024

Lifted Up

Numbers 21:4–9

⁴From 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. ⁵And 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.” ⁶Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. ⁷And 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. ⁸And 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.” ⁹So 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.

As the Children of Israel were camped near the Promised land, King Arad, a Canaanite, attacked them and took some of them as slaves. They prayed to God for victory, and God provided it; then He told them to go around Edom instead of cutting through. They didn't like that, so they complained.

They grumbled against God and against Moses. They called the miraculous food God gave them every day “worthless.” They said they had no water, which wasn't true. They whined that the journey was hopeless, that God wasn't keeping His promise to rescue them. He kept sending them on detours! They felt as though they were going to die. For 38 years they'd traveled on foot through the desert. Imagine a million crabby children all crying out: “Are we there yet?” They were ready to revolt!

But let's think about what had transpired during those 38 years. God delivered them from Egypt with 10 miraculous plagues. They were fed daily with manna and quail. Their clothes and sandals never wore out. God was there in a cloud by day and fire by night. Still they were having trouble believing God's Promises. Would you?

Many times they voiced their complaints. Put yourself in their place. Their lives were filled with stress, hardships, struggles, and aggravations. They had faced four decades of foes; and that “land of milk and honey” was nowhere to be seen. Now, they were told they had to take another detour!?

Perhaps the faithful response would have been to fall on their knees and thank God for all the blessings He had already given them, beg for courage and confidence, and then ask Him to be gracious and bring them relief. But, that didn't happen.

These ancient itinerants felt they deserved better treatment. Don't you? When you're sick, scared, short on cash, don't you get discouraged? Aren't you ready to question God?



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Yes? Well, such is our fallen nature.

Seems we so easily forget all that He gives us in life: air, water, food, clothes, friends, family, and so on. We're also tempted to believe that God's goal for us is a plump wallet, wellness, and sumptuous living in a land of plenty. We're not so different than those folks in the desert, are we.

So, how did God answer their complaint? He gave them more trouble. He sent snakes. Deadly snakes. Their bite felt like fire. And it took days to die.

Yes, God sent the snakes. St. Paul warns the Corinthian Christians that this is a call for us to obey God's Commandments and believe in Jesus. God will send trouble when His people abandon Him. Better to be warned here than warmed hereafter in hell! (Ephesians 2:1-3).

The good news in all of this is that the Children of Israel were made aware of their sins. Their grumbling was as deadly as the snakes' poison; it was killing their faith in God. Grumbling and back-biting and gossip is just as faith killing for Christians today. Such things poison our faith in Christ, just as grumbling against God's will does.

Thankfully, the trial of the snakes led the Children of Israel to repent of their sins. And, while this was a good thing, it wasn't so good that they followed their confession with instructions as to what God should do about their predicament: "Deliver us from the consequence of our sins! Quit penalizing me. I deserve better!"

I'm sure God didn't care for their rebellious attitude any more than He cares for mine.

Thankfully, He really does love the world, and His promise of the Savior would come through these people. So, He acted.

He heard their cries of repentance, but He did not fulfill their demands. He did something far greater. It would have been a miracle to stop the deaths with a word, or a wave of Moses' staff; or to remove the snakes. But God had Moses make a model of that snake out of bronze, which takes a really hot fire – 1,740 degrees, in fact – and that would take a little time. It took faith on the part of Moses to obey God and make this model of a snake.

It also took faith to be cured. Not a quick glance, but a lasting look in faith saved the person from a fiery poisonous death. Knowing about the snake was not enough. Agreeing that it was a sign of God's work was not enough. Trust was needed; trust in God's promise to prevent death and give life. There had to be knowledge, of course, and agreement, but also trust in God to defeat the poison.

Faith in the promises of God was the channel of God's work of healing. It was not the bronze serpent that healed and was to be worshiped. Hezekiah eventually destroyed it as an idol in 2 Kings 18(:4). It was God's healing through the look of faith. It was trusting God's Word, looking up at the representation of their sin in confession, and trusting they'd be spared the fiery death by the Savior of all.

Centuries before Moses, there was another deadly serpent. He did not bite with fangs, but with words. He was far more deadly. He encouraged grumbling; and he convinced



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God's people not to trust the Lord and to go another way, even though God had cared for them in His great love.

The poison of that old snake never goes away. All the children of Adam have it from conception to the grave. You could say that every ache, pain, misery, and disaster of nature comes from that one bite. Without a doubt, without the antidote, that bite always ends in eternal fiery death.

There's also only one healing, only one solution, only one antidote to this certain death.

"Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man have been lifted up on the cross, so that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life."

Jesus is the one greater than Moses Who "was fashioned as a Man" (Philippians 2:8) in living flesh, not dead metal. 2 Corinthians 5:21 tells us that "God made Christ, Who knew no sin, to be sin in our place." All the sin in our world that poisons us and damns us to fiery hell was placed on Him. The antidote to Satan's poison, the remedy to hell, is Christ crucified for all sin.

Not a singular rebellion, but for all the sins of the world He was lifted up. Not for relief from fiery venom; but for relief from fiery hell. Not to make life easier for a few years on our way to a chunk of real estate, but for healing during our journey of faith to the Promised Land of heaven. *This* is why God sent His only-begotten Son.

By grace alone, just as the bronze snake had the form and appearance of sin and its deadly venom, so Christ had the form and appearance of our fallen flesh.

John puts it like this: "Here's how God loved the world: He gave His only Son for the purpose (of giving His life as our ransom - 1st Timothy 2), so that the ones who believe in Him shall not end up in the fires of hell, but instead have eternal life." There's no middle ground, beloved: we're either saved believers or waiting-for-fire unbelievers.

The Father did not send His Son into our world to condemn us; but rather to save the world through Him. Here's the thing: We've all been bitten. The poison hasn't gone away. The crisis won't go away. The Old Serpent, Satan, keeps on biting and poisoning. But God works in us so that we will keep looking in faith to Jesus on the cross, that He may keep us safe from the eternal effect of Satan's bite.

God's people of old then trusted in the promise God put in that bronze snake, as a fruit of faith. God's people today trust in the promise He put in the Son of Man Who was lifted up for us. On the basis of God's promises we continue our journey of faith: following Jesus, obeying the Commandments, telling others about "the antidote," and relying on Christ crucified for all our failures, flaws, and fiascos.

God did not remove all the snakes then (that is to say: all the sin, poison, and consequences) nor does He remove them from our world today. Thank God He doesn't send snakes every time we grumble or stumble! Rather, He has sent His Son to be lifted-up so that we will not die eternally.

May the Holy Spirit continue to work that gift of faith in you – so that you will "fix your eyes on Jesus, the Author and Finisher of your faith," and may the whole world come to



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believe in the immeasurable riches of His grace in Christ Jesus! In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen