

*<sup>4</sup>They 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. <sup>5</sup>The 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!”*

*<sup>6</sup>The LORD sent venomous snakes among the people, and the snakes bit the people. As a result many people from Israel died. <sup>7</sup>The 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.*

*<sup>8</sup>The 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.” <sup>9</sup>Moses 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 Israelites had been complaining constantly since they left Egypt. And their complaints really focused on three things. They complained about their food situation, first that they didn't have any then after they had received manna and quail, that these foods were too bland. They complained about their water situation too. They didn't have any water, or the water didn't taste right. They complained about where they had to live. Many thought they would have been better off back in Egypt as slaves. This last one had kept them out of the Promised Land for 40 years when they wanted to go back to Egypt instead of going to war with the Canaanites.

But the complaint they give here is the last in the long line of their recorded complaints. It's not that they were done sinning and complaining. But this is the last mention in this pattern of complaining during their 40 years of wandering. And this last complaint is different than the rest. They had been blaming Moses for all of their problems. But now they're blaming God too. God had put Moses in charge, so their complaints against Moses were indirectly against God. But now they're not veiling their criticism by blaming Moses alone. Now we hear them speaking against God and against Moses.

Reading through the Israelites' complaints in the first few books of the Bible, it's hard for us to imagine that we grumble against God as much as they did. They complained about the availability of food. They complained that they deserved better than they were getting. We complain about the same things and even more. Have you complained about food prices at the grocery store? Have you complained that this situation or that situation you find yourself in is unfair or that you are undeserving of having to deal with whatever it is you face? Maybe the only difference between us and the Israelites is that Moses doesn't write down all our complaints for history to read.

But we go further than the Israelites. We don't just complain. We follow the path of rebellion to try to throw God off our backs. Then we can live the way that we want. Then we can provide ourselves with what we think we need. Have you ever seen those cages researchers drop over the side of their boats out in the ocean? They get their diving gear on, climb into the cage, and are lowered down into the waters. Now, you know the cage is there to protect the diver from sharks who might want to do some research themselves. But how foolish would it be for the diver to look at the cage in a different light? Wouldn't he sound like a fool if he went on a tirade about how this cage was a bad thing, keeping him from exploring the ocean to his heart's content?

When we complain against God and his ways, are we not seeing it as a cage that holds us in instead of a cage that keeps that which wants to feast on us out? And yet we keep doing it. We keep grumbling against his plans

and doing whatever we can to have control. Our rebellion against God isn't with swords and guns. It's not with firebombs and guillotines. This rebellion happens in our heart. And that's worse than any weapon of war.

God will not tolerate rebellion for long. He is gracious in giving people time to repent, but ultimately, he will drop the hammer. Not long after the Israelites' rebellious grumbling against God, he allows venomous snakes into the camp of the Israelites. And these snakes begin to bite the people and kill them. We don't know how long the Israelites stand there scratching their heads as they try to figure out what went wrong. Usually, people's first move is to cast blame on others instead of taking accountability. But pretty quickly the people repent. They say to Moses, "We have sinned, because we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray the Lord to take the snakes away from us." Sickness and death have a way of making people acutely aware of sin. While there may have been some confusion at first, they were no longer confused as to why this destruction and death was happening to them. It's all their fault. But as we hear from the way they speak to Moses, they also know the only place that they could go to find forgiveness and rescue.

God does not tolerate our rebellion either. You might say that people go their entire lives, almost a century, without their rebellion against God catching up with them. But those who do not know Christ's atoning sacrifice live without comfort. Day after day, they continue to make the sacrifices that they think the god they've conjured up in their mind desires. If they say the right things, support the right movements, or make the right choices when it comes to family, economics, or politics, then they'll find lasting peace in life. But that's simply not true. Every earthly thing that a person has can be taken away from them. And how can these things bring peace if they are here today and tomorrow extinguished? And ultimately, even if some of these things last a lifetime, no one who rejected what Jesus has won for them can evade the eternal punishment for their sins. Rebellion will not go unpunished.

Our rebellion of sin leads us to death too. And not just physical death, but eternal death. Unfortunately, the sinful world wants nothing more than to bury its head in the sand and ignore sin. People don't want to think about their eternal well-being because they're afraid of death. And even more than that, because everyone knows deep down that they're a sinner, they're afraid of what punishment will come after death. You know people who are worried about their status with God but too afraid to talk about it. We ourselves might even be those people sometimes. We don't want to come to grips with just how much our sin frays the relationship between us and God. The poison of sin flows through our veins. It promises to kill us painfully and eternally. But just like the Israelites, we know the only place to go for rescue. We know we can go to the God who doesn't want to see anyone die. We know we can go to him who welcomes us repentant sinners when we approach him hat in hand.

How could the Israelites make up for the consequences of their sin? They couldn't. So, God gives Moses instructions to form a bronze snake, put it on a pole, then tell the Israelites to look at it to be cured of the poison. But what kind of medical advice is that? We have people here that are trained in medicine. On which day did they teach you the bronze snake cure? We talk about how God's ways are not our ways. We talk about how God knows so much more than we do and has so much more power too. But then we watch Moses attach a fake snake to a pole and lift it up into the air as an anti-venom. It looks silly, doesn't it? Doesn't it feel like a waste of time?

Moses does what God commands, and the people who look at it are healed. Doesn't this show us something about how God works? We know he does what's best. We know he's all powerful and uses that power for our benefit. But sometimes he expresses that power in ways that seem so foolish. He does this for a purpose though. What could the Israelites experiencing all of this know for sure? What can we be certain of as we look on at the Israelites in the wilderness? We know that Moses was not a doctor ahead of his time. There is no scientific

explanation that can make it make sense. If you or I were poisoned, this bronze snake treatment would not work. Yet, we can be sure that this healing came only from the miraculous hand of God.

God answers our cries for help too. When we were dying of the poison of sin, God did not leave us to rot in the wilderness of life. Instead, he sent Jesus to be lifted up on the pole of Calvary, just like the snake and the wilderness. And as he is lifted up for the sins of the world, we're tempted to ask that question that the jailer in Philippi and every other person who's ever lived has asked, "What must I do to be saved?"

Instantly, all the incorrect answers come to mind. What must I do to be saved? "Live the life God wants you to live." What must I do to be saved? "Try your hardest to be a good person." What must I do to be saved? "Make the choice for Jesus. Get yourself to believe." But the scene in the wilderness, and ultimately the greater scene of the cross, reveals to us what God requires for our salvation. Nothing! Just look at the cross and be saved! And what do we find as we look to the cross? We find the one who voluntarily carried our sins to destruction. We find the one whose love for us leads him to death and hell so that we can have life in heaven.

When you feel the poison of sin in your life, friends, there is nothing you have to do. Just look to the cross. There you find the miraculous cure. In him you find salvation, free and gracious. Amen.