

**+ Numbers 21:4-9 + The Foolishness of the Cross: The Cross Means Looking to Jesus +
+ 4th Sunday in Lent + 6 March 2016 +**

Have you ever looked back on something you did or said or failed to do and it makes you shake your head? You look back and think, “How could I have been so foolish, so selfish, so blind?” Maybe that memory of your foolishness, your selfishness, your blindness makes you apply your palm to your forehead. “What was I thinking? Why did I say that? Why didn’t I do the right thing?” You feel regret and guilt and shame for what you said or did.

That’s how we Israelites felt as we turned the corner around Edom and headed towards Moab. Now I realize that places like Edom and Moab probably don’t mean much to you, but they did to all 2,000,000 of us who were wandering through the wilderness in what you know as Jordan today.

You see, for nearly forty years, our people led by Moses, the prophet of the Lord, had been traveling away from four centuries of slavery in Egypt to Canaan—the land promised to our forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. If you look at a map, it’s not a forty-year journey. So why did it take us so long? Nearly forty years before, our parents had rebelled against the Lord.

Moses had sent twelve spies into Canaan—one from each of our tribes—to check out the cities, the people, and the land. They didn’t need to tell us if we could take the land or not. God had promised to give it to us, but when they came back ten of the twelve spies filled my people with fear telling them that they were like grasshoppers to the Canaanite fighting men and their mighty fortress cities. Two of the spies—Joshua and Caleb—along with Moses and the high priest Aaron urged my people to take the land with God’s help, but our parents rebelled against the Lord.

They started plotting to get a new leader to take them back to Egypt. They actually threatened to stone Moses and Aaron. So Moses spoke to the Lord on their behalf and the Lord in his mercy forgave them, but consequences were coming. No one over the age of 20 would enter the Promised Land except faithful Joshua and Caleb. Later even Moses and Aaron disqualified themselves from entrance into the Promised Land.

Years passed and the generation before us died off in the wilderness. The time had come to make our way again to the Promised Land. To do that, we would have to pass through or go around the land of our cousins—the Edomites, but they refused to let us pass. In fact, they threatened us with bloodshed. So the Lord through Moses guided us on the extra-long journey around Edom. It meant we had to go back for a time towards the Red Sea in the south—the very same sea we had crossed years before—rather than up towards Canaan in the north. The way was long, hot, and thankless. Along the way, the Lord told Aaron that the end of his life had come. He was buried up on Mt. Hor, and his son Eleazer became the high priest—and we kept traveling on the long, hot, thankless road around Edom.

All this time, the Lord had been providing us with sweet, sustaining food. For six days every week for nearly 40 years we gathered manna—a white, sweet substance that tasted like honey. It’s amazing what you could make from that heavenly food! The Lord regularly provided us with quail for meat and miraculous sources of cool, flowing water throughout our travels.

The Lord was good to us day after day and even though we were heading away from the land he had promised to us, he had promised that we would still get there someday. But you know what happens when you’re hot and tired and sick of eating the same food every day for years, when it seems like you’ve been doing nothing, but wandering towards a land that seems so impossibly far away? Your patience gets short. Your tolerance for what you’re willing to endure grows thin. Your thoughts get bitter. Your words take a harder edge. Frustration and impatience grow—and you complain.

Looking back on what we did on that southbound road to the Red Sea fills me with regret and sadness. We weren’t just whining. When 2,000,000 people get tired and frustrated and impatient, it becomes so much more than that. Our impatience and frustration grew into rebellion and anger with God and with Moses for making our lives difficult. We wanted someone to blame for our troubles, so we started acting like our parents. **“Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!”** Ugh! Didn’t we learn anything from seeing what had happened to the rebellious generation before us? How could we utter such foolish, thankless complaints against God?

We were thinking more about our stomachs than God. We were blind to the many gifts that the Lord had given us. We didn’t take God’s gifts seriously. We took them for granted and threw them back in his face telling God—the Creator and Provider of all—that what he gave us wasn’t good enough. We didn’t want heavenly

food anymore. We thought we knew better than God, when in reality, we were rejecting God like our parents had. So we complained until God gave us something to complain about.

The region where we were traveling was infested with brightly colored, venomous snakes. The Lord had kept them away from us, but we were so blindly caught up in ourselves. We didn't realize how much we needed God to jar us to our senses. So he briefly removed his hand of protection and those brightly colored, venomous snakes soon slithered into our camp—and attacked.

“Many Israelites died” that day in rebellion against God. There was death everywhere—loved ones, friends—all because of our discontent! How foolish we were! How blind! How thankless! We finally realized that without the Lord's help, we'd never survive. So we pleaded with Moses for relief. **“We sinned when we spoke against the LORD of grace and against you. Pray that the LORD of grace will take the snakes away from us.”**

...And that's exactly what Moses did. Once more he served as our mediator. Once more he prayed on our behalf—and once more the Lord relented. In answer to Moses' prayer, the Lord of grace told him to make a snake out of bronze **“and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.”** So Moses made that snake **“and put it up on a pole.”**

It couldn't have happened at a better time. One of those fiery-colored, venomous snakes had bitten me. It hurt terribly. I knew that death was coming quickly, but the Lord of grace had attached a promise to that image that Moses had made. Yes, it seems foolish to look up at something on a pole and expect to be healed of a venomous snake bite, but I trusted that God has the power to keep his promises. This wasn't superstition. This wasn't putting my trust in a dead object. No, the Lord of grace had rescued us from Egypt. He had daily provided for 2,000,000 people in the wilderness for nearly forty years. Surely he could heal my snake bite. So I looked to the bronze snake up on that pole, trusting in God's promise—and lived.

Now you haven't been wandering in the wilderness for the past 40 years, but I bet you've had painful consequences for your sins like we did. As you look at your life, do you feel the sting of regret? The pain of guilt? The spiritual poison of sin? Have there been times when even though the Lord of grace had provided everything for you, you still thought you knew better than God? Have you ever thought more highly of yourself than God? Have you ever been blind to the many gifts that the Lord has given and didn't take them seriously? Have you ever been ungrateful for what the Lord of grace has given you and complained against him? Have you depended on yourself? Have you ever caught yourself looking within for the help that you need? Have you blindly rebelled against God like we did on that desert road?

We all have, haven't we? You have a sinful nature just like I do. You deserve to suffer God's punishment, God's condemnation just as much as we did. How often have you done or said something or failed to do or say something and it resulted in painful consequences for you and others? Yet as he did for us, the Lord in his grace does for you. He provides a solution. He points you not to a snake on a pole, but to a Savior on a cross.

Fourteen hundred years after my people lived, the Messiah came—God's long-promised Anointed One. Moses had prophesied that this prophet would come from among our people and would surpass the great things he had done. What amazing things Jesus did! He healed the sick. He cast out demons. He even raised the dead! He taught the Word of God as God himself. Yet most importantly, he came to be God's solution for you and me.

In tremendous, undeserved love, God sent his Son, the Messiah to do what we could not. From conception, he lived perfectly. He never complained. He never harbored bitter feelings against God. He never thought he knew better than God. He never thought more of himself than God or others. He had no reason for regret, but didn't come to just be an example. He came to do what you could not. He came to be lifted up so you could look and live!

Jesus looked back to that regretful event in our history to teach you why he had come. **“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Many must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”** (John 3:14-17)

Jesus is God's solution to the sting of your regret, to the pain of your guilt, to the spiritual poison of your sin. Look not to yourself, but to Jesus! God wanted us to look in faith to that bronze serpent up on the pole so we

could be saved from those venomous snake bites. So also God wants you to look in faith to Jesus hanging on a cross of wood to save you from all your sins.

The Lord in his grace provided that solution for those times when you feel the painful consequences of your sin. Don't look to Jesus on the cross like some superstitious amulet to make you feel better, but look with eyes of faith. Look to Jesus trusting that God has the power to fulfill his promise to forgive your sin, to heal your pain, to give you life—even life eternal—again.

When you feel the painful sting of that old serpent Satan, when you feel the poison of sin's guilt, look to Jesus and live! He crushed the serpent's head, even at the cost of his own life. He died that you might live and then conquered death that you might have eternal life. Look to Jesus and live!

Looking back on my life, I recall those times that fill me with regret and guilt and shame. I wonder what I was thinking and why I did what I did. That day with the venomous snakes was one of those days, but that day the Lord of grace also gave me life again. That bronze serpent was meant to be a picture of the Savior to come—the One who really healed my soul and gave me life again. With the same eyes of faith, look only to Jesus on the cross and there find healing and help and life eternal. Amen.