

Numbers 21: 4-9  
Rev. Charles Degner

Lent 4  
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**<sup>4</sup> They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; <sup>5</sup> they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, “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!” <sup>6</sup>Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. <sup>7</sup> The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. <sup>8</sup> The LORD said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.” <sup>9</sup> So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived.**

***The weakness of complaining and the power of the cross!***

I don't think that I complain very much, but I think I probably complain more than I realize it. When I was a young man, I worked as a bus driver at Glacier National Park. That was the best job in the park and they loved to hire men from our college of ministry or our seminary to be drivers. We regularly spent the night at one of four different hotels in the park, which meant we sampled the food from all the different cooks. Our least favorite was the hotel in Canada called the Prince of Wales Hotel in Waterton Lakes. It wasn't unusual for the employees to be fed something called “Shepherd's Pie,” which was usually a concoction of leftover meat, vegetables and potatoes.

At one particularly bland dinner, we were complaining about the food we were eating. There were three seminary students at the table and one very worldly and very ungodly young man named Don. He was a nice guy, but not a Christian. Suddenly Don got up from the table and left to sit at a different table. “Don, what's up?” we called after him. And he said, “This food is bad enough the way it is without me having to listen to you yokels complain about it.” It's embarrassing when someone from the world calls you out and points out what a thankless person you are. So how much do you complain?

**I. The weakness of complaining**

Can we look at the children of Israel for a moment and see how weak and ugly complaining really is?  
**<sup>4</sup> They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; <sup>5</sup> they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, “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!”** These people had been on the road for more than forty years. The first time they came to the border of Canaan, they were afraid because of the rumors they heard about the strong people that were in the land. As a result, God condemned

them to forty more years of wandering in the desert until every who was older than twenty had died, except for Joshua and Caleb and Moses. During all that time God provided them with water to drink and food to eat. He made water flow out of rocks miraculously when they needed it, and he covered the ground every morning with a flaky food that was perfect for keeping them strong and healthy. It was a little sweet and could be baked into bread or cakes. At night, quail came across the desert and they could catch them to eat. So they had chicken and oatmeal every single day. In addition, their clothes and shoes never wore out. Think about that for a moment – same food, same clothes every day. Would you complain?

It was almost time for them to come to the land of Canaan, but they had a detour around the country of Edom through one of the hottest, windiest, dustiest parts of the desert south of the promised land. But they didn't complain about the weather. Not that we ever complain about the weather! They complained about the food! They said they couldn't stand this miserable food called manna. They just wanted to stop by a McDonald's in Jericho and have a nice, juicy McLamburger and a salad on the side. ***What I want you to note is that they weren't complaining about the bad things in their life. They were complaining about the good things in their life which they didn't think were good enough.***

Can we look at our complaining and let this story call us to repentance? I sent out an email to some of the youth that I have on my daily prayer list and asked them what teenagers complain about. Two things rose to the surface. One is that you complain about the rules your parents have in your home and not having the freedom to do what you want. Do you see how you are complaining against the good things that God put in your life? It's not good to have parents who let you do whatever you want. It's good to have parents who give you rules and expect you to keep them. God gave you those parents to protect you and to bring you up to follow Jesus. When you speak against your parents in your heart, you are not only speaking against your parents. You are speaking against God, just the way the children of Israel spoke against Moses AND God.

The other thing that teens said they complained about was not having the newest stuff – like the latest phone or clothes. Again, that's not complaining about bad things, but complaining about good things that aren't good enough. Have you looked at all the clothes you have in your closet? Does your phone function and do what phones are supposed to do? And what makes you think that you deserve a phone at age 16 or 14 or 12? When we complain to our parents about this, we not only complain against our parents. We complain against God!

Our youth have a lot to learn, don't they? Well, parents, ask yourself if you are really being a good role model for them. What do you complain about? You complain about your work. Work is a good thing, because God is providing for you and your family. But when is ordinary work not good enough? If you complain about work, why shouldn't your children complain about school, or doing their chores, or their homework? Maybe in your heart you complain against your spouse. Yet God gave you your spouse to provide you companionship for your life

here on earth. You are like Adam who complained that it was Eve's fault and called her, "the woman you gave me." All complaining leads back to God.

What do we gain from complaining? Complaining is weak. It doesn't change anything. Complaining doesn't make your cell phone work better. It doesn't make the weather change. It doesn't change the fact that you have to get up for work in the morning. It doesn't get your homework done at night. I have this vivid memory from a Sunday night in grade school. I had four verses of a hymn to memorize, and I complained about it all night. The more I complained, the worse I felt and the harder it was to get my work done. I still remember how frustrated my parents were with me! Complaining doesn't accomplish anything positive. The only thing that complaining accomplishes is that it makes the people around us want to get up and sit at a different table from us.

No, there is something worse. Complaining invites God's anger. That's what happened to the children of Israel. Our text says, "**Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died.**" In 1 Corinthians 10, when Paul gave some examples of Old Testament believers who failed in their faith, Paul said that some of them "tested" the Lord and were killed by snakes. Why does God get so angry with complaining? Because complaining comes from a heart that says that God isn't enough. Because complaining is a symptom of a heart that is not filled with his grace. Because complaining leads not just to the death of the body but the death of the soul. And that is something that is something that God does not want to happen to you. That's why God invites you today to lift up your eyes and look at the cross.

## II. The power of the cross

The second half of this story is as beautiful as the first half of this story is ugly. <sup>7</sup> **The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed for the people.** <sup>8</sup> **The LORD said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live."** <sup>9</sup> **So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived."** It is a beautiful thing when God's people come to their senses and own up to their sins and ask God to save them. They realized that nothing could save them from the poison of the snakes, just as nothing can save us from the poison of our sins, except for God alone. And that's what God did. He put the poisonous serpent on the pole and when the people looked at the brass serpent, they were saved.

When my children were small, my wife made a "Busy Bible" that she used to keep them entertained in church. It was made of cloth so that it didn't make any noise and didn't tear. On each page there was a Bible story in pictures. Every picture had something busy little fingers could do. On the creation page, a child could open windows on the world to see what God

made on each day. That's how my children learned what God did on each day of creation. For the flood, you could put animals in the ark. For the tower of Babel, you could build the tower with Velcro blocks. You could put Joseph's coat of many colors on Joseph and you could untie Moses' sandal at the burning bush. The last page there was the brass serpent on a pole, which looked like a cross, and there was nothing to do. Do you get it? God had to save his people. The people didn't have to DO anything but look and believe.

Fast forward to the New Testament and Jesus used this Bible story to teach Nicodemus the most important lesson in his life. John 3:14-15 says, **"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."** The Israelites could do nothing to save themselves from the poison of the serpents, and we can do nothing to save ourselves from the poison of sin. There is no antidote to sin. So God lifted up Jesus and put him on the cross so that everyone who looks at Jesus and believes in him will be saved from death.

But let's explore this comparison a little further. Why is Jesus like the bronze serpent? God put the snake on the cross because it was the poison of the snake that was killing them. God took that poison and lifted it up away from them. Why did God put Jesus on the cross? Because the poison of sin is what is killing us, and Jesus became sin for us. That's what the Bible says in 1 Corinthians 5:21. **"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."** Do you see what Jesus did for us? He took the poison of our sin into his body on the cross so that he could render the venom of our sin powerless.

I can't begin to imagine what that must have felt like. The reason the serpents are called fiery serpents is because their poison hurt so much. I know what sin feels like. It hurts. It makes me feel guilty. It makes me feel ashamed. It makes me scared. Jesus never felt that way in his life until that day on the cross when he took ALL the sins of the whole world into his body. Can you imagine how much that hurt? No. You can't. You can only get a little glimpse of how much it hurt. That's how much Jesus loved you and still does. Jesus saved you from the pain and death of your sin.

And more. The power of the cross does not end with just taking away your guilt and pain. Jesus once told his disciples in John 10: **"I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."** You can have everything that money can buy and still feel empty enough to complain. You can have friends and fame and fortune and still find no joy in this life.

Brad Pitt starred in Fight Club, which is about a man who has the American dream and yet remains unsatisfied. Rolling Stone interviewed him. Listen to what Pitt said: *Man, I know all these things are supposed to seem important to us—the car, the condo, our version of success—but if that's the case, why is the general feeling out there reflecting more impotence and isolation and desperation and loneliness? If you ask me, I say toss all this—we gotta find something else. Because all I know is that at this point in time, we are heading for a dead end, a numbing of the soul, a complete atrophy of the spiritual being. And I don't want that.*

Rolling Stone asked him what we should do to avoid this dead end of dissatisfaction despite all that we have, and he said: *Hey, man, I don't have those answers yet. The emphasis now is on success and personal gain. I'm sitting in it, and I'm telling you, that's not it. I'm the guy who's got everything. I know. But I'm telling you, once you've got everything, then you're just left with yourself. I've said it before and I'll say it again: it doesn't help you sleep any better, and you don't wake up any better because of it.*

You, dear friends, know what Brad Pitt doesn't know. You have the answer to isolation, desperation and loneliness. You have the antidote to the poison that infects us all, and that is Jesus and the power of the cross. Read Psalm 73 and see how the Psalmist complains and despairs of this life until he find his Savior, and says, **"I am always with you, O LORD; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever."** Amen.