

Symbols of Lent: The Cross

Numbers 21:4-9 (NIV84)

⁴ They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; ⁵ 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!" ⁶ Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. ⁷ 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. ⁸ 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." ⁹ 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.

John 3:14-15 (NIV84)

¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

"[The Israelites] traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; 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!' Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died." (Numbers 21:4-6) Does the punishment fit the crime? I mean, the people are only complaining. We've all dealt with our fair share of complaints, and we know that we've made a fair number of them ourselves. But does anyone deserve to die for complaining, to have lethally poisonous snakes be unleashed upon them?

You read a section of the Bible like this, and you begin to understand why people commonly cry out that the God of the Old Testament was a vengeful and wrathful God who would strike you dead just as much as look at you. It seems petty, brutal, insensible. No one deserve to die for complaining. Complaining isn't that bad of a thing to do.

Did you know that complaining is actually harmful to you? When complaining is used solely to vent and is done to a person who can't do anything about your situation, it actually increases your stress levels every time you complain without anything being resolved. According to recent research done by Stanford University, 30 minutes of complaining every day damages a person's brain – whether you are the one complaining or if you are the one receiving the complaints. Exposure to negativity peels back neurons in the hippocampus – the part of the brain used for problem solving and cognitive function. So, the mere act of complaining or listening to complaining damages your ability to problem solve. Complaining is detrimental to your health. But do you deserve to die from doing it?

Take that question and reverse it: Why do you deserve to live, even as you complain? Is it because everyone has an inalienable right to live, that no one should take their life from them ever? Is it because you are a good person and the things you have done or complained about just aren't bad enough to merit the death penalty? Do we feel that we should live in spite of complaining because we have placed ourselves in the position of judge, jury, and executioner?

If you have elevated yourself to judge what is right and fair, weigh into your judgment what God had already done for the Israelites. He had already used his great power to rescue his people from their bitter lives of slavery in Egypt, and that was no small feat. Pharaoh refused to let God's people go until ten destructive plagues ravaged the land of Egypt. And even after everything was ruined and the Egyptians had lost all their firstborn children from these plagues and Pharaoh had told the Israelites to leave, he changed his mind again and sent his army to reclaim the Israelites back into slavery. God, though, provided safe passage for his people going through the Red Sea on dry ground with walls of water stacked up on each side which then came crashing down on the Egyptian pursuers when they tried to overtake the Israelites. Then, the Israelites began their journey to the land God had promised them. All the while on that journey, God fed them every day with food that they did not have to plant or grow but simply pick up. He provided water from rocks when there was no water around. He defended them against attackers. In fact, in the verses immediately preceding our reading from Numbers 21, the LORD had given the Israelites total victory against the Canaanite king of Arad who had drawn first blood from the Israelites and captured some of their people.

Then the people grew impatient and spoke against God and their God-given leader, Moses, "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!" (Numbers 21:5) It's like biting the hand that feeds you. God had provided rescue for his people, food, water, protection, and the list goes on. Yet, when they are impatient, when they feel like things are taking too long, they turn on God. They accuse God of bringing them out of Egypt, rescuing

them from slavery, just so that they would then die in the desert. They complain that there was no food, but really there was. They just didn't want it. They didn't want what God was providing. It's like an ungrateful, spoiled kid. No, it's worse than that. They were essentially accusing God of trying to murder them when the facts say that God had done everything to save them.

Complaints against someone who is providing for you, taking care of you, helping you, are wrong. They're sinful. We may think that sending venomous snakes to these Israelite complainers is overkill, but that's when we are playing judge, when we are arrogant enough to think that we are the ultimate rule of right and wrong. We know we don't get everything right. We know that we don't know everything. We know that our judgments can be and are often flawed and misinformed, but not God.

God, who knows all things, who is perfect himself, says the wages of sin is death. You sin; you deserve death - whether we agree with the punishment or not. These complaints are sinful. Sin earns us death, not life. If we let God be the judge, and his verdict is that the wages of sin is death, I have to ask myself if I have ever sinned, if I have ever done wrong. Because if I have sinned or done wrong even once in my life, one ungrateful comment to someone who is trying to help me, one complaint that ignores all the other kindness shown to me, I know what God's justice demands. The wages of sin is death. I do not deserve to live. I deserve the exact same venomous snakes to be sent to my house, to bite me for all the times that I have complained, for all the times that I have complained against God and what he has provided for me.

Even amidst all their complaints, God provided a solution to this whole wages of sin is death verdict. After many Israelites died from the snake bites, 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." (Numbers 21:7) So Moses prayed for the people. 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." (Numbers 21:8) Look at the thing that is killing you. If you do, you will live. And that's exactly what happened. "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." (Numbers 21:9)

Some 1400 years later Jesus taught, "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." (John 3:14-15) We are supposed to die for our sins, and that includes our complaints. Yet God provided a solution even while we complained. He points you to look at Jesus on the cross, an object of death that he uses to bring you life.

I'm sure there's a fair number of you that in no way want to look up at a snake like God instructed those Israelites to do to live. The sight of it reviles you because it looks slimy and because it might be poisonous. The snake that Moses put on a pole was poisonous. It was death, and God said look at it. Look at death! Even though it reviles you, wouldn't you look at death if you know that it would save you, if God promised it would save you?

I know when some of us look at the cross, we picture a suffering Jesus, a dying Jesus. We see a symbol of death. How can anything good come from that? Especially because he doesn't deserve it. He's innocent. He committed no sins. He never complained. He does not deserve to die this way. You're right. To a degree, you should revile the sight of the cross. Jesus didn't deserve death on a cross, but we do. It's because we do that he let himself be raised up on a cross. He wants you to see this, not to make you feel bad, not to guilt you, not to revile you, not to make you feel like you need to make a sacrifice like he did, but look at the cross so that you can see that he was taking your place. He took on himself the punishment of death that we deserved for all the sins we have done, all the complaints that we have uttered. He wants you to gaze upon that cross and know that his death gives you eternal life. He died on that cross so that you live. Look at it. Look at what Jesus did. Believe that that's what he did on the cross and you will have eternal life instead of eternal death.

God wants you to look at the cross and see what he did for you. He wants you to take him at his word, to look on this cross, and see that someone else was punished for my complaints. He did this so that I would not have to die in my sins. He did this so that I could live forever with him. When I look at the cross, I realize that it is by the cross that God saves me, gives me life when my sins, my complaints, should have killed me. That cross is a symbol of life, life eternal by the death Jesus died for us to take away our sins.

"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him." (John 3:14-15) Look at the cross. See Jesus' death for you. See what he has done for you and have eternal life. Amen.