

Look and Live

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.

The desert is a harsh place to live, and the Israelites have been wandering in it going on 40 years now. The previous rebellious generation had almost entirely died off. Aaron, the very first high priest for Israel and Moses' brother, had just died as well. They had paid their punishment. The good news, though, was that the LORD gave the Israelites a smashing victory over the Canaanite people of Arad. They were ready to leave the desert and enter into the Promised Land.

One problem, though. The shortcut through the land of Edom was denied by the locals and by God. Moses was now leading the Israelites on a longer route to the Red Sea to go around Edom. You can almost hear the thoughts of the people as they were forced to take yet another detour from the Promised Land. "But we can take 'em! C'mon! With the LORD on our side, we can't lose. In fact, let's dedicate this next victory to Aaron!" But the LORD's commands were to be honored. The Israelites were not to take even a foothold in Edom. And so, they had to go around.

This was too much. They could not handle one more delay. The Israelites' patience grew thin and snapped. "They spoke against God and against Moses." (verse 5) "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!" (verse 5)

It's easy to lose patience. All it takes are a few delays. I need to leave for church now, but my kid is still staring in the closet for his shoes after I have already told him three times to get his shoes on. I tell him to go to the bathroom before we leave, a task that should take a minute or so. Yet minute after minute ticks by. I'm tapping my foot as if it will make him go faster. We are already behind schedule, leaving later than I want to. I am getting upset, about ready to barge into the bathroom and see what is going on. He finally comes out. We pile in the car. I start it up, start backing out. Realize that I left my coffee mug on the kitchen counter. Hit the brakes. Put it in park. Run into the house, getting later and later by the minute. Finally get back in the car. Then everyone is driving so ridiculously slow. You know what? It's gone. No more patience, only anger. I am ready to shout at every single person who delays me from here on out!

As our patience depletes, so does the control of our tongue. When I am delayed and people keep making me later and later, my thoughts go places where I know they should not go. My anger starts to sputter and spew from my mouth with each additional delay, even though I am trying to hold it in. I grow so impatient that everything is miserable until I get past these delays and I can cool off and collect myself. And if you try to cheer me up or get me to look at the bright side when all my patience has been exhausted, so help me, I will unload my misery on you and get rid of your sunny disposition.

Although my impatience tends to be directed at people and situations, does that make it any better than losing patience with God like the Israelites did when they had to go the long way around Edom? Are we any less guilty of the sin of becoming impatient and letting anger and misery take over our thoughts and words when we are delayed compared to when the Israelites were delayed and complained against God and Moses for all their current woes? Impatience comes from us not having things the way we want it right now. But who is in control of all things? It's God. All impatience, whether it is directed at a person or a specific situation, is impatience with God.

What if God lost his patience at the same rate that we do? What if when we started spouting our impatience-fueled tirades, he turned it right around on us. "You sorry little ingrates! How dare you lose patience with your fellow man! I can't believe that you can't give this guy two more minutes of your time. Do you know how patient I have been with you, and this is how you treat your fellow man? I am so sick of you never waiting to see how this all plays out. That's it. I'm done with you." If God's patience was as thin as ours, we would have experienced something much worse than venomous snakes.

The snakes. That's right. God did lose his patience, didn't he? "Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died." (verse 6) That's losing his patience, isn't it?

No, there's a difference between lashing out at someone because you have grown impatient with them and disciplining someone when they have done wrong. One is done in anger. The other is done in love for the person, wanting to correct their behavior so that they prosper in life.

God sent the venomous snakes to show the Israelites how their impatience with God had led them to sin against him, how they had shown their ingratitude towards God and all that he has done for them. After the snakes came, they realized their sin. "The people came to Moses and said, 'We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you.'" (verse 7)

The LORD led the Israelites to repent of their sin of impatience by sending venomous snakes. How does he correct us when we grow impatient? Sometimes, when we get sick of waiting on God and we take matters into our own hands, we see our plans blow up in our faces. Things get ruined because we wanted things done our way on our time table and thought God wasn't acting fast enough. He leads us to repentance over our impatience as he lets us suffer our own consequences.

Other times, God combats our impatience by delaying our wants longer, by not giving us what we want right when we want it. He makes us wait. He allows us to be delayed so that we realize that things aren't done on our timetable, as if that's the best and only timetable allowed. Instead, God operates on his timetable, and he knows both the best time and the right time for us. Even when he allows delays, he is doing this for our good. He led the Israelites around Edom to keep his Word, his promise. Why he delays us in certain things, we may not know, but when he does allow us to be delayed, it is always to benefit us.

When we grow impatient and speak out against our neighbor or against God, his discipline is right there, and it condemns us. We don't even need snakes to poison us and kills us. Our sins, sins of impatience and all the others, they kill us. As our second lesson told us, "We were dead in [our] transgressions." (Ephesians 2:5)

The hand of death has been dealt, to the Israelites and to us. What can we do? Nothing. We can't cure ourselves, bring ourselves back to life, give ourselves the cure. Only God provides the solution to our deadly, poisonous sins. The Israelites said to Moses, "Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us." (verse 7) So Moses prayed for the people, and God acted on that prayer.

"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.' 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." (verses 8-9) Because of his great love for the Israelites, because he is rich in mercy, the LORD cured these Israelites of death. They lived because God gave his promise that all who looked at this snake on a pole would live. He took the very instrument, the very thing which caused them death, and removed death from it and turned it into a symbol of life.

This snake lifted up on a pole became a symbol of what God would do for all people. As Jesus said in our gospel reading, "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." (verses 14-15) We die to our sins, sins of impatience and more, every day. But brothers and sisters in Christ, look and live. Look at that cross. Jesus was lifted up on it to remove our poisonous sins from us. He took the very things that killed us and died to them for us. This lifted up Jesus is where God promised to give us eternal life. Look at Jesus and live!

Thankfully, the LORD is incredibly patient with us, more than we would ever be. He made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in our transgressions. He saved us by his grace. He saved us in spite our impatience and our complaints. He gave us his one and only Son that we should not perish but have everlasting life. Like the Israelites in the desert, look to God's undeserved love for us and live. Look at Jesus on that cross and know that he has taken away the consequence we deserve for our impatience. He has taken away the sting of death because he saved us rather than condemned us. We look to Jesus lifted up on that cross, and we know that we will live eternally with him. Amen.