

*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 wilderness? 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, they lived. (Numbers 21:4-9 NIV2011)*

### **Look Up and Live**

Ask my wife, I can be a distracted driver at times. There's just so much to see! Wildlife in the fields, clouds in the sky, a neat looking house, a classic car cruising along, not to mention all the things going on in the car too. It doesn't take too much to distract me. The thing is that with this comes taking the route-less-traveled. Or, what more people call, getting lost. It happens even when I have put the address into the GPS. Not paying close enough attention, looking elsewhere, or sometimes I think I know a better route, and you might hear me say, "Ope, that was my turn, wasn't it?" Overall the worst that happens is a couple added minutes to the trip.

Then I started thinking more about distracted driving. According to the National Safety Council distracted driving leads to about 1.6 million car accidents each year; specifically looking at cell phone usage. Then there's texting and driving causing 390,000 injuries and 1 out of 4 car accidents. No wonder many states have laws and you see signs along the road: Don't text and drive. Look up!

This isn't a PSA for not texting and driving or an encouragement for better focus. But in some ways, we encounter this while we travel through life going from one day to the next. Where are your eyes? What are you looking at? You might feel like you are cruising day-to-day with little change. You are just adding up the miles and ready to do it again another day. Maybe you are looking a little further ahead. You have an idea where you want to be. You know the type of career and life you would like to have. You have plans and goals for what you think is best. You maybe have an idea of what you need to do to get to that point.

Israel did too. They were so close to having it as well. The proverbial light at the end of the tunnel was staring right at them. They had been here before, at least mom and dad had been with grandpa and grandma. They were about to go into the Promised Land of Canaan. God had brought them just as he promised. But the

spies came back and reported how the Canaanites were too great, too powerful, they would be squashed like bugs! The people grumble and complain against God and Moses reluctant to go in. They end up wandering in the wilderness for 40 years and that generation wouldn't enter at all. God wants them to learn.

Now the 40 years is up. All they had to do was go through this one country, Edom. The problem was the king of Edom wasn't going to let that happen. Not so fast, Israelites. The king promises Israel if they try, he and his army will march out and attack with the sword. And in case Israel had any bright ideas, the king gathers a large and powerful army to shoo them away.

The Israelites get the point. They thought they would be conquering lands and taking names. Instead, more wandering many miles south then many miles east and then north. And to make things worse, most of that was through a hot, dry, barren wasteland.

Humanly speaking, how they react isn't a surprise. They become impatient. They are short with God. They are short with his called servant, Moses. They are discouraged. They thought it was going to be different. Things aren't going the way they had planned. So they speak against God and against Moses, **"Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!"** (v.5). 40 years have gone by and the whiny complaints are still the same. How did you forget, Israel, God's promise? He's kept you for forty years while you are wandering! And you are going to doubt him again? Didn't you learn anything from your parents? No water! He just brought you water from a rock not too long ago. Have you forgotten already? No food! He's still sending you that bread from heaven, manna. But you say this literal heavenly bread is disgusting, turns your stomach, and worthless!

Discouraged when life doesn't go the way one expects...impatient because things aren't progressing according to plan...complain about God's gifts not being good enough...quick to forget God's promises when struggles come into life...quick to doubt God, his timing, his plan, his goodness and guidance...telling God how he should be working...wishing for the supposedly "good ole days"...sound familiar? There's a fine line between sharing frustrations, not wanting to bottle things up inside, getting something off your chest and grumbling, complaining against, and doubting God. Have you crossed it while looking down at what you think is best? Have you crossed it as you are distracted by keeping up with the Joneses and what this world claims you need to be doing and have accomplished? Have crossed it so you fail to see God's blessings and trust his promises that he has never failed to fulfill? Do you really think that now he is going to change? Whining is easy. Complaining isn't hard. It comes naturally as babies and we don't grow out of it. Sometimes it's under our breath and mumbling. Other times not so much. Have you crossed the line?

Israel did. But the complaining and whining are simply symptoms of a far worse problem of lack of faith in God. So the Lord sends venomous snakes among the people. Defenseless against their attack the people feel the bite and poisonous venom burn through their veins. People suffer. Men, women, children are dying. Unable to save themselves or the ones they love the people come begging to Moses, **“We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us”** (v.7).

And Moses does. The Lord hears their cries. He doesn't have to do anything. At the same time, he isn't going to do as they ask. The Lord's ultimate goal wasn't just to bring them to the Promised Land of Canaan, but to bring them to the Promised Land of Paradise with him. So the snakes continue their biting, poisoning, and killing and the Lord tells Moses to make a snake. Model it after the very thing that is killing them, put it on a pole with the Lord's promise: anyone bitten can look up and live. So Moses does. Moses lifts up the snake in the wilderness with the promise from God, “Look up and live!”

I wonder how many thought, “Are you serious, Lord? Why couldn't you just take the snakes away like we had asked?” I wonder how foolish the first person felt as he or she looked up to that snake? Is there worry? Are there thoughts of not being sure this is really going to work? But there's still God's promise. And if God promises it, she knows she doesn't need to understand the how's or why's but simply believes. So she looks up and she lives. And with this new life I'm sure she shares the good news: God's promise is true. She learns where her hope lies. She is assured of where to put her trust. It was not enough for the Lord to save their earthly lives from the snakes. He wants to save their souls from eternal death. As they continue into the Promised Land there would be more struggles, more temptations to doubt. With this the Lord teaches again: Look up to Him and live. Put your trust in God alone.

That's the Lord's ultimate goal for you, fellow traveler in this life. He doesn't take away all the struggle and difficulties. The disappointments are still there and the frustrations very present. It's easy to whine and complain, to grumble against the Lord and tell him how he should be operating in our lives. We like to think it is harmless and just a good exercise of blowing off steam. Very rarely it is. So the Lord sends the Law that bites and stings. It exposes the darkness of sin that we try so hard to hide. It shows us complaining, discontent, impatient sinners for who we are. The complaining is simply a symptom of the poisonous curse of sin coursing through our veins. On our own we cannot heal or save us from its imminent end. The result of sin is death! In fact, that is what we are by nature: dead in our transgressions and sins.

But, God shows his love for us in this way: he gives you his one and only Son. For the world, you, me God sends one not just modeled in our likeness and in our image but is true Man. As the thing that saves in the desert is modeled after the

thing that kills—a snake—so Jesus, the one who saves, becomes the thing that kills us. He who had no sin, became sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21). Because Jesus became sin for us, that means he must suffer the result of sin. So Jesus is lifted up on the cross as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness. As we look at the cross we might wonder, “How is this supposed to work? Is he really able to save?” He hangs there dying like any other human being. He suffers. He cries out. It looks like once again that poison will only lead to death. And it does. Jesus bows his head and gives up his spirit.

But the poison didn't win. In Jesus, sin has been defeated. We know because three days later God raises his Son from the dead. He will not let his holy one see decay. With his innocent blood pouring off that cross it pays the debt we owe. Where, O death is your victory? Where, O death is your sting? Not here! Jesus died our death so that we might live with his life. And all who look up to him, all who believe have eternal life in him. The guilt of your complaints and lack of faith has been taken away. It is finished.

How? It is by grace you have been saved. Grace. God's love we do not deserve and cannot earn He freely gives. It was grace that saved Israel. It's God's grace that saves you. It's yours in the washing you receive in in his name when you were baptized into Christ. There in those waters you and your sins are lifted up with Jesus on that cross and killed with him. From those waters you were raised with Jesus to a new life. You are God's handiwork made new in Christ Jesus. His life he lived is now your own. His perfection is your robe and glorious dress. Look up, see him hanging on that cross for you. His death brings you his body and blood poured for the forgiveness of sins and strengthening of faith in the Lord's Supper. Look up and live doing the good works that God prepared in advance for you to do. Rejoice that even sharing a little glass of water is a great work in God's sight.

As we continue our travel through life we know we will face more struggles and more temptations and we ask that he take them from us. Sometimes he does, but not always. But what he does do is give you one who was lifted up for us with the promise he will he never leave you. And since he has given you Jesus, how will he not also give you every good thing? Look up and live in Christ. Amen.