



Numbers 21:4-9 - 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.

How far will God go?



How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!

(1 John 3:1)

“I will turn this car around!” Any parents in the room ever say something like that? Maybe you’ve said it, maybe you’ve heard it, but it’s kind of like the universal response to whining and complaining that might come from the backseat. Load up the family in the car and hit the holiday road on your way to a fun day at the amusement park or a family getaway, and you barely get around the block before it starts. *Mom, I’m hungry! Dad, he’s on my side of the seat! She’s kicking me! He’s pulling my hair! Are we there yet? It’s so hot in here! I’m cold, I want a drink, why couldn’t we just fly like everyone else does?* And then from the driver’s seat bellows the threat, “I will turn this car around!” The threat of ending the trip before you reach your destination makes people think.

As odd as it sounds, that’s kind of what God did with his people of Israel. With an outstretched arm, the LORD God had delivered his people from their slavery in Egypt. When they faced a sea of water in front of them Pharaoh’s army bearing down on them, the Lord parted the Red Sea so the entire nation could walk through on dry ground. When they got hungry, the Lord sent bread from heaven and brought quail to their camp for the people to eat. When they got thirsty, the Lord did the unthinkable and impossible – bringing water for a nation from a rock. Time after time, the Lord their God had shown his unfailing love and unfathomable power for his people. He brought them to the border of the Promised Land with a promise that it was all theirs. But the people weren’t so sure. Those Canaanites are pretty big; their fortified cities looked pretty strong...and what’ve we got? Israel doubted God’s power to do what he promised to do, and so the Lord God turned the car around – and the people would wander in the wilderness for forty years.

Fast forward four decades. With the exception of two people, an entire generation of Israelites had died off and there the new generation of Israel stood, once again on the border of the Promised Land. All they had to do was take the short cut through the country of Edom and they’d be home free. But Edom wouldn’t let them. So Israel would have to walk around. Apparently, that was the straw that broke the wandering camel’s back. Israel had been meandering in the desert for 40 years...would a few extra miles to go around Edom really make much of a difference? But just like it is today, small things can people off.

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!” This generation of people was 40 years removed from slavery in Egypt, yet they echoed their parents’ complaints. And just what were the people complaining about? The fact that God had rescued them from slavery and provided for their needs. What were they complaining about? God’s grace! His deliverance! The miraculous way he provided for them even in the most impossible circumstances! *What’s God ever done for me?!* They fumed, even while they had been released from shackles of slavery and were walking as free people. *Yeah, if only God would show me at least a little that he’s looking out for me!* They charged, even as their clothing and sandals somehow hadn’t worn out over the course of their forty years in the wilderness. *If God really cared about me, he’d be taking care of me how I deserve to be taken care of!* They shouted, as they stuffed their faces with bread they didn’t bake and meat they didn’t hunt. God’s miraculous and marvelous providence was treated like nothing. The goodness and loving care of God practically slapped them in the face every day, but they were looking for something else. They’d rather be slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt than to be God’s people on their way to the Promised Land.



Does that sound familiar? Isn't it easy to turn our focus entirely on what we don't have, rather than what we do have? It's more expedient and we feel at least a little justified looking at all the ways God *hasn't* blessed us (at least the way we think he should) rather than at all the ways God *has* and *does* continue to shower his goodness on people who don't deserve it – you and me. What is it for you? If you could add another zero to the end of your net worth, would that do the trick for you? Never mind the fact that you, yes even you, are wealthier than 99% of the people on this planet. Do you ever find yourself wishing that things would just look a little more impressive or glamorous in your work, your family, or your church – kind of like those people next door? Never mind the fact that God's given you the ability to work and a job to do, a family to love, and a country in which to worship him freely. But it's never quite good enough, is it? The grass is greener over there. The Joneses need to be kept up with. And so we can't see, or we refuse to see, the majesty that lies behind our current little bit of "misery." You've been set free in Christ – truly free – from sin, from death, from the power of the devil, but sometimes we wouldn't mind going back to the sins of our youth, even if just for a field trip; or lay our hands on some forbidden fruit God's told us to avoid. What's at the root of all this? A fundamental distrust that God actually does know what's best for me and has the ability to provide it. *I know better than God.* So we find ourselves standing shoulder to shoulder with our ancestors of Israel, thinking and acting as if slavery were better than true freedom.

There's an unstated question that runs its way through the account of the Exodus, and in fact all of Scripture, and here it is: How far will God go? How far will he go to provide for his people? How far will he go to bring his people back? Consider all the answers to that question – the plagues in Egypt, the providence in the wilderness, and yes, even the snakes. Snakes? **Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died.** What a ruthless God you have! I can't imagine a loving God who would do that! What an unloving, selfish ogre who demands his pound of flesh! But is that what's happening here? Think about it...If God simply wanted to punish his people for their whining and complaining, he should've just left them alone. God should've just walked away from them, because it was abundantly clear they were already beating a path away from him. But he doesn't! He sent those snakes not to wallop them in retribution, but to win them in repentance.

The people said to Moses, **"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. 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."** 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 Lord provided rescue and salvation – in what seemed like a backwards way. Isn't it striking that the cure to their problem (the bronze serpent) took the form of the problem itself (venomous snakes)? If poisonous venom were coursing through your veins, wouldn't you hope to look up and see a syringe filled with anti-venom? That would make good sense to me, but that's not how God works. It wasn't the bronze serpent itself that did the healing – it was God's word of promise specifically attached to it. It seems absurd – God hides his rescue and deliverance in what looks like the problem itself. God hides himself under his opposite.

Does that ring a bell? How far will God go to bring his people back? A holy God is justly offended by the sins of humanity, so what does he do? Purely, out of his undeserved love, he provides rescue from the problem in a Savior who looks like the problem itself. Jesus, the Son of God, took on our human flesh to become one of us – why? To succeed where we had failed. Every moment of our discontentment and complaining; every time we traded the freedom of the gospel for the slavery of sin; every instance of thinking even for a second that I know better than God – every one of those sins was laid on Jesus Christ, who was himself lifted up as a sacrifice for sin. Jesus said in our gospel lesson, **"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."** God's perfect rescue for sinners like you and me, comes in



the form of the crucified God. Do you see how far God is willing to go – how far God *has* to go? He comes from heaven to earth to be your substitute; from divinity to humanity to take away your sins; how far will God go? All the way to hell and back if it means having you as his own.

The people complained. The Lord responded by sending snakes. The people repented. They pleaded with Moses, **“Pray that the LORD will take snakes away from us.”** But notice the way the Lord answered their prayer – the snakes stayed, but God provided rescue and a Savior. Sometimes, it might seem like your life resembles the wandering of Israel in the desert. When I’m tempted to think that I’m not getting what I should be, and I’m receiving what precisely what I don’t deserve. But Jesus didn’t promise that our lives of following him would be a Sunday stroll in the park – he promised things like rejection and hardship; self-denial and a cross. So what happens when the snakes seem to be slithering your way? When it’s your bank account that looks emaciated; when no matter how hard you try, it’s your family that’s growing ever more dysfunctional? What happens when it’s you who sit alone with the medical report, or when it’s you who’s crushed by private guilt? Will those things be a cause for complaint or a time for trust? In other words, when hardship comes your way, will you see the snakes of will you see the Savior?

When things in your life don’t seem to be going the way you think they should; when hardship comes; when you face rejection or pain or loss, don’t look down to the pesky things biting your ankles, trying to get you to despair of God’s grace. Don’t look down. Instead, look up. **“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. 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.”** In faith, look to the Savior who endured the venomous bite of Satan in your place, and rose from the dead to guarantee your eternity. Look to the Savior, who was lifted up high on the cross to show the world that your sin has been paid for. Look to the Savior, Jesus, and in him, see just how far your God will go for you.

Amen

And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

(Philippians 4:7)