

Sermon Text (Numbers 21:4–9 ESV)

⁴From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. ⁵And the people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.” ⁶Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. ⁷And the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” ⁹So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

Jesus Was Lifted Up for You

Their long journey was finally over! It took the Israelites about two years to get from the land of Egypt to the land of Canaan, including the time that they spent at Mount Sinai. Now, they would finally be able to enter and take possession of the land that God had promised them. However, before they did, Moses sent twelve spies, one from each of the twelve tribes of Israel, into the land of Canaan to gather information on it, according to God’s command. Moses said to them, “Go up into the Negeb and go up into the hill country, and see what the land is, and whether the people who dwell in it are strong or weak, whether they are few or many, and whether the land that they dwell in is good or bad, and whether the cities that they dwell in are camps or strongholds, and whether the land is rich or poor, and whether there are trees in it or not. Be of good courage and bring some of the fruit of the land” (Numbers 13:17–20).

The twelve spies did as Moses told them, and the spies returned after forty days, carrying a cluster of grapes on a pole, as well as some pomegranates and figs, with them. However, despite the goodness of the land, and despite witnessing the power of God with their own eyes, ten of the twelve spies gave a bad report, saying, “We came to the land to which you sent us. It flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. However, the people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large. And besides, we saw the descendants of Anak there. The

Amalekites dwell in the land of the Negeb. The Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites dwell in the hill country. And the Canaanites dwell by the sea, and along the Jordan” (Numbers 13:27–29). Caleb, one of the other two spies, tried to encourage the people, saying, “Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it” (Numbers 13:30). Despite the seemingly impossible odds, Caleb, as well as Joshua, the last spy, put their trust in God, that he would be with them and would give them the victory. However, the other ten spies said in response, “We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we are” (Numbers 13:31).

When the people of Israel heard the bad report, they grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and therefore against God, saying, ““Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why is the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?’ And they said to one another, ‘Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt’” (Numbers 14:2–4). The people even wanted to stone Joshua and Caleb when they told them not to rebel against God or to fear the strong people living in the land of Canaan because God would be with them and would give the land to them. As punishment for their sin, all the Israelites who were twenty years old or older, except for the Joshua and Caleb, would not get to enter the land of Canaan. Instead, they would wander in the wilderness for forty years until only those who were nineteen years old or younger were left.

Despite this punishment, God continued to graciously provide for the daily needs of the people of Israel by giving them daily bread from heaven. However, the people of Israel didn’t seem to learn their lesson. Even though God had told them they would spend forty years wandering in the wilderness, they grew impatient when they saw that they were being led further away from the promised land of Canaan. They then grumbled against God yet again, saying against him and

against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food” (verse 5).

As punishment for speaking against him, God sent fiery serpents, serpents that may have been a shiny, metallic brown and whose bites may have caused a burning pain. Many of the people of Israel died from the snake bites, and when they were faced with the reality of their sin and the punishment that they rightfully deserved for their sin, they repented, saying to Moses, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us” (verse 7). Moses did as the people asked, and God said to him, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live” (verse 8). Moses did as God had said. He “made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live” (verse 9).

It really seems like the people of Israel could just never learn, always returning to their rebellious ways, despite the boundless grace and mercy that God showed to them, and the same is true of us. God continues to provide for us daily, promising to always be with us, no matter what hardships we face, and giving us everything that we need for this body and life. Despite God’s promises to be with us always and to guide us safely through this present evil age to our home in heaven, we see the looming threats of dangers, such as deadly diseases and evil people, and we become consumed by the fear of what could happen to us. Despite how much God has blessed us with earthly possessions, when we see something that we really want that we don’t have, we can feel like our lives are incomplete unless we have it. Despite being blessed with more food than we know what to do with, we still can find ourselves opening the fridge, looking at all of the food that we have inside it, and thinking that we have nothing to eat. Like the people of Israel, our ungratefulness and distrust of God is a trap that we keep falling back into, preventing us from

entering into the promised land of heaven and making us worthy of the punishment of death, both temporal death in this life and eternal death in the next. However, even though the burning venom of sin courses through every part of our body, God has given us someone to look to so that we would not die but live: his only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ.

Christ, our king, left his throne in heaven to live among us as one of us. He subjected himself to his own Law, but, unlike us, who constantly rebel against God by daily breaking his Law, Jesus never broke the Law once. We may complain about having nothing to eat even when we have more than we could possibly eat, but when Jesus found himself with no food after fasting for forty days and forty nights in the wilderness, he trusted that his Father in heaven would give him exactly what he needed, even if it was not food at that moment. As it is written, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). Despite living a humble life with not many earthly possessions, not even having a place to lay his head during his earthly ministry, Jesus never wanted more than he had. Even when Jesus knew that the time for his death was near, he never lost his trust in his Father, praying to him, “My Father, if this [cup] cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done” (Matthew 26:42).

Even though Jesus was the only one who did not deserve death, he still died so that you might live. As Jesus said to Nicodemus, “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3:14–15). You may have had the burning venom of sin coursing through every part of your body, but by looking to Jesus in faith, the Jesus who was lifted up on a cross as a sacrifice to pay the price for your sins, you are cured. Just as the Israelites who were bitten by serpents lived when they looked at the bronze snake, so you live by looking at Jesus. Your venomous sinful self is put to death, drowned in the waters of holy baptism and continuing to be drowned by those waters daily when

you repent of your sins. In its place, you have a new life in Christ, a life that reflects Christ's perfect life. Now, when your time on this earth is over, your journey through the wilderness of this life being at its end, you will find yourself standing before the gates of heaven, being welcomed in by God to live with him forever. Even though your rebellious attitudes prevented you from entering the kingdom of heaven, Jesus opened the gates of heaven for you by facing the eternal death in hell that you rightfully deserved.

That is what Jesus rode on toward on the first day of the Holy Week. Our king, who had left his throne in heaven to live under the Law as one of us, rode on in majesty to save us from our sins by his innocent suffering and death, by his sacrifice, answering the shouts of the crowd who worshipped him as he rode into Jerusalem, saying, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" (Matthew 21:9). "Hosanna!" that is, "Save us now!" the people shouted. And Jesus did save them, as he saved us. Therefore, let us never take our eyes off of Jesus, for it is only through him that we are saved and have eternal life.