

Numbers 21:4-9

Was there ever a time in your life when you needed to be **rescued**? Maybe it was when you were a **child**, and you climbed up into a **tree**, and then you couldn't figure out how to get **down** again. Or, maybe later in life you found yourself stranded on the side of the **road**, or you got out to the middle of a **lake** and ran out of **gas**. If you've ever found yourself in a situation like that, then you know what a great **feeling** it is when someone comes to the **rescue**. There is a reason we **respect** rescue workers - people like **policemen**, **firemen**, and first **responders**. Their work is so **valuable** - **especially** when we find ourselves in a **crisis** situation. In our sermon text today, we see a very dramatic **rescue** take place. As we look at how **God Rescues His People** - the children of **Israel** - we **also** think about how God rescues each and every one of **us**.

Our text begins by filling us in on the travel plans of the Children of Israel. We read, "*They set out from Mt **Hor** along the road to the **Red Sea** to go around the land of **Edom**.*" This event takes place near the **end** of the 40 years of wandering in the **wilderness** for the Israelites. They were **almost** ready to enter into the **Promised Land** - but not quite **yet**. They had asked the king of Edom **several** times, if they could travel **through** his land to **finish** their journey, but each time he **refused**. Now, because the Edomites were not inhabitants of **Canaan**, they were **not** one of the groups of people that the Lord wanted His children to **destroy** in battle. So, instead of starting a **conflict** with them, they were forced to make a **detour**, and go **around** the land of Edom.

As a result of this **delay**, the people started to **complain** again, and unfortunately, this **younger** generation sounded very much like the **previous** generation who had **often** grumbled against the Lord. They complained, "*Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to **die** in the desert? Look, there is no **food**! There is no **water**! And we are **disgusted** by this **worthless** food!*" Apparently, they didn't **realize** that they had almost **reached** their destination - the **Promised Land**. The Lord had promised to be **with** them along the way, and He **was**. The Lord had promised to give them the food and drink they **needed**, and He **did**. In the verses before these, we even read how the Lord granted them a **military victory** over the Canaanite king of **Arad**. But somehow, the people looked right **past** all those blessings, and returned to their **grumbling** and **complaining**.

What a **selfish** and **sinful** attitude. They **deserved** to be **punished** for their actions, and that's exactly what **happened**. We read, "*The Lord sent venomous **snakes** among the people, and the snakes **bit** the people. As a result many people*

from Israel died.” Sounds like a pretty **harsh** punishment, doesn’t it? But the Lord was completely **justified** in His actions. These people were completely **misrepresenting** Him and **defying** Him. They were accusing the Lord of **not** taking **care** of them, when in reality He had done much **more** for them than they could ever have **earned** or **deserved**. Their sin was **serious**, and if it went **unchecked**, it could eventually lead to **total rebellion** against the Lord, just like it had with their forefathers. So God punished them **swiftly** and **severely**.

I think we would be more than a little bit **surprised** if the Lord would decide to send **venomous snakes** into our **church** today, and people would start **dying** from **snakebites** right in front of our eyes. But in **reality**, we aren’t any **less** guilty of **sin** and **rebellion** than the Israelites were. There have been **many** times when we have looked **past** our blessings from the Lord, and found all kinds of reasons to **grumble** and **complain** about what we **don’t** have. It seems like it’s so easy to **forget** just how **much** we have **received** from the Lord. So, we get **upset** when God causes us to take a **detour** in our lives. Just because something happens that we don’t **want**, or that we don’t **like**, we start accusing God of being **unfair**. Instead of looking at what we actually **have** from God, we focus on the things we **don’t** have. And that kind of **self-centered** attitude is very **offensive** to our God.

Do we even **realize** just how **serious** those sins are? If we **don’t**, I’m pretty sure that a few **venomous snakes** would open our eyes. But we shouldn’t **need** anything that **drastic** to happen, because the Lord **constantly** tells us about the **seriousness** of sin in His Word. He says, “*The wages of sin is death.*” Our sins **deserve** death - not just the **physical** death which is common to **all** people, but **eternal, spiritual** death. Eternal death in **hell** is far worse than venomous **snakes**. And it’s something that each and every one of us **deserves**, because each and every one of us has **sinned** against our gracious God. So that leaves us in pretty much the same situation as the **Israelites** in our text for today. The question is, what comes **next**?

Well, let’s take a look at those **Israelites**. What did **they** do? We’re told that this generation of Israelites weren’t **completely** like the previous generation, because when they were **confronted** with their sin, they **repented**. They realized that they didn’t want to go down that same path of **rebellion**, and end up wandering in the **wilderness** for **another** forty years. They **knew** they had **sinned**, so they called out to Moses, “*We have sinned, because we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord to take the snakes away from us.*” And **Moses**, as he had done so many times in the **past**, **pleaded** once again on behalf of

God's people. And once again, the Lord **listened** to Moses' prayer, and He provided a **rescue** for those **sinful, self-centered** people.

The rescue came in what seemed to be a very **unusual** way. We read, "*The LORD said to Moses, "Make a venomous **snake** and put it on a **pole**. If anyone who is bitten **looks** at it, he will **live**."* We can well imagine that **some** of the people thought that solution was absolute **foolishness**. What **good** is a bronze snake on a **pole** going to do **me**, when I'm **dying** from a poisonous **snakebite**? Yet, there was **no reason** for them to **doubt**, because **God Himself** had **provided** this solution. So we read: "*Moses **made** a bronze snake and put it on the **pole**. If a snake had **bitten** anyone, if that person **looked** at the **bronze** snake, he **lived**."* It wasn't that this bronze **snake** had some kind of magical **power** to heal. It was the **Lord** who did the healing. Looking at the bronze **snake** was just the outward **means** that He used to bring it about. Their willingness to **look**, demonstrated their **faith** in the words which God had spoken. So, everyone who **believed** and **looked** to **God's solution**, was immediately and dramatically **rescued**.

Now let's bring that into **our** situation. Because of our **sin**, we are just as **lost** and **desperate** as the **Israelites** were. It's not something we can **fix** on our own. No matter how hard we **try** - no matter where we **turn** - we will always be left with the fact that we are **sinful**, and that we deserve God's **punishment**. We **can't** **rescue** ourselves. But thanks be to God, He has provided a rescue **for** us, by sending His one and only **Son** to **suffer** and **die** for us. Jesus' **life, death** and **resurrection** made up God's **rescue** plan. And it was a plan that worked **perfectly**.

When Jesus suffered and died on the cross, He suffered the punishment for the sins of the **whole world**. That **suffering** was **exponentially** worse than a **snakebite**. Jesus suffered all the torments of **hell itself**, and He **suffered** those things to satisfy God's **justice**. Our rescue took place **on the cross**, and now when we **look** to that cross in **faith**, we **also** are **safe - rescued** from the venom of **sin**.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus made a **comparison** between the bronze **snake** and the **cross** when He said, "*Just as Moses lifted up the **snake** in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be **lifted up**, so that everyone who **believes** in him shall not **perish** but have **eternal life**."* Some of the people in Moses' day **scoffed** at the idea of looking at a **bronze snake** for their **rescue**. And in the same way, some people today **still** scoff at the idea of looking to the **cross** for rescue. They think it's **ridiculous** - they think it's **foolish**. What **good** is a man dying on a **cross** going to do for **me**? But you and I **know** that the cross is **nothing** to scoff at.

The Lord has **opened** our eyes to **see** the cross for what it truly **is** - the means of our **rescue** - from **sin**, eternal **death**, and the power of the **devil**.

May we continue to **look** to that cross in **faith**. When our lives take a **detour**, and we are tempted to **grumble** and **complain**, may we look again to the **cross**, and remember how God has **rescued** us from our **greatest problem** - the problem of **sin**. And may we always **remember** that God is with us **every day**, to **strengthen** us and **guide** us. When we feel **crushed** by the weight of **guilt**, or **burdened** by regrets over our sinful actions, may we look to the cross of **Jesus**, and know that God has completely **removed** our sin and guilt through **His Son**. Amen.