

People Spoke Against God

Lent 4

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Numbers 21:4-9

Grace, peace, and mercy be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

I don't like God's way. God never listens to my prayers. I'm going to go do things my own way.

I've been following after this Moses guy for so long and there's still nothing to show for it. And I'm so tired of this worthless bread. This Moses says that God was angry when we built the golden calf, but how do I really know that's what God thought—if He even exists? Here I am trying to survive on this bread—not even sure where it's coming from—and following this man to who knows where. I'm going to go complain. This just can't be right. Does this guy even care that we've had nothing but this bread to eat and are still out here wandering around? If this keeps up, I'm going to go do things my own way.

How often has rebelling worked in your life? Does doing things your own way work better? Even if it may seem to be right now, will your way work forever? Are you even considering these questions, or are you so fed up with how things are going in your life you're not even really listening?

We will explore how things worked for those in our Old Testament text when they were getting frustrated, feeling abandoned, and began to rebel against God.

Verse 1

After giving the Ten Commandments and Moses interceded for the people so that God would not destroy them for building the golden calf, God led them into the wilderness. But not everything was going well. The people had complained about needing food, so God gave them manna—bread from heaven. Then they complained about needing water, and Moses became so fed up He struck the rock from which God had promised to give water, so that Moses himself lost the opportunity to enter the Promised Land. Aaron, who had built the people the golden calf, had also passed away, and now it was only Moses leading them according to God's purposes.

“From 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. And 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.’”

Again, God had given the people the manna, the bread from heaven, and had given them water from a rock, and yet the people complained as though they had received none of it. But then relented a little saying that they only “loathed this worthless food”—in other words, they did have food, but they hated it.

Complaining. Complaining. Complaining. Lack of trust. Lack of trust. Lack of trust. Even to the point that God became angry with the people yet again. “Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.”

God is not a being who will never become angry. He declared in giving the Ten Commandments that He is a “jealous God” who not only could but would punish the children to the third and fourth generation of those who disobeyed Him but showing love to those who would keep His Word. God's anger was kindled against the people when they build the golden calf until Moses interceded for them. But once again the people spoke against God and His anger was kindled. In His righteous anger, He permitted some of them to be bit by serpents and to die from their bites. Yes, you heard that right, God allowed them to die. He is not the old

grandfather God who pats His children on their heads for whatever they're doing, whether it's what He desires or not. No. He is a holy and just God who desires that His people love Him and keep His Word.

Verse 2

Yikes! Not only does God exist, He even gets angry as He told us through His speaker Moses! My fellow Israelites and I, yes even I, have sinned against Him and have kindled His anger against me. Perhaps if God listened to Moses before and spared us from His anger in building the golden calf, He will listen to Moses again. I need to go find him before I get bit and die!

“And 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. And the Lord said to Moses, ‘Make a fiery serpent on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.’”

So often in our lives, we desire to be taken out of hard and challenging situations. We desire for those things giving us the hard time to be taken away. Sometimes God does. Other times, He does not. For instance, pay close attention to what the people desired, and how God responded. The people asked Moses to pray that the Lord would “take away the serpents.” But how did God respond? Did He remove the serpents? Did He snuff them out? Did He teleport them somewhere else? No. He left the snakes right where they were. He did not respond as the people had desired. Instead, He gave them a way to trust His Word: by looking at the serpent of bronze He had commanded Moses to construct.

So, too, sometimes God may stop a problem immediately, just as He calmed the storm which had frightened His seaworthy disciples. And other times, He may leave the snakes in your lives. In our Old Testament text, He gave the people a physical symbol to look to so that, if they believed His Word, they might be saved. And “if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.”

Toward the beginning of the Gospel of John, we find another individual in the midst of conflict, Nicodemus. He was a member of a group of Pharisees who did not all believe that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah who had been promised to come. Going by night, so as not to stir up more dissension, he went to talk to Jesus.

In His response to Nicodemus' questions, Jesus alluded to our text: “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. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

Verse 3

Referring to the Old Testament, Jesus had explained to Nicodemus that *in this way* God had saved the Israelites from the bites of the serpents: by having Moses lift up a bronze serpent, that whoever looked at it would be healed. Then, referring to His own life, and the death we now see Him going toward, Jesus was explaining that *in this way* God would save the world: by lifting up His Son on the cross of Calvary. In dying on the cross, Jesus, God's Son, would pay for the sins of the world, that whoever would believe that God and Jesus, who is also God, had had Him go to the cross for that person, he or she would be saved from the bite of her or his sin.

On His way to the cross to pay for those sins, Jesus would pray later in the Gospel of John. He prayed, “I have given them (that is you, me, and all believers) the words that you (God) gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours...I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.”

Though they had sinned, the Israelites who believed God’s Word were saved from physical death. The serpents were not taken from them, but they were given means to be sustained in the midst of them. Although you and I have sinned, we who believe God’s Word are saved from eternal death through Jesus’ death and resurrection. Our afflictions may or may not be taken from us, and we may not be taken out of this world until we die, but we are given all that we need to be sustained in the midst of them. God has given us His Word about His Son, Jesus Christ, and the Sacraments to be kept in the faith until we reach life everlasting. This is most certainly true for us as we believe on God’s Word till we reach life eternal. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.