

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

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Are you a person that tends to see the glass half empty, or the glass half full? I suppose the question is: are you a pessimist or an optimist? The pessimist tends to see the negative in everything while the optimist finds a good side to almost everything. However, I would venture a guess that even those of you who consider yourselves optimists, still sometimes grumble and complain. In other words, you don't *always* see the bright side, do you?

The Scriptures before us today force each of us take an honest, hard look at our grumbling and complaining. And let's be honest: we all do it, right? I haven't yet met a person that is so optimistic that he never grumbles or complains. I want you today to honestly think about the following questions: What is it you grumble and complain about? Why do you do it? Why is it so bad? And finally, how can we stop doing it?

Now I'm just guessing, but I bet many of you already have someone in mind who especially needs to hear this message. "Oh, I'm so glad our family came to church today, because my kids *so* need to hear this. I'm so tired of their complaining!" Or you think, "My wife needs this." Or "My husband..." Or maybe, "If I had knowing we'd be talking about grumbling and complaining, I would have brought *so and so* to church today." But I want you to fight that temptation. I'll repeat what I already said: All of us grumble and complain. I want you to force yourself to think only about yourself. No one gets to say on the drive home today, "I sure hope you were listening to pastor today. He was obviously talking about *you*." No, no, no! This message is only for each of us individually. You're not allowed to apply this to someone else.

So with that, let's turn our attention to the word of God. We're in Numbers 21:4-9. Let me bring you up to speed. God had miraculously delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt. He led them to the Promised Land and told them to conquer it. In view of the miracles the Israelites had seen, they should have trusted God to give them the victory. They should have trusted that he would give them the ability to do what he asked them to do. But they doubted. They didn't believe God would give them the victory. They refused to fight the nations that inhabited the land God had promised. For their unbelief, God condemned them to wander in the wilderness for forty years. The story we just read took place during that time of wandering.

The Israelites wanted to travel through the country of Edom along a major trade route. But the people of Edom refused to let the Israelites travel through their land. Perhaps they were afraid that a small nation traveling through their territory could cause them trouble. To prevent Israel from crossing, they mobilized a large army along their border. When Moses saw this army, he decided to lead the Israelites around Edom. They were not ready to fight a war. But the Israelites did not like Moses' plan. Here's what happened.

Numbers 21:4-9 [The Israelites] traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But 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!"

. How did this happen? These people had seen God's magnificent power displayed many times. They saw the ten plagues God brought against Egypt. They saw the parting of the sea. They saw the thunder, lightning and smoke at Mt. Sinai... the glory of God. And God continued to miraculously provide for them. Their clothes never wore out, so they didn't have to make new ones or find a way to replace them. Every day he sent manna from heaven... a miraculous food that just appeared on the ground, and they made bread and cakes from it.

So they had seen God's power with their own eyes. Yet now they doubted God's power. These people had seen God's love and care for them. He rescued them from brutal slavery. He did not allow them to be destroyed by Pharaoh's army. Could there be any doubt that God loved them? And yet there was doubt. *The Israelites allowed their circumstance to blind them to what they knew to be true.* The bad situation made them forget about God's power and love which had moved him to help them in the past. Instead of basing their faith on what they *knew* to be true, they based their faith on what they feared *might* be true. ("We might starve! We might die of thirst!") God was greatly displeased by Israel's lack of trust, their short memory and their stubborn selfishness.

But before we quickly judge the Israelites, let us first remember something about ourselves. Don't we too frequently rebel against God as we grumble and complain? Aren't we also blinded by current circumstances and forget all that we know and believe about God?

- If we are having troubles in our relationship with a loved one, we complain, "Why did God every let me meet this person!? I'm so unhappy! I feel trapped!"
- If we are sick or there is an accident, we think, "Why did this have to happen to me? I'm in pain. I'm not happy. It's not fair! Why doesn't God just heal me?"
- If we don't have enough money, we complain, "Why am I having these problems? I don't have enough money to pay all my debts! It's hopeless!"
- If you are very busy and don't have enough time, you think, "I hate this kind of life. I'm always rushed and have no time for myself. I'm so unhappy with my life!"
- We often grumble and complain about who we are: "If only God had made me more outgoing. Or more sympathetic! Or more approachable! Or smarter! Or more beautiful."

Is it really hard for us to imagine being in the Israelites' situation and saying, "There is no bread! There is no water! And I detest this miserable food!" How could they? How could we? The complaints of the Israelites sound just like our complaints. Like them we question God and rebel against the all-wise, all-powerful, all-loving Creator.

How does God feel about our grumbling and complaining? Listen to what happens next: **Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died.**

God was angry about the grumbling of his people. So he sent poisonous snakes among the people. Any of you with kids understand how grumbling and complaining can drive you absolutely crazy! I don't like meatloaf! I don't want to watch this show, I want to watch my show! I don't want to clean my room! Why can't I get a cell phone (or better cell phone) like all my friends? Parents, you know how that makes you feel, don't you? It makes you feel like your children don't appreciate you. It might make you think they're spoiled. It probably makes you think that they're not very respectful. This is what God experienced... except because he's holy and perfect, God's indignation was even greater than ours. God sent a punishment on the Israelites. Poisonous snakes.

Friends, make no mistake. God hasn't changed one bit since this particular incident 3500 years ago. He doesn't tolerate our complaining or grumbling any more now than he did then. When we complain or grumble we are saying to God. "Your love and your power are insufficient. You're coming up short God! You're inadequate. I demand more!"

God will not accept such an attitude from creatures he created. Understand his anger over such sin. Understand his sadness and disappointment when we act this way.

Here's how the people responded:

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.

Do you understand why God sent the snakes? As long as the Israelites continued to grumble and complain, they were living in rebellion against God. That rebellion broke their relationship with God. God loved them enough to want to restore it. His love that he showed wasn't working. What I mean is, in spite of his love, they were revolting against him. So he disciplined them by sending the snakes. Poisonous snakes are what it took to snap them to attention, humbly turn back to God, and *listen* to him once again. They didn't justify their complaining. They finally outright confessed it.

Listen carefully: Are God's love and promises alone not keeping you close to him? Are you taking his love for granted? Is this evident in that you grumble and complain? Listen: God loves you too much to allow this to go on. God loves you enough to allow unpleasant things into your life to call you attention and to help you recognize your sin. When you grumble and complain, don't be too surprised if God disciplines you to bring you to your senses! Look how often he does that in the pages of Scripture. If his word is not sufficient to call us to repentance, than God will find another way to bring us around. And if God is being patient with you... don't mistake that for acceptance. Grumbling and complaining are wrong. They always evoke the wrath of God.

Turn to God and confess your sins of grumbling and complaining just as the Israelites did. Lay them out before God. But is there any hope for us sinners deserving of death?

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.

God, motivated only by his great love, provided a remedy for the sin of the Israelites. God told Moses to make a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. He promises whoever would look to it would be saved. The snake bites no longer had an effect. People who looked did not die.

I wonder how many more people died even after the serpent was put in place. Do you think there were some stubborn people who refused to look at the bronze snake? I imagine there were such people. They thought such a remedy for a snake bite was ridiculous. They doubted God and did not obey him. And they died.

Was the bronze snake magical? Did it have special powers? No. Then why did looking at it heal a person who had been bitten by a poisonous snake? It healed people simply because God had promised that it would. It was God's promise that brought healing... not the snake. It was God's love that saved the people... not the snake-shaped piece of metal. Those who trusted God's promise and looked at the snake received God's gift... life.

God has provided the same gift for us. He didn't promise us healing from a snake bite by looking at a bronze snake. He promised something much greater. He promised us spiritual healing and salvation from eternal death. He promised that all who trust in Jesus have the guilt of their sins removed completely. He promised us that all who look to his Son in faith will be granted eternal life. God's promise is clear and simple:

John 3:16 "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."

Jesus is the perfect sacrifice for our sins. God had set the judgment for sin. He ruled that death was the punishment. It was a punishment that a just God could not abolish. Think of the punishment we have accumulated. All of the times we questioned God and complained against him and rebelled... we deserve eternal separation from God. We deserve hell. But God loved us and found a way for another to be punished in our place. When Jesus suffered on the cross, it was because the sin and rebellion of each one of us had been transferred upon him. He died for us. The debt of sin has been paid in full. There is no punishment remaining for us who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Rejoice, for this is a fact! The certainty of eternal death has been transformed to the certainty of eternal life! In John's Gospel we hear: John 3:14-15 **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.** Just as all Israelites who looked on the bronze serpent were saved from certain death, so also, all people today who look on Jesus and trust in him receive the gift of forgiveness and life.

Many people don't understand the urgent need for Christ's forgiveness. Many think Christ's death on the cross is a foolish myth. Others think that faith in Christ's death is too simple a solution for the guilt of our sins. Such people refuse to look to the Son and be saved. Tragically, apart from Christ there is no life. Only in Christ can we be saved.

Warn people. This week... *today* tell people about the danger they are in. Tell them about the certain eternal death which awaits all people who die in their sins. Explain in detail what behavior God hates. Tell them about the results of dying as an enemy of God. When some hear these truths, they will repent. They will ask God for mercy. When this happens, share what you know about Jesus. Tell them who he is and what he has done. Tell them about his perfect life and his innocent suffering and death. Tell of his glorious resurrection. Through faith in him our guilt is removed. We are saved. God grants us eternal life. Rejoice in this truth and share it with others! Amen.

And the peace of God which surpasses all human understanding will guard and keep your hearts and your minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.