

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. (Numbers 21:4-9)

Trust and Live!

"Why do we have to do that?" A man I know believed in teaching his children the importance of hard work. So even though he owned a perfectly good snow blower, he always made his kids shovel the driveway. They would whine and complain, "Why do we have to do that? There's a snow blower sitting right there!" The man's daughter – who's now a parent herself – told me that they used to get so mad. But now she considers that to have been a very important lesson in her life. "Why do we have to do that?" Sometimes, we have to trust people who know more than we do. We have to trust our parents when they tell us that we'll be glad we learned the value of hard work. We have to trust our teachers when they make us do fifty long division problems and tell us we'll be better off for it. We have to trust our doctors when they tell us to drink a gallon of foul tasting liquid the night before a colonoscopy – or when they tell us we need surgery or we'll die.

So much of our life depends on the judgment and the good will of others. But no matter how important trust in our parents or our math teachers or our doctors is, trust in Christ is even more important because trust in Christ is the ultimate life and death issue. This morning, we see an example of that in Israel. What they experienced and what Jesus tells about that experience can be summed up in one sentence: **trust and live!**

I.

Last week, we saw the nation of Israel gathered at Mt. Sinai where God gave them the Ten Commandments. The incident before us today took place almost forty years later. In between, the children of Israel had gone to the borders of the Promised Land, but then had chickened out. They were afraid they would die and their children would be enslaved, so they disobeyed God's command to enter that land. So God told them they would have to wait for forty years until all the adults of that generation died. Then those children whom they feared would be slaves would enter the land and receive the inheritance God had promised them.

Well, those forty years were almost over. The people were now heading toward the borders of the Promised Land for a second time. They were leaving from a place called Mt. Hor in the harsh desert to the south of the land. The easiest way north was to go east toward the Great Rift Valley which eventually becomes the Jordan River Valley. A highway ran north through valley and next to various mountain streams. It was an easy and well-watered route. But the nation of Edom occupied that land. They would not let Israel pass through their territory.

So the Israelites had to go around. They had to go south to go north. They had to travel hundreds of miles out of their way and in this direction, the land was desert. As their spirits sagged, "**They spoke against God and against Moses.**" They 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!**" They were slaves in Egypt. Their parents and grandparents had cried out to the Lord for deliverance. In the desert, God provided manna – bread from heaven for them six days a week for forty years. But they were sick of that "miserable" food. They whined and complained and accused God and Moses of doing a lousy job of taking care of them.

So God disciplined his people. He sent poisonous snakes against them. Now, we don't know how many people died from these snakes, but it was enough to recognize that God was punishing them. So they begged Moses to pray to God to take the snakes away. Moses did. That's when things got really interesting. God told Moses to make a snake and put it on a pole. Everyone who was bit by a poisonous snake and then looked at the pole lived.

Why do you think God did that? Well, what was the heart of their sin? Unbelief. God promised these people that he would watch over them and bring them to the Promised Land. But when they were tired of walking the wrong way, when they couldn't understand why God led them in that direction, they disregarded all the miracles he had done for them and all the promises he gave them. They went by what they could see instead of by what God had said. And their lack of faith came out in whining and complaining.

All sin is finally unbelief. Because we don't have perfect trust in God, we put what we want or what we feel ahead of what God says and we sin. In a marvelous act of symmetry, God's solution to our sin is faith. Snakebite is a horrible, painful way to die. If you have snake venom in your veins, what good could looking at a bronze snake do? None at all. But God promised that he would reach down from heaven and cure all those who came to look at that bronze snake. Everyone who trusted the Lord and came, lived.

Every one of our sins has the same root their sins did. Unbelief still lives in our hearts just like it did in the hearts of the children of Israel. And we show it over and over again. Whining and complaining are a national pastime in the United States today. I'm not looking down on a single one of you. I'm a world class complainer. It's one of my least attractive features. And every time we whine and complain, we're showing that we are not satisfied with the way God is taking care of us. Do we have reasons to be dissatisfied? It may seem that way at times. Sometimes our dreams and our goals seem to be almost within our grasp only to melt away. We find ourselves going in the opposite direction to the one we want to go in. We often feel that we have every right to vent a little. That's healthy, right? Not really. Whining and complaining are always an indictment against God. They're sins because God has promised to love us and care for us. And if he takes us the long way around from where we want to go, he calls us to trust that he will always do what is best for us. When we don't trust him, we deserve his punishment in hell.

But God provides a way out of hell for us. God didn't want the people of Israel to die for their sins. And he doesn't want us to die or go to hell for ours. Jesus said, **“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 put Jesus on a pole – on the cross. He lifted him up. There on the cross, Jesus gave his life so that we don't have to die for our sins. Jesus suffered hell itself so that we won't enter hell when we die. We do still die, but for us death is no longer the punishment of an angry God. For us, death is the doorway to eternal life.

Just like trusting in God's promise gave physical life to Israelites who were bit by a snake, trusting in Jesus gives eternal life to all of us who were bit by the devil in the Garden of Eden. Every human being is dying from the moment we are born. Even the babies here today are on the way to the ends of their lives. But in Christ, there is no end to our life, only an end to life as we know it here. In Christ, we live forever. In Christ, our bodies will rise from the grave. In Christ, our sin is conquered. My friends, **trust in Christ and live forever!**

II.

The people of Israel got themselves into trouble. When they lost heart and gave in to doubt, their grumbling and complaining led to the disaster that followed. It was their own fault. And that makes their reaction to God's discipline a true joy to behold. They 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.”**

Sin gets us into trouble. We may not face poisonous snakes, like Israel did, but we often do come face to face with the consequences of our own sins. At that moment, we can make excuses. We can blame other people. We can lose our tempers and act like the world is being totally unfair to us. Or we can admit our sin and ask God to forgive us and to deliver us from the consequences of that sin. The difference between a mature Christian faith and an immature one can largely be measured by how we react to our own guilt and sin.

God had been working with Israel for nearly forty years. Even though unbelief reared its ugly head and caused them to criticize God for the way he was caring for them, this was still the people of God. And faith did still live in their hearts. Their humble confession is a model for believers of every age. Notice, they didn't say, “If we sinned, we're sorry.” “God if we offended you in anyway, we really didn't mean it.” They said, **“We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you.”** True repentance always admits guilt. But that's not the end of true repentance. True repentance trusts in God's forgiveness. So a repentant believer lives in hope because he trusts God's grace. That's why the Israelites asked Moses to pray that God would take away the just consequences of their sin.

We can offer that same prayer. We are sinners. But we can live in hope even when our own sin wreaks havoc on our lives. Jesus was lifted up to die for every sin of every sinner everywhere. He died for you and he died for me. He died for the sins that keep us up at night. He died for the failures that we're depressed about today. He died for it all. He rose to tell the whole world that sin is paid for. When you and I understand that God means those very sins that we agonize about, when we know that Christ has swept away all the pride of our hearts and all our grumbling and complaining, then God gives us peace in Christ. God gives us hope.

Christian hope is not a "maybe" kind of thing. I hope that we have nice weather this week. I hope all the kids in my catechism class get an A on their test this week. But I don't know if those things are going to happen. Christian hope is not like that. Christian hope is knowing that God has something better in store for us because Jesus was lifted up to give us peace. That something better will most certainly come in heaven. When we die, we will be with the Lord. Whatever hardships we faced here, whatever sadness and difficulty, whatever sin did to us and cost us here, in heaven we will be free. When the Lord returns, he's going to call these physical bodies out of the grave and make them perfect. Then we're going to live with him in a perfect world for all eternity. Christian hope clings to that promise.

But Christian hope also clings to God's promises for this life. God is still with us here, no matter how difficult the way ahead may seem. At the end of this account, God's people still had a long way to go. They still had to reach the Red Sea, turn east and then turn back north again and then finally turn back west to reach the borders of the Promised Land. God did not spare them the rest of that journey. But God did go with them. He did protect them and care for them and he even continued to discipline them. He did all that because he loved them.

He loves us, too. Sometimes, in this life, he takes the snakes away. He saves us from the disasters we make of our own lives. Sometimes, he calls us to walk through the desert away from what we think our goal should be. Sometimes, we have to struggle with hardship and opposition and pain. But always our God is with us. Always he cares for us and loves us. If we ever start to doubt that, how can we renew our faith? Not by looking around. Too often, what we see is the empty desert. Too often, we're tired of the bread God has been giving us. We renew our faith by remembering who brought us here: Jesus, who was lifted up on the cross to draw all men to himself. If Jesus let himself be nailed to that cross to take our sin away, if Jesus gave up his spirit so that our spirits go to heaven, if Jesus let his body die and be buried so that we can come out of our graves, if Jesus rose to give us eternal life with him, don't you think he's going to make sure we get it? Don't you think he's going to do everything to keep our faith alive? Yes, he is my friends. So **trust in Christ and live in hope here!** Amen.