

Intro.: The inland taipan is said to be the most venomous land snake in the world, but the protein in its venom has been found useful in stopping excessive surgical bleeding. Similarly, the venom of the Malayan pit viper seems to have potential for helping stroke victims. And cobra venom is being used in researching cures for Parkinsons and Alzheimers. The venom of sin, though, has no benefit for man. It only kills. And yet in today's readings we see that God can even use things that bring a curse to manufacture a cure. All we need to do is to look up and live. In our Old Testament reading...

I. WE GRUMBLE AGAINST THE LORD.

A. The Israelites Grew Short With God Because They Did Not Like His Plan For Them.

The Israelites were troubled because it seemed that they were ready to enter the promised land, after a long delay. But then, the Edomites refused to let them through, so they had to take another route, by way of the Red Sea. It felt like they were going back to where they started. At this point, they were exhausted, in the original language it says that their breath and their patience with the Lord, grew short.

We may experience the same thing at times in our journey of faith. The Lord has laid before us the promise of a glorious inheritance in his heavenly kingdom, which is the real promised land. Through Jesus, he has delivered us from our bondage to sin, and set us free to be His people. Even now, we are on the brink of entering into glory (this close to seeing God's promise fulfilled), but day after day we struggle with sin, obstacles to faith confront us, and our journey is filled with hardships and troubles. Like the Israelites we are tempted to grow short with God. When His directives seem to be leading us in circles, we too may end up out of breath. And yet, like Israel, we seem still to have enough to voice our complaints and accusations against God.

B. Actually, The Israelites Were Wasting Their Breath On Complaints And Accusations Against God.

You see, our reaction does not have to be rebellion and complaining about the Lord. What if the Israelites had instead used their breath to confess their sin, and acknowledge the troubles which it had brought upon them? What if they would have asked for mercy and the Lords help to part company with those who were making excuses for sin, and harboring hostility toward God?

The reason the Israelites had experienced these 40 years of torment was not because the Lord was unjust or unloving, but because of their own sin. The Lord promised to give them the place that He had promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He promised to deliver all their enemies into their hands, so that they could go in and take possession of the land, but they doubted it, and accused God of lying to them, and predicted that they would surely be killed. So the Lord vowed not to let any of them, except for Caleb and Joshua step foot in the promised land.

In our weariness wouldn't we do better to seek out the fellowship of those who hate sin, especially their own; people who would confess with us... "O Almighty God, I a poor miserable sinner confess unto Thee all my sins and iniquities...", than wasting our breath grumbling against our loving God?

The sin which is identified in the events of our OT is not that of growing weary, but getting grumpy toward the Lord. Likewise, our sin is not in being exhausted from our difficult journey in the wilderness of this world, but in becoming short with God, and murmuring against Him, and accusing Him of being unloving or unfair. It is common for people who grow tired to develop a sinful tendency to lash out against, and cast blame upon, others for their troubles. So that is often the way we speak toward God. Our confession of faith can easily be twisted into an accusation of unbelief. The confession of the Israelites, **"You brought us up out of Egypt,"** can easily become an accusation, **"You did it in order to kill us in this desert..."**

Think about the ways in which you have turned confession of faith into accusations of unbelief. "Father you are all powerful....so it is your fault that I suffer from so much evil." "Jesus, you are the great physician...so I blame you for my mother's death to cancer." "Holy Spirit, you call us to faith through the Gospel...so you are the one responsible for my child's unbelief." Worst of all is when our shortness with God blinds us to all the blessings He gives us by grace.

C. The Israelites Had Grown Blind To The Daily Blessings Of God's Grace During Their Wilderness Journey.

When complaining about our present, we can quickly become spiritual pessimists. We have a way of blinding ourselves to present blessings and past curses. The Israelites viewed their slavery with rose-colored glasses when they began to make their case against God. In the wilderness all they remembered were the fleshpots of Egypt, not the whips, the hard labor, and the death by sword. They even go so far as to call Egypt a land flowing with milk and honey. Once they had to slave for their bread under the lash, now they pick up sweet manna every morning, freely by God's goodness. but it has gone on so long that they complain about it instead of giving praise and thanks. It is as if they were

moaning, "We are sick and tired of waking up in the morning and finding that it has rained the same old groceries on our lawn."

And we are no different. How many professing children of God have grown tired of the body and blood of Christ, so that they see no need to even nourish their souls with heavenly food? How many have grown, sick and tired of hearing the Gospel which is the only Word that brings eternal life? How many of us complain that the daily provision we receive from the hand of the Lord is just not good enough? Like the Israelites we may view life without Christ and God's grace with rose-colored glasses. The flesh-pots of the unbelieving world continue to call us back into slavery. A life unfettered by the bonds of faith and love seems so desirable to our sinful, murmuring old self.

II. GOD CALLS TO REPENTANCE THROUGH THE CURSE AND HEALS THROUGH ITS SYMBOL.

When I was a child, I can remember being upset about something and hearing my father shout up the stairs, "Stop that, or I'll really give you something to cry about." In the end I either found a more cheerful attitude, and a restored relationship with my parents, or I truly did find something more to cry about. We sort of see the Lord doing the same thing in our lesson for today.

A. Israel Suffered The Consequences Of Their Unjust Complaints And The Lord Heard Their Cry For Mercy.

When the Israelites complained about the Lord's gift of the same old groceries, it is almost as if God were replying, "Perhaps you would like snakes for a change." God responds to the Israelites swiftly and decisively. He acted in a twofold way: He sent the snakes, as a curse to remind the Israelites of their sin and the troubles that they were bringing upon themselves. He did it, not out of spite or even retribution, but to call them to repent, so that they might have a restored relationship with Him. Then, after the curse – after giving them something to really cry about - He sends the very symbol of the curse, a bronze snake, to offer salvation to all who would look up to it and live through faith in His grace and mercy.

Consider what is being called for here. The snakes are crawling, probably hissing, and dripping venom. But they are not to look at those wriggling, lashing vipers. They are not to look for a path to escape on their own. Just stay there surrounded by the snakes, even bitten by them, and look to the cure which comes through the very image of that curse. And those who looked to that bronze snake that was lifted up did not suffer the curse of the serpent's bite and its dreadful venom that leads to death. Instead, by faith they were given life and a new relationship of trust with their Heavenly Father.

B. We Also Are Entangled In The Curse, But Are Called To Look To The One Who Became A Curse For Us.

We have all suffered the deadly bite of the ancient serpent and have been infected by his venom. As we heard in our epistle, the result was that we were dead in our trespasses and sins, as we suffered the troubles that we brought upon ourselves as we lived in the passions of our flesh. The wages of our sin, the venom that poisoned us, is certain and eternal death. And now the Lord tells us to turn away from all the troubles around us, and the sin that brings the sting of death. He calls us to turn away from everything else, and all the distractions around us, and to look up to the One who has been lifted up for us – to look up and live.

In our Gospel Jesus tells us, ***"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. God so loved the world, [that includes all of us] that He gave His only Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life."*** Do you see what the Lord has done for ungrateful grumblers and murmurers like us? Sure, sometimes He gives us something to cry about, so that we can confess our sins, recognize the troubles we bring on ourselves, and turn to Him for mercy and grace.

But He also sent His Son to take on our flesh and to become a curse for us, so that we could look up to Him on that cross, and live. There we see the curse of our sin, becoming the cure. The ancient serpent bruised the heel of the woman's offspring, and in so doing his head was crushed, and God manufactured an antidote to His venom. By grace we are now saved through faith as a gift from God. All we need to do is to look up to the one who knew no sin yet became sin for us. Look to Jesus and believe! Not just a quick glance, but with a fixed gaze we are to keep our eyes on Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith. Because He is risen from the dead, we know that we are now alive in Christ. The wages of sin might be death, but the greater gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. [Cf. Rom. 6:23]

Concl.: So my dear friends in Christ, in the midst of your arduous journey through this wilderness on your way to the glory of the greater heavenly promised land, do not waste your breath grumbling and complaining. Instead, give thanks for the greater gifts of God's grace. And when the serpent bites and the venom of sin is causing you pain and leaving you fearful. Look up to the one who was cursed to become the cure! Look up to Jesus, and live! Amen.