

God's Grace Reverses Our Place

4) From Grumbling & the Grave to Grateful & Saved

Numbers 21:4-9 • 2021-03-14 • Series for Lent



We've occasionally permitted our children to order toys online. But 5-7 days for shipping can seem like so long when you are only that many years old. Waiting can be difficult. Does anyone ever really outgrow the natural disgust we have for waiting? I recently made a purchase online and did what a lot of people do. I repeatedly checked the tracking on the package to see when it would arrive. It doesn't make things come faster but I sometimes will check anyway. And when it is just a day or two late, there's grumbling. What about when it comes to patience as we live out our lives as Christians? What happens if we grumble at the patience which God requires of us? We find out as we look at God's dealings with his people, recorded for us in Numbers 21.

Faith often requires great patience. Consider how God dealt with the world from the very beginning. He promised to send a Savior who would destroy the work of the devil. That promise had to be trusted over thousands of years of patience. Noah and his family waited in the ark for over a year. Did he ever grumble? Abraham was a man of 100 years when his promised son Isaac was finally born. He had not so patiently waited 25 years. Abraham's descendants made up the tribes of Israel and were slaves in Egypt for over 400 years. They waited for the rescue God had promised. Trusting in the Lord had always meant trusting in him for a lifetime and beyond. The descendants of Abraham carried the promise to possess the land of Canaan. And they had waited for over 600 years.

And that brings us to the people we read of in Numbers 21. They were the generation who would finally enter the promised land! They had so patiently wandered in the wilderness for around 40 years. Now they finally set out to enter the promised land. But how did the last part of their journey play out? The nation of Edom would not let them pass on the shortest route to Canaan. So, they took a route they didn't expect to take. They were going to enter Canaan through the side door. Instead of just marching north into Canaan from the wilderness, Moses led the people further along the edge of the desert of Arabia. After 40 years of waiting, they were so close but so far away!

Taking the longer hard road is often a part of our life. We're not the nation of Israel heading to the promised land of Canaan. And God hasn't given a specific promise that this congregation or any group today are going to inherit a certain land on this earth. But all Christians and all of us who are gathered here *as children of Abraham through faith* hold to a great promise of God. We share in the promise to receive the blessings of God's kingdom. We look forward to our inheritance of a new heaven and earth, the home of the righteous in Christ. We have a far more glorious destination ahead than any we could imagine.

But we might like to imagine our journey going a little smoother. Christians experience setbacks and hardships. Sometimes it's a health decline. Sometimes it's a setback in finances. Sometimes it's a struggle in relationships with others around us. Sometimes it is the plans you have for your family, church, or your own life. You see your goal. One moment you are ready to praise God and thank him for carrying you to this point. But the next you realize that another hurdle lies ahead! What about God's great blessings promised for us?! How much must we wait and struggle?

The journey of the people of Israel was written for your benefit. How could they lose patience and grumble? They had the Lord's promise that they would enter the Promised Land. They were the generation that knew better than their parents. They were the people who witnessed the gradual sentence placed on their fathers for doubting the Lord. One by one all their fathers died in the desert. Now they had their chance. They set out to receive what their Lord had long promised. But what happened? "The people grew impatient, and they spoke out against God and against Moses."

Notice their complaint is the lack of food and water. We might say, "Who wouldn't complain?" But remember that God has provided them with food and water for over 40 years now! They were abundantly supplied—even given enough to store up for each Sabbath day of rest. Each day without fail God sent them manna to eat from heaven. But what did they now say about God's food? "*We are disgusted by this worthless food!*" They weren't just complaining about the long journey! They were beginning to despise the long-enjoyed gifts and blessings of God!

What about you? When your walk of faith reaches a new hurdle, what is your focus on? Is it grumbling or gratefulness? We could be grateful in faith and say, "Thanks for all your past blessings God! I know you'll still continue to bless despite all appearances to the contrary!" Or we could grumble and say, "God did you forget about me?!" Or maybe even speak against our Lord, "God, what are you thinking? Why am I facing this? Why now?"

And when we question God's goodness for us, don't we then also like to forget his past goodness? Sometimes no matter how good the gift is from God or how long you have had the enjoyment of the gift the sinful nature will begin to despise it. Grumbling begins. It is done by Christian people who begin to despise their children, their spouse, their home, their job, and their church—all the blessings that God has given. How about you? Are you immune to grumbling? Don't think that the cry, "we detest this miserable food" was only made by unbelievers.

The people of Israel stand as a lesson for us in the human heart. So richly blessed by God for so long! (As are we!) What does the human heart still do when confronted with a demand for patient trust? Grumbles against God!

God responded first by sending venomous snakes among the people. Many from Israel who were bitten died. What else could God do in response to their grumbling? Try that with your spouse after just one week of marriage “I detest this miserable food.” God had dealt with these people and their fathers for the past 40 years as grumbling complainers. They were now on the verge of receiving the Promised Land but also on the verge of judgment.

Doesn't our grumbling place us on the verge of death and judgment? The sad reality that the apostle Paul records is that many in Israel had fallen away from faith. Referring back to his event he warns, “*Do not grumble as some of them did... If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you do not fall!*” (1 Cor 10) When we focus on the evil, the challenges, the road, and we despise what is already ours, it will never be good enough. It will never be good enough it is not received with patient faith.

Thank God that his patience is not a rarity. Instead of destroying them he uses yet another set-back to turn their hearts back. The snakes were sent to remind the people of their sin. God sent the snakes. It was a consequence and chastisement. The pain, like the slavery in Egypt, led them to seek the Lord once again. “We sinned when we spoke against God and against Moses!” Moses turned in prayer to the God of mercy. And God provided a rescue for his people. Now they regained their senses. They recalled how the Lord was their life and their merciful God!

The rescue plan was simple but didn't seem to make sense. The people were told to look at an image of the very thing which had been the cause of their suffering. Moses lifted up the image of a venomous snake on a pole. God had promised that all who looked would be healed. If anyone was bitten and he looked, he lived. This was an immediate consequence of their sin- and they knew it. It was also an immediate rescue by God, and they knew it!

It was a rescue that was based on their faith, their trust in him. Faith is a trust in God's Word. It doesn't look for immediate signs of fulfillment of a promise. It doesn't waver when times get tough. It simply holds to a promise despite all appearances and all circumstances. God's rescue comes only through faith.

Finally, it was a rescue that showed God's great patience and mercy for the sinner. Why does he provide a way out? Why does he provide healing and hope? Grace. It had nothing to do with the complainers. It had everything to do with who our great God is! He reverses our place in grace, from grumbling and the grave to grateful and saved.

God's rescue is contrary to all human reason and human hope. But he promises the foolishness of the cross is the source of life for all who believe. Jesus spoke to Pharisee Nicodemus at night. Nicodemus thought he had it all figured out until he came across this man. “We know you must be sent from God because of the things you are doing.” Jesus spoke of God's long-standing promise –one that they had been waiting for ever since that serpent and that fruit were lifted up on the forbidden tree. Jesus spoke of a rescue that involved a rebirth by water and the Spirit. To Nicodemus, it didn't make any sense.

But it was a rescue that called for faith and trust in his Word. To the one who trusts God's promise, it saves. Jesus then explains God's solution: “*Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert the Son of Man must be lifted up –that everyone who believes might have eternal life.*” (John 3:15) Just as the looking to the snake on the pole healed all who believed so it is with Jesus. Those who trust him, who look to him lifted up on the cross, live. And this is not just for Israel in the wilderness –it is for all the world. And it isn't just for illness leading to death, but the sin which condemns us to death and hell. Put your trust in him.

And God's rescue is also purely by grace. “Must... be lifted up.” Why must Jesus be lifted up? Not because God had to provide. But the necessity was there. It was because of his love for the world. God so loved the world, you, that it had to be this way. He would be lifted and cursed on a tree so that you might find rescue from the curse and death. And you find that rescue by looking to him –given purely by grace and received through faith. And he would be lifted up from the grave to glory so that we might forever look to him for deliverance from death and judgement.

Have you ever found yourself on the shores of the ocean or large lake going for a long walk or run? One evening I set out for a walk with my siblings and cousins on one of the Great Lakes. We ended up walking much further than usual, so we decided to head to a park that we could see in the distance. We knew it was far away. But we could see it jutting out –a point of land and distant beaches. But no matter how many minutes we ran it seemed that the goal was only further and further than expected. You would see what looked like only one small beachhead. But then as you got closer you realized it dipped way back inland. It was like the journey was starting all over again. The most discouraging part of crossing each new point in the horizon was you couldn't look back and see how far you have gone. You were blinded to the ground covered and could only see the last point a few hundred yards back.

That's what it was like for the people of Israel as they neared their goal –a long journey instead of instant success. They forgot to look back to gain strength and endure what was ahead. That's what it is like as we live out our lives in faith. In faith we know where we are headed. We can see what is in store. But we can't see the trials, the dips, and the long road that God intends us to travel –all to his glory and praise. The way may seem long. But the promise is there. The destination is sure. His grace is yours. And as we look to Jesus and his cross, God reverses our place, from grumbling and the grave to grateful and saved.