

**Goal: That the hearers greatly rejoice in the Jesus, who was raised for our salvation.**

Growing up as a PK, pastor's kid, meant that I went to Sunday School every week, from Kindergarten through High School, I completed 2 years of confirmation, went to countless Bible studies, and shared in family devotions most evenings after dinner. I knew the Bible pretty well, at least I thought I knew the Israelites better than most. Those whiney, constantly complaining people who God saved from slavery in Egypt and brought them out on dry ground through the Red Sea.

Sure, they wandered the desert for 40 years, but it wasn't because Moses was a typical man who wouldn't stop to ask for directions. It was because all they did was complain. So, God led them south through the Sinai wilderness, then north through the Sinai wilderness and then around the loop again and again. Because of their lack of faith and their constant complaining not one person who had been brought out of Egypt would set foot in the Promised Land; not even Moses.

Today, we get a glimpse of one of those moments when the Israelites were whining to 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."*** (Numbers 21: 5) Couldn't they give the guy a break? I mean, he's trying to lead, according to [Numbers 1](#), about 2 million women and children, and 603,550 soldiers on a road trip. They didn't have a GPS or Google Maps, only a pillar of cloud and fire to follow.

In the desert, water's always an issue. I'm sure they got thirsty and complained to Moses. I can imagine them my kids complained, *"I'm thirsty! How much longer."* And there wasn't any food, well except the manna that they called worthless. At one time, they were so grateful for it, but now, now, they wanted more. More seasonings, more flavor, just more. It's funny that the name manna literally means, *"What's this?"* Which is what they said when first gathered it on ground to eat. But now that name mocked God and His blessings for them.

What's weird about the story isn't the Israelites behavior, but it's God's sending poisonous snakes among the people to bite them so that many died. ***"Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. 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."*** (Numbers 21: 6 – 7) This isn't an image of God we find comforting. In Hebrew they're called *Hantashime Hashrahphim* or fiery serpents, which is the same adjective used to describe the seraphim, the fiery angels of

God. This description is intended to show how the children of Israel had become so familiar with the holy God that they became ungrateful and spoiled children. They got too close to the fire and got burned. The serpents venom burned as their fangs sunk into their skin. That may be more than you wanted to know, but it's that detail that connects clearly to our Gospel.

I don't like to suffer and none of you do either. We've all been in situations where we've prayed for God to "*take away the serpents*", whatever is biting us at the time. Sometimes He does, but a lot of times God doesn't, at least not in the way we wanted. Doors close. Situations remain unchanged and we cry out for help.

God didn't take away the serpents, shut their mouths, or break off their fangs. ***(“And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.” (Numbers 21: 8 – 9)*** What He did do is He gave those whiners another serpent, a fiery snake on a stick. This has got to be one of the strangest events recorded in the 1<sup>st</sup> 5 books of the Bible. As the serpents are biting and injecting their venom into the bodies of the children of Israel, the cure was to simply look up at this snake on a pole.

Could you do that? When serpents are at your feet, nipping at your heels, where are you looking? Down, right? Of course you're looking down so you can see where they are and avoid them. But that didn't work so well. Then again, a lot of things people do to solve their problems don't work very well. We can get so obsessed with the problem that we ignore the only True God and trust in other things to fix it so that we sin, we walk away from God.

And with that snake on a stick, came a promise: ***“everyone who is bitten when he sees it, shall live.”*** Our problem is looking down when the solution is up. That bronze serpent didn't have any magic in it. It was a test of faith. It was simply an invitation to see the solution that God had already provided, to ***“Look Up and Live.”***

I think our lives are like that too whenever we find ourselves wandering in a spiritual wilderness. Now, I'm not trying to make light of the struggles we face or of the fears that torment us like something biting at us. But I'm saying that we need to learn to look up and see what God has already done and trust that He's working even through our painful situation for our good. Paul said, ***“For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8: 38 – 39)*** We don't even have to fear death because Jesus already took care of that on Good Friday and in baptism we were buried

with Christ in His death so that we would rise to a new, eternal life. (***“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”*** (Ephesians 2: 8 – 10)

Which brings us back to the Gospel. [John 3:16](#) always gets the attention, and it should, but don't miss what Jesus is connecting it to. ***“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.”*** (John 3: 14 – 15) There's that snake on a stick again. The Bible repeats the same message over and over. Why? Because we don't listen very well and we don't learn very well. Even the Israelites soon went back to their grumbling. They even took that bronze serpent with them, thinking it was magic. They kept it for hundreds of years until King Hezekiah ([Numbers 18:1-5](#)) destroyed it, because they turned it into an idol. They called it, Nehustan, and worshipped it instead of the God who saved them.

It's easy to worship technology, ingenuity, and knowledge, while forgetting the One True God who created it all. That is, until God takes drastic steps. Jesus told Nicodemus that soon He was going to be ***“lifted up.”*** Back then, the cross was so horrifying that the word crucifixion was never spoken by the Jews. They simply called it ***“being lifted up.”*** And there, on that symbol of shame, in all its bloody horror, God reconciled the world to Himself by an innocent life, sacrificed for us.

When people want to know what our faith is all about, don't say that it's about being nice or loving or well-behaved. Our faith testifies to something much greater. A pastor in Detroit, MI, asked the boys in his After School program what Jesus meant when he said, ***“For God so loved the world.”*** Who did that include? A young man who was African American said, ***“it means he died for the members of the Ku Klux Klan, too.”*** That youth, living as a minority in a society filled with hatred, understood the depth of God's grace.

It's always and only by God's grace that we are invited to *Look Up and Live*. It's always by God's grace that we are able to cling to the cross by faith. (***“For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.”*** (John 3: 20 – 21) May God who is always rich in mercy for Jesus' sake lead us into His gracious light so that all our works and all our words would reflect His light and love into our darkened world. Amen.