

The Problem with Impatience and God's Answer

4th Sun. in Lent – 03/10/24 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Numbers 21:4-9 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 7, **“And the people came to Moses and said, ‘We have sinned, for we have spoken against Yahweh and against you. Pray to Yahweh, that He take away the serpents from us.’ So Moses prayed for the people.”**

Introduction

✘ In our Old Testament Reading today we are transported back in time to the year 1407 BC. It has now been 40 years that the people of Israel have been wandering through the wilderness, always with their eyes on The Promised Land; where Yahweh told them He would lead them. They're getting really close now. They're coming at the land of Canaan from the south, leaving the Sinai Peninsula. All they have to do is cross quickly through the land of Edom and it's happened, they are there.

➔ But when Moses sends messengers to negotiate permission to do so, the king of Edom refuses to allow this pilgrimage of between 2.5 to 3 million people go traipsing through his land – even though Moses promised that they would not drink their water or trample their fields.

➔ 40 years they have been walking, camping; trusting in Yahweh's cloud by day and pillar of fire by night to guide them. And now they are told that they've got to extend their journey off to the east – around the land of Edom.

✘ So as verse four says, they set out and “...the people became impatient...”. Well, none of us have ever seen our ideal plans change, right? None of us have ever struggled with impatience before, have we?

➔ Of course we have – we are not the first to become impatient and we will not be the last. But just because it is something we all have faced, it doesn't mean we can't learn something from these ancient ancestors and especially from God's response to their struggle with this deadly sin and its progression in the lives of all mankind.

✘ Because impatience is so common, it's easy for us to think that it's not that big of a deal. Sure, we wish we could be more patient, but who's it really hurting anyway?

➔ Consider the story of a boy named Rodney, looking at a rattlesnake in a cage with his cousin Sam. The signs were prominent – “Danger! Do not touch or tap the cage.” Rodney was fascinated. All he wanted was to see that rattler do something scary. He jumped up and down. He made loud noises. But all he got was the serpent's attention. It coiled up, lifted its head and looked at him.

➔ “Come on,” Rodney complained, “do something. Strike at me you stupid snake.” Sam told him that was enough. It was time to move on. But Rodney grew impatient with the snake. He saw the sign, but he knew the wire mesh would keep the snake from getting to him. It couldn't hurt anything – just one quick tap, that's it. So he did it; he tapped the cage with the back of his hand. His skin touched the mesh for only an instant, but an instant was all that the rattlesnake required. He exploded from his coil, struck, inserted the fangs and injected the venom – all in a split second.

➔ The next few hours were touch and go. The poison coursed through Rodney's hand and up his arm – swelling both up like a balloon as they waited for the anti-venom to arrive, be administered and do its work.

✘ Yes, tapping that cage was foolish, but Rodney didn't roll out of bed that morning with the intent to do something that would send poison streaming through his veins. He wasn't struggling with

issues of patience earlier that day, but the old wily serpent, the devil – as 1 Peter 5:8 warns us, “prowls around like a roaring lion,” – today we could say, “slithers around like a sneaky serpent” – “seeking someone to devour.”

→ And as we see here in today’s text, there is a progression to the problem of impatience; a progression that applies to our struggle with all sin. James 1:13-15 summarizes both the problem and the progression in this way, “¹³ Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God,’ for God cannot be tempted with evil, and He Himself tempts no one. ¹⁴ But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. ¹⁵ Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.”

✘ So, let’s take a quick look at that deadly progression as well as God’s merciful and saving answer as we see it among our Old Testament ancestors today.

I. The Problem

✘ Number one is “The Problem.” We’re told that “the people became impatient on the way” (v.4). It’s interesting how often impatience is the first part of a very deadly problem of sin with God’s people. There are numerous examples in Scripture.

→ Forty years earlier, right after God rescued these people from Pharaoh’s slavery – bringing them through the Red Sea on dry ground – they couldn’t wait for Moses to come back down from his meeting with Yahweh on Mt. Sinai, so what did they do? They built and then worshiped a golden calf. (Ex. 32:1ff.)

→ In Genesis 16 Sarai became impatient with God for not fulfilling His promise to give Abram a son according to her timing, so she enticed Abram into adultery with her servant Hagar.

→ In Isaiah 30 the people didn’t trust in God’s protection as they knew the King of Babylon was coming with his army to attack. They trusted more in Egypt’s army than in God to help them, so that Jerusalem was destroyed and they were led away as exiles for 70 years.

→ And in Luke, chapter 10, Martha is impatient with her sister Mary because she sat at Jesus’ feet to learn instead of helping her with the chores of serving, and she was rebuked by Jesus because she did not choose what was truly “necessary” according to Jesus (Lk. 10:38:42).

✘ How many things or people have you been impatient with; how many times have you struggled with patience? With what we call “this messed up world”; with “those messed up people”; with the fact that God hasn’t healed me or helped me as quickly as I think He should? Or the fact that He hasn’t destroyed or punished or taken vengeance upon that country or this false religion or that person who is causing so much grief in my life?

✘ That’s when the next step in the progression strikes – placing blame. Verse five says that “the people spoke against God and against Moses, ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?’”

→ Why are you and I so quick to place blame? Because we think that it diffuses our own guilt. So we blame “those other sinners” and the devil of course. We even blame our “human nature”, thinking it’s somehow better when we say, “we just can’t help but do it”. In all of this though, we ultimately blame God.

✘ And it all shows up in our irrational complaining and whining. It’s almost comical when we see it in someone else. The people continued in verse five, “There is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food”. Wait, they just said there was “no food” but then they admit they are getting food. In fact, for 40 years God had been providing both manna in the morning and quail at night.

→ God gives us all so much more than we ever deserve and what do we do? We complain, “I deserve better than this”. Umm, no we don’t. “I want something more.” Why are we never satisfied with God’s free gifts?

II. God’s Response of Judgment

⌘ What happens next? God cannot abide this kind of blatant sin and rebellion, so for their own good, He must respond in judgment. Verse six, “Then Yahweh sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.”

→ Our Epistle reading today tells us where we all deserved to be before Jesus. Ephesians 2:1-3, “And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience – among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.”

→ And in verse 19 of our Gospel Reading, Jesus Himself says that when He came into the world as “the Light”, “people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil” (Jn. 3:19). So, just as it was at the time of Moses, so it was when Jesus came, and so it is still today, sin of any and all kinds requires and results in death.

III. The People’s Response

⌘ How did the people respond to God’s judgment? What is God’s intended response to His judgment? Verse seven, “The people came to Moses and said, ‘We have sinned, for we have spoken against Yahweh and against you.’ They realized that it is never a good thing to speak against God or His representative and to their credit, they came clean; they confessed their sin. They repented concisely without softening the reality of their guilt.

→ And they cried out for help, asking Moses, “Pray to Yahweh, that He take away the serpents from us.” To which Moses quickly fulfilled his role as the mediator between God and His people at that time. God told Moses (Deut. 18:15) that His role was intended to be an illustration, what theologians call “a type” that points us all forward from Moses to the ultimate mediator for all times. This is why 1 Timothy 2:5 shuts down any prayers today to angels or to saints like Mary or Peter as any other kind of go-between to God when it says, “For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.”

IV. God’s Answer to Repentance

⌘ That leads us to the fourth step in the progression from sin to God’s blessed answer. In Psalm 51:17, King David, who had his own dramatic story with sin and it’s progression in relation to God, says from experience, “The sacrifices of God” – meaning, the response that God desires from His people when they sin – “are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”

→ So, in response to the people’s confession and sorrow over their sin, Yahweh provided an answer both to save them from the venom that their sins brought upon them and to point them in faith and trust to the object of their ultimate salvation for life beyond their time on earth. He told Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live” (v.8).

⌘ This answer from God took the people back to His promise with Adam and Eve when they allowed the serpent, Satan to tempt them into impatience and doubt toward God; to think that they deserved more than all He had provided for them in that first paradise.

→ God promised that Eve's descendent, Jesus would suffer the bite and venom of Satan and sin as well, but the injury to Jesus would not come from just tapping the cage. No, Jesus' injury, as a bite upon His heel, would come as He shoved the full weight of His perfect and sinless life right into Satan's face and crushed, through His death on the cross, Satan's head and power once and for all!

→ Our Gospel Reading, in John 3:14-15, tells us that Jesus is Himself the fulfillment of this event with Moses and the people in the wilderness, "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."

- ⊗ Yes, every drop of venom; every bit of guilt that we deserve in our countless sins passed from you and me to Jesus when He was lifted up and nailed to the cross. As Jesus says in John 3:18, "Whoever believes in Him is not condemned" and in John 3:16, "whoever believes in Him [will] not perish, but have eternal life".

V. The Response of the Forgiven

- ⊗ That's the final step of the progression, the response of faith from those who are forgiven by grace. We see first how Moses responded to God in faith when he believed that placing a bronze serpent on a pole would come with God's power to save the people.

→ Then for those whom the serpents bit, when they looked up in faith and trust at God's answer on that pole, they were saved – not only that day from the serpents' venom, but for eternity by the blood of the promised Messiah, Jesus who came to crush sin, death and the devil for us all.

Conclusion

- ⊗ You see, being saved from the serpent and his deadly intent, for those in the wilderness with Moses and for those in Jesus' time and for those of us today in this very room is the same: we are changed; we are different now!

→ Instead of certain death and condemnation from the bite of the devil and the venom of our sin, we have been saved – not by our own doing, it is by the power of the only effective anti-venom for sin, death and the devil: the grace and the blood of Jesus!

→ He shed His blood on the cross – not for Himself – but for you and for me; to crush the devil's power, yes, but 1 John 1:7 tells us that "...the blood of Jesus [God's] Son cleanses us from all sin."

- ⊗ This, dear Christian, is the only answer to the problem of our impatience; to the progression of our sin – faith in Jesus lifted up on the cross and His blood connecting us to Him and His gift of salvation today and into eternity. To Jesus be all the glory. Amen.