
Look Up and Live! (Numbers 21:4-9)
3/11/2018 Sermon by Pastor Jason Liebenow



It might have been one of the most infuriating moments of my life. I was in charge of snacks for a Vacation Bible School a long time ago. I really wanted to get something nice for the kids, so I spent the extra money on what I thought were some of the better kinds. When snack time came however, apparently, I was wrong. Most of the kids were fine, but some of them didn't even touch the snacks I had gotten for them! Instead they just whined, complained, and kept asking if there was anything else to eat. I was furious, until I thought about it more and realized that I'm often just as ungrateful.

In the account of the Bronze Snake, our God shows us a lot about our ingratitude and his undeserved grace to us. Today, despite the many struggles that keep us looking down at everything going wrong, God encourages us to Look Up and Live!

The Israelites were ungrateful. But before we jump on them for that, let's take some time to understand where they were coming from. It had been a while since God did all those great acts to take them out of Egypt. Most people are pretty happy on their wedding day, but that day's happiness doesn't keep us smiling nonstop for years into the future. We get used to the new situation and it sort of becomes normal. It's no longer an ecstatic happy state but just a normal happy state. For the Israelites, that ecstatic state had a good amount of time to pass from their minds.

In their current situation, they weren't seeing those great miracles that God had done in the past. Yeah, they had manna and quail to eat but it was the same thing every day. I can hardly imagine eating the exact same two foods for a whole week, let alone for months and years! In addition to that, their days consisted of basically just wandering through the desert. It was hot, uncomfortable. Sand was everywhere. It was dirty. You could only wash yourself so much.

With the nasty situation they were in, you can see how it just grated on the Israelites, day after day, the same struggles. It never felt like they were getting anywhere. For many of them, their mind played that trick on them like it does for most of us, where we look back at the past like it was just perfect in every way, when the reality is we probably had just as much to complain about back then. For the Israelites, they looked back at their lives of slavery and thought, "Yeah, but we had all the food we needed. We had clean beds. We could get out of the sun easily." And on and on.

Life wasn't all that great for the Israelites. I don't think any of us would want to live like they had to. But in spite of how bad things were for the Israelites, they had one problem that made everything that much worse: ingratitude.

Their ingratitude led them to focus on all the wrongs and to ignore everything that was right! Regardless of how long it had been, these people had seen God show his power on their behalf! They witnessed God decimate their enemies, the Egyptians, all in order to save them! They had finally been freed from the years of slavery, tyranny, and oppression!

They had walked through the Red Sea on dry ground! They were surviving in a desert where there should have been no food or water at all, but God had given them miraculous meals of manna and quail to keep them alive in what anyone else would have called a God-forsaken place! They got to see God's presence with them every single day! And every day, they were walking the journey to the promised land God had sworn to their forefathers.

Yeah, their lives weren't pleasant. They didn't have everything they wanted. But they had so much behind them, with them, and ahead of them. In their sin, they allowed their minds to shift away from those incomparable blessings, and instead they focused their minds on everything that was wrong. They despised the great things they had and instead put all their mental energy toward complaining.

So, God gave them something to complain about. These people had God's blessing and his favor, not because they deserved it, but because God had mercifully given it to them. If they wanted to forget about God's blessings, they didn't *have* to have them. God could instead let them die in the desert. That's after all par for the course as far as traveling through deserts goes.

God allowed snakes to come among them. God allowed many of them to die. And a very curious thing happened then. Suddenly, their harsh lives surviving in the desert didn't seem all that bad compared to their new harsh lives dying in the desert! They realized that, bad as things were, they still had plenty to be content about. Harsh as it was, God was still providing them with the things that mattered!

So they repented. They recognized that the real problem was not the harsh conditions they were living in. Their real problem was their sin, their ingratitude, their complaining.

Moses prayed to God for them. And what does God do? Does God think about it logically? "Well, look at all I've already done for them and they weren't grateful for it, why should I help them again?" Nope. God doesn't do that. Did God look into the future and see that, even if he helped them now, they would find even more to complain about in the future? No. He didn't do that either.

Instead, God in his mercy gave them a means of salvation. He had Moses make a bronze snake and raise it up on a pole and then told the Israelites that any of them who was bitten and looked up at the snake would live. God doesn't seem to know a lot about medicine, does he? No! This did not make sense, but it was God's power at work here. God told his people, "This will save you. Believe it." And with those promises, God created faith in the hearts of his people so that they did trust his words. They lived according to those words. When they were bitten, they looked up at the snake and lived.

Then they could keep living their harsh lives in that harsh desert. They still had plenty to complain about. They still had all the same problems. But now they were able to live that life with gratitude for the things that really mattered. They were able to stand up in the middle of their suffering and bear their own burden; more than that, they were able

to be someone other people could rely on! That's the change!

You've probably got plenty to complain about. Most of us could spend all day telling everyone else what's all wrong with our lives. We've all got disappointments, frustrations. We struggle physically, emotionally, socially, financially. But in those struggles, have we forgotten our greatest need? Have we forgotten what is really important?

Think of the husband whose wife isn't all that good a cook, but she's willing to do that work for their household. But years of just not great meals makes the husband grumble and complain. Then one day, the complaining turns into an argument with his wife. After making some rather harsh statements, the husband storms out of the house and goes to work. Later that day, the husband hears that his wife died in a car accident.

Moving forward from there, do you think the husband's thoughts about that day are going to be, "Man, I'm glad I got my say in about the food!" Or do you think his thoughts are going to more be along the lines of, "How could I destroy my relationship with my wife over something as stupid as food?" Do you think the satisfaction of that first statement or the guilt of the second are going to matter to him more? The problem for that man is always going to be that he let the details that were going wrong ruin the important things that were going right.

Maybe your spouse cooks and maybe they aren't the greatest cook. I'm not saying that you just suck it up and force that food down your throat. But I am saying, keep the main thing as the main thing! If you really care more about your relationship with your spouse than you do about your food, then, when you talk to your spouse about their cooking, make it clear what is most important to you! Make sure they know that you appreciate them and their willingness to put forth the effort to cook! Don't attack them just to make your point. Talk to them in a way that shows you still value what really matters.

This is essentially what the Israelites did. They became so obsessed with the details that were going wrong that they unwittingly became willing to sabotage their own relationship with God. Do you do that?

Do you find yourself so caught up with the things that are going wrong in life that you forget that God has taken care of your greatest need? Through Jesus Christ, God has forgiven you of all your sins! God has brought you into his family! God has won eternity in heaven for you! If everything in your life only gets worse from here on out and you live a long life of just constant pain and suffering, you can still be sure that your deepest need has been satisfied. That first moment in heaven will take away every tear. Are you grateful for that?

Even now, God has provided you with every good thing you have so that you are here to this day! Are you thankful for that? Or would you rather ignore those good things to complain about your health, or how things just aren't going your way, or the things everyone else is doing wrong? Consider your life: do your actions show that you care more about the important things or about the minute details? Are you grateful for your

greatest need fulfilled in Christ? Does the way you fulfill your responsibilities say that you are grateful? Does your treatment of the people in your life say that you are thankful to Jesus or does it say you really don't care about what Christ has done? Does the way you talk say "thank you" to God or does it more ask God to give you something to really complain about?

Honestly, God should give all of us something to really complain about. We are no less deserving of it than the Israelites were in the desert. We don't live as people who will be in heaven one day. We don't live as people whom God has mercifully forgiven and blessed.

But God doesn't treat us logically. He doesn't say, "Look at everything I've done for them, and how much they complain!" He doesn't look into the future and say, "If I keep helping them now, they are only going to keep complaining about new things later on!" Instead, God graciously gives us a means of salvation. He put his Son Jesus on a cross and has told us to Look Up at him and Live. With his gospel promises, God grants us faith to trust in what Jesus has done for us and God gives us confidence that we will have eternal life in spite of our sins.

And so God brings us back to our daily lives. In many cases, not a whole lot has changed. Our lives are still harsh. We still have plenty to complain about. We are still struggling. But through Christ, God has given us something to be grateful for. God has given us the ability to stand up in the middle of our suffering and to still be thankful. God has given us a way to bear our burden with a deeply held joy. God has given us a way to, rather than be embittered by our sufferings, instead we can become people that others can rely on despite our personal struggles.

So live that gratitude at home and at work. Speak that gratitude forth in the way you talk to the people in your lives. Yeah, go ahead and tell your spouse and your kids the things you would like to see improved, but make sure you say those things in a way that makes it clear to them that you are grateful for your relationship with them and that you are grateful for your relationship with God.

Life is going to keep you looking down at all the things going wrong in the world and in your life. But don't let your head stay down. Don't let yourself become embittered by all the evils that you forget the good God has worked in you. Make sure you remember the heavenly gifts that God has showered on you through Jesus. Make sure you Look Up and Live! Amen.