

In Isaiah 55, the Lord says "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." And we say amen! Our God is so remarkably different to us, he can do more that we can even imagine. We put those verses on magnets and have them on our fridge, we post them on our social media feed.

And then years like 2020 hit.

I know for some it's been a good year. Babies born. Marriages. Lovely things. But for many of us it's been tough going. And we who believe in God know it's not chance. We're not here by accident. But your standard clichés start to sound a little hollow in light of it all. *Trust God's timing... You're exactly where you're meant to be.* Ouch.

"As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways," says the Lord. God, in his perfect wisdom, has given us a pandemic. He's given us a season that is uncomfortable and restricted and entirely uncertain. We've lost some of the freedoms we love. We've realised job and financial security are a lie. We've seen governments stumble and world superpowers weaken. Nothing's sure anymore and it's disconcerting. It feels like we've been here for an eternity, when in fact, it's only a few months. And no one, save God, knows what lies ahead. We are in this season for as long as he has chosen. I wonder if that comforts us, or disturbs us? It could be one year. It could be ten. We just don't know.

And times like this serve as a bit of a reality check for our faith. It's easy to say we love and trust God when the sun is shining, when we walk in fields of green. But it's walking in the wilderness, in difficult seasons, where our faith and our true attitude toward God, is tested and exposed. And it's not always pretty.

We're in the book of Numbers this morning. The Hebrew title for Numbers is 'In the Wilderness', which is very appropriate – not only because the Israelites were literally in the desert for the forty year period the book spans, but because they were in a wilderness season of life. God's incredible act of salvation, rescuing them from slavery in Egypt, was behind them. Entering into the Promised Land was ahead – albeit pushed far into the future because of their sin. And so, they were stuck in the middle, in a barren season. A season of testing. Discomfort. Hardships. Where their utter dependence on God for everything was painfully exposed, and their trust in him placed under pressure. Time and again, unfortunately, they fall short. They complain about God's provision. They complain against the leaders God has placed over them. They complain about the difficulties they face. Perhaps 'Grumbling in the Wilderness' would be a better title for the book!

And our passage this morning recounts yet another occasion where the people complain.

Let's read Numbers 21:4-9.

⁴From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. ⁵And the people spoke against God and against 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." ⁶Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. ⁷And 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. ⁸And 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." ⁹So Moses made a bronze^[a] serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

The people had been wandering in the desert for a while now, and as verse four tells us, are moving from Mount Hor, to the south of the promised land, to Edom, a region to it's east. Miriam and Aaron have passed away, and Moses, having disobeyed God drawing water out of a rock, knows that he too will die in the desert. The older generation are slowly on their way out, just as God foretold. And you'd think that by now, the people would have learned; they would have learned that God is trustworthy, that he will lead

and guide them, provide for them, protect them. You'd think they'd know that God will not fail them. And having seen the consequences of their complaining – forty years wandering in the desert, people dying from plagues and fire and the earth swallowing them – you'd think they'd know there are serious consequences for opposing God.

But as we see in verse four, as they travel up toward Edom, the people grow impatient. They are dissatisfied with God's timing. He's not operating according to their schedule. And so, they speak against God, and against 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."*
It's hard to hear, isn't it.

It's hard to hear because they despise God's mighty act of salvation, they resent what he's done for them, as though they weren't as good as dead under horrible oppression in Egypt. It's hard to hear because God has provided food and water for them in miraculous fashion every step of the way. This 'worthless food' that they complain about, this manna, is God's gracious provision for them – day in, day out, without fail, they eat till their tummies are full.

It's hard to hear because they've complained about all this before, and yet here they go again, not learning the lessons of the past. God has been so aboundingly gracious and merciful toward them, not treating them according to what their sins deserve – and yet they continue to oppose him. What we might dismiss as a little grumble here is actually vastly significant, and serious, and sinful.

To be impatient with God's timing is to tell God' he's got it wrong. It's to kick God off his throne and put ourselves up there instead.

To revile God's provision is to turn our noses up at God's goodness and kindness. To say He's not done enough. He's not met our standard. We deserve more.

To resent God's salvation is to reject his amazing, undeserved gift. To throw it back in his face. God does not have to save anybody. Nobody, absolutely nobody, deserves salvation or is owed anything by God. None of us deserve his goodness or kindness or compassion. And yet he shows it toward the Israelites, time and time again.

Can you see that their grumbling is actually very serious?

And I'm not saying that the Israelites had an easy run – they didn't. Can you imagine year after year wandering in baking heat by day and freezing desert nights? Always on the move, living in tents, with sand in your bedding, your clothes, everything? Giving birth to children in the sand, raising them in the desert? Eating the same thing day in, day out for forty years? No wifi? No hot showers?
We live the life of kings in comparison, yet we complain about much less.

So why was the Israelites' complaining so bad? Because at its heart, their grumbling signified rebellion against God. A hardness and resentment and sense of entitlement. God, in his great wisdom and goodness, had brought them into the desert. His presence was with them, leading, guiding and protecting. It was he who sustained them. He had saved them, and he would lead them to the promised land. In the mist of the wilderness, they were in fact deeply blessed, because God was with them. He had made a covenant with them. He'd bound himself to them and covered them with his love. And yet they rejected him. Their hearts were hard. They resented his salvation, his grace, his guiding, his timing. They wanted their own way, they wanted to kick God of his throne and be king of their own lives instead. It was sin, and it was catastrophic. Their sin warranted death, and it came in the form of venomous snakes. Everyone who was bitten, died, and this was just punishment for their rebellion. The goodness and holiness of God has been rejected, and the wages of sin is death.

But what comes next is truly remarkable.

Seeing what's going on, the people recognise their wrongdoing and go to Moses. *"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.

The people recognise their sin. They repent. And they go to Moses, asking him to mediate between them and God. And God in his mercy provides a solution. ⁸ *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."* ⁹ *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.*

The people want God to take the serpents away, but he doesn't. They still get bitten. There's still a consequence for their sin. But no longer must they die because of their sin – if they trust God and look to that bronze snake on the pole, they will live. This is amazing mercy and grace. We get a glimpse into the heart of God for his people. Though they reject him and sin against him, God has compassion on those who would turn to him, and he provides a way for them to be spared from death. Our God is remarkable.

It's hard to imagine the Israelites ever grumbling against God again after this. But they did. Life in the wilderness was hard and very soon God's grace and mercy were forgotten, and the people rebelled yet again. And we shake our heads. Until we realise that we are no different.

How many times have you and I grumbled in our wilderness season?

How many times did we complain about the shopping situation a few months back, when all the while God provided us food to eat each day?

How many times did we complain about our medical system, when in God's grace we had access to medicines and professional care?

How many times did we complain about our activities being restricted, yet neglected to thank God for the roof over our head and bed to sleep in and the safety we enjoy living in Australia?

Is our complaining any different to the Israelites?

I'd suggest it's actually worse. Not only because we in the west have been so abundantly blessed in material terms that we've completely lost perspective on how good we've got it – that's a whole other issue. But because we live this side of the cross.

In John 3, Jesus says, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that anyone who believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life."

We all were lost in our sin. We all deserve death. But God, in amazing grace and mercy, provided a way for us to live. Whoever looks to Jesus Christ, whoever believes in him, will be saved. We were once dead in our sins; but because of Jesus, we live. We were once condemned, now we have life in him. We were once rightfully under God's wrath, now we are his children. And it's all because of God's great mercy in Jesus Christ. Who suffered in our place. Paid our penalty. And rose victorious that we might live. We have the hope of eternal life, eternity in God's presence, a hope that will never perish, spoil or fade. And we have the Holy Spirit living within us, God with us every moment of every day. *The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy. Amen?!*

How could we ever complain?

We're not bitten by snakes when we do, but perhaps that would be an act of grace. To remind us that our wise, sovereign Father has brought us into this season. He is with us. He's providing for us and leading us. He's never going to leave us. And he will lead us home.

We who know Jesus as so abundantly blessed in this season. Sure, there are hardships. But we have everything to rejoice about. I need to examine my heart. Perhaps you do too. We are children of God. What more could we ask for?

But what of those who don't know Jesus? What hope do they have in this season and beyond?

If Moses hadn't passed on God's word to the Israelites to look to the bronze snake, none would have been saved. If no one had of once shared the gospel with you and me, we would be as good as dead. And if we don't share the gospel with a world living in darkness, they too will perish. Does that burden our hearts? Let me share something that really struck my heart recently. Phillip Jensen, a pastor and evangelist here in Australia, said this in an interview last week:

"If I don't see the greatest thing that's happened in my life as being saved by the Lord Jesus Christ, I won't get his vision for saving other people. The lost never see the lost, but those who are saved see the lost. I know that there but for the grace of God go I. God's grace to me has been so wonderful to rescue me out of my sinfulness, and to rescue me out of the judgment that is rightly due to me. And to know that but for hearing the word of God, that person may be saved as well – how could I not speak to them about salvation and about Jesus? How can I not long for them to come to know Jesus Christ, and to know the salvation that he has won for us? If I love the Lord Jesus Christ as the saviour of heaven and earth, how can I be content with Australians ignoring him, spurning him, using his name as a cheap swear word? How can I be happy that Jesus is put in amongst all the idols of other religions, as just another person to listen to? I must contend for the Lord Jesus Christ. I must contend for other people's salvation. If I'm not willing to do that, if that doesn't burden me in some way, do I really believe that Jesus is the Lord and Saviour? Do I really believe that his death has paid for my sin?"

We read in Romans 10 *if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in you heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved...but how can they call on him to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them? And how will anyone go and tell them without being sent? As it is written, how beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news'.*

In this wilderness season through which we walk, may those feet be yours and mine.

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