

“By grace you have been saved”

The Lord gives, and gives, and gives some more – and how does Israel respond? The Lord sets them free from slavery in Egypt – He delivers them from their enemies, from death – He leads them every step of the way in the wilderness, shepherding them to the Promised Land – giving them food and water along the way. And how does Israel respond?

“You brought us out here to die – there’s no bread, there’s no water – we loathe this worthless food.” God’s beloved children – the recipients of His gracious gifts – respond with ungratefulness, lies, and rebellion.

In spite of their reaction – in our text for today – the focus is on our heavenly Father, and His response. What does He do? Is He angry? Absolutely! Does He give them what they deserve? YES. “Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.”

Did the Lord’s anger get the best of Him? Did He get carried away? NO. The Lord does not respond like we do. He doesn’t fly off the handle and get carried away with rage. Rather, the Lord “disciplines those He loves.” All that He does – even sending these poisonous snakes into the Israelite camp – serves His ultimate purpose, to give and sustain life.

“What do you mean, ‘give and sustain life’? They died! How is that giving and sustaining life?” You’re right, it doesn’t look that way to us. It looks like the Lord is finally fed up with these rebellious children, and now He’s taking it out on them. But before we get carried away, let’s look at what is really going on here.

First of all, we need to remember that this is the same Lord who redeemed His people – broke them out of their prison-house – freed them from their captors – fed and nourished them – protected and guided them. The Lord has given, and given, and given some more – providing for all of Israel’s needs – THEY, however, have turned around and complained, lied, grumbled, and rebelled against the Lord.

Remember what Jesus said to us earlier – “Whoever believes in [God’s Son] is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already.” These Israelites stood condemned already because of their rebellious unbelief. By their sin, they had already rejected the Lord their God. The Lord did not kill them – the snakes did not kill them – because they were ALREADY DEAD, “dead in their trespasses and sins.”

Now we can look at the situation differently – truthfully – from God’s eyes. Now we see what the Lord is really up to – and what we have here is all GRACE, pure grace. The Lord, who is rich in mercy, continues to love these “complaining-rebellious-dead” children – and in His love and mercy, He provides for their salvation.

It was “by grace” that they were saved, “through faith” – and this was not their own doing – “it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no Israelite may boast.”

For God so loved them, that He graciously gave them poisonous serpents so that they might see the severity of their sin. He loves them enough to call them to repentance, because He does not want His beloved children to die eternally, but to live.

He graciously gives them the bronze snake as the means of their salvation. But it is not the snake that saves – rather, the promise that He has attached to that snake – that “everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.”

Now imagine that! You are surrounded by crawling, hissing, venom-dripping snakes – but God says, “don’t look at them” (don’t look at what your sin has brought into your life) – and don’t look for your own way to escape. Just stay right where you are, surrounded by death – and look only to the One hanging on that pole – look at that One, and believe what I have promised you.

By God’s grace they were saved – through faith in His promise. Now do you see what God is doing? Do you see how it is with His love?

God speaks these words into your ears this very day so that YOU may hear and believe – not just a story about some ungrateful, rebellious people of old – but your story. YOU are Israel – redeemed from slavery – delivered from enemies – led and fed – guided and protected and you grumble and complain against the Lord your God.

The Lord gives, and gives, and gives some more – and you do not realize His gifts and receive them with thanksgiving. He gives you life – parents to provide you with food and drink, clothing, shelter. He gives you gifts and abilities, and the opportunities to work. He guards and protects you – guides and leads you. And how do you respond? Like Israel of old.

Did you hear God's diagnosis of who you were? Dead in trespasses and sins – following the course of this world, following the devil who is at work in the sons of disobedience – living in the passions of your flesh – by nature “children of wrath.”

God is not to blame for the suffering that you endure – He's not trying to kill you. Rather, it is by His grace that He is sustaining your life – providing for all your needs of body and soul – because He loves you, even though you are not deserving of His love.

If He were to draw back His hand of grace from your life – the poison of sin would come creeping in, surrounding you with misery and death. That Israelite camp full of deadly snakes is a picture of your life apart from God's grace.

For God so loved you, that He gave His only-begotten Son. “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.” God the Father lifted up His beloved Son upon the pole of the cross so that He might shed His blood to atone for the sin of the whole world – to give up His life, so that YOU, and the WHOLE WORLD, may not die, but live!

Lift up your eyes to the Crucified Christ and see God's love for you. Though sin's poison courses through your veins, Jesus is the antidote for your sin and death. His blood is death-defeating and life-giving.

This is God's grace FOR YOU. All who look to Him in faith shall not perish, but have eternal life. Dearly beloved, this is what God is doing, even now. This is how God responds to your rebellion. He loves you, and saves you – through His Son, Jesus Christ – so that you may have life, now and forevermore. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, guards your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.