



Immanuel Lutheran Church

Transcript from March 14, 2021 sermon delivered by guest minister Rev. Mark Taylor

Grace, mercy and peace you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sometimes in life, it can actually look like God has become our enemy. Maybe that sounds a little shocking to hear a pastor say that, right? But sometimes I think it's actually true. Our Old Testament lesson for today certainly reminds us of this fact. The Israelites, as they're wandering out on their journey through the wilderness, began to grumble against the Lord and against Moses, because things don't really seem to be working out like they sort of wanted them to. They have the manna and quail-- that's about all. Okay. Sometimes there's not water that's plentiful. And we, some of us perhaps, know what that's like recently with the winter storms.

But, their hearts turn cold. And honestly, it must have been rather difficult for them out in the wilderness that whole time. I don't know about you, but I don't think I would want to wander in the wilderness for a week, let alone 40 years. And it's at this point when the people really begin to see God as their enemy, as the one who has brought these hardships upon them. And they get kind of angry at him for it. Now, we might not want to admit it, but I suspect many of us would probably be given to the same kind of frustrations, or at least the temptation to blame God when things don't wind up going very well at all. Sure, that might not happen all the time. But when things look bleak, it's hard not to ask the Lord, 'why is this happening? What did we do to deserve this?' Have you ever felt that way before? Maybe when a loved one dies suddenly? Or there's some unforeseen tragedy that strikes in your life? What about if you've unexpectedly lost a job? Maybe you have to end up selling your home, moving somewhere else to find work? Maybe you know somebody who's come down with a serious illness, like cancer. And at such times, we can be left wondering, 'why, Lord, why is this happening to me?' If it goes on long enough, we might just find ourselves accusing God of the suffering at hand. That's what the Israelites do. But it doesn't have the effect that they think it will. The Lord heard their cries, but instead of giving them exactly what they wanted, he answered them in a different way.

He sent fiery serpents among them. Now the Israelites situation probably seemed worse than it was before. As if their discontentment with the manna and quail were not enough, now they must contend with venomous snakes. I don't know about you, but I really don't like snakes. And those people, they're bitten by them. And many of them, the Word of God says, died in the wilderness. Their situation's gone from difficult to deadly. And perhaps that old sinful Adam would once again like to blame God for their suffering. Why does he not help them? Why doesn't he stop the death of his people in the wilderness? Well, the Lord does not see things like we do. He does not act in ways that always conform to our expectations, because his ways are not our ways, and his thoughts are not our thoughts. His goal is not to make the lives of his people easy and comfortable. That is a kind of earthly thinking. The Lord knows that if we got all the desires of our heart all the time, it would only lead to an evil action, because the hearts of sinners are set on evil all the time. It wouldn't be any different for us. Do we really think that if



Immanuel Lutheran Church

we had everything we wanted right now and all the time, right, as soon as our hearts desired it, that that would really be better for us?

I don't think it's likely that would be the case at all. And it certainly wasn't for the Israelites in the wilderness. It's not until they start to die in the wilderness that the people of God recognize that they've actually sinned. Their hearts were not content with what God had given them. They always wanted more and then grumbled when they didn't get it. When the Lord had taken away the good that he had given them and replaced it with venomous snakes--no doubt a reminder of the will of the devil, that is, the snake itself--well, it's only then that the people wake up and realize what's really going on. It's only at this moment of desperation that they cry out to the Lord, and to his servant Moses, saying, 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. They confess their sin, and they ask God for deliverance by removing those fiery serpents. That response from the people is exactly what God is looking for. It's the response of faith, the admission of one's sin and guilt, and the trust that looks to God for every good of both body and soul and deliverance in all manner of things. The Lord has used something that looked terrible in order to actually help the people of God.

Without all that suffering, they would have just remained in their obstinacy, and that would have led them to an even worse result. Because it wouldn't be their earthly life that they would need to worry about at that point, but their eternal life. It's interesting to note here, too, that the scriptures never say that the fiery serpents are removed from the people like they had originally asked. Instead, God heard their cries, but he does something different. He has Moses set up a pole with a bronze serpent on it, so that when anyone who is bitten by one of those snakes gazes upon that pole, and the serpent on it, he will not die. See that God does not remove all their suffering from them. He just provides a way through it. A way which looks to God for deliverance, a way which cultivates in the faith and trust in the Lord. But not the need to receive everything they have wanted. That's really not all that different with us in our lives, right? Like the Israelites who wandered in the wilderness, we too can have times of great hardship and suffering--I mean, those times really do come in life.

But it is not our Lord's desire that we should be undone by such times. Instead, he wants to use those times so that they would be a blessing for us. A blessing that is in the ways that we actually need. Our God is concerned above all else that we be saved. What good will it do us if we receive all the desires of our sinful heart and our sinful flesh, but we lose our souls for eternity? We will have gained nothing but a rightful and everlasting punishment. And yet, that is exactly what God wants to deliver us from. He knows the inclination of our heart to treasure up the things of the world instead of the things of God. That's why sometimes he takes the things we love from us in the world. He wants to show us that they're not going to last. Just ask anybody with little kids, right? They'll tell you it's not going to last. Everything that this world has to offer comes to nothing. It is vain and empty to long for those things, and to treasure them in our heart. Even our own earthly life will come to an end. And when we suffer,



Immanuel Lutheran Church

God is teaching us to let go of this life and to treasure up the Kingdom of Heaven instead. You know, I think this is the lesson that many of us are learning quite well in this time and age.

With that most recent snowstorm, I suspect--and I don't know all of your situations here--but some of you might have been without power. Maybe some of you were without water. And there's really not a whole lot you can do in the midst of something like what we've just gone through. We saw how quickly we can go from living life like normal, to be reminded just how dependent we are on God, and how quickly everything can be taken from us. It's the same way too with the hostility that the church is continually facing from the world. We do not find ourselves as biblical Christians in a world that is favorably disposed towards us anymore. There's a lot of threats coming our way. And it's not just towards churches, but even sometimes towards employers and employees and students who are Christian, and especially those who will not give up the confession of the truth for a lie.

Yet all of this, which will cause so much consternation for our flesh, is ultimately for our good. Because it reminds us that this life is passing away. And we as the people of God have not been called to long for this life, but for eternal life. That's the gospel lesson today too. God so loved the world, not to make it rich and lazy, but to save the world from its sin. And he did this, once again, by lifting something up. Except this time, it wasn't a bronze serpent in the wilderness, but the crucified Christ at the cross. If we want to see God's love, we are not to look to the things of the world, you're not going to find it there.

Instead, we are to look to the greatest gift that God gave us. We have to look to Christ. There's nothing more precious in the world that the Lord could give us than the crucified savior. We're all under the threat of death, because it is the punishment for sin. Because sin separates from God. And if you're separated from God, you are separated from the author of life. And therefore, if you don't have life in God, well, the only alternative is death. But to bridge that chasm, our Lord has acted mercifully, albeit in the most painful way for himself. He's entered the creation to suffer as mankind does. To suffer because of trial and tribulation that is in the world as a result of the fall. He takes upon himself the pain and the drudgery of this life. And he endures its worst. All this he does, so that he might make a sufficient purchase price for the sins of the world. That he might make the purchase price for your life, by giving up his life in suffering and death for you.

It's kind of like Jesus allowed himself to be bitten by one of those fiery serpents in the place of those who would have died. He gave up his life with the sins of the whole world upon it. That's a lot of sin. All so that those who are going to die in the flesh will not die in eternity. And it means that we will not die bearing our own sin. So that when we pass away from this life, it's not going to be unto judgment in death, but unto judgment in eternal life. You and I are destined to live with God forever, because our sins have been paid for in the flesh and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. He was raised up for our iniquities, that we might be set free from the vain and sinful desires of the flesh. And we are saved



Immanuel Lutheran Church

through this free gift of the Son of God, whose righteousness was displayed in his death on the cross and yet, by faith, has become our own. Whatever we might lose in this life--and we're going to lose things in this life--none of it will ever compare with what we've received in Jesus. Not the loss of wealth, or mammon. Not the corruption of the flesh through illness or disease. We're not even going to lose more in the suffering that we face at the hands of the world. None of those things will ever match the greatness of the free gift of eternal life.

And so, whatever it is that you're suffering right now--because a lot of you probably are--and if you're not, whatever you're going to suffer in the future, remember; your God does not love you as the world loves you. But he will hear your prayer. And He will answer it in a way that is best for you. That is in a way that is meant to preserve your faith, to enlighten your heart and mind in Christ, and to keep you in the forgiveness of sins, that he's won for you. Your Lord is so concerned about you. It's just that his concern is that you live with Him forever. Which is why suffering in this world is not going to go on forever.

It will come to an end one day and when it does, you will enter into paradise. You will enter into the presence of God with all his people who have gone on before us and will come after us. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

And Now may the peace of God which surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.