

Children love to ask the question "why." It's one of the questions they seem to ask all the time, because they just want to know things, right? Why does this happen? Why do we have to do this? Why is this the way that it is? Why, why, why, why, why? If you've spent any amount of time around children, you'll know exactly what I'm talking about. But even we as adults ask the question "why" too, but more often when things aren't going the way that we might like. Why is this happening to me? Why do I have to deal with these things? Why does it seem like it's never going to come to an end? Why, why, why, why, why? And on and on the questions go.

But we also ask God this question too, this question of "why." But this is where things get a little bit confusing. Because sometimes in the Bible when people ask God the question "why," it's a good thing. It's a normal thing. It is a godly thing. But then sometimes when they ask him the question "why," it's a sin. So how do we tell the difference? How do we know when it's one way or the other? Because consider, for example, Psalm 10, where David says this: "Why, O Lord, do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" When David asks that question, it's not a sin, as we know from the rest of the Psalm. This is a legitimate, godly question. But then over in Numbers 21, in our Old Testament reading, the people of Israel ask God "why" and they sin in doing so. So how do we tell the difference? How can we keep them apart?

Well, we do so by asking another question: why? Why do you ask why? Are you asking God why, because you trust him? Because you know that he can take care of you? Because you know that he's going to do something for you? That would be like David in our Psalm. Or do you ask God why, because you've become impatient? Because you are irritated? Because you're in some sense accusing God? That's how we know the difference. Are you being impatient with God or not?

Because Israel in our Old Testament reading is certainly being impatient. And they have a good reason to be impatient. Because when we meet Israel here in Numbers chapter 21, this is at the end of their wandering through the wilderness. God has finally told them it's time to go to the promised land. It's time to finally be done wandering in the wilderness. And they're excited about that! They're overjoyed. "We don't have to be out here anymore. We can finally go home." And so, just like anybody who's excited, they want to make a beeline straight for the promised land. "We're not going to turn one way or another. Let's just get there already!" But there's a problem. Because in between them and the promised land is Edom, the descendants of Esau. And when they get to Edom and asked them in Numbers chapter 20 to let them pass through the land, Edom tells them no. "We're not going to let you. We're not going to let you pass through our land. You have to go some other way." And so what should have been a journey of about 50 miles or so is now turned into a journey of more than 300, all of it on foot. That would make anybody grumpy and upset with their situation. But more than that still, the land they are passing through is a terrifying wilderness, a land of no food, a land of no water, a place where nobody lives and for good reason. It's the kind of place that you wouldn't want to spend very long in at all. And now they have to go through it for weeks, with no end in sight? It's no wonder that they have become impatient. It's no wonder that they're wondering: "How long is this going to go?"

And Christians, we also have many reasons to become impatient in our lives, many things that we struggle with. I know that we received a lot of wonderful rain yesterday, and we should give

thanks to God for that. But when dealing with something like this drought that we've been going through, do you feel impatient? Impatient with God, wondering: "How am I going to make ends meet? How am I going to get through this? Is this going to be a good year or not?" And on and on the questions go. Or maybe you're dealing with the disruption that this past year has brought and that seems to still be going with no end in sight. And we become impatient and say: "When will things finally get back to normal? When can I finally go back to the way I remember? How long will this go?" Or maybe you're just dealing with some sort of personal trouble, some personal turmoil in your life, and you're wondering: "Why do I have to deal with this? Why does it seem like this never comes to an end?" And so we become impatient in that way. Because Christians, many of these things are unavoidable. It's part of living in this sinful world. But the question you have to ask yourselves is how do you react when these things happen? Do you react trusting in God or do you accuse him of not caring for you?

Because that's what Israel ends up doing, accusing God of not caring for them. Because consider what they have to say: "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." God, you don't care about us! You've left us out here to die! And even the things that you have given to us, they say, we don't want it. If you really cared about us, you'd at least give us some variety. Something else to eat than this food that we continue to eat. They show their impatience towards the Lord, asking him, "When have you done anything for us?" But Christians, God had done many things for Israel. God had provided for them in so many different ways. Because consider what he says in Deuteronomy 8: "And God humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. Your clothing did not wear out on you, and your foot did not swell these forty years." So, in other words, God had provided for Israel by giving them bread from heaven, the literal heavenly bread come down from the angels so they would have something to eat out there in the wilderness. And more than that, he says, "I kept your clothes intact. All of your possessions did not wear out this whole time, so you didn't have to replace anything. Have you ever heard of that happening at any other time in the world?" And more than that still, he says, "Your foot did not swell." He gave them exceptionally good health, so that as they wandered there in the wilderness, they did not suffer in that way. God had provided for them time and time again. And not just for a couple weeks or a year or even a couple years, but for forty long years. How could they forget that? How could they forget everything that God had done for them?

And more than that, we hear in verse 15: "God led you through the great and terrifying wilderness with its fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where there was no water." So, in other words, this was a wilderness filled with snakes, filled with dangerous animals, and God had kept them away from Israel for so long. That was another thing that he had done for them: forty years protecting them from the dangers of that wilderness. And now, Israel asks impatiently, "What have you ever done for us?" Is it any wonder, then, that God is upset? Is it any wonder that he's angry? How would you feel if you had done so much for somebody, and then they turned around and said, "Well, you haven't done anything for me at all"? And so God in his wrath removes his protective hand and allows the serpents to come in. God sends them among the people, so that many are bitten and die.

So Christians, how do we react when dealing with the troubles of life? How do we react when it comes to all of our struggles? Do we accuse God? Do we say that: "You have done this to us. You have forgotten us. You have left us out here to struggle and to suffer"? But have you forgotten, Christians, all the wonderful things that God has done for you? If you've been feeling impatient about the drought and about the things that we are struggling with, have you forgotten how God has provided for you in the past? Have you forgotten the good years that he gave to you, those years when the harvest was bountiful, so that he cared for you? Or have you even forgotten how he has brought you out of droughts in the past? Have you forgotten what God has done? Or if you're impatient about these disruptions, the things that we have to struggle with in the present day, have you forgotten how God has cared for you in years gone by? How he has given you everything that you need? Have you forgotten what God has done? Or if you're struggling with personal troubles, things going on in your life that you're wondering why it's happening to you, have you forgotten how God takes care of you? How he provides for you in everything? Nothing's changed. It hasn't become something different. God still cares for you through everything. Or do we just become impatient with every little thing? Even minor inconveniences set us off, so that we become impatient and angry with God. But if that's the case, Christians, we shouldn't be surprised if God chastises us, if he chastises us for that sin.

But Israel, to their credit, repent of their sin. They turn to the Lord, and they say to him: "Please forgive us. Forgive us this sin, and Moses will pray for us, so that you will take these serpents from us." That's what they want. But notice that God doesn't do that. God doesn't actually take the serpents away from them, because sometimes God leaves our troubles in place as a way of teaching us, as a way of leading us back to himself. But what he does do is he commands Moses to create a metal serpent. He says to him: "Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live." All they have to do, God says, is listen to me and look at this serpent. Because when they do that, they will not die. Now, God has not taken the serpents away from them, but he has taken away the power of those serpents to harm them. No longer will they die when they are bitten. No longer will they have to continuously suffer. God has provided for them a way out, so that they will find deliverance even in the midst of their troubles.

And Christians, Israel held onto that bronze snake for a very long time. We know this, because in 2 Kings chapter 18, 700 years later, Hezekiah actually has to destroy this serpent. Because by that time Israel had turned it into an idol and called it Nehushtan. But that shows us that Israel kept this serpent through all the rest of their time in the wilderness and through most of their time in the promised land. And that shows us that God gave them this serpent as a way of reminding them of what he had done on that day, as a way of showing them, time and time again for centuries to come, that he provides for his people, that he takes care of them, that they don't have to be impatient with him because he is their God. So yes, they kept that serpent as a reminder that God was with them from then on and throughout all of their suffering.

And Christians, we also have a serpent on a pole, so to speak: our Lord Jesus Christ. Because we hear in John chapter 3, starting in verse 14: "And 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." Jesus Christ himself compares himself to this serpent, so that just as the serpent was raised up in the wilderness, so Jesus Christ was also raised up on the cross so that we can look at him

and be delivered from the power of death. So that we can look at him and be saved from all of the things which trouble us. Jesus becomes like the serpent in a greater way as the sign of God's mercy towards his people.

But the cross also teaches us patience, Christians. It teaches us patience, because it shows us beyond all doubt that Jesus is with us through everything. There's no reason to be impatient with God. There's no reason to be upset with him. No matter what happens, the cross shows us that God is with us always. When we look to Jesus on the cross, we know that God cares for us and that he will provide for us all of our days.

So Christians, don't be impatient. Don't be impatient with God. Look to him. Look to Jesus who was raised up for you. Look to Jesus who has given himself so that the sting of all of your troubles may be taken away. Look to Jesus who is a sign of God's love toward you. And you will know when you look to that cross that God will be with you always through all of your troubles. So be patient. Trust him, because he will take care of you always.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, we thank you that you have given us your Son, Jesus Christ, to show us your love and to deliver us from all sin and death. We pray that you would teach us to always look to him, knowing that we can trust him and you to take care of us all of our days. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.