

When God freed the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt, there was great rejoicing. They passed through the dry bed of the Red Sea and enjoyed freedom from the oppression of Pharaoh. The Chosen People indeed had God on their side. Unfortunately, memories are often very short. The journey through the desert was a difficult one and it occasioned much grumbling. Many complained against God and Moses for taking them out of Egypt.

- “If only we had died at the LORD’s hand in the land of Egypt, as we sat by our kettles of meat and ate our fill of bread! But you have led us into this wilderness to make this whole assembly die of famine!” (Ex 16:3).
- The Israelites lamented again, “If only we had meat for food! We remember the fish we used to eat without cost in Egypt, and the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now we are famished; we have nothing to look forward to but this manna” (Nm 11:4-6).
- “Why have you brought us up from Egypt to die in this desert, where there is no food or water? We are disgusted with this wretched food!” (Nm 21:5).

They would have preferred to go back into slavery where they felt life was easier. The saying, “The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence” summarizes the short sightedness of human nature. We too find fault with what we have and look to what others have with a bit of envy.

God was not deaf to the Israelite’s complaints, but they were deaf to God. Psalm 78 summarizes their growing hardness of hearts. “But they went on sinning against him, rebelling against the Most High in the desert. They tested God in their hearts, demanding the food they craved. They spoke against God, and said, “Can God spread a table in the wilderness? True, when he struck the rock, water gushed forth, the wadies flooded. But can he also give bread, or provide meat to his people?” (17-19).

How can God help them to get back on the right track? He must show them how dependent they are for every breath in order to help them repent and return to him. “The LORD heard and [his] ... anger flared up against Israel. For they did not believe in God, did not trust in his saving power” (Ps 78:21-22). Serpents struck at their heels and many died. “Then the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned in complaining against the LORD and you. Pray to the LORD to take the serpents from us” (Nm 21: 7).

Through God, Moses offers help far beyond what they could have ever imagined. “And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life” (Jn 3:14-15).

The journey through the desert lasted for 40 years so on a certain level we can understand the impatience of the Israelites. Under the pandemic, we have been journeying in a metaphorical desert for a little over a year and we long to have things return back to normal. Over the weekend, people who had flocked to Miami Beach for spring break protested against all of the restrictions by having a party in the streets and throwing caution to the wind. Miami had to send in the police to break up the party and then imposed a curfew to restore order and protect the crowds from a super spreader event.

God is not deaf to our complaints. Are we deaf to God? Have we forgotten all he has done for us? Do we look to him in faith to help one day at a time? Is the Lord’s anger flaring up at our rebellion? Do we test God in our hearts? Have we sinned in complaining against the LORD? Have we prayed faithfully to the LORD for protection from the devil, the serpent who brings death through disobedience? Let us never forget God’s response. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life” (Jn 3:16).