

“So Must the Son of Man Be Lifted Up”

Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21

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“And just 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.” (John 3:14-15) It is the beginning of one of the most famous passages in the Gospel of John; indeed, one of the most famous passages in the entire Bible. The 19th-century Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon once said that that this is the chapter he would choose to read to a dying man who did not know the gospel; he called it “the most suitable one for such an occasion.” For in this passage lies the key to a kind of immortality: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” That verse is often emblazoned on signs at football games. and tattooed on peoples’ bodies.

The passage is deep, and rich. To properly understand it, we need to step back into the Old Testament, because John makes a direct comparison to a specific event that is described in the book of Numbers. The Israelites were on their way from Egypt to the Promised Land, that forty-year journey in the wilderness. They have come to Mount Hor, a prominent mountain on the southern side of the Dead Sea. Aaron, the brother of Moses, died and was buried there. They are about to resume their journey, which will take them in a wide somewhat circular path around the nation of Edom, on the southeastern side of the Dead Sea. But the people – not for the first time – become impatient and irritated with Moses. They complain – also not for the first time – about the lack of food, despite the fact that God was providing them with manna and quail day after day. They are tired of the hardships of the wilderness journey; they fear they are going to die in that desert wasteland. So they do what we humans are oh-so-capable of doing, when things aren’t going the way we want: they complain.

But if the people were impatient with their circumstances, God was also impatient with them. We read in Numbers: “The Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died.” There are indeed some varieties of poisonous serpents in the Arabian desert; such as the painted saw-scale viper, a reddish snake with a colorful pattern on its skin; it can grow to be about 30 inches long, and is found in rocky deserts in the Middle East. It is, indeed, a venomous serpent, and its bite can kill not just animals, but also people. The Israelites found themselves bitterly tormented by vipers such as this, and a number of Israelites died. They interpreted this to be God’s punishment on them for their many complaints. So they appealed to Moses: “We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.” Moses prayed on behalf of the people. God answered Moses’ prayer, instructing Moses: “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” That is, God told Moses to craft an image of one of these vipers, and raise it up on a high pole, so that it could be easily seen by any Israelite who had been bitten. Moses did so; he “made a serpent of bronze, and put it on a

pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.” The presence of the bronze serpent on the pole did not prevent people from being bitten, nor did it prevent them from suffering, but it *did* prevent them from dying, so long as those who were bitten made a point to actually *look* at the bronze serpent. In short, God provided a means for the people to *live*, when they would have died. God provided a means for them to experience a *miraculous gift of life*.

So, the Israelites no longer had to worry about these poisonous serpents in the wilderness, for Moses brought the bronze serpent that he had made with them on their journey. In time, when it was no longer needed, it seems to have been kept with other sacred objects. It appears one more time in the Old Testament. In the days of King Hezekiah, who was a good king who ruled Judah from about 715 to 685 BC, there were some people who were using the bronze serpent as an object of worship. Moses had never told the people to *worship* the bronze serpent; indeed, that would have been a violation of the second commandment, “you shall not make for yourself an idol...; you shall not bow down to them or serve them.” (Exodus 20:4-5) Moses had told people to *look* at the bronze serpent; he had never told them to *worship* the bronze serpent. But evidently, hundreds of years later, people were doing just that. Hezekiah, being faithful to God, sought to remove idolatrous worship from Israel, so he tore down pagan shrines throughout the land. He also, we are told, “broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it.” (2 Kings 18:4) So from that moment on, there was no more bronze serpent in Israel.

But the memory of it lived on. To this day, Jews still retell the story of the making of the bronze serpent in their annual cycle of readings from the Torah. In the first century, the Gospel writer John used this story as a metaphor: “And just 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.” (John 3:14-15) We now understand the first part of that sentence. The purpose of the bronze serpent in the wilderness was to provide a miraculous means by which the people might *live*, in circumstances when they would have *died*. So now we can understand the rest of that sentence: “so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” The Son of Man is, of course, Jesus; that’s one of the titles the Gospel writers use to refer to him. “Lifted up” – that’s a reference to Christ’s crucifixion. The Romans took his beaten and bloody body, and impaled it onto a cross, a couple pieces of wood. They would most likely have impaled him while the cross was lying on the ground, then they would have hoisted the cross upright, so that Jesus could die a slow death from asphyxiation. So they *lifted him up*, literally *raising* his body upwards, in much the same manner as Moses would have affixed that bronze serpent that had had made onto a wooden pole, and then hoisted it up for all the people to see. The Romans wanted the people to see Jesus, impaled on that cross; they *wanted* his dying body to be visible. Crucifixion was a common form of execution for Roman criminals; Roman soldiers would line roads with the crucified bodies of their defeated enemies. It was a means of saying, “We’re in control;” “don’t mess with us;” “don’t do what these sorry fools did.” They *wanted* people to see those poor souls.

What they didn’t know, when they crucified Jesus, was that they were actually helping God’s divine plan. “So *must* the Son of Man be lifted up,” John wrote. Why the word “must”? Because it was *God’s will* that Jesus die for the sins of the people – for that was the means by which God would offer *forgiveness* and *new life* to the entire world. Indeed, just as the bronze serpent that Moses lifted up in the wilderness offered *life* to people who were doomed to die, so too does Jesus, whom the Romans lifted up at a place called Calvary, offer *life* to people who are doomed to die. The difference is that Jesus offers *eternal* life. *Everlasting* life. In both instances, the providence and mercy of God was

mightily at work. The first instance simply offered the Israelites an extension of their *present* life. The second instance – the more important instance – offers everyone a life *beyond* this present life.

John clarifies this, with his most famous line: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” John is clear: *the reason why God did this is because of love*. “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” God wanted to provide a means of *salvation* for the people, for *all* the people. What God did for a relatively small number of people in the days of Moses, God now does on an infinitely larger scale through the death of Jesus Christ: larger in terms of the number of people affected, and in terms of the lasting *effect* of this gift.

The thing is, though, the gift doesn’t *automatically* have effect on *all* people. Back in the days of Moses, there was something people who had been bitten by a poisonous serpent needed to *do*. A simple something, really; not anything that would require a great deal of effort. They simply needed to *look* at the bronze serpent that Moses had lifted up. If you were bitten and you didn’t *look* at the bronze serpent – well, tough. I hope you enjoyed your life. It’s like a boat coming to rescue you in the midst of a flood. The simple *existence* of the boat doesn’t save you from the flood. The boat doesn’t do you any good if you don’t get *in* it. That bronze serpent didn’t do people any good if they didn’t *look* at it. “Whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would *look* at the serpent of bronze and live.”

So when we come to Jesus, the simple *fact* of Christ’s death on the cross doesn’t necessarily help *anybody*. There’s something we have to *do*. A simple something, basically as simple as turning to *look* at that bronze serpent. It’s simply *believing* in this Jesus who came to offer you life. Placing your *trust* in him. *Acknowledging* that he is worthy of your faith, your trust, your eternal *hope*. John writes: “Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” Those people who were bitten by snakes in the wilderness – *they were going to die*. That was a *given*. But there was something they could do to *change* that, something they could do to *extend* their life. In the same way, our eternal fate is already sealed. The normal parameters of this life offer no hope for us beyond the grave. *But there’s something we can do to change that* – because God wants to offer us something *extraordinary*.

It requires just one thing. Just one! Something so *incredibly* simple that it doesn’t require any more effort than it took for the Israelites to turn their heads ever-so-slightly to *look* at that bronze serpent. Simply turn your *heart* towards Jesus. Reach out towards him; accept the gift of *life* that he is offering to *you*. You don’t have to feel *worthy* of this gift; you don’t have to have a perfect life, a sinless life; indeed, that’s the point; God is offering this gift to *everybody*, regardless of *anything* anybody has done, regardless of *any* past crime or offense or regret. That’s part of what makes the gift so precious. *It doesn’t matter who you are*. It doesn’t matter where you came from, what you look like, what other people think about you. It doesn’t matter whether you are rich or poor, educated or illiterate; it doesn’t matter whether you fit into traditional societal conventions, or whether your life looks wildly different from what’s considered “normal.” God made this gift available to *everybody*. And I mean – *everybody*.

All you have to do is *accept* it. Take hold of the hand that is being held out to you, the love that is being extended to you. Believe the simple truth that God cares about *you*, that God loves *you*.

And receive. Receive the precious gift of everlasting life through Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

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