**If I Be Lifted Up**

Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, was a very confused man. He had been told by Jesus that he had to be born again to enter the kingdom. So he asked, “*how can a man enter a second time into his mother’s womb*?” Then he was told about the wind, connecting it to spiritual birth. He replied, “*How can these things be*?” Jesus said, “*Are you a teacher of Israel and don’t know these things*?” Then insult was added to injury when Jesus told him, “*If I have told you earthly things that are elementary to understand, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things*?” It had to be very humbling for this prestigious ruler. I’m sure he felt so small he could sit on a curb and still dangle his feet.

But Jesus continued to school him in the lessons he should have understood from childhood. He takes him back to the famous story that all Jews knew from Moses’ writing in Number 21:4-9. First we will read that text, then return here to John 3 and see how Jesus applied it.

**The Bronze Serpent**

**Number 21:4** Then they journeyed from Mount Hor by the Way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; *and the soul of the people became very discouraged on the way*. 5 And the people spoke against God and against Moses: “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread.” 6 So the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died.  
7 Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, “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.” So Moses prayed for the people.  
8 Then the LORD said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live.” 9 So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived.

Now we read Jesus’ actual reference to that text:

**John 3:13** “No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven. 14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. 16 For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. 17 For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.”

If Nicodemus felt discombobulated by the new birth analogy, and the blowing of the wind metaphor, he was undoubtedly confused about the bronze serpent on a pole’s connection to Jesus. If you are confused too - we need to spend a moment learning about it as we prepare to take the Lord’s Supper.

Jesus will use this “*lifting up*” illustration at least two more times in John’s gospel. Let’s read them:

**John 8:23-30** *To the Pharisees and Jewish leaders*:  
23 And He said to them, “You are from beneath; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. 24 Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for if you do not believe that **I am** *He*, you will die in your sins.” …

28 Then Jesus said to them, “***When you lift up the Son of Man***, then you will know that **I am** *He*, and that I do nothing of Myself; but as My Father taught Me, I speak these things.

**John 12:23-33** *To His Apostles***:**23 “The *hour* has come that the Son of Man should be glorified…   
  
27 “Now My soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save Me from this *hour’*? But for this purpose I came to this *hour*. 28 Father, glorify Your name.”  
Then a voice came from heaven, saying, “I have both glorified it and will glorify it again.”  
  
31 Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out. 32 And I, ***if I am lifted up from the earth***, will draw all peoples to Myself.” 33 This He said, *signifying by what death He would die*.”

It seems obvious to us now in the 21st century that Jesus’ statement that He must be ***lifted up*** refers to His crucifixion. But even now, 20 centuries later, we fail to make the connection to the significance of Jesus being the substance of the shadow of that bronze serpent. To be honest, sometimes I feel as ignorant as Nicodemus because I don’t think deeply enough about what Jesus did for me. Let’s learn again, or for the very first time, what that metaphor in Moses’ day means as we break bread.

Go back into that wilderness with me. Better yet, go back there with Israel. They had been wandering in that desert for most of 40 years. They had been through so much. They had been through rebellions, plagues, and other hard lessons, including the 100’s of 1000’s of funerals of that entire first generation that had left Egypt. Most of the first generation had now been buried in the sand and dirt. Moses is now leading them toward the promised land. But instead of going straight into the land, they are having to take the long route so that they don’t fight their kinsmen from Edom. This leads once again to the people belly aching as the text says, “and the soul of the people became very discouraged on the way.” (vs. 4).

You have already heard what happened. God sends poisonous fiery serpents to bite them. Vs. 6 says, “*Many of the people of Israel died*.” God’s remedy is to mold a bronze serpent and place it on a pole. If bitten by a snake you now have a cure. If bitten you make the necessary journey to where Moses’ has placed the pole with the bronze serpent and look on it. Miraculously you will be healed. You will be cured. You’ll be SAVED!

The lesson should be obvious. We have been bitten by a serpent too. His name is Satan. Sin is the deadly poison in our souls. It is imperative that we hurry as fast as we can to get to the cross and stare at Jesus as if our life depended on it. It does. When I say “stare” I mean just that. Fix your eyes on that cross. Gaze at it. Don’t take your eyes off of it. Look closely. What do you see?

Do you see the excruciating pain of a pathetic figure squirming for some comfort?  
Do you see Him gasping for breath?   
Do you see the crown of thorns embedded on His skull, blood dripping down His face?  
Do you see the nails in His side, and His feet, blood pooling on the ground near Mary?  
Do you see the beaten, scourged, dehydrated, bloody figure of one who just recently had   
 been transfigured on a mountain into the glory of God?  
Do you see one who through gasping breaths whispers: “Father, forgive them, they   
 know not what they do?” – as if He is talking straight at me?  
Do you see the crimson blood? The soul cleansing blood? The saving blood that cures   
 your death sentence and washes you white as snow?  
Do you see your only way to escape the sting of death and the grave’s victory?  
Do you see your Savior, with His dying breath, saying, “It is finished.”   
Do you then see Him bow His head, perhaps with a triumphant smile forming on His   
 face, and as He breaths His last, sigh, “Father, into Your hands I commend my spirit.”  
Do you see, and feel, the earth quake. The darkness lift. The sun shine. The angels in   
 heaven shout “Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!”

Picture Israel in that desert, terrified of dying a horrible death by poisonous snake bites. It is inconceivable to me that anyone would refuse to hurry as fast as possible to the site where Moses had hung that brass serpent.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, in this perilous time of the invisible enemy called COVID-19 we see a world that is terrified of this possible death sentence. Hysteria reigns, just like in that wilderness 3400 years ago. But now, like then, God has provided a cure. God has lifted up Jesus on a cross so that we can now read the Great Physicians prescription: Isaiah 53:5

“But He was wounded for our transgressions,  
He was bruised for our iniquities;  
The chastisement for our peace was upon Him,  
And by His stripes ***we are healed***.”

As we now take this bread, and this fruit of the vine, what do you see?

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