

John 17 – As Moses Lifted the Serpent in the Wilderness

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Scripture 1: (Jn. 3:11-15 ESV)

Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?

No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 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.

Scripture 2: (Num. 21:1-9 ESV)

When the Canaanite, the king of Arad, who lived in the Negeb, heard that Israel was coming by the way of Atharim, he fought against Israel, and took some of them captive. And Israel vowed a vow to the LORD and said, "If you will indeed give this people into my hand, then I will devote their cities to destruction."

And the LORD heeded the voice of Israel and gave over the Canaanites, and they devoted them and their cities to destruction. So the name of the place was called Hormah. From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way.

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 we loathe this worthless food."

Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.

And 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.

And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live."

So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

Sermon:

Nicodemus came to visit Jesus at night. Presumably, they were alone. No one seems to have been around and even the disciples are notably absent from this story. Yet this is the moment when Jesus will declare one of the most profound Gospel truths.

After speaking concerning earthly things, after telling Nicodemus that we must be "born again": born by the LORD and of His Holy Spirit; and after claiming to possess divine authority as Daniel's "*Son of Man*", Jesus now begins to reveal and explain a mystery of the divine counsel: the **why** for the Incarnation of God the Son and the means by which our redemption from sin and Satan's power will be achieved and received. Jesus proclaims to Nicodemus precisely **how** a person is to be saved; just how a person "...*may have eternal life.*"; how they may be healed, restored, and reconciled to the LORD.

So, how?

By faith. By faith, alone, and the object of that faith is the “*Son of Man*”: Jesus the Christ.

First, Jesus told him, “*No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.*” claiming all glory, power, dominion, and authority given by the “Ancient of Days (Dan 7:13-14) for Himself as the “Son of Man”, and then He says, “*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.*”.

With this single sentence, Jesus draws upon their past to inform their present and explain the LORD's purpose and the eternal counsel of His Will for our redemption. He draws upon a short event from Israel's forty years in the wilderness, an easily missed, obscure incident nestled between the death of Aaron and Israel's arrival to the edge of the Promised Land. We must look back to this earlier moment in redemptive history, in order to truly understand what is meant by the most famous: the most quoted and most relied-upon out of context proof-text; verse which will soon follow, John 3:16.

But, there is some background necessary to the story:

- Israel's time under God's wrath wandering in the wilderness was soon ending. After almost forty years, the sons of Israel were making their way to Canaan, to finally take possession of the Land and execute the LORD's judgment upon the nations for their wickedness and sin.
- When they approached the Promised Land from the west, their Edomite cousins (the descendants of Esau, the older brother of Jacob/Israel) refused to allow them peaceful passage, which forced them to turn south {towards the Red Sea} and go around Edom.
- Meanwhile Aaron, the first high priest and Moses' older brother, died and was buried upon Mount Hor; an event followed by thirty days of corporate mourning.
- Then, before continuing on their way, the Canaanite king of Arad attacked Israel in a “preemptive strike” and captured some of them. So, just as they would throughout the *Charam*, the Conquest, Israel swore to devote him and his cities to destruction in the LORD's Name and so God gave them the victory. {Arad was renamed (C)Hormah, verbally related to *Charam*, which later became a part of the territory assigned to Simeon (and was ultimately absorbed by Judah).}

Next, while Israel continued to travel south, in order to go around Edom, “...*the people became impatient on the way.*”. Truly, “...*there is nothing new under the sun.*” (Eccl. 1:9 ESV). Even after forty years and the expiration of the generation which came out of Egypt with Moses, the Israelites have still not learned the lesson.

“*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 we loathe this worthless food."*”.

Recall that after they left Mount Sinai forty years prior:

- The people complained about the “hardship” of their new life, so the LORD sent fire to burn and consume them; but Moses prayed to the LORD, interceding for them, and God relented of His wrath (Num 11:1-3).
- Then they complained about the manna which the LORD gave them from heaven every morning {except for the Sabbath since He gave and commanded them to gather a double portion on the day prior}. They began reminiscing about all the different varieties of food they enjoyed back in Egypt

because they were “bored” of manna” . When Moses brought their complaint before the LORD, God decided to send them flocks of quail. He gave them meat to eat, just as they had asked; except however, God told Moses to explain **why** to the people, explaining “*Therefore the LORD will give you meat, and you shall eat. You shall not eat just one day, or two days, or five days, or ten days, or twenty days, but a whole month, **until it comes out at your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you, because you have rejected the LORD who is among you and have wept before him, saying, “Why did we come out of Egypt?”***” (Num. 11:18-20 ESV).

- Next, when they arrived at the borders of Canaan for the first time, they sent twelve spies into the land and ten returned quaking with fear, convincing the people of the impossibility of taking possession of the land. The people cried out, rebelling against the LORD's command to go, “*“Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why is the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?”*” (Num. 14:2-3 ESV). But after Moses interceded for the people again, the LORD said, “*“As I live, declares the LORD, what you have said in my hearing I will do to you: your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness, and of all your number, listed in the census from twenty years old and upward, who have grumbled against me, not one shall come into the land where I swore that I would make you dwell, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua the son of Nun. But your little ones, who you said would become a prey, I will bring in, and they shall know the land that you have rejected. But as for you, your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness. And your children shall be shepherds in the wilderness forty years and shall suffer for your faithlessness, until the last of your dead bodies lies in the wilderness. According to the number of the days in which you spied out the land, forty days, a year for each day, you shall bear your iniquity forty years, and you shall know my displeasure.”*” (Num. 14:28-34 ESV)

A reasonable person would expect that after seeing all the wonders which the LORD performed; after being redeemed from Egypt; and, after **repeatedly** receiving God's mercy and gracious pardon that the people would have learned something.

A reasonable person would expect that the older generation instructed the younger generation to trust the LORD and His Word; to have faith in and to obey Him. Yet here they went again, grumbling against the LORD and against His servant Moses, just like their parents and grandparents before them.

So, how did the LORD discipline Israel this time? What form did His judgment take?

*“Then the LORD sent **fiery serpents** among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.”*

Fiery Serpents. God sent **fiery serpents** among the people. That certainly evokes a dramatic mental image of divine wrath, does it not? But before we allow our imaginations to get carried away, these were not: divine snakes made of fire {snake shaped seraphim}, fire salamanders (*Salamandra salamandra*), nor were they “dragons”; {Caleb, I'm sorry if that disappoints you.}. When we compare the language of this text with others in Scripture, like Deuteronomy 8:15, it becomes clear that they were far less exciting, but no less dangerous.

While the King James and the ESV translate the Hebrew literally here, the NIV interprets it following with the simple Septuagint Greek translation as merely being “venomous snakes”. These were serpents whose bite was “fiery” because their poison would “burn” within a person's blood, causing severe inflammation and a fever, so that their victims would feel like they were “burning up”.

God does not resort to supernatural means, when the natural means (that He created), will suffice.

The point is, on account of their grumbling, God “plagued” Israel with these serpents in judgment and many died. Yet still, even in this extreme act, the LORD exercised restraint within His discipline. He exercised mercy and grace, because it could have been much worse for them. So, because of God's **loving discipline**, “...*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."*”, and Moses interceded for the people before God once more.

But this time, Moses received a different kind of answer to his prayers. “*And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live."*” Previously, his intercessions resulted in a kind of universal pardon or reprieve for everyone included within corporate Israel {the visible covenant community; a mixed body containing both regenerate and unregenerate}. But this time, God's blessing of restoration and healing was much more limited. It was limited to those subject to the LORD's curse and who responded with the obedience of faith {the regenerate **only**}.

“*So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.*”. Now there are some things which must be made clear concerning this “object”.

1. It was not magic. This was not a case of someone just “looking” at it and then, “Abracadabra”, they were healed.
2. This was not an idol. It was not something intended to be prayed to or sacrificed to. {Although, when it reappears in Scripture (2 Kings 18:4), it had been adopted as an idol and was having incense sacrificed to it, which caused King Hezekiah to have it dismantled and destroyed during his religious reforms.}
3. This was also not a universal “Cure-All”. It was limited to the specific problem of venomous snakebites.

Regardless, things do get a little sticky here as regards the Second Commandment and the use of “images” in worship, because this “object”: a bronze snake stuck on a pole; was not what people were supposed to look **to** in faith. It was something that they were intended to look **through** in faith. They were not going to just look at the snake and be healed. Instead, they were supposed to look at the snake on the pole, be reminded of their sin as well as the LORD and His promise of healing, then repent and ask His forgiveness in faith. If they did so, then they would be healed. The snake would not heal them, God would heal them.

So, that was the past; the moment in redemptive history which Jesus drew upon in His conversation with Nicodemus. It may have been an obscure story for the average person, but for this Scripturally literate and Torah educated Pharisee, he was surely familiar. This story would also have been familiar for any faithful Jew whose trust and confidence for divine pardon; whose *pisteuo* was in the LORD God instead of their own personal righteousness; for anyone who lived as holy by keeping the commandments out of sincere love for God and for others, instead of those who did so for earthly glory and honor, or in a vain hope of receiving divine blessings in return for their good works.

How did Jesus use this past to inform their present?

“... *as Moses lifted up... so must the Son of Man be lifted up...*”.

Living on this side of the crucifixion and the resurrection, it is easy and obvious for us to see this as a prophetic moment foreshadowing the manner of Jesus' death on a Roman cross. It was, in part, a statement for Nicodemus to remember later to confirm the rightness of his faith, after that moment came. Yet Jesus was saying so much

more than that. He was using a classic method of Jewish rhetoricism, arguing for something greater from the lesser; speaking of “types and antetypes”. He used “... *as Moses lifted up...*” as a lesser type pointing ahead towards the greater antetype of “...*the Son of Man [being] lifted up...*”, using their understanding of the lesser to explain the later, greater reality.

What ought Nicodemus to have thought upon hearing this? He should have been asking:

- What was the serpent which Moses lifted? What was it, really?
- Was it an object of faith or was it a visual reminder to turn the LORD in faith?
- Was this a salvific ritual or was it the shadow of something more spiritual, moving behind the scenes of reality?

The bronze serpent was nothing in itself. It could do nothing in itself. It had no authority or ability to pardon those who grumbled against the LORD. It possessed no healing power within itself. The only thing it could do was point **beyond** itself to something else, to someone who could both pardon and heal, the LORD: the “Ancient of Days” and the “Son of Man” to whom He gave that same power and authority (Daniel 7:13-14).

This story about the fiery serpents was representative of our spiritual condition, laying out the LORD's whole plan for our redemption. Consider this:

- The people “*became impatient*” therefore, they failed to trust God, just as Adam and Eve became impatient and failed to trust God.
 - The ancient Israelites sinned so, they fell under God's judgment and curse like Adam and Eve.
- The fiery serpents bit people and those who were bit, died, just as the curse of death was imposed upon Adam, Eve, and their posterity. Although their lives now became consumed with both toil and fear, they/we were not utterly or immediately destroyed.
 - The LORD withheld the fullness of His wrath in mercy and offered the Israelites His grace. He gave them time and the opportunity to repent of their sin; to recognize the depth of their depravity and their need for forgiveness and rescue; in order to turn to Him and be saved.
- Suffering under the LORD's judgment, the people went to Moses confessing their sin. They asked him to intercede with God on their behalf. They were repentant of their sin and they were looking to the LORD for deliverance.
 - So must we all repent, when we are confronted with the depth of our own sin and wickedness. We must repent and change our ways. We turn away from ourselves and our selfishness and turn to the LORD, who is the only hope and reason for confidence.
- “*So Moses...*”, the “Servant of the LORD” and God's earthly representative, “...*prayed for the people.*” just as Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, God's Son, and our heavenly representative, will pray for His people: His adopted brothers and sisters; in the “priestly prayer” of John 17 and just as the resurrected Jesus presently prays for and makes constant intercession for us in heaven (Isaiah 53:12; Hebrews 7:25).
 - Thus we are confident that our prayers of confession are heard and are answered whenever we pray to the LORD “in Jesus' Name” (John 14:14).

- The LORD told Moses, “...*everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.*”, meaning that now, everyone who has been bitten with the venomous poison of sin, if they turn to the “lifted up” Son of Man and look upon Him with faith: with trust and devotion; then, they shall receive “eternal life”.
 - Thus we look to the cross; we must look **through** the cross and look to Jesus Christ as our “only hope in life and in death” (Heidelberg Catechism #1).

The story of the bronze serpent also gives us a picture of the Church through the example of ancient Israel.

- As all humanity is afflicted by sin's curse and are equally liable to God's judgment, so all Israel was equally at risk of suffering the bite of these fiery serpents; yet it was only those who were bitten that became ill and, apart from divine intervention, died.
 - However, we must remember and confess that we have all been bitten by that serpent called sin, original sin, through our shared guilt in Adam's first transgression. We are all doomed to die because of his and our sin, unless the LORD comes first (Hebrews 9:27).
- It was only those who looked upon the serpent with faith in the LORD's promises, were healed; not everyone who merely saw the image lived.
 - Those who believed and saw, lived.
 - Those who did not believe yet saw, died.

This shows and reminds us that not everyone in ancient Israel believed, that “*For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring.*” (Rom. 9:6-8 ESV). Those who believed, lived. Those who earnestly believed had been regenerated. They had circumcised hearts; therefore, they loved the LORD their God with all their heart and their soul (Deuteronomy 30:6). But those who did not believe, remained reprobate and so they died, condemned to the same “...*eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.*” (Matt. 25:41 ESV).

It continues to remain the same for us today. Not everyone in church belongs to the Church; just because a person is a church member, or attends most every week, or acts decently, it does not mean that they belong to Jesus Christ. Only those who believe and trust Christ are saved, while those who do not trust Him are damned and will be condemned by Christ on the day of judgment. This is true for those out in the world and it is also true for all those within the visible church, because the earthly covenant community of God has always consisted of both believers **and** non-believers.

So, once more, I ask you to consider for yourselves, “Have you been 'born again'?”

Lastly, Jesus leads us from the past, through the present, to describe His purpose: to God's purpose. Jesus speaks to the purpose of the Incarnation saying, “...*whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*”,.

- Moses, as God's representative, fashioned the bronze serpent in the image of the fiery serpents. It represented God before men; it reminded men of the pain that is suffered on account of God's wrath against Israel's sinfulness and it directed them to turn to the LORD in repentance and faith.

- Jesus, the Son of Man, was born in the image of sinful man (Romans 8:3-6). He was born to represent the LORD before men, as God, and to represent men before the LORD, as Man (as the second and **last** Adam; 1 Corinthians 15:45).

Thus, when we look up to the cross in faith, we look **through** it to see Jesus: the only LORD who mercifully pardons sin, gives true life, and justifies us before God with His imputed righteousness. Whereas, when the LORD looks down upon the cross, He sees Jesus: the only Man who suffered the fullness of God's wrath against our sin, imputed to Him as our righteous substitute, fully satisfying divine justice.

That is when the religious paradigm must have begun shifting within Nicodemus and this is where the religious paradigm must shift within us.

Suddenly Torah, the Law, good works and, all of the many rules and stipulations of Jewish religion would have now been understood simply as the obligation of our obedience to the LORD, setting the standard for our holy living as God's chosen people because the LORD is Holy (Leviticus 11:44) instead of a means for perfecting oneself and earning God's favor and the blessing of eternal life. Now, he would have begun understanding that the means of gaining eternal life rested entirely upon God's gracious gift alone: a gift received by faith (by trust) in the Son of Man (in Jesus Christ) alone; a fact testified to by the Hebrew Scriptures, which he loved, alone.

Nicodemus' works of righteousness, which were once the most important thing to him, were suddenly nothing; just the consequence of the most important thing: his faith in the LORD; his faith in Christ Jesus.

So,

- Because of our faith in Christ, we are declared righteous in the sight of God; we are justified in Christ.
- Because we are justified, we begin to live righteously before God and are made holy; we are being sanctified by God's Holy Spirit.
- Because we live righteously and because we are being sanctified, we begin to obey God's Law out of our love for Jesus and we begin to serve others out of our love for Jesus.

All because God first chose us, regenerated us, and gave us the necessary saving faith in Jesus Christ. So, we must be “born again”. Therefore, we must look to Christ in faith: knowing that sin runs throughout our veins, knowing that we deserve death, knowing that we are powerless to save ourselves, believing that He alone has the power and desire to show us mercy, to forgive us, to heal us, and deliver us from our sinfulness and the dominion of death and Satan.

We are all sinners. Therefore, we must repent and confess our sins, in faith, to Jesus Christ who, interceding with our heavenly Father, will pardon our sin and give us life everlasting.

The Son of Man has been lifted up. If you have been “born again”, then look to Him; believe and He will give you eternal life and welcome you into His eternal Kingdom.

AMEN