

High and Lifted Up – The Bronze Serpent

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Well, Jesus wants Nicodemus to see these things, so just like Daniel's vision of the Son of Man, Jesus again leads him back to a story out of the OT. He does this to answer Nicodemus' question about how something as wonderful yet strange as the new birth can actually take place.

Turn with me if you will to Numbers 21: I'll read the passage in a moment, but here's the context:

The nation of Israel is coming fresh off the heels of a military victory. Right on the southernmost border of the Promised Land, they had been raided by a Canaanite king, the King of Arad, who had taken some of the Israelites captive. So they appealed to God and God gave them a great military victory over this Canaanite king and Israel wiped him from the face of the earth.

Because of this victory against a resident king of Canaan, the Israelite people were ready to jump right into the Promised Land and begin conquering. But there was a problem... it was a geographical problem, and it was a family problem. Let me explain:

Instead of going ahead and invading Canaan at this time from the South, Moses led Israel on a roundabout route to the east and then the north, so that they could enter Canaan on its Eastern border. Moses did this because the Edomites (who lived to the south of the Promised Land) had refused Israel safe passage over their lands. This was the geographical problem.

So why not just take them as they had the king of Arad? Well, there was also a family problem. God had instructed Moses 40 years earlier (see Deut 2:4) not to provoke the Edomites to war. God instructed Moses that He wouldn't give Israel any of the land of the Edomites.. not even enough to set a foot upon. God said this because the Edomites were the descendants of Esau, Jacob's (Israel's) brother, and this made the Edomites the cousins of Moses and the other Hebrews. God had promised Esau this land and He would protect them from the Israelites. Being obedient, Moses then went around Edom and approached the Promised Land from another direction.

Needless to say, the always stiff necked and rebellious populace of Israel didn't care for the detour.

This context brings us to our text:

Nu 21:4 They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way;

Nu 21:5 they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!"

Nu 21:6 Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died.

Nu 21:7 The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us.” So Moses prayed for the people.

Nu 21:8 The LORD said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.”

Nu 21:9 So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived.

This story comes at the very end of Israel's 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. The children of Israel in this account are the first generation descendants of the people that originally left Egypt in the Exodus. And just like their fathers and mothers before them, they are complaining about God's treatment of them rather than being thankful and trusting Him. They are speaking disrespectfully against God and His appointed leaders. And they are spurning God's provision – because the “food” they called detestable was the manna God had provided them each and every day (minus sabbaths) of their 40 years of wandering. And as a result of their heart attitudes, they brought God's judgment down upon themselves in the form of the invasion of venomous snakes.

Now there is much, much more to this account than at first meets the eye. Jesus isn't simply bringing Nicodemus back to this historical account of the Exodus to tell him that He must be crucified – lifted high on a pole like the snake in the story. It's much, much deeper than that and Nicodemus would have or should have clued in on the depth of meaning Jesus was trying to convey. Just like the account of the “Son of Man” in Daniel, the very author of these words is leading an honest seeker to the truths contained therein.

See, right out of the bucket in this historical account we are faced with a severe problem. And I'm not talking about the Israelites behavior. I'm also not talking about the fact that God used serpents to inflict His judgment. God uses the natural world all the time to both punish and bless His creations. What I'm talking about is the crisis of God's direction.

God directed Moses to fashion a serpent of bronze and to affix it to a pole where it could be lifted up for all to see – and more specifically, the reason for this was so that when a wounded Israelite looked upon the bronze serpent for healing, God would heal him. So in other words, the serpent was either a direct target for faith, or it was a representation used to place one's faith in God. Either way, the serpent was a faith target. That means that either way, it was used in some measure for worship.

So if God has directed such a thing, what's the big deal with it? The second commandment is the big deal with it:

From the Amplified Bible:

Ex 20:4 You shall not make yourself any graven image [to worship it] or any likeness of anything that is in the heavens above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth;

This next passage is Deut 4: 15-18. Moses is reminding Israel about their encounter with God at mount Horeb, which is an alternative name for Sinai. In essence, this passage is a mini sermon on the 2nd commandment:

Dt 4:15 You saw no form of any kind the day the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire. Therefore watch yourselves very carefully,
Dt 4:16 so that you do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol, an image of any shape, whether formed like a man or a woman,
Dt 4:17 or like any animal on earth or any bird that flies in the air,
Dt 4:18 or like any creature that moves along the ground or any fish in the waters below.

Do you think God is trying to make Himself clear?

So the first huge issue we have is that God directed Moses to make a graven image, seemingly in conflict with the 2nd commandment.

The second thing I want to point out has to do with why the Israelites were at odds with God, and what God prescribed to remedy the situation.

The Israelites were at odds with God because they didn't trust Him. They had no faith in Him. This lack of trust, this lack of faith was the source of and led directly to their rebellion against God. So what did God prescribe for these faithless rebels?

Well, God never changes. There is no shadow of turning in Him. What He required from these Israelites is exactly what He requires of you, me, and everyone else. If you are obedient to God, that is a very, very reassuring fact. But if you are a rebel, it should terrify you.

For their lack of trust, God prescribed faith. For their rebellion, God prescribed obedience. Pretty complicated, huh? What God prescribed for them, He does for us. And that is: the exercise of trust as shown by our willful obedience to His word. It's that simple. Trust and obey, for there's no other way.

Are you faithless towards God? Then decide between your own ears to trust God, place your faith in His Redeemer, Jesus Christ... and God will grant your desire and grant you the faith you lack... but you must decide.

Are you a rebel towards God? Then decide between your own ears to serve God. Decide that He will be your Lord, and you will be His servant... and God will grant it to you. Anyone that comes to Him He will not cast out. But you must decide.

Well, God didn't leave how to be obedient to Him an open question for the Israelites, just as He doesn't for us.

He instructed Moses to make a graven image of that which was killing them: a serpent, and to stick it on a pole, and raise it high and lifted up, so that any who would look upon it in faith would be healed.

Guess what? That's exactly what He has done for us. He who knew no sin, became sin for us. We'll come back to this too.

I want now to return to the first issue:

Why did God direct Moses to make a graven image, a likeness of the serpents that were killing them? How could God do this when He Himself had directed the Israelites not to make graven images? How could looking to this graven image God had prescribed actually heal anyone?

See, these are the critical questions in this historical account of the brazen serpent, and it is exactly these questions that Jesus was seeking to arouse within Nicodemus. Jesus keeps leading Nicodemus back to the Old Testament, back to what should have provided questions in the Old Testament, so that He could show Nicodemus, and us, that He Himself is the answer to those questions.

God left loose ends, as it were, - enigmas, conundrums, unanswered questions - all over the works of the law and the prophets.. purposely. Purposely. So that His people would be looking ahead for what was still to come, and so that in knowing the very specific problems and questions in the Old Testament, they would understand the very specific resolutions and answers that were only embodied in God's Redeemer, Jesus Christ.

Why did God outlaw the making of graven images for worship in the first place? Quite simply because of the great and wonderful plan of salvation that He was working out for those that would accept Him in faith.

See, in God's plan of salvation, each and every one of us must have a personal relationship with Him in order to be saved. The mold of Adam must be restored and surpassed through the mechanism of the second Adam:

1Co 15:45 So it is written: "The first man Adam became a living being" ; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit.

1Co 15:46 The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual.

1Co 15:47 The first man was of the dust of the earth, the second man from heaven.

1Co 15:48 As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the man from heaven, so also are those who are of heaven.

1Co 15:49 And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven.

1Co 15:50 I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

God has to change us, convert us, from what we are, into something else. We have to be born again. For those that are now in Christ, we are not now what we will be. But the spiritual change, the change God makes to our natures when He saves us – the entrance of the Holy Spirit to live within us.. that is the down payment – the earnest money God gives us to both reassure us that He is there, and to make it possible for us to please Him. The balance of the change will come when He returns for us. And just as an aside, if you are trying to please God without being reborn of His spirit... it's my job to tell you that you aren't making any headway at all. In fact, you are making things worse for yourself. The only way we can please God, is to please Him in the manner He has indicated that we should, by turning over all of ourselves to Him, in and through His Son.

But because God effects this change, this rebirth, through a personal relationship between us and Himself, He will not sanction anything or anyone coming in between us and Himself... be it an idol that leads people astray, a priest that leads people astray, or a body of religious tradition that leads people astray.

In His great plan of salvation, God was preparing His redeemer, the second and last Adam, Jesus Christ... the one who would rescue His people from their sin. The one who would come and heal the sickness and dementia of sin.

Why did God outlaw graven images, or molten images for that matter? Because God knew that if the people sought to fashion some physical representation of Himself, the only place that would lead would be to idolatry. They would end up worshiping the image rather than what the image was supposed to represent. The other consideration here, is how do you make an image of the One True God, who is incomparable to anything else in creation, and that – being Spirit – has no physical form?

No...God did not want people to settle for anything less than Himself.

There is another aspect to this as well though. See, God had prepared a gift for the world – and at the correct time, in the correct place, and in the correct way, He was going to deliver this gift. And what's really, really cool, is that in His efforts to save those that will turn to Him in repentance, God was going to come to us. The only God that there is, simply because He wanted to because He made the decision to love us, condescended to actually come to Earth, to interject Himself into space-time, as a human (without becoming any less God) so that He could show us the only approved image of Himself, and so that He could satisfy His own wrath against sin.

We don't have to worry about forming idols, or creating rituals, or any of that other stuff to try to reach out to God.. because He has already reached out to us. He tells us that His efforts are fully sufficient. If we then try to add on to what He has done, are we not in effect calling Him a liar and telling Him that in fact His efforts are not good enough?

And in the full and final expression of His efforts, God Himself was preparing His **own** graven image to give to the world. Now that's a shocking statement isn't it?

To say that God has a graven image. What is that? Did Mr. Preacher here just step off into a cesspool of heresy? Not at all. God does have a graven image. It was and is His very Son (God Himself), graven in the clay of humanity, and sent to the world through a woman as God's redeemer – His Savior. Jesus Christ is God's living and breathing graven image. He is the only image of God that is true and pure.

Col 1:15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.

Col 1:16 For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.

Col 1:17 He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Col 1:18 And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.

Col 1:19 For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him,
Col 1:20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

In this event of the bronze serpent, God was showing us what He would do in the future... He would provide His own image, Himself. His own source of salvation to save people from their sin – for those that looked to His provision in complete reliance and trust. Complete reliance and trust. Halfway won't do.. it will just do you in.

And it is no accident that God instructed Moses to make the serpent in this account from brass. In the Old Testament, brass is a symbol of God's judgment. God will judge sin. You can take that to the bank. He will either judge it in you, or He will judge it in the provision He Himself provided on the cross. But it will be judged. My advice, is to run don't walk to God's offer of amnesty. Lay down your pride, lay down your rebellion, lay down your self sufficiency, and run to the cross and embrace Christ. All of us, when looking over our lives, realize we have made some really stupid decisions... don't let ignoring or denying Christ be your ultimate stupid decision.

If you do accept Christ, be assured that some people will laugh. They will. Be assured that some people will scoff. They will. In some circles you will be the butt of jokes. But realize this, in daily life, even though we don't know it, we are all laughed at, we are all scoffed at, and we are all, at one time or another, the butt of jokes. So the only thing that is new is a positive.. you will be right with God and inherit eternal life.

God wants everyone to be right with Him. Thus the entire Bible is about Jesus Christ in one way or another, and in this little account from the Exodus, we have a beautiful painting of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We have God reaching out to man, offering deliverance to him from his slavery (known and unknown) – offering provision to him for his needs – (known and unknown). And in turn we have people – rejecting God's deliverance and provision when it does not suit their particular tastes, when it doesn't fall into the mold that they desire. And then we have God responding with judgment and wrath upon their distrust and rebellion – because He cannot let sin reign unjudged, but at the same time, we also have God extending grace and mercy for those that will turn from their distrust and rebellion, and who will take Him at His word and trust Him. In the very midst of the judgment, God's grace and forgiveness is ready and waiting for anyone who will accept it. What a wonderful God. What a loving God.

And right in the middle of this display of His judgment and His grace, God is instructing us and showing us how He works. And how He works, isn't at all how we would work.

Please consider...

The people asked Moses to in turn ask God to remove the serpents:

Nu 21:7 The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed for the

people.

But God didn't do remove them, did He? In fact, we have no indication that from this point forward in the travels of the Exodus that God fully removed the serpents. We are told that Israel carried the brazen serpent with them hinting that they would continue to need its services in the future. Why didn't God just remove the serpents? Simply because the serpents weren't the root of the problem – just as God's wrath against sin isn't the root of anyone's problems. What's true about these ancient Israelites is true about us: their problem was their distrust and rebellion against God. Our problem, and our only problem, is our distrust and rebellion against God. And it is to this problem that God directs His solution:

Nu 21:8 The LORD said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.”

Now just look at what God did. He took the very thing that was killing them, the judgment upon them from God Himself for their faithlessness and rebellion, and God used that very thing to save them. God took something that previously had only been a curse, a death delivery device for their sin, and God turned it around 180 degrees and turned it into a vehicle of blessing – a life delivery device according to their trust and obedience in Him.

There is no one else like Him, is there? What a wonderfully powerful and completely in control God is ours just for the asking. It's truly impossible to fully comprehend the glory of God.

Here's another lesson is this account from the Exodus:

How do you suppose looking upon this brazen serpent for healing actually healed anyone? How could looking to this thing that God had Moses make, turn the curse into a blessing? How could that counteract the venom that was coursing through someone's body. How could something like trust, that has no mass, no physical presence, be used to counteract such a real, physical problem?

This one is actually easy to answer... looking upon the brazen serpent, high and lifted up, brought healing for one reason and one reason only. Because God made it so.

This was no act of divine shamanism... it was no case of magic or voodoo. It was God doing what God has done with humanity since our creation: God stating that something is true, and us either distrusting Him and going our own way, or believing that what He has said is true, and then walking forward with Him in that special kind of active trust that the Bible calls faith. That's it. Plain, simple, and sweet. And it's exactly the same with Jesus as it was with this brazen serpent. Looking to Jesus in faith for eternal forgiveness of our sins saves us, simply because God makes it so.

And in recalling this account to Nicodemus's mind, Jesus is telling him... “hey Nicodemus. God is still in the business of delivery from sin and death, but now it's time for the main feature. You see Nicodemus, all of these things we've been talking about are the things that God gave in the past to tell you that I was coming. They're about me Nicodemus... the manifestation on Earth of Heavenly things in Heavenly terms. And this account of the brazen

serpent is no different. Just look at what God did Nicodemus... He removed His judgment upon sin and rebellion based on trust. Trust Nicodemus. “

Jn 3:14 **Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,**
Jn 3:15 **that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.**

It's like Jesus was saying, “you know that brazen serpent Nicodemus? That's a picture of me. A graven image commanded by God Himself. That's me. A graven image in which there is no rebellion or iniquity – no sin, because the image is from God's own command. That's me. Yet the graven image is made to represent all rebellion, all sin. That's me too. And any who look to Me in the trust that what God has said about Me is true... that person will be saved Nicodemus. They won't have to suffer the ultimate consequence of their sin. They'll live forever more Nicodemus.”

And then Jesus comes to the whole reason for His very presence on Earth. He explains why it is God sent Him:

Jn 3:16 **“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.**

Jn 3:17 **For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.**

Jn 3:18 **Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.**

If you want to accept God's offer of salvation in Christ, you can. Not by your own efforts, as the Pharisees and others thought, but simply by your response to God's offer.

One cannot see the kingdom of God unless one is born again. That should be the tell, shouldn't it? That Christ would use this analogy of birth?

Which of us by our own efforts effected our own birth? The answer: none of us. Now the analogy can be taken too far, just as any analogy can... one might say, which of us decided to be born? The answer would be none of us, and some use this to try and say that no one has any power whatsoever in being saved, even to the point of deciding to be saved and placing saving faith in Christ.

They would say that all of that is absolutely none of us, even as far as our response to God. I find that to be untrue, and it does injustice to Christ's teaching here, and God's character in general in the balance of the Bible.

Just as in the story of the brazen serpent, where the afflicted must exercise their will in response to God's provision, and then in the great verses of John 3:15 and following, He makes it categorically clear that we must exercise our wills and take action in order to be saved.

The crux of the matter is that not all verbs are meritorious works... Not all actions are

meritorious works. Just because we do something that leads to salvation does not mean that that something bought us merit with God. Not at all. In fact, that "something" actually affirms our condemnation before God. Have you ever thought about that?

When we turn to God in repentance and faith, we aren't making ourselves look good to God. What we are doing is actually agreeing with God's determination of our own state. We are agreeing with God about how horrible and wretched we really are, and that in that wretchedness we can do nothing to save ourselves.. nor can we do anything to please God while we are only once-born.

But if we will cast our eyes to God's provision in Christ, high and lifted up in the dangerous wilderness that is this world, and if we will cast ourselves upon Him in the trust that He will do what He has promised to do, why then everything changes. We enter into the intimate relationship with God that He has always intended for us. He changes us from what we were, into what we never thought we could be. He effects in us the new birth and our eternal life with God in His kingdom starts right then and there.

If you want to accept Christ, you can. God's offer is being made to you. If you want to accept it, you can pray a prayer like this. Now this isn't something that one must say by rote.. it's not an incantation or some type of spell. What's important is the meaning behind it. It involves admitting your sin before God, and asking Him to apply the sacrifice of Christ to you. It's you pleading guilty in God's court to your rebellion. It's you laying down your own life, your own desires, your own plans, and instead asking God for new marching orders. His marching orders. It's a decision of the will to change your allegiance to God most high. And if you respond to God in this manner, He'll do the work of saving you.

But always remember. Salvation in Christ isn't about your ability. It's about your response, to God's ability.

Dear God. Thank you for making your word known to me, and thank you for sending Christ to die for me. Thank you for loving me and caring for me. Please forgive me for not loving you or caring about you. I want to change that. I want to turn from my sin and I want to turn to your redeemer, your Son. I want His life of obedience to you, to be my life. And I want His death on the cross, to be my death. So that like Him, I can live anew to you. Please put me under the blood of your Son father. Please forgive my sins on the account of Him. And please guide me and show me what you want me to do. Thank you for saving me Father. In your Son's precious name... Amen.