

JCI #177

October 2016 Christ Lifted Up Numbers 21, John 3

Most folks I know would agree that the best known verse in the Bible is John 3:16. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” (ESV) To see this verse in its larger context, we must listen as Jesus speaks with a confused Pharisee and Rabbi named Nicodemus. Jesus just told Nicodemus he (Nicodemus) would never see or enter the kingdom of God unless he was born again. Nicodemus took Jesus very literally and responded with shock that a person needed to enter into his mother’s womb a second time! Jesus then went on to explain the distinction between physical birth (of water and flesh) and spiritual birth (of the Spirit). He also explained that unless the Holy Spirit gave a person a new birth, they would never enter God’s eternal kingdom. Jesus explained that the work of the Spirit is evident and powerful in its effect like wind, but just as invisible and unpredictable. And people who are not born of the Spirit cannot understand. Nicodemus simply could not fathom this. Jesus then responded by telling Nicodemus that if he couldn’t understand earthly things, he would never understand heavenly things. The reason Jesus understood heavenly things is that He came down to earth from heaven. No one else had ever done that. Then Jesus lays out the picture of Moses’ serpent on a pole, and Jesus’ coming death on the cross. This is the introduction to John 3:16. Let’s take a few minutes to compare the serpent in the pole and Jesus on the cross.

John 3:13-18

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. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

Numbers 21:4-9

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. 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 we loathe this worthless food.” ⁶ Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. ⁷ 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. ⁸ 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.” ⁹ 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.

Same Direction - God commanded it: God commanded Moses to raise up the serpent. Jesus came down from heaven to do the will of His Father who sent Him.

Same Context – Man’s Rebellion: The people of Israel complained and rejected God’s will in spite of the daily miracle of manna, water, and constant protection. Jesus came to rescue hell deserving sinners who continually reject God’s will in spirit of common grace that gives and sustains life for all of us.

Same Consequence - Death Because of Sin: The fiery serpents came with their lethal bite as a punishment of Israel’s sin against God and Moses. Death comes upon all men because all have sinned. Romans 5:12, Romans 6:23

Same Figure - The Cause of Death: The bronze serpent, representing the cause of death, is lifted up on a pole for all to see. Jesus becomes sin for us, the cause of eternal death, and is lifted up on the cross for all to see. 2 Cor 5:17

Same Desperate Need – Death is inescapable. The Israelites knew that death was coming when the serpent bit them. We all know that death is ahead of us. Our need is real, immanent, desperate. Hebrews 9:27

Same Means of Rescue - Look by faith. The text says that those bitten were to “look to” or “look towards” the serpent on the pole. This is telling. The camp of Israel comprised nearly 2 million people living in tents, plus flocks of sheep and goats, and herds of cattle and donkeys. Bible scholars estimate the camp of Israel was 20 miles long and 20 miles wide. The likelihood of being able to see a bronze serpent on a pole in that rock waste of a desert even a few hundred yards away was almost non-existent. However, Moses lived near the tent of meeting and the tabernacle, with the pillar of cloud and fire clearly visible to all. So everyone could look towards the serpent on the pole, even if they couldn’t see it. They knew who to look towards, what to look towards, and why to look towards it, even though only a few could ever actually see it. So it is with Christ. Only a comparative few saw Him lifted up for us to die. But we look “to Him” just the same as the Israelites did. We know who He is: The Son of God. We know where He is: The Father’s right hand. We know what He did: Lifted up on the cross to die for us, and now risen in glory. Hebrews 12:2 1 Peter 1:8

Same Confrontation – a bronze serpent lifted up, a crucified Savior lifted up. When Israel looked towards the serpent, they were confronted with their sin. They were confronted with judgment. They were confronted with their need. So it is with the Savior on the cross. To believe in Christ is to be confronted with our inexcusable sin, His holiness and righteousness, His sacrificial death, our desperate need, His amazing grace. To look to Jesus is to see our sin and His suffering judgment in our place.

Same Universal Offer – Whoever looked lived. Moses didn’t separate the people and say some could look and others couldn’t. He didn’t hide the serpent on the pole from anyone. And no one had to see it, just look towards it. So it is with the Son of God. “Whoever believes will not perish!”

Same Faith – look. Looking is a tremendously effective illustration of faith. We don’t do. We don’t go. We don’t try. We just look. It signifies intention. You have to want to look. It signifies willingness. No one can make you look at what you don’t want to see. It signifies submission. We are looking away from ourselves and to the source of life and eternal healing. It signifies specificity. We are looking around; we are looking towards. We know what we need to be looking towards. It is specific. The serpent on the pole. The crucified Christ, risen and seated now in glory. We look to Christ in heaven for eternal life and Him only.

Same Simple Call – Look and Live! Moses didn't tell them to climb a mountain, or bring money, or do some great feat. He just said "look towards the serpent on the pole and you will live." So simple. So possible. Day or night. Young or old. Man or woman. Jesus invites us to come to Him by simple faith.

Same Definite, Wonderful Outcome – Whoever looked lived! No ifs, ands or buts. Whoever looked lived! Whoever believes has eternal life. Did all those who were bitten look? We don't know. But they could have. They should have. They needed to. But we don't know if they all did. So it is with the glorious invitation of the gospel. Whoever is willing... whoever is thirsty... whoever hears... whoever... come!

"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.

Self-check

- 1) Do I recognize my desperate need of Christ every single day?
- 2) Am I filled with eagerness to share the glorious news that there is rescue, healing, life eternal for all who will just look to the crucified Christ?
- 3) Do I see the desperate need of my friends, neighbors and family who are dying and need to hear once more the wonderful news of Jesus, Savior of all who look to Him?

For Further Study: Consider the types of Christ found throughout the Old Testament.

Coats of skin, Ark, Melchizedec, Isaac and the ram, Passover Lamb, Tabernacle, Veil, Scapegoat, High Priest, Manna, Water from the rock...

"Lord, I look to You. I am a sinner and have brought the misery and judgment I deserve on myself. No one else is to blame but me. And no one else can rescue me and restore me and forgive me but You. You alone are the crucified, risen, sovereign Savior. I look to You, Lord Jesus. My eyes, my heart, my soul is fastened on You for life eternal. I look to no one else. All else are but distractions. Keep my eyes ever on You, Lord, for salvation, for strength, for direction, for cleansing, for all. I pray in Your holy name, You who are the lifted up and exalted Son of God, Amen."

Remember, you are very special to us and we pray for you.

Living with leaving in view.... John 9:4 Ron& Val

Seeing The Invisible,
embracing The Unapproachable,
declaring The Unexplainable,
changed by The Immutable,
running after The Irresistible
with inexhaustible joy
in our inexpressible sorrows,

spending our time on eternity,
owning nothing yet possessing everything
that matters and lasts.
We are Pilgrims in Paradox.
Welcome to THE JOURNEY