

Lifted Up

John 3:9-15

Have you ever heard anyone say, "We need to lift up the Lord Jesus Christ!" By that they mean that we ought to speak about the Lord to those who may not know him. A song found in the Boatman hymnal reflected that sentiment. "Oh! The world is hungry for the living bread; lift the Savior up for them to see." It was a very lively hymn with a strong melody. But it missed the point of the words spoken by Christ about his mission.

Nicodemus did not understand the need for spiritual rebirth, for a divine begetting, even though that truth was taught in the scriptures. And he certainly did not anticipate the way that salvation would come to the undeserving. The Lord Jesus Christ reminded him of the mercy of God that came to Israel in the wilderness.

The children of Israel had once again grown impatient with the Lord. They complained about his leadership, and that of Moses, and professed their loathing for manna, the food that God had miraculously provided them on their journey. The Lord's response was to send what are described in Numbers 21:6 as "fiery serpents" among them. The serpents bit many and many died.

Suddenly Moses was "in demand" again and the people called on him to pray for them. The Lord told Moses to fashion a fiery serpent and set it on a pole. Those who were bitten were to look to it and when they obeyed they did not die. Those who looked to the serpent, lifted up on the pole, lived. You have seen this serpent on the pole used as a symbol of the medical profession.

It was this very short account of a rebellious incident that the Lord used to point Nicodemus to the very heart of his messianic work. The Lord would be lifted up. This was not the only time that the Lord used such language. Near the end of his time on earth he rode triumphantly into Jerusalem. On that occasion he told the people, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." (John 12:32) John went on to explain that, "He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die." The crowd had seen far too many people "lifted up" by the Romans. They had seen far too many dying on crosses. They thought that death on a cross could have nothing to do with the true Son of Man.

But it was that death for sinners that was the heart of the matter. The Lord Jesus Christ would become like a poisonous serpent, like a detested thing. He would become sin for us in his death. He, who had never sinned, would suffer the punishment for the sins of his people. And like the serpent in the wilderness, all who would look to him would not die. All who looked to him in faith, trusting him to deliver them, would live.

W.A. Ogden wrote these words,
I've a message from the Lord, Hallelujah!
The message unto you I give:
'Tis recorded in His word, Hallelujah!
It is only that you "look and live."

Life is offered unto you, Hallelujah!
Eternal life thy soul shall have
If you only look to him, Hallelujah!
Look to Jesus who alone can save.

I will tell you how I came, Hallelujah!
To Jesus when he made me whole
'Twas believing on his name, Hallelujah!
I trusted and he saved my soul.

John 3:13 records words of the Lord about the unique role that he would play in redemption. "No one has ascended into heaven except him who descended from heaven, the Son of Man." Only Christ, by his own righteousness, has ascended into the very presence of God. Have you looked to the Lord Jesus Christ who alone has been lifted up on the cross, and who alone has ascended above?

by Joe Nesom