

The Son of Man Must Be Lifted Up (John 3:13-36)

Expository Lessons from the Gospel of John

I. Introduction to this Lesson

- a. In the prior lesson, we talked about the meaning of what Jesus said to Nicodemus, that no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again of water and the spirit.
- b. In this lesson we will cover:
 - i. Perhaps the most famous verse in all of the Bible, to evangelical Protestants, “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.” (**John 3:16**, NKJV)
 - ii. A reference to an odd, relatively obscure story buried in the Old Testament, in the **Book of Numbers**
 - iii. The spiritual battle for the souls of men, described in terms of “light and darkness”.
 - iv. How John the Baptist responded to the rising popularity of Jesus.

II. Like the Snake in the Desert

- a. Read **John 3:12-17**
 - i. Jesus is having a serious spiritual discussion with Nicodemus, who he refers to as “the teacher of Israel”. Jesus makes a point from a seemingly obscure passage from Moses in the Wilderness.
- b. Read **Numbers 21:4-9**
 - i. Problem: people are complaining about their time in the Wilderness.
 1. It is a snake and scorpion-infested desert, after all.
 2. They are eating manna for breakfast, lunch and dinner; and are getting tired of that.
 3. Paul refers to this incident in **1 Corinthians 10** as an example to us, that we should not “test the Lord”, either. They were killed by snakes, to teach us a lesson!
 - a. Maybe you don’t think complaining, being ungrateful for what God has given you in this short life, is a serious sin?
 - b. (For example, complaining about your job, your financial situation, your spouse, etc.)

- c. Maybe you don't think testing God's patience, as they did, is that big of a deal?
 - i. Some think: "After all, it's only what is coming *out of my mouth*; it's certainly not nearly as bad as idolatry or adultery or murder or the *serious* sins, is it?"
 - ii. However, God sent poisonous snakes in to teach them (and us) an important lesson regarding how dangerous those sins (complaining and testing the Lord) are. Those sins prevented many Israelites from reaching the Promised Land. We are warned that these same sins can prevent us from reaching heaven if we do not repent!
- ii. The people cry out for help; God tells Moses what they must do in order to survive the bite of the poisonous snakes.
 - 1. Moses it told to make a bronze or copper snake
 - 2. Then put this snake on a pole, or on a "sign".
 - a. In the LXX it says, "on a sign", or "on a sign/ signal pole".
 - b. Keep in mind that the apostles and early disciples (and Jesus) generally quote from the LXX when they refer to the Old Testament. Also, according to Eusebius (church historian, writing around the year 325) the LXX was "the only version that is approved by the church of Christ, which has spread throughout the whole world, and it is the version that was handed down to us from the beginning by the apostles and disciples of Christ." (Source: Eusebius of Caesarea, *Chronicon*, Book 1)
 - c. The word used for "sign" that the snake was mounted on (σημεῖον) is the same one used in Exodus when God gives Moses three signs to demonstrate that he is sent by God. Also, it is the same word Jesus uses when He says, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah." (**Matthew 12:39**, NKJV)
- iii. The copper or bronze snake is lifted up on a pole for all to see.
 - 1. All who look to it live; those who refuse to will die because of their sins.
 - 2. But something very odd about this story!
 - 3. God had specifically forbidden the Jews to make carved or cast images, including the likeness of "any creature that moves

along the ground”. Read **Exodus 20:4** in the Ten Commandments; also consider what it says in **Deuteronomy 4:14-18**.

4. Making an animal image is what got the people into trouble at Mount Sinai in the first place, when they made the golden calf (**Exodus 32**)
5. In fact, they *did end up in the sin of idolatry* with this bronze snake. For that reason, many years later, king Hezekiah would break it into pieces. (**2 Kings 18:1-4**)
6. Tertullian (Christian writer from Carthage, c. 160-225) commented on this story:
 - a. “Why, again, did the same Moses, after the prohibition of any ‘likeness of anything,’ set forth a brazen (= *made of brass* - CP) serpent, placed on a ‘tree,’ in a hanging posture, for a spectacle of healing to Israel, at the time when, after their idolatry, they were suffering extermination by serpents, except that in this case he was exhibiting the Lord’s cross on which the ‘serpent’ the devil was ‘made a show of,’ ...For he who then gazed upon that (cross) was freed from the bite of the serpents.” (Source: Tertullian, *An Answer to the Jews*. In Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 3, p. 166).
 - b. Tertullian says sin and Satan were to be defeated at the cross, demonstrated by the snake on the pole.
- c. Jesus made the point, “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” (**John 3:14**, NKJV)
 - i. Jesus uses the same expression about being “lifted up”, in **John chapter 12**: “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself.” (**John 12:32**, NKJV)
 - ii. Similarly, in **John chapter 8** Jesus says, “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 8:28**, NKJV)
 - iii. This is the same word “lifted up” that is used in the LXX at the beginning of the famous prophecy in **Isaiah 52:13-53:12** about the Suffering Servant, describing the crucifixion of Christ that would happen about 750 years later.
 1. “Behold, My Servant shall have wisdom and He shall be exalted and glorified exceedingly.” (**Isaiah 52:13**, OSB, LXX)
 2. The word translated “exalted” in this version is the same word Jesus used describing the copper/ bronze snake being “lifted

up”; some other translations render it “lifted up” here in **Isaiah 52:13** as well.

- iv. These references that Jesus makes, that he must be “lifted up” are describing the manner of his death and the instrument of our salvation: His being lifted up and crucified on a cross.
- d. Notice also that Jesus said, “the Son of Man *must be* lifted up”. As Paul said in **1 Corinthians** and is still true today,
 - i. “but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness....” (**1 Corinthians 1:23**, NKJV)
 - ii. This is and was a stumbling block to the Jews, who ask, “How could it be possible that our people could have crucified our own Messiah?”
 - iii. This has always been a stumbling block to the philosophical types who are looking for higher spiritual wisdom of a different type. This is particularly a stumbling block for the Muslims today; Mohammad taught in the Koran that Jesus was a great prophet, even the Christ; however, He was not crucified (it only appeared that way).
- e. Does it seem odd to anyone that *Jesus* be represented as a snake? A lion and a lamb perhaps; but doesn’t a serpent represent *Satan*?
 - i. In addition to considering the Tertullian made as discussed previously, we may also want to review what Peter said about Jesus: “Who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed.” (**1 Peter 2:24**, NKJV)
 1. Jesus bore our sins on his own body when he was on the cross; perhaps foreshadowed by the form of a serpent.
 - ii. Let us also consider what Paul said happened at the cross: “He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it.” (**Colossians 2:13–15**, NKJV)
 1. By the cross (also note that connection to baptism is mentioned in the prior verse, **Colossians 2:12**):
 - a. Our sins are forgiven;
 - b. The old Law of Moses was taken out of the way and “nailed to the cross”; and
 - c. Our enemies, the powers arrayed against us (Satan and those with him) were disarmed and “*made a public spectacle of*” through the cross.

2. Or as Tertullian said, “the devil was made a show of” through the cross. Perhaps that explains why God would use *a snake* here!
- f. Now, let’s take another look at **John 3:16** in context.
- i. Re-read **John 3:14-17**.
 - ii. The point Jesus is trying to make to Nicodemus is that people are already condemned and dying by their own sins (like the snake-bitten Israelites in the Wilderness). However, Jesus would be lifted up like the bronze snake, to be the antidote; to save them from death.
 - iii. We must look to Him; there is no other way to be saved from death.
 1. He is *not* trying to say, “All you have to do is *believe*” (nor that obedience, repentance and baptism are not necessary).
 - iv. The dangers of one-verse or two-verse Christianity
 1. Examples I have seen: **Matthew 16:18, John 3:3, John 3:16, Romans 10:9, Acts 2:38, and Matthew 28:18-20**
 2. (For some reason, there is one verse in particular that never seems to make it on anyone’s “most-important-one-verse” list:
 - a. “I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.” (**Luke 13:3**, NKJV))
 3. This one-verse Christianity approach is the height of spiritual laziness.
 4. Those who practice this approach tend to miss out on other absolutely critical teachings. Priorities get distorted, and people cannot discern the most important teachings from the secondary ones.
 5. Often, people and groups that do this take their favorite verse out of context, misunderstanding or misapplying the intended point. They do not understand who is the intended audience and the overall point that the speaker or writer is trying to make.
 - a. (This is the main reason why our group emphasizes expository preaching and teaching, and daily personal devotion to reading through the entire Bible.)
 6. Jesus said we are to teach others to observe all things He had commanded (**Matthew 28:18-20**)
 - v. Take this example, in the modern Evangelical Protestant world: “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.” (**John 3:16**, NKJV)

1. Their conclusion, many times, is: this is *all you need to know to be saved!*
2. They reason that since it says here, “*whoever believes*”, all that we need to do is simply *believe*, in order to be saved.
3. What a convenient ‘gospel’ this is: essentially gutting all of Jesus’ teachings from the Sermon on the Mount!
4. HOWEVER,
 - a. We must not forget that this was *just one part of a conversation with Nicodemus*, a Jewish teacher.
 - b. Jesus had already told him that no one can see the kingdom of God unless He is born again of water and the spirit. (As we explained in the prior lesson, the early Church understood this to be referring to water baptism.)
 - c. Furthermore, Jesus is about to tell Nicodemus that sinners must “come into the light” and renounce their evil deeds. In other words, *they must repent*, too!
 - d. Taking Jesus’ discussion with Nicodemus in **John 3** as a whole, Jesus therefore is telling this teacher that all of the following are necessary for our salvation:
 - i. Our believing in Jesus
 - ii. Jesus being “lifted up” (crucified on the cross);
 - iii. Our decision to repent and come into the light; and
 - iv. Baptism in water, a spiritual rebirth involving water and the Spirit.

III. The Problem: Men Love Darkness Instead of Light

- a. Read **John 3:17-21**
 - i. In my own life, this is one of the hallmark passages to provide me with a proper perspective on evangelism and the nature of the world.
 - ii. The problem was, is, and always will be: sin. That is what makes the world a dark place!
 - iii. Jesus and the prophets brought the light of truth into the world, exposed peoples’ sin, and called them to repent. From the very beginning, they were killed, stoned, beaten and persecuted for this.
 1. Abel’s life exposed Cain’s sin in **Genesis 4**, and Cain did not want to repent. He is the first example for us.

- a. “For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another, not as Cain who was of the wicked one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his works were evil and his brother’s righteous.” (1 John 3:11-12, NKJV)
2. Joseph exposed his brothers’ sins in **Genesis 37:2**, giving his father “a bad report of them”. They hated him, wanted to kill him, and ended up selling their own brother into slavery.
3. As the people were being taken into captivity in Babylon, we are reminded of the sorry story.
 - a. “And the Lord God of their fathers sent them warnings by His messengers, rising up early and sending His messengers, because He spared His people and His dwelling place. But they mocked His messengers, despised His words, and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the Lord rose against His people, and there was no remedy.” (2 Chronicles 36:23-24)
4. We are reminded of the many heroes of the faith from the Old Testament, in **Hebrews 11**.
 - a. “Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth.” (Hebrews 11:35-38, NKJV)
5. John the Baptist called people to repent. However, although he was a hero to many among the people, he was despised by the religious leaders for calling out their greed and love of money. Furthermore, he was beheaded for calling out the sin of the king and queen, who were in an illicit marriage. (See **Matthew 14:1-12**)
6. Jesus began his ministry by calling people to repent, to be prepared for the kingdom of God. And Jesus also explained why he was hated.
 - a. “(The world...) hates Me because I testify of it that its works are evil.” (John 7:7, NKJV)

7. If we are faithful disciples of Jesus, we will present the same challenges to the world as He did. And we should expect to be treated the same way.
 - a. Paul begins by building bridges to the Gentiles in Athens in **Acts 17**. However, he does not take long to “drop the spiritual sledge hammer” on them. He told them, “Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent.” (**Acts 17:30**, NKJV)
 - b. Paul summarized his message and ministry to King Agrippa: “I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance.” (**Acts 26:19-20**, NKJV)
 - c. Jesus warned his disciples in **John 15** how they would be treated. Jesus said,
 - i. “If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also.” (**John 15:18-20**, NKJV)
 - ii. Jesus was hated because he exposed the sin of the world, including that of the religious leaders. If we are his disciples, we will tell the world the same thing, and be treated in the same way. A few will love us and listen; most will hate us.
- b. Lessons to me, regarding evangelism
 - i. We cannot “nicey-nicey” people into the kingdom of God. We should not look to the world for applause. The kingdom of God is *not* a self-improvement program designed to give people a nice supportive community, wholesome life and feeling of purpose.
 - ii. Our mission is to love people and reach out to them with compassion and respect. However, it also involves calling them (and one another) to repentance. (We do not do this out of self-righteousness; we must always pull out the plank from our own eye first.) However, Jesus

brought the light, exposing sin. A few were willing to step into that light, but most hated it, and Him; and most will hate us as well.

- iii. If we are following Jesus, we will be exposing the sin of the world and we will be hated by the world. If we want to be “politically correct” and please the world, we will not please God. It has always been that way. We will not be popular, no matter how many community service projects we do. We will be hated today for:
 1. Being “narrow minded and judgmental” in calling out sinful lifestyles and saying that there is *only one place to look* to be healed from the serpent’s bite.
 - a. Only one way, and only a few saved
 - b. Living a lifestyle of self-control
 - c. Rejecting fornication, adultery, drunkenness, lying, cheating, drug abuse
 2. Even among the religious world we will be considered: unenlightened, bigoted, not understanding the grace of God, when we hold on to the “faith once for all entrusted the saints” and reject the world regarding:
 - a. How we dress (modesty and simplicity)
 - b. Role of women in marriage and the church (women speaking in church, head covering, men leadership, submission)
 - c. Permanence of marriage
 - d. Discipline of children
 3. We can’t smoothly manage people into the kingdom of God. In fact, we will be a stench to the world. (**2 Corinthians 2:16**) Most will not appreciate it. Will hate us. There is no perfect way to do it. It is not about us: it is about them, their hearts, and how they respond to the light of truth in exposing sin.

IV. John the Baptist: Baptizing and Demonstrating Great Humility

- a. Read **John 3:22-36**
- b. Notice that shortly after the discussion with Nicodemus about “you must be born again of water and the spirit,” John is writing about baptism and says in **John 3:23** that John was baptizing in a certain location “because there was much water there.” Why do you need “much water”?
- c. The Bible does not provide detailed instructions regarding the authorized mode of baptizing. However, consider the following:
 - i. In the story of the Ethiopian eunuch’s conversion we read, “So he (the eunuch) commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the

eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him.” (**Acts 8:38**, NKJV)

1. Note that they had to go *down into* the water (as opposed to taking out the canteen and sprinkling water on his head).
 - ii. Paul writes regarding Christian baptism, “Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection,” (**Romans 6:4-5**, NKJV)
 - iii. Historically baptism was by immersion (triple-immersion actually), reflecting being buried with Christ (unless that was impossible for some reason; see *The Didache* for early Christian writing on this). The meaning of the word is to dip, plunge or immerse.
- d. Humility of John the Baptist
- i. John’s disciples feel threatened when Jesus starts to gain more followers.
 - ii. However, John understands that this is all about the kingdom of God; he only has to fulfill his role. He understands that he will now become lesser, as Jesus becomes greater.
 - iii. For John, it was not about himself nor about his group.
 1. This is such a great example of wisdom and humility for us all today. We should not be building our own sect/group/church, but instead just doing what God has put us here to do, whether little or much, to build up His Church and spread kingdom teaching everywhere.
 - iv. John points to Jesus.
 1. HE is the one sent from above
 2. HE is the one given the Spirit “without measure”.
 3. HE is God’s own Son
 4. HE is the one in whom we must have faith, to gain eternal life. (Otherwise, the wrath of God will remain on him.)
 - v. May we imitate John’s tremendous example and point all to Jesus, becoming less as He becomes more!