
The Cross in Prophecy

The Savior and the Serpent

“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life” (John 3:14, 15).

One of the pictorial prophecies that our Lord made concerning His death contains a comparison between the cross and the bronze serpent in the wilderness. He composed it from the Old Testament episode of the Lord's sending fiery serpents to punish Israel for their lack of faith, showing a type and an antitype linkage between the two events.

As the people of Israel went around Edom, they began grumbling about how God was providing for them. In their judgment, He had not given them the water and food that they believed they should have. In truth, God had met their need, but He had refused to satisfy their greed. Moses said that the people spoke against God, complaining in bitterness, “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 miserable food” (Numbers 21:5).

God was displeased with their hearts, words, and actions, and He allowed serpents to come among them and bite them. The text reads, “The LORD sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died” (Numbers 21:6). This time of life for this new nation became a day of death for them. Rejecting the God whom they had chosen and who had chosen them, God permitted them to suffer the consequence of their choice by lifting His hand of protection from them. Venomous snakes appeared among them and sent some of them to their deaths.

As people succumbed to the poison of the vipers, the nation saw its sinfulness and cried

for mercy. The Word says, “So the people came to Moses and said, ‘We have sinned, because we have spoken against the LORD and you; intercede with the LORD, that He may remove the serpents from us.’ And Moses interceded for the people” (Numbers 21:7). In response to Moses' intercession, the Lord instructed Moses and the people to construct a bronze serpent, place it upon a pole or standard, and lift it above the people where anyone who so chose could see it. Moses was told that whoever had been bitten could look at the bronze serpent that had been lifted up before them and that person would live.

Moses lifted up the serpent. The afflicted people who looked at it were healed. The text says, “And Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on the standard; and it came about, that if a serpent bit any man, when he looked to the bronze serpent, he lived” (Numbers 21:9).

As Jesus carried on a conversation with Nicodemus, He acknowledged this event from Israel's wandering in the wilderness to be a prophecy of His death. He drew a comparison between this serpent on a pole and the death He would die. How were these two events similar?

First, these two events bore a likeness in kind. Both events involved a salvation of some kind. In the case of Israel, the smitten people were being saved from the sting of death that was afflicted upon them by deadly serpents. In the case of all the people who are saved by the cross, they are saved from the bitterest sting of all, the sting of death resulting from their sins. The

Israelites had to look on the bronze serpent to have the healing that they sought. Jesus made it clear that whoever believes in the crucified Savior would be saved or have eternal life: "So that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life" (John 3:15).

Second, the serpent on the pole and Christ on the cross were alike in method. Both events involved a "lifting up" or a seeing. In the case of the serpent, the replica of it was lifted up on a pole so that anyone who wished could see it and live. In the case of Jesus, the cross would bring a lifting up of Jesus. His death would be on a cross, in public, before the eyes of a watching world. God used the method of requiring those who had been bitten to look at the uplifted bronze snake for life. In His eternal purpose, God has used a similar method in connection with our Lord's death. He has willed that salvation can only come to those who look at Jesus upon the cross, recognizing the necessity of His death, the essentiality of accepting His death, and the importance of being bathed in His blood.

Third, the two events bore a resemblance in necessity. There is a singularity to both of these events. The bronze serpent provided only one way to life, and so does the cross. In the case of those who had been bitten in the wilderness, they had only two choices: look and live or disbelieve and die. If they looked in faith at the serpent, they lived; if they did not look, if they only pondered the thought of looking at it, they perished. The same is true of Jesus' death. Those who believe on the Son of God with an obedient faith will have eternal life. Those who do not believe shall forever die. It is either the cross or hell.

To the person who is saved by the cross of Christ, there are four "lift's." We began the journey to eternal life with *the lift of grace*. We come to the cross, accepting it by faith, turning from sin, confessing Christ's deity, and being baptized into Christ's death.

We continue our life in Him through *the lift of growth*. Hebrews 12:2 bids us to fix "our eyes

on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." Day by day we look to Him as our model, our spiritual food, and our Mediator, the One who for us has been lifted up on a cross.

As we engage in the evangelism of our world in harmony with His commission, we utilize *the lift of going to others*. Evangelism is nothing more than lifting Jesus up before the eyes of those we are trying to teach. Our message to those outside of salvation is simply "Jesus." He is their way, truth, and life (John 14:6), even as He is ours.

Finally, in God's time, whether it is when He comes to get us through the return of Christ or when He calls us home through the door of death, we will experience *the lift of glory*. We partake of His glory now, but we will enter into it fully when we pass from this earth into His presence. With Paul we can say, "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:18).

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Three times in the Gospel of John, Jesus referred to Himself as being "lifted up":

The uplift of salvation: "'As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life'" (John 3:14, 15).

The uplift of evidence: "So Jesus said, 'When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He, and I do nothing on My own initiative, but I speak these things as the Father taught Me'" (John 8:28).

The uplift of attraction: "'And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself'" (John 12:32).