

“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life” (Jn 3:14).

If we turn the pages of the Bible back to the time of Moses, God provided for the nomadic community of wandering Jews by meeting their basic needs. But they were not happy with the bare essentials, so they grumbled. “Why have you brought us up from Egypt to die in the wilderness, where there is no food or water? We are disgusted with this wretched food!” (Nm 21:5). We can easily take for granted the sacrifices others make to provide for our basic needs and instead of expressing gratitude, we can exhibit sinful pride and complain that we do not get everything that we want. The Lord was not pleased with the sinful contempt of the Israelites. From a biblical perspective, death and eternal separation from God is the consequence of a grave sin.

The Lord does not want this. Rather, he wants his people to return to him. He demonstrates to them what happens when they intentionally turn from God. Venomous snakes, representing Satan and his evil minions, plague the people. Many were bitten and died. The people recognize their error. God is not at fault, they are. “Then the people came to Moses and said, ‘We have sinned in complaining against the LORD and you. Pray to the LORD to take the serpents from us’” (Nm 21:7).

Moses turns to God in prayer and once again the LORD provides for his people. Akin to our veneration of the cross on Good Friday, Moses takes a bronze serpent and places it at the top of a pole. The repentant people, looking for healing from the venom of the snakes, are humbled and obedient. In turn God offers healing. Everyone bitten by a snake and following the prescription offered is healed. “When an Israelite gazed at the symbolic portrayal of the effects of his sin, the bronze serpent, he was granted healing and life.”<sup>i</sup>

When Jesus speaks of being lifted up, he is looking towards good Friday and his own passion and death. Literally, Jesus will be lifted up from the ground on the cross. There is a secondary meaning. To lift up in a more spiritual sense means to exalt. “Jesus’ being lifted up in [humiliation] from the ground while on the cross will also be the moment of his exaltation, when he preeminently reveals God’s love.”<sup>ii</sup>

Lifting up is also an allusion to the Suffering Servant from the Prophet Isaiah. Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophecy of the Suffering Servant. “He was pierced for our sins, crushed for our iniquity. He bore the punishment that makes us whole, by his wounds we were healed” (53:5).

Christians are offered healing and life through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As we gaze at a crucifix, we see an image of Jesus being executed. To take the sting of death away from us, Jesus willingly offered his life as a sacrificial lamb. We look to our own sinfulness, our own discontent and grumbling and we are humbled by the sacrifice of our Savior.

We live in a land of abundance. We can take things for granted and grumble because we are not satisfied. Material things will never satisfy our deepest needs for love. Only God can satisfy our deepest longings.

Take a few moments today to express your thanks to God for all he has done for you. If you have been envious or prideful, ask God for forgiveness. Gaze on the image of Jesus on the cross and slowly recite John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.”

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<sup>i</sup> Martin, Francis; Wright, William M. IV. The Gospel of John. Pgs. 73-74.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.