

“If I Be Lifted Up...”

The Serpent in the Wilderness

Numbers 21:4–9: A very odd story.

Class discussion of problems: For what purpose did Moses do this? Is this a violation of 2nd commandment? Why was this story preserved for us?

- Serpents were causing their deaths, but the serpents were the punishment for their sin of distrust, hence, serpents associated with sin as well as death.
- Moses was instructed by God to fashion a bronze serpent: *He who looks upon the serpent will live*. Christ, in comparing Himself to the serpent was saying that whoever would “look upon” Him will be spared from eternal death. This He said within the context of Jn. 4:3–5 and vs 16. That is, those who “look on Him” are those who believe in Him and are born again by water and Spirit.

New Testament connections

Jn 3:14

“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up.”

1. Jesus connects this story in Num. 21 with Himself, much like He did with Jonah and the resurrection (Matt. 12:40; Lk 11:30).
2. Context: Vv 1–5, “Born again,” of water and the Spirit; 3:16 “God so loved the world...” vs 16. The subject is *salvation*.
3. But with salvation is the warning of judgment: “*Unless* one is born again, he *cannot* see the kingdom of God.” And, “...that whoever believes in Him *should not perish...*”. What are we saved *from*?
4. *The punishment for sin is death*. From the beginning this was so: “In the day you eat of it, you shall surely die” (Gen. 2:17). In Ezek 18:4 and 20, the law of sin and death is stated this way: “The one who sins shall die.” This is *spiritual* death; an eternal separation from God.
5. Rom. 8:1–2 – The law of the Spirit of life in Christ (“born of the Spirit...”) sets one free from the law of sin and death. But how?

Jn 12:31–34

1. This is a “first-level” reference point to John 3:14. By “lifted up,” Jesus meant crucifixion, lifted up on a pole, like the bronze serpent.
2. “I will draw *all* men to Me.” Both Gentiles and Jews are drawn to Jesus by His crucifixion.

Jn. 19:37

“They shall *look on* Him whom they pierced,” is a first-level reference point to Zech. 12:10.

Zech. 12:10

Note pronouns: “They shall look on *Me* whom they have pierced and mourn for *Him...*” (cf. NASV). Zech. 12 is surrounded by references to the Messiah, or the Shepherd:

3. Zech. 11:4–14 is a prophecy of the Messiah as shepherd (comp. vs. 13 with Matt. 27:3–10).
4. The shepherd pastures the flock, but the flock is not worthy of Him. He breaks His staves of Union and Favor and asks for His wages.
5. They pay him 30 pieces of silver, the penalty for wounding a slave (Ex. 21:32). This was fulfilled in Judas' betrayal of Christ (Matt. 25:15; 27:3, 9–10)
 - a. Jehovah considers this a valuation of Himself (vs. 13, "...that magnificent price at which I was valued..."). Thus, what is done to the Shepherd is done to Jehovah.
 - b. A similar idea is seen in Jesus' response to Saul in Acts 9:4. Whereas Saul was persecuting the church, Jesus asked, "Why do you persecute Me?" See also Matt. 25:40.
6. Zech 13:7 is fulfilled in Matt. 26:31 when the disciples are scattered.
7. They shall "mourn for Him" – Lk 23:47–48, "beating their breasts." Acts 2:37, "pierced to their hearts;" 2 Cor. 7:10, godly sorrow brings about repentance.

Gal. 3:13

Christ became a curse for us (cf. Deut. 21:23). The word for "tree" is the same as "wood" in both Hebrew and Greek. Christ was nailed to a "wood" and so came under that curse.

- 2 Cor. 5:21 – God made Christ to "be sin" (perhaps by being under a curse while on the cross) on our behalf. Hence, the crucified Christ becomes the embodiment of our sin and death. It was our sins that put Him there. It was the sins of the Israelites that caused their deaths by the serpents.

Gal. 6:14

What is there about *the cross* that is the reason for our boast?

A Standard for the nations

Is. 11:10–12

The context of this passage is the kingdom of peace under the Messiah and is connected to several New Testament reference points. Vs. 2 foreshadows the events which took place during the baptism of Christ (Matt. 3:16; John 1:32). It should be noted that the reason for this peace is that the "whole earth" will be full of the knowledge of Jehovah" (vs 9). The behavior of animals is unaffected by the preaching of the word, nor do they have any "knowledge" of it. The knowledge of the Lord is that which is received by people.

Therefore, this peace is among the citizens of His kingdom who once were at enmity with each other (cf. Eph. 2:11–22). The book of Isaiah is structured in such a way as to bring a systematic coherency to the understanding of God's kingdom once the kingdom was revealed as it has now been through Christ and His apostles (Eph. 3:1–10). In Isaiah chapter 2, the *scope* of the kingdom is revealed. It is to be spread throughout the entire globe. Notice in 2:1–2 that the Gentiles would approach the house of the Lord because the word would come to them. Compare the peace of vs. 4 with our text in 11:1–9. Isaiah 4 refers to the Restorer as "the Branch of Jehovah." Chapter 7 introduces the nature and significance of His birth (vs 14, "God with us;" compare Matt. 1:23); chapter 9:6–9 speaks to the nature of the king (Immanuel) born to live among us.

- 11:10–12 – "In that day"—in the day of His kingdom—the "root of Jesse" would be a *signal, banner, ensign, flag, standard* (depending on your translation) for the peoples and the nations. The Hebrew word used here, *nes*, is the same as in Num. 21:8–9, and

the other passages we will look at. It is a “flagpole,” “standard,” “ensign,” etc. This standard would be lifted up for both Jew (the “people” of vs 10) as well as the Gentiles (the “nations” of vs. 12). Do you remember our study of Psalm 2 in Chapter 7 (Understanding Reference Points)? There, the *nations and kings* are interpreted in Acts 4:27–28 as Pilate and the Gentiles and *peoples and rulers* are interpreted as Herod and the Jewish people. Here in Isaiah 11, we have the same kind of inclusion of both Jew and Gentile under the “banner” of the Messiah. Notice how the remaining verses also describe this “standard” as rallying the Gentiles to join the lost tribes—the remnant of His people—in coming to the Lord to fight with Him against His enemies. A highway is mentioned in vs. 16, which in 19:23–25 joins these three enemy nations—Egypt, Assyria and Israel—in joint worship to Jehovah.

Isaiah 18:3

Compare vs. 2 and 7 in this context. Verse 2 talks about messengers being sent to a foreign land, Ethiopia (Cush), and Cush pays homage to Jehovah. This is not the queen of Sheba who honored Solomon more than 2 centuries earlier. This is the homage of a foreign nation responding to the standard which has been raised.

Isaiah 49:22

Notice the context which implies the rebuilding of Israel with both Gentiles (the “nations”) and Jews (the “peoples”).

Isaiah 62:10–12

The rebuilding of Jerusalem is not the physical but spiritual (“Your *salvation* comes...”). Compare with Gal. 4:26–27, which quotes Isaiah 54:1. But 54:2–3 speaks of the rebuilding during this time. For other “restoration” passages in Isaiah, and the Spirit working through the citizens of the new Jerusalem, see Isaiah 4:2–6; 44:1–8; 58:10–12; 61:4–6; 66:7ff.

Summary points:

1. The faith required to believe in Jesus is greater than the faith required to look upon the serpent. Yet if God was willing to spare the lives of those who simply *looked* upon the serpent, how much more will He spare the lives of those who “look upon” His Son? Comp. also with John 20:26–29.
2. Mourning for Christ’s death produces repentance. Sorrow for one’s sins is a prerequisite for repentance.
3. Jn. 6:44–45 – No one can come to Jesus unless the Father draws him. For nearly 2000 years the standard of Christ has been lifted up among all the nations, but only a few have rallied to it. Only those who wish to be “taught of God” can come to God. He does not compel people to come nor reject any that do come with true desire. But the same standard that is a magnet for the few also repels the many. This is God’s way of separating the sheep from the goats.
4. Since people are drawn to Christ by His death on the cross, then we must preach “Christ and Him crucified.” Any attempt to attract people by offering social activities, dinners, games, “dynamic speakers” with college degrees, entertainment, etc. is a breach of trust (1 Cor. 2:1–2). If a person is not drawn to Christ through His word *alone*, then he is not drawn to Christ at all. There is a difference in being converted to a church and converted to Christ.
5. To “look upon” Christ means to be drawn to Him in faithful obedience, to be “born again” of the water and the Spirit. So we are reborn when we die with Him in baptism and are raised with Him to a new life (Rom. 6:3–10).