

Christ Lifted Up

“And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me” (John 12:32). This is the third time Jesus compared his coming death to the event described in Numbers 21:4-9). He makes reference to it in His discourse with Nicodemus in John 3:14: *“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.”* He alludes to it again to his yet doubting disciples in John 8:28: *“When ye have lifted up the Son of Man, then shall ye know that I am he and that I do nothing of myself; but as my Father hath taught me, I speak these things.”*

Most people mistakenly believe that the familiar emblem of the healing profession, one or two serpents twined around a rod, had its origin in Moses lifting up the serpent of brass in the wilderness. But the symbolism of the *caduceus* has a far more ancient origin. In the beginning of the Bible we find Satan appearing as a serpent and seducing our first parents with a promise of knowledge. His success in their deception and fall earned for him the description, “murderer from the beginning” (John 8:44). The final book in the Bible still has Satan represented as *“that old serpent called the Devil and Satan”* (Revelation 12:9).

But how does Satan get himself so closely identified with the arts of healing? And what does the lifting up of a serpent of brass have to do with Christ’s being lifted up? Ah, the answer to that will tell us much of the strategy of Satan, and help us better understand much of what is going on in this present world of spiritual darkness. And it will give us a better understanding of the magnitude of what happened on that Cross on Calvary’s hill.

In ancient Greek mythology, Aesculapius, who was the son of Apollo and nymph Coronas, became greatly learned in the art of medicine. Legend claimed that he became so skilled that he could restore the dead to life, and thus became known as the “Restorer of Life”. One of his feats figures prominently in Christmas symbols yet in use today. The sun god Adonis, whose mother was said to have miraculously changed herself into a tree and thus qualified him to usurp one of Christ’s titles, “Man of the Branch”, is said to have been cut down by his enemies. Aesculapius, as a serpent, was said to have coiled himself around the dead stump. In the morning, a new tree of an entirely different species appeared. In Egypt, this tree was a palm, and called Baal-Tamar. In Rome, it was a fir, and called Baal-Berith. During the festival of the winter solstice the sun-worshippers put the cut-down Yule log in the fire. In the morning, it had disappeared, and in its place stood the (Christmas-Baal) tree – restoration of life, compliments of Aesculapius, serpent god of healing.

Greek art depicted Aesculapius as a young man carrying a knotted staff with a serpent twined around it, hence the physician’s caduceus. But Aesculapius, “The Restorer of Life”, came to be symbolized by the serpent itself. All of this may be confirmed by consulting the *World Book Encyclopedia*, *Fairbairn’s Bible Encyclopedia* (Zondervan), and *The Two Babylons* (Loizeaux Brothers), or other reliable reference works on mythology.

In our Lord’s letter to the church at Pergamos, He writes, *“I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, even where Satan’s seat is . . . where Satan dwelleth” (Revelation 2:13).* These words are very significant. Pergamos is said to be Satan’s seat and Satan’s dwelling! Not even idolatrous Thyatira or apostate Laodicea have such an infamous distinction. The reference is to the city rather than the church. Pergamos was a city of advanced culture and learning, having a library rivaled only by that at Alexandria. It templed many pagan deities, but these were all powerfully overshadowed in apostolic times by the temple of Aesculapius, the serpent god of healing. That is why the Lord calls Pergamos “Satan’s seat”.

Satan, the “murderer from the beginning”, parading himself as the god of healing and the restorer of life? Incredible! How could this be? Yet, why not? What more powerful inducement to serve him could he offer those *“who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage” (Hebrews 2:15).* It was with a sound philosophy that he attacked Job’s faith through health. *“Skin for skin, yea, all that a man hath will he give for his life” (Job 2:4).* He was wrong about Job, but dead right about the fallen race. A man with no eternal hope in Christ will give everything he owns to breathe one more day.

The one appropriation of taxpayers’ dollars that no politician dares assail is that which is confiscated for medical research. The one industry that continues to grow despite debt and recession is the health care industry. The popular mentality that the highest good is in extending temporal life as long as possible, and that perfect health is everyone’s human right, has mandated that whatever research discovers and the health industry builds, the people must buy. Greedy insurance companies and ambulance-chasing lawyers have compounded all this so as to make it true, indeed, that “all a man has earned all his life he will surely pay to keep on living.” And men still die. One hundred percent of them. This is the knowledge and wisdom that the serpent promised?

What will the five “extra” years a person’s life’s earning has purchased mean to him who now has an eternity in hell before him? And will he who now rests in heaven’s glory remember fondly those last few months or years of wheezing, groaning, pain and sorrow? Religion at its lowest common denominator is bodily healing. Find him who is at the same time a holy man and most feared and powerful person in any primitive village or tribe, and you will have found the medicine *man* or witch *doctor*.

Make no mistake about it. That segment of religion that yet calls itself Christian, and centers its message and activities around healing, is operating in the spirit of ancient Aesculapius.

It is true that Jesus healed the sick; such healings as no man either before or after Him has ever done. He also raised the dead, transformed the elements, multiplied food, stilled the tempest and walked on water. As Creator and Sustainer of the universe He could do no less. But these were not the center of His activities, the purpose of His incarnation, or the message of His preaching. For that we must take an in-depth look at *“And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me.”*

The almost unanimous misuse of John 12:32 is a striking testimony to the devil's ability to hide the gospel, our shallow reading of the scripture, and our willingness to ignore its plain meaning to preserve our own preferred application. At least two popular hymns, "Life the Savior Up", and "He Said if I be Lifted Up", are based on this misconception. There are four prominent wrong interpretations and usages of the above verse.

The first is that embodied in the hymns. It says that lifting up or exalting Christ in our witness and preaching will draw all men to Him. This is the formula for successful ministry, we are told. We must forget about everything other than lifting up Christ. If we will exalt Him constantly and sufficiently, we are assured that each and every person who hears us will be saved.

I do not wish to argue with exalting Christ. That we certainly must do in every aspect of our lives. But this verse neither enjoins that, nor guarantees *any* evangelistic success for its employment. Indeed, when Stephen did it, it got him, not converts, but stones!

Being "lifted up" was, in that day, an idiom for death by crucifixion, much as "swinging" or having one's "neck stretched" was a euphemism for death by hanging. Verse 33 clearly tells us that He meant by it His death on the Cross. The people who heard him well understood the colloquialism, for the responded with the puzzled, "If Messiah is said in the law to abide forever, how can you say the Son of Man is to be lifted up (crucified)?"

The second misuse of this verse acknowledges the plain reference to the Lord's death by crucifixion, but yet insists that it prescribes the message of successful evangelism. Taking this to be a parallel passage with 1 Corinthians 2:2 in its *narrow* usage, many believe that we should preach nothing but the actual crucifixion and dying of Christ on the Cross. They assert that this teaches us that if we will do this, then all who hear us will be converted. This runs into the absurd. Ultimately, all the vivid descriptions of the sufferings of our Lord, the physical and psychological factors in His death, the legal and punitive ramifications of His substitutionary expiation of our sins, will be exhausted. And if one thinks that all of this will infallibly convert every person who hears it, he is going to be terribly disappointed. Men may be sympathetic, horrified, repulsed, indignant, bored, informed or confused, but they will certainly not be converted. Whatever value or effectiveness all this preaching may have, it manifestly does not draw all men to Christ. That is not what the Lord meant or said.

The third misuse of this passage makes some improvement in textual interpretation. It acknowledges that Christ speaks, not of preaching content, but of His death itself and nothing more. This view is that the crucifixion of Christ will effectively save all men without exception. The grammar and narrow context say exactly that. But it cannot be allowed to stand because of the analogy of faith, the teachings of the entire Bible. The Book of Redemption teaches everywhere that the present order of things that we call time is to culminate with a final judgment wherein all men are separated, some to eternal bliss and some to eternal torment. As much as God loves His creatures, and as much as we may desire that every single person be saved, and as sufficient the sufferings and merit of our Saviour, yet all men *will not* be drawn to Him.

The fourth misuse of these words of our Saviour recognizes all of the above, and attempts to resolve the difficulty by reducing the force of the word translated "draw" to something like "attract" or "attempt to draw". Christ, we are told, draws all, but all will not come. He is successful with some, but not all. He is doing the best He can, trying very hard, using all the divine resources at His disposal. He manages to pull in those of us who are not too hard, too mean, too callused, too obstinate. But the really bad ones effectively resist all His powers of persuasion. He "draws at" all of us with all His might, but is simply unable to save all whom He intends.

This explanation may satisfy some who have a low view of God. But for those of us who believe in a God Who "*works all things after the counsel of His own will*" (Ephesians 1:11), and who "*will do all (His) pleasure*" (Isaiah 46:10), this "failure" of Christ is unacceptable. Nor will the Greek *helkuo* stand that sort of interpretation. It is never used in the Bible in any other sense than to effectively draw.

What, then, would the Saviour have us understand by His being "lifted up"?

We are to understand that *Christ* draws men to Himself. It is not good preaching, sound theology, persuasive invitations, zealous soul-winning, clever methods, fine church buildings, impressive and moving liturgies, that bring men to Christ, but *Christ Himself*. It is not pretty Christians, loving and gracious lives, but *Christ Himself*. Ghandi accused Christians of not being like Christ, and suggested that if they had been, then he himself might have become converted. The world may buy that, but Christians know better. It is true that Christians are but poor imitators of Christ, even though they are predestined to be like Him. But if they were all perfect imitations, they would be only that – and not Christ. Christians, for the most part, are admittedly an unattractive, motley crew. And that may not be a bad thing. We, with our appealing flesh, draw too much of the world into the pale of Christendom as it is. People like us, like our program, like our doctrine, like our buildings, like our fellowship, but have no love for Christ. These cannot be Christians.

A man with his heart set on a woman for a wife cares nothing for the house in which she lives, for her father, mother, sisters or brothers. The attractiveness or repulsiveness of her family weighs nothing in his desire for her. He is not marrying them, but her, and it will be her or nothing that brings the two together. We who come to Christ come to our greatly desired Husband, Saviour and Redeemer. His love will draw us, and nothing less.

Christ *draws* men to Himself by His love and power in grace. The goodness of God leads us to repentance (Romans 2:4). We are not driven, terrorized with threats and intimidations. Naught but love and goodness, long spurned and ignored, will break a sinner's heart and bring him weeping to the Saviour's feet.

This further teaches us that Christ draws of all kinds of men to Him, not Jews only. It is not the usage of "draw" that solves the problem, but the varied usage of "all". In many places in the Bible, "all" does not mean "all" in the absolute sense (see Matthew 2:3, Mark 1:5, Luke 2:1, Acts 2:17). There are no ethnic, racial, cultural, social or economic barriers to divine grace. The "all" has special significance to the *Gentile nations* in connection with Christ's crucifixion, as we shall see later.

Christ draws all His *Own*, selectively. “*All that the Father given me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out*” (John 6:37). Jesus is the heavenly Lodestone. As a magnet introduced to a box of mixed sawdust and iron filings will pick up absolutely every iron filing while leaving the sawdust undisturbed, so does Christ draw His *Own* elect out of a world of reprobates. In doing so, He positively separates His *Own* from the rest of the world. He is the absolute Divider of men.

We are told by these words that Christ draws men to Himself. Christ does not draw men to a system of theology, a movement, a denomination, a cause or a particular preacher – it is men who do that. He does not draw men to an age group, a social atmosphere, a particular culture – it is unregenerate flesh that does that. He does not draw men to an experience or catharsis. It is ignorant preachers who hawk these substitutes for *Christ Himself*. But those whom Christ draws, He draws to nothing more or less than *Himself*. He does, indeed, add people to His Church, gives experiences and engages His people in doing His will. But He first draws them to *Himself* and then *brings* them to these with *Himself*.

This thrice-quoted reference to Christ’s being lifted up tells us that the *death* of Christ on the Cross is the dynamic center of Christianity – not His birth, His resurrection, His ascension or Pentecost. As significant as these may be in themselves, they are not the dynamic center of Christianity. All the world’s founders of religions had the dynamic center of their religion in their life and it ended at their death. The death of Christ marks the beginning, not the end, of His power and reign. All the effectual work in redemption, the unseating of all hostile powers, the absolute liberation of all of Christ’s people and the eternal security of their heavenly inheritance was secured in the death of our Saviour on the Cross.

It is the *one thing* He requires us to remember and commemorate. There is not the slightest suggestion by Him or any of His apostles that we should commemorate His birth and resurrection as false religion has. Christmas and Easter may lend themselves to worldly squandering, merrymaking, strutting, gluttony, reveling and drunkenness, but can you see the impossibility of creating a “holiday” around that mass of beaten flesh, the desecrated, bleeding, mutilated body of our Lord, hanging in shame while God poured out His wrath upon Him? No, Christians remember our Lord’s death in the Communion, but the world will never celebrate it in its holidays. It has no part or lot in that matter, and had rather ignore it. The world may glory and revel in its holidays (holy days), but Christians will glory in nothing but the Cross.

The death of Christ on the Cross is the power-center of Christianity from three different aspects:

Godward

God’s love motivated Him to redeem, but His righteousness would not permit Him to arbitrarily pass over sin. He would justify sinners, but He must be just in doing so (Romans 3:26). Men may forgive sins without rectification of the trespass, but God cannot. This is not because God is less compassionate nor willing to forgive, but because man is less righteous and unable to sense the heinousness of the crime. It is not man, but God Who is the Judge of all the earth, and the Judge of all the earth must do right.

Jesus’ death, as the sinner’s penal substitute, satisfied completely all the just demands of God’s righteous law, thus removing any legal barrier to His forgiveness. All the sins of the elect sinner were imputed to Christ, Who in turn bore their full penalty in His death.

Not only the actual sins of each believer were removed in the death of Christ, but the curse we bore by virtue of our union with Adam was taken away. The death penalty exacted for the sin of Adam upon all his posterity (Romans 5:12) was satisfied in the awful death of God’s Lamb Who took away the sin of the world.

The lifting of this death sentence removed any legal obstacle to the restoration of spiritual life to the beneficiaries of Christ’s death. The sinner now can and will be regenerated. Spiritual life will be restored to the fallen human spirit. With the restoration of spiritual life comes “ears to hear”, “eyes to see”, and a “heart of flesh” to seek and believe the Lord, a love of righteousness and a loathing of and repentance from sin. In short, effectual calling is wrought, and the sinner comes to Christ.

Satanward

Notice Jesus’ words in John 12:31: “*Now shall the prince of this world be cast out . . .*”. Our Lord makes this declaration in full view of His *now* imminent crucifixion, for He follows it with, “*and I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto me.*” The Cross is the scene of Revelation 12:9-11: “*And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil and Satan . . . and they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb . . .*”. The blood of the Lamb was shed at only one time and in only one place – the Cross at Calvary. It is our reconciliation to God by the blood of Jesus that delivers us from the one having the power of death, the devil (Hebrews 2:14-15).

Revelation 20:1-3 is but another graphic description of what happened at the Cross. Lucifer, even in his fallen state, is yet the mightiest of all created beings. Not even Michael the archangel dares rail against him (June 9). Who, then, is this angel that can manhandle him into the bottomless pit? And what sort of chain can bind a spirit? And what sort of pit will contain him? Now, they who would literalize these symbols boldly assert that God can make such an angel and such a chain and such a pit. This I certainly do not deny. But I do deny that it was necessary for Him to do that. Why should He? He already has all the “angel”, “chain” and “pit” He needs, in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

He needed no angel, no chain nor pit to prevent and limit Satan’s touching Job, his possessions and his family. He needed no angel nor chain to hold Satan off Peter, even while that malignant enemy begged for permission to sift him. No, God does not have to frustrate evil powers by mechanical means.

But if you will insist upon what John visualized with human eyes as a literal chain, then let us be reminded that the devil has never been unchained. God has always restricted his activities by His sovereign power. Had that mad dog been loosed to do all he would, we would have certainly all been devoured.

There is only one Person in the universe able to handle Satan and restrict his activities, and that Person is Jesus Christ. There is only one work of Jesus Christ that stripped Satan of his power to deceive the Gentile peoples, and that is His death on the Cross as their penal Substitute.

The binding of Satan in Revelation 20 is carefully defined. He is not said to be prevented from tempting, accusing, destroying or causing general havoc in the world, nor even utterly from the activity of deception, but from “deceiving the Gentiles” for a period of time. The fulfillment of this vision is unmistakable. The most astounding and incredible phenomenon of Christianity to the Jews was that immediately after Pentecost, Gentiles by the thousands began to call upon Jacob’s God as revealed in Christ Jesus. By far the biggest theological wrangles in the apostolic church were centered around these hordes of Gentiles crowding into the church of the living God. When you consider that for the first 1,500 years of Israel’s history, Gentile interest in their God was virtually zero, this is certainly significant. So great was this influx of Gentiles, the church itself soon lost its Jewish character, and became predominantly a church of “the nations”, precisely those whom Satan was bound from deceiving. To this the prophets bear witness: “*The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light*” (Isaiah 9:2). “*I the Lord . . . will give thee for a light of the Gentiles*” (Isaiah 42:6). Of course, this unblinding of Gentile eyes by the proportionate binding of Satan was not absolute. Otherwise, all Gentiles without exception would be converted. Nor was the national rejection and blinding of ethnic Israel absolute, since the elect remnant are still coming to Christ. But the crucifixion coincided with the general bringing in of the Gentiles and the general shutting out of Israel after the flesh.

Jesus’ crucifixion was necessary for, and wrought effectively, the unblinding of His Own disciples’ eyes. “*Then Jesus said unto them, ‘when ye have lifted up the Son of Man, then shall ye know that I am he’*” (John 8:28).

God created Adam a living soul, but after he sinned, God declared him now to be nothing but “dust” (Genesis 3:19). Dust is serpent’s bread (Genesis 3:4). Fallen man without a redeemer and without the sovereign restraint of God on his enemy is snake bait! He is the devil’s lawful prey. Sinners are said to be taken captive at the devil’s will (2 Timothy 2:26). He is held fast and secure by the “strong man”. Only when the “stronger than he come upon him” (Luke 11:21-22) will he be compelled to let his captives go free.

Once again, it is the death of Christ on the Cross and its canceling of our sin debt that robbed the devil of his legal claim on us. That is why the devil hates and fears the Cross and the blood of Christ. Our preaching, teaching, singing, praying, witnessing and praising are all irritating and disturbing to him. But none of these are effectual without the power, the work, that one masterstroke that the Captain of our salvation wrought when He died on the Cross and utterly disenfranchised the devil.

Manward

In order to appreciate the subjective and objective aspect of man in redemption applied, let us consider the lifting up of the serpent in the wilderness recorded in Numbers 21:4-9).

Death has invaded the camp. People are dying everywhere. They are made to acknowledge their sins – that they have rebelled, despised the goodness of God and railed against Him and His deliverer. Moses, the Old Testament type of Christ our Mediator, intercedes for the people. God then directs that a brazen serpent be set upon a pole and erected in a visible place where people might come and look upon it and live. Those who looked, lived. Those who did not, died.

This was the option set before any particular Israelite. He could deny his sin and blame, and refuse to believe that his dying had anything to do with God. He could curse his bad luck, rail on Moses for bringing them into snake-infested territory, try one futile cure after another, and eventually die. Or he could admit that his dying was the consequence of his sinning. But he must not only admit it to himself, he must step out into a public place, and in view of all eyes, take his place as one of the condemned and dying sinners around the erected serpent. Then he was to do something that had no merit, could win him no acclaim, could earn him nothing, and which in itself could not effect the slightest degree of cure for his disease. He was simply to effortlessly lift his eyes and look. The look is a look of confession – not only of guilt, but of helplessness and of faith. “I am dying. I am guilty. I am helpless. I have nothing to offer. I am looking to God for my deliverance.”

The serpent represents sin, personified in Satan. Brass represents judgment. They who looked, saw their tormentor judged and his power of death nullified. Their look, therefore, was not only a look of faith and dependence upon God’s salvation, but a look of enlightenment, certain to produce joy and edification and encouragement. They had been delivered, freed from sin and the power of death.

Likewise, our Saviour was lifted up as an Object of faith for perishing people, and as a Testimony of their deliverance from the power of the devil. God made Him to be sin for us Who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him (2 Corinthians 5:21).

We are in identical circumstances with the Israelites in the wilderness. We are dying. Our dying is the proof of our sinning. We may ignore it, deny it, try to cure it, rail and blame all we wish; but regardless of all we do, we shall yet die. We are stricken with a terminal disease. We have been serpent-bitten. If we would live, we must look. God has given us an Object of faith – His Son lifted up on the Cross as our Sin-bearer, our Substitute.

We must look to Christ on the Cross – not Jesus in the manger, not Jesus healing and feeding people, not Jesus the teacher, not Jesus resurrected, not Jesus coming again. All of these have their place and time, but not in deliverance from sin and death. For that we must look to Christ on the Cross. We must not look at “The Old Rugged Cross”. The Cross has, for the major part of Christendom, been emptied of its redemptive content, and has become an idolatrous shrine, of no more value than a pagan symbol much like the Easter egg and the Christmas tree. It is used as a fetish on a chain or waved by a priest. Hezekiah had to deal with that in 2 Kings 18:4. The brazen serpent that Moses made had now become an idol, and they were burning incense to it. Hezekiah smashed it into pieces and called it “a chunk of brass”. All such *nehushtans* must likewise be put away.

As the sinner looks to Christ on the Cross, he confesses his sin, his guilt, his helplessness, his poverty and also his faith in the ability and willingness of another to save him. He sees his sins judged, his captor captive, and himself free.

He can then see his risen and reigning Lord. “*For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more being reconciled, we shall be saved by His life*” (Romans 5:10).

Our looking is our living. It begins at the Cross, but does not end there. It continues in a dependent, trusting, imploring and adoring gaze upon the God Who alone can save us and meet every need in our sojourn through this wilderness of sorrows and trials. *“Look unto me and be ye saved, all ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else” (Isaiah 45:22)*. There is nowhere else to look. We need no other.

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C. M.

Look and Live

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"

I've a message full of love, Hallelujah!
A message, O my friend, for you;
'Tis a message from above, Hallelujah!
Jesus said it, and I know 'tis true.

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.

"Look and live," my brother, live,
Look to Jesus now and live;
'Tis recorded in His Word, Hallelujah!
It is only that you "look and live".