

Why Did It Have to be the Cross

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John 3:14-21

14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

17 “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

18 Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

19 And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.

20 For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 21 But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

SNAKES!

There’s a scene from the movie, Raiders of the Lost Ark that many of us find hard to forget. Indiana Jones has discovered the Ark in a obscure spot in Egypt, but when they open the vault the floor is covered with snakes.

Indiana, who is deathly afraid of snakes cries out as he is lowered to the floor of the vault, “Snakes, why did it have to be snakes?”

That scene taps into a fear that many of us have. A recent Harris poll on “What We Are Afraid Of” discovered that 36 percent of all adults in the US list snakes as their number one fear. It affects 49 percent of women and 22 percent of men. (I wonder how many more men are really afraid of snakes and are just afraid to say so.)

Anyway there’s something about snakes that just doesn’t go over well with human beings. The first story of the Bible explains why. It was the serpent that tempted Adam and Eve, and for that reason it was cursed to crawl on its belly and be despised by the woman and her offspring.

It really has worked out that way. The snake is often an object of fear and loathing. There is still hostility between the snake and the offspring of Eve. Snakes play an important but nefarious role in the story of salvation.

SNAKES IN THE WILDERNESS

Our Scripture lesson for today begins with a reference to another “snake story.” Jesus told Nicodemus, “Just as Moses lifted up the servant in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” (14-15)

What was Jesus talking about? Jesus was referring to something that happened when God’s people were wandering in the wilderness.

You’ll remember that God delivered his people from slavery in Egypt. But, the route to the Promised Land consisted of a long and winding trail through the wilderness.

And while they were in the wilderness, God’s people complained, a lot. The King James Version translates this as “murmuring.” I like that translation. They were like rebellious teenagers as they voiced their complaints under their breath.

“Why is this water so bitter? Why is the manna so sweet? Why don’t we have any meat to eat? Why couldn’t we have stayed in Egypt? We were slaves, but at least we had something to eat.”

Murmuring.

Again and again Moses interceded for his people and asked God not to hold their lack of faith against them. But, in the end most of the people who were freed from slavery in Egypt (including Moses) didn't get to go into the Promised Land.

So, the people quit murmuring and began to speak openly of their discontent. They spoke against God and against Moses. Bad mistake. Poisonous snakes crawl out from the rocks of the desert and bite these constant complainers. Some even die.

But, most of the people cry out for forgiveness and healing. And God once again graciously provides for their salvation. But, this time God does it in a unique way.

God told Moses to fashion a bronze snake and put it on a tall pole. Moses then lifted that bronze snake up so all the people could see it. And if any of the people were bitten by the serpents in the wilderness, they could look up at that bronze serpent and be healed.

A SYMBOL OF SIN AND SALVATION

This is the story that Jesus is referring to in his midnight discussion with Nicodemus, a leader of the Pharisees. Nicodemus may not have understood what Jesus was getting at with this analogy, but the readers of John's gospel knew.

What does Jesus being lifted up on the cross have to do with this snake story in the desert? Everything.

Many of the stories about Jesus are Old Testament stories writ large. God is bringing salvation to God's people once again, but this time it is on a grand scale. If you want to understand why Jesus was lifted up on the cross, you first need to understand what happened in the wilderness long ago.

Why do you think God had the people look up at the bronze serpent? What was the point of that exercise? Why couldn't they just say "sorry" and be done with it?

Well, maybe because just saying “sorry” hadn't worked.

They had said “sorry” before and then kept on murmuring. They were allowing fear to rule their life. They needed a symbol that would remind them of their own sin and the power of God’s salvation. The bronze serpent provided that symbol.

For a long time every time they looked at that bronze serpent, they remembered the cost of mistrusting the goodness of God and how God had delivered his people in the wilderness.

But, there would come a time when that symbol no longer served its purpose. 500 years later this bronze serpent shows up in the Temple. And the people have turned it into an idol. The people worship the bronze snake instead of the God who commanded its creation. And so King Hezekiah is forced to destroy it.

A SYMBOL OF SIN

So, God’s people needed a new symbol, a symbol that would describe not only their sin but also the cure for that sin.

As our second hymn puts it, “Lift high the cross.” Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so Jesus was lifted up on the cross. The cross is a reminder of our own sinfulness and at the same time a reminder of our salvation.

We have to be very careful not to do what God’s people did with the bronze serpent. Instead of using it as a symbol of sin and salvation they turned it into a talisman, a lucky charm.

Many people do that with the cross as well.

Let me be clear. The cross is not a negative turned into a positive. The cross is not a way of saying “when life gives you lemons make lemonade.”

The cross is not a way to drive out vampires or ensure good luck.

The cross is a profound symbol of sin. It is the consummate symbol of man’s inhumanity to man. It is a symbol of fear. It is a symbol of pure evil.

Most of all the cross is a symbol of the world's rejection of God.

The Israelites complained about God. But, on the cross we see more than complaints; we see the Son of God crucified. When Jesus hung on the cross, the world turned dark.

And the sins represented on the cross are more than just the sins of the religious and political leaders of the ancient world. The sins represented on the cross are our sins as well.

A SYMBOL OF SALVATION

In the first part of the book of Acts Peter preached a sermon and he closed his sermon by telling his congregation, "In conclusion, let me say that you crucified the one God sent to save you." And those who heard Peter's sermon were "cut to the heart." And they asked, "What should we do?"

And Peter responded, "Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus. You will be forgiven and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

When those first Christians looked to the cross, they could see clearly their own sinfulness and their complicity in the death of Jesus. But, that painful acknowledgement was the beginning of their salvation.

Salvation begins when we look upon the sign of our sinfulness. For the Israelites in the wilderness it was the sign of the serpent. For us it is the sign of the cross. Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness so Jesus was lifted up on the cross.

John makes it clear. The cross was no accident. It was a part of God's plan. It was the ultimate sign of fear and sin. But, God turned it into the ultimate symbol of salvation.

That's what we read in the very next verse. "The Son of Man was lifted up so that all who believe in him may have eternal life." A symbol of hatred was turned into a symbol of the God who loved this broken world so much that He even gave up his only Son for that world.

The love of God is sacrificial. The love of God is cruciform in shape. When we look to the cross we see our own sins crucified.

WHY DID IT HAVE TO BE THE CROSS?

Indiana Jones asked, “Why did it have to be snakes?” I have often asked, “Why did it have to be the cross? Why was the cross necessary?”

We will not understand the meaning of the cross completely until we enter glory. But, this analogy at least begins to help us understand. The cross is a symbol of our sin and of our salvation.

That’s why we have Lent. It sets aside time for us to look to the cross.

We need to take some time to contemplate our own sinfulness. We need to take some time to contemplate how our fears are separating us from God and from our fellow human beings.

There are still “snakes in the grass” who would use our fears to control us and have us adopt the ways of violence. But, adopting the ways of violence just leads to more violence. Somewhere the cycle needs to stop.

The cycle stopped on the cross.

On the cross we see God’s nonviolent response to a violent world. In the words of Jesus we see forgiveness and compassion lifted up on a cross. “Father forgive them. They don’t know what they are doing.” And on the cross we see a love so great that even the enemy says, “Surely this man was the Son of God.”

BELIEVE

How do we appropriate the salvation of God as revealed in Jesus? Does it come automatically? Will God save us because God is in the saving business? Maybe we have to consent to certain doctrines. Believe these three things and you’ll get to heaven? Right? Wrong.

In John’s gospel the noun “faith” is rarely used. Instead, John uses a verb, “believe.” Belief is faith in action. Belief is showing by our actions that we trust the message of the cross to be true.

And at the heart of that message is something that I say almost every Sunday after the confession of sin. "God sent not his son into the world to condemn the world but that the world through him might be saved."

If we believe this our behavior changes.

We repent of our sin. Instead of joining the world's rush to violence and darkness we seek the light. We take up our cross and follow him.

We pursue the ways of nonviolence and hope in a violent and pessimistic world.

We say by our deeds that we have looked upon the sins of the world on the cross, we have looked upon our sins and have come away shaking our head at God's grace and compassion. Like the centurion we too say, "Surely this man was the Son of God."

I have met some people who not only say they don't believe in God; they also are adamantly opposed to any kind of religion. Some have even written books suggesting that we need to get rid of the foolish idea of God and embrace the ideals of science.

But, if God is a myth, why are they so invested in rejecting that God?

Usually, it is because they think religion is a detriment to society. They can and do give many examples of how people have used religion to procure their own selfish aims.

But, what if God is not how He is portrayed by the world?

What if God rejects the oppression of the poor and prejudice and violence?
What if God is even willing to "die" for the sins of the world?

If we really believed that, how would we give expression to that belief in the world? And how might that belief answer the objections of the skeptics?

I don't mind people saying that they don't believe in God. I just want them to be clear about the God they are rejecting.

Are they really rejecting the God revealed on the cross of Christ or are they rejecting those who use faith as an excuse for doing evil and embracing darkness?

BELIEF AND BEHAVIOR

Jesus once said, "By their fruits you will know them." People who believe in Jesus will act upon that belief. Real belief brings about a change in behavior.

Let me give you example that's "semi-religious".

If I believe that Apple computers are better than windows based computers I will buy any Apple computer. In fact, some people believe in Apple so "religiously" that they stand in line at the mall to get the latest gadget.

Belief affects behavior.

If we really believe in someone we will stick with them through thick and thin. If we believe in the philosophy of a particular political party we will donate money and campaign for that party's candidates.

Belief leads to action and even sacrifice for what we believe.

Probably the best example of what it means to believe came from a sermon I heard when I was just in junior high school. (I know. At my age it's amazing that I still remember anything from junior high school. But, this I remember.)

I attended a Methodist Church with a friend, and the speaker that day was a missionary. He and another missionary were trying to translate the gospel of John into a native language.

But, they had run into a problem. There was no word in the native language for believe. You cannot translate the gospel of John without the word believe.

And after weeks of getting nowhere one of the missionaries flopped down in a chair and used a native word that meant "put you whole weight on." He put his whole weight on the chair.

And then there was a moment of inspiration.

He had his word for believe.

If we put our whole weight on God as revealed in Jesus Christ, if we believe in him, we will be saved. We will not perish.

We will be saved from our own sinfulness, and we will be saved from those who would lead us to the dark side.

A STORY OF AMAZING GRACE

Sometimes people ask in frustration, "What's this world coming to?"

In other words, they are letting pessimism rule their lives.

But, those of us who look to the cross will not ask that question.

We know what the world is coming to. It is coming to a new creation, a new heaven and a new earth.

And even a cross will not get in the way of that kingdom.

There is story that comes out of the Bedouin culture. (The Bedouins are nomadic Arabs and live a lot like the people of the Old Testament lived.)

According to this story during a heated argument a young Bedouin struck and killed a friend.

Knowing the ancient and inflexible customs of his people the young man fled into the darkness of the desert. Eventually he came to the tent of the tribal chief, and sought his protection. The old chief took the young man in and assured him that he would be safe until the matter could be settled legally.

The next day the young man's pursuers arrived and demanded that the murder be turned over to them. They would see that "justice" prevailed.

But, the chief refused. He said, "I have given my word." "But, you don't know who he has killed." The chief said firmly, "I have given my word." "He killed your son."

The chief was shaken to his core, and stood there with his head bowed for a long time. Everyone wondered what the chief would do now that he knew the truth. Finally, the old man raised his head and said, "Then he shall become my son, and everything I have will one day be his."

I'm not sure this is a true story. It's hard to believe that a human being could react with such forgiveness and compassion at a time like this. Love in its purest form is always hard to believe.

But, isn't this what our heavenly Father did in response to the death of his Son? Look to the cross. On the cross we see the sign of our sinfulness and the sign of our salvation.

Amen.