

John 3:9-14

Lifting Up Christ

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up – v. 14.

Had Nicodemus understood what Christ meant by this reference to Moses he would have marveled as much as he did when Christ told him he must be born again. Indeed I think it would be fair to say that apart from the new birth no man will understand and appreciate what Christ meant when he said *the Son of man must be lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness.*

The reference, of course, is to that chapter in Numbers we read earlier – Numbers 21. In that chapter we have the account of the children of Israel grumbling against God and against Moses – again. Such grumbings had become pretty common by then. Only now the Lord's patience was sorely tried and so we read how He sent fiery serpents among the people which led to a number (a large number) of people dying. Upon the recognition of their sins they approach Moses and confess their sins and Moses is then instructed to make a fiery serpent and mount it to a pole and all it took was a look by the people to this fiery serpent on a pole in order to be healed from the deadly effect of the serpent's bite.

You might well picture Moses raising that pole with the fiery serpent on it in order to make it as visible as he could to as many people as he could. What Christ is now saying to Nicodemus is that Christ Himself must be raised just as that serpent was raised. Christ would make reference to that fiery serpent again later in John's gospel. In Jn. 12:32 He says *And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me.* And then John, the author of the gospel adds this comment to Christ's words: *This he said, signifying what death he should die (v. 33).*

There's a connection between that fiery serpent on a pole that Moses lifted in the wilderness with Christ's crucifixion. I can't imagine that Nicodemus had even a slight clue during that nighttime interview what Christ was talking about. Perhaps he would have understood what followed in Christ's words that *God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.*

Although it's not hard to wonder how much Nicodemus really understood those words also. I'm afraid that the most well known verse in the Bible is to this day one of the least understood verses in the Bible. How many have referenced this verse and suggested from it that God's love for the world is unconditional love. And we're told that our love for those near and dear to us is suppose to be unconditional love. The problem is that Jn. 3:16 indicates most clearly that there is a very definite condition to God's love for the world. The condition is found in believing on His Son. *He that believeth not is condemned already* Christ says two verses later. Christ's love does extend far and wide but it does not extend wider than the cross.

But I want to return now to this idea of Christ being lifted up just as Moses lifted up that serpent in the wilderness. There is in those words an implicit Christian duty for you and I to lift up Christ. And I'm not now suggesting that in our lifting up Christ we re-crucify Him. The church of Rome blasphemes Him that way by suggesting that each time they serve mass, they're crucifying Him anew. We know better and you may recall from our last communion service that I conducted a study out of the epistle to the Hebrews and that Hebrews especially places a strong emphasis on His atoning death being a once and for all finished work.

So by our lifting up Christ, we are not offering a sacrifice again that is already a finished and a perfect sacrifice. What are we doing, then? How are we to lift up Christ? That's the question I'd like to raise and answer this morning. That's the theme we'll focus on, the theme of lifting up Christ.

We Have a Duty to Lift Up Christ

And in order for us to perform that duty there's 3 things we have to understand about the lifting up of Christ. We need to understand how men lifted Him up in His day. We need to understand and appreciate how God Himself has lifted Him up. And we need to understand exactly how we're to lift Him up today.

Let's think first of all then on:

I. How Men in His Day Lifted Him Up

In his commentary on John's gospel, R.C. Sproul makes an interesting point about the use of this phrase *lifted up*:

In Scripture, the expression "lifted up" usually means "to be exalted." For instance, when Isaiah had his vision of God exalted in His heavenly throne room, he wrote that: *In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple* (Isa. 6:1). Thus, when Jesus said, "As Moses lifted up the serpent ... even so must the Son of Man be lifted up," it would make sense to understand Him to be saying, "I will be exalted."¹

And there was to be sure a sense in which the people were willing to lift up Jesus this way. So we read in Jn. 6:14,15: *Then those men, when they had seen the miracle that Jesus did, said, This is of a truth that prophet that should come into the world. When Jesus therefore perceived that they would come and take him by force, to make him a king, he departed again into a mountain himself alone.*

The miracle that Jesus had performed was the feeding of the five thousand. Here was a man that could take care of their every material need – they must have thought. And if they'd followed Christ for any length of time at all they might also conclude that He could take care of their every health need. Here was a man, after all, who healed many that were

¹ R. C. Sproul. John (St. Andrew's Expository Commentary) Kindle Edition
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brought to Him. So there was on their part a willingness to exalt Him or to lift Him up. I've often wondered, based on that verse in John 6 how the Dispensational notion could gain any footing that suggested that Jesus offered the Jews a kingdom but when they rejected that offer, plan B had to go into effect which plan was Jesus dying on the cross. That scene in Jn. 6 indicates that not only were they willing to receive Jesus in the capacity of a king based on the miracles they saw but they were ready and anxious to the point of apprehending Him by force in order to make Him king.

What they failed to understand then and I'm afraid what many professing Christians even fail to understand now is that when Jesus spoke of being lifted up, He had an aim in view that went way beyond this present evil world. I realize, of course, that there are present benefits to being a Christian. We enjoy salvation now. We have in our present possession the blessing of sins forgiven and the peace that accompanies that assurance. And so our peace is referred to as a peace that passes all understanding and our joy is referred to a joy unspeakable and full of glory.

Having said that, however, I'm reminded of the words of the Apostle Paul in 1Cor. 15:19 *If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.* If we fail to see beyond this world and make the mistake of thinking that our religion is geared entirely toward this world then our religion has failed us. Christ, you see, saw way beyond this world when He said the Son of man must be lifted up.

He was looking toward the accomplishment of redemption. He was looking toward a new heaven and a new earth where righteousness would reign and sin would be no more. And in order for that to happen, He had to indeed be lifted up but not in the way that the Jews or Nicodemus would have thought. R.C. Sproul again:

But when Jesus used the phrase "lifted up" here, He was speaking more directly to what had to happen for people to enter His kingdom. He must be lifted up on a cross; He must become the substitute serpent, if you will. He had to take on Himself the sting of death. He had to take on Himself the poison of sin on the cross. There's little doubt in the minds of the commentators that when Jesus spoke of being lifted up like the bronze serpent, He was referring primarily not to his exaltation but to His crucifixion.²

We should remember here the order in which Jesus is teaching Nicodemus about the kingdom of God. We've seen already how in the first 8 verses of the chapter Christ places a strong emphasis on the need to be born again. That need becomes all the more magnified when you consider what Christ goes on to say about being lifted up. He was referring to His crucifixion. He was referring to that time when He would suffer untold sufferings. There's no way that anyone in that time period, not the Jews, not Nicodemus, not even Christ's closest followers would have viewed being lifted up as being nailed to a cross. The cross was a cursed death.

² ibid

It's for good reason that Paul would write to the Corinthians that *We preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness*. There was nothing glamorous or exalting about being nailed to a cross. And yet Paul would go on to state *But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God* (1Cor. 1:24).

This is why I say that nothing short of the new birth is needed to acquiesce to the cross and to affirm the truth of the cross and all that is implied by the cross. The cross, you see, tells you what you deserve. The cross teaches you that you're a sinner and that you deserve to be cursed of God. Our part in lifting up Christ under this heading is to own that our sins lifted Him up. Our sins drove the nails into His hands and feet. Our sins left Him suspended between heaven and earth suffering shame and scoffing rude.

I wonder this morning – have you lifted up Christ this way? Do you own that your sins nailed Him to Calvary's cross? This is not something that the natural man receives, you know. It destroys all pride and men in their pride strive to resist it. The disciples didn't understand it even when it was declared to them and Peter in one instance even tried to oppose it. Yet apart from owning it, you cannot begin to perform your duty of lifting up Christ, nor can you gain the benefit of salvation that comes with lifting up Christ this way.

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up our Savior said. And the first thing we must understand is how men lifted Him up. Sinful men apprehended Him and lifted Him up by crucifying Him. So must we own our part in lifting Him up this way.

But let's move on to consider that not only did men lift up Christ but we must also contemplate:

II. How God Lifted up Christ as Well

When Peter preached on the day of Pentecost he was very direct with his audience. He went so far as to charge them with the greatest crime conceivable to the Jewish mind. Listen to how he puts it in Acts 2:23 *Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain*.

Perhaps no other verse in all the Bible brings two truths together that are sometimes thought by small minds to be irreconcilable. The truth of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. *You have taken Him*, Peter says to his audience. *You have taken Him and with your wicked hands have crucified Him*. You see how he lays such an awful crime to their charge?

And yet none of this caught God or Christ by surprise. What wicked men did with their hands was in accordance with the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God. This was not plan B, you see. This was the plan of the ages. This lifting up of Christ was foretold all the way back in the garden of Eden when God said to the serpent in Gen. 3:15 *And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel*.

And everything you read in Scripture from that verse forward becomes the outworking of that plan that God announced. This is why Christ can be referred to in the book of Revelation as *The Lamb slain from the foundation of the world* (Rev. 13:8). God had and has a purpose to magnify His Son to the praise of His glorious grace. So God has had His part in the lifting up of His Son. It is truly in this sense of being lifted up on Calvary's cross that we go on to read Jn. 3:16 *For God so loved the world that He gave His only Begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.*

But this is not the only way that God lifted up His Son. It is true that this lifting up of Christ on the cross was and is foundational to His exaltation. But after having lifted Him by way of the cross, God would go on to lift up His Son in the way that we more generally understand being lifted up. In other words God would exalt His Son.

Our shorter catechism asks the question in Q28 *Wherein consisteth Christ's exaltation?* Answer: *Christ's exaltation consisteth in his rising again from the dead on the third day, in ascending up into heaven, in sitting at the right hand of God the Father, and in coming to judge the world at the last day.*

And so Christ has been lifted up, you could say, by rising from the dead. In the book of Acts Peter and Paul make much of the fact that God raised up Christ.

Acts 2:32: This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses.

Acts 10:40: Him God raised up the third day, and shewed him openly;

Acts 13:29,30 And when they had fulfilled all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree, and laid him in a sepulchre. But God raised him from the dead:

Christ also made it a point to state that He raised Himself from the dead: *Jn. 10:17,18 Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father.*

But the raising up of Christ does not end with His resurrection. As the catechism answer notes – His exaltation also consists in His ascending into heaven. *Mk. 16:19 So then after the Lord had spoken unto them, he was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God.*

I think I can add something that our catechism answer alludes to but doesn't mention specifically but is also most definitely a part of His being lifted up or exalted. Listen to words of *Phil. 2:8-10: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth.*

We're coming up to that particular Sunday in which much attention is given to the resurrection of Christ. I routinely mention on Easter Sunday that the whole reason the

church meets on Sunday is because Christ rose, or Christ was exalted, or Christ was lifted up in the sense of being exalted on the first day of the week. There is so much importance and so many ramifications to Christ being raised from the dead on the third day that God saw fit through His Apostles to change the Sabbath Day from the last day of the week to the first day of the week.

So man has lifted up Christ not by making Him a king but by nailing Him to a cross. And God has lifted up Christ by sending Him forth for the express purpose of being nailed to that cross and by raising Him from the dead and receiving Him into heaven and by giving Him a name that is above every name.

It remains for us to consider:

III. How We Lift up Christ Today

We've seen how we lift Him up by owning our part in His crucifixion. But when we consider how God has also lifted Him up by raising Him from the dead and receiving Him into heaven and by giving Him a name that is above every name – what do these glorious truths add to the way we lift Him up today?

And if we can start with the fact that God has given Him a name that is above every name then we can lift up our Savior by doing today what everyone will one day eventually do. We bow the knee to that name and we confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God, the Father. In a sense we imitate what doubting Thomas did when given the chance to see the risen Christ and to behold His hands and thrust his hand into his side. You remember what that led to? It led to Thomas's confession *my Lord and my God* (Jn. 20:28).

In other words we worship Him. And in our worship we exult in Him. We understand who He is and what He's done. We know now the connection between His being lifted up and His love for the world and we believe in Him. That's the wonderful thing about worship, you know. It becomes a fitting occasion to announce to Him and before each other that we believe in Him. I sometimes make this point with regard to the Lord's supper but the application doesn't have to be restricted to the Lord's supper.

I hope you're here this morning because you believe in Him. And if you don't yet believe in Him I hope you will. He's the Savior of sinners and there is none other name under heaven given among men whereby you must be saved. So we believe in Him and we confess our faith in Him by worshiping Him, by singing to Him and about Him.

But let me come back now in closing to that Old Testament character that is mentioned in our text. You'll note that Christ says that *as Moses lifted up that serpent in the wilderness*. How did Moses lift up that bronze serpent that he made? I think we interpret the verse very literally and we need to remember the setting. The Israelites were being bitten by deadly serpents. They had acknowledged their sin to Moses and God told Moses to create that bronze serpent and mount it to a pole so that everyone that looked upon it might be delivered from the deadly effect of the serpent's bite.

By lifting up that pole Moses endeavored to get it as high as he could so it would most readily come into the people's view. He didn't want to make it hard to see in other words. He didn't put it in his tent and make people line up and enter one at a time. No, he endeavored to do all he could to make that bronze serpent as visible as he could.

And this is how we must lift up Christ in our day – we make Him as visible as we can. He obviously can't be seen with the fleshly eye today. He's ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God. But He can be seen through you and through me. And we're to lift Him up by making Him visible through us.

Isn't this what Christ had in mind when He said in His Sermon on the Mount: Mt 5:14ff *Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.*

This is how we lift Him up today. We let our lights shine before men. We never fear to own His name and we freely confess Him before others. And we show what motivates us to do what we do in this world. I had the opportunity yesterday to meet with a number of men I use to work with in the printing industry. It was kind of strange learning how old their children were. Most of their children have grown up and gotten married and have children of their own now.

It brought back memories of the days when I worked at Design Printing. And among the things I remember doing when I worked in printing was printing out in large letters on a sheet of paper the words of Col. 3:23,24 *And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men; Knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance: for ye serve the Lord Christ.*

This is how we lift up Christ today. We worship Him and we serve Him. He is the One who gives meaning and purpose to what we do. You should strive to lift Him up this way by doing whatever it is you do heartily, or with all your heart. And you're not doing what you do to make money or climb the ladder in your workplace so to speak – though if you are able to make more money and climb higher, so be it, that's great. But that's not why you do what you do. You have a higher aim and a greater and deeper purpose. You aim to lift up your Savior. I hope you stand out in your work because of how hard you strive. But I also hope that you're never ashamed to make known to people why you do what you do. You lift up Christ by your life because He's become your all in all.

So I wonder this morning – are you lifting up Christ? Do you own your role in His crucifixion? We do know that He spoke of His death when He made mention of Moses lifting up that serpent in the wilderness. Do you lift Him up that way? And do you recognize and appreciate that God has lifted Him up? – God has lifted Him up by devising salvation's plan and sending His Son into the world to die for sinners. And do you lift Him up by exulting in Him and worshiping and serving Him? How I hope and pray that as we lift Him up we'll see others drawn to Him that they too may gain salvation.