

Numbers 21:4-9

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

Ephesians 2:1-10

John 3:14-21

### WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM MAY HAVE ETERNAL LIFE

The gospel lesson today begins with John 3:14-15, which requires that we first discuss the reading in Numbers 21. Then we can see how Jesus became the living version of the bronze serpent lifted by Moses.

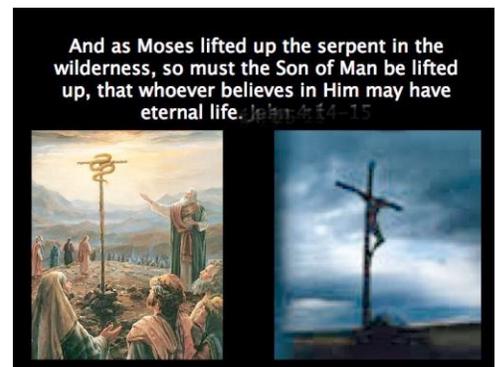
Num 21:4-9. *From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the people became impatient on the way. <sup>5</sup>And the people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.” <sup>6</sup>Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. <sup>7</sup>And the people came to Moses, and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. <sup>8</sup>And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and every one who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” <sup>9</sup>So Moses made a bronze serpent, and set it on a pole; and if a serpent bit any man, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.<sup>1</sup>*

- *“We loathe this worthless food!”* (v.6). Discuss v.4-5 with Ps 78:16-20, “... they tested God in their heart by demanding food ... Why did God afflict his chosen people? The Jews were in a strange land and “spoke against God and against Moses” (v.5). They were beginning to doubt whether “God and Moses” could ever satisfy their appetites. They said, “Can God spread a table in the wilderness?” (Ps 78:19).
- *And the people came to Moses, and said, “We have sinned ...”* (v.7). The Jews repented of what they had said. Now Moses had a choice. He could, in his own righteousness, judge the people and warn them not to rebel any more, or he could identify with them and intercede and ask for mercy on their behalf. Moses chose the latter. He illustrated what Jesus Christ would do one day for you and me, and for all mankind.
- *And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole ...”* (v.8). Throughout Scripture, *serpent* is one of the names of Satan – the personification of evil and the enemy of all mankind. Why would God choose to use such a symbol – the very thing that had been killing the people – as a reminder of his mercy and healing? Why not a dove or a bright light? Verse 9 gives us a clue:
- *If a serpent bit any man, he would look at the bronze serpent and live* (v.9). The answer lies in the effect this symbol had on the minds of the people. The serpent reminded them that, like Adam, they had heeded the voice of the Serpent, failed to trust God, and complained against him. Secondly, the serpent on the pole reminded them of God’s unfailing love, which resulted in healing and mercy in spite of their sin against him.

Our gospel reading today shows how the cross has the same effect on believers today. We first see God’s anger and the sin in our lives, now lifted to the shoulders of the Son of God. Then we see God’s unfailing love which has brought healing and redemption to those who repent and believe in him.

John 3: 14-15. *“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”*

- One might say that v.13, “No one has ascended into heaven but ... the Son of man” implies Jesus was speaking of the ascension here. But Moses’ lifting of the serpent in the wilderness is far more indicative of the cross than of the ascension. You and I live in a spiritual wilderness, and have been afflicted by the fiery serpent of sin. The symbol of our healing is the cross of Jesus Christ, rather than his ascension to heaven.



<sup>1</sup> Bible quotations are from the RSV.

John 3: 16-21. *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup>For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. <sup>18</sup>He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.*

*<sup>19</sup>And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup>For every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. <sup>21</sup>But he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God.*

• *God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.* (v.16). John 3:16 is said to be the Bible verse most quoted by Christians. Taken by itself, as it is often, it contains some of the most sensational claims ever made:

1. It describes the Supreme Being (*God*) as a person capable of loving.
2. It says God loved *the world*, that is, the human race.
3. It says there is an *only Son* of God, whom God has *given* to the world in order to save it.
4. Finally, it says that anyone who *believes* in the Son will *not perish but have eternal life*.

No statement ever uttered has had greater consequences. Each person, once he has heard or read John 3:16, is faced with the decision of whether to believe it or not. In the game of life, you stake everything you have – all you are, all you own, and all of your life to come – on the truth or falsehood of this one statement. If we bet the statement is true and are wrong, then, as Paul wrote, “*We are of all men most to be pitied.*” If you believe the statement is false and are wrong, then, as Jesus said, “*You will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he.*” (John 8:24). No other choice in life is so simple, yet so vital.

Verses 16-18 are in quotes (spoken by Jesus) in most translations (KJV, NKJ, NIV, ASV, NAS, LB, NLT), but not all. A few translations (RSV, NET, GNB) include the verses without quotes as part of the text of the gospel. Discuss the difference. For example, if Jesus spoke the words, then he was aware of his coming destiny on the cross, which would agree with our understanding of John 2:4, “*O woman, what have you to do with me? My hour has not yet come.*”

And even if Jesus did not speak the words in John 3:16-18, we can find things he did say that are very similar. Discuss how the following verses convey the meaning of John 3:16: John 5:24, John 6:38-40, and John 10:27-30. Also discuss Acts 4:11-12, Rom 5:6-10, and 1 John 4:9-10.

• *God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him* (v.17). The Jews had plenty of prophecies of justice and judgments coming down from God, and they also had prophecies of pardon and mercy. Jesus fulfilled the prophecies of forgiveness and redemption – that the world might be *saved* by him. *Save* has many meanings in English, but the word usually has a special meaning in the gospels. Discuss the meaning of *saved* in the following passages:

Rom 5:8-10. *But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. <sup>9</sup>Since, therefore, we are now justified by his blood, much more shall we be *saved* by him from the wrath of God. <sup>10</sup>For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be *saved* by his life.*

Rom 10:9-13. *If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be *saved*. <sup>10</sup>For man believes with his heart and so is justified, and he confesses with his lips and so is *saved*. <sup>11</sup>The scripture says, “No one who believes in him will be put to shame.” <sup>12</sup>For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him. <sup>13</sup>For, “everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be *saved*.”*

• *He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God* (v.18). Is this not a compelling reason to affirm your faith in the Son of God? Anyone, in any circumstance, is pardoned, not condemned, and in fact even *justified* before God when he or she receives Jesus Christ as his or her Savior and Lord. If you have not done so, put all things aside now and ask Jesus to come into your life and save it.