

# The Cross in the Wilderness

*“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes in Him will have eternal life... And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself.’ But He was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which He was to die.” John 3:14-15; 12:32-33*

In this passage of Scripture, Jesus compared His impending death on the cross to Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness. This Old Testament story can be found in the Book of Numbers (see Chapter 21:4-9). When the people of Israel journeyed in the wilderness, they complained in unbelief against God. As a result, poisonous serpents bit them and many of them died. After the people confessed their sins and repented, God told Moses to make a bronze serpent and fasten it to a standard or stake. God said if anyone was dying from the poisonous venom and they gazed at the serpent on the stake, they would live.

Why did Jesus compare His death on the cross to this story of the serpent on the stake? The Bible says Satan is the serpent of old (Revelation 12:9) who rules this world (John 14:30; 2 Corinthians 4:4). Sin and spiritual death entered the human race when Adam disobeyed God and yielded to Satan (Romans 5:12-21). Since then, everyone (except for Jesus Christ the Son of God) who is born into this world is born with a sinful nature (Psalm 51:5; Ephesians 2:1-3).

Therefore, the story of the serpent in the wilderness is initially a picture of how Satan poisoned man’s nature with sin leading to spiritual death. But thanks to God’s plan of redemption for mankind, this is not the end of the story. For ultimately, the serpent nailed to the stake in the wilderness helps us understand how Christ’s death on the cross has freed us from Satan’s power of sin. The Bible calls this the “mystery of the gospel” (Colossians 1:27). The mystery is this: How can a man born with a sinful nature be reborn with God’s divine nature? This is essentially the same question Nicodemus

asked Jesus: How can someone be born again and enter the kingdom of God (John 3:3-7)?

Since we were born sinners and our bondage to sin came by our birth, God in His wisdom and power delivered us from our sin nature by including us in His Son’s death (Romans 6:3-5). God’s plan of salvation was not to *improve* our serpent-controlled, sin nature but to *kill* it and remove it (Romans 6:6). Therefore, when Jesus Christ died on the cross, He took our sin nature upon Himself (2 Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 3:13). When Christ died, we died with Him (Romans 6:3-8). Thank God that old serpent nature of our sinful man has been crucified with Christ!

John the Baptist declared, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29)!” Thus, by His death, Jesus Christ completely redeemed us from sin. He redeemed us from the penalty and condemnation of sin (Romans 8:1; Ephesians 1:7). He also completely delivered us from the power of sin (Romans 6:7). He delivered us from the power of this fallen world (Galatians 1:4; 6:14). And finally, Christ redeemed us from the power of the devil (Colossians 1:13; 2:15; Hebrews 2:14; 1 John 3:8). What a complete redemption we have obtained through Christ’s death on the cross!

Our redemption was accomplished through a “divine exchange” that took place on the cross. By dying on the cross on our behalf, Jesus Christ willingly paid the price for our sins and exchanged His own holy life for our sinful life (2 Corinthians 5:21; Colossians 1:21-22; 1 Peter 2:24). By this holy and mighty sacrifice of His only Son, God translated us from our sinful Adam nature into Christ’s divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). Therefore, when we receive Jesus as our Lord and are born again by God’s Spirit (John 3:3-8), our sinful, self-centered nature is removed (Colossians 2:11) and we become a new spiritual creation in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). In a sense, God performed a divine heart transplant and replaced our terminally sin-sick heart with His Son’s divine heart to save us from the power of

sin and certain doom. Thus God included us in His Son’s death so that His resurrected Son might now sovereignly live in us (2 Corinthians 13:5; Colossians 1:27).

When the people of the Old Covenant faced death in the wilderness, God told them to fix their eyes by faith on the serpent fastened to the stake in order to physically live (Numbers 21:8). God is now telling us, His people of the New Covenant, to fix our eyes by faith on Jesus and the power of His cross in order to spiritually live (Hebrews 12:2). When we abide (stay rooted by faith) in the Biblical truth that our old sinful nature was put to death with Christ on the cross, we will experience deliverance and healing from the power of sin (Romans 6:6-7). Therefore, the power of the gospel (Romans 1:16) is the message of the cross (1 Corinthians 1:18) that Jesus Christ died for our sins (Romans 5:8) and we also died with Him (Romans 6:8). Thus the serpent in the wilderness was a prophetic picture of how our sinful nature would be put to death on the cross with Christ.

Jesus’ last words on the cross were, “It is finished (John 19:30).” When the Galatians lost sight of Christ’s finished work on the cross and tried to live the Christian life based on their human efforts, the apostle Paul warned they were severed from Christ and had fallen from grace (Galatians 3:1-4; 5:4). If we are trying to serve Christ through our natural ability, we are practicing a moral code, which nullifies the power of the cross in our lives. The basis for our living Christ’s resurrection life (the Spirit-filled life) is to know by faith that our sinful nature has been crucified with Christ. When we know that our sinful nature is dead and gone, then our life will not be based on trying to imitate Christ through our willpower and self-effort. Instead, we will trust Jesus Christ to live His life through us.

*“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.” Galatians 2:20*