LIFTED UP TO LIVE by Andy Diestelkamp

Late in their wilderness wanderings, the children of Israel again found themselves near the southern border of Canaan where they had been so many years before (cf. Num. 13:26; 14:45; 20:1; 21:3). Seeking permission from Edom to pass through its territory, Israel was denied passage (20:14-21). So, they “journeyed from Mount Hor by the Way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the soul of the people became very discouraged on the way” (21:4), no doubt because this took them in the opposite direction of the land of promise. Again they asked why God had brought them out of Egypt only to die in the wilderness and, in reference to the manna, murmured “our soul loathes this worthless bread” (v. 5).

For this impatient ingratitude, God sent “fiery serpents among the people; and many ... died” (v. 6). This divine chastening elicited repentance and a plea to Moses to intercede with God on their behalf “that He take away the serpents from us” (v. 7). Yet, take note that God did *not* remove the serpents as requested. Instead He provided the opportunity and means to be healed from the serpents’ bites. The divine prescription for their healing in this case was that whoever was bitten should look at the bronze serpent that Moses made and placed on a pole and live (vv. 8,9).

Jesus used this bizarre incident in Israel’s ancient history as a type of Himself in His conversation with Nicodemus (an apparently sincere and inquisitive ruler and teacher of the Jews). Their preceding discussion about the concept of being “born again” seemed to befuddle Nicodemus, prompting Jesus to question how a “*teacher of Israel”* could not grasp this concept (Jn. 3:1-10). Later Jesus said, “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (vv. 14,15).

What may have seemed an odd event in Israel’s history was really a foreshadowing of God’s grace to offer new life to sinners. Yet, it also foreshadowed the manner by which it would be accomplished. The point of comparison emphasized by Jesus is the literal action of being “lifted up.”On a later occasion, as Jesus spoke with the Jews about His going away (8:21-23), He said, “When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He ...” (v. 28). Jesus later observed, “I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself” which signified “by what death He would die” (12:32,33). If Nicodemus or anyone else who heard Jesus speak about being “lifted up” would have understood Jesus to be referring to crucifixion, they would not have seen how that could apply to the Christ (v. 34).

Notably, the word translated “lifted up”is often translated figuratively as “exalted” (e.g. Ac. 2:33; 5:31). Indeed, the cross (as bizarre as *it* might seem) is Jesus’ means of 1) drawing all (Jews and Gentiles) to Himself, 2) offering them new life (“born again … born of water and the Spirit - Jn. 3:3-5), and 3) ultimately being exalted (Phil. 2:9) and exalting us (Js. 4:10).

As sojourners, we are assured that, in *our* wanderings, all who have been bitten by the “serpent of old” (Rev. 12:9) can look to Jesus and have new life in Him! “That whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (Jn. 3:16). God has not yet taken away the serpent from us, but He *has* provided healing through the lifting up of His Son and thereby hope for all who will look to Him.

There is much that we do not understand about God’s ways, but it is clear that He *will* test our faith with trials. So, borrowing from another inspired allusion to Israel’s failures in their wandering in the wilderness, “Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief” (Heb. 3:12). “Let us lay aside … the sin which so easily ensnares us, and … run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of God” (12:1,2).