

## **If I be Lifted Up: From the Poison to the Passion**

***When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I AM.***

All of us have seen on pharmacy items, doctors offices and store windows pictures of a vertical pole and a serpent coiled around it. In fact there are many variants of this, in many cultures. Traditionally the AMA website explains that they go back to the Greek Asclepius, god of health and healing. In fact the Hippocratic Oath, taken by doctors all over the world, was originally given in this Greek god's name. And he had a pole with a serpent on it, soon to become the symbol of medicine.

However the staff and serpent predate this point in Greek mythology by a millennium or more. And so we find it in today's first reading from the book of Numbers, one of the first five books of the bible called the Torah, though that word is always the Hebrew scripture . Christians often refer to the first five books of the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, as the Pentateuch, meaning five books or scrolls. These were written in Hebrew as Greek mythology was just developing. Curiously, the healing from a snake bite involved giving the potion back in well-controlled dosages which gave rise to pharmacology in its primitive form. The outgrowth today of this science is so universal that we expect healing from a pill or injection instantly. It was not that simple in ancient times, nor in the Sinai desert for Israel 's children.

We enter the story which describes Israelites as complaining about the wandering in the desert, jolting their expectations. After all they were pitching and felling their tents getting on 40 years and eating the same fast food for breakfast, lunch and supper. It was the same McManna over and over. It became routine and to put it mildly, they were ungrateful.

But there is an upside to those bothersome, lifeless things. They can work to bring order and bond or hold together, especially when dealing with family, community, industry, or a wandering nomad people traipsing through the desert for 40 years. The manna became a test to see if the meats and veggies left behind in Egypt were really that important as measured against the freedom promised by Yahweh through his chosen man Moses. Here we see staged in the wilderness the ups and downs and the test of tenacity: will these people succumb, or will they ratchet up trust? Nothing seemed just around the corner. How long will this go on?

So God brings on the action. Saraph serpents. Coming from the desert, perhaps like the rattlesnake, or some other creature that was up to no good. The word *saraph* meant fire and scholars are not able to agree on just what creature this was. No matter. The mortal bite that Satan took out of mankind's spiritual health in convincing Eve and then Adam to be "like God" was much more consequential. Here in Numbers account, these creatures were just physical, not spiritual mischief-makers.

Now one would think the cure to their bites would be to offer a salve or a libation or at least something quite *opposite* to what caused the wound. But Numbers records Moses offering a snake held high, however not a living snake that would come back and bite. Instead, he offered a bronze snake. And instead of a potent elixir was the need to make eye contact and gaze on the serpent. Out of fear? Out of anger? What was this required gaze all about? Why the connection between beholder and bronze serpent? The Gospel today supplies the answer:

*When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I AM.*

Jesus' flashback reference to the desert experience points to Himself as the reason for the imagery of the lifted bronze serpent and its healing

effect in the book of Numbers. Israel has sinned by *complaining* over a *gift* of sustenance and a test of trust that for them is wearing thin in their minds' desire and stomachs' pleasure, and they're looking back for Egypt, gradually turning from God, stirring up their own mischief. Today in our own lives – even in Lent – it is not about doing the same thing over and over, but rather elevating our spirit to gaze upwards at the One who gives all our sacrifices, little resolutions, packaged neatly deeper meaning. It's about redemption, buying back, resourcefully healing and being healers to others. Or re-member-ing, focusing on Calvary.

All right: So God let them know his displeasure for their ungratefulness. Bring on the fiery serpents. That'll show 'em. .. Not so fast...

God did not wind up just chastising them and leaving them work out their own destiny in pain. The snakebites *brought them to their senses* as well. Or least it put them on the right path to change. From which He introduced a further goal. He provided a remedy with the figure of that bronze serpent. The word seraph is used just three times in the Old Testament, twice associated with seraphim, as angelic. But here it is not. Imagine the sun in the desert gleaming on that raised-up serpent. Nothing else would matter to the eyes, or get in their field of vision. For it couldn't be missed! Look away from it and it would even then be dominating the field of vision if only for a few waning seconds, like coming into a dark room from the noonday sun on a blue, cloudless, sunny day – in the *desert*.

All of this of course prefigures Jesus Christ, lifted up on the Cross at Calvary, the vision we now look towards as the drama of Lent further unfolds and accelerates in the Church's chosen readings for this Holy Season. In chapter 12 after the raising of Lazarus from the dead, last Sunday's Gospel, Jesus says:

*Now judgment is upon this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out. [32](#)"And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself."  
[33](#)But He was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which He was to die....*

By this time in John's Gospel Jesus had already been "lifted up" in another way, on a colt in procession of *Hosannas* amidst palm branches like royalty. A relatively short triumph. That is commemorated next Sunday, in the blessing of the palms. No, that was not the "lifting up" the Lord referred to. He did not draw all to himself on account of that entry into Jerusalem, though it looked for the moment that he had won them over. A few days later others would shortly hunt him down and find him. Fickle, easy politically correct *Hosannas* would soon metastasize into *Crucify him!* It is chilling to contemplate how a crowd can be swayed in several days by instigators to turn on the Lord and Savior of the world.

During this time also, Jesus came upon some Greek strangers looking for him and symbolized his dying likening it to a grain of wheat to be buried in the ground, gone from the sight of all. I wonder if those preparing the Cross digging into the hill of Calvary had any notion of the veritable earth-changing event their work readying the soil for that vertical beam would bring about. The Cross is both hidden and exposed whereas the seed is buried. Christ is exposed and lifted up for all to see, not in triumph it would seem, but in humiliation, like a crushed and buried seed. He asks us to take on the same posture: standing even sacrificially for others while burying of our pride and self-centeredness to sprout fresh fruits of love. Standing up for truth, yet letting our stubborn opinions be humored.

Listen to what one present day Jewish commentator writes about the scripture passage in Numbers we read today:

*Moses (paradoxically) creates a mirror image of the very creatures that plague his people. When the Israelites look at the copper serpent – an inanimate, nonliving material object – they do indeed heal. The living serpents take life away, the copper serpent renews it.*

*The Zohar, the masterpiece of Jewish mysticism, explains this miraculous process: **“As soon as the victim turns his eyes and sees the likeness of the serpent, he becomes filled with awe and prayers to the Lord, knowing that this was the punishment he deserved.”***

*The paradox of the serpent is that in one form it causes fear and pain, while in the other it causes awe and healing. My interpretation of this teaching from the Zohar is that the copper serpent is meant to confront, even afflict, the souls of the sinners — but only in order to inspire and elevate them. The Zohar may view the fiery serpents as a “punishment” for the Israelites’ rebelliousness and lack of faith, but it is a punishment that is self-inflicted. The people’s own actions are what distance them from God. Yet there is a path out of the darkness. After they have made an act of *yeridah*, of inner descent and falling away from their covenantal relationship with God, God (through the image of the copper serpent) makes it possible for them to have an experience of *aliyah*, of elevation and redemptive reconnection with the divine.*

These are words of a Jewish Rabbi, Niles Elliot Goldstein. The insight is amazing in that the imagery, though universal, points, like the Suffering Servant passages in latter Isaiah, to Christ and his passion. The Hebrew Zohar was an early body of spiritual writings guiding an already spiritual minded person through 125 stages to deepen spirituality and get to the core of one’s soul. Here he explained: *“As soon as the victim turns his*

*eyes and sees the likeness of the serpent, he becomes filled with awe and prayers to the Lord, knowing that this was the punishment the victim deserved,”* and another took his place, we add in Christ.. His LIGHT radiates through the sunlight reflection and gives life anew. The bite of the snake, from the garden of Eden up to today can only be cured by looking upon the One lifted up on the Cross. From the ever-present subtle allurements to “become like God” in a selfish narcissistic way, to being drawn to a God who, humiliated and left to die amidst the daylight sun on the beam of the cross, the Cross opens up hearts and minds and souls in a way nothing else can, and pours into the receptive mind, heart and soul of the disciple. Listen to Isaiah and the Suffering Servant passage...

*We had all gone astray like sheep, each following his own way; but the Lord laid upon him the guilt of us all... He was cut off from the land of the living and beaten for the sin of his people... though he had done no wrong nor spoken any falsehood... If he gives his life as an offering for sin, he shall see his descendents in a long life, and the will of the Lord shall be accomplished through him. (Isaiah 52).*

We will hear this reading again in the starkness of Good Friday’s Liturgy of the Passion of the Lord. Where did such a unique description come from, but from the inspiration of God Himself to the prophet Isaiah.

What comes to mind here is Saint Thomas Aquinas’ famous line of his finding more meaning in meditation on the Cross of Jesus than in all the theological writings he read or wrote. The gleaming bronze connection of the raised victim is not apparent in the bloodied Body of the Lord. And in one sense the eye can’t take in the light emitted by the serpent on the pole, in that case blinding the onlooker because of his sinfulness, to take this beyond the physical ailment and gaze into the soul. On the other hand

looking at the Crucifix one can't take it in without seeing the stark contrast between sinner – us – and Victim – Christ. O Salutaris Hostia - O Saving Victim - we recall daily here at EWTN as St Thomas' beautiful hymn used for centuries in millions of Benedictions of the Most Blessed Sacrament around the world! *O saving Victim*. Abraham's son Isaac was to be sacrificed, but God spared him. Here, taking on every quality of humankind except sin, as the bronze serpent took on the appearance but the poison of the biting serpents, Christ in his passion and death conquers the poison of Satan and we are saved. That Death, the bronzed Glory of the Lord poised on the Cross, brings out to those disposed to acknowledging our sins a luster that shines beyond the grave of our sinfulness. Now the seed, smothered in the ground, brings forth new life.

***When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I AM.*** This meant His clear claim to divinity, "I AM", the Name God identifies himself as he appeared to Moses. When Christ is lifted up on the Cross will be the measure of his love, and in it His Divinity. It is in his emptying of his life that we are given eternal life.

Brothers and sisters, to admit we are sinners as we say 53 times in each rosary, is not to be glibly humble, nor hypocritical, unless we don't admit we've been bitten, or being bitten try to patch ourselves up, or excuse it as a mere mistake. Pope Francis made it clear, and as a fundamental part of his self knowledge in answer to who he is: "I am a sinner." In saying that there is a purifying address before God who through His Son reaches out and draws all to Himself. Admitting being a sinner is one thing. Whereas turning to the cross, to the Face of the One Lifted up and admitting our *particular* sins, that's another thing. We need to turn to Him again and again in the Sacrament of Confession, because we are, I am, you are sinners and these are our particular sins - before receiving the

Lord in His Precious Body and Blood, to return to Mass after choosing to miss Mass or be away for a period, the Eucharist comes via the Confessional. But the poison of sin needs to be extracted by His eternal mercy, when called upon, for no other pharmacy prescription will work.

Please pray for the conversion of our land, our families, co-workers, friends, community, the busied world who today have forgotten or dismissed the meaning of sin, an extremely fatal mistake; no one can claim God's mercy without begging forgiveness as sinners.

For those of you who find yourselves hurting, distant from God, angry or confused, gaze upwards to the infinite mercy of God Who will never fail us. His Death is remembered each day thousands of times around the world in every Mass. Now join us around the world as we gaze upwards to discover new grace in this very remembrance we continue celebrating today! And humbly let Him draw you to Himself here and forever!