

Lesson 4

Fourth Sunday in Lent

The Holy Gospel: John 3:14–21

Jesus said, “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” God uses conditions and customs in human history in working out His will and purpose. Had the Jews been an independent nation when the Sanhedrin found Jesus guilty and condemned Him to death, He would have been executed by stoning. But the Roman Empire ruled, and the Romans executed non-Romans by crucifixion. So Jesus spoke of being lifted up, and pointed to the bronze snake on the pole as God’s prototype of this. Elsewhere, John quoted Jesus’ “I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to Myself,” and commented, “He said this to show by what kind of death He was going to die” (John 12:32–33). The Greek word *dei* spoke of necessity: “the Son of Man *must* be lifted up.” His being lifted up was not a chance result of a turn of events. It was a result of God’s purposeful, saving will—“that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”

56. What was the compelling factor behind the necessity of Jesus’ being lifted up on a cross?

57. John 3:16 is probably the most widely known verse of the Bible. Luther called it “the Gospel in miniature” because it states the truths of salvation in one sentence. One preacher said of it: “It is so wonderfully simple that it is simply wonderful.” State the important salvation truths that are inherent in its key words:

God

loved

world

gave

Son

whoever

believes

perish

eternal life

Because Jesus was lifted up in atonement for the sins of the world, sin and guilt are no longer the determining factors in human life and death. The question that determines eternal destiny is not “Are you a sinner?” but now is ____.

58. Whether one is a person of faith or of unbelief is evidenced in daily living. What does this Holy Gospel point to as the difference between one who “does wicked things” and one who “does what is true”?

Modern philosophies espoused by and practiced by many today, such as atheistic materialism and secular humanism, do not in themselves encourage a morally reprehensible lifestyle. That may result, however, because they repeat the original sin of making the individual the judge of what is good and what is evil. They tend to be permissive because their value systems are subjective, not objective, and relative, not absolute.

59. According to John’s words in this text, what is missing in the approach of such philosophies to human self-awareness and morality?

The Old Testament Lesson: Numbers 21:4–9

The Edomites were descendants of Esau, the brother of Jacob. They were “cousins” of the Israelites, but it was now 500 years since their ancestral brothers lived. Moses sent messengers requesting permission for Israel to pass through Edomite territory on their way to the Promised Land, but the request was refused, and the Edomites threatened to fight them if they proceeded anyway. Later, the Lord judged Edom for its enmity toward His people (see Jeremiah 49:7–10). At this time, however, Moses avoided conflict with the Edomites and led his people around their territory. They traveled through rugged desert to the south of the Dead Sea. It was a hard and discouraging journey that involved them in fighting the people who lived there (see Numbers 21:1–3). A new generation had grown up during the 40 years of wanderings, but they, too, grumbled against Moses and against the Lord.

60. What was the “worthless food” they detested? Why had they come to detest it?

This incident, like many others in Bible history, shows that God will not just continually put up with faithless grumbling against Him by His people. There comes a time when He disciplines His people because of their faithlessness. In this instance, He sent venomous snakes into the camp, and many Israelites died.

61. What was the Lord’s intention in punishing the complaining Israelites in this drastic way? What was the result of the Lord’s “tough love”? What does this say to us for our own lives as Christians?

62. In what ways was the bronze snake in the desert prototypical of what Jesus Himself would experience and accomplish?

63. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today's Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: Ephesians 2:1–10

Paul reminded the Ephesian Christians regarding their lives of transgressions and sins when they “[followed] the course of this world.” Paul’s description of Satan, “the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience,” points to Satan’s nature as one of God’s (fallen) spiritual creatures.

64. What was true about them that had led them to their pagan way of life?

Paul was born into and was dedicated to worship of Yahweh in a pious Jewish family. As a young man, he studied in Jerusalem under Gamaliel and became part of the Pharisee sect. He said of himself in Philippians that “as to righteousness, under the law [I was] blameless” (3:6).

65. How could he then include himself in “We all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath”?

66. What is the key word in what followed, as Paul spoke of their being made alive with Christ? What does the word *grace* mean? How do Paul’s words strikingly emphasize that it is entirely by God’s grace that we have been made alive with Christ?

Paul’s words implicitly review our Savior’s experience in His exaltation. He was “made alive” and was “raised up” and now sits “in the heavenly places.” The amazing Good News that Paul has for us is that *we* experience the same with him. *We* were “made alive together with Christ” and “raised up with Him” and “seated . . . in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.” In Greek, this emphasis is strong; the verbs are in the aorist tense, denoting a past, completed action that continues to have present significance. We readily understand that we have been made alive with Christ, through faith in Him, but here also, our having been *raised up* with Him and having been *seated* with Him in the heavenly places are stated as accomplished facts.

67. When did this take place for us? (See 1 Peter 3:18; Romans 6:4.) What was Paul underscoring here about our relationship with God in Christ? When will we fully appreciate the truth of how He has blessed us in Christ?

It is hard for human pride to accept that this is *all by grace*. It is said that everyone wants an insurance policy that guarantees eternal life, but most want it to be at least 10 percent deductible. St. Paul,

after “boasting” about his background as a Jew and a Pharisee, said he considered all that rubbish compared to knowing Christ Jesus and being found righteous in Him (see Philippians 3:4–11). After “boasting” about his hard work and his sufferings as an apostle, he said he would boast only in his weakness, which magnified the power of Christ in him (see 2 Corinthians 11:21b–12:10). Paul was determined to boast only in the cross of Christ (see Galatians 6:14).

68. What “boasts” might you have to discard as “rubbish” to be righteous in Christ alone? Why is it that we have no basis for boasting about our salvation—not even about our having accepted Christ as our Savior? (See 1 Corinthians 12:3.) What happens when you insist on and trust in your contributing at least 10 percent for your salvation? What is the only thing you can do when you receive a gift that lets it remain purely a gift?

69. Saved by grace through *faith alone* is complemented by “for *good works*.” What are some of the misunderstandings about these two teachings? In what way are good works an *essential* part of the “grace package” that is God’s gift to us in Christ?

70. Paul’s “we are [God’s] workmanship” emphasizes that good works flow out of the gracious action of the Holy Spirit. Does doing good works require conscious effort on our part? (See Philippians 2:12–13.) What does it say to us that God has “prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them”?

71. With what good works are you consciously saying “thank You” to God?