

The Ascended Christ

Caleb Hyers | The Resting Place Apostolic Family | John 3:13-15

What if the same symbol the enemy used against you is the very symbol God chose to save you? In this message, Caleb Hyers traces the ascended Christ through Moses' bronze serpent, the garden of Gethsemane, and the wounds of Isaiah 53, and shows exactly where to look when shame tries to tell you who you are.

NO ONE HAS ASCENDED EXCEPT HE WHO DESCENDED

The title of my message this morning is The Ascended Christ. Today we're going to look at a strange Old Testament story that Jesus mentions. Part of our ninety days is that we continue to preach from whatever the readings were the week before. So if you're doing the readings, you've already read the passage we're going to focus on today. We're going to look at that strange Old Testament story of a bronze snake on a pole, and discover why God used the very symbol of the enemy to bring healing. By the end of this message, I hope you'll know exactly where to look when shame tries to tell you who you are. I hope you'll know exactly where to put your eyes when shame speaks and tries to tell you who you are.

Let's start with the words of Jesus from our reading this week. This is John 3:13-15, just one of the readings. Jesus said this:

No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

Do you see this side by side here? There's this ascension, descension, lifting up thing going on. There's a pattern in here, and Jesus is doing it on purpose. Jesus said he descended from heaven. He's claiming that no one has descended from heaven except the Son of Man, and that is his title. So Jesus said he descended from heaven, and since he is eternal, he can also say he has ascended into heaven, because God the Son is coeternal with God the Father and God the Spirit, and therefore

outside of time. The point he's making is this up and down, this ascension and descension. They are intrinsically linked. And then he says the Son of Man must be lifted up on the cross. What's another way of saying lifted up? A sign. The implication is not just that he'll hang on that cross, but that he will descend from that cross to the grave, because he's placed in the tomb.

So he's saying so much. The Son of Man will be lifted up, but he's implying that he'll also descend after being lifted up and be laid in the tomb. That would later lead to what happens on the third day. He rose from the grave, and then later ascended into heaven. So the descension into the tomb didn't stay. It didn't end there. It was a precursor to an ascension. But that's not the end of the pattern. He ascended into heaven. He's there now, but he will descend again. He's coming the same way he left. He is going to return. You see the ascension, descension, ascension, descension, ascension, descension. And then he's going to take us with him.

This is the context. And I believe this is vital to understanding our very salvation. Do you know what comes after John 3:15? That's John 3:16, the most famous verse in the Bible in the modern era, and it has the context of this strange serpent-on-a-pole story right before it. When we think about these things, this ascension and descension pattern is a part of your salvation story. I might have been the first person to tell you this, but I'm glad to say it.

YOU SHOULD NEVER BUILD A DOCTRINE WITHOUT A SECOND OR THIRD WITNESS

If I'm saying this ascension and descension element is vital, that it should be taken seriously, you should know you should never build any doctrine, anything universally applied to all times and all people, unless you have a second or third witness. This is very important. If you can't find a second or third witness, it is not a good doctrine. And let me caution you, even the words of Jesus, you should find a second or third witness for. It's easy with Jesus, because he is the Word, and he loves to repeat himself. In him are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

This is not the only place the scriptures talk about the ascension and descension. Ephesians 4:8-9, written by the apostle Paul, says:

Therefore it says, When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men. In saying he ascended, what does it mean but that he also descended into the lower regions of the earth?

That's a reference to Hades. He didn't just descend into the tomb. He went below the earth. He went into Hades. Notice what it says. When he ascended on high, he led a host of captives. Who were the captives? They were the ones who had died before him and descended below the earth. He actually went beyond the grave. He went down to hell, to what's called Abraham's bosom. You can do your own research on this. It's kind of like a holding place for everyone who believed the Messiah would come, the son of David. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Elisha, Enoch. Everyone else, King David, Moses, everybody, they were sitting there waiting for the Messiah, believing the entire time he was coming. And Jesus didn't just descend into the grave. He descended into hell and said, hey, it's time to go. He led a host of captives with him, all the men and women who believed on him for ages before he came.

Acts 1:9-11 shows us the moment he ascended:

And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who is taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.

He lifted off the earth in front of them, and then two men in white appeared and disappeared out of nowhere. This is an undoctored understanding of the ascension and descension paradigm. And finally, 1 Thessalonians 4:16 says it plainly:

For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God.

Nobody's going to miss it. He's going to crack the sky open with his voice. Jesus has yet to shout. One day he will, and you're going to hear it, and every tongue will confess that he is Lord of all. Can you see the importance of the ascension and descension reference in the midst of the salvation arc? That could be a sermon all by itself, but that was just my introduction. Take a deep breath. You'll be fine.

THE BRONZE SERPENT IN THE WILDERNESS

So why did Jesus mention Moses and the snake? Why did he say, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, just as Moses lifted up a serpent? The people hearing that, the people in his hearing that day, knew exactly what he was talking about. Any Jew would have known the story, because it's actually a horror story. It was told over and over again as a warning. It's scary, but most of us Western Christians don't even know what he's referring to.

It's out of Numbers 21:4-9. This is when the Israelites are out of Egypt, wandering in the desert. It says they set out by way of the Red Sea to go around the land of Edom, and the people became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses. Bad idea. What did they say? They said, Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food. Here's where it gets intense. Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. 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 may take away the serpents from us. So Moses prayed for the people, and the Lord said to Moses, Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live. So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole, and if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

That's what Jesus is referencing, because this is the story of our salvation. What happens? The people became impatient, they spoke against God and against Moses. This is a picture of not trusting the Father, and rebelling against the deliverer, the Father and the Son. Moses is a type and a shadow of Christ, taking a people out of Egypt into the promised land. That was his assignment. Moses was a deliverer. And then the Lord sent fiery serpents to bite the people, and they died. The wages of sin is death. Sin kills. When we rebel against God, even now, it's a death sentence. If you're in Christ, that's not an eternal one, but there are consequences. Sin still kills.

We rebel and align with the enemy, which is pictured by a serpent, a snake, and it literally comes back to bite us. This is a picture of our salvation. Then what do they do? The people confess their sin against God and their deliverer. They repent, and repentance isn't saying, oh, I did bad. It's changing from the bad. It's turning away from it. So when we confess our sins and repent, what happens? We are saved. We say, that's wrong, we want to do right, we want to follow God, and Jesus is then our Savior. And then they asked Moses to pray for their deliverance. Jesus is actually our advocate. First John 2:1 says, if anyone sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Christ Jesus the righteous. It's not a foregone conclusion that you will sin. The assumption is that you're actually walking out of darkness and into life. It says we have an advocate with the Father, Christ Jesus the righteous, and it also says that Jesus ever lives to make intercession on behalf of the saints, that's you and I. A third of the Trinity is praying for you. Another third is saying yes to the prayers. And the last third is enacting it and working it out on your behalf.

The Lord told Moses to raise up the serpent on the pole, and have the people look upon the serpent to be healed. The Father sent his Son as a sin sacrifice on the cross, and if we trust in him, if we see his sacrifice for what it is, we are saved, we are healed, we are delivered. Does that make sense? You see the story arc of redemption there.

WHY WOULD GOD USE THE SYMBOL OF THE ENEMY

Let's look a little deeper into the comparison of Christ crucified and the serpent on the pole, because this is right before the verse everyone knows. There is power packed in there. Other cultures actually made the serpent on a pole a false icon of worship even before God told Moses to do it. Other cultures predating Moses had a serpent on a pole associated with different medical remedies, even hallucinogenic rituals. God says to Moses, do that thing that all the pagans are doing. Do you know how strange that would have sounded to Moses? He didn't fully understand what was going on. He's like, well, God said it, so I'm doing it. It's associated with this horrible event in Israel's past. There's actually something interesting here. Have you ever seen what's on the back of an ambulance? It's a snake on a pole. That symbol tracks all the way back to this and back to these ancient practices. It's in our modern day. You can look that up.

But it's associated with this horrible event in Israel's past. Their ancestors died in the desert from these fiery serpents. That is not a good memory. And it gets worse, because even after the bronze serpent, years later, in 2 Kings 18:4, the Israelites start worshiping the bronze serpent, and it has to be destroyed. We do the same thing sometimes. God does something one way in our past, and we think that's the only way he can do it. Then we expect him to keep doing it that way, and when he doesn't, we get mad at God for not working the way he used to work. What we've actually done is created an idol of our own making. It doesn't say I do an old thing, because I do a new thing. He's not making all things old, he's making all things new. Even in our context, we're looking for an ancient future faith. Looking for the way of Christ and his apostles, and how it's going to take us into eternity. It's not about old, it's about ancient future.

So it's a terrible story in Israel's past. They end up worshiping the pole. This seems like strange context for the most famous verse Jesus ever said. And not only that, think of another time a symbol of curse was on a tree. All the way back to the garden, the original fall of mankind. A serpent in the garden deceiving Eve. Why would God use the symbol of the enemy and of the pagans as an example of how he would bring our salvation?

Here's why. The salvation of the human race required more than paying for our sin. It required becoming it. That's how deep it got. Jesus didn't just send a check and say, pay the bill. He became the problem. This is straight out of the scriptures, not my opinion. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says:

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

He made him to be sin who knew no sin. That's a different story than we're used to. Salvation cannot be preached only as Jesus paid for our sin. It has to be preached that he became sin itself. Why? Because Jesus came to redeem more than individuals, more than humans even. He came to redeem all things, creation included. So he took the very symbol of the enemy's supposed victory to defeat him forever. Jesus said, I'm going to become you. I'm going to show how much power I have over you. I can be you and beat you.

Now, is God the author of sin? No. I'm saying he became the thing that was killing you and me, so that we could be delivered and set free forever, and that all redemption could be wrought in his hands, that he alone would be the source of even creation being released from its frustrations. This

is much more than your prayer or your spot in heaven when you die. It's the redemption of all things. Jesus did not just die for your sin. He died as your sin. That's the gospel. He died as your sin. This is why he said, just as Moses lifted up the serpent, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.

HE BECAME SIN ON A TREE

This is why we have eternal life. He became sin on a tree. The tree of life himself died upon a tree, as sin itself. He is the tree of life. He is the eternal source of life, and he became sin upon a tree. This is another reason why he prayed in the garden, if possible, let this cup pass from me. People say, oh, Jesus was trying to get out of the cross. No. Earlier in the same gospel, John's gospel, he says, shall I ask to be delivered from this hour? No, it is for this hour that I have come. And then he says, lift me up.

He was wrestling in the garden. He said, I'm not supposed to die surrounded by trees in the dark. I'm supposed to die upon a tree in the light, in front of everybody. He says, deliver this cup from me, meaning the one he's drinking right now, where his blood vessels are bursting and he's dying prematurely. Ask any nurse, when all your blood vessels rupture, that's typically a death event, especially with no medical care. Hebrews backs this up. It says:

In the days of his flesh, he offered up loud cries and supplications to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence.

Was Jesus saved from death on the cross? No, he was not. But was he saved from death prematurely, in the garden? Yes, he was. He was not relinquishing his assignment. He was saying, sustain me unto the cross. I need to get up on a tree, not die in a garden surrounded by trees. He became the instrument of our downfall in order to raise us up with him. This is the ascended Christ. He became the very instrument of humanity's downfall in order to raise all of humanity up with him. He descended so he could ascend, and descend again.

This is why Paul declared in 1 Corinthians 2:2, I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. What is he saying? I know nothing but the living, ascended Christ. He doesn't mention only the crucifixion. He mentions the ascension. Paul wrote that after Jesus ascended, so he's saying, I know nothing among you except Jesus, who is alive. Jesus is alive in

heaven. I know nothing but him, the living one, and him crucified. That's ascension in heaven, and that's crucifixion on the cross. He said, I know the ascended Christ, and nothing else. We need to look at the cross instead of ourselves. We need to stop looking at ourselves and calling it holy. Looking at our mistakes and calling it piety. Bragging about how awful we are and calling it salvation. No, look at him. He became it.

We need to get cross-eyed. Your vision needs to blur to anything but the cross. We need to see nothing but Christ and him crucified. Just as Moses looked at the serpent and they were healed, we need to gaze upon the ascended, crucified Christ to find eternal salvation. We look upon his wounds to heal our woundedness. We're not focused on our stuff. Don't spend time looking at your sin. Gaze upon him who became sin. You've learned repentance by way of focusing on yourself. Quit being selfish. Honor the Son of Man, the Son of God, who was sin for us. Honor his work, not how much you're working on yourself. I'm tired of the self-help program being idolized in the church. You are not able to help yourself. Christ alone is your help. He alone is our salvation. You cannot make yourself better. You cannot make yourself holy. You cannot make yourself improve. He alone is our salvation, now and forevermore. That idea itself, the self-help program, is an idol masquerading as spirituality. Don't waste your energy focusing on your worst days. Look into the wounds of his worst day.

BY HIS WOUNDS WE ARE HEALED

This is all captured by one of the most famous messianic prophecies, from Isaiah, written hundreds of years before Christ. Isaiah 53:3-5 says:

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, and as one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our grief and carried our sorrows. Yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.

Stop staring at your sin and start staring at the wounds he took as sin, because what looks like a curse is actually the cure. The enemy, in the form of a serpent, was the only animal cursed in the garden. The ground was cursed because of him, but the serpent was the one cursed. God said, because you've done this, you will crawl on your belly. He descended into the dust. And it says the seed of the woman will be against you. You'll strike his heel, but he will crush your head.

So we need to grasp the full ascension and descension cycle that is the context of our salvation. Let's slow down even more. We ended with John 3:15. Let's read the next verse, John 3:16. After the Moses serpent, Son of Man lifted up passage, it continues: For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. Do you know what was saving the people in the wilderness? It's the context of that story. God knows exactly what he's doing. The storyline here is amazing. Then it continues, for God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. We are saved not just by him, we are saved through him, through Jesus becoming sin. We are saved through his willingness to become the very thing that was killing us. He defeated death and hell and the grave by becoming sin on the cross.

This is so much more than getting a mansion when you die. It's not about me in eternity. It's the redemption of all things. Jesus used the symbol of our destruction to deliver us forever.

WHERE TO LOOK WHEN SHAME COMES CALLING

I want to tie a bow on you as you think on this. The ascended one, Jesus, who is God. Jesus is God. He is the ascended one. Always has been. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He has always been coeternal with the Father and the Spirit. The ascended one descended into humanity. Born of a virgin. He lived his life and ascended in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, on the cross. And then he descended into the tomb, and then into the lower regions of the earth, even into hell. And then he ascended all the way back to heaven, taking many captives with him, all who believed in him before, and all who will believe in him in the future. Us. He will descend again, and then we will ascend with him, to be where he is forevermore.

I just threw a lot of theology at you. Let me give you a couple of ways to apply it. The next time you feel shame or regret over your mistakes, picture the broken open wounds of Jesus, and see your failure tucked within them. You can see them, because he was broken open for you. The next time you fail and feel like you need to beat yourself up about it, literally visualize your shortcomings within the split open side of Jesus on the cross. There's no reason to beat yourself up over it. He already took a beating for it. He didn't just pay for it. He became it.

The next time someone hurts you and sins against you, look into the trauma in his flesh on the cross, and find their sin there as well. That's the easiest path to forgiveness. Find that thing they did tucked within his wounds, the next time it happens. The next time you remember the horrible thing done to you in your past, see it within his sacrifice on the tree, and forgive them quickly. This is what it means to be cross-eyed. You need to look for the woundedness of your life within his wounds. That's how you truly find healing. Find your healing in him. The ascended Christ. The ascended Christ.