

Here it is, perhaps the most famous Bible verse, and certainly the most famous citation of a chapter and verse. You've seen the signs and bumper stickers that just say, "John 3:16," and for many people, that verse sums up the Christian faith. But Saint John the Evangelist was not one of those people. There is no indication in the text that it's more important than the surrounding verses. If anything, the fact that it starts with the word "for" is a clue. In Greek that indicates that the full meaning of the sentence comes only from the context of the previous sentence.

So it's a good thing the lectionary recaps the serpent incident today, because it's not the most famous Old Testament story. The incident occurred toward the end of Israel's wandering in the desert, when times were especially hard. They had just been attacked, and you get the impression that the people of God were at their wits' end. Their complaining went beyond ingratitude and reached the point of losing faith, doubting God, and flirting with the idea of rejecting God and returning to Egypt. God's response was shocking... especially for anyone who's afraid of snakes. And the resolution of the incident is just plain weird.

The Ten Commandments forbade both graven images and magical rituals, and making a bronze serpent for a supernatural healing ritual looks like both. And sure enough, some rabbis have been uncomfortable with the idea of a "magic" object — made by a man, no less — causing a miraculous cure. Those rabbis said that the bronze serpent thing did not heal the Israelites in and of itself, but rather, caused them to look up to God. Reconnecting with God caused them to reconnect with their faith, and thereby reconciled with God, their mission, their identity, their community, and themselves. That works for me. And apparently that worked for God, too, because it was the last time during their desert sojourn that Israel complained.

So when Jesus is referring to that episode, he's not talking about an individual choice to agree with an idea or opinion about himself. He's also not talking about the afterlife, or at least, not only the afterlife. He's talking about a corporate experience of sin, and God's remedy for sin. In the story Jesus refers to, the people realized they had sinned, and they asked Moses to intercede with God, and he did. When you need people to get the message, don't say it with flowers, say it with poisonous snakes!

And they got the message, all right. Their personal, individual regret and desperation led them to Moses, but those feelings didn't change the situation. God had to act. And then the people had to look at their sin in the figure of a serpent of bronze, and look beyond it, to the God who forgave them, and healed them, and renewed them. All. Corporately. In this life, not the hereafter.

The comparison between Jesus and the serpent of bronze is apt. As Mark Davis puts it, "Life here and now is filled with God's gracious provision. If the elevation of the bronze serpent interprets for us the elevation of Christ on the cross, salvation includes our own reckoning with how we either accept or reject Jesus as God's provision. And the cross, of course, is not merely a device for elevating something so that all can

gather around and see. It is an instrument for inflicting torture, in order to overcome enmity through violence. That is the sin we must gather to see, to look square in the eyes, and with which we must reckon.”* I would say, not so much because God makes our salvation conditional on our looking up and reckoning with the Cross, but rather, because that is the only faithful response to what God did for us on the Cross. Looking to Jesus’s sacrifice for us is both the mark of a mature Christian, and a remedy for ingratitude and doubt.

Did you ever wonder what happened to the bronze serpent? I didn’t, either. If you had asked me at “stump the clergy,” I would have guessed that it went into the Ark of the Covenant with the other memorial objects from the Exodus. But no. Centuries after the Exodus, though still centuries before the birth of Christ, the good and faithful Jewish king Hezekiah embarked on a course of religious reform to ensure that his people only worshipped God. In addition to demolishing illicit shrines, he was outraged that people were worshipping the bronze serpent, making offerings to it. Any idolatry was unacceptable, but this was especially perverse, since the object was originally made in obedience to God, and a reminder to stay faithful to God. So Hezekiah destroyed the serpent.

The comparison between Jesus and the serpent is helpful, but the contrast is also apt. The serpent was good, but it was merely an instrument, a creation, and as Hezekiah observed, people could abuse it. But Jesus is God; in him, our creator has come among us, and therefore, worshipping Jesus is not only appropriate, but right, just, and joyful. Not only is Jesus worthy of worship, but his incarnation initiated a new era of intimacy between creator and creation. Jesus’s experience of punishment and suffering was the end of God’s infliction of punishment and suffering on anyone, a sufficient sacrifice for all the world, for all time.

People still reject God’s love and grace, and suffering ensues from those rejections, not by divine retribution, but by simple cause and effect. Therefore, our reckoning with sin is ongoing. But we don’t need a bronze serpent, or any material thing, in order to respond to the sin that plagues the world. When we allow God to fashion us into instruments of healing, God can lift us up for the good of others. We may allow God to change us with complete confidence because, as Saint Paul wrote, God will “show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ...For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”

Through Christ, reconciliation is always at hand. And God is always ready to forgive and comfort us, for God so loves the world. No matter how hard this life gets, we can always lift up our hearts to reconnect with God. As soon as we do, things are looking up.

*<https://politicaltheology.com/the-politics-of-reckoning-john-314-21/>