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The Paradox of the Cross

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September 14, 2025—Exaltation of the Holy Cross

Readings: Numbers 21.4-9; Psalm 78; Philippians 2.6-11; John 3.13-17

On September 14, we celebrate the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross. Historically, this feast commemorates the finding of the true cross of Christ's crucifixion by St. Helena in the early 4th century. The readings for today's mass, however, invite us into more than just a remembrance of an event in history: they present to us the paradox of the cross of Christ as our victory over sin and death. As Christ abased himself in his humanity, he was ultimately glorified through his death on the cross. By our faith in him, we are also lifted up into his glory.

Ignominy and Salvation

John's Gospel today is a portion of Jesus' nighttime encounter with Nicodemus. It is clear from Jesus' conversation with this esteemed teacher of the Law that Nicodemus doesn't understand Jesus' mission. This can be seen by his confusion, earlier in this chapter, about being "born again" (John 3.9). After explaining what it means to be born of the Spirit, Jesus next describes the Son of Man (his preferred method of self-address) as both *descending* and *being lifted up*. Note here that the Son of Man's descent is a result of his own action: he is the one who "has come down from heaven." After this descent, however, he must "be lifted up" (see John 3.13-14). The language in this second situation is something that happens *to* him rather than *by* him. While this passage does not explicitly mention the cross, this is clearly what is meant by "being lifted up." Given the ignominy of this manner of death, the torturous death of a criminal, we begin to see the paradox of the "exaltation" of the cross.

The Snakebite of Sin

The reading from Numbers today provides important context for understanding Jesus' words. He says, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up" (John 3.14). Numbers 21 reveals that serpents were sent to the people of Israel in their desert journey from Egypt to Canaan as a consequence of their ingratitude. According to the text, many died as a result of these serpent bites. God's

liberation came through the command to Moses to affix a bronze image of a serpent to a pole and whoever would look up upon the image would be saved (Num 21.9).

By itself, this is a strange story. To make an image of a snake and offer it up for the people to look upon for healing seems like it might be a form of idolatry. The specific imagery here is important, however: there is a snake and it is “mounted on a pole,” and the condition for being saved from the poison is to look at it. First, there is the snake itself. Among the many symbolic images of the snake in art and religion, a critical one is as an image of sin. The Christian understanding of the snake in the Garden of Eden is that it is the devil, and therefore the “offspring of the serpent” (see Gen 3.15) is sin.

Second, this image of sin is affixed to a pole, nailed to it – crucified, if you will. Those who have been “poisoned” by the bite of sin are doomed to perish, unless they look upon the Crucified and are healed. How does this relate to Jesus, the sinless Incarnation? According to Paul, Jesus became sin on the cross: “For our sake he *made him to be sin* who did not know sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him” (2 Cor 5.21). The way to healing in Numbers is to look at the pierced snake lifted up. In the Gospel, the Son of Man is lifted up so that we who have been poisoned by sin might have eternal life (John 3.16).

Release from Slavery

We celebrate the exaltation of the cross because it is the fulfillment of Jesus’ rescue mission to save humanity. C.S. Lewis writes, “Christianity is the story of how the rightful king has landed – you might say landed in disguise – and is calling us all to take part in a great campaign of sabotage” (C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Book 2, Part 2). God’s infinite love is made manifest in becoming one of us, in humiliating his divinity to become one with our humanity. God wills this in the love he has for the creatures made in his image and likeness (see Gen 1.27). As Paul points out in his *Letter to the Philippians*, this is clearly a *descent* from his glory. The language he uses is even stronger than a mere “coming down” as Jesus says in the Gospel; Paul says that God *emptied himself* (Phil 2.7) and took the form of a slave. Christ becomes fully one of us, not merely appearing as one of us. The full meaning of this descent was argued much in the early church as they struggled to reason through the meaning of what their faith told them: what does it mean to say that God became man? It’s worth pointing out that the dogma of the Incarnation is a truly distinctive element of Christian teaching. Diverse religious traditions throughout human history have stories of a god appearing as a human being, or of a god inspiring or speaking through a human being, but only Christianity teaches that our humanity is so important that God would become one of us to save us from slavery. This term also bears further elucidation.

Paul says that Christ became a “slave,” rather than simply saying he became a human being. This is because of Paul’s understanding that all human beings are slaves to sin (see Rom 6). We *need* to be rescued. The Incarnation is, as Lewis noted above, the form of that rescue mission. God chooses to descend, is lifted up on the cross, and then finally will ascend once again from whence he came. This ascent as the end of his mission only occurs after the Resurrection. In the meantime, however, Jesus in John’s Gospel invites our attention not on that future happy moment, but rather on the nearer event of *being lifted up*. The mission plan begins with the descent but cannot proceed to the return in glory without going through the cross. Paul says that, because of what Christ chooses to do in his self-emptying, his Father exalts him (Phil 2.9). Then the apostle concludes by saying that participation in Christ’s exaltation comes about only by going the way he has gone. We must be on our knees before the glory of God – “every knee must bend” – a minimal participation in submission when compared to the lifting up of Christ on the cross, but still the pathway to eternal life. We exalt the cross as the way in which Christ’s exaltation occurs and, by extension, our own exaltation in him.

The very beginning of our submission is revealed in the last few verses of the Gospel passage that focus on the invitation to believe. The Son of Man is lifted up so that those who *believe* may have eternal life (John 3.15-16). The price of our own exaltation is our belief that Jesus being lifted up is the path to eternal life. Jesus will do the heavy lifting for us and by our belief, we are empowered to follow him. Jesus undergoes the humiliation

of both laying aside his divinity *and* taking up the horror of the cross, but all we have to do is believe that his action will save us! A small price to pay and certainly a reason for exaltation.

Remember the Works of the Lord

The Psalmist invites us to remember the works of the Lord. Psalm 78, of which only seven verses of the much longer psalm are included in the Responsorial for today, gives several examples of how God supported his people Israel, but also how the people continuously rebelled. In their rebellion, God allowed them to become victims of their circumstances. The antidote to this was for them to “not forget the works of the Lord.”

This hasn’t changed for the people of God. Even though God in his love emptied himself and was lifted up on the cross for us so that we could be exalted with him, we still persist in our rebellion and thus remain in our slavery. We become victims of our circumstances and fail to take responsibility for our own misery. We forget the works of the Lord. We, like the Israelites in the desert, complain about what we want God to do to satisfy our selfish desires while failing to recognize all the ways in which he has acted to save us. On this Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, we should reflect on the paradox of how the horrific event of the cross is not a tragedy but the doorway to the happy ending of God’s story. Christ does not stand at a distance and watch his people; he becomes one of us and leads the way, in humility, through the cross, to bring about the fullness of the Kingdom. We should never forget the works of the Lord; we should believe in him so that we might have eternal life (John 3.16).

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For Further Reading

Athanasius of Alexandria, [*On the Incarnation*](#)

[*Catechism of the Catholic Church*](#), # 599-623

C.S. Lewis, [*Mere Christianity*](#)

In Short . . .

- *Jesus is exalted on the cross by his free decision to first lower himself and become one of us.*
- *We are all slaves to sin but we are freed from slavery when Christ is lifted up on the cross.*
- *Because of his love for us, God’s plan was always to free us from sin, as demonstrated in the events of the people of Israel in the desert.*
- *We participate in Christ’s victory on the cross by having faith in its victory and then living as people who have been set free.*