

The life-giving sign. (John 3:14-21)

* Dear Friends, if you are planning to take trip through the wilderness you may encounter battle with the poison snakes. Even though snakes generally prefer to stay away from people, they can attack, particularly if people accidentally step on them or enter upon their territory. Some snakes are very dangerous; they usually release poisonous venom if they bite. Whenever you'll be fishing or jogging where snakes are found, be aware of their habits, dress yourselves for protection, and know what to do or not to do if you come across or are bitten by a snake.

* On the internet I saw a picture of a man's hand bitten by a snake. Friends, it is such a striking picture you may not forget if you glance at it, even just one time. But the greater degree is yet another image, the Son of God, the Master of the universe, bitten by the serpent of Eden and lifted up on the cross. That is the real shocking image we have never seen, but might imagine!

* The Gospel reading for today carries simultaneously the shocking and encouraging message. It says, "... just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life," (v.14,15). In the 3rd chapter of John's Gospel we don't find any miracle that tells us about Jesus' power and authority, instead it recalled the imagery of the Son of Man nailed on the cross, just like the bronze serpent in the wilderness. Either way it is not the enjoyable image for us, and especially for those who were blinded by the wrong belief with regard to a sign of cross and image of the crucified One.

* In chapter 3 Jesus draws a verbal self- portrait where the Son of Man will suffer the cross for many. It is an offensive picture for some Christians because unconsciously they want to experience resurrection apart from the "crucifixion" of their own flesh contrary to the apostolic teaching, (Rom 12:1). In addition to that, they cannot bear a crucifix because they believe that after the Resurrection a crucifix has not shaped for the King of kings. In order to make sense to those who follow after their wrong beliefs, they reinterpreted apostolic message; but still not everybody found among their followers. The Lord says "my sheep know my voice." The sound remains the same as it was in the beginning, -- the "Christ crucified." Here is the message, "For I had made the decision to have knowledge of nothing among you but only of Jesus Christ on the cross," (1Co 2:2). Unlike the emptied cross that doesn't carry the message of redemption, the imagery of Christ nailed on the cross continues to be the powerful life-giving sign for all who believe!

* To foretaste this powerful sign, it was given to the Israelites while they were wondering in the wilderness many years before Christ's coming. It happened that "the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, 'We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us.' So Moses prayed for the people. And the LORD said to Moses, 'Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.' So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone,

that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live," (Num 21:6-9).

* When I looked for a commentary on this topic I found that both, Jewish and Christians interpretations are similar. For example, the Jewish scholar Dr. Akiva Belk in his article "What Happened to the Bronze Serpent?" says, "... the intent of placing a bronze serpent on a pole was to require acknowledgement of sin and then acceptance of the healing It was not adequate to think in one's heart, "I'm sorry for my mistake." To be healed the second action was required. They had to look up towards the heavens and view the bronze serpent to live." Now let's hear what the Life Application Study Bible Commentary says, "It was not the snake that healed the people but their belief that God could heal them. This belief was demonstrated by their obedience to God's instructions." No doubt, God himself healed the people when they looked at the bronze serpent with hope based on the message, the person bitten by snake will be healed if such a person looks at it. The idea that the copper serpent itself was the source of such magic power is not Biblical.

* Friends, when we pray to the Lord for help we have the tendency to tell God in which way He should help us. Here is a story I tell you as an illustration. Once upon a time, there lived a farmer who prayed to the Lord to set him free from a heavy mortgage. Therefore, he pleaded for good weather and timely rain. He asked God for the protection his crops from bugs and all wild animals. But contrary to what the man asked for, God didn't provide. The farmer expected timely rain but it was not given; moreover, deer, bugs and rats consumed more than he reaped. His harvest was very poor. Nevertheless, the farmer was helped. Soon after this, Shell, the huge petroleum corporation asked the man for half of his unproductive field to build a pipeline through it. In exchange the man received two and half million dollars that was surpassed man's expectations in one hundred fold. Could you believe?

* This story is not a fiction, it took place many times but under different circumstances. It proves God's sovereign and inapprehensible mind just like it was shown in the wilderness. Asking for help, Moses and Israelites expected God to remove the poisonous snakes. However, that did not happen. Snakes were not removed!!! They continued to bite men and women. So, God says to Moses something like that, "Make the bronze serpent and nail it on a cross shaped pole. Anyone who looks at the serpent will be healed." This was the amazing way God responded to Moses. God solved the problem in a way that surprised the people and Moses. In exchange for the suffering and death God asked the men for faith, trust, hope, respect and to love him.

* According to Jewish beliefs when the Messiah would come, he would appear to all nations as the mighty King David; they hoped the Messiah would establish an earthly kingdom and grant to devoted Jews the authority over the nations. But it was not the same what God had in His mind. The Messiah came under the image of the Servant of the Lord, he suffered the cross and made all believers in him free from their sins. In fact, the mystery of mankind salvation is still closed to many. We believe that God solved men's problems in a very, very unusual manner. He sent to the world his Son to save us from our sins by dying on the cross. "For this is the way God loved

the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life,” (Joh 3:16). What God asked in exchange is that people believe in him, hope in him and follow him. The salvation built upon Christ’s suffering on the cross was accomplished there by the Son of God. It stands aside from all conceivable human endeavors such as to be saved by good works. Our salvation belongs exclusively to Christ; it’s unshakably grounded within the apostolic message we are given to believe. “For by grace you are saved through faith, and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God; it is not from works, so that no one can boast,” (Eph 2:8, 9).

* In exchange for yours and mine eternal deaths God asks us to believe, trust and follow Jesus. The Holy Spirit unveiled the sacred message: to be saved we need look at him as he is - the suffered servant of the Lord, who suffered the cross personally for each of us. Are you able to bear the image of that Man afflicted, full of sorrow, stricken, smitten and crushed for your transgressions? To be saved you need to believe in such a Person, hope upon him, respect him and follow him. Could you? It is not God’s task to believe and follow after Christ crucified. We were asked to do it!!!

* Though our life in Christ demands us to sacrifice our sinful desires and give up with worldly things, we are still not alone. By the power of the Holy Spirit given in God’s promises we are able to believe and receive. Also the Spirit helps us in our weakness, because we even don’t know how we should pray, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with inexpressible groaning, (Rom 8:26).

* In conclusion let’s say again; God saved us by the way that surprises many. It may continue surprises us if we experience of the crucified and risen Lord. When I look at the image above of my home-altar, it brings my feeling into one accord with those in the past who stood under the cross. There I see Christ crucified, as He was, the suffering servant of the Lord. This phantom lifts up my spirit to the upper place where it finds the Lord but in the brightness of his victorious Resurrection. Both, Christ crucified and Christ risen are inseparable, powerful manifestation; both are life-giving sign for our salvation. Amen.

Beloved, “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.”

Amen.