

Title: “Living on the Inside”

Chris Ryan

Numbers 21:6-8, John 3:14

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Service Readings: Num 21:4-9, Eph 2:1-10, John 3:14-21

The eternal salvation of people are at stake. Are you watching from the outside or urgently participating in the lives of others to point them to Jesus?

Message:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

“Why didn’t they put down the camera and help?” Has this question ever entered your mind as you watched some accident or incident on Facebook? There, right in front of the person with that camera is someone who is stuck, or hurt, or in need of some sort of immediate assistance. But instead of dropping the camera to help, the person continues recording. How can they possibly think their inaction is okay? How can they possibly think that it is appropriate to watch from the outside, to not get involved; to not provide aid? It makes no sense, and yet they do it. Over and over again. There are hundreds of thousands of videos like it. It is as if people have removed themselves from community and instead have decided to watch from the outside. Could you imagine if that’s how it played out in the time of Moses? This nation is traveling and complaining and God responds.

⁶Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. ⁷And 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 take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸And 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.”

Could you imagine Moses building that serpent, raising it on a pole, and then not telling people to look at it? Instead, pulling out his video camera and recording the mayhem that played out before his eyes? Of course not! It’s ludicrous to even consider such a thing. And those he instructed, those who were saved, do you think *they* remained silent as their loved ones were being bitten? I can’t imagine so. I imagine that they told anyone and everyone. I imagine that they didn’t watch from the outside; they *lived* on the inside. That they rejected the option to be passive observers and instead became active participants.

“Ah, But these two illustrations are nothing alike,” you might respond. “The lives of the Israelites were in danger, but that can’t be said of those Facebook videos. So,” you might argue, “you are comparing two extremes: death on one hand and minor injury on the other.” Two very different situations. Maybe you are right, but let me try again with a different extreme.

Let me start with Moses in the desert, the life and death example. *Because* the situation is so critical, *because* there is so much on the line, the expectation is that everyone will spring into action to save the lives of each other. And they did. In the wilderness, the serpent was set on a pole and lifted up; a serpent made of bronze. And all the nation looked upon it for the preservation of their lives. And they did so with great urgency and with great proclamation. And word of this lifesaving remedy, the cross, spread like wildfire. Everyone told everyone else. They felt compelled to because physical lives were on the line.

Now, let’s look at a different extreme. This time we’ll look *not to Facebook* but to Scripture. In our Gospel passage John writes this:

¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

In Jerusalem, thousands of years later, Jesus was nailed to a pole and lifted up. A man who was also God. He was lifted up not for the salvation of physical life but for the salvation of the eternal one. And all the nation.... did what? Where was the urgency? Eternal life was on the line.

Two extremes. Two extremely different reactions.

When life is on the line, we leap into action, not just to save ourselves but to save others – even those who we consider strangers. In times of emergencies we risk our lives for anyone who we can help, not just close friends and family. And yet, when it comes to something even more critical we tend to respond in exactly the opposite way. We don't call out to those in spiritual need. Instead, we silently watch from the outside; we convince ourselves that it is better for us to stay quiet and not interfere with their lives. We choose the path of least resistance, least confrontation; we choose the path of greatest convenience. And by "we" I mean you, and I mean me. We all do it. But why? Why do we not recognize that a person's spiritual life is so much greater than their physical one? Why don't we act like the Israelites in the desert and frantically seek out people who have not yet looked upon the cross of Jesus and so are actively dying?

I believe that the main reason that we don't act, that we watch from the outside, is because we don't fully appreciate what Jesus did. Sure, it is cognitive knowledge – it has affected your brain, but has it affected your heart? Has it impacted you so completely that it has actually changed your life? In the desert the people faced death. They watched as their loved ones screamed in pain from the serpent's venom. They saw life slowly drain from the bodies. What they witnessed didn't just affect their brain – they didn't just see it with their eyes. No. It affected their heart. They saw loved ones suffering and their hearts were impacted. And that led their lives to be impacted, also. No longer did they continue with their normal tasks, they pivoted into a new way of living – a life-saving way of living. They dropped their firewood that they were collecting. They set down their cooking pots. They stopped everything they were doing and began doing something else – saving the lives of others. You see. The reality of what was happening to them affected their entire being and their actions reflected that. At that moment they were living to serve, living to save.

But when it comes to spiritual life, we don't see it in the same physical way. The reality of eternal salvation and eternal damnation remain just head knowledge. We have not seen heaven nor have we seen hell, so our hearts can't react and our lives can't be changed. But I think that is part of the point of this passage. *We can't. We can't affect our hearts; we can't change our lives.* On our own, the reality of our destination remains little more than a fact, and one we cannot fully comprehend; maybe one we can't fully believe. You see? Our sinful nature has so corrupted us that not only can we not save ourselves, we can't even believe that we need to be saved from anything!

But thanks be to God, he didn't observe from the outside but stepped into the inside – into his own creation. He sent his son to act on our behalf. And when Jesus had accomplished this work, the Father didn't stop there, for he knew that it would take his intervention for our hearts and lives to be impacted. And so he sent the Holy Spirit to spark in us faith. Faith that would not just recognize our situation and Jesus' saving work, not just affect our mind, but affect our heart as well.

So, if the Son of Man being lifted up is more than just head knowledge, if our hearts have been affected, our lives will be impacted, too. We'll see the world through eyes that actively seek out those who are suffering, who have not looked upon the cross of Jesus to live. We will use every moment God gives us, every situation he places us in, every person he brings into our day. We'll take every opportunity to point others to the cross. We'll do this by serving others. We'll do this by forgiving others. We'll do this by always telling people about Jesus and the cross. Every action in our lives will be one that reflects this urgent work. And people will look upon us and see that we are looking upon the cross. And maybe they too will turn to gaze upon it with us. And maybe they too will then reach out to those around them and share this life saving news.

Don't observe from the outside. Live on the inside. Be active. Be changed. Be lifesaving.

Please pray with me.

¹⁶“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

Lord, may we live in a way that reflects the urgency of your message. May all we do turn others to gaze upon your cross and the salvation that it provides.

Amen