

# “Lifted Up”

Psalm 121:1-2, Jeremiah 31:31-34, John 3:3 & 12:20-33

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Being lifted up, gives one a fresh perspective and new insights. Metaphorically and literally one can see the forest and the trees. One of the joys of backpacking is seeing the terrain from elevated perspectives. Seeing the majesty of the contours of the land, meandering rivers, groves of towering trees, clinging vegetation, reflective lakes, and if you are high enough, a carpet of clouds. Mount Rainer filled me with awe, in one direction I saw the snow-capped, rugged summit, in the other effervescent meadows of purple, red, orange, brown, yellow, and green. The variety of color was stunning. God’s love permeated me as I gazed upon the splendor.

I have also marveled from the fresh perspective of a skyscraper, airplane, and pictures of earth from space. I know the details well from day to day life. Being lifted up enables me to see how they fit together, revealing that I am a part of a much bigger community and interconnected with the cosmos. The psalmist sings, **Psalm 121:1-2 “I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.”** Jesus said, **John 12:32 “And I, as I am lifted up from the earth, will attract everyone to me and gather them around me.”** John Calvin wrote, “The meaning undoubtedly is that the cross will be, as it were, a chariot, by which Jesus shall raise all. Though Jesus alludes to the form of his death, yet he means generally that his death will not be a division to separate rather a drawing of earth upwards toward heaven.”

The prophet Jeremiah is speaking to people who are overwhelmed by the details. They have been exiled, driven from their homeland. They are afraid of their future and grieving their losses. Jeremiah assures them that God is with them, then lifts them up to a grandeur perspective to glimpse their glorious future, the new covenant, all will be forgiven, all will know God, all will be united in love. Jeremiah proclaims, **Jeremiah 31:31-34 NRSV “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.”**

Jesus’ ministry lifted everyone up to see a fresh perspective. Jesus told Nicodemus that **John 3:3 “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”** Jesus’ ministry helps us see that all people are loved by God, that entire world is God’s family. Jesus lifted up every outcast, rose above every barrier, healed and welcomed all regardless of sinfulness, religion or faith. Jesus lifted up women, soldiers, tax collectors, lepers, foreigners, pagans, young, old, prostitutes even a deranged lunatic that was banned from town. Jesus was constantly correcting the religious leaders who wanted to keep people down, divide people up, to exclude certain people, to judge some people as unworthy of eternal life. Jesus strived to lift the religious leaders up to see that God’s love, forgiveness, healing, blessings, and eternal life is for everyone.

Tony Kayala wrote, “Jesus ‘lifts up’ ordinary people—Jews and Gentiles. Jesus says, ‘when I am lifted up’. This is to Tony more than the crucifixion. This is an ultimate human and spiritual desire to be lifted up from the darkness, sorrows, debts, daily chores, disappointments, failures and even deaths. This is the cry from Syria, Iraq, Pakistan and India. This is the shout of black people from Ferguson, Alabama. Who’s there to lift us up? Our mission is to lift people up, husbands and wives, parents and teachers, politicians and bureaucrats to learn to lift up their districts, each other, our society, our nation. Every confession, spiritual direction, counseling, preaching, every hand that wipes the tears off the cheeks, every arm that holds is to ‘lift up.’”

Being lifted up enables us to see God's love that is enabling all to love and uniting all in love. *Homiletics* magazine wrote, "Jesus lifts us up, so we are able to see, to have our vision cleared up, our imagination opened and sight enlarged. It is our ability to see that releases power in our life. The wrong perspective is imprisonment; the right perspective is empowerment. Spirituality is, more than anything else, the art of seeing -- first, seeing things 'as they are,' and second, seeing things as they can be."

The gospel of John tells of unreligious foreigners, Greeks who want to be lifted up so they can see. **John 12:20-33 MSG** "There were some Greeks in town who had come up to worship at the Feast. They approached Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee: "Sir, we want to see Jesus. Can you help us?" Philip went and told Andrew. Andrew and Philip together told Jesus. Jesus answered, "Time's up. The time has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. "Listen carefully: Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over. In the same way, anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you'll have it forever, real and eternal. "If any of you wants to serve me, then follow me. Then you'll be where I am, ready to serve at a moment's notice. The Father will honor and reward anyone who serves me. "Right now I am storm-tossed. And what am I going to say? 'Father, get me out of this'? No, this is why I came in the first place. I'll say, 'Father, put your glory on display.'" A voice came out of the sky: "I have glorified it, and I'll glorify it again." The listening crowd said, "Thunder!" Others said, "An angel spoke to him!" Jesus said, "The voice didn't come for me but for you. At this moment the world is in crisis. Now Satan, the ruler of this world, will be thrown out. And I, as I am lifted up from the earth, will attract everyone to me and gather them around me." Jesus put it this way to show how he was going to be put to death."

The world was and is in crisis. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross pays the debt of humanity's sin. Jesus set us free. Jesus being lifted up on the cross enables us to see the full extent of God's love which is drawing all of rebellious humanity home to God's loving family.

Dirk Lange wrote, "John indicates the ever-expanding reach of Jesus, drawing all the nations and all peoples to himself. God is glorified by Jesus who is not looking to get something for himself but who simply wishes that all may be drawn toward God's gracious heart. Jesus walks this path that all may know God, not through ideology or patriotism or even theology, but in communion. This path, this identity, finds its fullness in the joy of giving and in drawing all toward God's love. In drawing all toward God, a new identity is given: fullness, life and eternal life."

Jesus gives us two more metaphors to expand our lifted up seeing; the seed and how one lives life. Anyone who holds on to life just as it is, destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you'll have it forever, real, and eternal. In other words, although death is very close for Jesus, he tells the disciples that his own literal death is a metaphor for understanding how his followers must live every day: they must live by dying. When they do, like a seed in the ground, they will grow and bear fruit. So, the cross is not an exit rather an entrance into a new plane of seeing and living. We are to let go, so we can let come.

Madeleine L'Engle wrote, "Heaven is nothing we can seek through our own virtue: it cannot be earned; it is a gift of the God of love. When we are self-emptied enough to make room for this love, it is not as a result of our own moral rectitude or willpower. But it is sometimes given to us, this lovely emptiness, and then the Holy Spirit can fill it."

Jesus sets us free and is helping us let go of fear, anxiety, hate, division, guilt, anger, regret, status quoism, broken relationships, so we can let come love, peace, joy and hope. The paradox is only by fully letting go are we able to live fully alive. Letting go enables us to fully experience God's love, to participate in God's beauty, to let come the wonders of God. If we hold on, we become a distant critic. If we let go, we become an intimate lover. Love never tries to control. Transformation begins with letting go. When stuck, or overwhelmed with a dilemma, the first response is to take a solution that has worked in the past and apply to our current situation. Rarely is this the best solution. New problems are best solved when we are lifted up to look at the entirety of the situation, to see a variety of solutions, to imagine what our life will be like when we love fully, to imagine what the world will be like when everyone fully loves each other. A lifted up perspective invites us to implement new solutions that will draw all together in love.

To see Jesus, to be lifted up by God's grace and power, was vital to the first followers of Jesus. When describing the early Christians to the Emperor Hadrian, Aristides wrote: "They love one another. They never

fail to help widows; they save orphans from those who hurt them. If they have something, they give freely to the person who has nothing; if they see a stranger, they take them home as a brother or sister in the spirit, the Spirit of God.”

Fred Craddock, defining what it could mean to take up the Savior's cross and follow Jesus said, “I think it means to be willing to empty your pockets for somebody else's children. I think it means to treat as father and mother those who are not really your mother and father. I think it means to claim as brother and sister people to whom you are not kin. I think it means to reach out and touch untouchable people as far as our society is concerned. I think it means to sit at table with people who live far outside the tight social circle of some of your friends. Break bread together. It means to be a voice for moral values in a culture that will immediately accuse you of sinking into a bunch of moralistic thinking. It means to witness for Jesus Christ when evangelism is being laughed at everywhere. It means being an advocate, to speak the gospel as though something were at stake. It means to continue to give money to others when the paint is peeling in the sanctuary. I think it means that.”

Max Lucado wrote, “Want to see a miracle? Take a small seed, put it under several inches of dirt. Give it light, water and fertilizer. It doesn't matter that the ground is a zillion times the weight of the seed. The seed will push it back! Never underestimate the power of a seed. James, the epistle writer, wasn't a farmer. But he knew the power of a seed sown in fertile soil. ‘Those who are peacemakers,’ he said, ‘will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of goodness.’ How good are you at sowing seeds of peace? Jesus modeled peace through acts of love, washing the feet of men he knew would betray him, and honoring the sinful woman whom society had scorned. Want to see a miracle? Plant a word of love heart-deep in a person's life. Nurture it with a smile and a prayer, and watch what happens!” Amen