

# When I AM Lifted Up

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In the Gospel According to St. John, we encounter a notion of “glory” unlike anything religion had previously known.

On the night of his arrest, Jesus offers up these opening words to his high priestly prayer:

*“Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began”* (John 17:1-4).

Having glorified his Father through a lifetime of perfect surrender, Christ announces that the time is now for the Father to glorify his Son. Now is the moment of his glorious exaltation and enthronement—the revelation of his glorious and victorious crowning as King of kings and Savior of the world.

But the now to which Jesus refers is not his resurrection or ascension. He will indeed be “lifted up” but ironically, the throne to which he ascends is the Cross and the “royal diadem” with which he will be crowned is a wreath of thistles.

The revelation of God as “cruciform” (cross-shaped) unveils the truth that to be divine has nothing to do with the earthly glory of infamous emperors who define power through domination. Rather, the glorification of God-in-Christ looks like the all-powerful Love of extreme humility, radical forgiveness and selflessness. Yes, “Love wins” but the means of Love’s triumph were a shocking crucifixion and ghastly death.

The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) portray Good Friday as an apparent defeat and humiliating death. They only see the glorious victory of Christ in his resurrection and ascension. But for the Jesus of John’s Gospel, exaltation and crucifixion are simultaneous. Everything begins with, revolves around and flows from the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

## “If I am lifted up...”

John conflates the death of Christ and the victory of Christ through the deliberate use of a clever pun. The Greek word is *hypsotho*, which means “to lift up.” The play on words combines physically hoisting something upward and metaphorically elevating someone’s status. For Jesus, being “lifted up” onto the Cross (crucifixion) is *at the same time* “ascending to the right

hand of the Father” (to be glorified).

Here are the key texts:

- John 3:14-15: *Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.*

This verse is embedded in the story of Jesus’ moonlight conversation with Nicodemus, “the teacher of Israel” and a member of the Sanhedrin. Nicodemus is an earnest seeker who will ultimately become a disciple of Jesus. But he struggles to understand where Christ is coming from (both literally and figuratively). Jesus’ teachings and his signs (John’s term for miracles) indicate that God has sent him. But Nicodemus struggles to understand what phrases like “*You must be born from above*” could possibly mean. He stumbles over his own literalism, knowing he can’t re-enter his mother’s womb.

Jesus shifts the metaphor and recalls the story of the plague of serpents from the book of Numbers. God saves the people from death by instructing Moses to erect a bronze serpent on a pole. Those who look to the bronze serpent in faith will be healed. Jesus says, basically, “that incident was a preview of my mission. When I am ‘lifted up,’ those who look to me will be healed



of the serpent's venom—the curse of death that bit the human race in Adam.”

• John 8:28: So Jesus said, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me.”

In this brief passage, Jesus reveals who will “lift up” the Son of Man. “When you have” refers to his audience, the Judean establishment (specifically, Pharisees here). They may hear him claiming that they will “exalt” him and imagine to themselves, “No way. Never.” But in fact, by crucifying Jesus, they will do exactly that.

• John 12:32-33: “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me.” This he said, signifying what death he should die.

Finally, John is unambiguous: when Jesus says “lifted up,” he is referring literally to his crucifixion. BUT, as we shall see in the end, he is also alluding to his glorification as King. □

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