

✠ John 3:1-15 ✠

IN NOMINE IESU

While in the wilderness, somewhere around Mt. Hor, along the Red Sea, the Israelites became impatient with God and spoke against God and His servant, Moses. They complained that Moses had brought them out of Egypt to die in the wilderness where there was no food and no water. And the food that was there, the food that God had provided for them, was detestable. And so God killed a great many of them by sending venomous snakes among the people. And so God's name was made holy, for they who did not wait upon the Lord perished in the wilderness.

But the people begged Moses, the servant of God, to intercede on their behalf and plead with God that He would remove from them these fiery serpents. God heard the prayer of His servant, Moses, and provided salvation for the people for the sake of His servant who was one of them. He did not remove the serpents, for God demands faith. Rather, He instructed Moses to cast a serpent of bronze, in the form of those that inflicted such mayhem and death, and hoist it up on a pole, lifted high and exalted. This was God's gift to His people.

And like all of God's gifts, this gift came with a promise attached to it. God never gives a gift as we do. He never gives a gift because it makes Him feel good about Himself. He never gives His gifts for the sake of the giving or the gift. He always gives His gifts for the sake of the recipient. God benefits nothing from giving. As if His giving fulfilled some need. As if He needs to feel loved or respected or generous. God doesn't need our worship or our adoration. He doesn't need our love or our tithes and offerings. God is sufficient in Himself, perfect unity; perfect harmony. Before we were, He is. And if He needs anything, anything at all, then He is not God, but just another dependant being.

But who has known the mind of God? Or been His counselor? Who has given God a gift, that God must repay him? What does God owe you for your gift of love? Success? Happiness? A long life? An easy life? Does He owe you respect? Does He owe you privilege or honor? What does God owe you for your devotion to Him? Repent. He owes you nothing, for He needs nothing from you.

But we do need Him and His gifts. We cannot exist without His gift of creation. From where would you receive food and shelter? Clothing and shoes? Your wife and your children? From whom would we receive the rains for the harvest? Or the sunshine for our health? If not from God? And with these gifts, God has attached a great promise: "I will be your God. I will provide for you and care for you. I will watch over you as you work and play and are at rest. I will keep calamity from overtaking you and I will keep evil from your doorstep. I am the Lord, and beside Me there is no other. I feed the young raven when it calls and I provide food for the cattle. And you, the crown of My creation, you I love most. For you I will give everything, even Myself."

It is we who owe Him our love and devotion. It is we who owe Him honor and praise. For all He does, He does out of His great love for us; His fatherly divine goodness and mercy. Even giving His Son in the form of a man, lifting Him up in the wilderness and attaching to Him this promise: everyone who gazes upon the Son of Man, lifted high on the cross, shall not die because of the venom of the ancient serpent.

That is the greatest mystery of all. Greater than the mystery of the unity of the divine essence in the Holy Trinity; greater than the mystery even of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. Greater than all mysteries, is the mystery of God's mercy for sinners. That God, perfect and holy, righteous and just, would not count sin against the sinner but that God would reckon him righteous for the sake of Himself, is beyond comprehension.

Yet, in Christ, this is precisely what He does. We are men and women of unclean lips, and we dwell among a people of unclean lips. It is not that we use bad words and curse, though that should be struggled against. It is that we have not always called upon the name of the Lord for our benefit and good. We have called upon the names of foreign gods: the gods of self-sufficiency; the gods of money; the gods of doing-it-my-way; the gods of family loyalty above loyalty to God's Word; the gods of honor among thieves.

We have even used God's name falsely. We have sworn oaths we could not keep. We have made promises we did not mean. We are a people of unclean lips. We have no status before God. We have no plea. Justice should be our demise, and righteousness should be the end of us. For who can stand before the Almighty and plead his case? Who can look upon the Lord of hosts, the Lord of armies, and say that the Lord owes him life? But with the Lord there is forgiveness, that He may be feared.

The Lord of lords has not wiped away your sins. He has not erased your slate so that your sin goes unaccounted for. Your sins have not been magically dissipated. Rather, the Lord of lords, the King of the universe, has judged your sins and found them wicked. He has measured you against Himself and found you unrighteous because of your sin. He has taken stock of every vile and selfish and petty thing you've ever done. He has kept the record of wrongs. And he demands justice.

And so He has it. But not as we would demand justice. We demand the guilty pay; God demands the innocent pay. God the Father sent forth God the Son who willingly emptied Himself of His divine rights, becoming like you and me so that He might make atonement for our sin by paying the price of blood for the rebellion against the Lord. This is the greatest mystery, and it is the greatest gift because attached to it is the greatest promise. Whoever gazes upon the Son of Man lifted high and exalted, shall be saved.

With the gift of the baby born in Bethlehem comes the promise of you being born of the Spirit. For just as the Son of God came by water and blood, born of a woman, so you come into His kingdom by water and the Spirit, born of God. He drowns your hard-hearted Pharaoh in the sea of His font, and brings His people safely out on the other side. And He purifies His people.

He is the burning coal that is from the altar of God, the cross, and touches your lips that they may be purified. For unholy lips say unholy things, but holy lips say holy things. But the fire of His love does not stop there. For out of the abundance of his heart does a man speak. Therefore, He burns your tongue and sets your heart on fire, purging away the dross and filth and recasting it in the image of His heart. He is holy that you may be holy. The Lord opens your lips, and your mouth declares His praise. Now He hears holy speech where there was once unholy filth. Now He hears praise and honor where before there were only lies and greed.

You are purified by God from the altar. And now you join the choir of heaven, with the Seraphim and all the hosts of heaven, praising God and singing, "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of power and might; heaven and earth are full of your glory." For He has had mercy. He has given forgiveness. He has been lifted up that you might be saved. Oh, the depth of the riches

and wisdom and knowledge of God! Blessed is He who sits in the firmament of the heavens,
greatly to be praised and glorified forever!

In the name of the FATHER and of the ✠ SON and of the HOLY SPIRIT.

✠ AMEN ✠