

March 11, 2018 – Numbers 21:4-9, Ephesians 2:1-10, John 3:14-21

There's a fine line there is between flying and falling. Anybody who's been on an airplane knows that. One minute you're sitting on the ground, perfectly still. The next you're soaring through the air. And all you needed was enough speed to get you off the ground. Enough upward lift to carry you into the sky. That line between flying and falling... it's so simple. So well understood, really. And yet, so tenuous.

The pilots of Air France 447 found that out. Their plane crashed into the Atlantic on June 1, 2009 for a pretty simple reason: they didn't have enough lift.

You see, the air speed indicators on Flight 447 were defective. They didn't tell the pilots how fast they were actually going. And so the plane gradually slowed down until it lacked the lift to fly and started to fall. A situation known as a stall.

But even then, the pilots couldn't recover. You see, the gut reaction of anyone flying a plane when they start to descend rapidly is to point the nose of the plane up and try to gain altitude. But that's actually the exact opposite thing you should do in that circumstance. Because the problem isn't about altitude, it's about speed. You need more speed to create lift. And the best way to gain speed, is to point the nose of the plane down. Use gravity to build up speed and restore lift to the plane.

They didn't. They kept pointing the nose up. Desperately trying to gain altitude as they fell, until they eventually crashed into the Atlantic. It was a horrible accident. And it could have been avoided so easily. If one of those pilots had simply fought through his panic, remembered his training, and pointed the nose of the plane down, 228 people might be alive today.

As God's people our lives are a journey. A journey of flying. Or a journey of falling. And there's a fine line between flying and falling. The ancient Israelites knew something about that journey. In fact, God kinda made them into a living object lesson of that journey.

40 years they spent in the wilderness of Sinai as wandering nomads. 40 years they spent learning the lessons that God wanted to teach them. Obey Me. Trust Me. Love Me. Depend on me for everything. Far easier said than done. An entire generation would have to pass away before they even began to understand what those words meant.

But God was faithful. After 40 years of waiting, they were finally flying. Flying in faith. Flying toward Canaan. The Promised Land. The end of their journey. Only one thing stood in their way. The nation of Edom.

Now, Edom was kind of Israel's brother, in more ways than one. You see, while Israel was founded by Jacob, Edom was founded by Jacob's twin brother, Esau. That should have made them allies. Similar history. Similar culture. Similar religion. They both traced their heritage back to Abraham. And though Edom was not part of God's people, it seems like they should have been at least able to work together.

But, they were brothers. And, just like Jacob and Esau, they fought. A lot. Much of Israel's history is spent arguing with Edom. Fighting like brothers.

So here we have Israel, ready to be done with this 40 year seat in the time out chair that God has given them. Excited and encouraged to be finally entering the Promised Land. And they fly toward the southern border of Canaan. And there's just this little strip of Edom's land that separates them from Canaan. They get there and find the army of Edom waiting for them. Refusing to let them through their land.

And so now Israel has to go around. Miles and miles and miles around Edom, to enter Canaan from the east. And all of the progress that God has made with them over the last 40 years begins to slip away as they lose speed. The lift under their wings fails. And soon they are no longer flying. They are falling.

*And the people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food."*

The complaint is almost laughable when you read it. Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? Wait a second. You've been in the wilderness for over 40 years and you haven't died yet. Why would God let you die now?

Not to mention that second complaint. There's no bread. There's no water. And we detest this bread and water that God has provided day after day for our entire journey.

They have nothing to complain about. But they complain anyway. Because that's the sinful gut reaction of every person as frustration and impatience bog us down and we begin to fall out of the sky. When things don't go our way. When the journey of life seems longer and harder than we thought it would be. When we forget all the blessings God has poured out on us day after day.

Instead of remembering all of God's promises and all of God's faithfulness. We blame God for everything. We blame the giver of every good gift we have for the one gift we didn't get. We selfishly and arrogantly demand that God be our vending machine of blessings.

We point ourselves against gravity. Against God. Against His Word. We try to do things our own, sinful way. Even if it means crashing into the ocean.

For the Israelites, that crash was approaching quickly. God sent snakes into their midst. Fiery serpents with a deadly bite. And the people panic.

But God gives them a way to recover from their stall. A way to regain flight. He tells Moses to put a bronze snake on a pole, that whoever looks at it might be healed and live.

And I can imagine what they were thinking. "You want us to look at a metal snake? After being bitten by a bunch of poisonous snakes, you want us to ignore our wounds, go find this lovely sculpture of the thing that just fatally wounded us, stare at it, and hope that the God who sent these snakes in the first place decides to heal us now. Right. That makes sense."

It's a tougher request than it seems. The Israelites are falling. And they have to point the nose down. They have to hope, they have to have faith, that this snake that Moses has just lifted up will give them lift and set them flying once again.

It's a tough request. And Jesus uses it as a symbol of what faith in Him means as well. "*And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*"

OK. Makes sense. The parallels seem pretty obvious. The Israelites were poisoned by snakes. Humanity is poisoned by sin. The Israelites looked at the bronze serpent on a pole and lived. Humanity looks at Jesus on the cross and lives. Pretty straightforward.

But it's a harder concept than we realize. And Jesus spells it out even clearer in the next verse. One of the most famous verses in the entire Bible. "*For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.*"

Simple. Concise. Elegant. Right? Well, think about what that verse is saying for a second. God loved his children so much that he sent his most beloved child to be killed, that life will come to those who look at this child whom God loves as he hangs dead on a cross.

John 3:16 doesn't sound so simple anymore, does it? We're supposed to look to Christ hanging dead on a cross and believe that death gives us life. We're supposed to have faith that God would sacrifice his child to save his children. We're supposed to point our nose down and trust that it will make us go up.

It's a tough request. It's an impossible request, really. It defies all logic. It runs contrary to every intuition. And fortunately, we don't have to figure it out, because it's already happened. It's already been done for us. You see, while we were dead in our transgressions, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ.

By baptism, our death is tied to Christ's death, and our life tied to Christ's life. Death is a horrible thing. It makes no sense. It never does. And yet, somehow, God defies all logic, runs contrary to every intuition, and takes this thing that we hate – death – and turns it into life.

He takes a bronze serpent, lifts it on a pole, and uses it to lift His people from death. He takes his Son, lifts Him on a cross, and uses Him to lift His people from death. He takes us, lifts us up on our cross, and then lifts us from the grave.

By grace you have been saved. And this is not of your own doing. It couldn't possibly be. It goes against everything in our sinful hearts and minds. But God, being rich in mercy, gives it to us as a gift anyway. He points his Son toward death, in order to give us life.

Life that makes us fly. Fly towards heaven. Fly towards the resurrection. Fly towards the immeasurable riches of his grace found in Christ Jesus. Amen.