

THE CROSS

By

Curtis Dickinson

Note: This article was written shortly before the day that is called “Easter.”

As the resurrection day approaches, it becomes time for preachers and Christian journalists to turn attention to the one thing which to the apostles was the central theme of year-around preaching—the cross of Christ.

Unfortunately, the preaching of the cross often is reduced to a narrative of the mechanics of crucifixion and the attempt to describe its cruelty and the intensity of Christ’s suffering. Needless to say, no one, not even a medical expert, can adequately know the physical and mental suffering which Christ experienced those hours on the cross. But His purpose was not to gain our sympathy because of His six hours of agony, and to attempt to do so is to miss the point of His whole mission.

While the apostle Paul stated that his message was “Christ and him crucified,” there is no record of his attempt to set forth the details of crucifixion as is so often done in today’s preaching and writings. The burden of the apostolic mission was not to impress upon us the intensity of pain inflicted upon Christ but rather the **purpose** and the **meaning** of His death.

To the extent that the meaning of death, as it related to the punishment for sin, has been obscured, so also has the meaning of the crucifixion been diminished, so that the emphasis has been switched from the purpose of the cross to the drama surrounding it. Deep and tearing emotion may be aroused over the cruelty against Jesus, so that sorrow is experienced which is misinterpreted as repentance. One may respond to such preaching of the cross without every having considered that Christ underwent the death penalty because death is what each sinner faces as the punishment for sin. Many people think they are saved because of such an emotional experience, which is purely subjective and without the objective faith in what Christ actually did on the cross.

THE PENALTY: The punishment which Christ underwent on the cross was that which is due sinful man. Otherwise, His death, a death which was according to God’s eternal purpose, would make no sense at all. According to Isaiah, Jesus took the punishment which was due us. “God has laid on Him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53:6). Isaiah explains that the stoke of death which Jesus suffered is that which is due all of God’s people for sin. What Christ did was to assume this sin, then undergo its punishment. Although He Himself knew no sin, through any personal experience of it, God made Him “to be sin on our behalf,” then executed Him through the death on the cross (II Cor. 5:21). It is of great significance that throughout the New Testament scripture, Christ’s death is referred to by the simple term of “blood,” because blood represents a person’s life. “The life of the flesh is in the blood” (Lev. 17:11). It is life that is at stake and this life includes all that a man is, not merely the sustaining of his spirit, but the life of the man as an entity. When it speaks of the soul it is speaking of man as a complete living being including body and spirit (breath of life) which together make “a living soul” (Gen 2:7).

TYPES: Christ's death was portrayed in type throughout the history of biblical record. For example, the whole burnt-offering was to be slain and then burned. The command was "The priest shall burn the whole on the altar," indicating that the whole man is subject to the penalty for sin, and portraying the fire of judgment, as "the earth is stored up for fire against the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men" (II Peter 3:7). So every sinner who turns away from forgiveness in Christ shall be subject to the fire of Divine Justice; and his whole person — "the living soul" — shall be consumed in the unquenchable flame. "The wicked shall perish and the enemies of the Lord shall be as the fat of lambs, they shall consume; into smoke shall they consume away" (Psa. 37:20).

The burnt-offering was only typical. It could not serve as a true substitute for man. The sacrifice of animals could never pay the full penalty for the sin of man, created in the image of God. It took the perfect man, the God-man, Jesus the Christ to actually undergo the death that is due the sinner. In the case of animal sacrifices suffering was kept to a minimum. The thing to be portrayed was not the pain but the loss of life. This is not to minimize the anguish that is certain to be realized by those who must face the fiery judgment of God. There will be weeping and wailing enough; but nowhere does scriptures say that the punishment for sin is weeping and wailing. These are by-products, sorrow of those who realize that life is forfeit, as well as the physical pain of a horrible death; still, the justice of God is not realized by suffering, but in death itself.

Another type predominant in the Old Testament, is that the offering of Isaac (Gen. 22). Isaac was to be sacrificed as a burnt-offering, but after Abraham had committed himself to this awesome task, even when the knife was raised and ready to fall, God supplied a substitute. Isaac's life was spared and Abraham sacrificed a ram instead. In like manner, instead of the blow of death falling upon man a substitute is supplied, the Son of God, and His life "cut off" for the sins of His people "to whom the stroke was due" (Isa. 53:8).

In every type which is given to portray the judgment of God upon sinners the victim pays with his life, and the penalty demonstrated is not that of perpetual torture in some spiritual purgatory or spiritual penitentiary but rather the taking of his life.

JUSTICE: A prominent preacher, in discussing the crucifixion, wrote, "when eternal, spiritual death leered at man (the sinner) and beckoned him to disaster, Jesus placed Himself between man and death and gave Himself as a savior at His own expense." It is strange indeed, that one who emphasizes preaching the scripture without addition or subtraction should see fit to insert the word "spiritual" when writing for the death which the unredeemed sinner must face. This error is being repeated constantly so that the issue of life and death which is resolved at the cross is at best obscured and at worst refuted completely. The obscuration is increased by such expressions as "save your soul" or "you have a soul to save," as if that which is to be saved is a detachable appendage, rather than the man as a whole.

If God's purpose of salvation is to save some intangible, immaterial, spiritual part of you from a spiritual curse often referred to as 'spiritual death' then we might see the intent of Christ's death to be an impression of anguish of spirit. If the punishment of the sinner in judgment is to be perpetual life of the spirit suffering misery and anguish, then we would expect Christ's death to be such as to emphasize the spiritual sorrow rather than the physical ending of life. This seems to be the thinking of much modern theology, but it is not the way Christ's death is presented in scripture. The Hebrew letter states that

Christ became a flesh and blood man because he was to die for flesh and blood people (Heb. 2:1;4). Throughout scripture the emphasis is on the fact that Christ's death was a bloodletting death, that He gave his flesh and His blood in death as an adequate substitute for the death of the sinner in judgment.

“And the word was made flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14).

“Who his own self bear our sins in his body upon the tree” (I Peter 2: 24).

“The bread which I will give is my flesh for the life of the world” (John 6:51).

“...sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ” (Heb. 10:10).

Much confusion would be eliminated if we would stick to what scripture says and not add the interpretative “spiritual” to the text.

It is common practice to personify death, and suggest that it “beckons” man, as if death is some personal force, and is in competition with God. The fact is that it is God Himself who passed the sentence of death upon man, and it is God who executes the sinner in the day of judgment. The whole problem is one that is produced from the fact of God's absolute justice and man's absolute sin. God's justice must be met. It is God that imposed the penalty, “the soul that sins it shall die,” and in the Day of Judgment it is by His word that the fire will destroy the sinner. The only hope of the sinner is for the penalty to be met by another, that justice to be done without his own execution, and this is exactly what happened on the cross. The sinless One bore our sins in His body and suffered completely and perfectly the just penalty – death. Thus God is both “just and the justifier of them that have faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:26).

A crucifixion is a nerve-shattering ordeal, a death by horrible torture. To reflect on the fact that Christ suffered for us may give us courage and challenge us to deny ourselves and suffer, if need be, for Him. To know that sin brought this agony to Christ may keep a Christian from yielding to temptation and make him wiling, like Moses, to share the afflictions of Christ rather than enjoy the pleasures of Egypt (Heb. 11:26). But assurance and victory are ours, not because of the amount of pain Christ endured, but because at the end of it, He laid down His life for us.

The justice was not met by the suffering, however intense it must have been, but by the final dying of the Savior. Neither is the sinner saved by the depth of his emotion, but by Christ's death! He is saved at the point that he, too, enters into that death of Christ, and is freed from sin. “All we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death...for he that had died is justified from sin” (Rom. 6:3, 7).

PAID IN FULL! God forgives us, not because he sees the sinner as a poor fellow who is doing his best, but because he see him justified by the justice done at the cross.

God is immutable. His law is immutable. He does not forgive because of a mellowing of His attitude to sin and sinner. He does not overlook sin as a parent, who, remembering his own failures, says, “That's okay son, just forget it and try to do better.” God is a meticulous bookkeeper. The record says that man has sinned, and justice says that this required death. The books must balance. But God is not only just; he is merciful as well. In mercy He balances the record by the death of Christ. The wages of sin are reaped by Jesus. The penalty has been paid. The sinner is free; not just partially free, or

temporarily free — he is totally free. The penalty is total and the death is total, so the forgiveness is total.

Instead of a book of record of sin there now is a book of life and the forgiven sinner has name written there. Though his sins were as scarlet, the record is as white as snow. Though he was clothed in sin as dark as crimson he is now clothed in the righteousness of God as pure as wool” (Isa. 1:18).

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