

THE WONDROUS CROSS

By

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*“When I survey the wondrous cross,
On which the prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.”*

(Isaac Watts)

Paul wrote, “For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness: but unto us which are saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:18). It has become a popular practice for churches to try to portray in drama the horrific details of Christ’s death. But we do not find such an emphasis in apostolic preaching and writing. Rather. The apostles give us the purpose, the meaning, and the benefits of the death of Jesus, the Lamb of God.

1. The cross declares the seriousness of sin. From the beginning it has been man’s tendency to minimize the commands of Cod and rationalize away the serious results of ignoring them. Adam and Eve did not think the Creator meant it when He said that death would result from their disobedience. They must have been shocked at suddenly discovering that it had resulted in drastic changes. Scripture describes their frantic efforts to repair the damages and hide from God. The seriousness of the event finally dawned upon them when they were driven from the garden and the tree of life, finally to realize that God meant it when he said of their disobedience, “You shall surely die.”

Biblical history is an account of how God brought judgment upon individuals and entire nations because of their refusal to trust Him and abide by His moral standards. One of the earliest examples was Sodom and Gomorrah, located in a land described as “like the garden of Yahweh” (Gen. 13:10). However, “the men of Sodom were wicked and sinners against Yahweh exceedingly” (Gen. 13:13). The cities were punished by total destruction, never again to be inhabited. In spite of this example, man continued to refuse to take seriously God’s warning about sin. Philistia, Moab, Edom, Tyre, Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon - one after another they fell under God’s judgment and were destroyed.

The seriousness of sin stands forth in bold relief when we see Christ nailed to the cross. God’s justice is absolute and perfect, demanding a perfect atonement. The very Son of God, of whom God said, “This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased,” the only man who was tempted in all points and yet remained without sin, the man “who knew no sin” but always was obedient to the Heavenly Father, became our sin-bearer, and immediately suffered the penalty of sin – death.

Two truths stand out here. First, if Cod would sacrifice His own son for sin, then sin must be a major problem to God. Second, if sin is such a problem for God, then how much greater it must be for us, His creatures? Sin is the one terrible thing that put Christ on the

cross. When I consider the cross, it strikes me that it was my sin for which He died, and for which God's mercy was poured out without measure. The serious and deadly force of sin was matched by the great love and extreme mercy of God, so that by grace I can call Him Father. Salvation and a true fellowship with The Father can be found only by those who take seriously what happened on the cross.

How serious. then. is the fact that our nation is rife with sin of every description, with so much crime that we cannot build prisons fast enough?

Should we not expect Yahweh our God to look seriously at the nation's lax morals, the greed that pervades the business world, the hypocrisy that fills churches, the national arrogance and pride because of superior military might, and devotion to sports and recreation at the neglect of the poor, the widows and orphans? Shouldn't we expect Him to take seriously the corruption in Congress and in politics in general? The sins of our nation are deplored by the entire world; surely God takes them seriously - and personally. In the words of Homer Hailey, "Has our nation hardened itself against God so that it cannot report? Unless it can, and does, God cannot be true to Himself without bringing it into judgment" (*God's Judgments and Punishments*, Nevada Pub., 2003).

2. The cross means the forgiveness of sin. Man cannot bear the burden of guilt. He may find ways to deny it for a while, but its weight continues to burden him. He may try to drown it in drink or by plunging into a sea of pleasure and exciting activities, but in his private moments its weight comes crushing his joy and robbing him of peace. The rich and the famous may appear beautiful and happy, but what is not visible is the emptiness, the pain and the misery of guilt. Poverty and sickness are hard to bear, but not nearly so hard to bear as guilt.

One may forget the past, but the sin remains. Psychiatric treatments will not erase one sin. There is an instinctive recognition that a penalty must be paid for sin. This is what happened on the cross. Jesus, who knew no sin, was made to be sin on our behalf, that we might be reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:20-21). The wages (penalty) of sin is death, and when Jesus died on the cross, he was bearing the guilt and paying the penalty for sin for each person who becomes a true believer. "There is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1).

3. In the death of Jesus on the cross God gave us a lesson on the subject of the punishment for sin. Isaiah wrote concerning the Messiah: "He was wounded for our transgression, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him...Yahweh has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isa. 53:5-6). Isaiah then went on to tell of the penalty Jesus would suffer as our guilt bearer: "he was cut off out of the land of the living to whom the stroke was due" (vs.8).

In order to meet the human penalty for sin, God's son had to be human. "Since then the children are sharers in flesh and blood, he also himself in like manner partook of the same; that through death he might bring to naught him that had the power of death, that is

the devil ...” (Heb. 2: 14). Under the guilt of sin, not his own, but ours, Jesus took the penalty of sin upon himself, and that penalty when carried out was death.

All the sacrifices under the Mosaic sanctuary service pointed to Jesus, “The lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Under the Mosaic Law there was no such punishment as imprisonment for life, much less imprisonment for life under continuous torture. The penalty for the greatest offenses was always and only death, and the sacrificial system was based upon death to atone for sin. This entire sacrificial system was fulfilled in Christ. If the punishment due for our sins is not actual death, but unending punishment, as many claim, then Christ could not have made atonement for us by his death.

The cross, therefore, demonstrates that the punishment for sin in the Day of Judgment will be death to the unforgiven sinner. Not unending imprisonment, nor perpetual suffering – nor as some like to say, “eternal separation” from God – but complete and everlasting death. It is summed up in John 3:16, that, “God gave His only begotten son that whosoever believes on him should not perish, but have eternal life.”

While no one will ever be able to fully know the humiliation and excruciating pain that Jesus suffered in his death, we do know that he faced it with the assurance that his Father would raise him up from death and give him glory and eternal life. We have the same assurance. The apostle Paul wrote that in baptism we are “immersed into His death; that like as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with him in the likeness of his death. We shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection.” (Rom. 6:4-5). Paul was continually persecuted for preaching the gospel. Imprisoned, beaten, and always under the threat of death. He stayed the course and wrote. “Knowing that He that raised up the Lord Jesus shall raise us up also with Jesus and shall present us with you” {2 Cor.”1:14).

This is the hard core of the Christian faith: the joyful certainty that Christ met the penalty for our sin at the cross, and now we live in the hope of a resurrection to immortality.

“Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.”

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