

THE CROSS OF CHRIST — BIBLE TEACHING ABOUT REDEMPTION

Lesson #6

WHEN our thoughts turn to the cross of Christ, what sort of mental picture do we have? Do we see the cross as something ennobling and glorious?

Do we have warm, sentimental feelings about crucifixion?

Crucifixion

In reality it was a stark and hideous spectacle. Crucifixion must surely be one of the most monstrous of all human inventions.

Scourging sometimes preceded crucifixion. The condemned man was whipped with thongs of leather to which pieces of bone or metal had been attached. There were times when people died as a result of scourging. Next, the victim was nailed, through hands and feet, to a wooden cross which was then lifted to a vertical position and fixed firmly in the ground. Then he was simply left to die. He was not killed — just impaled in a position from which escape was impossible, and left there until death overtook him.

By sheer animal instinct the man would struggle to keep alive, although life meant torture. Under its own weight, his body would slump forward, constricting the lungs and restricting breathing. But again and again, despite the intense pain

in pierced hands and feet, he would heave his chest upwards to draw breath — and keep alive. Ultimately death would come as a relief, but only after hours and hours — often days — of indescribable agony. The Lord died after six hours on the cross, and Pilate was amazed that he had died so soon (Mark 15:44).

In the days when the Romans ruled, crucifixion was regarded with revulsion and disgust. The offender — usually a dangerous political enemy or an incorrigible criminal — was raised aloft and placarded before the people as a grim warning that disobedience does not pay.

Those who witnessed the ghastly spectacle usually took the lesson. Of the Lord Jesus Christ it is written that he "endured the cross, despising the shame" (Hebrews 12:2). It was such a shameful death that some contended that Jesus could not have been the Son of God because God would never have allowed His Son to die such a vile death.

Jewish Intrigue

The crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ was a combined operation. The Jews made the plans, and the Romans carried them out.

When the Jews first became aware of the presence of the Lord Jesus, they were hopeful and excited. The Romans had robbed them of their independence, and they resented it.



“Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.”

(Hebrews 12:2)

They wanted a king of their own, and Jesus of Nazareth, as they called him, seemed a likely candidate for this office. He seemed to have *all* the qualifications!

Although the Lord Jesus was — and still is — destined to be a king, other matters had to be dealt with first. Especially important was the need to preach repentance and personal holiness, as the Lord did early in his ministry in the Sermon on the Mount. The Jewish leaders did not appreciate this emphasis on moral integrity. They felt rebuked, not only by his words, but also by the awesome holiness of the Lord's character. Also they were envious of his popularity with the common people.

Roman Suspicion

This popularity was an embarrassment for another reason too. The leaders no longer thought of Jesus as a prospective king, but the common people still seemed attracted to this idea. The excitement of the crowds could make the Romans suspicious, and the Jewish leaders were afraid that they might "take away both our place and nation" (John 11:47,48).

How then could they get rid of him? First they had to persuade themselves and their fellow Jews that there were good reasons for removing this man. The real reasons

— envy of Jesus and fear of the Romans — could not be broadcast, though attempts to conceal them were not remarkably successful. What then should the "official" reason be? After a deal of bungling because the false witnesses whom they had suborned kept contradicting each other, they found a charge that would make them appear as men of high principle: Jesus had claimed to be the Son of God. Although the claim was true, they called it blasphemy, and blasphemy was punishable by death. His fate was determined.

But there was still a problem. The Romans were their overlords, and only those whom the Romans condemned could be put to death — and then only by the Romans themselves. So they had to persuade the Romans to kill him. It would have been no use their complaining to the Romans that Jesus of Nazareth had claimed to be the Son of God. The superstitious Romans might even have honoured him for this high claim; certainly they would not have thought of it as a capital charge. So, with tongue in cheek, the Jewish leaders reported to Pilate, the Roman governor, that this man claimed to be the king of the Jews, whereas they acknowledged no king but Caesar. He was therefore, they argued, a threat to the Roman government. If you let this man go, they said to Pilate, you are not

Caesar's friend. (Remember that, not so long before this, they would have welcomed Jesus as a king because they wanted to be independent of Rome!)

Of course Pilate could see through their guile, yet he was forced to give in to their demand lest he himself should be reported to Caesar for disloyalty. So Jesus was crucified.

Conspiracy against Christ

The crucifixion of Christ was no small operation. It is not usually appreciated how many people and how many types of people were involved. Representing the Romans were Herod the king, Pilate the governor, a centurion and some common soldiers. Two rival Jewish parties were also involved — Pharisees and Sadducees. The Pharisees consisted largely of narrow-minded, intensely religious scribes; whereas the broad-minded, pleasure-loving priests belonged to the Sadducees' party. Also there was a treacherous apostle named Judas, a seditious killer named Barabbas, and a little army of Jewish accessories in that bizarre assortment of enemies.

See how opposite types were drawn together. Normally Jews and Romans hated each other, and so did the Pharisees and Sadducees. Indeed Pilate and Herod were enemies until the trial of Jesus. It

was a strange mixture of peoples that conspired together to put the Son of God to death. Differences were sunk because there was a formidable common enemy.

The Challenge of Jesus Christ

The enemy was the only completely righteous man who has ever lived. To each man, to each group of men, he was a person who did not belong. Despite their differences, all these people felt easier in each other's company than in the company of this man. This motley crowd of sinful people had nothing in common with Jesus, the uniquely righteous man. Jesus was a challenge to the world; his teaching and the quality of his life were a rebuke to all men.

Jesus is still a challenge to the world. All who belong to the world are on the side of the crucifiers. If we belong to the world, we are in the same class as those who crucified Christ.

What a shocking commentary on human nature: when the righteous Son of God lived on this earth, people decided that they would be better off without him they plotted to get rid of him! And once they had made up their minds, they would stop at nothing: lies, hypocrisy, illegal trials, bribery, false witnesses, blackmail, torture, murder. Those who simply blame the Jews

are missing the point. The point is that, given the circumstances, any other nation would have acted in the same way. Perhaps, in this sophisticated age, the *details* of the story might have worked out differently. But the *motives* and the *end* would have been the same.

Human beings just cannot tolerate a person whose one ambition in life is to obey the laws of God. To express it in another way: human beings reject the standards required by God. They prefer to obey their own human instincts. And what are these instincts? Let the Lord Jesus tell us:

"From within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: all these evil things come from within, and defile the man" (Mark 7:21-23).

And the apostle Paul completes the description of human nature:

". . . Jews and Gentiles . . . are all under sin; as it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: there is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God . . . there is no fear of God before their eyes" (Romans 3:9-18).

A revolting picture — of us!

Man's Estrangement

The sad story of man's estrangement from God goes right back to Adam and is told in the early chapters of Genesis. The first fact presented in the Bible is that God is the Creator. He created the heaven and the earth, and everything on the earth, including man. The creation of man is summarised thus:

"And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul" (Genesis 2:7).

Now consider. Because God is the Creator of heaven and earth and all that they contain, everything belongs to Him. And because He is the Possessor of everything, He is in charge. His word is law. So when God put man into a garden which He had prepared for him, it was altogether reasonable that He should have given him instructions concerning what could be done and what could not be done. (How strange that this should need saying at all!) God's instructions were:

"Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die"

(Gen. 2:16-17).

The Tragedy of Eden

Genesis 3 continues the narrative. It tells of the disobedience of Adam, and the consequences of this disobedience. God pronounced the death sentence upon Adam:

"In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Gen. 3:19).

The effect of this upon the rest of humanity is stated by Paul:

"By one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned" (Rom. 5:12).

Like begets like. Adam disobeyed and became a sinner, and all his children follow him in the way of sin. The Scriptures declare, and we know from personal experience, that there is in all human beings a strong tendency to defy the law of God. Adam was condemned to death, and his descendants, the sin-stricken human race — all who are "in Adam", to use a Scriptural expression — are likewise subject to death: "Death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned."

Sin and Death

The Scriptures themselves emphasise the fact that man is subject to death

because of sin. Romans 5:1 2, quoted above, is just one of many passages that stress this relationship between sin and death. The oft-quoted Scripture, "The wages of sin is death", occurs in the next chapter of Romans (6:23), and in the chapter after that it is stated that "the motions of sins, which were by the law, did work in our members to bring forth fruit unto death" (7:5). And so on .

Who was right — God or Adam? Obviously God was right. Despite a clear warning, Adam broke God's law and paid the penalty. Yet the verdict of man is that Adam was right and God was wrong. People do not usually say this in so many words, yet by action and attitude they show that their respect and sympathy are for Adam, not God. They express this attitude in two ways: (1) by condoning sin; and (2) by resenting death.

Man's Just Reward

All human beings demonstrate by their own deeds that they approve of the way of disobedience. Already we have looked at the teaching of Scripture concerning human nature. Many blatantly and deliberately reject God's laws; others simply do what they want to without ever taking God's laws into account; others profess to fear God, but find excuses to justify doing what *they* want to do, instead of what God

requires of them. Even the few who really try to serve God feel dissatisfied with their efforts: the gravitational force of sin drags them down.

"All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23).

All reject death. They resent the death sentence that God pronounced on the human race. To many it seems that, instead of receiving the just reward of their deeds, they are being cheated. Even if he were not a sinner, man could not reasonably claim the right to live for ever. Yet sinful human beings seem to regard death as an unjust and cruel imposition.

Indeed, many people deny that death takes place at all. Although all the evidence points the other way, they say that death is only an appearance — not a reality. When a man dies (they claim) life really begins. They regard death as the gateway to a richer and fuller life.

This is utterly contrary to the teaching of Scripture. As we have seen, the Bible teaches that death is a punishment. It was never intended to be something pleasant and attractive. According to the Bible, when a man dies "his thoughts perish" (Psalm 146:4); and "the dead know not anything" (Eccles. 9:5). To put it simply: death is the

cessation of life.

Although man keeps fighting against God throughout his life — by continuing to sin and by rejecting death — God wins decisively in the end, and man returns to his native dust. God did not say in vain, "Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return".

Why was Christ Crucified?

Jesus Christ was crucified because the Jews hated him and wanted to get rid of him. This is one obvious reason. But surely God could have stopped them from committing this terrible crime, and at the same time have spared His Son the pain and shame of crucifixion? Obviously God was powerful enough to intervene and prevent the crime. And yet, although the Lord Jesus prayed three times to his Father, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me . . .", God did not intervene. If God's principles were to be upheld and His purpose fulfilled, intervention was not possible. God's plan required that His sinless Son should be crucified.

But how was God to fulfil His good purpose in a world governed by man's disobedience and wickedness? God's wisdom found the way. Whilst it would seem that sinners would triumph in putting Jesus to death, in reality God would surely fulfil His purpose despite

man's wickedness, indeed by turning it to good account. Peter puts it like this:

"(Christ) being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain" (Acts 2:23).

Saving Man from Sin

At the very time that man was doing his worst for God by murdering His Son, God was doing His best for man by using the death of His Son as a means of bringing wonderful blessings to the human race.

Two quotations here remind us what the first of these blessings was:

"Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures" (1 Cor. 1 5:3).

"Now once in the end of the world hath he (Christ) appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Heb. 9:26).

The death of Christ was therefore God's way of saving man from sin.

Redeeming Man from Death

We could easily work out for ourselves what the other great blessing is. Because the death of Christ saves men from sin, we should expect it also to save men from death, the consequence of sin. And this is precisely what the apostle

John says:

"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:14-16).

The first part of this quotation refers back to an incident which we hope to discuss later. But the vital message is easy to understand: the death of Christ presents man with an opportunity to live for ever.

Everlasting Life

The basic facts relating to God's gift of everlasting life, though wonderful beyond words, are not difficult to understand. Think first of the Lord Jesus himself. He died and his body was put into a tomb — a man-made cave, hewn out of a rock. Then, three days later, the great stone that had closed the mouth of the cave was rolled away by superhuman power; by God's mighty power Christ was raised and came forth to live for ever.

The importance of the Lord's resurrection is emphasised in 1 Corinthians 15. It is the foundation fact upon which the Christian hope

is based:

"Now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept. For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. But every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming" (1 Cor. 15:20-23).

Like the Lord Jesus himself, his followers will be raised from the dead. Do not miss the fact that the passage quoted also tells us that the resurrection of Christ's followers will take place when he comes again.

This is not the whole story. After his resurrection, the Lord Jesus proclaimed triumphantly: "I am he that liveth, and was dead" (Rev. 1:18). But he did not stop there. He continued: ". . . and, behold, I am alive for evermore". He was therefore making a double claim:

1. That he had been raised from the dead; and
2. that he would never die again.

And so it will be with those "that are Christ's". Not only will those who have died be raised from the dead when their Lord returns: they will also receive eternal life, "the gift of God".

The blessings of resurrection and immortality are therefore promised to the Lord's followers because he

himself surrendered to God's will and died upon a cross. The facts are clear, though the reason for them involves much that is deep and wonderful.

The Followers of Adam

Think now of Adam as the leader of a great procession. The whole human race is following him along the broad way of disobedience and sin. Many people stride eagerly along this attractive road, and a few tread reluctantly. Most people, however, would neither think of themselves as eager or reluctant followers of Adam. They never realise that they are following him at all. They simply do as they please. But pleasing self instead of pleasing God is sinning: so, all unknown to themselves, they are a part of the Adamic procession.

There comes a point when some of Adam's followers begin to see the unwelcome destination towards which they have been moving. When death looms large before them they start dragging their feet, but all to no avail. Although they are not willing to die, death claims them.

The Lord Jesus was different. He always resisted sin and he accepted death without complaint. Thus he declared by his life and his death that Adam was wrong and God was right.

To accept death as the just reward of one's sins is exceptional. But to accept death without ever having sinned marks out the Lord Jesus as a unique person.

"The man, Christ Jesus"

If Jesus had an altogether superior nature to the rest of us, the lesson would not have been so impressive. But the Scriptures assure us that he possessed a nature just like ours. It is easy to be misunderstood, so let us spell out the facts in simple language.

The Lord Jesus had no human father. He is called the Son of God because God was truly his Father. The power of God, called the Holy Spirit, caused his mother, a member of the human race, to conceive and give birth to a son — the Son of God:

"And the angel answered and said unto her (Mary), The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35).

"Like unto his brethren"

The Son of God is now immortal (he partook of "the divine nature" after his resurrection), but in the first phase of his existence he shared our human nature:

"Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, this is, the devil . For verily he took not on him the nature of angels; but he took on him the seed of Abraham. Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people. For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted" (Heb. 2:14-18)

"For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15).

The fact that the Scriptures lay so much emphasis upon this truth is the measure of its importance. It is strange that so many people indignantly reject the Bible teaching that, in "the days of his flesh", our Lord had a nature like ours. His temptation in the wilderness was not play-acting: it was real. The suggestions were attractive. He had to struggle to resist them; and it was likewise a struggle to accept death.

Yet, by resisting sin and accepting death, the Lord Jesus repudiated Adam and came down decisively on God's side in the great controversy.

Christ's Conquest over Sin

In his life and in his death, the Lord Jesus had honoured his Father and declared Him (not Adam) to be righteous. Thus in character he was perfectly in accord with the will of his Father. He honoured God like a true Son. And God honoured him, raising him from the dead and making him immortal.

Think now of the Lord Jesus as the leader of another procession — a much smaller one. To his disciples he said:

"If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" (Matt. 16:24).

Do you see the picture? In the lead is Jesus himself — going to the place of crucifixion. Following him is a procession of people who have opted out of the Adamic procession. Each is bent under the burden of a cross; each is a volunteer for crucifixion. These have also decided, like their Leader, that God is right. They are going to die with Christ that they might live with him.

Baptism — Burial with Christ

It is by baptism that people demonstrate that they have decided to become followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is stated in Romans 6:

"What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein? Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection: knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin" (Rom. 6:1-6).

See how the baptism of a believer unites him with the Lord Jesus Christ. He dies with him. In the figurative language of the chapter, he is crucified with him. He is crucified to sin — he renounces his former way of life — and the life that he lives after baptism is a new life, like that of the resurrected Christ.

Changing Sides

To recall a conclusion that was presented earlier: all who belong to the world belong to the people who crucified Christ. We have just seen that baptized believers are crucified with Christ. They must therefore have changed sides. The crucifiers now become the crucified: the persecutors are persecuted.

This change happened dramatically to the man they called Saul of Tarsus. There was a time when he was "breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord" (Acts 9:1). So intimately did the Lord Jesus identify himself with his disciples that he intervened and rebuked Saul, saying: "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" In response to Saul's enquiry, the Lord said: "I am Jesus whom thou persecutest" (Acts 9:4,5).

When Saul was converted, he was required to suffer persecution. The Lord said: "I will show him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake" (Acts 9:16). And how he suffered!

Crucified with Christ

Later Saul (whose name had been changed to Paul) wrote to the Galatians:

"I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life

which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me" (2:20).

More light is shed on this subject by another passage from Galatians:

"But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world" (6:14).

Paul is involved in two crucifixions here: (1) "the world is crucified unto me . . ."; (2) ". . . and I unto the world." The second crucifixion is easy to understand. Paul is crucified (figuratively speaking) by the hostile world because he is a follower of Christ. But what about the first crucifixion? Paul — and other believers — are crucifiers of the world. How can this be?

The answer is that, as well as being outside of us and around us, the world is inside each one of us. Human desires are called the world (1 John 2:16). This world within us, which is also called "the flesh" has to be crucified. Thus in Galatians 5:24 Paul says:

"They that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts."

Disciples must therefore prepare for

confrontation with the world on two fronts. They have to crucify, or destroy, their ungodly tendencies; and they have to suffer the hostility of a world that hates them because they hate sin. The hostility of the world shows itself in various ways. Sometimes it takes the form of physical assault; sometimes it is petty persecution; invariably there are indications that the people of the world do not appreciate the company of true Christians.

Representative or Substitute?

The fact that Christ died for our sakes is an important part of New Testament teaching. But let us get one thing clear: although Christ died for us, he did not die instead of us. As we have seen, Christ's followers have to die with him. This is the meaning of baptism: ". . . our old man is crucified with him" (Rom. 6:6).

When God pronounced the death sentence on mankind in Eden He was upholding His own righteous law. If He were to waive this sentence, He would, in effect, be saying that sin does not really matter after all. So the sentence of Eden stands and God requires that each of us must die.

Sooner or later death overtakes all men: but God encourages us to recognise our own degraded and hopeless condition and *anticipate*

the death sentence. We must volunteer for crucifixion. Now think of Christ. He is our representative, who identified himself with the human race in suffering, in temptation, in mortality. Although he never sinned, he carried the great burden of other people's sins, with their painful and shameful consequences. Isaiah the prophet expresses it like this:

"He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth" (Isa. 53:5-7).

The question is sometimes asked: Why did Jesus have to die such a painful and shameful death? One reason is because he bore the sins of others: he bore the sins of all who identify themselves with him. The pain and the shame of the cross are the just reward for their deeds. The penitent thief recognised that he deserved crucifixion (Luke 23:40,41), and so must all true

Christians. By crucifixion our Lord placarded before the world what human nature deserves.

Christ is our representative. He identified himself with human nature in life and in death. And we must identify ourselves with him. With him we must die; and with him we shall be raised to a life over which death has no power.

"It is a faithful saying: For if we be dead with him, we shall also live with him: if we suffer, we shall also reign with him: if we deny him, he also will deny us" (2 Tim. 2:11,12).

The Brazen Serpent, The Lamb of God

In John's Gospel the Lord Jesus is described as a lamb: "Behold, the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). In the same Gospel, the Lord Jesus compares himself to a brazen serpent: "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up" (John 3:14).

A greater contrast it would be impossible to imagine. Lambs are attractive, innocent and of great value. Serpents are repulsive, vicious, dangerous. If our Lord had not compared himself to the brazen serpent, we would never have dared to do so. How remarkable that both

these creatures, the lamb and the serpent, should be used as symbols of the Lord Jesus *in his death*. This may help us to appreciate that there are truths here which need to be understood. Do not miss the fact that the comparison is with a *brazen serpent* — a harmless image of a creature with an immense potential for evil.

The story of the brazen serpent is told in Numbers 21. The children of Israel had brought the wrath of God upon themselves by their incessant grumbling about God's good gifts. God sent fiery serpents amongst the people and many of them were bitten and mortally wounded. Then, in compassion, God instructed Moses to make a brazen serpent and to set it upon a pole in the midst of the stricken multitude. Those dying Israelites who deliberately turned to look at the brazen serpent were healed.

The Law Could not Save

There are important lessons in this true story. First, it demonstrates the impotence of the Law of Moses to save people from death. And there was nothing that the Law could do to meet this calamitous situation. As we should expect, the God-given Law of Moses was a just and wise code of laws. Those who kept the Law were promised rich blessings. The trouble was that man was simply not good enough to fulfil the

reasonable demands of the Law:

"Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:20).

But the rituals and ordinances of the Law of Moses were very instructive. The Law in fact reflected God's love and concern for man. It was "our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith" (Gal. 3:24). The Law prepared the discerning Israelite for — and helps us to understand — the atoning work of God in the death of His beloved Son.

Faith, Grace, and Love

Until people learn the humbling fact that they are sinners who deserve to die, salvation is impossible, but to those who are aware of their wretchedness these gracious words apply:

"But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference: for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ

Jesus." (Rom. 3:21-24)

So the incident of the brazen serpent is a dramatised parable demonstrating that there was no power in the Law of Moses to save humanity from the serpent bite of sin. That is why God provided His only begotten Son.

But why does the Lord compare himself to a serpent, of all creatures? The Son of God came in human form. In character he was perfect, yet he had inherited from Adam a "serpent" nature — a nature which could be tempted to sin. This nature was the cause of the trouble. It had to be cursed and crucified.

To hang a person on a tree, pole, or cross, was a symbolic act. It was the Hebrew way of cursing the one who was "lifted up". In the words of Scripture: "He that is hanged is accursed of God" (Deut. 21:23). In comparing himself to the serpent on the pole, the Lord was teaching that salvation from death could only come by cursing and destroying human nature with its potential for rebellion against God's authority. The Lord Jesus, an innocent bearer of this rebellious nature, showed what to do with it. He crucified it, and he invited others to do the same.

The Passover

The "Lamb" is another symbol that

takes our thoughts back to the Old Testament — to the Passover in Egypt, the beginning of the history of Israel as a nation. First came that series of plagues, culminating in the death of every firstborn in Egypt. There was no automatic exemption for Israel. They were required to kill an unblemished male lamb, eat its flesh and sprinkle its blood upon the lintels and doorposts of their houses. Only if they did this were their firstborn children spared when the Egyptians were destroyed (see Exodus 12).

The ultimate outcome of this amazing demonstration of divine power — power to destroy and power to save — was the deliverance of the whole nation from Egyptian bondage. To ensure that the children of Israel never forgot this mighty deliverance, God instructed them to commemorate the Passover annually. Each family procured for itself a lamb, which was slain and eaten in circumstances that would provide a vivid reminder of the deliverance from Egypt. Generations as yet unborn would have reason to thank God for that fateful night.

In New Testament times the Jews were careful to observe this annual Passover Feast. No detail was neglected; indeed they did more than was required. Yet there was no gratitude in their hearts. At the very

time that the priests and rulers were making elaborate preparation to keep this feast — a feast designed to show their gratitude for a mighty deliverance — they were plotting to put God's only Son to death!

A Greater Deliverance

But God was making *His* plans too. All unknown to themselves, these plotting priests were making preparation for the offering up of the greater Passover Lamb the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world. His death would provide deliverance from a bondage far more grievous than that of Egypt — the bondage of sin and death.

What is the lesson of the Lamb?

Pure and precious, it represents the best that man can afford. The best is offered up to God. Everything that is truly good comes from God and belongs to God. Men are required to offer up to God all that is worthy in themselves, and all their treasured possessions and above all, life itself. The paschal lamb was not offered instead of the offerer. It represented his best, and was a token of his own complete surrender to God. By eating the flesh of the lamb, the Israelites symbolically identified themselves with it. Its blood was, in a sense, their blood, which means that its life represented their life. By this ceremony they declared that they were not their own — they were offering themselves to God. And

God recognised them as His own and delivered them.

So too with the Lamb of God. Conscious of his need for help, he sought it diligently from his Father — and received it. All his virtue and the perfection of his character had come from God and was offered up to God. We are invited to admire his perfection, to identify ourselves with him and through him to offer ourselves up to God. Like Israel of old, God will then recognise us as His redeemed people, "not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold . . . but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot" (1 Peter 1:18,19).

Identification with Christ

The initial act of identification with the Lord Jesus is baptism. But God knows how foolish and forgetful human beings are, and just as He instituted for Israel the annual Passover lest they should forget, so He has provided Christians with a means of remembering that they are a redeemed people. Lest they should forget that their Saviour died for them, disciples are required to eat bread and drink wine, symbols of the body and blood of their Lord. This rite is a symbol of identification. "He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him" (John 6:56). From the days of the Apostles, believers have celebrated this memorial feast week

by week.

The brazen serpent symbolises the destruction of what is evil, and the paschal lamb symbolises the giving back to God of what is good. Together they sum up all that was accomplished by the death of Jesus, and all that is required of his followers.

Human nature is evil and offensive to God. It must be destroyed. This is the lesson of the brazen serpent. But life itself, and every good gift, has come from God and must be given back to him in sacrifice. This is the lesson of the paschal lamb.

Dedicating our Lives to God

People are reluctant to dedicate to God life and all that is good. Yet how can they be losers when they give back to the Creator that which is already His? The Lord Jesus urged his disciples to believe and act on the principle that "whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it" (Matt. 16:25).

In life and death Jesus upheld this principle himself and proved it to be true by his glorious resurrection. He invites us to follow him through death to everlasting life. Dare we reject so gracious an offer?

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The Cross of Christ
