

The Atonement - The Significance of Christ's Death - Loraine Boettner

If we compare the manner in which the service of the world's greatest men have been rendered, and that in which Christ's work of redemption was rendered, we are immediately impressed with an outstanding contrast. While the service of men is rendered during their lifetime, and while Christ too, for that matter, lived a life of unparalleled service, the climax of His work came at its very close, and our salvation is ascribed pre-eminently to His suffering and death. Practically all of the material recorded in the Gospels has to do with the events which occurred during the last three years of His life, and approximately one-third of the material has to do with the events of the last week, commonly known as Passion Week. The prominence thus given to the closing scenes indicates very clearly that the distinctive work of Our Lord was accomplished not by His life but by His death. Neither His example nor His teaching reveals the love and mercy and justice of God so convincingly as does His death; and consequently the cross has become par excellence of the Christian symbol.

During the latter part of the public ministry Jesus spoke repeatedly and insistently of the death which He was to suffer at Jerusalem. "From that time," says Matthew, marking the beginning of a Period, "began Jesus to show unto His disciples, that He must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed," 16:21. "He took unto Him the twelve," says Luke, "and said unto them, Behold, we go up to Jerusalem, and all the things that are written through the prophets shall be accomplished unto the Son of man. For He shall be delivered up unto the Gentiles, and shall be mocked, and shamefully treated, and spit upon: and they shall scourge and kill Him," 18:31-33. When Moses and Elijah appeared in glory at the time of the Transfiguration they talked with Jesus concerning "His decease which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem," Luke 9:31. We are told that when the time drew near that He should be received up "He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem," Luke 9:51, knowing full well what awaited Him there. With such majestic determination did He press forward toward the cross that the disciples were "amazed" and "afraid," Mark 10:32. "I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how am I straightened till it be accomplished," He said to the disciples, Luke 12:50. Loving His people with an infinite love, and having come to earth specifically for their redemption, He longed to suffer and to accomplish His appointed work. In these and numerous other statements He shows His preoccupation with His death, and that in such a manner as to make clear that in His mind it constituted the most significant part of His work.

That the specific purpose of Christ's death was to secure forgiveness for others is taught directly in Scripture. "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many unto remission of sins," said He as He instituted the Lord's Supper which through all succeeding generations was to be observed as a memorial of His death, Matt. 26:28. "The Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many," Mark 10:45. "I lay down my life for the sheep," John 10:15. "Therefore doth the Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No one taketh it away from me, but I lay it down of myself," John 10:17, 18.

It is not enough to recognize Christ as a teacher while rejecting Him as the atoning Savior. In the conversation with Nicodemus He promptly brushed aside the complimentary words, "we know that thou art a teacher come from God," and declared that until one is born anew he cannot even so much as see the kingdom of God. And similarly the pity of the "Daughters of Jerusalem," although doubtless sincere, was rejected apparently because it did not recognize the fact that His suffering was not for Himself but for others,--"Weep not for me, but weep for yourselves," Luke 23:25. And the rending of the veil of the temple, which symbolized that the way into the presence of God had been opened for all men, occurred not at His baptism, nor at the Sermon on the Mount, but at His death.

The same teaching concerning the death of Christ is found throughout the New Testament. The Apostle Paul, for instance, pointedly conscious that he had received the cleansing which comes through faith in Christ, places His atoning death at the very heart of his theological system. "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us," Gal. 3:13. "Him who knew no sin He [that is, God] made to be sin on our behalf [that is, laid on Him the punishment due for sin]; that we might become the righteousness of God in Him," II Cor. 5:21. "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures," I Cor. 15:3. He is the One whom "God set forth to be a propitiation, through faith, in His blood," Rom, 3:25. "I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ and Him crucified," I Cor. 2:2.

Peter declares that "Christ also suffered for sins once, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God," I Peter 3:18; and again that He "bare our sins in His body upon the tree," I Peter 2:24. John says, "The blood of Jesus His Son cleanseth us from all sin," I John 1:7; and "He is the propitiation for our sins," I John 2:2. "Apart from shedding of blood there is no remission," wrote the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, 9:22; and again, "Now once at the end of the ages hath He been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself," 9:26. And in John's Revelation the triumphant Christ is pictured as "arrayed in a garment sprinkled with blood," 19:13.

Even in the Old Testament this doctrine was clearly anticipated. In the Messianic 53rd chapter of Isaiah we read: "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 Jehovah hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all ... He was cut off out of the land of the living for the transgression of my people to whom the stroke was due... When thou shalt make His soul an offering for sin ... He shall justify many; and He shall bear their iniquities. . . .He bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors," vss. 5-12.

In appointing the lamb as the principal animal for the morning and evening sacrifice in ancient Israel, God chose the animal which is at one and the same time the most harmless and gentle and the most attractive and pleasing of all the

domestic animals, and thus emphasized both the innocence and the inherent value of the victim whose life was taken. The people were thus taught that their sins were forgiven and their lives spared only because another who was innocent and virtuous took their place and died in their stead. The term "Lamb of God," when applied to Christ, calls to mind the Old Testament sacrifices and invariably refers to His sacrificial death. John the Baptist, for instance, pointed out Jesus as "the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world," John 1:29. Peter says that we were redeemed, "not with corruptible things, with silver or gold ...but with precious blood, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot, even the blood of Christ," I Peter 1:18, 19. In the Book of Revelation the redeemed are portrayed as those who have "washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb," 7:14. And since Christ in His relationship with His people manifests so preeminently the attributes of gentleness and tenderness, and since He rules them in and through love, we are further given to understand that all opposition to Him is unprovoked and malignant.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TERM "BLOOD"

The term "blood" as used in theological language is, of course, to be understood as a figure of speech. It is used as a synonym for Christ's atoning death, and it designates the price which He paid for the redemption of His people. There are, as might be expected, many in our day who take offense at the term "blood," and wish to earn their salvation by their own good works. But the New Testament, as if anticipating this very offense, not only repeatedly asserts that salvation is not by works, but makes direct reference to the "blood" of Christ some thirty-five or forty times; and in the Old Testament there are innumerable references to the blood of the animals which were used in the ceremonies and rituals which prefigured the death of Christ. Salvation in all ages has been through Christ alone; and the Old Testament saints who worshiped God in His appointed way of sacrifice and poured-out blood looked to the same Savior as do we who live in the Christian era. "The life of the flesh is in the blood," said the Lord to Moses, "and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls: for it is the blood that maketh atonement by reason of the life," Lev. 17:11. When the blood is poured out, the person or animal dies. Under the ceremonial law the blood with which atonement was made was secured in such a way that the life of the victim was always forfeited. In the twelfth chapter of Exodus we are given an account of the Passover, with its sprinkling of blood and the deliverance of all the firstborn of Israel from death. On the day of annual Atonement the high priest was to sprinkle the blood of the bullock and of the goat over the mercy seat and upon the horns of the altar, Lev. 16:1-34. The various Old Testament blood rituals were but prophetic types or prefigurations of the great sacrifice which later was to be made by Christ when He offered Himself for the sins of His people.

The teaching of the New Testament concerning the blood is very explicit. We have seen that Jesus' own words in instituting the Lord's Supper were, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many unto remission of sins," Matt. 26:28. Paul repeatedly asserts this truth: "Now being justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him," Rom. 5:9. "Jesus Christ in whom we have our redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace," Eph. 1:3, 7. "But now in Christ Jesus ye that once were afar off are made nigh in the blood of Christ," Eph. 2:13. Christ has "made peace through the blood of His cross," Col. 1:20. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, contrasting the work of Christ with that of the high priest in ancient Israel says that "Christ having come a high priest ... not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, entered in once for all into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bull, and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling them that have been defiled, sanctify unto the cleanness of the flesh: how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish unto God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God" Heb. 9:11-14. John writes, "The blood of Jesus His Son cleanseth us from all sin," I John 1:7. And in the songs of praise to the Redeemer, recorded in the book of Revelation, we hear the words, "Worthy art thou to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and didst purchase unto God with thy blood men of every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation. . . . Worthy is the Lamb that hath been slain to receive the power, and riches, and wisdom, and might, and honor, and glory, and blessing," Rev. 5:9, 12.

So let no one take offense at the term "blood." Since salvation was purchased for us by the vicarious suffering and death of Christ, and since that suffering and death is symbolized by the blood, it is but natural that both the Old and the New Testament should mention the blood repeatedly. Many persons have tried to gain salvation by other methods, by church membership, pledge signing, good resolutions, meritorious works, etc., only to find that such methods invariably end in failure. So clearly and constantly and emphatically do the New Testament writers assert that the efficacy of Christ's work is to be ascribed to His death, His blood, His cross, that we are justified in asserting that the Scripturalness or un-Scripturalness of the various present day theories of the atonement can be fairly tested by the place which they give to His death.

To the unsaved nothing seems more unreasonable and meaningless than the assertion that salvation is to be obtained through the blood of Christ. The Scriptures, of course, recognize this condition of the unregenerate heart, and declare that, "The word of the cross is to them that perish foolishness," and then add by way of contrast, "but unto us who are saved it is the power of God," I Cor. 1:18. Those who have experienced the cleansing and forgiveness which comes through this faith know that the crucified and risen Lord is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near unto God through Him, and that there is no salvation in any other.

And unless Christ did thus give His life a sacrifice for others we are at a loss to know why He died. We have seen that the penalty which God originally prescribed for sin was the loss of life,--and like any other penalty it can be justly inflicted only where the law has been violated. But Christ suffered the penalty of death even though He had no sin of His own. Consequently He must have died for the sins of others. Unless He did thus die, His voluntary surrender to death, and that

at the early age of thirty-three, must be looked upon as utter foolishness, as, in fact, criminal suicide.

NOT MERELY A MARTYR'S DEATH

There are many who deny that the death of Christ had any value as an atonement. The most common alternative view is that He died merely as a martyr. But apart from the fact that a mere martyr's death would leave most of the distinctive Christian doctrines without any adequate foundation, the narratives themselves make it quite clear that something profoundly different was involved. Compare His feeling, in view of death, with that of Paul: "having the desire to depart," Phil. 1:23; "The time of my departure is come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give to me at that day; and not to me only, but also to all them that love His appearing," II Tim. 4:6-8. Jesus, on the other hand, was filled with anguish. "Now is my soul troubled; and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour," John 12:27. We are told that "His sweat became as it were great drops of blood falling down upon the ground," Luke 22:44. And as He hung on the cross we hear the despairing cry, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Matt. 27:46. As Dr. A. H. Strong has said, "If Christ was simply a martyr, then He was not a perfect example; for many a martyr has shown greater courage in prospect of death, and in the final agony has been able to say that the fire which consumed him was 'a bed of roses.' Gethsemane, with its mental anguish, is apparently recorded in order to indicate that Christ's sufferings even on the cross were not mainly physical sufferings."

As Jesus hung on the cross He was, in His human nature, the true sin-offering for His people, and as such, it was necessary that He suffer alone. God can have no association whatever with sin, since in His sight it is infinitely heinous. And, as in the Old Testament ritual for the sin-offering, this was symbolized by the burning of the flesh of the bullock outside of the camp (even the offering itself being treated as offensive and polluted since in the mind of the offerer it stood representative of and was in some way associated with his sin), so Jesus, as He bore in His own body the full weight of the penalty of sin, was temporarily cut off from the Father's presence and paid the entire cost of redemption without help from any other. The darkened heavens, and the cry, "My God, my God, Why hast thou forsaken me?" indicate as much. He was acutely conscious not only of the pain from the nails, but also of a break in that intimate and loving fellowship which He had always enjoyed with the Father. Since Jesus in His human nature was subject to the limitations which are common to men, it was as possible for Him to experience the sense of separation from the Father as it was for Him to be ignorant of the time of the end of the world, or to suffer pain or hunger. But during the crucifixion, as He bore a burden of sin such as had never been borne and could never be borne by any mere man, He went through an experience far more awful and terrifying than is possible for any mere martyr. In contrast with His sufferings, the Christian martyrs were deeply conscious of God's presence as they yielded up their lives. If Christ's death was only a martyr's death it might well fill us with terror and despair, for it would show that the holiest man who ever lived was utterly forsaken by God in the hour of His greatest need.

Death is primarily the separation of the soul from God; and physical death, or the separation of the soul from the body, is only a by product and a relatively unimportant consequence of that greater catastrophe. Jesus did not suffer the pangs which are experienced by lost souls in hell, but in paying the penalty for His people, He did suffer death in its most essential nature, which is separation from God. And while His sufferings were not identical, either in intensity or in length of time endured, with those which His people would have suffered had they been left to their own sin, in view of the infinite worth and dignity of the Sufferer they were nevertheless a full equivalent to those sufferings.

Let us keep in mind that it was not Christ's divine nature, but only His human nature, which was subject to suffering and death, as it was only His human nature which was subject to temptation, hunger, thirst, sleep, etc. While we do not fully understand the relationship which exists between His two natures, we have a faint analogy in our own persons in which a spiritual and a physical nature are united; and on the basis of our own experience we know that what He experienced in either nature He experience as a person, that is, as the God-man. This latter fact is of the utmost importance since it explains why His work of redemption was possessed of infinite value, sufficient to save all those who put their trust in Him. And again, while we do not fully understand the relationship which exists between the two natures, and while the analogy does not hold at all points, we may picture His divine nature during the crucifixion as not only fully sympathetic with His human nature, but as looking down upon His human nature calmly and serenely as the moon in its majesty looks down upon the troubled sea.

It seems quite evident that the work of redemption, which together with its wider effects may also be designated as the spiritual Reformed-creation of the souls of men, was a greater work than the original creation of the universe. When the starry heavens were brought into existence and spread throughout the vast bounds of space, that work, while requiring great power and wisdom, was accomplished at God's spoken command. Such creation was comparatively easy, and is referred to as but "the work of His finger," Ps. 8:3. "He spake, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast," Ps. 33:9. But when the work of redemption was to be accomplished, God, in the person of Christ, took upon Himself human nature with its attendant weaknesses, was born a helpless babe in low condition, underwent the hardships of this life, was scoffed at and rejected by the religious and political rulers of the nation, suffered the cruel pain and cursed death of the cross, was buried, and continued under the power of death for a time. While the work of creation was accomplished through a mere exercise of power and wisdom, the work of redemption was accomplished only at an infinite cost of suffering on the part of God Himself. As man's soul is of incomparably greater value than his body, so the redemption of the souls of men was an incomparably greater work than the original creation of the universe. Christ's work of redemption

is now seen to have been the central event of all history.

We do not mean to imply that man's salvation was completed by the work of Christ on the cross. His words, "I have accomplished the work which thou hast given me to do," John 17:4, and "It is finished," John 19:30, relate to the objective atonement which He provided for the sins of men. But the great purpose of His coming, that of making men subjectively just and holy, was not yet fulfilled. As the work of providence follows the work of creation, so the subjective cleansing of the sinner is a continuing process as the redemption which was purchased by Christ is applied by the Holy Spirit to those for whom it was intended. Here enter the works of regeneration, justification, adoption, sanctification, and glorification. But this opens up a whole new field of theology, that of the person and work of the Holy Spirit, which we have not space to discuss in this present work.

Thus the death of Christ emerges as the central truth in the Christian doctrine of redemption. It is the link which holds together all of the other distinctive doctrines. The mark of His blood is upon them and signifies their ownership, as the scarlet thread running through every cord and rope of the British navy signifies that it is the property of the crown. It hardly seems possible that, with this central truth written so plainly and so repeatedly across the pages of Scripture, any honest or serious minded persons could arise, as do the Unitarians and Modernists, and declare that the essence of Christianity consists in our following the example of Christ in lives of social service, or that the chief purpose of the Church is to build a new social order in this world. It is very evident, of course, that in our daily lives we are to follow the example of Christ as closely as possible. And in due course of time a new social order, based on justice and improved living conditions, will gradually arise as Christian principles are applied first to the lives of individuals and through them to the life of the community. In many limited social groups we already see the effects of this uplifting process. But Christ's expiatory death is no more an object for our imitation than is the creation of the world. For in His death He took man's place and rendered to divine justice a satisfaction which man himself was utterly unable to render. That Christianity is not primarily a social movement, but a redemptive religion, setting forth a way of escape from sin, is as plain as it is possible for words to make it.