



The Crisis of the Cross

Why did Jesus die?

Where did it happen?

It happened outside the walls of Jerusalem, in a very public place. The Bible says, "This thing was not done in a corner". Jesus of Nazareth was crucified between two thieves. The place is called Golgotha, otherwise the Place of a Skull, or the hill of Calvary. These are places described in the gospel records . Matthew, Mark, Luke and John . and identifiable today. It was a very real place.

When did it happen?

It took place about two thousand years ago, not long after the year from which our Western calendar today began, often called "The Year of our Lord". No other event of that time is remembered today all over the world. Jesus was about 33 years old, a young man, when he was executed by crucifixion at the time which the Jews call Passover, and which Gentiles call Easter.

The Romans had perfected the art of crucifixion. In earlier times other nations had crucified their criminals but always after they had been killed by other means. But the Romans crucified their victims alive and left them to a lingering death which often took several days.

How did it happen?

It was a gross miscarriage of justice. Both the Jews and the Romans conspired together to bring about the death of an innocent man whose only crime was, as the Bible says, that ~~he~~ went about doing good.

The Jews were living as a subject nation of the Romans whose local Procurator was Pontius Pilate, who is remembered only because he condemned Jesus to death. They had always been a stubborn and defiant people, often at loggerheads with one another rather than at peace. They were the same under the Romans. The Sadducees, the priestly class, governed worship at the temple. The Pharisees, the Separate Ones, were their opponents. Whilst the former were liberally minded, the latter were stern, strict and meticulous keepers of the Law of Moses.

They finally became united in their hostility to Jesus Christ who took the Sadducees to task for the hollowness and sham of much of their worship, and reproved the Pharisees for the back-breaking legal burdens they laid upon the people and useless traditions invented by men which overrode and often sidelined the word of God.

Hostility deepened into murderous intent against the Lord Jesus. His standing amongst the common people, the wonder of his miracles, the clarity of his authoritative teaching from God made them say that ~~no~~ man ever spoke like this man, and, ~~he~~ was never seen like this in Israel, about his wonderful works. More ominous for the rulers was their fear that the popularity of Jesus would seriously injure their own standing in the sight of the Romans with whom they worked in a harmony of intrigue to protect their authority.

The final plot to kill Jesus was made secure when they bribed Judas Iscariot, one of the apostles, to betray him to them in a suitable place at an agreed time.

How was it done?

Although his life was in danger and he knew it, Jesus came to Jerusalem at Passover time when the city was thronged not just with local Jews but with pilgrims from all the countries of the Dispersion. The rulers wondered whether Jesus would resist arrest and whether he would upset their plans by one of his miracles. Thus they had temple officers, Roman soldiers and a motley band of people at hand for the crucial time.

Surprisingly, Jesus was quiet and, to all outward appearances unafraid. During the Last Supper, Judas slipped away to the rulers to confirm that he thought that that night would be a convenient time for the arrest of his Master and the garden of Gethsemane would be a convenient place because Jesus often went there to pray.

From that moment, both Jewish and Roman law was put to shame by the behaviour of the authorities. It was about midnight when Jesus was arrested. Against the law, he was tried in the night and on the flimsiest of charges in which even the so-called witnesses were in disagreement.

It was a hurried and disgraceful affair. The condemnation of Jesus was pronounced personally by the high priest Caiaphas, despite the fact that the so-called charges had not been substantiated by any evidence. The Council were constrained by the high priest to concur in the sentence, ~~he~~ is deserving of death (Matthew 26:66).

By this time it was early in the morning of the following day, according to Western reckoning, and Jesus was put in prison for a few hours. At this point it becomes apparent that Pontius Pilate had been primed as to what would happen and that his co-operation would be required that day so that Jesus could also be condemned by the Romans.

An appalling miscarriage of justice

Pilate did not find the interrogation of Jesus altogether to his liking. The prisoner did not appear to be the kind of person who would commit blasphemy, as the Jews alleged, or treason against Rome as they were now urging.

At first it looked as though Jesus would be delivered from Roman hands because Pilate three times pronounced him innocent (see John 18:38; 19:4,6). This infuriated the rulers who had convinced themselves that this part of the trial was a mere formality and now things were going dreadfully awry for them. But the Jews were arch manipulators of law and of people. They set to work on Pilate, ruthlessly and shamelessly. One of their trumped up charges against Jesus was that he was seeking to be king and, they said, that was treason against Rome.

But they put this part of their case in different terms, %f you let this man go, you are not Caesar's friend+(John 19:12). Pilate was trapped and knew it. He also knew that for envy they had delivered Jesus into his hands. But most of all, he was certain that the Jews would not hesitate to betray him to Caesar were he to release Jesus.

Part of the customary rituals at this time of year was for the Romans to release a convicted prisoner. Pilate snatched at this straw and offered the Jews a choice between a notorious man of violence, Barabbas, and Jesus of Nazareth. Without hesitation and by much stirring of the people, they chose Barabbas . %ow Barabbas was a robber+(John 18:40).

Almost casually, Pilate delivered Jesus to be scourged before his crucifixion. Scourging was brutal. A soldier, armed with a leather whip of many tails reinforced with pieces of bone and metal, applied all his force to the bared back of his victim who was then taken to the place of death where he was nailed by hands and feet to the dead trunk of a tree which was then lifted and dropped into a retaining hole in the ground to keep it upright.

But why?

Why did God allow it? It is impossible to read the gospels without being forced to ask why this should have happened to one so innocent and selfless as Jesus. Was it a tragic accident? a purposeless execution? Was Jesus the unfortunate victim of the barbarity of heartless men?

If the answer to any of those questions is yes, was Jesus simply a martyr for a cause and caught up in forces beyond his control? If so, are we being constrained to accept that the forces of evil were greater than the power of Jesus for good? Is the ideal of Jesus beautiful but, in the end, unattainable? Is there a way in which we can find the real meaning of the crisis of the cross?

Was it divinely planned? This would not of itself explain the crisis but it could remove the suggestion that the cross was a terrible accident. What does the Bible say? Let us look first of all at the New Testament commentary:

him (Jesus), being delivered by the determinate purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death. (Acts 2:23)

For truly against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together to do whatever your hand and your purpose determined before to be done. (Acts 4:27,28)

From these verses, we learn that the death of Jesus was the purpose determined before by God. Notice particularly it is not only that God had always known what would happen, but, also, that what happened was as God had planned. Yet what took place did not affect the free will and therefore the responsibility of those who carried it out. They are described as wicked hands.

What does the Old Testament say?

Since the death of Jesus was in the mighty plan of God, He had already revealed it to the Old Testament prophets:

Those things which God foretold by all his prophets, that the Christ would suffer, he has thus fulfilled. (Acts 3:18)

More especially, it is exactly what Jesus said to the apostles themselves after his resurrection from the dead:

These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning me. (Luke 24:44)

The reference to the Law of Moses is particularly interesting, for there . . . in the daily, weekly, monthly and yearly sacrifices . . . Israel was taught the principle that without shedding of blood there is no remission of sins (Hebrews 9:22). Jesus came as the Lamb of God, a final sacrifice for sin, the one to whom all those earlier sacrifices had pointed forward: This man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God (Hebrews 10:12).

In other parts of the Old Testament, the sufferings and death of Christ had been quite explicitly foretold and the apostles, when they began their worldwide preaching of the gospel, constantly referred to those prophecies.

We would love to have the list of scriptures used by Jesus when he was speaking to his apostles. But we are denied that privilege and we have to find some of them for ourselves. Two of the most striking include these words:

The congregation of the wicked has enclosed me. They pierced my hands and my feet; I can count all my bones. They look and stare at me. They divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots. (Psalm 22:16-18)

These words were written about 1,000 years before the birth of Jesus and declare the actual experiences of the Lord Jesus Christ as he was upon the cross. For example, the Roman soldiers, as the custom was, divided the victim's clothes amongst themselves, exactly as the Psalm had foretold (see John 19:23-24). Again:

Reproach has broken my heart ÷ I looked for someone to take pity, but there was none; and for comforters, but I found none. They also gave me gall for my food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.+(Psalm 69:20,21)

Once more there is a detail given which is remarked on in the gospels. One of the torments endured on the cross was a raging thirst which arose from the direct heat of the sun and dehydration from the wounds on head, back, hands and feet. The record says:

After this, Jesus, knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the scripture might be fulfilled, said, I thirst!qNow a vessel full of sour wine was sitting there; and they filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on hyssop, and put it to his mouth.+(John 19:28,29)

Two hundred and fifty years later than these Psalms, the prophet Isaiah wrote: He is despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief ÷ he was cut off from the land of the living ÷ he was numbered with the transgressors+(Isaiah 53:3,8,12), a clear reference to the two thieves with whom Christ shared the cruelty of the cross.

These are but a few of the places in the Old Testament where the death of Christ is spoken of in uncanny detail. But what did Jesus know? We do not have to guess. Before the dreadful machine of injustice began to turn, the Lord knew what would take place. Not only so, but he gave his bewildered disciples such detail as to leave us in no doubt that he knew all:

From that time Jesus began to show to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day.+(Matthew 16:21; cp. Luke 18:32,33)

Was Jesus an unwilling victim?

Was Jesus a fatalist yielding to God's will? or was there some other explanation of his behaviour at this crucial time in the history of Israel? These questions are asked because we know from the Old Testament that the death of Jesus was part of the purpose of God. Was the will of God achieved despite what Jesus himself thought and wanted or with his explicit co-operation?

Jesus knew that he was written about in scripture and that the purpose of his life was to do the will of God, and he was glad about it. The fulfilment is exactly what had been foretold but there is something even more impressive: the spirit and cost of the manner in which Jesus carried out the will of God:

As the Father knows me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep ÷ Therefore my Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from my Father.+(John 10:15-18)

There is a wealth of information in those words. Let us restrict ourselves at this time to learning that Jesus was commanded of God to give his life for the sheep, and this he would do and it was not the violence of man, but his submission, that took away his life. They would have taken it, but he gave it freely. Therefore his Father loved him.

As we have seen, Jesus was not entangled in a net of events as a fish might be taken unawares. He had willingly come to Jerusalem knowing what lay ahead. The record says, "It came to pass, when the time had come for him to be received up, that he *steadfastly set his face* to go to Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51).

We have already learned that the death of Jesus was not a tragic accident despite God's own will, but, rather, that everything that happened was according to the will of God. It had been recorded beforehand by the prophets in the Old Testament, and was fully understood in detail by Jesus himself. We are still left, however, with the question as to why events so terrible were part of God's required purpose. What was that purpose and was there no other way in which it could have been accomplished?

The heart of the problem

We instinctively feel that there is something repulsive about what happened, but that is precisely what it was . repulsive to us. The fault does not lie in the will of God but in the will of man which condemned an innocent man to die in the most appalling and cruel circumstances. It is exactly what man is capable of and so often does. World history is strewn with individual and national acts of shame. Nations have traded in slaves, carried out what is today called ethnic cleansing and engaged in deliberate cruelties against fellow human beings. In the name of politics or religion or both, men have tortured, killed or held captive those with opposing views.

These things apart, civilised society is constantly scarred by personal violence, rape, drug-trafficking, and numberless acts of injury to the minds and bodies of others. Against all this, we see thousands who devote themselves to the care of others, campaign for good things and sacrifice themselves to improve the lot of others. There are good people, doing good things.

How is it then that in God's world there are these starkly opposing kinds of behaviour? Why do the minds of all of us suffer from the constant tension between good and evil, frailty and success, generosity and greed? Is it a vain question to ask why all human life ends in suffering and death? Does Calvary have anything to say on these deeply important matters?

What did Jesus say?

The human heart is said by Jesus Christ to be the origin of evil. No scapegoat is suggested, no blame placed elsewhere: it rests squarely on the shoulders of men. The heart of man is evil:

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

Other scriptures say the same thing and explain why we are apt to blame others or make excuses for our wrongdoings:

"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?" (Jeremiah 17:9)

Let no one say when he is tempted, I am tempted by God; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death. (James 1:13-15)

It is interesting to note that these words echo the words of Jesus about the origin of evil . man's own heart. Surely, that agrees exactly with our own experience.

But where did our evil hearts come from? This is a fair and searching question. Obviously, we can say that we are what we are from our parents and they from their parents and so on. What does the Bible say? There is no mention of the evil heart of man until after Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden because of their sin. Sin brought evil consequences. Later on, when the world had become filled with wickedness prior to the coming of the Flood, the scripture says:

When the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. (Genesis 6:5)

This is exactly what Jesus said. Man's heart is responsible for all the wickedness in the earth. Once this basic Bible teaching is understood and we cease to lay the blame elsewhere, we are ready to begin to understand the crisis of the cross.

Did Jesus experience the same trouble in himself?

At first, we feel it is almost blasphemous to frame such a question. How could this be true of Jesus the sinless One? Was Jesus sinless because there was no possibility of his being otherwise? Was he free from the temptations we experience? In other words, Was his nature different from our own? Jesus was brought into the world by the power of the Holy Spirit by which Mary of Nazareth conceived:

The angel answered and said to her (Mary), The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that holy one who is to be born will be called the Son of God. (Luke 1:35)

So, God the Creator, by His power . the Holy Spirit . caused Mary to conceive. Jesus therefore can be described as born of a divine Father and a human mother, whose genealogy went back to Adam (Luke 3:38). This unique combination produced a baby by the usual nine months development which, in that respect, was like other babies. Jesus needed parental care and had to learn as he grew. He was not born with a fully matured mind: Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and men. (Luke 2:52). Was Jesus naturally obedient to God? Here is the earlier question in another form. Was Jesus different because he had no propensity for disobedience . no natural impulses to go against God's will? What does the Bible say? Though he was a Son, yet he learned obedience by the things which he suffered. (Hebrews 5:8). Jesus learned obedience. There is no mistaking what the verse says, and the lesson is repeated elsewhere: Being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. (Philippians 2:8).

This verse is even more instructive. It tells us that the secret of the victory of Jesus at Calvary was that he humbled himself and became obedient. The implication of these verses is that Jesus could have been disobedient and proud. In other words (dare we say

it?), he was tempted to sin like the rest of us. The Bible says this clearly: *We do not have a high priest who cannot sympathise with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin* (Hebrews 4:15).

In other words, the greatness of Jesus was not that he could not be tempted to sin, but that having been tempted altogether like us he never gave in: he was totally victorious.

We have yet to find out why Jesus had to *learn* wisdom instead of being naturally endowed from his birth, and why he had to be tempted just as we are. How did those things contribute to our salvation by his death upon the cross?

Like his brethren

Here are two of the important verses on this subject:

What the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh – He condemned sin in the flesh. (Romans 8:3)

There was no way in which man could be righteous by his own works. From our own experience, we know that to be true. In our helplessness God sent His own Son.

The second verse is in the letter to the Hebrews which, in describing Jesus, says: *Here am I and the children whom God has given me* (2:13). Christ was unmarried and therefore had no children. Who, then, are *the children*? They are God's children, given to Christ . those who believe His promises and seek to be obedient to His commands. By natural birth they are Adam's children. Speaking of these, the passage continues:

As much then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared in the same, that through death he might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. (Hebrews 2:14,15)

Notice an outstanding truth which we have come across before, namely, that Jesus was altogether of our nature. It is emphasised five times in the above quotation: *he, himself, likewise, shared in, the same*. *The same* refers to flesh and blood . like those he came to save. Secondly, he had to die. He came to die. His mighty work of salvation was accomplished *through death*.

Where did death come from?

Death was the consequence of Adam and Eve's disobedience in the garden in Eden: *the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you shall return* (Genesis 3:19). They became mortal creatures, and finally they died . *For the wages of sin is death* (Romans 6:23), as the Apostle Paul tells us.

Death was therefore God's answer to sin. Sinners cannot live for ever, God will not allow it. Adam was not executed but he was henceforth different because death worked in his body and would finally cause him to die. Also, sin had become part of his thinking and would always affect him and all his descendants.

Paul describes this condition. He talks of wishing to serve God but finding that the wish to do good was challenged within him by a natural urge to do otherwise:

%delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God . through Jesus Christ our Lord!+(Romans 7:22-25)

Adam's sin brought death into the world and the legacy for his children is mortality (death at work in us) and a natural urge to please ourselves, whatever God commands.

The devil and death

We learned from the verses from Hebrews that %the devil+has the power of death. But how can this be? It was God who brought death into the world because of Adam's disobedience. How then could the devil be said to have that power?

Look at these phrases from scripture and see whether you can make sense of them: %the wages of sin is death+(Romans 6:23). %the sting of death is sin+(1 Corinthians 15:56). %him who had the power of death, that is, the devil+(Hebrews 2:14). Three things emerge from these verses: sin brings death, sin is the sting of death, and the devil has the power of death. Man committed sin and brought death into the world. This is exactly what Paul says: %through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned+(Romans 5:12).

±The devil± is therefore ±sin at work in us± and is expressed in the world around. Sin's work brings death. The Bible quotations we have just looked at make no sense at all if the devil is a supernatural being, as some believe. The %devil+is personified in scripture, but is not a living person: there can be no rival to God . %There is no God besides me,+declared the Almighty (Isaiah 45:5).

How did Jesus deal with the devil . with the power of sin? The Bible has already given us the answer: Jesus was flesh and blood in which death works and where sin is produced, and Jesus shared that nature with its evil potential.

This is the key to his redemptive work. The bliss of Eden was destroyed by Adam's sin, and Adam's life was slowly but surely destroyed by death. Sin reigned like a king over all Adam's descendants; none was free from sin and all would die. How could the vicious circle be broken and thereby bring deliverance from death? Redemption and salvation could come only from God. But how could it come *righteously* from God? in other words, how could God's righteousness be vindicated in providing a Saviour, whilst sin was not ignored but truly condemned?

%He saw that there was no man ÷ no intercessor; therefore his own arm brought salvation for him; and his own righteousness, it sustained him.+(Isaiah 59:16)

The strong man of sin

To all appearances, sin was unassailable within its fortress . all mankind. God created man in the first place and it was not His purpose to abandon man to his misery but instead to provide a wonderful Deliverer. Sin was to be defeated on its own territory. Jesus said,

No one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man. And then he will plunder his house+ (Mark 3:27).

That was the key: to enter the house of the strong man of Sin and bind him, and then spoil his goods. The strong man's house was human nature in which sin had reigned ever since Adam sinned. How then could sin be bound within its own house? It was done by Jesus entering the strong man's house. He was born of a human mother and thereby shared her . our . nature. This meant that he would inevitably suffer temptation like all men; and, by sharing Mary's nature, flesh and blood, Jesus would himself be mortal; death would be at work in him.

This was the greatest battle in human history. Other battles have been between sinners of one kind and another and every victor was himself in the end beaten by the last enemy, death. But this battle was to be astonishingly different. Temptation and Sin were to be defeated on their own ground! In the very nature which resulted from Adam's sin, Sin was to be crushed and mortally wounded. A seemingly mysterious word of prophecy spoken by God in Eden after Adam and Eve had sinned was thus realised:

He will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel. (Genesis 3:15)

Having no human father, Jesus was truly the seed of the woman. Sin was mortally crushed by Jesus through his sinlessness, but in that process, Jesus himself died. The last enemy, death, appeared to have the final triumph.

But the sinless Jesus had not personally earned the wages of death: It was not possible that he should be held by it (death)+ (Acts 2:24). Jesus had a will of his own which would have preferred not to tread this path of ultimate suffering. But he did not say, I will not submit to death. But, rather, O my Father, if this cup cannot pass away from me unless I drink it, your will be done+ (Matthew 26:42). Our will be done+ were words he taught his disciples in the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:10). Now he took the lesson to himself, magnificently.

But, again, why death?

In the Middle Ages, theologians sought to resolve this problem by regarding the death of Jesus as a kind of commercial transaction in which Christ took upon himself the penalty of death due to us, so that we might be free. This is known as the theory of substitution.

This theory is deeply flawed. How could a righteous God make an innocent man die instead of someone to whom death was due? God would then have been unrighteous. In any case, to whom was the life of Jesus paid? And how could he rightly receive it back by being raised from the dead? Would not that nullify the transaction? By twisted thinking, some theologians said that the price was paid to the devil (in their eyes a personal devil with great power) but, God tricked the devil whereby the body of Jesus was retrieved from his clutches! You will see that such thoughts deny the righteousness and justice of God.

The Bible makes it plain that all that happened was out of God's love. There was no savage hatred, no calculated cruelty, but perfect love. It was not only God's love for a world in the grip of sin and death, but also love for Jesus. Jesus said: Therefore my Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it again+ (John 10:17).

There were two remarkable elements in the life of Jesus. First and foremost was the sin-free life which he led in submission to the will of God. Second, and strangely, he was son of Mary and therefore mortal. He had a dying nature by which he could and would die, when, paradoxically, he had done nothing worthy of death. It is that amazing combination which provided the clue to the meaning of the crisis of the cross. That he (Jesus), by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone+(Hebrews 2:9). So, in the death of Jesus we find both the love and grace of God! This was no terrible accident, the day when everything went wrong. Instead it was the triumph of God; a day of great victory. The saving breakthrough was made when sin and death were put to flight. Jesus did not die *instead of us* but he died *on our behalf*.

The bi-focal perspective

The root of temptation lay in Jesus . as in all of us . in the nature he inherited from his mother. As Paul said, he had a law in his members, warring against the law of his mind+(Romans 7:23). The only way to eliminate that law was to die, not simply by growing old and dying, but by the deliberate choice of death, the total rejection of the seat of rebellion by willingly dying. That was the Great Triumph, the Ultimate Victory. The Cross was not a defeat, it was the final mastery, the complete vanquishing of Sin.

All who looked on Jesus saw a crucified, dying man put to public shame and unspeakable ignominy. But, was that the whole picture? Is rejection by humankind and the degradation of the Son of God what it was all about? Not at all! Far from it!

Look more closely and see the surpassing beauty of what was done. God was served to the limit by the sacrifice of His own Son, so that the way of salvation could be opened for us all.

In his sacrifice it was not just his body that Jesus was rejecting, for his body was fearfully and wonderfully made. It was that inner fault-line, inherited from Adam, from which sprang temptation and the possibility of rebellion against God, that was lamented. Jesus gave himself so that the fault-line might be removed. The fault-line was righteously there because of Adam's sin and God's condemnation of it. It was now to be righteously removed by the sinlessness of Jesus and his resurrection, and by the consequent God-provided bestowal of immortality.

Victory through resurrection

The first battle had been won, but it was at the cost of his own life. The gates of death closed on Jesus of Nazareth. But the tomb of Joseph of Arimathaea in which Jesus was buried became the gateway to life. As the scripture says about Jesus in the tomb: God raised up (Jesus), having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that he should be held by it+(Acts 2:24). If death was for sinners, then resurrection was for the righteous Servant of God . God's one and only Son, who became the firstborn from the dead to enter immortality.

Sin was slain for ever and death itself was conquered. Jesus, who shared our nature, shared it to the full by sharing death with all mankind. But there was a marvellous difference:

Now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man came death, by man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. (1 Corinthians 15:20-22)

The two mortal enemies of man . sin and death . have been conquered by Jesus Christ. The word ~~Christ~~ means ~~Messiah~~ or ~~Anointed One~~. He is not only the Saviour; he is also the Priest and the King, as a result of his sacrificial act. God has given him the authority to proclaim: ~~I~~ am he who lives and was dead ~~and~~ And I have the keys of Hades (hell, the grave) and of death (Revelation 1:18).

Look at these words quoted at Pentecost: ~~For~~ you will not leave my soul in Hades, nor will you allow your Holy One to see corruption (Acts 2:27). ~~Hades~~ sometimes translated as ~~hell~~, is the grave, where the body corrupts after death. But it was not to be so for Jesus. His body was the place of his victory over sin and his righteousness was vindicated by his Father. He did not corrupt, but God brought him out of the grave on the third day, as the Lord himself had said (Matthew 16:21). Now he will live for ever because he is immortal: ~~Our~~ Saviour Jesus Christ ~~and~~ has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel (2 Timothy 1:10).

Why did Jesus die? The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ was the way God chose to uphold His righteousness and show mercy through forgiveness.

This brings us, then, finally, to consider *our* reaction and response to the death of Jesus. What is the way ahead for us?

The way ahead

Jesus said about himself:

~~I~~ am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:6)

~~I~~ am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, though he may die, he shall live. (John 11:25)

There is no way to God and no way to life eternal except through Jesus Christ. Both the early believers and their enemies called the gospel, ~~the~~ Way (see Acts 9:2). It is a way of life and *the* way to eternal life.

The question, ~~What~~ do you think of Christ? was addressed by Jesus to some of his hearers and it has rung down the ages since then. Everyone who comes to learn about Jesus Christ is constrained in the end to answer that question for himself. Paul said when overwhelmed by the surpassing goodness of God and the boundless love of Jesus Christ:

~~The~~ love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if one died for all, then all died; and he died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for him who died for them and rose again. (2 Corinthians 5:14,15)

As Paul says, we are all ~~born~~ in trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1). This is what the Bible calls spiritual death. We are living the life of Adam and walking the road to death: ~~like~~ sheep they are laid in the grave; death shall feed on them (or ~~be~~ their shepherd);

the upright shall have dominion over them in the morning+(Psalm 49:14). We are all death's sheep and death never loses his sheep. No wonder death is called by the poet, the Grim Reaper, and by scripture, *the last enemy*+

How can we find eternal life? Paul tells us powerfully how it was for him and the believers to whom he wrote:

We were buried with him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.+(Romans 6:4)

The burial in the waters of baptism of a believing and repentant sinner signals the death of his old way of life. He rises from baptism as a new creature in God's sight with his sins forgiven . washed away in the blood of Jesus.

No forgiveness without baptism?

No forgiveness of sins without baptism? This may be puzzling or astonishing, but the scripture is absolutely plain on the matter: *Peter said to them, Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins*+(Acts 2:38).

We are to repent, which means *to* have a new mind. Our old mind is our old way of thinking and our old way of life. The new mind comes by understanding and believing the gospel. The mind is washed clean by the pure word of God and by faith. Repentance must be followed by baptism through which forgiveness of sins is obtained.

It is not uncommon to hear the suggestion that forgiveness comes as soon as we believe, in other words, without baptism. We know for a certainty that is not true. Saul of Tarsus was apprehended by Jesus as he was travelling to Damascus where he intended to persecute the Christians. The Damascus Road has become a symbol for conversion and, erroneously, for the forgiveness of sins. Saul's sins were not forgiven on that road and we are taught in scripture that he still had his sins three days later! It was not until he was baptized that his sins were forgiven. He later recalled how he was instructed: *Why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins*+(Acts 22:16).

Forgiveness comes only by the death of Jesus. We have been told that by belief and baptism we truly become related to the death of Jesus. It is clear that when Philip the evangelist preached about Jesus Christ to the Ethiopian eunuch, he preached about baptism, because the Ethiopian cried out suddenly: *See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?*+(Acts 8:36). For us the message of Jesus is simple and clear: *He who believes and is baptized will be saved*+(Mark 16:16).

Your crisis and the cross

Sooner or later everyone comes to the crisis. For many, sadly, it is the crisis of death, not having believed in the Lord Jesus Christ and his mighty saving work and glorious future. For you, it need not be like that. Your future is now in your own hands because the work of Jesus has placed it there. Your crisis is to decide whether what took place in Jerusalem about 2,000 years ago is God's answer to the human dilemma. Jesus said, *Without me you can do nothing*+(John 15:5). That is still and always will be true.

Life without Jesus Christ ends in certain and hopeless death. Why hang on to that? It is like refusing the lifebelt when you are sinking in the ocean. God wants to save us through Jesus and to give us everlasting life in His kingdom here on earth when Jesus comes back to reign on the earth. Why not grasp this golden opportunity? Jesus tells us the way:

Whoever desires to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. (Matthew 16:24-25)

For those who believe these things and are baptized, and who promise to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, the crisis has passed. Sins are forgiven. We can walk in the way of the cross to the glorious future of eternal life.

What is hindering YOU?

By Harry Tennant

If you would like to find out more about the Bible's message for you, then please go to our website and explore the True Bible Teaching concerning the Purpose of Almighty God with this earth and your opportunity to be a part of it.

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