

A Meditation on the Cross of Christ

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SCRIPTURE teaches that there is significance about the way our Lord Jesus Christ died. His death by crucifixion fulfilled a number of Old Testament prophecies and types (e.g. Ps 22:16; Zech 12:10; Gen 22:6; Num 21:8). In this article we ask the question: Why did our Saviour die on a cross?

The origin of sin must be traced to Adam's offence in taking fruit from a forbidden tree. Somehow it seems strangely fitting that Christ, the last Adam, should deal with sin by means of a tree. The Bible says, 'his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree' (1 Pet 2:24). Augustine, in one of his sermons, comments: 'As we have been made dead by a Tree, so have we been made alive by a Tree; a Tree discovered to us our nakedness, and a Tree covered us with the leaves of mercy'.

According to the Bible's doctrine, sin has completely destroyed the harmony which once existed between man and God. When man sinned he became alienated from God and subject to his wrath. There was therefore a need for someone to intervene between the two parties at variance and to reconcile them. Now the biblical word for such a person is 'mediator', which literally means 'middle-man'. 'There is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus' (1 Tim 2:5).

In his death, the Lord Jesus stood between the offended God and the offending sinner, making full satisfaction to divine justice by his suffering and death. The cross - with its foot on earth and its top directed towards heaven - seems to symbolize the connecting link between them both. 'So seem my Saviour's cross to me, a ladder up to heaven'.

Christ's work on that cross is described as a sacrifice for the sins of men. By this we mean that

Christ offered his life to divine justice in order that guilty sinners might be saved. This sacrifice was wonderfully illustrated and exhibited in the vicarious sacrifices of Old Testament times. God intended that they should foreshadow our Lord's atoning work. One of them, the lamb of the Passover, is specially important in this respect. 'Christ our passover is sacrificed for us' (1 Cor 5:7).

We quote here an interesting footnote in Dr Farrar's 'Life of Christ': 'It is a striking circumstance that the body of the Paschal lamb was literally crucified on two transverse spits. I witnessed the Samaritan Passover on the summit of Mount Gerezim in 1870, and the bodies of the seven lambs as they were prepared for roasting looked exactly as though they were laid on seven crosses'.

So Christ became the sin-bearer. Significantly, he suffered that particular death which the law had associated with the infliction of the curse: 'He that is hanged is accursed of God' (Deut 21:23 cf 27:26).

And by undergoing the curse on our behalf, he has liberated us from it. 'Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is everyone that hangeth on a tree' (Gal 3:13).

Why was death by hanging regarded as so terrible? The criminal, in public disgrace, was lifted up between heaven and earth as if rejected and abandoned by both. 'Jesus cried - My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?' (Matt 27:46)

The early Christians loved to meditate upon the cross and delve into its spiritual mysteries. Among

other things, they noticed that it extended four ways as if it had reference to north, south, east, and west.

It was an interesting observation, for we know that the precious blood of Christ avails, not just for a few in one place, but for elect men and women the world over. We have been redeemed 'out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation' (Rev 5:9); and it is this vast company of redeemed souls which will one day gather together in the heavenly kingdom. 'They shall come', said our Lord, 'from the east, and from the west, and from the north, and from the south, and shall sit down in the kingdom of God' (Lk 13:29).

Observe too that, lifted up on his cross, Christ was exhibited to multitudes of men and women. According to Luke's Gospel, 'all the people...came together to that sight' (Lk 23:48). Of course, this was all part of the divine arrangement, intimating that Christ was to be set forth and freely offered in gospel preaching, so that sinners everywhere may 'look' to him for salvation (Is 45:22; Zech 12:10; Jn 1:29).

In one of the ancient prophecies we actually hear Christ speaking of his long- continued offers of grace, and saying: 'I have spread out my hands all the day unto a rebellious people' (Is 65:2 cf Rom 10:21). Matthew Henry, with his characteristic spiritual perception, says: 'When Christ was crucified, his hands were spread out and stretched forth, as if he were preparing to receive returning sinners unto his bosom; and this "all the day", all the gospel day'. The cross is preaching to all; and the text of its sermon is: 'This man receiveth sinners' (Lk 15:2).

So what is the good news of the gospel? It is that God grants a free pardon to every believer. The cross is a striking revelation of that. God's Law had become

for all of us like one enormous bill informing us of the extent of our terrible debt; but the Lord Jesus met those legal demands on behalf of his people and all who believe can rejoice that their bill has been fully paid. Now here is something worth noting: the ancient way of cancelling a bond was by driving a nail through it and fixing it to a post.

What Christ did was to take to himself our liabilities which were then nailed with him to the cross. This was God's way of saying that the account had been settled. 'Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us,...(he) took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross' (Col 2:14).

Take another look at the cross. People present at Calvary saw it raised up and it must have appeared to them as some kind of standard. The Gospels tell us of some, like the centurion, who enlisted under that blood-stained banner (Matt 27:54). And still today, the once crucified but now glorified Redeemer presents himself to the whole world, that sinners may give themselves up to him and serve him to the end of their lives. 'In that day', Isaiah promises, 'there shall be a root of Jesse, which shall stand for an ensign of the people; to it shall the Gentiles seek: and his rest shall be glorious' (Is 11:10; cf Lk 1:70-75).

Finally, observe how the cross has a judicial significance. On the upright was a projecting peg (sedile) upon which Christ would have been able to sit, perhaps for a few brief moments. Its purpose was to prevent the weight of the body from tearing the hands. But when elevated above the people, the cross bore a resemblance to a seat, and Christ, sitting upon it, appeared like a Judge at a solemn Tribunal.