

Centrality of the Cross – Mark 10.32-45

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THE CENTRALITY OF THE CROSS

No one may effectively argue that the incarnation of God is unimportant, but the central question of the New Testament is not why or how did God become a man but why did Christ, the second person of the Trinity, die. Why did the cross, the means of his execution, become the primary symbol of the Christian church? Only two of the four gospels relate any of the details surrounding the birth of Jesus, but in all of the gospels we find the central motif to be Jesus' crucifixion. Within the Synoptic Gospels Jesus himself makes known that it is his intention to offer up his life as a ransom for many. In Mark 8 Peter confesses that Jesus is the Christ. Immediately after his confession Jesus told his disciples that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be killed but that afterward he would rise again (Mark 8.31). Mark records Jesus' prediction again in 9.30-32 and yet again in 10.32-34. Finally, in response to the requests of John and James to hold positions of prominence in Jesus' kingdom, Jesus says: *and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many* (Mark 10.44-45). During the last week of his life, Jesus recognized that centuries of prophecy about his atoning work were about to be fulfilled through his death. It is with this in mind that while they were celebrating the feast of the Passover, *Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins"* (Matthew 26.26-28).

In the Gospel of John one finds the declaration of Jesus' vicarious atonement stated very early in the Gospel narrative: *Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!* (John 1.29). The manner of this atoning sacrifice is implied in John 3.13-15: *No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.* Seven times John makes reference to the "hour" awaiting Jesus: the first was at the wedding at Cana when in response to his mother's prompting to make himself known he said, *My hour is not yet come* (John 2.4). When at the feast in Jerusalem some Greeks approached Philip asking to see Jesus, he replied, *The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified* (John 12.23; cp. 17.1). Of course, Jesus is glorified in his death and the justice and holiness of God is vindicated through his death.

As with the gospels, so too with the remainder of the New Testament. The preaching in the Acts of the Apostles highlights the saving work of Christ. Paul summarizes the good

news in 1 Corinthians 15: *For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve* (15.3-5). The author of Hebrews portrays the blood of Christ as more precious than the blood of goats or calves. Throughout the book of Revelation Jesus is depicted as the Lamb; he is also the firstborn from the dead (1.5); and he further holds the keys of death and Hades (1.18).

THE NECESSITY OF CHRIST'S DEATH

What is the proper question? Is it, "Why did Jesus die?," or is it, "Why was Jesus killed?" Both questions have some validity. On the one hand, Jesus was killed because he was betrayed by Judas into the hands of conspirators who felt threatened by the influence and popularity of the itinerate rabbi. They, in turn, remanded Jesus over to the Roman authorities for trial. The gospels point to three individuals who took part in the death of Jesus: Pilate, Caiaphas and Judas all played their part in his execution. There were other players on the stage as well: the soldiers who carried out the scourging and execution, and the crowd that cried out for his death all contributed to his death. Peter at Pentecost, Stephen before the Sanhedrin, and the apostle Paul in his letters make it clear that the Jewish authorities, along with the cooperation of the Roman officials were responsible for killing Jesus.

Though each person is responsible for his or her actions, we know that Jesus orchestrated his own death (cf. John 5.26; 10.17-18). Frankly, the religious aristocracy had little to gain from forcing Jesus' hand during the Passover celebration; they would have been quite content to let the week pass and settle their accounts with Jesus after the festivities had subsided and the crowds had returned to their homes. But as the Lamb of God it was fitting that Jesus be offered as a sacrifice during the Passover (John 1.29; cf. 1 Peter 1.18-19; Galatians 4.4). The apostle John records the words of Jesus: *"For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father"* (John 10.17-18; cf. 5.25-26). If Jesus were merely killed, whatever the circumstances, then the account of his death might have been an interesting chapter in history. But if, as we have noted, Jesus truly laid down his life and took it up again we must agree with the gospel writers that Jesus' death must be understood in the context of his declaration that *the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many*. That is, he rescued those who are held in bondage to sin by the shedding of his blood: *Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life* (Romans 5.9-10).

The Bible traces the root of sin back to Eden and its inhabitants. The Genesis account is neither myth nor legend, but a historical snapshot of real people living in a real place. The fall of Adam was paradigmatic for the human race. That is, the consequence of Adam and Eve's sin affected all their offspring. Not only is every person born with a predilection to sin, but each one is also inherently sinful. God told Adam (Adam later told Eve), *you may eat of any tree in the garden but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil you must not eat* (Genesis 2.17). One may rightly ask: of what does the knowledge of good and evil consist? Is God describing what will happen if they eat of the tree, or does He mean, as some suggest, that they will develop moral discernment? Such a suggestion hardly seems tenable since God's command would have had no meaning had Adam not already understood the parameters of moral law. While it may not be readily apparent, it appears more reasonable to assume that the quest of Adam and Eve was for wisdom. Not the wisdom that comes from revelation (God's self-disclosure), which is the highest pursuit of man (Proverbs 1.7), but the wisdom alluded to by Job, a wisdom which belongs to God alone (Job 15.7-9; 40.1-8; Deuteronomy 29.29; Proverbs 30.1-4). Theirs was a quest for knowledge independent of revelation. In other words, Adam and Eve were seeking parity with God; it was a search for autonomy. Their hunt was fraught with ethical and moral implications. The Lord God had already made his will known: namely, do not eat of the tree of knowledge. Adam's quest for parity resulted in his death, physical and spiritual. This event was reenacted in the tabernacle when the law of God was stored in the ark of the covenant for which there was a prohibition to touch it (cp. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 63-64). The fellowship with God that was lost at Eden when Adam ate from the forbidden tree was restored by Jesus through his execution on a tree at Calvary. So Paul writes: *We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God* (2 Corinthians 5.20b-21).

THE DEPTH AND BREADTH OF THE CROSS

God is love – there is a happy thought! One is eager to clap his hands for the joy of it. But, that God is holy, that he has the right of moral expectation and is angry with those who oppose his will, is not an idea frequently entertained – not even by evangelicals who ought to blush with shame and repent in tears at the thought of it. How is it possible to address God as Abba Father without hating sin? While Isaiah assures us that God is able to save those who call upon Him, he also reminds us that unrepentant sin separates men from God: *But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear* (Isaiah 59.2). The fuller and more complete one's awareness of the heinous nature of sin the more one may begin to fathom the depth and breadth of Jesus' work on the cross.

Sin is not a group activity; it is individual and personal to its core. One may rightly say that Christ died for us, but the truth of it only strikes home when I say, "Jesus died for

me.” In one of his many hymns Horatius Bonar, the 19th century Scottish divine captured something of this thought:

See the crowd in Pilate's hall,
their furious cries I hear;
their shouts of "Crucify!" appall,
their curses fill mine ear.
And of that shouting multitude
I feel that I am one;
and in that din of voices rude
I recognize my own.

I see the scourgers rend the flesh
of God's beloved Son;
and as they smite I feel afresh
that I of them am one.
Around the Cross the throng I see,
that mock the Sufferer's groan;
yet still my voice it seems to be,
as if I mocked alone.

'Twas I that shed that sacred Blood,
I nailed him to the Tree;
I crucified the Christ of God;
I joined the mockery.
Yet not the less that Blood avails
to cleanse me from sin,
and not the less that Cross prevails
to give me peace within.

His death was necessary and voluntary. He did it for us, not for himself. Through his death the believer may secure for himself or herself a good that can be achieved by no other means. Christ's death brings one to God (1 Peter 3.18). Christ's death provides an atonement for our sins (Romans 3.21-26; Hebrews 9.27-28). Christ died in the place of the sinner (Romans 6.23), that is, the death Jesus died is the death all sinners deserve: namely, to be spiritually separated from God. That was the great agony of the cross.

It is generally agreed that Jesus lived for about 30 – 35 years, but the purpose and mission of his life was fulfilled in the last 6 hours. Throughout John's Gospel the tension builds toward that final moment: *"Now is my [Jesus'] soul troubled. And what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour? But for this purpose I have come to this hour."* Everything Jesus said and did led up to that final hour (cf. John 17.1). Thus, we hear the words: *It is finished* (John 19.30), as words of proclamation and it naturally follows,

then, that Jesus could say, *Father into your hands I commit my spirit* (Luke 23.46). These are not words of defeat; to the contrary, they are the words of victory! *I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself* (John 5.25-26).