

The Cross of Christ

By Paul Washer

One of my greatest burdens is that the Cross of Christ is rarely explained. It is not enough to say that “He died” - for all men die. It is not enough to say that “He died a noble death” - for martyrs do the same. We must understand that we have not fully proclaimed the death of Christ with saving power until we have cleared away the confusion that surrounds it and expounded its true meaning to our hearers - He died bearing the transgressions of His people and suffering the divine penalty for their sins: He was forsaken of God and crushed under the wrath of God in their place.

Forsaken of God

One of the most disturbing, even haunting, passages in the Scriptures is Mark’s record of the great cry of the Messiah as He hung upon a Roman Cross. In a loud voice He cried out:

“Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?” which is translated, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

In light of what we know about the impeccable nature of the Son of God and His perfect fellowship with the Father, it is difficult to comprehend Christ’s words, yet in them, the meaning of the Cross is laid bare, and we find the reason for which Christ died. The fact that His words are also recorded in the original Hebrew tongue tells us something of their great importance. The author did not want us to misunderstand or to miss a thing!

In these words, Jesus is not only crying out to God, but as the consummate teacher, He is also directing His onlookers and all future readers to one of the most important Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament - Psalm 22. Though the entire Psalm abounds with detailed prophecies of the Cross, we will concern ourselves with only the first six verses:

“My God, my God, why have You forsaken me? Far from my deliverance are the words of my groaning. O my God, I cry by day, but You do not answer; and by night, but I have no rest. Yet You are holy, O You who are enthroned upon the praises of Israel. In You our fathers trusted; they trusted and You delivered them. To You they cried out and were delivered; in You they trusted and were not disappointed. But I am a worm and not a man, a reproach of men and despised by the people.”

In Christ’s day, the Hebrew Scriptures were not laid out in numbered chapters and verses as they are today. Therefore,

when a rabbi sought to direct his hearers to a certain Psalm or portion of Scripture, he would do so by reciting the first lines of the text. In this cry from the Cross, Jesus directs us to Psalm 22 and reveals to us something of the character and purpose of His sufferings.

In the first and second verses, we hear the Messiah’s complaint - He considers Himself forsaken of God. Mark uses the Greek word *egkatalēpo*, which means to forsake, abandon, or desert.² The Psalmist uses the Hebrew word *azab*, which means to leave, loose, or forsake.³ In both cases, the intention is clear. The Messiah Himself is aware that God has forsaken Him and turned a deaf ear to His cry. This is not a symbolic or poetic forsakenness. It is real! If ever a creature felt the forsakenness of God, it was the Son of God on the cross of Calvary!

In the fourth and fifth verses of this Psalm, the anguish suffered by the Messiah becomes more acute as He recalls the covenant faithfulness of God towards His people. He declares:

“In You our fathers trusted; they trusted and You delivered them. To You they cried out and were delivered; in You they trusted and were not disappointed.”

The apparent contradiction is clear. There had never been one instance in the history of God’s covenant people that a righteous man cried out to God and was not delivered. However, now the sinless Messiah hangs on a tree utterly forsaken. What could be the reason for God’s withdrawal? Why did He turn away from His only begotten Son?

Woven into the Messiah’s complaint is found the answer to these disturbing questions. In verse three, He makes the unwavering declaration that God is holy, and then in verse six, He admits the unspeakable - He had become a worm and was no longer a man. Why would the Messiah direct such demeaning and derogatory language toward Himself? Did He see Himself as a worm because He had become “a reproach of men and despised by the people”⁴ or was there a greater and more awful reason for His self-deprecation? After all, He did not cry out, “My God, my God, why have the people forsaken me,” but rather He endeavored to know why God had done so! The answer can be found in one bitter truth alone - the Lord had caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him, and like a worm, He was forsaken and crushed in our stead.⁵

This dark metaphor of the dying Messiah is not alone in

Scripture. There are others that take us even deeper into the heart of the Cross and lay open for us what “He must suffer”⁶ in order to win the redemption of His people. If we shutter at the words of the Psalmist, we will be further taken back to hear of the thrice-holy⁷ Son of God becoming the serpent lifted up in the wilderness, and then, the sin bearing scapegoat left to die alone.

The first metaphor is found in the book of Numbers. Because of Israel’s near constant rebellion against the Lord and their rejection of His gracious provisions, God sent “fiery serpents” among the people and many died.⁸ However, as a result of the people’s repentance and Moses’ intercession, God once again made provision for their salvation. He commanded Moses to “make a fiery serpent and set it on a standard.” He then promised that “everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he will live.”

At first, it seems contrary to reason that “the cure was shaped in the likeness of that which wounded.”⁹ However, it provides a powerful picture of the cross. The Israelites were dying from the venom of the fiery serpents. Men die from the venom of their own sin. Moses was commanded to place the cause of death high upon a pole. God placed the cause of our death upon His own Son as He hung high upon a cross. He had come “in the likeness of sinful flesh,”¹⁰ and was “made to be sin on our behalf.”¹¹ The Israelite who believed God and looked upon the brazen serpent would live. The man who believes God’s testimony concerning His Son and looks upon Him with faith will be saved.¹² As it is written, “Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else.”¹³

The second metaphor is found in the priestly book of Leviticus. Since it was impossible for one single offering to fully typify or illustrate the Messiah’s atoning death, an offering involving two sacrificial goats was put before the people.¹⁴ The first goat was slain as a sin offering before the Lord, and its blood was sprinkled on and in front of the Mercy Seat behind the veil in the Holy of Holies.¹⁵ It typified Christ who shed His blood on the Cross to make atonement for the sins of His people. The second goat was presented before the Lord as the scapegoat.¹⁶ Upon the head of this animal, the High Priest laid “both of his hands and confessed over it all the iniquities of the sons of Israel and all their transgressions in regard to all their sins.”¹⁷ The scapegoat was then sent away into the wilderness bearing on itself all the iniquities of the people into a solitary land.¹⁸ There, it would wander alone, forsaken of God and cut off from His people. It typified Christ who “bore our sins in His body on the cross,”¹⁹ and suffered and died alone “outside the camp.”²⁰ What was only symbolic in the Law became an excruciating reality for the Messiah.

Is it not astounding that a worm, a venomous serpent, and

goat should be put forth as types of Christ? To identify the Son of God with such “loathsome” things would be blasphemous had it not come from Old Testament saints “moved by the Holy Spirit,”²¹ and then confirmed by the authors of the New Testament who go even further in their dark depictions. Under the inspiration of the same Spirit, they are bold enough to say that He who knew no sin, was “made sin,”²² and He, who was the beloved of the Father, “became a curse”²³ before Him. We have heard these truths before, but have we ever considered them enough to be broken by them?

On the Cross, the One declared “holy, holy, holy” by the Seraphim choir,²⁴ was “made” to be sin. The journey into the meaning of this phrase seems almost too dangerous to take. We balk even at the first step. What does it mean that He, in whom “all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form,” was “made sin?” We must not explain the truth away in an attempt to protect the reputation of the Son of God, and yet, we must be careful not to speak terrible things against His impeccable and immutable²⁵ character.

According to the Scriptures, Christ was “made sin” in the same way that the believer “becomes the righteousness of God” in Him.²⁶ In his second letter to the church in Corinth, the Apostle Paul writes:

“He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”²⁷

The believer is not the “righteousness of God” because of some perfecting or purifying work upon his character that makes him like God and without sin, but rather as a result of imputation by which he is considered righteous before God through the work of Christ on his behalf. In the same way, Christ was not made sin by having His character marred or soiled, thus actually becoming depraved, but as a result of imputation by which He was considered guilty before the judgment seat of God on our behalf. This truth however, must not cause us to think any less of Paul’s declaration that Christ was “made sin.” Although it was an imputed guilt, it was real guilt, bringing unspeakable anguish to His soul. He took our guilt as His own, stood in our place, and died forsaken of God.

That Christ was “made sin,” is a truth as terrible as it is incomprehensible, and yet, just when we think that no darker words can be uttered against Him, the Apostle Paul lights a lamp and takes us further down into the abyss of Christ’s humiliation and forsakenness. We enter the deepest cavern to find the Son of God hanging from the Cross and bearing His most infamous title - the Accursed of God!

The Scriptures declare that all humankind lay under the curse. As it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all the things written in the Book of the Law, to perform

them.”²⁸ From heaven’s perspective, those who break God’s Law are vile and worthy of all loathing. They are a wretched lot, justly exposed to divine vengeance, and rightly devoted to eternal destruction. It is not an exaggeration to say that the last thing that the accursed sinner should and will hear when he takes his first step into hell is all of creation standing to its feet and applauding God because He has rid the earth of him. Such is the vileness of those who break God’s law, and such is the disdain of the holy towards the unholy. Yet, the Gospel teaches us that, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us -- for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.’”²⁹ Christ became what we were in order to redeem us from what we deserved. He became a worm and no man, the serpent lifted up in the wilderness, the scapegoat driven outside the camp, the bearer of sin, and the One upon whom the curse of God did fall. It is for this reason the Father turned away from Him and all heaven hid its face.

It is a great travesty that the true meaning of the Christ’s “cry from the cross” has often been lost in romantic cliché. It is not uncommon to hear a preacher declare that the Father turned away from His Son because He could no longer bear to witness the suffering inflicted upon Him by the hands of wicked men. Such interpretations are a complete distortion of the text and of what actually transpired on the Cross. The Father did not turn away from His Son because He lacked the fortitude to witness His sufferings, but because “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”³⁰ He laid our sins upon Him and turned away, for His eyes are too pure to approve evil and cannot look upon wickedness with favor.³¹

It is not without reason that many Gospel tracts picture an infinite abyss between a holy God and sinful man. With such an illustration, the Scriptures fully agree. As the Prophet Isaiah cried out:

“Behold, the Lord’s hand is not so short that it cannot save, nor is His ear so dull that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear”
(Isaiah 59:1-2)

It is because of this that all men would have lived and died separated from the favorable presence of God and under divine wrath unless the Son of God had stood in their place, bore their sin, and died “forsaken of God” on their behalf. For the breach to be closed and fellowship restored, “Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things?”³²

Christ Dies under the Wrath of God

To obtain the salvation of His people, Christ not only suffered

the terrifying abandonment of God, but He drank down the bitter cup of God’s wrath and died a bloody death in the place of His people. Only then could divine justice be satisfied, the wrath of God be appeased, and reconciliation be made possible.

In the garden, Christ prayed three times for “the cup” to be removed from Him, but each time His will gave into that of His Father.³³ We must ask ourselves, what was in the cup that caused Him to pray so fervently? What did it contain that caused Him such anguish that His sweat was mingled with blood? It is often said that the cup represented the cruel Roman cross and the physical torture that awaited Him; that Christ foresaw the cat of nine tails coming down across His back, the crown of thorns piercing His brow, and the primitive nails driven through His hands and feet. Yet those who see these things as the source of His anguish do not understand the Cross, nor what happened there. Although the tortures heaped upon Him by the hands of men were all part of God’s redemptive plan, there was something much more ominous that evoked the Messiah’s cry for deliverance.

In the first centuries of the primitive church, thousands of Christians died on crosses. It is said that Nero crucified them upside down, covered them with tar, and set them aflame to provide street lights for the city of Rome. Throughout the ages since then, a countless stream of Christians have been led off to the most unspeakable tortures, and yet it is the testimony of friend and foe alike that many of them went to their death with great boldness. Are we to believe that the followers of the Messiah met such cruel physical death with joy unspeakable, while the Captain of their Salvation³⁴ cowered in a garden, feigning the same torture? Did the Christ of God fear whips and thorns, crosses and spears, or did the cup represent a terror infinitely beyond the greatest cruelty of men?

To understand the ominous contents of the cup, we must refer to the Scriptures. There are two passages in particular that we must consider - one from the Psalms and the other from the Prophets:

*“For a cup is in the hand of the LORD, and the wine foams; It is well mixed, and He pours out of this; surely all the wicked of the earth must drain and drink down its dregs.”*³⁵

*“For thus the LORD, the God of Israel says to me, ‘Take this cup of the wine of wrath from My hand and cause all the nations to whom I send you to drink it. They will drink and stagger and go mad because of the sword that I will send among them.’”*³⁶

As a result of the unceasing rebellion of the wicked, the justice of God had decreed judgment against them. He would rightly

pour forth His indignation upon the nations. He would put the cup of the wine of His wrath to their mouth and force them to drink it down to the dregs.³⁷ The mere thought of such a fate awaiting the world is absolutely terrifying, yet this would have been the fate of all, except that the mercy of God sought for the salvation of a people, and the wisdom of God devised a plan of redemption even before the foundation of the world. The Son of God would become a man and walk upon the earth in perfect obedience to the Law of God. He would be like us in all things,³⁸ and tempted in all ways like us but without sin.³⁹ He would live a perfectly righteous life for the glory of God and in the stead of His people. Then in the appointed time, He would be crucified by the hands of wicked men, and on that Cross, He would bear His people's guilt, and suffer the wrath of God against them. The perfect Son of God and a true Son of Adam together in one glorious person would take the bitter cup of wrath from the very hand of God and drink it down to the dregs. He would drink until "it was finished"⁴⁰ and the justice of God was fully satisfied. The divine wrath that should have been ours would be exhausted upon the Son, and by Him, it would be extinguished.

Imagine an immense dam that is filled to the brim and straining against the weight behind it. All at once, the protective wall is pulled away and the massive destructive power of the deluge is unleashed. As certain destruction races toward a small village in the nearby valley, the ground suddenly opens up before it and drinks down that which would have carried it away. In similar fashion, the judgment of God was rightly racing toward every man. Escape could not be found on the highest hill or in the deepest abyss. The fleetest of foot could not outrun it, nor could the strongest swimmer endure its torments. The dam was breached and nothing could repair its ruin. But when every human hope was exhausted, at the appointed time, the Son of God interposed. He stood between divine justice and His people. He drank down the wrath that they themselves had kindled and the punishment they deserved. When He died, not one drop of the former deluge remained. He drank it all!

Imagine two giant millstones, one turning on top of the other. Imagine that caught between the two is a single grain of wheat that is pulled under the massive weight. First, its hull is crushed beyond recognition, and then its inwards parts are poured out and ground into dust. There is no hope of retrieval or reconstruction. All is lost and beyond repair. Thus, in a similar fashion, "it pleased the Lord" to crush His only Son and put Him to grief unspeakable.⁴¹ Thus, it pleased the Son to submit to such suffering in order that God might be glorified and a people might be redeemed. It is not that God found some gleeful pleasure in the suffering of His beloved Son, but through His death, the will of God was accomplished. No other means had the power to put away sin, satisfy divine

justice, and appease the wrath of God against us. Unless that divine grain of wheat had fallen to the ground and died, it would have abided alone without a people or a bride.⁴² The pleasure was not found in the suffering, but in all that such suffering would accomplish: God would be revealed in a glory yet unknown to men or angels, and a people would be brought into unhindered fellowship with their God.

In one of the most epic stories in the Old Testament, the patriarch Abraham is commanded to carry his son Isaac to Mount Moriah, and there, to offer him as a sacrifice to God.

"Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you."⁴³

What a burden was laid upon Abraham! We cannot even begin to imagine the sadness that filled the old man's heart and tortured him every step of his journey. The Scriptures are careful to tell us that he was commanded to offer "his son, his only son, whom he loved." The specificity seems designed to catch our attention and make us think that there is more meaning hidden in these words than we can yet tell.

On the third day, the two reached the appointed place, and the father himself bound his beloved son with his own hand. Finally, in submission to what must be done, he laid his hand upon his son's brow and "took the knife to slay him."⁴⁴ At that very moment, the mercy and grace of God interposed, and the old man's hand was stayed. God called out to him from heaven and said:

"Abraham, Abraham! ...Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me."⁴⁵

At the voice of the Lord, Abraham raised his eyes, and found a ram caught in the thicket by his horns. He took the ram and offered him up in the place of his son.⁴⁶ He then named that place YHWH-jireh or "The Lord will provide." It is a faithful saying that remains until this day, "In the mount of the Lord it will be provided."⁴⁷ As the curtains draw to a close on this epic moment in history, not only Abraham, but also everyone who has ever read this account breathes a sigh of relief that the boy is spared. We think to ourselves what a beautiful end to the story, but it was not the end, it was a mere intermission!

Two thousand years later, the curtain opens again. The background is dark and ominous. At center stage is the Son of God on Mount Calvary. He is bound by obedience to the will of His Father. He hangs there bearing the sin of His people.

He is accursed - betrayed by His creation⁴⁸ and forsaken of God. Then, the silence is broken with the horrifying thunder of God's wrath. The Father takes the knife, draws back His arm, and slays "His Son, His only Son, whom He loves." And the words of Isaiah the prophet are fulfilled:

"Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed... But the Lord was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief."⁴⁹

The curtain is drawn to a close on a slain Son and a crucified Messiah. Unlike Isaac there was no ram to die in His place. He was the Lamb who would die for the sins of the world.⁵⁰ He is God's provision for the redemption of His people. He is the fulfillment of which Isaac and the ram were only shadows. In Him, Mount Calvary is renamed "YHWH-jireh" or "The Lord will provide." And it is a faithful saying that remains until this day, "In the mount of the Lord it will be provided."⁵¹ Calvary was the mount and salvation was provided. Thus, the discerning believer cries out, "God, God, I know you love me since you have not withheld your Son, your only Son, whom You love, from me."⁵²

It is an injustice to Calvary that the true pain of the Cross is often overlooked by a more romantic, but less powerful theme. It is often thought and even preached that the Father looked down from heaven and witnessed the suffering that was heaped upon His Son by the hands of men, and that He counted such affliction as payment for our sins. This is heresy of the worst kind. Christ satisfied divine justice not merely by enduring the affliction of men, but by enduring and dying under the wrath of God. It takes more than crosses, nails, crowns of thorns, and lances, to pay for sin. The believer is saved, not merely because of what men did to Christ on the Cross, but because of what God did to Him - He crushed Him under the full force of His wrath against us. Rarely is this truth made clear enough in the abundance of all our Gospel preaching!

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