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THE CROSS – DEFEAT OR TRIUMPH?

Introduction

What appears to be can be very different from reality because realities in God's kingdom are often not obvious, even to believers. They are not visible to the physical eye nor felt by our other senses. Besides, the realities in God's kingdom are also very different from the aspirations, perceptions and perspective of the fallen world, and admittedly, the fallen world has a very strong influence on us.

While there are many subjects we can dwell upon to aid us in our Christian journey, none is more helpful than contemplation on the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, His being, the circumstances surrounding His birth, His life, His conduct, His teaching and His approach to various issues of life. The fact that His life and teaching are full of paradoxes makes it all the more interesting and enriching. Engaging in a careful study on His life and ministry will certainly yield immeasurable benefits for our own spiritual life. This we had sought to do in the preceding messages AR118 to 172.

We now want to go on to consider the most important and significant aspect of the life and accomplishment of the Lord Jesus Christ: His death on the Cross. This is the first in a series of reflections on the death of the Lord Jesus Christ, the circumstances surrounding His death and the major issues that flow forth from it.

When Christ died on the cross, all appeared lost, but in reality it is the crowning event in His life. It is also the pivotal, most important and crucial event in the history of mankind and in the fulfilment of God's purposes. Upon it hinges the primary issues pertaining to the most important aspects of life and the salvation and well-being of man. It opens up the way for:

- the reconciliation between God and man, the forgiveness of sins
- the path of freedom from bondage to sin and the evil one
- progress in moral and spiritual development in the direction of the highest level and quality
- deep fellowship with God and amongst the brethren
- a life of fruitfulness and full participation in the fulfilment of God's purposes.

It seems to me fitting to conclude our consideration of the Lord Jesus Christ and the whole series of messages on Appearance and Reality by reflecting on the death of Christ.

A careful consideration of the death of the Lord Jesus Christ would involve much doctrinal content, deep truths and profound spiritual realities. There are significant and far-reaching implications that are difficult to fathom. As such, our understanding and appreciation of this subject can at best be limited. It is therefore with a degree of hesitation and a sense of inadequacy that I am considering this important and profound subject with you. Let us look to the Lord to help us appreciate and understand as much as we can, and grant us true insight. We should guard against merely accumulating ideas and concepts. Scriptural passages on the death of the Lord Jesus Christ are very familiar to believers. This sense of familiarity can hinder us from plumbing the deep truths that can be found in them.

At this point in time, let us try to view the event of His death from the standpoint of those who were present at the scene, looking at it through the eyes of the onlookers and His disciples.

A Pathetic Picture

The first passage we will look at is Mark 15:1-37.

Mark 15:1-37

1 Early in the morning the chief priests with the elders and scribes and the whole Council, immediately held a consultation; and binding Jesus, they led Him away and delivered Him to Pilate.

2 Pilate questioned Him, "Are You the King of the Jews?" And He answered him, "It is as you say."

3 The chief priests began to accuse Him harshly.

4 Then Pilate questioned Him again, saying, "Do You not answer? See how many charges they bring against You!"

5 But Jesus made no further answer; so Pilate was amazed.

6 Now at the feast he used to release for them any one prisoner whom they requested.

7 The man named Barabbas had been imprisoned with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the insurrection.

8 The crowd went up and began asking him to do as he had been accustomed to do for them.

9 Pilate answered them, saying, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?"

10 For he was aware that the chief priests had handed Him over because of envy.

11 But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to ask him to release Barabbas for them instead.

12 Answering again, Pilate said to them, "Then what shall I do with Him whom you call the King of the Jews?"

13 They shouted back, "Crucify Him!"

14 But Pilate said to them, "Why, what evil has He done?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify Him!"

15 Wishing to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas for them, and after having Jesus scourged, he handed Him over to be crucified.

16 The soldiers took Him away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium), and they called together the whole Roman cohort.

17 They dressed Him up in purple, and after twisting a crown of thorns, they put it on Him;

18 and they began to acclaim Him, "Hail, King of the Jews!"

19 They kept beating His head with a reed, and spitting on Him, and kneeling and bowing before Him.

20 After they had mocked Him, they took the purple robe off Him and put His own garments on Him. And they led Him out to crucify Him.

21 They pressed into service a passer-by coming from the country, Simon of Cyrene (the father of Alexander and Rufus), to bear His cross.

22 Then they brought Him to the place Golgotha, which is translated, Place of a Skull.

23 They tried to give Him wine mixed with myrrh; but He did not take it.

24 And they crucified Him, and divided up His garments among themselves, casting lots for them to decide what each man should take.

25 It was the third hour when they crucified Him.

26 The inscription of the charge against Him read, "THE KING OF THE JEWS."

27 They crucified two robbers with Him, one on His right and one on His left.

28 [And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "And He was numbered with transgressors."]

29 Those passing by were hurling abuse at Him, wagging their heads, and saying, "Ha! You who are going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days,

30 save Yourself, and come down from the cross!"

31 In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes, were mocking Him among themselves and saying, "He saved others; He cannot save Himself.

32 "Let this Christ, the King of Israel, now come down from the cross, so that we may see and believe!" Those who were crucified with Him were also insulting Him.

33 When the sixth hour came, darkness fell over the whole land until the ninth hour.

34 At the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" which is translated, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"

35 When some of the bystanders heard it, they began saying, "Behold, He is calling for Elijah."

36 Someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a reed, and gave Him a drink, saying, "Let us see whether Elijah will come to take Him down."

37 And Jesus uttered a loud cry, and breathed His last.

From the angle of those who witnessed His death, the picture was pathetic, one of abject failure. There was nothing much to show at the end of the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus. His followers deserted Him and fled; and like a lamb led to the slaughter, He was abused, mocked at, spat on, scourged and finally He died the most painful, humiliating and agonising death, being crucified on the cross. And even while He hung on the cross, the abuse and the mocking continued unabated and He appeared a picture of one who was weak and helpless.

A question that could easily come to the minds of people would be, "How could this be the conclusion of the life and ministry of the Son of God and one who claimed to be the Saviour of mankind?"

Little wonder then that the apostle Paul noted that the preaching of Christ crucified is to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles, foolishness. The Jews were looking forward to the coming Messiah, the One promised by God to be a deliverer and here He was dying such a terrible and humiliating death on the cross. To proclaim this Jesus who died such a pathetic death as the Christ, the One specially anointed by God to be the Saviour of the world, is sheer foolishness to the Gentiles.

Before the Jewish Supreme Court

There are several other issues we can ponder over. Consider the issue of justice. Justice seemed to be nowhere in sight because here was the purest, the noblest life that ever lived. He is the sinless One. The Scriptures records that He was "tempted in all things yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15) and that He "knew no sin" (2 Cor. 5:21). And yet the Lord Jesus, the sinless One, was crucified as a criminal next to two other criminals. To add to the irony, He was crucified after having appeared before and been condemned by the Jewish Supreme Court, the Sanhedrin, a gathering of the rulers and religious leaders of God's chosen people! These people were the ones who had the laws of God; and the Sanhedrin was supposed to be administering God's law. If one were to expect justice, surely this would be the place to find it.

Mark 14: 53, 55 and 56 tell us about Jesus before the Sanhedrin:

Mark 14:53, 55, 56

53 They led Jesus away to the high priest; and all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes gathered together.

55 Now the chief priests and the whole Council (*in the margin "the Sanhedrin"*) kept trying to obtain testimony against Jesus to put Him to death, and they were not finding any.

56 For many were giving false testimony against Him, but their testimony was not consistent.

The Sanhedrin made desperate attempts to find some grounds to charge the Lord Jesus and put Him to death. Though many people were called to give false testimony

against Him, none of the testimony could be used in convicting Him as they were inconsistent.

They then questioned Him about His claim to be the Christ.

Mark 14:61-64

61 But He kept silent and did not answer. Again the high priest was questioning Him, and saying to Him, "Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?"

62 And Jesus said, "I am; and you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven."

63 Tearing his clothes, the high priest said, "What further need do we have of witnesses?"

64 "You have heard the blasphemy; how does it seem to you?" And they all condemned Him to be deserving of death.

When questioned, "Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?" the Lord Jesus answered, "I am; and you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven." At this, they all condemned Him to be deserving of death. For what did they condemn Him? For blasphemy. But in reality, He was testifying to the truth. The Jewish supreme court condemned the righteous Son of God to death for testifying to the truth!

After having condemned Him, they presented Him before the Roman governor Pilate.

Before Pilate, the Roman Governor

Pilate was aware that it was out of envy that the chief priests wanted the Lord Jesus dead. (Mark 15:9, 10). He preferred to release Him because he felt that the Lord Jesus had not done anything deserving of death. When the crowd under the instigation of the chief priests shouted, "Crucify Him!", Pilate asked them, "Why, what evil has He done?" (Mark 15:13)

A parallel passage in Luke 23:13-15 reads:

Luke 23:13-15

13 Pilate summoned the chief priests and the rulers and the people,

14 and said to them, "You brought this man to me as one who incites the people to rebellion, and behold, having examined Him before you, I have found no guilt in this man regarding the charges which you make against Him.

15 "No, nor has Herod, for he sent Him back to us; and behold, nothing deserving death has been done by Him.

Having examined the Lord Jesus, Pilate found no guilt in Him regarding the charges that were levied against Him. This was the pronouncement from Pilate's own lips.

Yet, wishing to satisfy the multitude, he had the Lord Jesus scourged and delivered to be crucified (Mark 15:15).

In the history of mankind, Rome was noted for its laws, the due process of law and justice. And yet here was the Lord Jesus before the Roman governor Pilate, who though finding the Lord Jesus not guilty of death, yielded to the clamouring of the multitude and delivered the Lord Jesus to be crucified. What travesty of justice we see before our eyes!

Beyond all these, the Lord Jesus had Himself declared that God the Father has given all judgement to the Son (John 5:22) and has given Him authority to execute judgement (John 5:27). And yet, in this instance, the Lord Jesus, the judge of all the earth was being judged and delivered over to be crucified!

We may wonder where was justice and how could there be hope for justice when such gross injustice was inflicted not only on someone who was innocent, but on someone totally sinless and the judge of all the earth! If the judge of all the earth did not receive justice, what hope do we have?

Others may wonder, "Could He be the judge of all the earth if He Himself suffered such gross injustice? Could He indeed be the righteous Son of God He claims to be?"

The Darkest Hour

The circumstances surrounding the death of the Lord Jesus may appear to be the darkest hour of human history. In a sense, it is true. In the crucifixion, we witness not only the greatest injustice done to man, but also the most terrible sin and evil being manifested against the Son of God who had come to save all men. Beyond the issue of injustice perpetrated by the Jewish supreme court and condoned by Pilate who represented Roman justice, we can say that the crucifixion of the sinless Saviour of mankind is the climax, the most terrible manifestation and consequence of evil and darkness in the heart of man.

It would appear that not only was there triumph of evil at the human level, but also the greatest triumph of evil in the spiritual realm, that is, the triumph of Satan and the powers of darkness. They were clearly at work, stirring up and promoting evil. Satan, the adversary, is always actively at work, opposing and seeking to frustrate the fulfilment of God's purposes.

In the early history of mankind, there was the prophecy about the enmity between the woman and the serpent, between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman (Gen. 3:15). The words of the Lord to the serpent, "He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel" have been generally regarded as prophetic of what would take place at the cross.

Clearly the powers of darkness were actively stirring up the people against the Lord Jesus. In John 13:27, we see Satan himself working through Judas in an unusually powerful way, that is, Satan entered him. This was a gross manifestation of man in bondage to sin and the powers of darkness.

The evil one and the powers of darkness appeared to have triumphed over the Son of God, the Messiah sent by God. In His death, the Lord Jesus appeared to be a helpless victim of sin and the power of sin, the victim of Satan and the powers of darkness.

Even the whole land was covered with darkness. Mark 15:33 tells us that "When the sixth hour came, darkness fell over the whole land until the ninth hour." It is clear from the context that the darkness was unusual. It was a darkness that had significance in the spiritual realm and had a bearing on what was taking place.

As we contemplate on what appeared to be the darkest hour in human history, bear in mind that the Lord Jesus had declared again and again, "I am the Light of the world," for example in John 8:12 and John 9:5 Likewise in John 12:46, the Lord Jesus had said, "I have come as Light into the world." The apostle John had also testified of the Lord Jesus as the true Light which, coming into the world, "enlightens every man" (John 1:9).

Bearing in mind these words of the Lord Jesus, the thoughts that may come to the minds of those present could be, "How can it be that the Lord of all be overcome by Satan and the powers of darkness? How can the True Light be overcome by darkness?" The True Light, the Light of the world, appeared to have been snuffed out by the powerful darkness!

Forsaken by God the Father?

Beyond all these, even more striking, is the fact that God the Father appeared to have forsaken the Lord Jesus at the moment of His greatest need:

Mark 15:34

At the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" which is translated, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"

The Lord Jesus cried out in anguish. This appears to be a cry of desperation, despair, helplessness and hopelessness. Even God the Father did not seem to be present at the scene and did not seem to care. Do we at times feel this way? Prayerfully pondering over what took place at the cross and what the Lord Jesus went through can help us go through such times meaningfully.

What took place may give rise to the questions, "Did God the Father forsake His only begotten Son whom He had declared He was well-pleased with when John the Baptist

baptised the Lord Jesus (Matt. 3:17)? How could it be? (And yet the words of the Lord Jesus in Mark 15:34 seem to indicate that.) What do these words of the Lord Jesus mean? How could God the Father allow His only begotten Son to die such a death?"

Did not the Lord Jesus testify that He was always doing what was pleasing to God the Father (John 8:29)? All that was happening then would have seemed so incongruous to His disciples. Do we go through situations of life that do not seem to fit our understanding of who God is and what ought to be in our walk with God? Knowing the disciples ought to persevere in their faith even though they were perplexed drives home the point that we need to respond in like manner.

The Hope of the Disciples of the Lord Jesus Crushed

To the Lord's disciples, His death might have appeared to be a crushing of their hopes for they had pinned their hopes on Him as the promised Messiah, the coming King and the Deliverer of Israel. Luke 24:15-21 give a record of two disciples of the Lord who seemed to be expressing such a sentiment. And they were expressing that sentiment to the risen Lord whom they did not recognise at that moment in time!

In verse 15, we see the Lord Jesus Himself approached and travelled with them. And the Lord Jesus asked them, "What are these words that you are exchanging with one another as you are walking?" They stood still, looking sad (v.17). To these two disciples, what took place at the cross was not something they could rejoice in but something that saddened their hearts. Here was the exchange that followed:

Luke 24:18-21

18 One of them, named Cleopas, answered and said to Him, "Are You the only one visiting Jerusalem and unaware of the things which have happened here in these days?"

19 And He said to them, "What things?" And they said to Him, "The things about Jesus the Nazarene, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word in the sight the people,

20 and how the chief priests and our rulers delivered Him to the sentence of death, and crucified Him.

21 "But we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel."

In verse 18, Cleopas, one of the two disciples, in response to the question of the Lord Jesus, remarked, "Are You the only one visiting Jerusalem and unaware of the things which have happened here in these days?" Mark the irony of the question. He was speaking to the risen Lord, the only one who truly understood all that had taken place. None of the others really understood the meaning and true implications of His death on the cross.

These two disciples had a certain degree of knowledge of the Lord Jesus and faith in Him as the mighty Prophet promised by God in the Old Testament (v. 19). They were looking forward to the coming of this Messiah. In their own words, they said, "But we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel." "We were hoping!" - this expresses the sentiment that their hopes were dashed when they witnessed the Lord being crucified in such a dreadful way. Like them, many of the people of Israel were looking forward to the coming Messiah to redeem the nation.

The Promised Messiah

Several passages in the Old Testament prophesied the coming of the Messiah. Let us look at two such passages, one in Micah and the other in Zechariah.

Micah 5:2, 4

2"But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
Too little to be among the clans of Judah,
From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel.
His goings forth are from long ago,
From the days of eternity."
4 And He will arise and shepherd His flock
In the strength of the Lord,
In the majesty of the name of the Lord His God.
And they will remain,
Because at that time He will be great
To the ends of the earth.
This One will be our peace."

This passage from Micah tells us that there will come forth from Bethlehem one who will be a ruler in Israel. He will not be an ordinary king. The statement, "His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity" (v. 2), is an indication of His divinity.

Micah further tells us that He will be a mighty deliverer, that He will "shepherd His flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord His God..." (v. 4).

Under His reign, Israel "will remain". In the NASB margin, we see the word "remain" can also be translated as "live in safety". So Israel could look forward to this mighty deliverer, the King of Israel promised by God, and they could dwell in safety because He would be great to the ends of the earth. He would be their peace, their well-being. He would be a King not just of Israel, but His dominion would stretch to the ends of the earth. A similar prophecy is also recorded in Zechariah.

Zechariah 9:9, 10

9 Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout in triumph, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Behold, your king is coming to you;
He is just and endowed with salvation,
Humble, and mounted on a donkey,
Even on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
10 I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim
And the horse from Jerusalem;
And the bow of war will be cut off.
And He will speak peace to the nations;
And His dominion will be from sea to sea,
And from the River to the ends of the earth.

This prophecy is addressed to Israel: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! O daughter of Jerusalem!" It describes the coming King as one who is "just and endowed with salvation". In the NASB margin, it is indicated that this phrase can also be rendered "vindicated and victorious", that is, He is a victorious King, the Deliverer and Saviour of Israel. And His power extends to the ends of the earth (v. 10).

The Lord Jesus Himself also affirmed that indeed He had come as the King of Israel. We read this in Mark 15:2 and John 18:37.

Mark 15:2

Pilate questioned Him, "Are You the King of the Jews?" And He answered him, "It is as you say."

John 18:37

Therefore Pilate said to Him, "So You are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say correctly that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world.

When questioned by Pilate about His claim to kingship, the Lord Jesus acknowledged, "Yes, I am the King of the Jews" and "You say correctly I am a king."

If the coming of the Lord Jesus is the fulfilment of the prophecies in Micah 5 and Zechariah 9, how could He then, the victorious coming King of Israel, the Deliverer whose dominion is to extend to the ends of the earth, be crucified, hanging there dead on the cross? The irony of it all was that not only did Israel remain under Roman rule but the Lord Jesus Himself died under the authority of the Roman governor Pilate!

The King of the Jews Mocked

With this background, we can better understand why the soldiers in the Praetorium (the palace or court) taunted and mocked Him. With a touch of sarcasm, they dressed Him up as royalty, placed a crown (a crown of thorns!) on His head, and feigned obeisance to Him, kneeling and bowing before Him, even as they kept beating His head with a reed and spitting at Him. We read this in Mark 15:17-19.

Mark 15:17-19

17 They dressed Him up in purple, and after twisting a crown of thorns, they put it on Him;

18 and they began to acclaim Him, "Hail, King of the Jews!"

19 They kept beating His head with a reed, and spitting on Him, and kneeling and bowing before Him.

On the cross there was an inscription of the charge against Him that read, "THE KING OF THE JEWS" (Mark 15:26). It was meant to be a mockery of His claim.

To the onlookers, it seemed so ridiculous. They would be wondering, "How could it be that He who claimed to be the Saviour of mankind could not even save Himself? He appeared so helpless and weak." We read this in Mark 15:29-31.

Mark 15:29-31

29 Those passing by were hurling abuse at Him, wagging their heads, and saying, "Ha! You who are going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days,

30 save Yourself, and come down from the cross!"

31 In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes, were mocking Him among themselves and saying, "He saved others; He cannot save Himself."

The people who hurled abuse at Him, including the chief priests and the scribes, were in effect saying that, since He could not even save Himself, He could not be the Messiah, the Saviour. However, the truth of the matter is that it is precisely because the Lord Jesus is the Saviour of mankind that He had to be crucified on the cross and could not come down from it and save Himself. Our hearts are filled with gratitude to the Lord that He did not.

In Galatians 3:13, the apostle Paul quoted Deuteronomy 21:23: "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree." In the NASB margin of Galatians 3:13, it is mentioned that the word "tree", or literally "wood", can be a reference to the cross. The chief priests and the scribes, who were teachers of the Scriptures, would likely have understood Deuteronomy 21:23 in that sense. To them, how could the One hanging on the cross be someone whom God was pleased with since He was cursed of God? That was why they mocked and insulted Him.

Mark 15:32

"Let this Christ, the King of Israel, now come down from the cross, so that we may see and believe!" Those who were crucified with Him were also insulting Him.

Matthew 27:43 reveals further the line of thinking of the Jews:

Matthew 27:43

"He trusts in God; let God rescue Him now, if He delights in Him; for He said, 'I am the Son of God.'"

To their minds, if the Lord Jesus was indeed the Son of God in whom God the Father was well-pleased, surely the Father would deliver Him and not allow Him to die such a death. Yet God did not seem to be delivering Him. Their conclusion, which to them would seem a reasonable one, was that He could not be the Son of God whom He claimed to be.

Christ Crucified, a Stumbling Block to Jews

The failure of the Jews to understand the meaning and significance of the Cross prompted the apostle Paul to say in 1 Corinthians 1:23 that "we preach *Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block* and to Gentiles foolishness." The Jews could not overcome the hurdle that someone who claimed to be the Messiah could be so weak and come to such a dismal end. Ponder over the words "Christ crucified". These two words seemed to be an anomaly because the word "Christ" means the Messiah, the Deliverer, the Saviour, the Anointed One and "Christ crucified" seems a contradiction in terms. How could the Christ be crucified? And yet Christ was crucified!

As the Lord Jesus Christ hung there on the cross, it would appear to be the ultimate triumph of death. The whole scene smelt of death. Death, evil, sin and darkness. Where was truth, light, goodness, love, righteousness, justice and life? They all seemed absent. Death seemed to pervade the atmosphere, and the One who claimed to be the Way, the Truth and the Life (John 14:6) appeared to have been vanquished.

John the apostle had also testified, "In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men." (John 1:4). He is the source of life, eternal life (1 John 5:11,12). If death triumphed even over Him, did it not seem that death was the ultimate victor? How could death be overcome if the Lord Jesus was Himself overcome by death?

In Reality, the Greatest Triumph

We have tried to identify with those who were present at the crucifixion, who did not have the advantage of hindsight and the Scriptures as we have it today, and who

were not appreciating the death of the Lord Jesus from a Christian perspective - what could have been in their minds as they witnessed the scene at the Cross.

We can say that the death of Christ and the surrounding circumstances speak most powerfully that appearance can be very different from reality.

What was the reality? The Scriptures clearly teaches us that the death of Christ was in reality the climax of the fulfilment of His mission on earth and the climax of a fruitful ministry of the perfect Teacher and Preacher. He had a definite purpose in coming to this earth and His death was the climax, resulting in the most important accomplishments in the spiritual realm. His death was the greatest triumph of good over evil, not just for that moment but also with far-reaching and continuous implications in the lives of men.

This is the reason why I mentioned at the beginning of the message that the Cross is the pivotal, most important and crucial event in the fulfilment of God's purposes. On the basis of the Cross, many fundamental issues pertaining to the fulfilment of God's purposes flow forth. These are issues that we shall reflect on in subsequent messages.

The Lord's View of the Crucifixion

Let us turn to John 12 to appreciate the Lord Jesus' view of the crucifixion. He had told His disciples repeatedly about His impending death.

John 12:23-27

23 And Jesus answered them, saying, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified."

24 "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

25 "He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal."

26 "If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also; if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him."

27 "Now My soul has become troubled; and what shall I say, 'Father, save Me from this hour'? But for this purpose I came to this hour."

In verse 23, the Lord Jesus said that the hour had come for Him to be glorified. On the one hand the crucifixion was terrible suffering and humiliation; yet it was also a time when He was being glorified. The resurrection, the ascension and even the outpouring of the Holy Spirit were all vitally linked to the death of the Lord Jesus, for it was His death that led to all these glorious events.

In verse 24, the Lord Jesus spoke of a grain of wheat that falls into the earth and dies, bearing much fruit. This is a reference to His death on the cross and how it will

result in much fruitfulness. In verses 25 and 26, He invites us to join Him in embracing that kind of spirit and attitude: to live by the principle of the Cross.

The Lord carried on in verse 27, indicating that what would take place at the cross would be a very difficult and agonizing time for Him. He said, "My soul has become troubled." It is not possible for us to fully comprehend and identify with the magnitude and the intensity of His sufferings on the cross. If it were possible, He would rather not go through it (Matt. 26:39), that is, if there were any other suitable alternative. But He knew that the Cross was imperative for the fulfilment of God's purposes. On this point, He said, "For this purpose I came to this hour", meaning that the Cross was the primary purpose for His coming to this earth.

We can say then that the primary purpose of the Lord Jesus in coming to this earth was to die on the cross - not merely to preach, to teach and to testify to the truth - though these aspects of His ministry were important. The purposes of God could not be fulfilled without the death of Christ on the cross.

The Apostle Peter's Proclamation

Hear the words of the apostle Peter soon after the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost:

Acts 2:22, 23

22 "Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know -

23 this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death.

The apostle Peter knew that many did not appreciate the meaning and implications of what took place at the cross, just as he himself and the other disciples could not quite appreciate them at the time when the event occurred. But now Peter understood, and, filled with the Spirit, he was preaching the truth to the hearers who were primarily the people of Israel.

The apostle Peter proclaimed that the Lord Jesus was specially chosen and attested by God with miracles, signs and wonders and yet godless people nailed him to the cross. What they had done to Him was evil and they were responsible for His death. However, at a higher level, there was the sovereignty of God at work when Christ was delivered up.

The apostle Peter emphasised that the Lord Jesus was delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God. It was not that God's plan had gone wrong. On the contrary, the death of the Lord Jesus on the cross was at the heart of God's plan. It was God's intention from the beginning, for it fulfilled a vital purpose.

The Apostle Paul's Declaration

The death of the Lord Jesus is so central to the fulfilment of God's purposes and is such a glorious triumph and has such far-reaching and wide-ranging implications for every aspect of life that the apostle Paul declared in 1 Corinthians 2:2, "For I determined to know nothing among you *except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.*" These are very rich words worth pondering over. "Christ crucified", which was a stumbling block to Jews, became very much a mainstay in the apostle Paul's vocabulary.

At first sight it may seem difficult to understand why the apostle said these words in 1 Corinthians 2:2. Surely he had taught the Christians many important things. Besides teaching them about church life, body life and the purposes of God, he also taught them how they should live their lives, honour God, turn away from sin and live a life of holiness. Why then did he seem to limit the scope to "Jesus Christ, and Him crucified"?

There is in reality no inconsistency between what he said and what he did. All that the apostle Paul wanted to help them understand and enter into are centred on the Lord Jesus Christ. At the heart of it all was the death of the Lord Jesus - the Cross - and what was accomplished there. That was the critical issue and it was on that basis that all else flowed forth and could be worked out.

The Cross has implications for every aspect of our lives. It is the basis on which we live out our lives everyday and every moment. It is on the basis of our union with the Lord Jesus and what He has accomplished on the cross that we can now, in Him and through Him, be overcomers instead of being overcome.

The apostle Paul spoke further on this truth in the book of Galatians.

Galatians 6:14

But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ...

These are strong words, but there is no exaggeration in them. The apostle Paul says that if there is anything to boast about, it is not in any other thing except the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Cross may seem such a terrible thing but the apostle Paul says that this is something to boast about, to glory in, to exalt over because, contrary to what it appears to be, it is in reality the greatest triumph, a triumph over the powers of darkness, a triumph of good over evil and it lays the foundational basis for the accomplishment of God's purposes.

We can say that the Cross and the implications following forth from the Cross is a central theme of the Scriptures.

The Cross in the Old Testament – The Perfect Sacrifice

In many different ways, even the Old Testament points to the Cross. For example, the Cross is prefigured in the Old Testament system of sacrifice, a major aspect of the lives of the Israelites. Of it, the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 5:7 says, "Christ our Passover has been sacrificed." The Passover is a very important part of the Old Testament sacrificial system and a very important event in the lives of the Israelites. During this event, a very central aspect is the sacrifice of the lamb and participation in fellowship in eating, after sacrificing the lamb. When the apostle Paul says "Christ our Passover", he is saying that Christ is the Passover lamb and His death on the cross is the sacrifice that is the fulfilment of the Old Testament observance of the Passover.

Hebrews 10 can help us to appreciate the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament and what took place at the cross. The focus of this chapter is on the death of the Lord Jesus and the Old Testament sacrificial system.

Hebrews 10:1-4

- 1 For the Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, can never, by the same sacrifices which they offer continually year by year, make perfect those who draw near.
- 2 Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins?
- 3 But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins year by year.
- 4 For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

In verse 1, the writer to the Hebrews refers to the Law as a "shadow of the good things to come". This means that the Law, the sacrificial system and many other practices in the Old Testament were only a shadow, yet a shadow of something positive that is to come, as the term "good things" suggests.

Verse 4 tells us that it is not possible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. It is only a shadow - not the very form of things that can take away our sins. Without the coming of the Lord Jesus, the shedding of the blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sins. The Israelites could be forgiven only because of the anticipation of the coming Messiah who was going to die for the sins of the whole world. The blood of bulls and goats that was shed was only a picture, a shadow of the substance that was yet to come as Paul tells us in Colossians - the substance belongs to Christ or is fulfilled in Christ (Col. 2:17).

Hebrews 10:5-8

- 5 Therefore, when He comes into the world, He says, "Sacrifice and offering You have not desired, But a body You have prepared for Me;
- 6 In whole burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin You have taken no pleasure.

7 "Then I said, 'Behold, I have come (In the scroll of the book it is written of Me) To do Your will, O God.'"

8 After saying above, "Sacrifices and offerings and whole burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin You have not desired, nor have You taken pleasure in them" (which are offered according to the Law),

Verses 5 and 6 tell us that God does not desire sacrifice and burnt offering. This does not seem to tally with what we read in the Old Testament. Surely the offerings in the Old Testament were commanded by God. How then can we explain this apparent contradiction?

From time to time the Scriptures communicates in this form when comparing two things - one that has much lesser significance with one that has much more, one that God really desires. Sacrifice and offering were not contrary to the will of God as verse 8 tells us, for they were "offered according to the Law". But ultimately, God does not truly desire them for they could not fulfil God's purpose. They had a proper place in the Old Testament times but they were only a shadow. The substance had yet to come. The true fulfilment of what the sacrifice and offering prefigure is in the offering up of the body of the Lord Jesus as a sacrifice for us as we read in verses 9 and 10:

Hebrews 10:9, 10

9 then He said, "Behold, I have come to do Your will." He takes away the first in order to establish the second.

10 By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

These two verses tell us that the Lord Jesus came to fulfil the will of God the Father and that was accomplished through the offering of His body as the true sacrifice once for all. Verse 14 of the same chapter states that by that one offering, "He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified."

Concluding Remarks

We can therefore say that the Cross and the surrounding circumstances of the cross offer the most striking, profound and helpful illustrations of the contrast between appearance and reality. There is much that we can learn for our own lives, the way we view things, how we go through situations and what we must be prepared to go through in our walk with God as we fix our eyes on the Lord Jesus, our perfect example. There is much that we need to ponder over for our own lives as we meditate on what our Lord has gone through, culminating at the cross.

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