



PERSON OF CHRIST

LESSON 7

THE WORK OF CHRIST

The teaching of the New Testament states emphatically, and repeatedly, that the work of Christ is a work of God upon the greatest and grandest scale. This work is called the Atonement, (literally, at-one-ment) and points to a process of bringing those who are estranged into a unity. The Atonement is the doctrine of how man, separated from God by his sin, ineffectual in his own efforts to be "at one" with God, can be brought into acceptable relationship with him. When he comes into this relationship, his fellowship with God is real and satisfying and he is able to fulfil his divine destiny. This he is able to do both as an individual, and as a member of the community to which he belongs. Man is redeemed in order that he know the power and love of God in his inner life, and in all his complex relationships with men. This is the impressive witness of the New Testament.

The Atonement has two aspects to it: man's need and God's provision. The need for atonement is brought about by three things:

1. Sin is universal (1 Kings 8:46; Romans 3:23)
2. The seriousness of sin (Hab. 1:13)
3. Man's inability to deal with sin (Romans 3:20; Gal. 2:16)

If he must depend on himself, then man will never be saved. The second aspect of the Atonement is that God reaches out with his love toward sinful man. The Atonement shows us the love of the Father just as it does the love of the Son. It is not something wrung from a stern and wrathful Father by a loving Son. God loved, God sent, God gave. Paul emphasises this when he declares, "but God shows His love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us"(Romans 5:8) John 3:16 emphasises, "For God so loved, he gave", and the synoptic writers emphasise that the Son of Man **MUST** suffer and die (Mark 8:31 etc.).

The doctrine of the Atonement centres on the cross. The cross was not a sudden or belated decision by God to reach out to man, but as Dr Vincent Taylor reminds us, "to the mind of God the meaning of the cross is eternal, and what happened on Calvary was the emergence upon the plain of history of his timeless activity." (*The Atonement in New Testament Thought* page 92).

The cross, which had been a symbol of shame, became a symbol of supreme love and victory; that which seemed to represent defeat was transformed into glorious triumph. The cross was the central theme in the preaching of the apostles. The pattern of preaching, as we see again and again in Acts, climaxed with the pronouncement of the cross, even with the subsequent resurrection. Later, when the documents we call our New Testament came into being, the theme, though expressed in different ways, remained central. These different views of the Atonement complement one another and enrich this great doctrine of the work of Christ.

THE CROSS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The major block of material in each of the four gospels relates to the passion of Jesus. Nearly one third of each Gospel concentrates on the last week of his life, his death and his resurrection. He saw his vocation as the suffering servant (Isaiah 53) and expressed this in various ways. One such



example is Mark 10:45. "For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Jerusalem would be the place where this would happen, (Mark 10:32). He spoke of his death as a sacrifice, a ransom, a self-giving, and at the last supper indicated the broken bread and said, "this is my body" and the cup of wine and said "this is my blood" (Mark 14:22-24). Finally, the Cross was an historical fact and is firmly established as history, as expressed in the traditional words "He suffered under Pontius Pilate."

Paul the apostle saw the cross as the divine saving act and the central point of all Christian experience. His preaching was cross-centred. He had received from the Lord the message he now proclaimed: that Jesus had died and risen again, (1 Cor. 11:25). He preached that which he had received, "that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures." (1 Corinthians 15:3). Paul did not think it possible to understand the cross fully, except through experience, nor could Christian experience be understood apart from the cross.

The writer to the Hebrews declared that Christ made expiation for the sins of the people (Heb. 2:17). This was a work of God for man (Heb. 2:9). The sacrifice he made was "once for all", which replaced and discontinued the elaborate sacrificial system of the Old Testament. The temporary had been replaced by that which was permanent. Jesus had fulfilled and completed the old sacrificial system in one concluding, climactic act upon the cross. The old sacrifices were now superseded.

The writings of John are concerned with God's purposes as well as facts. He emphasises the purpose of love behind and in the cross event (John 3:16), and the parallel statement in 1 John 4:9, 10 emphasises this. Less quoted than John 3:16, the 1 John statement is the greater utterance, in that it presents the startling thought that the sacrificial act of the death of Christ is the deliberate expression of the love of God. In the light of both passages, any opposition between the Father and the Son in the ministry of redemption is seen to be entirely false to the spirit and teaching of the New Testament.

THE ATONEMENT

The question, "Why the cross?", needs to be asked and answered anew for each generation. There were certain reasons for the cross, which were related to an historic act, and certain others related to the revelation of the purpose of God in history.

The purpose of the cross was to restore fellowship between God and man, a fellowship which had been broken by the sin of man. Since man has estranged himself from God he cannot, by himself, by his religion, by his good works, regain his lost fellowship. It is only as God acts for man, that man has any hope of forgiveness and restoration. Man's sin cuts him off from God and also from his fellow man. The church began not with a great teacher, but a great Saviour, who came to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10). Calvary was Christ's offering of himself to God on behalf of sinful man.



Question 1:

Why, from man's side, was the Atonement necessary?

Question 2:

How do we know that the Atonement was an act of love from God, as well as from Jesus?

Question 3:

Why was the preaching of Jesus' death on the cross central to the message of the apostles, especially Paul? eg; 1 Corinthians 1:17, 18; Galatians 6:14-16; Ephesians 2:16; Colossians 1:20; 2:13, 14.

Question 4:

In the light of these lesson notes, and any other reading, comment on 1 John 4:9, 10.

Question 5:

This lesson has been the first on the "Work of Christ". How would you summarize and explain the Work of Christ in Hebrews 2:14-18?

QUESTION FOR GROUP STUDY:

"Christian experience cannot be isolated from the cross in either its beginning or continuation." What does this statement mean? Why is it true?