



## PERSON OF CHRIST

### THE WORK OF CHRIST

#### LESSON 8

#### THE MEANS ADOPTED FOR ATONEMENT

##### **1. The Cross: Fact**

The death of Christ by crucifixion was not startling or dramatic, but commonplace and unspeakably cruel. It was death by prolonged agony and sometimes a man would take days to die. The speed with which death came to Jesus was a surprise to his executioners, and they did not have to break his legs, as with the others crucified with Him. An inspection found the body was lifeless. The New Testament does not say much about the physical aspects of the crucifixion: it merely says "they crucified him." (Mark 15:24). It is the church and history which have given meaning to the method used for Jesus' death. However, to the curious, casual observer, another death, was crushing tragedy to those who had been healed, helped and forgiven. As the news of Jesus' death spread among his followers, gloom and despair took hold, and this was only dispelled at the resurrection. The fact of the cross was more than the cruel means of putting a criminal to death: it has deeper meanings for the Christian and the church, for it stands for that which is central in Christianity and which makes Christianity unique among the religions of the world.

There are many who ask, "Why did Jesus die?" The cross, though planned in eternity, was for Jesus a struggle, a point of crisis. "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want" (Matthew 26:39 NRSV).

The Old Testament metaphor of the cup is confined, in the Gospel, to the idea of pain; so it was then in the case of "this cup", with its contents of trembling and sorrow, the cup of wrath and death. "There was more than one dark potion in that bitter chalice of grief and pain, and we can still discern some trace of the mixture from which he was to drink. At the very bottom of the cup there was death, and worse by far than death by hemlock; it was death as sin's due, death in all its blackest features. It was death in its most awful reality, stark and naked as the final act of judgement which sin deserves. But close to the surface there were many other bitter acids which would float in that cup: the traitor kiss, the pagan scourge, the crown of thorns, the cross of shame. That cup was filled to its brim with the wrath of God against the sin of man. Must he drink it, dregs and all? Could it not pass from his lips?" (*The Man of Sorrows, Marcus Loane, pp 22, 23*).

At the cross the forces of life and death, light and darkness meet in mortal conflict. It is the basic, cosmic conflict between good and evil.

##### **2. The Deeper Meaning of the Cross**

The cross is meaningful because of the one who died upon it, for there is no merit in the wooden instrument of execution at all. The cross is meaningful because it stands in time as the symbol for the outpoured love of God for man. In all of history, no act has helped people understand God as the death of the Son of God on the cross. It represents the supreme act of self-giving, sacrificial love, the holy one for the unholy, the loving one for the unloving, the son of God for the frail, fallen sons of men, the Saviour for the sinner. The deep implications of the cross are seen throughout the New



Testament and Paul emphasises this when he says, "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God", (1 Corinthians 1:18f). The human view, without faith, does not and cannot understand. Faith is the key that unlocks the deep implications.

The cross represents the high level of Jesus' life in complete communion with the Father at two significant points.

1. It speaks of his complete obedience to the will of God, "he became obedient unto death, even death on a cross" Philippians 2:8. This is full self-surrender to God's eternal purpose of redemption, even though life itself must be given. The cross is the high symbol of life lived in total obedience.
2. The cross speaks of sacrificial love, and reminds us continually that man is sinful and that "God is love".
3. Related Ideas (There are three of these. One will be discussed here and the other 2 in Lesson 9)

#### a) **The Blood of Christ**

A study of the meaning of the cross can hardly be complete without a consideration of ideas related with that event. One such idea is expressed in the phrase, "blood of Christ" (Ephesians 2:13; Hebrews 9:14, 10:19; 1 Peter 1:19; Revelation 4:9, 7:14), and in many other related expressions. The accounts of the last supper bear clear witness to the fact that Jesus thought of his death as being the sacrificial act by which a covenant (the new covenant as foretold by Jeremiah 31:31-34), was ratified between God and the new Israel, the church. As the old covenant was ratified in the blood of the sacrificial animals on Sinai, so the new is ratified by the blood of Christ. The words of Jesus at the Last Supper, as recorded by Mark, are a clear reference to Exodus 24:8. Jesus took the cup of wine and declared, "This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many" (Mark 14:24). He was saying, in the typically allusive biblical fashion, that his death, now imminent, was the sacrificial act by which God was making a new covenant with a new people replacing the old, broken covenant of Sinai. According to Paul's account in (1 Corinthians 11:23f), he told his disciples whenever they should meet, (as in the past they had so often met in the fellowship of the disciples), to do this "in remembrance of him."

It is not surprising that Jesus should have regarded the shedding of his blood as a necessary condition for the making of the new covenant between God and man, which he understood to be the purpose of his own mission and work, as we have already seen, in the person of Christ. Jesus saw himself as the Messianic Son of Man of the Old Testament prophecy. He interpreted this, so far as his coming death was concerned, by means of the concept of the suffering servant of Isaiah. He thought of his death as the pouring out of his life as a sacrifice on behalf of the "many" (Mark 10:45, Isaiah 53:10f). The prophecy interprets the whole redemption, brought about by the servant, as a second deliverance and exodus from bondage in which the servant is a new Moses, who is given for the purpose of establishing a new covenant with the people of God.

Jesus steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51), with the deliberate intention of giving his body and pouring out his blood on behalf of "the covenant of the people". For more than nineteen centuries, the 'people of God', (which his death did in actual fact bring into being), has made solemn



remembrance of his atoning self-sacrifice. The name 'people of God', which had been distinctive of the ancient covenant-people of Israel (e.g. Hebrews 11:25), was now taken over by the Church of Jesus Christ, who had been given by God for 'a covenant of the people' (e.g. 1 Peter 2:10, Titus 2:14). The apostolic Church regarded Christ's death, as he himself regarded it, as the means whereby a new people of God are 'redeemed' or delivered from bondage to sin, just as in ancient times Israel had been ransomed' from Egyptian bondage; and thus, here is constituted again a people for God's own possession, the people of the new covenant (Acts 20:28; Ephesians 1:14; 1 Peter 2:10; Titus 2:14).

### **Question 1:**

What is "crucifixion"? Briefly summarise (in point form) the events of the crucifixion from the arrival at Golgotha to Jesus' death. (Matthew 27:33-50; Mark 15:22-37; Luke 23:33-46; John 19:17-30).

### **Question 2:**

What does "cup" mean in Isaiah 51:17? What does it mean in Matthew 26:39? Why did Jesus have to "drink" it?

### **Question 3:**

Give a brief resume of the events of the original Passover, especially explaining why blood had to be shed (Exodus 12:1-14).

### **Question 4:**

What is the connection between Jesus' blood and the events recorded by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:23-29? Why are Christians to follow this procedure?

### **Question 5:**

What is the connection between Mark 10:45 and Isaiah 53:10, 11? What have they both got to do with the Work of Christ?

### **QUESTION FOR GROUP STUDY**

These notes tell us that the cross speaks of "obedience" and "love". Explain both of these concepts for Jesus (e.g. Who was He obedient to and why? What was the cost? etc). What is your response to such obedience and love?