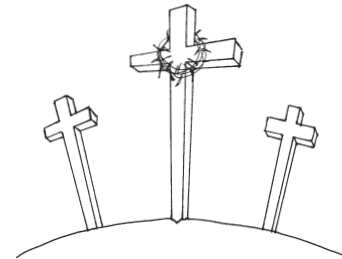


When Jesus Looked At The Cross



“Was it God’s intention from the beginning that Jesus should go to the Cross?” asked the popular British preacher Dr. Leslie Weatherhead (1893–1976). “I think the answer to that question must be ‘No.’ I don’t think Jesus thought that at the beginning of his ministry. He came with the intention that men should follow him, not kill him.”¹

But the Scriptures make it clear that the cross of Christ was neither a divine afterthought nor a human accident, for Jesus was “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Revelation 13:8).² In his message on the Day of Pentecost, Peter affirmed this truth when he said that Jesus was “delivered by the determined counsel and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23). Peter was there when it happened; he knew that Calvary didn’t catch Jesus by surprise. Years later, when he penned his first epistle, Peter called Jesus the Lamb that “was foreordained before the foundation of the world” (1 Peter 1:20). Could anything be clearer?

Paul agreed with Peter that the cross was in the mind and heart of God from the beginning. After all, if God promised eternal life “before time began” (Titus 1:2), and if he “chose us in Him [Christ] before the foundation of the world” (Ephesians 1:4) and wrote our names in the Book of Life (Revelation 17:8), then the great plan of salvation belongs to the divine counsels of eternity.

When Jesus came to earth, he knew that he came to die; so let’s listen to the Master himself

as he explained the Scriptures to those two discouraged disciples on the road to Emmaus. “Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?” he asked (Luke 24:26). The cross was a divine assignment, not a human accident; it was a God-given obligation, not a human option. Later that same evening, Jesus appeared to the eleven apostles and said, “Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day” (Luke 24:46). Jesus was not murdered; he willingly laid down his life for his sheep (John 10:15–18). His death was a necessity in the eternal plan of God.

i.

The atoning sacrifice of the Messiah was taught in the Old Testament prophecies and types, and Jesus perfectly understood the Jewish Scriptures. The entire Mosaic sacrificial system, and the priesthood that maintained it, were types and shadows of the good things to come. Jesus knew what every Jew knew, that the heart of that system was Leviticus 17:11, “For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to

you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul.”

In his “birth announcement,” Jesus declared that his incarnation gave to him a body that he would offer as a sacrifice for the sins of the world.

Therefore, when he came into the world, he said:

Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, but a body You have prepared for Me. In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin You had no pleasure. Then I said, “Behold, I have come—in the volume of the book it is written of Me—to do Your will, O God” (Hebrews 10:5–7).

Jesus would give himself as the burnt offering, in total surrender to God, as well as the sin offering to pay the price for our offenses against God. “Sacrifice” refers to any of the animal offerings and would include the trespass offering and the peace offering (Leviticus 1–7), while the word “offering” refers to the meal and drink offerings. By his death on the cross, Jesus fulfilled the entire

sacrificial system and put an end to it forever. He accomplished with one offering what millions of animals on Jewish altars could never accomplish, “for it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins” (Hebrews 10:4).

The sacrificial death of Christ was first publicly announced by John the Baptist when he saw Jesus coming to the Jordan River: “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29, 36). John was answering Isaac’s question, “Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” (Genesis 22:7) and announcing the fulfillment of Abraham’s promise, “My son, God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering” (Genesis 22:8).

Then John pictured Jesus’ sacrificial death when he baptized Jesus in the Jordan River (Matthew 3:13–17; Mark 1:9–11; Luke 3:21–22; John 1:19–34), although only Jesus understood it at the time. John knew that Jesus wasn’t a sinner needing to repent, so he hesitated to baptize him; but Jesus knew that his baptism was his Father’s will. “Permit it to be so now,” he said to John, “for thus [in this manner] it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15).

We read these words casually, but they raise some difficult questions. To whom does the pronoun “us” refer? Does it include John? If it does, then we have a problem explaining how a sinful man could help a holy God “fulfill all righteousness.” One solution is to forget John and note that the entire Godhead was involved in this important event. God the Father spoke from heaven; God the Son went into the water; and God the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus as a dove. Doesn’t this suggest that “us” refers to the Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit? Isn’t it God who fulfills all righteousness by giving his Son as a sacrifice for the sins of the world?

The New American Standard Bible translates Matthew 3:15 “for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” In what way? In the way illustrated by his baptism: death, burial, and resurrection. In fact, Jesus used baptism as a picture of his passion: “But I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how distressed I am till it is accomplished” (Luke 12:50). He also identified himself with the experience of Jonah (Matthew 12:38–40; Luke 11:30), and again we see the image of death, burial, and resurrection.

In other words, as Jesus began his public ministry, he gave witness of the fact that he had come to die for the sins of the world. The only sign he would give to the Jewish nation was the same sign God sent to the wicked Ninevites: death, burial, and resurrection.

ii.

The sacrificial lamb is the first of several vivid pictures of the death of Christ that are found in the Gospel of John. The second is the destroyed temple: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19). As with so many of our Lord’s metaphorical utterances, this statement was misunderstood by those who heard it. They didn’t realize that “He was speaking of the temple of His body” (John 2:21). At our Lord’s trial, some of the witnesses cited this statement as proof that Jesus was an enemy of the Jewish law (Matthew 26:59–61; Mark 14:57–59), but this absurd witness accomplished nothing.

The body that God had prepared for his son was the temple of God, for the eternal Word had become flesh and “tabernacled among us” (John 1:14 literal translation).

“For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell” (Colossians 1:19). “For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily” (Colossians 2:9). And yet the lawless hands of wicked men were laid on that holy temple, and they did to him whatever they pleased. They thought they could destroy the Prince of Life, but their attempts were futile.

Contemplating the sufferings of Jesus and the horrible things sinful men did to the temple of his body causes us to marvel at the sinfulness of man and the mercy of God. In the space of a few hours, the officers arrested him, bound him, led (or pushed) him from one place to another, whipped him, spat upon him, humiliated him, made him wear a painful crown of thorns, and then led him out to nail him to a cross. This was all done to a man who was absolutely innocent! In all of human history, never was there such a miscarriage of justice.

They tried to destroy this temple, but they failed. God fulfilled the promise of Psalm 16:10 that Peter quoted in his Pentecostal sermon: “For You will not leave my soul in Hades, nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption”

(see Acts 2:25–28). Jesus triumphantly arose from the dead on the third day, and the sign of Jonah to Israel was completed.

John’s third picture of the crucifixion is the uplifted serpent. Jesus told Nicodemus, “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:14–15). Nicodemus was familiar with the story recorded in Numbers 21:5–9, but he must have been shocked to learn that the promised Messiah would have to endure such an ignoble death. King David compared himself to a worm (Psalm 22:6), but how could the miracle-working teacher sent from God compare himself to a vile serpent? It was unthinkable!

That the Messiah must be “lifted up” on a cross also perplexed the common people who had been taught that their promised Redeemer would “remain forever” (John 12:31–34). To be hung on a tree was the ultimate humiliation; it was the same as being put under a curse, “for he who is hanged is accursed of God” (Deuteronomy 21:22–23). But on the cross, Jesus

was made a curse for us and thereby redeemed us from the curse of the law (Galatians 3:13).

iii.

If considered by themselves, the images of the lamb, the temple, and the serpent might give us the false impression that in his death Jesus was a victim instead of the victor. This erroneous interpretation is balanced by the fourth image, that of the Good Shepherd (John 10:11–18) who willingly laid down his life for the sheep. Our Lord was not murdered against his will; he voluntarily gave himself to die for us. “Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself” (John 10:17–18).

If you were driving down the highway and saw a sheep on the road, you would feel sorry for the stupid animal and try to avoid hitting it. But if in saving the animal you knew you would cause an accident and kill a human being, you certainly would opt to save the human and sacrifice the animal. Even Jesus admitted that humans are of greater value than animals (Matthew 12:11–12). But Jesus, the Good Shepherd, was willing to

give his life for sinners who deserved to die! “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep” (John 10:11).

Under the old covenant, the sheep died for the shepherd, but they did it ignorantly and unwillingly. It’s doubtful that any sheep ever volunteered to have its throat cut and its body butchered and then burned on an altar. But the gospel message declared that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, willingly died for the lost sheep of the world and did it with full knowledge of all that was involved. He didn’t die a martyr’s death; he died a criminal’s death on a shameful Roman cross. “He was numbered with the transgressors” (Isaiah 53:12; Mark 15:28).

The fifth picture of his death is the seed buried in the ground to produce fruit (John 12:20–28). The emphasis is on Christ’s willingness to give his life so that the Father might be glorified.

“The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified. Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain” (John 12:23–24).

Our Lord's death and burial looked like defeat for God and victory for the enemy, but it was just the opposite. His seeming defeat was actually the greatest victory Jesus ever won, a far greater victory than healing the sick or casting out demons. Our Lord's body was like a dead seed when Nicodemus and Joseph placed it in the tomb, but on the third day it was resurrected in power and glory. Today the preaching of his gospel is producing fruit all over the world (Colossians 1:5–6).

Here, then, are five pictures of our Lord's death on the cross, each of them emphasizing a particular truth. Like the lamb on the altar, Jesus died as a substitute for us who deserved to die. The Jewish priests were careful to give as little pain as possible to the animal being sacrificed, but Jesus' body was treated like a building being destroyed. It was a substitutionary death, a cruel death and a vile death, for he was like a serpent lifted up and made a curse. But his was a voluntary death, the Shepherd willingly dying for the sheep, the seed willingly being planted in the ground and producing new life.

At this point, all we can do is worship.

*Amazing Love! How can it be
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?*
(Charles Wesley)

iv.

Our Lord didn't speak to his disciples openly about the cross until after Peter's confession of faith at Caesarea Philippi (Matthew 16:13–20). "From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day" (Matthew 16:21). This announcement stunned them, and Peter intensely opposed the idea. But Jesus rebuked him and told him and the other apostles that if they wanted to be his true disciples, they would have to deny themselves, take up their own crosses, and follow him (Matthew 16:22–28). There was a cross in Peter's future as well as in our Lord's future.

From that time on, Jesus "steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51; and see 13:22, 33), knowing full well what kind of

reception he would receive there. From time to time, he reminded the Twelve what would happen to him in the Holy City, but they were unable to grasp what he was talking about (Mark 9:9–10, 30–32; 10:32–34). His enemies understood this parable about the wicked tenants (Matthew 21:33–46), but the disciples seemed to miss the point completely. So blind was Peter to the plan of God that he tried to defend Jesus when the officers arrested him in the Garden (Matthew 26:51–54). While we admire Peter’s courage and unselfish devotion to the Master, we regret his disobedience in the light of all that Jesus had taught him and his associates about the purposes of God.

However, let’s not be too eager to cast the first stone. After all, it’s much easier for us to understand the meaning of our Lord’s death since we live on the resurrection side of Calvary and have complete Bibles. The shadows disappear when you look at Calvary through the empty tomb. However, when it comes to the cross of Jesus Christ, there’s still much more for us to learn and put into practice in daily life.

This much is certain: our Lord’s vision of the cross was far different from that of his disciples. They saw it as defeat, but he saw it as victory. To them, it meant shame; to Jesus, it meant glory. To the people of that day, the cross meant weakness, but Jesus turned the cross into a thing of power. Paul understood this and wrote with his own hand, “But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, but whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Galatians 6:14).