

THE HOUR AND THE EVENT OF ALL TIME

by Blair

Blair's exposition on the crucifixion of Christ as the central event of all history, examining the theological significance of the cross and its implications for human salvation and the purposes of God.

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THE HOUR AND THE EVENT OF ALL TIME Jesus lifted up His eyes to heaven, and said, Father! the hour is come.-- John 17:1.

These were the words of our blest Lord on a memorable occasion. The feast of the Passover drew nigh, at which He knew that He was to suffer. The night was arrived wherein He was to be delivered into the hands of His enemies. He had spent the evening in conference with His disciples, like a dying father in the midst of his family, mingling consolations with His last instructions. When He had ended His discourse to them, "he lifted up his eyes to heaven," and with the words which I have now read, began that solemn prayer of intercession for the Church, which closed His ministry. Immediately after, He went forth with His disciples into the garden of Gethsemane and surrendered Himself to those who came to apprehend Him.

Such was the situation of our Lord at the time of His pronouncing these words. He saw His mission on the point of being accomplished. He had the prospect full before Him of all that He was about to suffer--"Father! the hour is come." What hour? An hour the most critical, the most pregnant with great events, since hours had begun to be numbered, since time had begun to run. It was the hour at which the Son of God was to terminate the labors of His important life by a death still more important and illustrious; the hour of atoning, by His sufferings, for the guilt of mankind; the hour of accomplishing prophecies, types, and symbols, which had been carried on through a series of ages; the hour of concluding the old and of introducing into the world the new dispensation of religion; the hour of His triumphing over the world, and death, and hell; the hour of His creating that spiritual kingdom which is to last forever. Such is the hour. Such are the events which you are to commemorate in the sacrament of our Lord's Supper.

I. This was the hour in which Christ was glorified by His sufferings. The whole of His life had discovered much real greatness under a mean appearance. Through the cloud of His humiliation, His native luster often broke forth; but never did it shine so bright as in this last, this trying hour. It was indeed the hour of distress and of blood. He knew it to be such; and when He uttered the words of the text, He had before His eyes the executioner and the cross, the scourge, the nails, and the spear. But by prospects of this nature His soul was not to be overcome. It is distress which ennobles every great character; and distress was to glorify the Son of God. He was now to teach all mankind by His example, how to suffer and to die. He was to stand forth before His enemies as the faithful witness of the truth, justifying by His behavior the character which He assumed, and sealing by His blood the doctrines which He taught.

What magnanimity in all His words and actions on this great occasion! The court of Herod, the judgment-hall of Pilate, the hill of Calvary, were so many theaters prepared for His displaying all the virtues of a constant and patient mind. When led forth to suffer, the first voice which we hear from Him is a generous lamentation over the fate of His unfortunate tho guilty country; and to the last moment of His life we behold Him in possession of the same gentle and benevolent spirit. No upbraiding, no complaining expression escaped from His lips during the long and painful

approaches of a cruel death. He betrayed no symptom of a weak or a vulgar, of a discomposed or impatient mind. With the utmost attention of filial tenderness He committed His aged mother to the care of His beloved disciple. With all the dignity of a sovereign He conferred pardon on a fellow-sufferer. With a greatness of mind beyond example, He spent His last moments in apologies and prayers for those who were shedding His blood. By wonders in heaven and wonders on earth, was this hour distinguished. All nature seemed to feel it; and the dead and the living bore witness of its importance. The veil of the temple was rent in twain. The earth shook. There was darkness over all the land. The graves were opened, and "many who slept arose, and went into the holy city." Nor were these the only prodigies of this awful hour. The most hardened hearts were subdued and changed. The judge who, in order to gratify the multitude, passed sentence against Him, publicly attested His innocence. The Roman centurion who presided at the execution, "glorified God," and acknowledged the Sufferer to be more than man. "After he saw the things which had passed, he said, Certainly this was a righteous person: truly this was the Son of God." The Jewish malefactor who was crucified with Him address Him as a king, and implored His favor. Even the crowd of insensible spectators, who had come forth as to a common spectacle, and who began with clamors and insults, "returned home smiting their breasts." Look back on the heroes, the philosophers, the legislators of old. View them, in their last moments. Recall every circumstance which distinguished their departure from the world. Where can you find such an assemblage of high virtues, and of great events, as concurred at the death of Christ? Where so many testimonials given to the dignity of the dying person by earth and by heaven?

II. This was the hour in which Christ atoned for the sins of mankind, and accomplished our eternal redemption. It was the hour when that great sacrifice was offered up, the efficacy of which reaches back to the first transgression of man, and extends forward to the end of time; the hour when, from the cross, as from a high altar, the blood was flowing which washed away the guilt of the nations. This awful dispensation of the Almighty contains mysteries which are beyond the discovery of man. It is one of those things into which "the angels desire to look." What has been revealed to us is, that the death of Christ was the interposition of heaven for preventing the ruin of human kind. We know that under the government of God misery is the natural consequence of guilt. After rational creatures had, by their criminal conduct, introduced disorder into the divine kingdom, there was no ground to believe that by their penitence and prayers alone they could prevent the destruction which threatened them. The prevalence of propitiatory sacrifices throughout the earth proclaims it to be the general sense of mankind that mere repentance was not of sufficient avail to expiate sin or to stop its penal effects. By the constant allusions which are carried on in the New Testament to the sacrifices under the law, as pre-signifying a great atonement made by Christ, and by the strong expressions which are used in describing the effects of His death, the sacred writers show, as plainly as language allows, that there was an efficacy in His sufferings far beyond that of mere example and instruction. The nature and extent of that efficacy we are unable as yet fully to trace. Part we are capable of beholding; and the wisdom of what we behold we have reason to adore. We discern, in this plan of redemption, the evil of sin strongly exhibited and the justice of the divine government awfully exemplified, in Christ suffering for sinners. But let us not imagine that our present discoveries unfold the whole influence of the death of Christ. It is connected with causes into which we can not penetrate. It produces consequences too extensive for us to explore. "God's thoughts are not as our thoughts." In all things we "see only in part"; and here, if anywhere, we see also "as through a glass. darkly."

This, however, is fully manifest, that redemption is one of the most glorious works of the Almighty. If the hour of the creation of the world was great and illustrious, that hour when, from the dark and formless mass, this fair system of nature arose at the divine command, when "the morning-stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy," no less illustrious is the hour of the restoration of the world; the hour when, from condemnation and misery, it emerged into happiness and peace. With less external majesty it was attended; but it is, on that account, the more wonderful that, under an appearance so simple, such great events were covered.

III. In this hour the long series of prophecies, visions, types, and figures were accomplished. This was the center in which they all met: this the point toward which they had tended and verged, throughout the course of so many generations. You behold the law and the prophets standing, if we may speak so, at the foot of the cross, and doing homage. You behold Moses and Aaron bearing the Ark of the Covenant; David and Elijah presenting the oracle of testimony. You behold all the priests and sacrifices, all the rites and ordinances, all the types and symbols assembled together to receive their consummation. Without the death of Christ, the worship and ceremonies of the law would have remained a pompous, but unmeaning, institution. In the hour when He was crucified, "the book with the seven seals" was opened. Every rite assumed its significancy; every prediction met its event; every symbol displayed its correspondence. The dark and seemingly ambiguous method of conveying important discoveries under figures and emblems was not peculiar to the sacred books. The spirit of God in presignifying the death of Christ, adopted that plan, according to which the whole knowledge of those early ages was propagated through the world. Under the veil of mysterious allusion, all wisdom was then concealed. From the sensible world images were everywhere borrowed to describe things unseen. More was understood to be meant than was openly expressed. By enigmatical rites the priests communicated his doctrines; by parables and allegories the philosopher instructed his disciples; even the legislator, by figurative sayings, commanded the reverence of the people. Agreeably to this prevailing mode of instruction, the whole dispensation of the Old Testament was so conducted as to be the shadow and figure of a spiritual system. Every remarkable event, every distinguished personage, under the law, is interpreted in the New Testament, as bearing reference to the hour of which we treat. If Isaac was laid upon the altar as an innocent victim; if David was driven from his throne by the wicked, and restored by the hand of God; if the brazen serpent was lifted up to heal the people; if the rock was smitten by Moses, to furnish drink in the wilderness; all were types of Christ and alluded to His death. In predicting the same event the language of ancient prophecy was magnificent, but seemingly contradictory: for it foretold a Messiah, who was to be at once a sufferer and a conquerer. The Star was to come out of Jacob, and the Branch to spring from the stem of Jesse. The Angel of the Covenant, the desire of all nations, was to come suddenly to His temple; and to Him was to be "the gathering of the people." Yet, at the same time, He was to be "despised and rejected of men"; He was to be "taken from prison and from judgment," and to be "led as a lamb to the slaughter." Tho He was "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief," yet "the Gentiles were to come to his light, and kings to the brightness of his rising." In the hour when Christ died, those prophetic riddles were solved: those seeming contradictions were reconciled. The obscurity of oracles, and the ambiguity of typos vanished. The "sun of righteousness" rose; and, together with the dawn of religion those shadows passed away.

IV. This was the hour of the abolition of the law, and the introduction of the gospel; the hour of terminating the old and of beginning the new dispensation of religious knowledge and worship throughout the earth. Viewed in this light, it forms the most august era which is to be found in the history of mankind. When Christ was suffering on the cross, we are informed by one of the evangelists that He said, "I thirst"; and that they filled a sponge with vinegar, and put it to His mouth. "After he had tasted the vinegar, knowing that all things were now accomplished, and the Scriptures fulfilled, he said, It is finished"; that is, this offered draft of vinegar was the last circumstance predicted by an ancient prophet that remained to be fulfilled. The vision and the prophecy are now sealed: the Mosaic dispensation is closed. "And he bowed his head and gave up the ghost."

"It is finished." When He uttered these words He changed the state of the universe. At that moment the law ceased, and the gospel commenced. This was the ever memorable point of time which separated the old and the new worlds from each other. On one side of the point of separation you behold the law, with its priests, its sacrifices, and its rites, retiring from sight. On the other side you behold the gospel, with its simple and venerable institutions, coming forward into view. Significantly was the veil of the temple rent in this hour; for the glory then departed from between the cherubim. The legal high priest delivered up his urim and thummim, his breast-plate, his robes, and his incense: and Christ stood forth as the great high priest of all succeeding generations. By that one sacrifice which He now offered, He abolished sacrifices forever. Altars on which the fire had blazed for ages, were now to smoke no more. Victims were no more to bleed. "Not with the blood of bulls and goats, but with his own blood he now entered into the holy place, there to appear in the presence of God for us." This was the hour of association and union to all the worshipers of God. When Christ said, "It is finished," He threw down the wall of partition which had so long divided the Gentile from the Jew. He gathered into one all the faithful out of every kindred and people. He proclaimed the hour to be come when the knowledge of the true God should be no longer confined to one nation, nor His worship to one temple; but over all the earth, the worshipers of the Father should serve Him "in spirit and in truth." From that hour they who dwelt in the "uttermost ends of the earth, strangers to the covenant of promise," began to be "brought nigh." In that hour the light of the gospel dawned from afar on the British Islands.

During a long course of ages, Providence seemed to be occupied in preparing the world for this revolution. The whole Jewish economy was intended to usher it in. The knowledge of God was preserved unextinguished in one corner of the world, that thence, in due time, might issue forth the light which was to overspread the earth. Successive revelations gradually enlarged the views of men beyond the narrow bounds of Judea, to a more extensive kingdom of God. Signs and miracles awakened their expectation and directed their eyes toward this great event. Whether God descended on the flaming mountain, or spoke by the prophet's voice; whether He scattered His chosen people into captivity, or reassembled them in their own land, He was still carrying on a progressive plan, which was accomplished at the death of Christ. Not only in the territories of Israel, but over all the earth, the great dispensations of Providence respected the approach of this important hour. If empires rose or fell; if war divided, or peace united, the nations; if learning civilized their manners, or philosophy enlarged their views; all was, by the secret decree of Heaven, made to ripen the world for that "fulness of time," when Christ was to publish the whole counsel of God. The Persian, the Macedonian, the Roman conqueror, entered upon the stage

each at his predicted period. The revolutions of power, and the succession of monarchies, were so arranged by Providence, as to facilitate the progress of the gospel through the habitable world, after the day had arrived, "when the stone which was cut out of the mountain without hands, should become a great mountain and fill the earth." This was the day which Abraham saw afar off, and was glad. This was the day which "many prophets, and kings, and righteous men desired to see, but could not"; the day for which "the earnest expectation of the creature," long oppressed with ignorance, and bewildered in superstition, might be justly said to wait.

V. This was the hour of Christ's triumph over all the powers of darkness; the hour in which He overthrew dominions and thrones, "led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men." The contest which the kingdom of darkness had long maintained against the kingdom of light was now brought to its crisis. The period was come when "the seed of the woman shall bruise the head of the serpent" For many ages the most gross superstition had filled the earth. "The glory of the incorruptible God" was everywhere, except in the land of Judea, "changed into images made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and beasts, and creeping-things." The world, which the Almighty created for Himself, seemed to have become a temple of idols. Even to vices and passions altars were raised; and what was entitled religion, was in effect a discipline of impurity. In the midst of this universal darkness, Satan had erected his throne, and the learned and the polished, as well as the savage nations, bowed down before him. But at the hour when Christ appeared on the cross, the signal of His defeat was given. His kingdom suddenly departed from Him; the reign of idolatry passed away: He was beheld to fall "like lightning from heaven." In that hour the foundation of every pagan temple shook. The statue of every false god tottered on its base. The priest fled from his falling shrine; and the heathen oracles became dumb forever. As on the cross Christ triumphed over Satan, so He overcame His auxiliary, the world. Long had it assailed Him with its temptations and discouragements; in this hour of severe trial He surmounted them all. Formerly He had despised the pleasures of the world. He now baffled its terrors. Hence He is justly said to have "crucified the world." By His sufferings He ennobled distress; and He darkened the luster of the pomp and vanities of life. He discovered to His followers the path which leads, through affliction, to glory and to victory; and He imparted to them the same spirit which enabled Him to overcome. "My kingdom is not of this world. In this world ye shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

Death also, the last foe of man, was the victim of this hour. The formidable appearance of the specter remained; but his dart was taken away. For, in the hour when Christ expiated guilt, He disarmed death, by securing the resurrection of the just. When He said to His penitent fellow sufferer, "To-day thou shalt be with me in paradise," He announced to all His followers the certainty of heavenly bliss. He declared the cherubim to be dismissed and the flaming sword to be sheathed, which had been appointed at the fall, to keep from man "the way of the tree of life." Faint, before this period, had been the hope, indistinct the prospect, which even good men enjoyed of the heavenly kingdom. Life and immortality were now brought to light. From the hill of Calvary the first clear and certain view was given to the world of the everlasting mansions. Since that hour they have been the perpetual consolation of believers in Christ. Under trouble, they soothe their minds; amid temptation, they support their virtue; and in their dying moments enable them to say, "O death! where is thy sting? O grave! where is thy victory"?

VI. This was the hour when our Lord erected that spiritual kingdom which is never to end. How vain are the counsels and designs of men! How shallow is the policy of the wicked! How short their triumphing! The enemies of Christ imagined that in this hour they had successfully accomplished their plan for His destruction. They believed that they had entirely scattered the small party of His followers, and had extinguished His name and His honor forever. In derision they address Him as a king. They clothed Him with purple robes; they crowned Him with a crown of thorns; they put a reed into His hand; and, with insulting mockery, bowed the knee before Him. Blind and impious men! How little did they know that the Almighty was at that moment setting Him as a king on the hill of Zion; giving Him "the heathen for his inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for his possession"! How little did they know that their badges of mock royalty were at that moment converted into the signals of absolute dominion, and the instruments of irresistible power! The reed which they put into His hands became "a rod of iron," with which He was to "break in pieces his enemies," a scepter with which He was to rule the universe in righteousness. The cross which they thought was to stigmatize Him with infamy, became the ensign of His renown. Instead of being the reproach of His followers, it was to be their boast and their glory. The cross was to shine on palaces and churches throughout the earth. It was to be assumed as the distinction of the most powerful monarchs, and to wave in the banner of victorious armies when the memory of Herod and Pilate should be accursed, when Jerusalem should be reduced to ashes, and the Jews be vagabonds over all the world.

These were the triumphs which commenced at this hour. Our Lord saw them already in their birth; He saw of the travail of His soul, and was satisfied. He beheld the Word of God going forth, conquering, and to conquer; subduing, to the obedience of His laws, the subduers of the world; carrying light into the regions of darkness, and mildness into the habitations of cruelty. He beheld the Gentiles waiting below the cross, to receive the gospel. He beheld Ethiopia and the Isles stretching out their hands to God; the desert beginning to rejoice and to blossom as the rose; and the knowledge of the Lord filling the earth, as the waters cover the sea. Well pleased, He said, "It is finished." As a conqueror He retired from the field, reviewing His triumphs: "He bowed his head and gave up the ghost." From that hour, Christ was no longer a mortal man, but "Head over all things to the Church," the glorious King of men and angels, of whose dominion there shall be no end. His triumphs shall perpetually increase. "His name shall endure forever; it shall last as long as the sun; men shall be blest in him, and all nations shall call him blest"

Such were the transactions, such the effects, of this ever-memorable hour. With all those great events was the mind of our Lord filled, when He lifted His eyes to heaven, and said, "Father! the hour is come." From this view which we have taken of this subject, permit me to suggest what ground it affords to confide in the mercy of God for the pardon of sin; to trust to His faithfulness for the accomplishment of all His promises; and to approach to Him, with gratitude and devotion, in acts of worship. In the first place, the death of Christ affords us ground to confide in the divine mercy for the pardon of sin. All the steps of that high dispensation of Providence, which we have considered, lead directly to this conclusion, "He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?" This is the final result of the discoveries of the gospel. On this rests the great system of consolation which it hath reared up for men. We are not left to dubious and intricate reasonings concerning the conduct which God may be expected to hold toward His offending creatures: but we are led to the view of important and

illustrious facts which strike the mind with evidence irresistible. For it is possible to believe that such great operations, as I have endeavored to describe, were carried on by the Almighty in vain? Did He excite in the hearts of His creatures such encouraging hopes, without any intention to fulfil them? After so long a preparation of goodness, could He mean to deny forgiveness to the penitent and the humble? When overcome by the sense of guilt, man looks up with an astonished eye to the justice of his Creator, let him recollect that hour of which the text speaks, and be comforted. The signals of divine mercy, erected in his view, are too conspicuous to be either distrusted or mistaken. In the next place, the discoveries of this hour afford the highest reason to trust in the divine faithfulness for the accomplishment of every promise which remains yet unfulfilled. For this was the hour of the completion of God's ancient covenant.

It was the "performance of the mercy promised to the fathers." We behold the consummation of a great plan, which, throughout a course of ages, had been uniformly pursued; and which, against every human appearance, was, at the appointed moment, exactly fulfilled. No length of time alters His purpose. No obstacles can retard it. Toward the ends accomplished in this hour, the most repugnant instruments were made to operate. We discern God bending to His purpose the jarring passions, the opposite interests, and even the vices of men; uniting seeming contrarities in His scheme; making "the wrath of man to praise him"; obliging the ambition of princes, the prejudices of Jews, the malice of Satan, all to concur, either in bringing forward this hour, or in completing its destined effects. With what entire confidence ought we to wait for the fulfilment of all His other promises in their due time, even when events are most embroiled and the prospect is most discouraging: "Altho thou sayst thou canst not see him, yet judgment is before him; therefore trust thou in him." Be attentive only to perform thy duty; leave the event to God, and be assured that, under the direction of His Providence, "all things shall work together" for a happy issue.

Lastly, the consideration of this whole subject tends to excite gratitude and devotion, when we approach to God in acts of worship. The hour of which I have discust, presents Him to us in the amiable light of the deliverer of mankind, the restorer of our forfeited hopes. We behold the greatness of the Almighty, softened by the mild radiance of condescension and mercy. We behold Him diminishing the awful distance at which we stand from His presence, by appointing for us a mediator and intercessor, through whom the humble may, without dismay, approach to Him who made them. By such views of the divine nature, Christian faith lays the foundation for a worship which shall be at once rational and affectionate; a worship in which the light of the understanding shall concur with the devotion of the heart, and the most profound reverence be united with the most cordial love. Christian faith is not a system of speculative truths. It is not a lesson of moral instruction only. By a train of high discoveries which it reveals, by a succession of interesting objects which it places in our view, it is calculated to elevate the mind, to purify the affections, and by the assistance of devotion, to confirm and encourage virtue. Such, in particular, is the scope of that divine institution, the sacrament of our Lord's Supper. To this happy purpose let it conduce, by centering in one striking point of light all that the gospel has displayed of what is most important to man. Touched with such contrition for past offenses, and filled with a grateful sense of divine goodness, let us come to the altar of God, and, with a humble faith in His infinite mercies, devote ourselves to His service forever.

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