

So Great a Death

by G.W. North

The sermon explores the significance of the death of Adam and the death of Christ, and how they relate to the salvation of humanity.

Scripture: John 3:16, Romans 5:12, Romans 6:4, 1 Corinthians 15:22, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Galatians 2:20, Ephesians 2:1-5, Colossians 2:13-14, Hebrews 9:22, 1 Peter 2:24

Topics: "Redemption", "The Cross"

Description

G.W. North emphasizes the profound significance of the cross in his sermon 'So Great a Death', explaining that God, in His wisdom and reason, revealed to Paul the reasoning, purpose, and power behind the cross. Paul understood that while all humanity died with Adam, not all are made alive in Christ, highlighting the necessity of Christ's death for the resolution of sin and death. North illustrates that the death of Christ was not merely a consequence of human actions but a divine necessity for the redemption of mankind, showcasing God's love and justice. He further explains that through Christ's death, believers are freed from the bondage of sin and can choose righteousness, contrasting the fates of those in Adam and those in Christ. Ultimately, North calls attention to the transformative power of the cross and the importance of understanding its implications for salvation.

Transcript

To be a God of wisdom God has to be a God of reason too. This is why He revealed to Paul: (1) the reasoning behind the cross; (2) the reason for the cross; and (3) the power of the cross. This revelation became the fundament of Paul's gospel, it furnished him with the ground of all his arguments; by it he was intellectually equipped to stand among his equals and with solid reason state the gospel of total salvation for the whole of mankind. He did not lay a foundation for universalism though; he thoroughly grasped the fact that though all men died when Christ died, all men did not come alive when Christ was made alive. In heart-conviction he fearlessly stated truth so that God's methods should be understood by all who wish to know them. He saw what few men have seen, namely that by Christ God dealt with the entirety of man. What Pilate said to the people at Christ's trial was perhaps more perceptive than most men think; when "Jesus came forth wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe Pilate saith unto them, 'Behold, the man. "Crucify Him, crucify Him"' they said. It filled their hearts, so He who alone was the real, complete man was crucified.

To God that was the important thing - the man had to die. It was all-important to the enraged mob of religious fanatics - they wanted the man dead, but it was more important to God that He died; God wanted the man dead. He wanted Him dead for other reasons than the ones for which they wanted it, far greater reasons, in fact the greatest of all reasons, the most important reasons in the universe, reasons important to God. Beyond human concepts or understanding, even to the initiated -- those who are made privy to the secret and the mystery of it -- God wanted Him dead. Beside Christ none of those who were included in the crucifixion or who witnessed it had any conception of what was most truly afoot in the invisible world of spirit that day. They could not see what God was doing. They did not know what had to be done, hence the folly of trying to formulate opinion. Most probably this was one of the reasons why darkness descended on the scene and covered the people and the whole land for three long hours. It held while Christ endured the agonies entailed in changing the source and course of man's spiritual life and the sources and laws of human heredity.

Men could not see the love in the heart of the Saviour. God was showing them that they could not see; they were blind, they had always been blind, they had never understood. Everything was beyond them in a different sphere, a world into which they could not enter. Men had no knowledge of what was going on, they were groping in the dark. Paul had been one of that company once, but now he knew; for our benefit by the election of God he was given to understand. When the glorified Christ revealed it to him he saw it all as clear as daylight. In the world's great darkness at the cross that day God was resolving His own problems and man's problems too. These problems were not problems to God in the same sense as they were problems to man; they never overwhelmed Him or left Him puzzled to know what to do about them, but they were nevertheless great and troublous things to Him. Since before the creation of the world (and since the creation of the world when troubles had arisen in Eden) these had remained with Him unresolved and unresolvable throughout history until Golgotha. That is why there was a Golgotha - there had to be a Golgotha so that God could resolve them all.

In order to settle the matter once for all God had to have a man, for it was with man that His greatest trouble and heartbreak lay; God made Adam, he was His and Satan slew him. Satan put Adam to death. Not by crucifixion, nor by stoning; it was not a physical thing at all; it was a death more sinister and deadly than that and utterly irremediable by man. The effects of that death were terrible to contemplate in the immediate, for it was a living death -- Adam became a living, breathing death. But, bad as that was, it was as nothing compared with the long-term effects of that death; it was corrosive, corrupting, spreading death, all the more insidious and dangerous because it was invisible and undetectable, and so contagious. Adam was such a powerful person, he was so potent that when it happened to him all mankind died with him; when Satan put Adam to death he put us all to death, as Paul saw and said - 'death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned'.

When God made Adam He made us all; all mankind was in him. Proof of this is that one day He put Adam to sleep and took a rib from him and of it made another person; she was in him and had been in him all the time. God made her in him first and then from his substance made Eve. Her inward substance and shape was in him all the time. When she first appeared to Adam in outward form he called her 'Isha', meaning taken from within man' (Ish); except that she was a woman, when made she was exactly like Adam. In nature, character, personality and potential she was the same; God's purpose in making her in female form and potential was that from within her others like them both may be begotten from Adam; the whole race of men was in them right at the beginning. Since the fall of Adam and Eve the whole human race has been dead; in effect we all died then -- we were put to death by Satan when he put death into Adam, even

though we had not been born and had not personally sinned we died with Adam. We died in Adam when, through his sin, he lost spiritual contact with God.

Adam lost the power to beget righteous children, all the potential governing the spiritual life and possibilities of his seed was changed then. He became a power for evil and not for good from that moment. That is why Paul said, 'In Adam all die'; thank God he also wrote 'In Christ shall all be made alive', thus completing the couplet. He was speaking of spiritual states and potential, not guaranteeing life universal for all mankind, for we are all sinners by nature and quite dead. We are not dead because we have sinned, on the contrary we sin because we are dead; death is the result of sin and sin is the evidence of that death. The fact that we have sinned proves that death has passed upon us. We sin because we are cut off from God and exist in a state of death. Sin is death's corruption.

This is the reason why the Lord Jesus, when on earth, never condemned sinners. God says He did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world and Jesus never once did it. He came that the world through Him might be saved. He loved to say things like 'neither do I condemn thee, go and sin no more'. He never once directly called a man a sinner; it would have been true if He had done so -- He could have called every man a sinner, but because He was the perfectly sinless one He never did so. Marvellous as this is in our eyes, the reason for it lies in His very sinless perfection, He was too good to say such things to men. He knew that if He had not been born the sinless Son of God He too would have been a sinner. A man cannot be blamed for being a sinner; we sin because it is natural for us to sin; He sinned not, because it was not natural to Him to sin. He had not the nature to sin, He did not desire to sin, He never chose to sin, He could not be tempted to sin, He kept Himself from sin, He would not succumb to sin and finally He expiated sin; He is Adam the second. Surely in spiritual life and power He is Adam the first.

He was the last Adam also. The first Adam was made perfect by a perfect Creator in a perfect creation, the last Adam was made perfect in an imperfect environment; the first Adam succumbed to sin through temptation, the last Adam resisted sin unto blood and was made even more perfect through suffering. The first Adam was of the earth - earthy, the last Adam was the Lord from heaven, a life-giving spirit. There were two Adams. Jesus Christ was not in Adam -- He was in God and came forth from the Father. As God chose to put all men in Adam, so He chose to put all His sons in Christ and He did so potentially before He put us all in Adam. The first Adam was put to death by satan, the last Adam was put to death by God, and as in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive The fact that Jesus Christ rose from the dead is the guarantee that every man shall rise from the dead; every man's experience was in some measure chosen in Christ.

We all, whether saved or unsaved, were for some purpose and to some degree included in Christ. God determined everything and everybody by His Son. Not every person was chosen in Him as is the Church (called in scripture the elect of God) but nothing was made apart from Christ. All things and persons were made by Him and for Him; all things consist by Him, they have done so from the beginning and still do to this very moment. He is before all things; in all things He has the pre-eminence, He is the firstborn of every creature, He is also the firstborn from the dead. 'In Him we (all) live and move and have our being and He is the Saviour (Preserver) of all men, especially of them that believe'. There is no exception to this, nor can there ever be - the whole creation, animate and inanimate, material and spiritual, celestial and temporal, was cast in one mould and that mould is Christ.

Everything was chosen and settled either in or in relationship to Christ before the foundation of the world. Each according to its order and in its time was designed to be in and of and by and through Him. Even sin

itself could only exist as being somehow associated with Him; it was not in Him as of divine nature, nor yet as of human nature - it did not originate with Him, indeed it was entirely foreign to Him, but it became His by gift of God at Calvary. Satan could not give Him sin, man could not give Him sin, He would accept it of neither, but He accepted it from His God and Father; so really did He accept it that He became it - 'He was made sin for us'. He who knew no sin, who could not be made to sin, was made sin by His Father whom He loved; God made Him the horrible nature and ugliest form and worst manifestation of sin. The Man was made the man of sin, the best and highest became the worst and lowest, and because the second Adam took this nature, form and personality of the first Adam, God slew Him. The devil could not kill Him, man could not kill Him, sin could not kill Him, Rome could not kill Him, Jewry could not kill Him, civil law could not kill Him, ecclesiastical law could not kill Him, yet he had to be killed. Only God could kill Him, so He did - He had to.

This is precisely why God made a second man on the earth; it just could not be that satan should have the final word about anything. When Christ was slain for us it was not as a result of a contest between God and man, though on the surface it seemed like it; it was the outcome of the conflict between God and satan. In Eden satan took the initiative, on the cross God took the initiative; indeed He did so at Nazareth by approaching Mary. Both God and satan started with virginity, Adam was virgin, so was Christ. Adam lost his virginity, Christ maintained His, Adam became old Adam, Christ is the new Adam; He was also the last Adam. There has not been another Adam since Christ, Adam is a beginning: Christ is The Beginning; old Adam has ceased, God who made him slew him, Christ lives and continues for ever.

This is what lay behind Christ's mysterious words, 'and I if I be lifted up from the earth will draw all men unto me', signifying what death He would die. All men were drawn unto Him on the cross and slain there; they were either put to eternal death as being in old Adam or presented to God as being made new in the new Adam: by His greatness and glory all were in Him. Whether in condemnation or salvation God ended the race there. Every man since, though born of the same humanity and in the same physical form as first Adam, is now totally responsible to the superior second Adam. This has far-reaching implications and effects, altogether too numerous to be dealt with here. Among the greatest of these is the implementation of God's intention that no man shall go to hell for first Adam's sin - men will die eternally only if they reject Christ. Adam will have to answer for his own sin and so will everyone else; it is comforting to know that no man is responsible for another man's sin; with the exception of Jesus Christ each one is answerable to God for his or her own sin. Herein lies the wonder of Christ -- He was made responsible for the sin of the world, first Adam bore the responsibility and guilt of bringing sin into the world, second Adam bore the responsibility and glory of taking it out.

All men became sinners by Adam's sin; because of that sin they also had the death sentence passed upon them. This death sentence is not sentence to eternal damnation in Gehenna, it is sentence to the death of being cut off from God. Of itself this death, being the logical result of the act of disobedience against God, manifested itself in and still consists in a state of unawareness of God's presence or even of His existence and a complete inability to do His will or even to desire Him. This is the result of the compound sins of generations of men and it has confused the real issue between satan and man, against God; it has also brought the world to its present state of corruption. The proof that death has passed on all men is that all men have sinned and that most men still do; as sin brought in death and death reigns over all, so sovereign death brought compulsive unavoidable sinning to all. Without Christ it is impossible for man to exist without being a consistent sinner.

Both first and second Adam were sovereigns. To be born of first Adam's line meant that a person must sin because that was what was involved in Adam's transaction with satan - it was a sovereign act affecting heredity; he made a choice and conformed the race. To be born of second Adam's line means that a person need not sin because this is what was involved in Christ's transaction with God; He also made a race-conforming choice. Adam need not have sinned any more than Christ needed to sin. Both Adam (originally) and Christ were free from sin; Adam was not compelled to sin, he was not compelled to be sinless either. When he sinned no-one made him do it, he did it quite voluntarily; satan breached his obedient love for God through his fleshly love for his wife. He was vulnerable and weak through love, and an incorrect evaluation of the seeming results of her sin caused him to sin with her. The results of his sin have continued, unavoidable and utterly disastrous, all the worse because the sin was an entirely voluntary choice. Likewise with Jesus, no-one compelled Him to remain sinless; when satan tempted Him He chose not to sin. His strength was His love for God and His Church; His correct evaluation of the immediate, as well as the eternal results of sin, made Him choose aright and the results of His unwavering choice are blessings incalculable. The effects of these two men's lives and deaths upon the lives and deaths and destinies of all mankind are totally immeasurable. God have mercy upon us all.

From all this two facts emerge, one of which we will consider here: (1) all men of first Adam's line are born free from righteousness and bound to sin; (2) all men of second Adam's line are born free from sin and able to live in righteousness. The first of these points we considered earlier as it is exemplified in Paul and set out for us in scripture; we will not return to it here. The second we will spend time on here, for it holds good for every child of God as well as Paul. From the moment he is born again no child of God is bound to sin; on the other hand neither is he bound not to sin, neither is he forced to live in righteousness all his days. He has been born of God's purpose that He should sin no more, but as with Adam (both first and second) he is left free to sin if he chooses. The new birth is in sinlessness, it consists in the re-creation of the spirit and the reclamation of the soul and the reformation of the whole moral nature. At that moment the will is unshackled, the body is quickened and newness of life commences, the man is redeemed and set free to obey God. He is not made free from sin for any other reason; this is God's love-gift to him, it is eternal life. But he is not forced to obey God, God does not want slavery in His kingdom -- everything must be done voluntarily. Because this is so the possibility that a man may lapse back into the old Adam state at any time remains; if he does not

obey God it is inevitable that he will do so. This cannot happen accidentally -- sin is not inevitable for the saint. Being made free from sin he can keep free from sin by choice. A phrase borrowed from Oswald Chambers puts this more perfectly: he says that growth is by 'a series of moral choices'; this is why in regeneration a man's whole moral nature is renewed.

God makes men free; the only bond God forges round a man is holy love. God wants the love of free moral agents; for this a man must bind himself to God in faithfulness as Christ did -- this alone is freedom. Every man wishing to do this will receive grace from God to do it; this is man's righteousness. This is the reason why Christ's righteousness is first imputed and then imparted to men. The righteousness of the man Jesus hinged upon His moral choices. He chose to obey God. This basic original and accumulated righteousness of Christ became the ground of our salvation. The accumulated righteousness of His constant obedience as a man -- even unto death -- added to His innate righteousness as being one of the persons of God, secured regeneration for us.

The reason lying deep, almost like a compulsion, in the heart of God for the cross was this -- the death of man -- it was an absolute necessity. The old man, first Adam, must be put to death, so the new man

Jesus, the second and last Adam, was put to death as that man; this was the basic necessity. Other great, far-reaching things took place on the cross also, things affecting angels and devils, things of eternal consequence, but none more vital for God and man than this. To God the death of His Son on the cross was the act and the moment and the point of resolution of all mysteries of iniquity, mysteries beyond the comprehension of man's mind. God needed to be justified and exonerated, shown to be right about His dealings with angels and men over sin. By the cross God was justified and because God was justified man was justified also, all happened at once. At the cross the sentence of death was carried out to the full in all realms of morality far beyond man's knowledge.

By the mercy and grace of God something of the vastness and terrors and power of this death were made known to Paul, who sought to compress its meaning into a phrase and express it in these words, 'so great a death'. So great was this death that the apostle found himself in constant need of deliverance from some aspects and degrees of it. With what gratitude he spoke of having been delivered from it in the past, with what joy he testified to being delivered from it in the present and with what confidence he declared he would be delivered from it in the future. He once wrote to the Ephesians about this death saying 'ye were dead in trespasses and sins'. He was not then so much referring to death itself as to its environs, that in which it consists and those things that are related to and associated with it, in much the same way as we associate death with graveclothes and a cemetery and a grave where death is placed. The grave is not death, it is where the dead are buried, the place of the dead; even so, trespasses and sins are not death but in this connection may be thought of as graveclothes.

A living man can put on and wear graveclothes if he pleases; a man does not need to be dead in order to wear the clothes of the dead: it would be unusual and unexpected, in fact distasteful, but not impossible. Possible though it is however, all who beheld it would at best think it a joke or at worst think such a person was unhinged or most peculiar, or more charitably, ill. There is a sad spiritual lesson to be learned here though -- many a man who has honestly been given life by the Lord. Jesus is still wearing graveclothes. He has turned back to his old sins and is trespassing against the law of Christ, forging habits and binding strong bands around himself greater and stronger than the chains which bound Legion and from which, unlike Legion, he cannot break free. But because he is a son he can turn again to Christ with all his heart and find repentance and forgiveness and. cleansing and. liberty from the Lord. Christ will then in love restore him to his first condition of life, fill him with the Spirit, clothe him with the garments of salvation and walk with Him in the light. But Paul was not speaking of this when he spoke of death. He was speaking of the deadness and the sheer desolation of it, its total ignorance of God and good. Oh, the terrible power of death, so great that a dead person is absolutely unconscious of the state he is in. He exists in this world cut off from God and does not know it until he departs from it to the place of the departed and the further-removed from which there is no return. There he may only anticipate without hope the second death to which he must be despatched, together with all those who, like him, have rejected Christ.

So universal and great is this death that Paul himself had no knowledge of it until he was delivered from it. It was this that made him so aware of its vastness. He had had no idea of his need, he had been dead, utterly dead, he said, and had not known it. When he did. discover he was dead it was frightening; he was devastated. He had lived a Pharisee, and as touching the righteousness of the law had been perfect -- faultless even -- yet he had been dead. He had thought he was alive but he had never known life; except in the will of God in Christ he had never existed even. He once wrote of his experience of self-discovery and of the condition of his existence under law in death. He said he had once been alive (presumably from his birth) without the law, and had existed in that condition until the law came -- at what age that happened

he does not say, probably from bar-mitzvah onwards -- but when the law came he died, he said. He claimed that it was the coming of (the realization of) the law and what it was saying that slew him. Until then sin had lain in him dead, but when the law really reached the true condition of sin in him it revived, and rebelled and he died.

Sin is like the light which Jesus says is darkness, great darkness, how great none but He can tell. Sin in a man can be as holiness and righteousness, this is its greatest power. Paul seems to be referring to a personal experience remarkably similar to the dispensational racial experience of Israel, which is not surprising; God seemed to raise up that nation in order to demonstrate in it every feature of human possibility. Upon consideration this is to be expected, for a nation is only made up of individuals so it must be the sum total of all the individuals in it. More than that, since the whole wide world of men is the sum total of every nation in it, what is basically true of every individual is true of the whole world. Sin came into this world 'as by one man' long before Israel's birth as a nation. Adam was not the first person in the world to sin; tragically he was neither the only one, nor yet the last person to sin in the world. Adam was the second person to commit sin in this world; the very first sin committed in this world was his wife Eve's.

Eve sinned by listening to satan's blandishments, she succumbed to him, believed his lies, partook of the fruit of the tree and gave to Adam who also ate and joined in the transgression. The eyes of them both were immediately opened and they knew they were naked. They had always been naked but until that moment they were not conscious of it. They did not know what nakedness was for it was natural to them and proper. Until that moment presumably the only clothing they had was inward and spiritual; they were naked and unashamed and had lived in that manner outwardly from the beginning. But when they partook of the forbidden tree they knew they were naked and were immediately ashamed. Feeling totally exposed and not understanding why, they contrived some form of clothing for themselves to hide their bodies from each other; they were afraid and when God came into the garden they were so overwhelmed with guilt that they hid from Him. It may be true that until then they had been clothed with ignorance, certainly they had existed in innocence before the Lord and each other. It is also certain that they had lived in righteousness, not the righteousness of the law of Moses, nor yet the righteousness of justification, for Moses had not then written the law, nor had justification been wrought. Their righteousness had been the righteousness of obedience. Until they disobeyed God by eating of the tree there had been no righteousness in them; theirs was the unconscious righteousness of faith, the unselfconscious state of natural life.

The risen Christ had a revelation; God gave it to Him. It was so wonderful that He chose to make it known, so He approached His servant, the apostle John, with this intention and gave him a commandment to pass it on to us. John, being an obedient servant, agreed and disposed himself to his Lord's will. Therefore, pictorially by vision and directly by dictation, the Lord made known some of the dearest secrets of His heart. One of the things He disclosed to John was that righteousness is like fine linen and should be regarded by us as the raiment He gives to the bride and wife of His heart. It is glorious clothing, He wore it Himself when He hung on the cross. Men would not have believed it, for they did not see it; in their eyes He hung there naked; they had stripped Him and taken away His clothes from Him and nailed Him to the tree, which became at once the tree of the knowledge of evil and death and the tree of good and life. He hung on it naked and unashamed; He did not care what men saw or thought. He had long been dead to that. In the eyes of God He was clothed with an inward clothing that needed nothing outward to cover it. His vesture was all the more glorious because it was dipped in blood -- His own righteousness, fine and white, clothed Him there, but it was red; His finest white linen was dyed with His own blood, it was perfect

in God's sight. Even when He was made sin on the cross the second and last Adam never lost His righteousness; His death itself was righteousness to Him, and through it He was made righteousness to us. How finely it was woven that day, a fine web of wondrous virtue, whiter than snow, to be imputed to us and imparted to us that we may be clothed with it. O how gladly we wrap ourselves in it! Blessed Spirit robe us in it to suit that heavenly bridegroom, for we love Him. Through Him living righteousness came into the world before, but Adam lost it.

Sin came into the world of men by Adam. He could have prevented it from passing into mankind if he had wished even though he was not the only person to sin on the earth. Eve was not responsible for bringing sin into the world of mankind of herself. She couldn't simply because, being one person and a woman, it was impossible; she could only bear children, she could not beget them. Unless Adam had sinned with her, her misdeed could not have been passed on to other human beings. Adam could have prevented it if he had wished, but in his heart he would not divorce from her, but chose to disobey God and sin with her. It was in this agreement together that sin was passed on -- first to his children and thence to the whole race of men. Part of the tragedy of the incoming of sin (perhaps the most tragic part) was the death that came in with it and by it. By Adam's transgression the race became a race of sinners, even though none since has sinned in exactly the same way as he. The whole of mankind is exceedingly sinful, but being dead does not know it; as Paul says, all outside of Christ are without understanding, past feeling and alienated from the life of God -- that is death.

So it was that, in common with all men, sin lay undiscovered in Paul's life; as it was in the race as a whole so it was with him as an individual, and with the exception of Jesus Christ so it is with every other individual. Sin never came to light in the race until God gave the law to Israel via Moses; it was there and had been from the beginning, affecting everyone since Adam, but it lay dead in the sense that it was not recognized for what it was, therefore it was not imputed to anyone because everyone was unconscious of its sinfulness in God's sight. Adam's original sin and consequent death was passed on to everyone as a nature to sin and a state of death. Although God has never imputed Adam's sin to anyone else, He could not prevent it from influencing everyone else, even though He knew they would be unaware of the reason for their deadness and would not know they were dead. Death is so universal and so great that even Job, who became a mighty man of God, did not at first know where or how to find Him.

Sin took on many forms and so did death. Perhaps there are as many forms of death as there are expressions of the nature of sin. In another context and with a different emphasis and meaning Paul once said he was in deaths oft. As a result men were in complete ignorance of God and of what He wanted. Strangely enough this death and unawareness is often accompanied by a desire to know God or by becoming a religious zealot. This may be one of its deadliest forms. Atheism is not the only form of death, though it is certainly the suicide of fools. Atheism is the snobbishness of intellectualism, the last stronghold of ignorance, the empty boasting of sin. Thank God not all have been so stupid and from the beginning it was not so. Here and there throughout history men have appeared to whom God revealed Himself or who reached out and found Him, but they were very few. Men have mostly been careless of their state and very defiant and critical of God. So eventually the Lord raised up Moses, that by him He should reveal Himself to men and give them His law and expose sin in some measure. Saul of Tarsus was one of these. The law came to him with such power that he died under it for by it he discovered sin, what it really is. He says these things about the law and sin -- 'by the law is the knowledge of sin', 'by the commandment sin became exceedingly sinful', 'by the law sin was enhanced', 'the strength of sin is the law', 'when the commandment (law) came sin revived and I died', 'sin working death in me by that which is good'.

As in Adam, so in Paul, sin worked death. The difference between them lay only in this - Adam knew what sin was and Paul did not, even though he knew the law. Saul of Tarsus could boast that as touching the law he was blameless, yet he discovered he was the chief of sinners. The exceeding sinfulness of the nature and working of sin is revealed in that it used the law, which was spiritual and good, to destroy its victims. We may thank God the age of law is past; but although that is true, the danger is not past. In this present age sin, which once used the law, now uses the gospel to slay its victims. The law and the gospel were not given for this reason though, God gave them to men, that by them He may expose sin and bring His salvation to hearts and lives. When the law really came with power to Paul's heart it brought light to him; it also brought tragedy. For the first time he saw what sin really was and as a result of it promptly died in hopelessness and despair; death was compounded in him and he was confounded by it: 'O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from this body of death?' he wailed. When he saw sin as God sees it, sin appeared to him as a body with as many members as there are forms of sin and that body was his self. Confused he groped his way through endless realms of darkness but could find no permanent relief, even though he contrived mental escape by delighting in the law. Sin was in his members, it was inescapable and unbreakable law in him. He had discovered himself to be a totally sinful and utterly wretched man. Then Christ, the original Light, came to him and brought him hope.

Paul was not saved by hearing a gospel message and responding to an appeal, he learned the gospel from Jesus Christ after he was saved. He was saved by Christ coming in blinding light to him on the Damascus road. In the glory of that light Christ slew him in the dust outside the city wall. Broken and humbled he was led by the hand into the city to the street called straight and there he was buried for three days. Praying there without sight in the dark, he lay before God and on the third day God raised him up by the same Spirit by which He raised Christ from the dead. Paul was raised, given sight and filled with the Holy Ghost in one sovereign move of God; Paul was born again. That happened to him when Christ 'came' to him. When the law 'came' to him it slew him and left him dead. The law was given by Moses but could not give life to those who received it; grace and truth came by Jesus Christ who gives life to all who receive Him. The law came into the world thousands of years before Paul was born; Christ Jesus came into the world possibly about the same time he was born, but neither came to him personally at that time. When and where the law came personally to him we do not know, likewise we do not know precisely when or where Christ came to him, but we do know it was at a precise time and place on the Damascus road. It was God's time for him, sin and death left him, he lived.

Looking back on it all with the light of revelation shining upon it and under the instruction of Christ he saw everything that had happened to him then in clearest reality. He had been a serpent, like his great fellow-apostle Peter he had been a vessel of sin, a spiritual configuration and human manifestation of satan, the devil. That is why it had been necessary for God to smite him down into the dust. He belonged there, he had been persecuting Christ and His Church. Praise God it was only a temporary measure and not eternal judgement. He was not smitten down into the dust of physical death and put into God's prison for rebellious spirits to await final judgement and the inevitable fires of Gehenna. He deserved that as we all did, but Jesus saved him despite the fact that he had been rebelling and kicking against the goads for a long time. Paul became a very grateful man and a most devoted servant of Jesus Christ. Just when he was caught up to the third heaven and what he saw and heard there we do not know, but he has left on record an amazing Gospel of grace and love, a precious testimony and a unique revelation of eternal truth.

As well as his understanding of the death of our Lord Jesus, it is his view of the events surrounding the cross also that is so arresting. Almost certainly he was not present at any of the several trials to which the

civil and religious authorities put Christ, yet he spoke of the death sentence passed upon Him as did no other. Each of the four biographers of Jesus records the historic events with varying detail, but none speaks of a death sentence in so many words. They do record that Pilate delivered Him to be crucified and that he wrote a superscription and had it placed on His cross, but death sentence, no. No man passed sentence of death upon Him as sentencing is known today when a man receives his just deserts for crimes committed. Jesus never committed any crimes; how then could any man formally sentence Him? Sentence of death was passed upon Him by God His Father in Gethsemane precisely for that reason. He had been alone when the sentencing took place; no man witnessed it, even the most select of the apostles were asleep. Whatever it was God said to Him we do not know. His words are not recorded, but Christ's are: 'if this cup may not pass from me except I drink it, thy will be done'. The agreement was perfect, the sentence had been passed, He arose from His place and presented Himself to His captors for its execution.

Paul saw what happened in this spiritual court of appeal and understood it perfectly and fully grasped its meaning and implications for men. He saw that it was a sentence of death for the whole human race and accordingly received it to himself. His written testimony is that he had this sentence of death in himself and that the purpose of it was that he should not trust in himself but in God which raiseth the dead. That is precisely the same attitude in which Jesus faced His death; He did so with complete confidence. It is recorded that He often said He would rise again from the dead. He knew that if He first accepted the death sentence and went to death without murmuring God would raise Him up again. It was an accepted fact of logic and of spiritual law that except He died there could be no resurrection; resurrection-life can only be experienced after death. When the man Christ Jesus went to death He did so trusting His God to raise Him again. Praise God He did not refuse to accept the sentence of death in Himself but received it; if He had not done so there could have been no gospel. The consequences of that reception were devastating to Him, but He did not for that reason refuse to accept the cup from His Father's hand. He submitted to His Father, accepted the sentence, received the cup and drank it to the dregs.

Paul saw all this, he also saw that unless he too accepted, received and drank in the sentence of death and experienced it himself he could not preach the gospel in its regenerating fulness. It is an amazing thing, but absolutely true, that even Christ Himself could not preach the gospel in all its fulness while He was here on earth and neither could any of His followers at that time. He could talk of the cross and of taking up the cross and of bearing the cross, but He could not talk of the death of the cross, or of the blood of the cross, for He had not yet hung on it and shed His blood; during His lifetime on earth the gospel was limited. The reason for this was that there had been no cross as yet, in the sense and meaning we understand it the cross did not exist. In the nature of the case He could give no direct teaching about the cross and its purpose and power before He hung on it; had He attempted to do so it would have been meaningless to His hearers. Worse still it would have been entirely out of place, and being so glaringly out of order it would have appeared quite farcical to the many earnest souls who had left all to follow Him. He therefore confined Himself to teaching them elements of truth about it which they could more easily understand and assimilate and reserved the most vital teaching of the cross till He should rise from the dead. It was necessary He should do so lest illogic destroy all hope of credibility.

It was equally necessary that when He rose from the dead He should set forth the mystery and true purpose of the cross which was not revealed during His lifetime and which none of the four evangelists included in their biographical works. He knew that unless He did so the bulk of His teaching prior to the cross could have no present-day application. Because all His words are vital to us He raised up Luke to

write two major works, each complementary to the other; the first is a record of His own birth and history called a Gospel and the second is a record of the birth of the Church and its earliest history, called the Acts of the Apostles. Luke commences his second work with these words: 'The former treatise have I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach until the day in which he was taken up'. It is at once clear that while on earth Jesus had only commenced His teachings and that, having risen from the dead, He took up and continued to teach His apostles again. This time He began to teach them the things He had left unsaid when He died, things He had to finish by that death and which therefore could not have been said before: chief among these was the vast fulness of truth related to His cross and death.

In His wisdom and because of its very nature the Lord selected for this a man who did not belong to the original group of apostles, in fact a man who had dedicated his life to the destruction of His church. He was a man of many parts and great accomplishments who was both a true-born Hebrew and a free-born Roman and a scholar; his name was Saul of Tarsus. Perhaps above all he was chosen because he was a zealot. The story of his conversion and how, by grace, he was made a son of God is now famous in history. To this man the Lord committed the bulk of His further teaching about the cross that he should commit it to men. This he did first by his life, then by preaching and ultimately in writing. Paul regarded this as a most sacred commission and he gave himself to it without ceasing for the rest of his days. Disappointingly some of his writings have been lost; at least three of his epistles are missing, but sufficient material has been preserved for us to make an assessment of the man and the matchless grasp he had of the truth and power of the cross of Christ. What a wonderful soul he was and what an apt scholar he proved to be; the Lord found just the right man.

Doubtless others of the apostolic band were just as quick to understand as Paul was, but to none of them did Christ grant the honour of writing His further teachings about His cross. That they all equally understood its power and glory cannot be doubted; only this could have qualified them for continued apostleship. They had witnessed the Lord's crucifixion, yet for reasons best known to Himself the Lord did not commission them to write of the cross in the same way or in such breadth and length and depth and height as Paul did. It might seem appropriate to us that they who saw the actual cross and were witnesses of everything that went on there and saw the death and burial of the Lord should have been entrusted with the further ministry, but it was not to be. The Lord decided otherwise; He raised up Paul to do it.

Why the Lord did this is not for us to question; His sovereignty and wisdom are paramount in His kingdom, but it is not beyond our power to think of reasons why perhaps He should do so. Saul of Tarsus was a fanatical Hebrew, a bigoted religionist and a nationalist of the highest order; he was famous in Jewry. His hatred of Christ and the Church and his persecutions of the churches were carried out with such venom and fervour that throughout the Christian world his name became linked with imprisonment and death. Saul of Tarsus was a tool of Satan, a human dragon breathing out threatening and slaughter, a most injurious man. He was a willing and enthusiastic observer, if not the instigator and engineer, of the death of Stephen. By Roman law it was an illegal death: all those Jews who stoned Stephen knew they should not have done it, but such was their hatred of Christ and those who loved Him that they defied Rome and took the law into their own hands; it was plain murder and Paul knew it and delighted in it. However such was the mercy and grace of God that He took up this man so full of misplaced love and zeal and made him one of the most glorious lovers of Christ and His Church of all time. Paul was a rabid nationalist who believed in everything Jewish, their method of capital punishment by stoning included. Then when God got hold of him He made him the chief preacher and expositor of the Roman method of capital punishment; it was a complete reversal of Paul's thinking. He knew that God had ordained execution by stoning so that

His anger against sin should be fully expressed by the whole nation. Stoning was not only a method of execution, it was also a symbol of the identification which existed between Himself and His people. Paul knew that crucifixion did not imply that; God held back His Son for the cross because it exhibited foreign anger against Christ, God's anger against sin and the sinner. To Paul's mind the change of method signified the commencement of a new era; the thoroughly new man had a thoroughly new message.

Paul knew all about the literal crucifixion of Christ; he had known of it when he was Saul the persecutor; he had most probably witnessed many other crucifixions similar to it, the details were familiar enough to him. What he did not know were the spiritual meanings of the Lord's death; the mysteries of the cross were as unknown to him as to any other until the time Jesus took him into His confidence and revealed these things to him. Just when the Lord included him into His school we do not know, but the evidence that He did so is clearly shown in the epistle he wrote to the Galatians. In this letter he certifies the brethren that the gospel he preached he received directly from the Lord; he was not taught it by man, he said, neither did he receive it from man. Just how long it took the Lord to impart the revelation we are not told -- perhaps as long as it took Him to give the old covenant to Moses at Sinai. This gospel of Paul's is the gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ delivered by Him to His apostle following His ascension and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. In itself it is a miracle of some magnitude.

In this epistle he discloses the two main lines of his revelation: the one concerns the death and work of the cross of Christ and the other the coming and ministry of the Holy Spirit. He includes other things in the epistle as well, because they are necessary to the Galatians and incidental to life, but everything is related to the central themes which comprise the main body of truth being imparted. All the apostle says about the law and circumcision and grace and other gospel truths is developed from this standpoint. The central passage correlating these two themes is first introduced by the statement, 'Jesus Christ was evidently set forth crucified among you and then followed by the question, 'received ye the Spirit?' The heart of God and the heart of the revelation and the heart of the gospel is revealed at the heart of the epistle. This is the second of the seven references to the cross he makes in the epistle. Set out in their order of appearance these are as follows:

1. The cross and the crucifixion of self.
2. The cross and the giving of the Spirit.
3. The cross and the redemption from the curse.
4. The cross and the scandal.
5. The cross and the crucifixion of the flesh.
6. The cross and circumcision.
7. The cross and the crucifixion of the world.

It is a fact little short of amazing that so great an amount of information about the cross should be packed into so brief an epistle. Even though some of Paul's writings are more than twice as long, in no other epistle is the cross mentioned so many times. This achievement is the more outstanding and most significant also when it is realized that this is possibly the very first epistle Paul wrote.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/gw-north/so-great-a-death/>

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