

The Three-Fold Message of the Cross

by Lewis Sperry Chafer

The cross of Christ is a declaration of God's love, a demonstration of His power, and a solution to the problem of sin.

Scripture: John 3:16

Topics: "The Cross", "Divine Salvation"

Description

Lewis Sperry Chafer preaches on the profound messages of God revealed through His Son, emphasizing the importance of carefully weighing and personally applying God's message of sin and salvation. The sermon delves into the divine revelation of God's essential being through His Son, showcasing His attributes of Light, Life, and Love. The cross of Christ is highlighted as a pivotal moment where God's love, righteousness, and salvation are declared, addressing the eternal issues of sin and the infinite love of God perfectly revealed through the sacrifice of Jesus.

Transcript

THE Epistle to the Hebrews opens with a reference to the messages of God which have been projected into this world, and which have widened the possible scope of man's understanding and action from the limitations of the things of this world and the conclusions of finite minds to the issues of the entire sphere of God's redemptive purposes and the verities of the Infinite. God has spoken. The effect of the message has been far reaching. Men generally believe in certain facts the knowledge of which could come only from the Scriptures of Truth; but men do not always pause to consider all of God's message and its personal application to them with its necessary demands upon their faith. They believe in the Bible heaven, but do not carefully consider the only condition the Bible reveals upon which any soul can enter therein; they believe in the fact of sin, but seem to care little for the priceless cure divinely set forth for it; they believe there is a holy God and that men are sinners, but do not estimate what problems were involved in bringing about a possible reconciliation between that holy God and the meritless sinner: yet how faithfully God has spoken on all these issues! It is not enough to believe generally that God has spoken. What He has said must be carefully weighed and personally applied. His message is as a shaft of light from the eternal sphere shining into a world where sin's darkness and blindness are supreme. Happy indeed is the man who humbly receives every word God has spoken both of sin and salvation, and is thus able to look into the realms of glory along this radiant shaft of divine revelation. The following are the opening words to the letter to the Hebrews:

"God who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son." The message from God spoken to the fathers by the prophets is contained in the Old Testament. The message spoken to us by His Son and which was confirmed unto us by them that heard Him, is contained in the New Testament. This latter message is primarily of "So great salvation" which in no wise can be neglected with impunity.

God has disclosed His own essential being through His Son. In this revelation which He has made through His Son, God is said to be Light, Life and Love, or Wisdom, Power and Love. Christ was an outshining of these elements which are in the being of God, and that manifestation of His being through the Son was made in terms which the finite mind might grasp. Men of Christ's time, from their study of Him, were able to say: "No man ever spake as this man," and "We know that thou art a teacher come from God; for no man can do the miracles that thou doest, except God be with him." So the wisdom and power of God were recognized in Christ; but the wisdom and power of God had already a sufficient revelation in the very things that were created, so that even the heathen world is without excuse. "Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse" (Rom 1:19, 20).

At least three messages from God through His Son are revealed in the cross:

LOVE

In Jhn 1:18 a special manifestation of God through the Son is mentioned: "No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him." "No man hath (fully) seen God at any time" would indicate that while His power and wisdom had been revealed to some extent by the things created, the complete revelation had not been given and there was to be a very special unfolding of His bosom of love. The Son was in the bosom of the Father (the seat of the affections; from that bosom He never departed). "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son."

Every moment of the earth life of Jesus was a manifestation of God's love, but one event in the ministry of Jesus is especially designated as the means by which the bosom of God was unveiled. "Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us" (1Jo 3:16); "In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be a propitiation for our sins" (1Jo 4:9, 10); "But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8).

In the cross of Christ, therefore, God hath declared His love, and this declaration is addressed as a personal message to every individual. It may be concluded that when that divine message really reaches a heart that individual will thereby become conscious of a fact far beyond the range of human knowledge and so far reaching in its value that it transcends all other issues in life and death. It becomes intensely personal according to the testimony of the apostle: "Who loved me and gave himself for me."

That knowledge-surpassing love is proven and expressed to "me" by the fact that He gave Himself for "me." The vital question at once becomes, what did He do for "me"? The Scriptures make it plain that He did enough to demonstrate finally and perfectly the infinite love of God. "Hereby perceive we the love of God because he laid down his life for us." This is more than a moral example: it is a distinct service rendered, and on so vast a scale that it adequately expresses the deepest message from the Father's

bosom.

The message must be understood by those to whom it is addressed, but not necessarily by the processes of mere human reason. The cross of Christ was the final answer to the great necessities and problems which sin had imposed on the very heart of God. This is revealed, and is knowable only to the extent to which God has spoken, and never because man has examined and analyzed the heart of the Infinite. Human philosophy and blind unbelief have woven many veils which have tended to obscure God's plain revelation.

The conditions which moved the heart of God exist in the higher realm and have no comparisons or counterparts in the range of human knowledge, hence human reason cannot be deemed sufficient to judge or challenge that which God has seen fit to reveal. Anything which adequately represents the infinite love of God will hardly be compressed into the limitations of man's wisdom. It is most probable that eternity itself will prove to be but a ceaseless unfolding of that fathomless expression of boundless love.

Even now that divine expression of love in the cross becomes the source of supreme ecstasy to the one who has received the message into his heart. "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." In striking contrast to this, the unsaved person, either Jew or Gentile, finds no attraction whatever, in the same cross. "For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God."

That something of eternal value to lost humanity was accomplished in the cross is clearly revealed. Just how much was accomplished could not be fully revealed. However, some things are made plain. The eternal issue of sin was called into question at Calvary's cross, and a sufficient Substitute stood in the sinner's place until all grounds of condemnation were forever past and every righteous judgment of God was perfectly met. Human wisdom has sometimes challenged this revelation on the supposed grounds that it would be immoral for God to lay on an innocent victim the condemnation that belongs to another. This might be true if it could be discovered that the innocent One was an unwilling victim; but on this point every doubt is forever dispelled. In Hbr 10:1-14, where the sin-offerings of the Old Testament are held in contrast to the one offering of Christ, the Lord is recorded as saying, "Then said I, Lo, I am come, to do thy will O God." So at the time of His crucifixion, He said to His Father: "Nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done."

But there is a still deeper truth to be considered when the challenge is made that the substitutionary death of Christ is an "immoral thing." "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself." Shall not the infinite God be morally free to bear on His own breast the doom of the one His infinite love would save? Would not a mother be morally justified who had flung herself between her child and the fire? Would the child be justified in later years, when gazing on those frightful scars, to deem that love-act as an immoral thing? What Christ bore we are saved from bearing. His work was effective. "He died for me": not to shew me how to die. He died that I might not die. God's love, in expressing itself to human hearts, provided a substitute for them in their sin judgments the issues of which reach out into infinity. This, we are told, is what divine love did. Who can measure the blasphemy of those who speak of this love-expression as an "immoral thing"? So fallen is the heart of unregenerate man that he will even attempt to incriminate by a charge of immorality the very God Who seeks to save him from his doom.

The cross of Christ, though unveiling the heart of God in a moment of time, was, nevertheless, the expression of that which is eternal in that heart. Christ was "a Lamb slain from the foundation of the world."

What God did for sinners, therefore, is an expression of His constant attitude toward them. The cross is an assurance of the undiminished love of God at this very hour. Only in the cross has God perfectly revealed His love to sinful man: not in nature, nor in the things and relationships of this life; for these may fail. And when they fail the stricken heart that has trusted these outward benefits alone as the evidence of God's love is heard to say, "it cannot be true that God loves me." God's perfect and final revelation of His love is in and through the cross, and the heart to whom this message has come is possessed with all the consolations of grace in the midst of the trials and afflictions of life. Such a one can say, "though He slay me yet will I trust Him." In these last days God is speaking through His Son of His personal love for each individual. Reader, has God said anything to you through His Son? Can you say in the joy of that greatest of all messages, "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ"? If the cross has not become this to you, is it not evidence to you that you are neglecting this great salvation in spite of all professions and good intentions, and from the unhappy end of such failure there can be no escape?

SIN

While Christians are grateful to Christ for what He did in His death for them on the cross, should they not be grateful also in some degree to the Roman soldiers who put Christ to death? This question has been raised by unbelief and may well be answered by first discovering just what part the soldiers took in that great event as it is viewed in the Bible. In Jhn 10:17, 18 we read that Jesus said: "Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again." He evidently made no resistance at the moment of His crucifixion, which was doubtless in great contrast to the violent struggles of the two thieves and wholly opposed to the highest ideal of that time when self-preservation and self-advancement were the first consideration of all men. Whatever else took place, no man took His life from Him. So, also the last words recorded as falling from His lips on the cross were of victory and authority. "Father, into thy hands. I commend (deposit) my spirit." This language distinctly indicates that His death was in no way a defeat through human force. Not one reference in the Bible, outside the mere historical statement of the crucifixion, ever assigns this death to human sources. It is rather indicated that God the Father was acting in that death. "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isa 53:6); "Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood" (Rom 3:25); "For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (2Cr 5:21). The soldiers might take a human life; but God alone could accomplish a reconciliation through Christ's death and thereby solve the great problems created by human sin. Christians are saved by the divine reconciliation alone, and no gratitude is due the human factors in the death of Christ.

The deed of the soldiers is not without meaning, however. From the first sin of man to the present hour every unregenerate person is said to be at enmity toward God. That enmity is usually covered and latent, but as assuredly exists as the Word of God is true. It was the will of God that at the exact time and place when and where His infinite love was being unveiled there should be an unveiling, as well, of the desperate wickedness of man. Every human act in the crucifixion was a revelation of the fallen creature; yet to crown it all, one man, as though representing a fallen race, took a spear and drove it into the heart of God. The deep significance here lies in the inexplicable fact that "God was in Christ" and that this human act was in reality against the person of God, as well as a rejection of the human presence of Christ and the blessings of grace He presented. So all those who tarry in unbelief are warned that in so doing they "crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame."

Thus no man can be ignorant of the true nature of his own sinful heart who has honestly faced the meaning of the sin of rejecting Christ as enacted in the crucifixion. On this point God has spoken through His Son. Oh the sin of even hesitating to receive the marvels of God's grace as offered to lost men in the cross of Christ!

RIGHTEOUSNESS

The cross of Christ is also a message from God in that it is said to be a declaration of the righteousness of God. "Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; to declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus" (Rom 3:25, 26). The English word "declare," as used in this passage, is also used in the passage in John 1:18 already considered, wherein the bosom of God is said to have been "declared." The Greek words from which these two translations are made are not the same. In the passage in John the word presents the idea of announcement (cf. Luk 24:35; Act 10:8; 15:12, 14; 21:19), while in the passage in Romans the word indicates the legal aspect of a full proof of something in question (cf. 2Cr 8:24, "Proof"; Phl 1:28, "Evident token").

In verse 25 of the passage under consideration the evident proof of the righteousness of God was made in the cross concerning the sins committed before the death of Christ. God had always anticipated a perfect and sufficient sacrifice for sin. The blood of bulls and goats had never taken away sin, but had been the divinely appointed symbol of the blood that was to be shed. In view of the sacrifice that was to be, God had passed over, or pretermitted, the sins aforetime on the condition that the offender present the symbolic innocent sacrifice for his sins. Although the offender may have comprehended but little of all the divine meaning and purpose, the sacrifice stood as a covenant with Jehovah that He would, in the fulness of time, meet all the need of the sinner. When the true and sufficient sacrifice was accomplished, that sacrifice stood as a full proof that God had been righteous in all the generations wherein He had freely acted in view of that great event which was yet to come.

In verse 26 the declaration, or full proof, of the righteousness of God is made in the cross in relation to the sins committed since the cross and in this time when the human responsibility for adjustment and cure for sin is not the providing of a symbolic sacrifice, as in the Old Testament, but is rather conditioned on a personal trust in the sufficient sacrifice fully accomplished on the cross. Such justification, according to this verse, is for "him which believeth in Jesus."

This verse also states what we may believe to be the deepest divine problem. How can the righteous God deal righteously with the sinner and at the same time satisfy His own compassion and love in saving him from the doom His own righteousness must ever impose on one who commits sin? Though He love the sinner, there are unalterable conditions to be met in upholding His justice and personal character. Sin cannot be treated otherwise than sin, else all standards of holiness and justice fail. This is not a remote and exceptional problem; but is one as far reaching and important as the very fact of the existence and destiny of the human family itself. It must also be considered as claiming the utmost attention of all intelligences of the universe. Can sin be righteously treated as sin and still a way be provided for the salvation of the sinner? Any theory which tends to lessen the imperative for judgment which was created by sin, does not fully weigh the fact of the unalterable character of the righteousness of God. Is He not all-powerful and all-sufficient and can He not waive aside the sin of those creatures His hands have made? Is He bound by any law whatsoever? The answer is not of human origin, any more than is the

question, though the human mind may comprehend it. Even God cannot change the character of righteousness by altering or lessening to the slightest degree its holy demands. What is done for the satisfaction of His love in saving any whom His righteousness condemns must be done in full view of all that His righteousness could ever require. The cross is said to be the message of God through His Son in answer to this divine problem. He might not change the demands of righteousness, but He has sufficient power and resource to meet perfectly those demands for every sin-doomed soul. The dying Christ was "set forth" in order that God might be just and at the same time satisfy His heart of love ill being the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus. As the righteous Judge, He pronounced the full divine sentence against sin. As the Saviour of sinners, He stepped down from His judgment throne and took into His breast the very doom He had in righteousness imposed. The cross declares the righteousness of God, and because of that cross His righteousness cannot suffer or ever be called in question, even when He wholly pardons the chief of sinners and floods him with the riches of grace. All that righteousness can demand has by the very Judge been supplied; for it was God Who was "in Christ reconciling the world unto himself." The problem was within the very nature of God Himself. How can He remain just and still justify the sinner whom He loved with an everlasting love? He was the mediator between His own righteous Being and the meritless, helpless sinner. The redemption price has been paid by the very Judge Himself.

This is revealed to finite man as being now accomplished by the infinite God. God has not thus acted because man requested Him to do so. It was His own solution of His own problem determined by Him before any man came into being. It was made actual in the cross in "the fulness of time." Man is only asked to believe and act on the facts thus revealed. Redemption by the cross was not God's second best as contrasted with the innocency of Adam in the garden. It was in the divine councils from the foundation of the world and its accomplishment is unto a heavenly state above angels and archangels, yea, into the very image of Christ. This is the good news of the Gospel. Sin's judgments are already perfectly met. "He loved me and gave Himself for me." While the cross is to the unsaved Jew "a stumbling block" and to the unsaved Gentile "foolishness," it is to those that are saved "the power of God and the wisdom of God." These extremes in the conclusions concerning the cross by equally intelligent people can be accounted for on no other ground than that some, by the Spirit, have apprehended and accepted the declaration of God's love and righteousness which He has made in the cross. They have seen that the very power of God in saving grace has been set free, and that God's own wisdom has been disclosed in solving His own problem of saving sinners by that cross. The new song of such a heart is, "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world." All praise be unto Him! Christ was God's Lamb "that taketh away the sin of the world." "He became a curse for us." "He bore our sins in his body on the tree." "He was made sin for us." "Jehovah hath caused to rest on him the iniquity of us all." "He is the propitiation for our sins." "He tasted death for every man."

It is, therefore, now possible for the righteous God to deal graciously with a sinner because that sinner, through the substitutionary death of Christ, is, in the estimation of God, placed beyond his own execution, and the ground of condemnation is forever past. God has, for His own sake, removed every moral hindrance which His infinite holiness might see in sinful man, and so it is now possible for Him to exercise the last impulse of His love without reservation or limitation.

When thus unshackled and untrammelled in His love, He, through His own lavishings of love and grace, places the sinner in the eternal glory finally perfected into the very image of His Son. There is nothing in the highest heaven beyond that. It is the greatest possible thing that God can do. It is the infinite demonstration of His grace. God's grace in action is more than love. It is love operating in full recognition

and adjustment to every demand of righteousness. "Even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord."

The conclusion from these revelations is that by the cross God has declared our sin, His own righteousness and His own unmeasured love. He has spoken to us through His Son. The reasonable requirement is that we believe that message. This is the only condition given in the Bible upon which one may enter into God's saving grace.

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