

# The Cross of Christ

by Watchman Nee

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*We are sinners by nature, but we can be delivered from sin through the death and resurrection of Christ.*

**Scripture:** Ephesians 1:17

**Topics:** "Christian Living", "Spiritual Growth"

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## Description

In this sermon on Knowledge, the preacher delves into the concept of 'epignosis,' a fuller, more intimate knowledge that goes beyond mere facts or intellectual understanding. The term emphasizes a deep, personal relationship with God and Christ, leading to a more thorough and experiential knowledge of His will. The preacher highlights how epignosis influences the form of religious life, affecting character and leading to repentance, faith, and holy living. Through various Bible verses, the sermon emphasizes the importance of growing in this true knowledge of God and Jesus our Lord for spiritual discernment, godliness, and genuine spiritual growth.

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## Transcript

We have seen that Romans 1 to 8 falls into two sections, in the first of which we are shown that the Blood deals with what we have done, while in the second we shall see that the Cross\* deals with what we are. We need the Blood for forgiveness; we need also the Cross for deliverance. We have dealt briefly above with the first of these two and we shall move on now to the second ; but before we do so we will look for a moment at a few more features of this passage which serve to emphasize the difference in subject matter and argument between the two halves.

\* Note The author uses 'the Cross' here and throughout these studies in a special sense. Most readers will be familiar with the current use of the expression 'the Cross' to signify, firstly, the entire redemptive work accomplished historically in the death, burial, resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus Himself (Phil. 2.8,9), and secondly, in a wider sense, the union of believers with Him therein through grace (Rom. 6.4; Eph. 2.5,6). Clearly in that use of the term the operation of 'the Blood' in relation to forgiveness of sins (as dealt with in Chapter 1 of this book) is, from God's viewpoint, included (with all that follows in these studies) as a part of the work of the Cross. In this and the following chapters, however, the author is compelled, for lack of an alternative term, to use 'the Cross' in a more particular and limited doctrinal sense in order to draw a helpful distinction, namely, that between substitution and identification, as being, from the human angle, two separate aspects of the doctrine of redemption. Thus the name of the whole is of necessity used for one of its parts. The reader should bear this in mind in what follows.-ED.

## SOME FURTHER DISTINCTIONS

Two aspects of the resurrection are mentioned in the two sections, in chapters 4 and 6. In Romans 4. 25 the resurrection of the Lord Jesus is mentioned in relation to our justification: "Jesus our Lord ... was delivered up for our trespasses, and was raised for our justification." Here the matter in view is that of our standing before God. But in Romans 6. 4 the resurrection is spoken of as imparting to us new life with a view to a holy walk: " That like as Christ was raised from the dead . . . so we also might walk in newness of life." Here the matter before us is behaviour.

Again, peace is spoken of in both sections, in the fifth and eighth chapters. Romans 5 tells of peace with God which is the effect of justification by faith in His Blood: " Being therefore justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." (5. 1 mg.) This means that, now that I have forgiveness of sins, God will no longer be a cause of dread and trouble to me. I who was an enemy to God have been " reconciled ... through the death of his Son " (5. 10). I very soon find, however, that I am going to be a great cause of trouble to myself. There is still unrest within, for within me there is something that draws me to sin. There is peace with God, but there is no peace with 'myself. There is in fact civil war in my own heart. This condition is well depicted in Romans 7 where the flesh and the spirit are seen to be in deadly conflict within me. But from this the argument leads in chapter 8 to the inward peace of a walk in the Spirit. " The mind of the flesh is death ", because it " is enmity against God ", " but the mind of the spirit is life and peace " (Romans 8.6,7).

Looking further still we find that the first half of the section deals generally speaking with the question of justification (see, for example, Romans 3.24-26; 4. 5, 25), while the second half has as its main topic the corresponding question of sanctification (see Rom. 6.19,22). When we know the precious truth of justification by faith we still know only half of the story. We still have only solved the problem of our standing before God. As we go on, God has something more to offer us, namely, the solution of the problem of our conduct, and the development of thought in these chapters serves to emphasize this. In each case the second step follows from the first, and if we know only the first then we are still leading a sub-normal Christian life. How then can we live a normal Christian life? How do we enter in? Well, of course, initially we must have forgiveness of sins, we must have justification, we must have peace with God: these are our indispensable foundation. But with that basis truly established through our first act of faith in Christ, it is yet clear from the above that we must move on to something more.

So we see that objectively the Blood deals with our sins, The Lord Jesus has borne them on the Cross for us as our Substitute and has thereby obtained for us forgiveness, justification and reconciliation. But we must now go a step further in the plan of God to understand how He deals with the sin principle in us. The Blood can wash away my sins, but it cannot wash away my 'old man'. It needs the Cross to crucify me. The Blood deals with the sins, but the Cross must deal with the sinner.

You will scarcely find the word 'sinner' in the first four chapters of Romans. This is because there the sinner himself is not mainly in view, but rather the sins he has committed. The word 'sinner' first comes into prominence only in chapter 5, and it is important to notice how the sinner is there introduced. In that chapter a sinner is said to be a sinner because he is born a sinner ; not because he has committed sins. The distinction is important. It is true that often when a Gospel worker wants to convince a man in the street that he is a sinner, he will use the favourite verse Romans 3. 2 3, where it says that "all have sinned"; but this use of the verse is not strictly justified by the Scriptures. Those who so use it are in danger of arguing the wrong way round, for the teaching of Romans is not that we are sinners because we

commit sins, but that we sin because we are sinners, We are sinners by constitution rather than by action. As Romans 5. 19 expresses it: " Through the one man's disobedience the many were made (or 'constituted') sinners ".

How were we constituted sinners? By Adam's disobedience. We do not become sinners by what we have done but because of what Adam has done and has become. I speak English, but I am not thereby constituted an Englishman. I am in fact a Chinese. So chapter 3 draws our attention to what we have done-" all have sinned "-but it is not because we have done it that we become sinners.

I once asked a class of children. 'Who is a sinner?' and their immediate reply was, 'One who sins'. Yes, one who sins is a sinner, but the fact that he sins is merely the evidence that he is already a sinner ; it is not the cause. One who sins is a sinner, but it is equally true that one who does not sin, if he is of Adam's race, is a sinner too, and in need of redemption. Do you follow me? There are bad sinners and there are good sinners, there are moral sinners and there are corrupt sinners, but they are all alike sinners. We sometimes think that if only we had not done certain things all would be well ; but the trouble lies far deeper than in what we do: it lies in what we are. A Chinese may be born in America and be unable to speak Chinese at all, but he is a Chinese for all that, because he was born a Chinese. It is birth that counts. So I am a sinner because I am born in Adam. It is a matter not of my behaviour but of my heredity, my parentage. I am not a sinner because I sin, but I sin because I come of the wrong stock. I sin because I am a sinner.

We are apt to think that what we have done is very bad, but that we ourselves are not so bad. God is taking pains to show us that we ourselves are wrong, fundamentally wrong. The root trouble is the sinner; he must be dealt with. Our sins are dealt with by the Blood, but we ourselves are dealt with by the Cross. The Blood procures our pardon for what we have done; the Cross procures our deliverance from what we are.

#### MAN'S STATE BY NATURE

We come therefore to Romans 5. 12 - 21. In this great passage, grace is brought into contrast with sin and the obedience of Christ is set against the disobedience of Adam. It is placed at the beginning of the second section of Romans (5-12 to 8.39) with which we shall now be particularly concerned, and its argument leads to a conclusion which lies at the foundation of our further meditations. What is that conclusion? It is found in verse 19 already quoted: - For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the one shall the many be made righteous." Here the Spirit of God is seeking to show us first what we are, and then how we came to be what we are.

At the beginning of our Christian life we are concerned with our doing, not with our being; we are distressed rather by what we have done than by what we are. We think that if only we could rectify certain things we should be good Christians, and we set out therefore to change our actions. But the result is not what we expected. We discover to our dismay that it is something more than just a case of trouble on the outside that there is in fact more serious trouble on the inside. We try to please the Lord, but find something within that does not want to please Him. We try to be humble, but there is something in our very being that refuses to be humble. We try to be loving, but inside we feel most unloving. We smile and try to look very gracious, but inwardly we feel decidedly ungracious. The more we try to rectify matters on the outside the more we realise how deep-seated the trouble is within. Then we come to the Lord and say, 'Lord, I see it now! Not only what I have done is wrong; I am wrong.'

The conclusion of Romans 5. 19 is beginning to dawn upon us. We are sinners. We are members of a race of people who are constitutionally other than what God intended them to be. By the Fall a fundamental change took place in the character of Adam whereby he became a sinner, one constitutionally unable to please God; and the family likeness which we all share is no merely superficial one but extends to our inward character also. We have been "constituted sinners". How did this come about? "By the disobedience of one", says Paul. Let me try to illustrate this.

My name is Nee. It is a fairly common Chinese name. How did I come by it? I did not choose it. I did not go through the list of possible Chinese names and select this one. That my name is Nee is in fact not my doing at all, and, moreover, nothing I can do can alter it. I am a Nee because my father was a Nee, and my father was a Nee because my grandfather was a Nee. If I act like a Nee I am a Nee, and if I act unlike a Nee I am still a Nee. If I become President of the Chinese Republic I am a Nee, or if I become a beggar in the street I am still a Nee. Nothing I do or refrain from doing will make me other than a Nee.

We are sinners not because of ourselves but because of Adam. It is not because I individually have sinned that I am a sinner but because I was in Adam when he sinned. Because by birth I come of Adam, therefore I am a part of him. What is more, I can do nothing to alter this. I cannot by improving my behaviour make myself other than a part of Adam and so a sinner. In China I was once talking in this strain and remarked, 'We have all sinned in Adam'. A man said, 'I don't understand', so I sought to explain it in this way. 'All Chinese trace their descent from Huang-ti', I said. 'Over four thousand years ago he had a war with Si-iu. His enemy was very strong, but nevertheless Huang-ti overcame and slew him. After this Huang-ti founded the Chinese nation. Four thousand years ago therefore our nation was founded by Huang-ti. Now what would have happened if Huang-ti had not killed his enemy, but had been himself killed instead? Where would you be now?' 'There would be no me at all', he answered. 'Oh, no! Huang-ti can die his death and you can live your life.' 'Impossible!' he cried, 'If he had died, then I could never have lived, for I have derived my life from him.'

Do you see the oneness of human life? Our life comes from Adam. If your great-grandfather had died at the age of three, where would you be? You would have died in him! Your experience is bound up with his. Now in just the same way the experience of every one of us is bound up with that of Adam. None can say, 'I have not been in Eden', for potentially we all were there when Adam yielded to the serpent's words. So we are all involved in Adam's sin, and by being born "in Adam" we receive from him all that he became as a result of his sin—that is to say, the Adam-nature which is the nature of a sinner. We derive our existence from him, and because his life became a sinful life, a sinful nature, therefore the nature which we derive from him is also sinful. So, as we have said, the trouble is in our heredity, not in our behaviour. Unless we can change our parentage there is no deliverance for us. But it is in this very direction that we shall find the solution of our problem, for that is exactly how God has dealt with the situation.

#### AS IN ADAM SO IN CHRIST

In Romans 5.12 to 21 we are not only told something about Adam; we are told also something about the Lord Jesus. "As through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the one shall the many be made righteous." In Adam we receive everything that is of Adam; in Christ we receive everything that is of Christ.

The terms 'in Adam' and 'in Christ' are too little understood by Christians, and, at the risk of repetition, I wish again to emphasize by means of an illustration the hereditary and racial significance of the term 'in

Christ'. This illustration is to be found in the letter to the Hebrews. Do you remember that in the earlier part of that letter the writer is trying to show that Melchizedek is greater than Levi? You recall that the point to be proved is that the priesthood of Christ is greater than the priesthood of Aaron who was of the tribe of Levi. Now, in order to prove that, he has first to prove that the priesthood of Melchizedek is greater than the priesthood of Levi, for the simple reason that the priesthood of Christ is " after the order of Melchizedek " (Heb. 7. 14 - 17), while that of Aaron is, of course, after the order of Levi. If the writer can demonstrate to us that Melchizedek is greater than Levi, then he has made his point. That is the issue, and he proves it in a remarkable way.

He tells us in Hebrews chapter 7 that one day Abraham, returning from the battle of the kings (Genesis 14), offered a tithe of his spoils to Melchizedek and received from him a blessing. Inasmuch as Abraham did so, Levi is therefore of less account than Melchizedek. Why? Because the fact that Abraham offered tithes to Melchizedek means that Isaac 'in Abraham' offered to Melchizedek. But if that is true, then Jacob also 'in Abraham' offered to Melchizedek, which in turn means that Levi 'in Abraham' offered to Melchizedek. It is evident that the lesser offers to the greater (Hebrews 7. 7). So Levi is less in standing than Melchizedek, and therefore the priesthood of Aaron is inferior to that of the Lord Jesus.

Levi at the time of the battle of the kings was not yet even thought of. Yet he was " in the loins of his father " Abraham, and, " so to say, through Abraham ", he offered (Hebrews 7.9, 10). Now this is the exact meaning of 'in Christ'. Abraham, as the head of the family of faith, includes the whole family in himself. When he offered to Melchizedek, the whole family offered in him to Melchizedek. They did not offer separately as individuals, but they were in him, and therefore in making his offering he included with himself all his seed. So we are presented with a new possibility. In Adam all was lost. Through the disobedience of one man we were all constituted sinners. By him sin entered and death through sin, and throughout the race sin has reigned unto death from that day on. But now a ray of light is cast upon the scene. Through the obedience of Another we may be constituted righteous.

Where sin abounded grace did much more abound, and as sin reigned unto death, even so may grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord (Romans 5. 19-21). Our despair is in Adam; our hope is in Christ.

## THE DIVINE WAY OF DELIVERANCE

God clearly intends that this consideration should lead to our practical deliverance from sin. Paul makes this quite plain when he opens chapter 6 of his letter with the question: "Shall we continue in sin?" His whole being recoils at the very suggestion. " God forbid! ", he exclaims. How could a holy God be satisfied to have unholy, sinfettered children? And so " how shall we any longer live therein?" (Romans 6. 1, 2). God has surely therefore made adequate provision that we should be set free from sin's dominion.

But here is our problem. We were born sinners; how then can we cut off our sinful heredity? Seeing that we were born in Adam, how can we get out of Adam.? Let me say at once, the Blood cannot take us out of Adam. There is only one way. Since we came in by birth we must go out by death. To do away with our sinfulness we must do away with our life. Bondage to sin came by birth ; deliverance from sin comes by death and it is just this way of escape that God has provided. Death is the secret of emancipation. " We . . . died to sin " (Romans 6. 2).

But how can we die? Some of us have tried very hard to get rid of this sinful life, but we have found it most tenacious. What is the way out? It is not by trying to kill ourselves, but by recognizing that God has dealt

with us in Christ. This is summed up in the apostle's next statement: " All we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death " (Romans 6. 3).

But if God has dealt with us 'in Christ Jesus' then we have got to be in Him for this to become effective, and that now seems just as big a problem. How are we to ' get into ' Christ? Here again God comes to our help. We have in fact no way of getting in, but, what is more important, we need not try to get in, for we are in. What we could not do for ourselves God has done for us. He has put us into Christ. Let me remind you of 1 Corinthians 1. 30. I think that is one of the best verses of the whole New Testament: 'Ye are in Christ'. How? " Of him (that is, 'of God') are ye in Christ." Praise God! it is not left to us either to devise a way of entry or to work it out. We need not plan how to get in. God has planned it; and He has not only planned it but He has also performed it. ' Of him are ye in Christ Jesus'. We are in ; therefore we need not try to get in. It is a Divine act, and it is accomplished.

Now if this is true, certain things follow. In the illustration from Hebrews 7 which we considered above we saw that 'in Abraham' all Israel-and therefore Levi who was not yet born-offered tithes to Melchizedek. They did not offer separately and individually, but they were in Abraham when he offered, and his offering included all his seed. This, then, is a true figure of ourselves as 'in Christ'. When the Lord Jesus was on the Cross all of us died-not individually, for we had not yet been born-but, being in Him, we died in Him. " One died for all, therefore all died " (2 Cor. 5. 14). When He was crucified all of us were crucified.

Many a time when preaching in the villages of China one has to use very simple illustrations for deep Divine truth. I remember once I took up a small book and put a piece of paper into it, and I said to those very simple ones, , Now look carefully. I take a piece of paper. It has an identity of its own, quite separate from this book. Having no special purpose for it at the moment I put it into the book. Now I do something with the book. I post it to Shanghai. I do not Post the paper, but the paper has been put into the book. Then where is the paper? Can the book go to Shanghai and the paper remain here? Can the paper have a separate destiny from the book? No! Where the book goes the paper goes. If I drop the book in the river the paper goes too, and if I quickly take it out again I recover the paper also. Whatever experience the book goes through the paper goes through with it, for it is in the book.'

"Of him are ye in Christ Jesus." The Lord God Himself has put us in Christ, and in His dealing with Christ God has dealt with the whole race. Our destiny is bound up with His. What He has gone through we have gone through, for to be 'in Christ' is to have been identified with Him in both His death and resurrection. He was crucified: then what about us? Must we ask God to crucify us? Never! When Christ was crucified we were crucified; and His crucifixion is past, therefore ours cannot be future. I challenge you to find one text in the New Testament telling us that our crucifixion is in the future. All the references to it are in the Greek aorist, which is the 'once-for-all' tense, the 'eternally past' tense. (See: Romans 6. 6 ; Galatians 2. 20 ; 5. 24; 6.14). And just as no man could ever commit suicide by crucifixion, for it were a physical impossibility to do so, so also, in spiritual terms, God does not require us to crucify ourselves. We were crucified when He was crucified, for God put us there in Him. That we have died in Christ is not merely a doctrinal position, it is an eternal fact.

#### HIS DEATH AND RESURRECTION: REPRESENTATIVE AND INCLUSIVE

The Lord Jesus, when He died on the Cross, shed His Blood, thus giving His sinless life to atone for our sin and to satisfy the righteousness and holiness of God. To do so was the prerogative of the Son of God alone. No man could have a share in that.

The Scripture has never told us that we shed our blood with Christ. In His atoning work before God He acted alone; no other could have a part. But the Lord did not die only to shed His Blood: He died that we might die. He died as our Representative. In His death He included you and me.

We often use the terms 'substitution' and 'identification' to describe these two aspects of the death of Christ. Now many a time the use of the word 'identification' is good. But identification would suggest that the thing begins from our side: that I try to identify myself with the Lord. I agree that the word is true, but it should be used later on. It is better to begin with the fact that the Lord included me in His death. It is the 'inclusive' death of the Lord which puts me in a position to identify myself, not that I identify myself in order to be included. It is God's inclusion of me in Christ that matters. It is something God has done.

For that reason those two New Testament words " in Christ " are always very dear to my heart. The death of the Lord Jesus is inclusive. The resurrection of the Lord Jesus is alike inclusive. We have looked at the first chapter of I Corinthians to establish the fact that we are " in Christ Jesus ". Now we will go to the end of the same letter to see something more of what this means. In 1 Corinthians 15. 45, 47 two remarkable names or titles are used of the Lord Jesus. He is spoken of there as " the last Adam " and He is spoken of too as " the second man ". Scripture does not refer to Him as the second Adam but as " the last Adam " nor does it refer to Him as the last Man, but as " the second man ". The distinction is to be noted, for it enshrines a truth of great value.

As the last Adam, Christ is the sum total of humanity ; as the second Man He is the Head of a new race. So we have here two unions, the one relating to His death and the other to His resurrection. In the first place His union with the race as " the last Adam " began historically at Bethlehem and ended at the cross and the tomb. In it He gathered up into Himself all that was in Adam and took it to judgment and death. in the second place our union with Him as " the second man " begins in resurrection and ends in eternity ? which is to say, it never ends-for, having in His death done away with the first man in whom God's purpose was frustrated, He rose again as Head of a new race of men, in whom that purpose shall be fully realised.

When therefore the Lord Jesus was crucified on the cross, He was crucified as the last Adam. All that was in the first Adam was gathered up and done away in Him. We were included there. As the last Adam He wiped out the old race ; as the second Man He brings in the new race. It is in His resurrection that He stands forth as the second Man, and there too we are included. " For if we have become united with him by the likeness of his death, we shall be also by the likeness of his resurrection " (Romans 6. 5). We died in Him as the last Adam; we live in Him as the second Man. The Cross is thus the power of God which translates us from Adam to Christ.

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