

The Death of Christ

by W.H. Griffith Thomas

The death of Jesus Christ was a unique and exceptional event that was a sacrifice for sin and a demonstration of His love for humanity.

Scripture: Matthew 16:21, Matthew 26:28, Mark 10:32, Luke 2:35, Luke 9:31, John 6:51, John 10:11, John 12:24, John 12:27, John 15:13

Topics: "Christ's Death", "Redemption"

Description

W.H. Griffith Thomas delves into the profound significance of Jesus Christ's death as portrayed in the Gospels, emphasizing how His sacrificial death was foreseen and foretold, forming the core of His earthly ministry. The disciples initially struggled to comprehend the necessity of His death, showcasing the mystery and importance of this event. Jesus Himself, fully aware of His impending death, displayed deep emotion and purpose, culminating in the ultimate sacrifice for the redemption of humanity, a concept unparalleled in other religions. The Gospels highlight the unique and sacrificial nature of Christ's death, revealing the depth of His love and the profound impact it had on His followers and early Church, particularly the Apostle Paul.

Transcript

There are two well-known pictures, each with the same title, "The Shadow of the Cross." One by Holman Hunt represents the interior of a carpenter's shop, with Joseph and the Boy Jesus at work. Mary also is present. The Boy Jesus pauses in His work, and as He stretches Himself the shadow of the Cross is formed on the wall. The other picture is a popular engraving which depicts the Infant Jesus running with outstretched arms to His mother, the shadow of the Cross being cast by His form as He runs.

Both pictures are fanciful in form, but their underlying idea is assuredly true. If we read the Gospels just as they stand, it is clear that the death of Jesus Christ was really in view almost from the outset of His earthly appearance. At first sight there seems little in them about His death, but as we look deeper we see more. It was part of the Divine purpose and plan for Him from the first, and very early we have a hint of something like it in the words of the aged Simeon to the mother of our Lord: "A sword shall pierce through thine own heart also" (Luke 2:35).

The impression that Jesus referred but little to His own death is due to a superficial reading of the Gospels. A closer acquaintance with them reveals the fact that at no period of His ministry was the thought of His death foreign to Him, and that during the last year of His life it was an ever-present and absorbing

preoccupation. [Stalker, *The Christology of Jesus*, p. 173.] If, therefore, we would thoroughly understand the true idea of the life of Jesus Christ as it is recorded in the Gospels, it is essential for us to give special attention to what is said concerning His death.

And our consideration must include two important inquiries: what the death meant as He Himself interpreted it, and what it meant as those nearest to Him interpreted it. Both these aspects are found quite clearly in the Gospels, while the latter is, of course, very definitely seen in the Acts and Epistles. No one can even glance at the New Testament without realizing that for all its writers the death of Christ had a profound and far-reaching significance. The revelation of the death was necessarily vague and fragmentary at first, but as time went on the fact and its purpose stood out in ever-increasing clearness.

At the outset of His ministry (in Judea) we find hints only, such as are implied in, "Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19); "The Son of Man must be lifted up" (John 3:14). The same reserve is seen in the early days of the Galilean ministry in such a word as "The Bridegroom shall be snatched away" (Mark 2:20, Greek). Another example of the same attitude is found in His reference to His death as a sign to His generation (Matt. 12:40). On any interpretation of the allusion to Jonah the significance of the sign is admitted. [Contentio Veritatis, p. 202.]

Later on, as the Galilean ministry was reaching its climax, came the discourses at Capernaum, when Christ spoke of His "flesh" which He would "give for the life of the world" (John 6:51). These discourses provoked a crisis, and many of those who had professed allegiance left Him. From this point onwards retirement rather than publicity marked His ministry, and He gave Himself mainly to the work of training the Twelve. The dividing line between the general and specific teaching about His death is seen at Caesarea Philippi.

That which before had been implicit now becomes explicit. In the seclusion of that remote spot He asked His disciples what men were thinking of Him, and, in particular, what they themselves thought of Him. On eliciting from Peter the confession, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God," Jesus Christ clearly felt that the time had come when He could entrust them with further and fuller teaching concerning Himself. And so we read significantly, "From that time forth began Jesus to show unto His disciples, how that He must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day" (Matt. 16:21).

The emphasis on "From that time forth" compared with the similar phrase which marked the beginning of Christ's ministry (Matt. 4:17) shows the importance of the new teaching. In this statement, together with two others uttered not long afterwards (Matt. 17:22 and 20:18) Jesus Christ revealed certain circumstances of His death. It was to be contributed to by three causes - the Jewish authorities, His own disciples, and the Roman power. A careful study of these passages in the light of the previous silence about the death, so far as the first Gospel is concerned, clearly shows that in them we have what has been rightly called the culminating idea as to Himself and to His function. [See Fairbairn, *The Philosophy of the Christian Religion*, ch. v.]

Later on the teaching becomes still more definite. The purpose for which He is to die is stated. "The Good Shepherd giveth His life for the sheep" (John 10:11). "The Son of Man came ... to give His life a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28). On the eve of the crucifixion, other additions are made to the teaching about the purpose of His death. The corn of wheat must die if it is to bear fruit (John 12:24), and the greatest proof of love is the laying down of life (John 15:13). Then at the institution of the Lord's Supper, Jesus Christ spoke

of His blood as that of the New Covenant shed for the remission of sins (Matt. 26:28).

Deeper and fuller still is the remarkable record of Gethsemane and Calvary. As we read of the agony in Gethsemane, we are impressed with the mystery of the sufferings of Christ, and as we ponder His cry on the Cross, we feel that we are in the presence of something other than ordinary sufferings, and that His death was indeed the "culminating idea" of His earthly ministry. Not least of all, we cannot help observing the prominence of the story of the last week of our Lord's earthly life in the record of the Gospels.

Taking an ordinary Bible, it is surprising to observe the space devoted to the last week of the life and ministry of Christ, those days which were spent in full expectation of and preparation for His imminent death. For example, out of thirty pages devoted to the first Gospel, no less than ten are given to the record of the last week. In the second Gospel, out of nineteen pages seven are occupied with the story from Palm Sunday to Easter Day. In St. Luke's Gospel no less than one-fourth is taken up with the story of these days, and out of twenty-four pages in the fourth Gospel ten are actually concerned with the same period.

This prominence given to the events, of the last few days demands and calls for explanation. In view of the crowded three years of Christ's ministry, is it not striking that there should be such fragmentariness in the story of those years until we come to the last few days? Surely the conspicuous place given to the death in the Gospels must mean that the writers regarded it as of supreme significance. But there is something much more than this mere record of the Gospels concerning the death of Jesus Christ.

When we review the entire situation we observe that two things stand out very prominently. The first is the utter inability of the disciples to understand this teaching about their Master's death. From the moment of the first disclosure, when Peter rebuked Jesus and repelled the idea of death with abhorrence (Matt. 16:22), they not only showed themselves unable to grasp its meaning, but for some time they would not even contemplate it as a fact. It was unwelcome and repellent to them, and they evidently did their utmost to shut their eyes to it.

Later on, when further reference had been made and fuller details had been given, they were still apparently unable to grasp the fact. To us, as we read the story now, this persistent dullness is astonishing, though, in view of what was to happen, we may well regard it as "providential," for: It became a security to the Church for the truth of the Resurrection. The theory that they believed because they expected that He would rise again is against all evidence. [Plummer on St.

Luke 18:34.] The response of James and John to the inquiry whether they could be baptized with His baptism and drink of His cup, is another illustration of this inability to enter into that which was already filling His soul, while the strife of the disciples as to who should be the greatest - a strife repeated on the very eve of the Crucifixion - is perhaps the most striking feature of the situation. This inability to understand and appreciate the Master's death, and the faithfulness with which this fact is recorded in the Gospels, constitute a very important feature of the problem of the death.

The other thing which stands out with equal prominence is the attitude of our Lord to His own death. Jesus Christ was truly man, and it is evident that He was deeply affected by the death which He so often mentioned and anticipated. It is not fanciful to see in the topic of the conversation on the Mount of Transfiguration some Divine encouragement to the Manhood of Christ: "Who ... spake of his decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem" (Luke 9:31). One of the most remarkable and mysterious passages is found in connection with an announcement of His death to His disciples.

"And they were in the way going up to Jerusalem; and Jesus went before them: and they were amazed: and as they followed they were afraid" (Mark 10:32). There was evidently something in His manner that impressed the disciples and gave rise to these feelings of awe and fear. Again, His reference to His "baptism" and His "cup" shows what was then in His mind as its over-mastering thought and purpose. "The prospect of suffering was a perpetual Gethsemane. In the last week these feelings found their full expression on three separate occasions.

The request of the Greeks to see Him was the occasion and apparently the cause of profound emotion. "Now is my soul troubled; and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour: but for this cause came I unto this hour" (John 12:27). The Agony in Gethsemane is so sacred and mysterious that we shrink from discussing it, and yet we must observe that its record of sorrow, conflict and submission is a revelation of Christ's consciousness which has a direct and important bearing on the meaning of death.

In a very real sense Calvary began in the Garden. And when we come to the last scene of all, the climax of the Cross, we are quite evidently in the atmosphere of something far exceeding, indeed quite different from ordinary sufferings and death. The cry, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" after all His wonderful life of fellowship, is the only time when the familiar term "Father" gave place to the more general one, "God". This must have had some deep meaning beyond anything ordinary and natural in connection with dying.

And so, as we think of the record of the death by itself in view of its place and prominence; as we think, moreover, of the effect of the announcement on the disciples; and, above all, as we ponder the effect of the anticipation of it on our Lord, we find ourselves face to face with a problem which must be taken into consideration and solved if we are to arrive at any full and adequate explanation of the manifestation of Jesus Christ on earth. What, then, does the death of Jesus Christ mean?

Why did He die? We know that He was in the prime of life; we know, too, that He ended His days after a time of immense popularity and widespread influence. What is the meaning of this catastrophe, so mysterious, so striking, so unmistakably predominant in the record of the Gospels? It was not the death of a suicide, for did He not say, "I lay down my life of myself?" The death was purely voluntary. We have to suffer: He need not have suffered. A word from Him might have saved His life.

Nor was it an accidental death, for the obvious reason that it was foreseen, foretold, and prepared for in a variety of ways. Again, it was certainly not the death of a criminal, for no two witnesses could be found to agree together as to the charge against Him. Pilate declared that he found no fault in Him, and even Herod had not a word to say against Him. This, then, was no ordinary execution. Some may say that the death of Jesus Christ was that of a martyr, and there is no doubt that as His death came at the hands of the Jews, and was a rejection of Him as their Messiah, there was in it an element of martyrdom for truth.

But does this really explain the event? How are we to account for the unutterable sadness if Jesus Christ was a martyr? What, on this view, was the meaning of the mysterious agony in Gethsemane? When we recall the story of men like Stephen, Paul, and others who were martyred, and recall the triumphant joy and courage with which they met death, we are compelled to say either Jesus Christ was inferior to them in the moment of death, or else that lie was something more than a martyr.

Perhaps, however, we may think of His death as that of an example. This, no doubt, was part of the meaning, but it is obvious from the Gospels that it does not exhaust the idea. Death may come through a variety of circumstances, and some deaths are more painful than others. What, then, would be the value

of the mere example of Jesus Christ in dying unless His death could in some way be an exact model for imitation for all who are called upon to die? Surely therefore, we must search again before we can understand the true meaning of His death.

Nor must we overlook the serious problem raised by Jesus Christ's death in connection with His personal character. The Jews charged Him with blasphemy because He made Himself the Son of God. If there was any misunderstanding in the meaning of this term, why did not Jesus correct it? It is clear that to the Jews this claim was tantamount to "making Himself equal with God" (John 5:18 and 10:33), and yet He suffered death for this without making any effort to show them their mistake.

His character is therefore involved in the fact and meaning of His death. The one and only adequate explanation of the death of Jesus Christ in the prime of life when He might have continued to exercise a powerful and marvelous influence over all the land of Palestine is that it was a sacrifice. And this is the account given to us in the Gospels. It was the death of One who was consciously innocent, of One whose life-work had been completed, of One who had come into this world for the very purpose of dying, of One whose death was foreseen, foretold, provided for.

It is thus exceptional and unique, and this is clearly the impression of those who wrote the Gospels and the impression of every one who reads those Gospels honestly, fairly, and as a whole. Its colour all through is the sacrificial colour, for Christ came not to be the mere Example, but also the Uplifter and the Redeemer of the world. We mark how as He drew near the close there were outbursts from a profound deep of sorrow. It was not that He had any secret remorse ravaging His heart.

There had been no moment of madness in His holy years, no moment that He longed and prayed to pluck from out the past. There had been no moral tragedy, though He had His conflict with the enemy. No, His grief was not for Himself; it was for us. It was a burden of sympathy. He had come to deal not with our sorrows only, not with our darkness only - He had come to save us from our sins, and all the forces of His nature were strained that He might deliver us. And the load of our guilt, the chastisement of our peace, was upon Him all His years.

Towards the end His burden-bearing is made more manifest. The secrets of His heart are more fully disclosed, but all the story is of one piece. [Robertson Nicoll, *The Church's One Foundation*, p. 46.] Taking the Gospels, therefore, as we have received them, we are compelled to give attention to the remarkable and unique feature of the death of Jesus Christ under circumstances which might easily have been prevented if only He had been willing to do what His enemies wished Him to do.

No one can mistake the profound impression made by that death on all the immediate disciples of Christ and if we may be allowed for a moment to inquire how it impressed the early Church, and especially one of the greatest thinkers, the Apostle Paul, we find exactly the same effect. To that Apostle as to all the rest the death was the predominant fact and factor in the manifestation of Jesus Christ, and, as we know, St. Paul drew from it some of the deepest profoundest, and most practical lessons for Christian people.

No consideration of our present subject, therefore, can possibly overlook the fact and meaning of Christ's death as recorded in the New Testament. This fact, too, is unique among the religions of the world. The Founder of the religion dies, and that, as a sacrifice for sin. Whence came this idea? How are we to account for it? In view of the prominence, not to say predominance, of this feature in the rest of the New Testament, can we doubt that the source of the idea was Christ Himself? And if so, we are brought once again face to face with the consciousness of Christ as the great problem for solution.

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