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Three Words About The Cross

Herald of Truth
...... radio programs
For many of us He is a romantic figure out of the legendary past. For others He is a vague power-figure for some remote era. For others He simply did not exist — this Jesus of Nazareth. For years official Soviet propaganda said that He simply never existed, but communist historians have now decided that their “scholarly findings” were based on error. One authorized spokesman for this sector of thought about Jesus recently remarked about the New Testament Gospels, “... they (the Gospels) ... reflect a definite fact” (p. 600. Commonweal, September 23, 1966).

The fact that Jesus of Nazareth lived has been disputed by few sensible men in recent years. The wild speculations of the late nineteenth century have been demolished by accurate history and revealing archaeology. The fact is that such a man did live among us, as the Gospels teach.

But His life is not our principle concern today. We do begin our discussion with the observation that even the avowed enemies of Christianity now admit Christ’s historical existence. His life, now so widely accepted, cannot be properly evaluated without recognizing the Gospels’ testimony about His purpose in coming to live among men. Jesus Himself said, “... the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28). At the last supper before His crucifixion, Christ said of the bread of communion, “This is my body which is given for you; this do in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). Of the communion cup He taught, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, even that which is poured out for you” (Luke 22:20). He taught His disciples the necessity of His death. Matthew records in his Gospel, “From that time began Jesus to show unto his disciples, that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and the third day be raised up” (Matthew 16:21). Paul, after Christ’s death, burial, resurrection, and ascension, explained to Christians at Corinth that “the gospel” which they heard and received was that “by which also ye are saved.” This “gospel” or saving message, the apostle explained, consists of the public declaration “that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried; and that he hath been raised on the third day according to the scriptures; ...” (I Corinthians 15:1-4).

In view of these words from Jesus, from the authors of the New Testament Gospels, and from the apostle Paul, one must recognize not only the historicity of Jesus — He did live as the Gospels reveal — but one must also accept His death by crucifixion as a fact of history. And that death occurred for one reason, that each one of us might know God’s redemptive power and forgiveness. “Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a people for his own possession, zealous of good works” (Titus 2:14). It is about His death, the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, that I want us to think for the remainder of our time. I would like to suggest “three words about the cross.”

First, look with me at the tragedy of the cross. God’s creation of man planted in his consciousness and imprinted on his being an ineffaceable “image” of the divine (Genesis 1:27). God’s relationship with the first man and woman was complete, intimate, and harmonious. But man rebelled in transgression of God’s will and lost his oneness with God (Genesis 3:1-8, 14-18, 24). God, thereafter, urged man through Noah and others to return to Him and to righteous living, all to no avail. God later gave the ten commandments through Moses in an attempt to keep man from losing all sense of direction (Exodus.
But the prevailing condition through all those generations was sin. Paul asks of the Old Testament law that originally came through Moses, “What then is the ordinance through angels by the hand of a mediator” (Galatians 3:19). That “promise” mentioned in this verse is explained earlier in the same reading from Galatians as that which God made to Abraham in which He promised to bless the world through that family (Galatians 3:16). “The seed” also mentioned in the verse just read is also explained in a preceding verse as Christ (Galatians 3:16).

The tragedy of the cross is that after all these hundreds of years and after all God's attempts to reach man and elicit an obedient response from him, God still had to express His love and concern to the ultimate degree. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

Yet, this great thought does not adequately express the tragedy of Calvary. Look at the cross from the viewpoint of Jesus Himself. Listen, as Paul does just that: “Have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, existing in the form of God, counted not the being on an equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men; and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, becoming obedient even unto death, yea, the death of the cross” (Philippians 2:5-8). He lived with God from eternity. He existed in equality with God. John tells us in the prologue to his Gospel that He was God (John 1:1-3). But He surrendered it all, gave it all up, to come live among us. He assumed the human frame completely. Our aches became His aches and our physical cares became His cares. So completely did He become a man that He was “in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15). But to have Him leave heaven and assume a fleshly form and human cares was not enough. If we must die, and dying we are every day in the flesh, He had to experience death as well. But ordinary death again was not enough because He died for a purpose, to accomplish a great task — our redemption. He died the death of the cross.

The most cruel and excruciating punishment,” one of His contemporaries remarked about crucifixion.

The tragedy of the cross occurs in the fact that Christ died in our stead, literally took our places. Isaiah predicted, “all we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and Jehovah hath laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:6). Peter, in the New Testament, pictures this same sad truth in the following words, “who his own self bare our sins in his body upon the tree, that we, having died unto sins, might live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed” (1 Peter 2:24). He went to the cross under the weight of our guilt. He experienced Calvary because of my transgressions. My sin, and the death it creates, required the sacrifice of God's Son.

But nowhere is the tragedy of the cross more poignantly expressed than in Hebrews 12. There we read: “Therefore let us also, seeing we are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising shame, and hath sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:1, 2). He died for “the joy that was set before him” — the joy of my forgiven sin. He willingly went to His death because of the freedom of guilt that I would subsequently be able to know. In the following verse of the same reading we hear, “For consider him that hath endured such gainsaying of sinners against himself, that ye wax not weary, fainting in your souls” (Hebrews 12:3). He faced all this for you and me. The tragedy of the cross is that God sent His beloved Son into our midst to suffer and die, for our eternal welfare.

Notice with me, as our second word about the cross, the discovery of the cross. Do you find it difficult to sense the nearness of God? How real is God in your life? Have you ever wondered about His existence? My friend, you have never been to Calvary! There one discovers God, the God who willingly expresses Himself to rebellious humanity. Paul says, “But all things are of God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and gave unto us the ministry of reconciliation; to wit, that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself, not reckoning unto them their trespasses, and having committed unto us the word of reconciliation” (II Corinthians 5:18, 19). “God was in the Christ,” this refrain that shakes our complacency and shatters our spiritual blindness.

“God was in Christ,” as He lived, suffered, and died. Nowhere, and at no time throughout history, was and is God more painfully apparent for each of us than at the cross. He asked His disciples, “believest thou not that I am in the Father, and the Father in me? the words that I say unto you I speak not from myself: but the Father abiding in me doth his works” (John 14:10).

The cross is also where we discover God's love for man. Parents, at times, doubt God's nearness and love at the death of a child. When tragedy strikes most of us are prone to ask, “Why would God let this happen to me?” Have you had trouble sensing His personal love for you? You have never been to Calvary. Listen, as Paul describes God's love at the cross. “For while we were yet weak, in due season Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; peradventure for the good man some one would even dare to die. But God commendeth his own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:6-8). He came out of “the bosom of the Father” as God's “only begotten Son” — the “Word” made flesh.” He died under obedience to God's redemptive plan, designed from eternity for the salvation of weak, sinful, impotent man. All because of God's love, a love commended, a love communicated, a love demonstrated, at the cross.

It is at Calvary that man also discovers God's righteousness. Paul establishes in the New Testament book of Romans that all men are under the condemnation of sin and that salvation can only be had through faith in Him. The ultimate conclusion being that God's righteousness is unattainable by man, or at least was until Christ's sacrifice. Paul explains the discovery of God's righteousness: “But now apart from the law a righteousness of God hath been manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ unto all men that believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God; being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: whom God set forth to be a propitiation, through faith, in his blood, . . .” (Romans 3:21-25). To know God, His love and righteousness, we go to the cross, we look to Calvary, and the inexpressible gift from heaven that assures us of life with God forever.

Our third word about the cross signals its effectiveness. For what purpose or purposes did Christ die? What is the relationship between Calvary and my sins? Was the crucifixion all that powerful and important? Paul first reminds us that nothing attempted prior to Christ
for the removal of sin and guilt was efficacious. “Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it speaketh to them that are under the law; that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may be brought under the judgment of God: because by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified in his sight; for through the law cometh the knowledge of sin’” (Romans 3:19, 20).

Rather than employ the Old Testament sacrifices of animals and their blood, Christ obtained “eternal redemption” for us by the sacrifice of His own blood, Hebrews 9:11, 12 states. In the next verses of the same chapter, the author of Hebrews makes the following comparison between the blood of animals and the blood of Jesus. “For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling them that have been defiled, sanctify unto the cleanness of the flesh: how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish unto God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?’” (Hebrews 9:13, 14). To talk about the death of Jesus is to talk about “eternal redemption” and the cleansing of Jesus of one’s conscience to properly serve and know God. Yes, His death was and is effective.

The sacrifices that were continually offered in the Old Testament era could not “perfect them” that offered them, “Else, questions Hebrews 10:2, “would they not have ceased to be offered?” (Hebrews 10:1, 2). In fact, the author of Hebrews again declares, “For it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins” (Hebrews 10:4). It took only one sacrifice of the spotless Lamb of God “to take away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Christ, “when he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God; henceforth expecting till his enemies be made the footstool of his feet. For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified” (Hebrews 10:12-14). Now man can know God’s forgiveness. Now man’s guilt can be erased. Now men possess certain hope of eternal life. Christ died one time, for all time, for all men who will obey Him.

These three words about the cross, its tragedy, its discovery, and its efficacy, make sin unnecessary in our lives. Paul asked the Christians at Rome, “What shall we say then? shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?” (Romans 6:1). That is the question I want each of us to ask ourselves right now. And I hope we can or will answer with Paul, “God forbid. We who died to sin, how shall we any longer live therein?” (Romans 6:2). The power to repudiate sin, the opportunity to live free of sin’s domination and condemnation, is the very reason Christ died on the cross. This is why the tragedy, discovery, and effectiveness of the cross have been emphasized in our study.

The real question now seems to be, “How do I make Christ’s death affect my life and free me from my guilt?” Paul, in the same reading just noticed from Romans 6, must have known this would be the next question. Listen to his inspired answer about how we reach the death of Christ and thereby “die” to or become free from sin’s condemnation. “Or are ye ignorant that all we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him through baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:3, 4). The New Testament conditions for this baptismal union, the tragedy, discovery, and effectiveness of Christ’s death, are faith (Mark 16:16), repentance (Acts 2:38), and public allegiance to Christ as Lord (Romans 10:9, 10).

He died for your salvation. The New Testament does make the method of our contact with His death clear. And Hebrews 5:9 reminds us that the Christ whose death saves us is “the author of eternal salvation” unto “all them that obey him.”

John Allen Chalk, dynamic evangelist and long-time radio speaker, is the first full-time speaker on the Herald of Truth radio program. He began his work with the Herald of Truth on January 1, 1966. Previously, Chalk was the featured personality in a 13 week Herald of Truth television series.

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He is a graduate of Tennessee Tech and has written a book, “The Praying Christ and Other Sermons” and two tracts. Chalk was nominated for the Outstanding Young Man of Tennessee in 1964 and was named Cookeville’s Young Man of the Year in 1963.