

“The Meaning of the Cross”

The Editor’s Private Corner

Ellet J. Waggoner

The Present Truth : June 12, 1902

“Why is it that ‘without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin’? Why could not God save men without Christ dying?”

With this question you have touched the very core of the Gospel, and, in fact, the work of the creation, the secret of all existence. It is a sad fact, yet it is a fact, that few professed Christians know the true principles, the foundation truths, of the Gospel. I do not mean by this that they do not know anything about the Gospel; that they have never to any extent become acquainted with the Lord and learned to draw strength from Him; I mean that to many there is a vagueness, a dimness, in the Gospel, and it seems to them a complicated affair, when it is simplicity itself. We spend the most of our lives going backward to the beginning. It is necessary that we begin at the beginning, and so we have the paradox, that to go back to the beginning is the only way to make real advancement. But it takes the most of us so long to get back to the beginning, to begin as little children, to learn the alphabet of Christianity, that comparatively few have ever appreciated the absolute simplicity of the Gospel, and the marvelous fullness that there is in that simplicity; for there is one glorious truth: then we have really come to the beginning and have the whole; for he who is the beginning is also the end. In Christ are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

THE CROSS THE REVELATION OF GOD

If I were to answer your question offering in my own words, I should say that Christ shed His blood because He couldn’t do otherwise and be Himself. It was in His very nature of things that He should die by Giving—the giving of life—is the law of the universe. By that means the whole creation came into existence, and by the same means it is upheld. The cross is not a unique thing, standing apart by itself, but is the expression of all law of life. It was not a thing devised by God after the fall of man, but the continuation of that by which man was created. It was not an afterthought, but God’s original thought, and the fullness of His thought from everlasting to everlasting. The events of Calvary are an object lesson, to show mankind what God is continually doing for His creatures; in it we find the Fatherhood of God revealed.

Let us set two texts of Scripture together. The first is Jeremiah 9.23, 24: “Thus saith the Lord, Let not the wise man glory in His wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the Lord which exercise loving kindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the Lord.”

The second text is Galatians 6.14: “God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, whereby the world as crucified and to me, and I and the world.”

Both these texts were inspired by the one Spirit of God, and are therefore in perfect accord. The first says that we are not to glory in anything except in the knowledge of God—in the knowledge that in all the earth He is working loving kindness, judgment, and righteousness. The second teaches that we are to glory in nothing except the cross of Christ. It is evident, therefore, that it is the cross that makes us know God; that in the cross, and in that only (for we are not to glory in anything else), we see the loving kindness, judgment, and righteous dealing of God. But “the earth is full of the loving kindness of the Lord” (Psalm 33.5, R.V.), and therefore we know that in all the earth we shall find the cross. Wherever there is life and love, —the life that is love—there is the cross of Christ.

HEATHENISM AMONG CHRISTIANS

Just to the extent that one does not see the cross in its true light, and understand its meaning, is their lack of knowledge of God. Of the fact that so many professed Christians do not see why God could not save men without the death of the cross, and that the question of the atonement is still a vexed one among theologians, shows that the cross, and therefore the nature and character of God, is not understood by them; and that means that there is a vast amount of heathenism in the professed church of Christ; for the heathen are they who do not know God. There are many degrees of heathenism, grading all the way from absolute ignorance of God, and so the grossest degradation, and to the point just below the full vision of God’s glory with unveiled faces, and thus complete deliverance from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.

The lingering heathenism in the church is seen in the common thought of God, which is expressed in the following line so frequently sung: —

“My God is reconciled.”

The idea that Christ died to appease God’s wrath, and to reconcile Him to sinful man, is totally foreign to the Scriptures, and highly dishonoring to God. God is considered as like unregenerate man, desiring revenge, and not satisfied after any offence, without some victim of His wrath. The idea is that an offence has been committed, and so somebody must be punished, must die; no matter who it is, only so satisfaction has been made, and His outraged feelings appeased by blood. This is called the Atonement! On the contrary, it is pure heathenism; the idea cannot fitly be described by any other term than devilish, for it describes the character Satan, and not of God.

The prevalence of this false view of God is the reason why so many people are afraid of Him, and the ground of the questions so often asked, “*Will God accept me?*” “*Can He forgive my sins?*” “*Have I not sinned so greatly that He cannot have anything to do with me?*” It is responsible for the almost universal idea that we must do something, make

some sacrifice, and punish ourselves in some way, in order to win His favor. It is the reason why there is not more spontaneous acceptance of God and salvation, and more joy in Him.

GOD IS LOVE, AND HE MAKES RECONCILIATION

“God is love.” 1 John 4.8. That is His nature, His life. He is Spirit, and “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance.” Galatians 5.22, 23. All these things flow out from the Being of God. They constitute His Being. He does not mark iniquity, but there is forgiveness with Him, that He may be feared. Psalm 130.3, 4. He is not the destroyer, but the Saviour, and Preserver; and He saves by the cross, which shows the gift of Himself. He says to sinners: “I am the Lord; I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.” Malachi 3.6. He is of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look upon iniquity (Habakkuk 1.13); He is the perfection of the love that “thinketh no evil,” or, “taketh not account of evil” (1 Corinthians 13.5); and therefore it was said of Him by inspiration of His own Spirit: “He hath not beheld iniquity in Jacob, neither hath He seen perverseness in Israel” (Numbers 23.21), and that notwithstanding the fact that Israel had rebelled against Him, and, choosing their own way, and blindly and stubbornly refused to recognise His presence among them. Such is the longsuffering loving kindness of our God. His name is “The Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth.” Exodus 34.6

“God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son,” and in giving Him He gave Himself and all heaven; for Christ was but the manifestation of God in the flesh. “No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him.” John 1.18. Jesus said: “He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father.” John 14.9. “He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?” Romans 8.32

“Herein is love, not that we love God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” 1 John 4.10. “God commendeth His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, Being now justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of the Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.” Romans 5.8-10. “All things are of God, who hath reconciled us to Himself by Jesus Christ, and have given to us the ministry of reconciliation, to wit, that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them.” 2 Corinthians 5.18, 19. The enmity is all on our side, the love all from God. He takes no account of our rebellion, but gives Himself to us, taking all the responsibility and all the guilt of our sin upon Himself, making Himself the sinner, us the innocent: and since He will by no means clear the guilty, He did not spare Himself; for be it known that the blood of Christ the Son of God is the blood of God itself, as we read in the apostle’s exhortation in Acts 20.28: “Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which He hath purchased with His own blood.”

LIFE COMES FROM LIFE

The cross is a necessity, because life can come only by the giving of life. It is necessary for God to give His life to us, because we have no life in ourselves. "In Him we live, and move, and have our being," "for we are His offspring." "There is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things." 1 Corinthians 8.6. "Lord, thou hast been our dwelling-place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth [born], or ever Thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting Thou art God." Psalm 90.1, 2. There is not a created thing in the universe that is not the product of the life of God, and that is not kept in existence by the continued gift of His life. The invisible things of God, even His everlasting power and Divinity, are to be perceived through the things that are made, and had been thus clearly manifested ever since the creation. Romans 1.20. "Of him, and through Him, and to Him are all things." Romans 11.36. "There is one God and Father of all, who is over all, and through all, and in all." Ephesians 4.6, R.V.

We are not self-existent; therefore God, the self-existent One, must give His life to bring us into being, and then, having brought us forth, He must continue to give us His life, in order that we may not cease to be; and when we have sinned, and have gone astray from Him, then is there the more need that the life should be bestowed, to restore to us His image. So we see that the cross is simply the manifestation of creative power. It stands as a revelation of what God is—of His eternal purpose and work. It shows us what God has always been doing, and what He will continue to do throughout eternity.

THE CROSS IN CREATION

"The Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul." Genesis 2.7. God breathed His own life into man, and by that life we now exist.

Now in connection with this text, are the following words concerning Christ. He hung on the cross: "And Jesus cried with a loud voice, and gave up the ghost." Mark 15.37. The words "gave up the ghost" are from a single Greek word (*ekpneo*), meaning literally to breathe out or to expire. The word "expire," a common synonym of "die," is a compound Latin word meaning to breathe out. Jesus breathed out His life upon the cross. It was not forcibly taken from Him, but He laid it down voluntarily, and laid it down on purpose that He might take it again as He had the ability to lay it down and take it again. John 10.17, 18

Jesus tasted death for every man. Hebrews 2.9. "With His stripes we are healed." Isaiah 53.5. Through His death we receive life. "We have redemption through His blood." Ephesians 1.7. Let us state the case in this simple way: (1) Christ had to give life to the world; (2) To die was *to expire, to breathe out*; (3) Man has life by a *breathing in* the life of God; (4) Therefore Christ *breathed out* His life on the cross, that we might *breathe it in*. Thus we see that the cross was simply the revelation of the Creator at work, and in the cross we see God creating man, the breathing into his nostrils the breath of life. "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature," or, "there is a new creation" (2

Corinthians 5.17), just as it was in the beginning; and we see clearly that the power of the cross is identical with the power by which man was created in the beginning, and by which mankind now lives. That, which is technically known by the cross, is that by which all creation lives and which made the worlds.

“Thou know’st He died not for Himself,
not for Himself arose;
Millions of souls are in His heart,
and me for one He chose;
Upon the palms of His pierced hand
graven was my name,
He for thy cleansing had prepared
His water and His flame.
Sure thou with Him art risen,
and now with Him thou must go forth,
And He will lend thy sick soul health,
strivings might and worth.”

THE CROSS NOT AN AFTERTHOUGHT

We see, therefore, that the “plan of salvation” was not a thing devised after the fall. The Father and the Son did not, as seems sometimes to be imagined, sit about to think out some method by which lost man could be redeemed, and arbitrarily settle upon the Cross; far from it. God was not taken by surprise and forced to invent something new to meet the emergency; but the stream of life, which had been flowing from eternity, was not withdrawn or turned aside, but still continued to flow. “Sin is the transgression of the law.” Transgression means a going astray; it is, so to speak, an obstruction, a dam, placed across the stream of life, and what is needed to remove it is for the stream to flow on uninterruptedly. Thus He “hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began.” 2 Timothy 1.9. The cross is the manifestation of God’s “eternal purpose;” the preaching of Christ is “the revelation of the mystery which has been kept in silence through times eternal.”

God’s eternal purpose is seen in creation; that is to say, the fact that God created earth and its inhabitants, is evidence that that was His eternal purpose; and therefore it is still further evident that the cross by which fallen men and the lost world are redeemed, is but the carrying out of that eternal purpose. So “Israel shall be saved in the Lord with an everlasting salvation: ye shall not be ashamed nor confounded world without end. For thus saith the Lord that created the heavens; God himself that formed the earth and made it; He hath established it, He created it not in vain, He formed it to be inhabited: I am the Lord; and there is none else.” Isaiah 45.17, 18

THE SEED AND ITS FRUIT

All nature teems with illustrations of this glorious truth. The sowing of seed and the growth of the plant is one of the most common phenomena, and one that is most

frequently used in Scripture to illustrate the Gospel. Speaking with direct reference to His crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus said, "The hour is come, that the Son of man should be glorified. Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abides alone; but if it die, it brings forth much fruit." John 12.23, 24

There we have Christ's own illustration of His death. The seed that is sown never appears again. It does not go out of existence, but gives its life to produce a multitude of beings like itself. This, according to Christ's word, is the death of the seed, but it is also creation—the creation of a numerous seed. Thus it was with Christ, the Seed; creation is by His death, the imparting of His life. The death of the seed is the multiplication of its life.

This is the law of the universe. There was a period in the ages past when God was alone. There was no creature to share the joy of His existence. He was self-existent, but no other being has this attribute. Therefore God could have no company except by giving His life to bring others into existence. So, even before the worlds were made, in the creation of the "innumerable company of angels"—the sons of God—we have the demonstration of the words, "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abides alone; but if it die, it brings forth much fruit." Creation is by the Cross, and the Cross, as we see it, is but the manifestation of God's creative power.

DEATH THE LIFE OF THE BEE

This truth is emphasized in the case of the bee. It is a well-established fact that when the queen bee takes her "nuptial flight," the male bee that succeeds in distancing his companions and effecting a union with her, dies in the act. Henceforth he exists only in her and in the multitudes of other bees, which she brings forth from the seed deposited by that one generative act. The seed, the essential part of the bee, remains alive in the body of the queen, rendering her perpetually fertile, and he yields up his life that it may be so. His death is the giving of life to a host of new creatures.

In this we have of course only a partial illustration of the great mystery of the cross; for although God gives His life for the production of new creatures, He does not cease to exist, because He is life itself. But no one thing in nature can fully represent God; each different thing represents some particular phase; and the case of the bee brings sharply to our notice because the fact that life comes only by the giving of life, and helps us to see that the cross is the law of creation—a necessity growing out of the very being of God.

THE TREE BEARING FRUIT

The same truth, the mystery of the cross, of life through death, through the giving of life, is taught by the fruit tree. The fruit is the life of the tree. In eating the fruit we eat the life of the tree, and thus receive its strength. That the tree does actually give its life in bearing fruit is well known to every gardener, who carefully guards his trees from over-production, lest they die. I well remember a certain apple tree, when I was a boy that in the first year of its existence was covered with blossoms, and, not being interfered with,

brought thirty-five fine, large apples to perfection. But its first year was its last, for it gave all its life to the perfecting of that fruit. This was an extraordinary case, but it serves to set forth in clear and sharp lines the lesson that the producing of fruit is the giving of life. The mature tree gives its life to the fruit that it bears, but does not die, because it has more abundant life, drawing, as it does, life from the Source of life. Thus the tree teaches us the same lesson that the bee does, but more perfectly.

“SAVED BY HIS LIFE”

“If, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.” Romans 5.10

Christ came, that we might have life, and that we might have it more abundantly. John 10.10. Our salvation is simply the effect of the more abundant life of Christ through the cross.

This was illustrated in His miracles of healing, which were recorded “that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through His name.” John 20.31. Healing is salvation. When Jesus had healed a person, he often said, “Thy faith hath saved thee.” The word “heal,” meaning *to make whole*, comes often in the New Testament from the Greek word (*sozo*) *to save*.

The healing of disease is by the giving of life, for disease is but the beginning of death. Whenever Jesus healed the sick or raised the dead, He did it by importing His own life. He was the living bread that came down from heaven, to give His life for the life of the world. The healing of the woman with the issue of blood (Mark 5.24-34) is a typical instance illustrating this truth. There was a poor woman with her life blood ebbing away. When she had heard of Jesus, she came in the press behind, and touched His garment; “for she said, If I may but touch His clothes, I shall be whole. And straightway the fountain of her blood was dried up; and she felt in her body that she was healed of that plague. And Jesus immediately knowing in Himself that virtue [power] had gone out of Him, turned Him about in the press, and said, Who touched My clothes?”

We see by this that the healing of the afflicted was a demand upon His life. In healing them He gave His own life to them. His fullness supplied their lack. This case of the woman was not an isolated one; for we read that when He came down from the mountain “all the multitudes sought to touch Him; for power came forth from Him, and healed them all.” Luke 6.19. Since He felt the strain upon His life force when only one touched Him, think what it must have been when multitudes drew healing power from Him. What a great draft was made upon His life. It is evident that since life went from Him in response to each touch, the inevitable result of the touch of multitudes would have been His death, if He had not been in constant connection with the fountain of life. He gave His life, and yet He lived. What have we here but the mystery of the cross before Calvary? As He went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil, He was laying down His life for the brethren, just as truly when He breathed

out His life on Calvary. So also He did when after His resurrection He breathed on His disciples, and said, "Receive ye the Holy Ghost."

It is all so simple, and yet so wonderful. We see the cross at work giving life, and recognize that it is in the cross that we live, and move, and have our being; for the cross is the revelation of God creating all things, and upholding and restoring the things created.

PERSONAL APPICATION OF THE LESSON

The Gospel is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; and the preaching of the cross is to us who are save the power of God. Romans 1.16; 1 Corinthians 1.18. But the cross means more than simply our own salvation; it means our union with God, the Giver of life, to be partners with Him in its bestowal on others; for, said Christ, "He that believeth on Me, as the Scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water." John 7.38. The stream of life, which flows from God to us, is not to be dammed up in us; that means stagnation and death. We have done it already, to our great loss. Therefore Christ is lifted up before us on the cross, that, seeing Him, we may be drawn to Him, and come into harmony with the soul, the law, of the universe. We are to learn that life means giving. We are to allow the obstruction which selfishness has interposed, to be removed, so that, as the life flows out to others, new life from God may flow in.

"Hereby know we love, because He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren." 1 John 3.16. He lay down His life, that He might take it again. By giving it, He retained, thus showing us that whoever will keep his life shall lose it, and whoever will give up his life shall save it.

"There is that scattereth, and yet increaseth; and there is that withholdeth more than is meat, and it tendeth to poverty." Proverbs 11.24. This is the lesson taught by the cross. The seed that is stored away, abides alone. More than this, if it be kept by itself too long it loses the power of reproduction. We sometimes hear of wheat found in the hand of an Egyptian mummy, which, after having been hundreds of years in the grasp of death, was sown, and produced a crop; but the story is a fable, for no seed can retain its life giving power so long. Some seeds retain it longer than others; but the longest period that any known seed will retain its vitality if not used is thirty years. If it does not fall into the ground and give its life before that time, it must abide alone.

So we, if we would live, must give our lives. By yielding up the best we have we obtain more. The reward of service is the power to greater and better service. The grace of God brings salvation (Titus 2.11), not only to us, but through us to others. The Apostle Paul said, "By the grace of God I am what I am; and His grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all; yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me." 1 Corinthians 15.10. "We then, as workers together with Him, beseech you that ye receive not the grace of God in vain."