



## How Did Jesus View the Cross?

*By Peter Barnes*

It is a commonplace in theological liberal circles to downplay the cross, to say, as Adolf von Harnack did, that the gospel is all about the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, and the infinite value of the human soul, with little reference to the atonement. In nineteenth century England, the Quaker Liberal politician, John Bright, was supposed to have murmured about evangelicals: ‘The atonement, always the atonement! Have they nothing else to say?’

Matthew, Mark and Luke are often thought to say little about Christ’s death for sinners. Such a statement could only come from one who had not read them. Mark’s Gospel, for example, has famously been described by Martin Kähler as ‘a passion narrative with an extended introduction.’ This is because around one third of the gospel is devoted to the Passion story – which is also true of Matthew and Luke. There is a major dividing point in the Gospel in Mark 8, where Jesus asks: ‘Who do people say that I am?’ (Mark 8:27) After speaking of the person of Jesus – He is the Christ – Mark goes on to tell of Jesus’ declaration that as the Son of Man He would suffer many things, be killed, and after three days rise again (Mark 29-32). This deals with the work of Christ, what He came to do.

Christ never speaks of Himself simply as an inspired teacher. The Son of Man is the king in God’s everlasting kingdom (Dan.7:13-14), and He came to give His life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). His death would pay the price of sin. At the Last Supper, Jesus took the cup and said: ‘This is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many’ (Mark 14:24). This is not the language of teaching and miracle-working but of blood and sacrifice, and of sins being paid for.

John’s Gospel is different to the Synoptics, but the message is

the same. John has 21 chapters, but some 50% of the Gospel deals with the immediate lead-up to Jesus’ crucifixion, and His subsequent resurrection (John 11-21). All through the Gospel there are reference to the Lord’s Passion. John the Baptist recognised the Messiah as ‘the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!’ (John 1:29, 36) As Isaac Watts put it:

*Not all the blood of beasts,  
On Jewish altars slain,  
Could give the guilty conscience peace  
Or wash away the stain.  
But Christ, the heavenly Lamb  
Takes all our sins away;  
A sacrifice of nobler name,  
And richer blood than they.*

Jesus is the fulfilment of the Old Testament sacrificial system.

In addition, Christ fulfils that strange incident recorded in Numbers 21:4-9 where Moses lifts up a bronze serpent, and all who look upon that serpent are healed from the poison of serpents. As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of Man will be lifted up on the cross, that those who look on Him will be saved (John 3:14). In the temple the Old Testament sacrifices were offered to God but Jesus’ body becomes the true temple where the one final sacrifice is offered (John 2:18-22).

As a shepherd, David had to risk his life against bears and lions which came after the sheep, looking for a meal (1 Sam.17:34-37). However, Jesus does far more than that. He is the good shepherd who does not just risk His life for the sheep but gives His life for them (John 10:11, 17-18). He has authority to lay down His life and He has authority to take it up again. The whole purpose of

His life was not to escape death but to embrace it for the sake of His sheep, and to give them new life. To use another image, His death would be like the dying of a grain of wheat in the earth, which then bears fruit (John 12:24). In paying for the sins of His chosen people, Jesus could cry on the cross: 'It is finished' (John 19:30) – which is one word in Greek. Most fittingly, Martin Luther proclaimed: 'In this word, "It is finished," will I comfort myself. I am forced to confess that all my finishing of the will of God is imperfect, piecemeal work, while yet the law urges on me that not so much as one tittle of it must remain unaccomplished. Christ is the end of the law. What it requires,

Christ has performed.'

The apostle Paul is said by some to have distorted the gospel by explaining the death of Christ in terms of substitutionary atonement. Actually, he was only echoing the message of the Gospels. The Gospels themselves tell of Jesus' cross of sacrifice and atonement, and the message of His death to win our life.

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