



Three Deaths: Socrates, Stephen, and Jesus

By Peter Barnes

While reviewing some meditations on the cross by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, I came across his summary that ‘Socrates overcame dying; Christ overcame death.’ It is one of those startling comments which force one to stop and think in order to capture the meaning. It also reminded me of a lecture that Oscar Cullmann had delivered on ‘Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead’, which he delivered in 1955 but which I read in the late 1970s. It is bracing for the Christian to think through the deaths of the ancient Greek philosopher, Socrates; the first Christian martyr, Stephen; and Jesus of Nazareth.

First, in 399 B.C. Socrates, reputedly the ‘gadfly’ of Athens, was sentenced to death for not believing the gods of the pantheon, introducing new deities, and corrupting the youth. Socrates had gained enemies by challenging his contemporaries with question after question. He advocated: ‘Know yourself’. Also, ‘The unexamined life is not worth anything.’ Instead of fleeing, as was expected, he calmly and even cheerfully drank the hemlock that was to take his life. There are only two contemporaneous lives of Socrates – by Plato and Xenophon. While not actually present at the death of his mentor, Plato records that he died serenely, ‘the best, wisest and most upright man of any I have ever known.’ Socrates ventured towards a belief in one god, but before he expired, he ordered that a cock be paid to Asclepius, the supposed son of Apollo and the Greek god of medicine. Believing in the immortality of the soul, Socrates saw death as the soul’s close friend; it released the soul from being trapped in its decaying body. Hence he died with a measure of peace that must attract our admiration.

The second death to be examined is that of Stephen, who was stoned to death by an enraged Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. Stephen’s

sermon was offensive in teaching that God is not confined to one land (Acts 7:2-7, 9-10, 15, 33, 38, 44); God is not restricted to a building (Acts 7:47-50); and that God’s people are often persecuted, even by those professing to be His own people (Acts 7:9, 17-19, 38-43). Finally, he declared that they had murdered the Righteous One foretold in the Old Testament, and that they had not kept the law of God (Acts 7:52-53). Nobody shook his hand in gratitude. Instead, they cast him out of the city and stoned him, which was an illegal act (John 18:31).

With the face of an angel, Stephen is described as full of the Holy Spirit, and able to gaze into heaven to see the glory of God and Jesus standing (not sitting) at His right hand. With a loud voice, Stephen cried out for the Lord Jesus to receive his spirit and for Him not to hold this sin against the crowd (Acts 6:15; 7:54-60). If Socrates’ death was impressive, Stephen’s is even more so.

Yet the pagan death of Socrates and the Christian death of Stephen serve as contrasts, in a number of ways, to the death of Jesus of Nazareth. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was distressed, and prayed that the cup would pass from Him (Mark 14:33-36). There is no serene draining of the cup of hemlock – quite the reverse. On the cross too, Jesus cites Psalm 22:1, ‘My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?’ (Mark 15:34) To Socrates, death was the liberator, the gateway to the immortality of the soul. To Jesus, it was what it was to the apostle Paul – ‘the last enemy’ (1 Cor.15:26). On the cross, Jesus was ‘poured out like water’ (Ps.22:14). It is true that His soul was troubled (John 12:27), yet He laid down His own life and took it up again (John 10:17-18). He was deserted by God and man, yet a Roman centurion was so impressed by His death that he exclaimed: ‘Truly this man was the Son of God!’ (Mark 15:39)

Was there ever a death like this? Human and divine – excruciating agony and triumph together. Jesus’ death is not designed simply to attract our admiration. There is far more at stake. Abraham Kuyper wrote in a meditation on Psalm 22: ‘Countless people have suffered crucifixion. But no one except Jesus alone, hanging on his cross, has descended into the depths of hell. No one has ever shouldered the burden of God’s wrath against the sins of all human beings. Furthermore, no one else by dying on a cross has ever been crucified in his soul, experiencing the unseen and painful weakness of dying a thousand deaths all at once.’

Something like that was taking place at Calvary. Appreciate the bravery of Socrates; admire the faith of Stephen; and give grateful thanks for the substitutionary agonies of Jesus.

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