

# **How Must We View The Death of Christ?**

by Walton Weaver

At the time of Jesus' death on the cross the enemies of Christ must have had a very decided view of what was taking place. To them the death of Christ would have meant no more than the execution of a common criminal, the eradication of a false teaching, and in some measure the extinguishment of a dangerous movement. The message of the cross has always been foolishness to those who are perishing, "but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18).

What does the cross of Christ mean to you? How do you view Jesus' death? Let's summarize the meaning of Christ's death in three words; what we might call the death of Christ in 3-V's.

## **CHRIST'S DEATH WAS VOLUNTARY**

Many no doubt see little significance in Jesus' death because they view it merely as an accidental occurrence. But was it? The Old Testament clearly pointed to the death of Christ (Isa. 53). Paul says that it was Jesus "whom God set forth to be a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness" (Rom. 3:25). This was not something that came into God's mind at the last moment. Christ "indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifested in these last times for you" (1 Pet. 1:20). He was "delivered by the determined counsel and foreknowledge of God," having been taken by lawless hands, crucified, and put to death (Acts 2:23). Jesus was "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Rev. 13:81).

Was the cross in Jesus' own mind from the very beginning of His ministry? The language of Scripture will allow no other conclusion. At the time of His very first miracle Jesus says to His mother, "My hour has not yet come" (Jn. 2:4). Later when His disciples urged Him to attend the feast of Tabernacles, He said, "My time has not yet come, but your time is always ready" (Jn. 7:6). What was "his time"? Whatever it was, even though some of His enemies wanted to take Him, no one laid hands on Him (Jn. 7:44); the reason being, "for His hour had not yet come" (Jn. 8:20).

The answer to this question is not found until we come to chapter twelve of John. Certain Greeks came to Philip and desired to see Jesus. When Philip and Andrew brought their request to Jesus, He said to them, "The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified" (Jn. 12:23). By His illustration of the grain of wheat falling into the ground and dying, and His prayer that the Father would save Him from this hour (Jn. 12:27), we are prepared to receive Jesus' grand declaration of His own lifting up when He says, "And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself" (Jn. 12:32). John explains the meaning of this statement by adding, "This He said, signifying by what death He should die" (Jn. 12:33). That His death had been in His plans all along is clearly stated in the last part of verse 27, "But for this purpose I came to this hour."

That Jesus' death was voluntary is indicated at several places in Scripture. Jesus Himself said

of the laying down of His life, "...I lay down my life ...No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself" (Jn. 10:17-18). Paul tells us that Christ "loved the church and gave Himself for it" (Eph. 5:25). As Christians we are to "walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma" (Eph. 5:2). The voluntary nature of His death is the greatest proof of His deep and abiding love for us.

### **THE DEATH OF CHRIST WAS VICARIOUS**

We must also see the death of Christ as vicarious. This means Jesus died in the place of others. The earliest indication we have in the New Testament from Jesus that this is how we must view His death is in the context of that passage where Jesus said, "I lay down My life" (Jn. 12:17/. Back in chapter ten of John where Jesus presents Himself as the good Shepherd, He said, "The shepherd gives his life for the sheep" (Jn. 10:11/. John the Baptist had at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry announced, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (Jn. 1:29/. The idea of sins being taken away by a lamb is based on the offerings of the Old Testament, especially the Passover lamb. The only firstborn males who were spared were those in whose families a firstborn lamb had died instead. Paul makes the specific application to Christ, when he says, "Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us" (1 Cor. 5:7).

According to Leviticus 17:11 blood is the symbol of life: "For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life." Because blood makes atonement due to life being in the blood, the blood that is shed "makes atonement for one's life." Thus, one life is sacrificed instead of another. What makes atonement "on the altar" is the shedding of substitutionary lifeblood. T.J. Crawford well said: "The text, then, according to its plain and obvious import, teaches the vicarious nature of the rite of sacrifice. Life was given for life, the life of the victim for the life of the offerer", or, more specifically, "the life of the innocent victim for the life of the sinful offerer." In the final analysis, animal sacrifice would not do; it took "the precious blood of Christ" (1 Pet. 1:19; Heb. 9:22; 10:1-4). Peter says that "He Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree" (1 Pet. 2:24), while Paul says that "Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many" (Heb. 9:28).

### **CHRIST'S DEATH WAS VICTORIOUS**

We know from the very first promise of Scripture that has Christ in mind that He would be victorious. He would crush the head of the serpent, while the serpent would strike His heel (Gen. 3:15/. It seemed at the time of His death that all was lost. Surely his enemies would have laughed at the time He hang on the cross if anyone would have suggested that the Crucified was a Conqueror. But that is exactly what God had promised in Genesis 3:15, and it was demonstrated finally that the victim was victor indeed.

The fact that Jesus came casting out demons, and Satan does not cast out Satan, is affirmed by Jesus to demonstrate that He has bound Satan, because one does not enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods unless he first binds the strong man (Matt. 12:25-30). Even though "the kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and

against His Anointed ...He who sits in heaven shall laugh; the Lord shall hold them in derision" and set His king on his holy hill of Zion (Psa. 2:2-6) in the very midst of their opposition. Jesus' death is only seeming defeat; it is in fact the very occasion of victory. Through His death He destroyed "him who had the power of death, that is, the devil," and gave release to "those who through death were all their lifetime subject to bondage" (Heb. 2:14-15). "O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?" (1 Cor. 15:55). "Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 15:57). Three days after Jesus' burial He emerged as "victor from the dark domain," and in that victory makes it possible for us to be victorious over sin and death.

## **CONCLUSION**

Just as Jesus volunteered for the cross, He invites all would-be disciples to volunteer to follow after Him (Matt. 16:24). As He died for others, He urges His disciples to die to sin and live for others (Rom. 6:17-19; 12:9-20; Phil. 2:3-4; Gal 6:10). Just as Jesus was victorious by His death on the cross, so he encourages people to share in the victory (Jn. 16:33; 1 Jn. 5:4: 2:13b)