

CHAPTER 12

WAS THE CROSS NECESSARY?

Did Jesus have to be martyred to fulfill God's plan? According to most Christians, Jesus expected to die when he decided to go to Jerusalem. He told his disciples to expect the bridegroom to be taken away. When Peter confessed that Jesus was the Christ in the crucial incident at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus replied with a prediction of his suffering and death (Mk. 8:31). At Gethsemane Jesus accepted his death as the will of God.

Death is often considered to be the fulfillment of Jesus' vocation. Jesus referred to his suffering and death as his baptism, and asked his disciples, "Can you drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" (Mk. 10:38). What he meant was that if they wanted to follow him, they must be ready to carry his cross.

Jesus' sufferings climaxed in his cry of abandonment on the cross, where the sinless Son of God was crucified as a common criminal, rejected by his people, and abandoned by God. On the cross, Jesus was one with sinners in their deepest experiences of shame and degradation. His death is also hinted at in the parable of the Wicked Husbandman (Mt. 21:33-43). God had given men one last chance; when Jesus was rejected

and killed, God handed down his decisive judgment upon the world. The death of Jesus demonstrated the enormity of human sin.

The New Testament also describes Jesus' death as a ransom (Mk. 10:45). Jesus came to give his life for men. His blood was the blood of the new covenant shed for many (Mk. 14:24). Jesus' reconciling act resembles an Old Testament sacrifice; he died sacrificially to bring God and God's people back together again. As the Fourth Gospel says, Jesus is the bread of life. By eating his flesh and drinking his blood believers have their lives nourished and revitalized (John 6:56).

Jesus' death was not an isolated event. His whole ministry revealed his spirit of sacrificial giving. Hence he challenged his disciples to take up their cross. As Paul states, to die with Christ and to be risen with him is the purpose of discipleship (Rom. 6:8; Col. 2:12-13). Christians believe that Jesus' death represents the central act of his mission.

Yet it appears that the disciples did not understand Christ's atoning work until after the resurrection. Once his followers experienced the reconciling power of Christ's death on the cross, they saw how the crucifixion was part of God's plan. But exactly how Christ atoned for sinful man is difficult to explain in a coherent theory. As we have seen, every interpretation has serious defects. What, then, can we say about the saving effect of the cross?

1. Jesus' death is the revelation of God's love. Because he lived, suffered and died, he heals and makes men free. As Jesus' mission was to bring God's love to sinners, his death was the climax to a life of self-giving. Therefore, his death was, like his life, a vivid manifestation of love.

Nevertheless, Christ's voluntary sacrifice should not be thought of as his alone. God was there too, at work in it and through it. In the cross, God was reconciling the world to

Himself. God had sent His Son for our sake, and suffered with him at Calvary.

2. The cross is also a stark reminder of God's righteousness. So often we fail to recognize our own involvement in Christ's death; he died because of our sins. All kinds of people are judged guilty before the cross—religious leaders like the Pharisees and the high priests (the Sadducees), government officials like Herod and Pilate, fickle crowds, and disciples like Peter who denied him. As the Negro spiritual asks, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" The answer, of course, is that we were all there. On the cross, Christ was condemned as an evil-doer, a blasphemer, heretic, troublemaker and dangerous revolutionary. But from that same cross, our sins are exposed and condemned.

God did not punish Christ for our sins. That traditional notion is abhorrent. At the same time, God cannot let evil go unchecked. He has to act decisively against it. We do not always pay for our sins; often other people have to suffer. We bear one another's burdens. When we recognize this, we are moved to repent and to cease our sinning. Christ showed God's willingness to share our sufferings. God restored the covenant between Himself and man in the act of bearing our burden with us. So God suffered too at the cross, grieving for His Son's agony.

In recent years the view that Jesus came to die for man's sins has been questioned by New Testament scholars and respected theologians. The last hundred years' quest for the historical Jesus has shed great light on Jesus' life and death. The question of why Jesus died on the cross has preoccupied scholars; many have concluded that Jesus died not because God willed it, but because his enemies were too powerful and his friends too weak. As Hans Küng states, Jesus was condemned as a heretical teacher, false prophet, blasphemer and

seducer of the people. His critics and enemies included the Pharisees and the Sanhedrin, Jewish collaborators and Roman occupation authorities. His religious foes plotted to dispose of Jesus and used Pilate's fear of rebellion to have him crucified. Jesus faced almost impossible odds and lost.¹ His life was far too short for his great mission.

Küng states further that Jesus died forsaken by men, even his closest followers. According to Mark, the oldest Gospel, none of the disciples were there at the foot of the cross.² Jesus died accursed and dishonored. His claim appeared to be refuted and his authority was gone. Both the scorn of his foes and the flight of his friends seemed to be justified.

Far worse, Jesus felt absolutely forsaken by God. While we cannot know much about what Jesus thought and felt as he hung on the cross, Mark does give one bit of information: Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mk. 15:34) and then expired. As Küng puts it, it was obvious to the whole world that Jesus had proclaimed the imminent advent of God's kingdom, and that this had not happened. God's witness was left in the lurch. Jesus' mission ended with a helpless, miracle-less and even God-less death, Küng says.

Küng gives a convincing explanation of why Jesus was executed. But did Jesus expect to die? He came heralding the dawn of the kingdom of God and he tried to persuade others of its imminence. According to biblical scholar Willi Marxsen, Jesus "did not see his death as a saving event"; he expected to succeed in his mission of inaugurating the kingdom of God on earth.³ There is no evidence that Jews believed in a suffering Messiah. Furthermore, when Jesus ate the Passover meal with his disciples, he claimed that he would soon eat and drink in the kingdom of God—not because his cause was doomed, but because it would soon be successful.⁴ When he realized that he

might die, he prayed that this cup might pass from him. Surely that is not the prayer of someone who intended to be a sacrificial lamb. Finally, according to Mark, Jesus' last words were an agonized cry of despair—which Luke and John found so unsettling that they edited it out of their accounts of the passion.⁵

We must also remember that the New Testament reflects the faith of Christians who lived a generation or more after the crucifixion and were not eyewitnesses of the events they reported. For them it was imperative to refute Jewish charges that Jesus was not the Messiah because he died an ignoble death. Their explanations took several forms: 1) Jesus knew beforehand that he would die; 2) God predestined His Son to die as part of the redemptive process; and 3) Jesus reinterpreted the Messiah's role in terms of the Suffering Servant concept in Deutero-Isaiah.

It is generally agreed that Mark and Q (a collection of the sayings of Jesus common to Matthew and Luke) are the oldest and most reliable New Testament sources. Nowhere in the sayings source is it claimed that Jesus' death is redemptive and therefore necessary; that notion comes mainly from Paul and later Johannine writings. The earliest Christian faith was dominated by the eschatological hope. Like Jesus, it was kingdom-centered and not cross-centered. No one thought of the cross as the means of atonement.

To my mind something more needs to be said. Jürgen Moltmann asserts that God was suffering with Jesus, right beside him at the cross; God is the crucified God.⁶ However, this is too sentimental. If Jesus' cry from the cross is authentic, it is an expression of utmost despair. Jesus must have realized he had not accomplished what God had expected him to do—far from it. At the same time he felt dismayed by the hostile reaction of the populace. They did not understand him; they did not support him; they did not even listen to him.

Jesus realized that he had failed God—and they had failed God. Naturally, at that moment, he identified himself with the people. It was as if he were taking their burdens on his own back. He felt forsaken.

On the other hand, God must have felt rejected, frustrated and betrayed. This aroused the deepest grief and anger in God's heart, much as at the Fall of Adam and Eve. Jesus must have felt this grief and anger too.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 12

1 Hans Küng, *On Being A Christian*, pp. 318-342.

2 Morton S. Enslin speaks of the “bleak despair” of the disciples: The bottom had dropped from their lives because of Jesus' execution. Their house of cards had collapsed. (See *The Prophet from Nazareth* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), pp. 210-211). Therefore Enslin believes that Jesus never told his followers he would suffer and die.

3 Quoted in Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ* (New York: Paulist Press, 1976), p. 115.

4 This does not mean that Jesus predicted he would soon be in heaven, as many readers assume. For him the kingdom always refers to God's reign on this earth.

5 Pannenberg speaks of the “disaster” of Jesus' condemnation and the “catastrophe” of his death. *Jesus—God and Man*, p. 251.

6 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), Ch. 6.