

The Greatest Theme in the World

by

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CHAPTER THREE

GOD AND CHRIST'S ATONEMENT

There are two ways by which the Niagara Falls may be reached.

They may be reached from the Atlantic Ocean, by going up the St. Lawrence, past the Thousand Islands, across Lake Ontario, up the Niagara river, past the whirlpool, and through the rapids.

The other way to reach the Falls is to start from the Rocky Mountains, and go through the four lakes, Superior, Michigan, Huron, and Erie, which are the feeders of the Falls.

As we look at CHRIST in His atonement, we may view Him from two standpoints.

We may view the ocean of GOD's love as it touches us in our necessity, the St. Lawrence of His grace, the thousand and more blessings the Lord bestows, the lake of the calm peace with GOD, and the whirlpool and rapids of His power, and we apprehend they all come to us from the pains of the Niagara of CHRIST's death.

Or we may view the atoning death of CHRIST from GOD's standpoint, and start from the Rockies of GOD's eternal purpose, and trace the wondrous path of CHRIST's obedience unto death as revealed in the four mighty lakes of the four gospels, and see the mighty display of the deep of GOD's love calling to the deep of His righteousness as they crash and flow at the Niagara of CHRIST's death.

I purpose to call attention to CHRIST's death from the latter standpoint, as the display of GOD's provision. The vastness of this section of the topic compels me to confine myself to one section of GOD's Word, namely, the Epistle to the Romans. [53]

I - GOD'S PURPOSE IN CHRIST'S DEATH

"Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood" (Romans 3:25). The words, **"In His Blood,"** as Bishop Ellicott remarks, are to be associated with **"Whom God**

hath set forth to be a propitiation." He renders the words, "Whom God hath set forth by the shedding of His blood to be a propitiatory offering through faith." And he comments, "It was in the shedding of the blood that the essence of the atonement exhibited upon the Cross consisted. No doubt other portions of the life of CHRIST led up to this one, but this was the culminating act in it, viewed as an atonement."

GOD is here viewed as *One Who is an Exhibitor*, or the Cross is the culmination of a specific purpose from which flashes out unmistakable truth, like the flashing forth of an electric light in the lighthouse across the foaming waves.

The electricity which illuminated the lamp was there before the current was switched on, but it was set forth by the switching on.

The word "**set forth**" signifies *to set before one's self*, that is an inward purpose. The compound word occurs in two other places.

Paul uses it when he writes to the saints at Rome, and says, "**I purposed to come to you**" (Romans 1:13); and it is used of GOD's loving purpose and will, when the apostle says, He made known to us "**the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which he hath purposed in Himself**" (Ephesians 1:9).

The death of CHRIST was the unfolding of the secret purpose of GOD.

Moule finely says, "Here is no fortuitous concourse, but the long-laid plan of GOD. Behold its procuring cause, magnificent, tender, Divine, human, spiritual, historic. It is the Beloved Son of the Father; no antagonist power from a region alien to the blessed law and its Giver. The Law-Giver is the Christ-Giver; He has 'set Him forth.' [54] He has provided in Him an expiation which does not persuade Him to have mercy . . . but liberates His love along the line of a wonderfully satisfied holiness."

II - GOD'S COMMENDATION OF HIS LOVE IN CHRIST'S DEATH

"God commendeth His love towards us, in that, while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

One has said of the word "**commendeth**," it means "to place together; of persons to introduce to one's acquaintance and favourable notice, hence, to commend, to represent as worthy."

The word is translated "**stood with**" in calling attention to the fact that Moses and Elijah were with CHRIST on the Mount of Transfiguration (Luke 9:32).

It is rendered "**make**" in recording what Paul said, when he declared he would "**make**" himself a transgressor if he went back to the law after having accepted the gospel (Galatians 2:18).

Very often the word is used in the sense of approving another in commending to some one's favourable notice (Romans 16:1, 2; II Corinthians 7:11; 10:18). The sense in each case is one person being so identified with another that they stand together, just as David assured Abiathar

his life was safe as long as he abode with him (I Samuel 22:23). GOD associates Himself in His love with the death of CHRIST for sinners, and the striking point of contrast is, man may sacrifice himself for a good man, GOD sacrificed Himself for bad men, "**sinner**s."

The gospel is a glorious fact about an act.

- The act of CHRIST's death commends the fact of GOD's love.
- The arms of CHRIST's Cross are the arms of Divine love.
- Some would have the Cross without the blood, that is Ritualism;
- others have a CHRIST without His Cross, that is Unitarianism; [55]
- we have CHRIST with His Cross, that is redemption, for in Him and it we find GOD Himself.

III - GOD'S MISSION IN CHRIST'S DEATH

"God sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh" (Romans 8:3).

Dr. Denney says, "It is the atonement which explains the incarnation. The incarnation takes place in order that the sin of the world may be put away by the offering of the body of JESUS CHRIST. The obedience of the Incarnate One, like all obedience has moral value - that is, it has a value for Himself; but its redemptive value, i. e., its value for us belongs to it not simply as obedience, but as obedience to a will of GOD which requires the Redeemer to take upon Himself in death, the responsibility of the sin of the world."

The incarnation of CHRIST among us does not explain His substitution for us, but His substitution for us explains His incarnation among us, even as the coal from the pit explains the necessity of sinking the shaft. As the shaft is the means to get at the coal, and thus demonstrates its purpose, so the end of the incarnation, His substitutionary sacrifice, proves the necessity of the means to that end, namely, that He should become a man to die for men.

As locating the origin of the provision which GOD Himself has made, the word "**sending**" indicates not the object to which one is sent, but the sender who commissions; thus the thought is, not sending to, but sending from - a letting go.

There is a stronger word than "*pempo*," namely, "*apostello*," which signifies, not merely a letting go, but to send forth one on a mission and fully equip him for it; thus *apostello* implies the mission he has to fulfil, and the authority which backs him.

Both words are used of CHRIST, especially in John's Gospel.

"*Pempo*" occurs twenty-five times (John 4:34; 5:23, [56] 24, 30, 37; 6:38, 39, 40, 44; 7:16, 18, 28, 33; 8:16, 18, 26, 29; 9: 4; 12:44, 45, 49; 13:20; 14:24; 15:21; 16:5); and "*apostello*" occurs seventeen times (John 3:17, 34; 5:36, 38; 6:29, 57; 7:29; 8:42; 10:36; 11:42; 17:3, 8, 18, 21, 23, 25; 20:21).

The word in Romans 8:3 signifies merely a letting go, but the word in John 3:17 signifies a fitting out for His mission. So taken together, GOD sent Him, that is, let Him go, to be condemned for us, but He did not equip Him to condemn, but to save us.

IV - GOD DEALING WITH SIN IN CHRIST'S DEATH.

"By a sacrifice for sin condemned sin in the flesh" (Romans 8:3, margin).

In a general way, by the holiness of His nature, GOD must condemn sin; but the statement before us says He condemned sin in a specific way, that is, He judged CHRIST for us. The expression, **"for sin,"** takes us back to the Old Testament, especially to the Book of Leviticus, where the words for **"sin"** and **"sin-offering,"** which one the same, occur over seventy times. The words **"for sin"** and **"for a sin-offering"** occur twenty-eight times.

In one chapter, the chapter of the sin-offering (Leviticus 4) the words occur nine times (Leviticus 4:3, 8, 14, 20, 28, 32, 33, 35).

The typical significance of sin and sin-offering being one and the same, identifies the sin with the offering, and the offering with the sin. CHRIST identified Himself with the believer's sin, and the believer is identified with CHRIST, Who gave Himself as an offering for sin, so that in Him the believer has answered for his sin, and has been judged for it.

Luther tersely put it - "He is my sin and I am His righteousness"; or, as Hooker remarks, "We have no knowledge in the world but this, that man hath sinned and GOD has suffered; that GOD made Himself the sin of men that men might be made the righteousness of GOD." [57]

The force and forcefulness of the word **"condemned"** must not be overlooked.

It embraces the three thoughts:

- a crime committed,
- a verdict passed, and
- a punishment meted out.

Take two illustrations.

Noah's act in building the ark is said to be not only a means of salvation to his house, but that **"by which he condemned the world"** (Hebrews 11:7); and of GOD's act of judgment upon Sodom it is said to have been condemned with an overthrow (II Peter 2:6).

In each case there is the sin which called forth the sentence of judgment and the execution of the judgment in the subsequent condemnation.

In CHRIST's unjust condemnation there are the same three things.

He is charged with the crime of blasphemy, and the consequence was **"they all condemned Him to be guilty of death"** (Mark 14:64). As GOD condemned the old world by the flood of judgment, and the cities of the plain by the baptism of fire; so He condemned His Son for us. Can we not imagine an Israelite as he stood watching the fire feeding upon the sin-offering till it was wholly consumed, saying "There am I dying for my sin, bearing the wrath of GOD against

it?"

V - GOD NOT SPARING HIS SON FROM DEATH.

"He spared not His own Son" (Romans 8:32).

Some expressions of the Bible touch a chord which recall many incidents, such is the expression **"spared not,"** it links our thought to Divine prohibition and incident.

- The Lord's injunction to Moses regarding the idolater was that he was not to be spared from being put to death (Deuteronomy 13:6-9; 29:20);
- the sin of Saul was that he dared to spare Agag and the goodly of the cattle, when GOD told him to utterly destroy and not to spare (I Samuel 15:3, 9);
- the Lord did not spare the Egyptians from death when Pharaoh and [58] his people dared to oppose Him (Psalm 78:50);
- He did not spare the angels from hell and the chains of darkness when they rebelled against Him (II Peter 2:4);
- He did not spare the antediluvians from judgment who were disobedient to His warning voice (II Peter 2:5);
- the Lord did not spare the nation of Israel from being cut off from blessing when in unbelief they forsook Him (Romans 11:21); and
- He did not spare Himself, although He had said a father always spares the son who serves him (Malachi 3:17), from smiting His Son when He gave Him to be our Substitute.

Why did He not spare Him?

If we are to be spared He must not be spared. Sodom and Gomorrah would have been spared for the sake of ten righteous men (Genesis 18:24, &c.), we are spared for the sake of the One, Who was bruised by the Lord, and because His stroke fell on Him (Isaiah 53:8, 10).

VI - GOD GIVING UP CHRIST TO DEATH.

"Delivered Him up for us all" (Romans 8:32).

When Henry Martin reached the shores of India he made this entry in his journal - "I desire to burn out for my GOD." From whence did he get this flame of burning desire? It was from the sacred fire of GOD's heart of love as seen flaming on the Cross of CHRIST's passion.

One of the strongest words is used to describe GOD's act of love when it says, **"He delivered up."** The Greek word means *to give over into the hands of another.*

- It is translated **"gave up"** and **"gave over"** in describing GOD's act of giving over to sin and its consequences, those who had previously given themselves over to sin (Romans 1:24, 26, 28; Ephesians 4:19), and
- the word is also translated **"given"** and **"gave"** and **"committed"** in speaking of [59] CHRIST's act in giving Himself up to death on our account (Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 5:2, 25), and in His committing Himself to His Father (I Peter 2:23).

We are not left in any doubt as to the reason of this giving up, for we are distinctly told He "**was delivered [up] for our trespasses**" (Romans 4:25).

One of the most intense and soul-anguishing cries of the Bible is that of David for Absalom - "**My son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!**" (II Samuel 18:33).

From a very different cause it seems some such feeling must have been in the heart of the Lord when He gave up the worthy Son of His love for the worthless sons of men.

VII - GOD FOR US IN THE DEATH OF HIS SON.

There are seven wonderful questions brought out in Romans 8:31-35, which are prefaced by one general question.

1. What shall we then say to these things?
2. If GOD be for us, who can be against us?
3. 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?
4. Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect?
5. It is God that justifieth.
6. Who is he that condemneth?
7. It is CHRIST that died, yea, rather, that is risen again, Who is even at the right hand of God, Who also maketh intercession for us.
8. Who shall separate us from the love of CHRIST? [60]

It will be noted that points five and seven make the Apostle give a definite statement. GOD, Who has declared the believer righteous, will certainly not bring an accusation against us, and CHRIST, Who died and is risen, will not condemn us, for He died and rose again to free us from condemnation, and He also 'lives to' meet any who would condemn us.

The death of CHRIST proclaims GOD's gift of CHRIST to act for us, and He gives to GOD what meets GOD's righteous requirement, and CHRIST in turn meets our need. Thus all CHRIST gave and did, are the giving, and the doing of GOD Himself.

All this brings out the fact that the crowning act of Revelation is the mighty act of GOD's love in the death of His Son. "**Herein is love,**" is the comment of the HOLY SPIRIT, "**not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the Propitiation for our sins**" (I John 4:10).

Hatton, in *Cruel London* represents two of his characters standing at the door of their dwelling-place on Christmas Day.

"Kerman went to the door. The snow had ceased to fall. The sun was getting up behind them. A grey mist brooded over the vast expanse of hill and dale. The sun seemed to dwell upon it. A fog-bow appeared in the sky; and beneath it the form of a Cross.

"Come here, Decker, quick!" cried Kerman.

"Decker hurried to the door.

"What's that?" [61]

"A phenomenon peculiar to mountainous countries. It is common in the Arctic regions and in the Alps. In the Hartz they are specters. But I've never seen the figure of a Cross before.'

"As he spoke the phenomenon disappeared. Kerman looked anxiously at Decker - 'What's the meaning of it?'

"It's an amen.'

"Of what?'

"That' GOD will not desert us. It is Christmas Day. He sends us His great sign manual, the Cross of CHRIST.'

"The face of the American lighted up, as he spoke, with a sublime expression of tenderness and hope.

"Kerman bent his head reverently.

"Let us go in, Jack, and pray. Don't let us be ashamed of our feelings; don't let us be afraid to speak to GOD in each other's hearing. We shall want His aid before long. Your shovel is no good against a tempest of wind."

The incident proclaims the inspiration and encouragement which the Cross of CHRIST brings, as expressing the love of GOD for man.

In the light of the Cross

- every darkness is dispelled,
- every sin killed,
- every question answered,
- every foe dispelled,
- every fear quenched,
- every hunger satisfied,
- every hope met,
- every longing fulfilled, and
- every promise kept. [62]

~ end of chapter 3 ~