

The Death of the Cross

by J.C. Philpot

The sermon explores the mystery of godliness, the importance of Christ's death as a propitiation and atonement, and the voluntariness of Christ's sufferings.

Scripture: Psalm 118:27, Isaiah 53:8, John 7:38, John 19:11, Romans 3:25, Ephesians 5:2, Philippians 2:8, 1 Timothy 3:16, Hebrews 9:26, Hebrews 12:22

Topics: "Atonement", "The Cross"

Description

Chapter Four from the book 'Meditations on the Sacred Humanity of Our Blessed Redeemer' delves into the profound mystery of Godliness, emphasizing the incarnation of God in the flesh and the sacrificial obedience of Jesus Christ unto death. It explores the necessity of shedding blood and the voluntary death of the sacrificial victim for atonement. The chapter vividly portrays the intense sufferings of Jesus, both physically and spiritually, as he bore the weight of sin and endured the wrath of God to accomplish redemption and reconcile humanity to God through his sacrificial death.

Transcript

Chapter Four from the book Meditations on the Sacred Humanity of Our Blessed Redeemer

Well might the apostle, as if in a burst of holy admiration, cry aloud, as with trumpet voice, that heaven and earth might hear, "Great is the mystery of godliness; God was manifest in the flesh." #1Ti 3:16 A mystery indeed it is, a great, a deep, an unfathomable mystery; for who can rightly understand how the divine Word, the eternal Son of God, was made flesh, and dwelt among us? "Who shall declare his generation?" #Isa 53:8; either that eternal generation whereby he is the only-begotten Son of God, or the generation of his sacred humanity in the womb of the Virgin, when the Holy Ghost came upon her, and the power of the Highest overshadowed her? These are the things "which the angels desire to look into;" which they cannot understand, but reverently adore. And well may we imitate their adoring admiration, not attempting to understand, but believe, love, and revere; for well has it been said,

There faith believes, and love adores.

Nor, if rightly taught and spiritually led, shall we find this a barren, dry, or unprofitable subject. It is "the great mystery of godliness;" therefore all godliness is contained in it, and flows out of it. There never was, there never will or can be a truly godly thought, feeling, or desire - no, not one godly word or work, a godly heart or a godly life which does not arise out of, and is not sustained by, the great mystery of an incarnate

God. There may be, indeed frequently is, as a legal holiness, a fleshly piety, a tithing of mint, anise, and cummin, and a profusion of good works, so called, independent of the grace that dwells in the Lord the Lamb; but godliness, as consisting in a new and heavenly birth, with all its attendant fruits and graces, can only flow from the fullness of a covenant Head, communicating life to the members of his mystical body. And this covenant Head, we know, is the Son of God, once manifest in the flesh and now exalted to the right hand of the Father. How clear on this point, that all life is in him and out of him, are his own words of grace and truth: "Because I live, ye shall live also;" "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man cometh unto the Father but by me;" "Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, ye have no life in you;" "I am the vine, ye are the branches. He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit; for without me ye can do nothing."

If, then, our hearts, as touched with an unction from above, are bent after godliness, as a felt blessing; if, as made daily more and more sensible of our miserable emptiness and destitution, and the drying up of all creature springs of happiness and holiness, we long more and more to realise the inward possession of that promised well of water, springing up into everlasting life, we shall desire to look more and more into this heavenly mystery, and to have its transforming power and efficacy more feelingly and experimentally made known to our souls. "If any man thirst," said the blessed Lord, "let him come unto me and drink;" and to show that not only should he drink for his own soul's happiness, but for the benefit of others, he graciously added, "He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly (or heart) shall flow rivers of living water." #Joh 7:38 The whole of God's grace, mercy, and truth is laid up in, is revealed through, is manifested by, the Son of his love; for "it pleased the Father that in him should all fullness dwell;" #Col 1:19 and this as Immanuel, God with us. Thus his sacred humanity, in union with his Divine Person, is the channel of communication through which all the love and mercy of God flow down to poor, guilty, miserable sinners, who believe in the name of the only-begotten Son of God.

If blessed then with faith in living exercise, we may draw near and behold the great mystery of godliness. To tread by faith upon this holy ground is to come "unto Mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn which are written in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus, the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than the blood of Abel;" #Heb 12:22-24; for every blessing of the new covenant, if we are but favoured with a living faith in an incarnate God, is then experimentally as well as eternally ours.

The last acts of the suffering obedience of our adorable Redeemer are couched in the words of the apostle, "And became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." #Php 2:8 The death of Christ was the fulfilment of the purpose for which he came into the world, which was, "to give himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling savour." #Eph 5:2 "Now once in the end of the world hath he appeared, to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself." #Heb 9:26 The sufferings, bloodshedding, and death of the Lord Jesus Christ were a sacrifice offered for sin, and are therefore spoken of as a propitiation #Ro 3:25 1Jo 2:2 4:10 and an atonement. #Ro 5:11 But in a sacrifice two things are absolutely necessary

1. That the blood of the victim should be shed, for "without shedding of blood is no remission:" "It is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul;" #Le 17:11; and 2. That the victim should die; for death being the penalty of disobedience, #Ge 2:17 Eze 18:4, the sacrifice offered as an atonement for sin cannot be complete without the death of the victim. In the sacrifice of himself, offering up his sacred humanity on the altar of his Deity, the blessed Lord accomplished these two essentials of a propitiatory offering.

1. His blood was shed upon the cross - the actual living blood of his sacred humanity. It is therefore called "the precious blood of Christ as of a lamb without blemish and without spot," #1Pe 1:19, and "his own blood." #Ac 20:28 Heb 9:12. It was precious as flowing from his sacred humanity; precious, as stamped with all the validity and merit of Deity; precious in the sight of God as a sweetsmelling savour; and precious in the hearts of his people as cleansing them from all sin. Sin is an evil so dreadful, so hateful and abhorrent to his righteous character, so provoking to his justice and holiness, that God could not pardon it unless an atonement were made adequate to its fearful magnitude. Thousands of rams and ten thousands of rivers of oil could not atone for sin. Did all men consent to give their firstborn for their transgression, the fruit of their body for the sin of their soul, #Mic 6:7, all could not suffice to outweigh the magnitude of sin. Lebanon is not sufficient for a burnt offering. Nothing short of the blood of the only-begotten Son of God could be an atonement of sufficient worth, of equivalent value.

2. But the death of the victim was also required. He who freely and voluntarily stood in the sinner's place must die in his room, or the substitution could not be effectual. Here then, we see the mystery of the death of Jesus. There was no natural mortality {1} in that sacred humanity which the Lord assumed in the womb of the Virgin. And yet he took a nature which could die by a voluntary act. The whole of his obedience in his state of humiliation was voluntary. Therefore the last act of it was as voluntary as the first the death on the cross as much as the assumption in the Virgin. The Lord's own words are decisive here: "Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life that I may take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father." #Joh 10:17,18.

The very merit of his obedience unto death whereby it became capable of being imputed for righteousness to the church of God consisted mainly in two things: the dignity of the obedient Sufferer and the voluntariness of the sacrifice as an act of obedience to the will of God. Had our blessed Lord not been God, and that as the eternal Son of God, There would have been no merit in his sufferings, bloodshedding, and death. As the brightness of God's glory and the express image of his Person, as his co-eternal Son he thought it not robbery - no unhallowed, disallowable claim, to be equal with God; #Php 2:6; and therefore the very infinity of Deity itself attached to his words and works so as to stamp efficacious merit upon them. It was not because his humanity was perfect that it was meritorious. Had his humanity been as perfect as it was, if Deity were not in conjunction with it, no merit could have been attached to it any more than there was merit in the obedience of Adam, or in that of an angel. But being God as well as man, the merit of Deity was stamped upon all the acts of the obedient suffering humanity, so that, as we have sometimes said, Godhead was in every drop of his precious blood.

Again, if the life of the blessed Lord had been violently taken away, contrary to his will, where would have been the obedience unto death? Had he been killed, so to speak, by the cross - had died because he could not help dying, had his life been violently torn from him, where would have been the laying down of his life as the last act of his voluntary obedience? What power could man have had over him? Had he so willed, he could have freed himself from the hands of his enemies. Therefore he said unto Pilate, "Thou couldest have no power at all against me except it were given thee from above." #Joh 19:11 And again, "Thinkest thou that I cannot pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels?" #Mt 26:53 When, then, the band of men and officers from the chief priests came to take him with lanterns, and torches, and weapons, he freely "went forth" to yield himself up; but when he said, "I am he," or rather, as the words literally mean, "I AM," the glory of his eternal Deity so flashed forth, that "they went backward, and fell to the ground." #Joh 18:3-6

Thus truly was he "brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth." #Isa 53:7 What heart can conceive, what tongue express what his holy soul endured when "the Lord laid upon him the iniquities of us all"? In the garden of Gethsemane, what a load of guilt, what a weight of sin, what an intolerable burden of the wrath of God did that sacred humanity endure, until the pressure of sorrow and woe forced the drops of blood to fall as sweat from his brow. The human nature, in its weakness recoiled, as it were, from the cup of anguish put into his hand. His body could scarce bear the load that pressed him down; his soul, under the waves and billows of God's wrath, sank in deep mire where there was no standing, and came into deep waters where the floods overflowed him. #Ps 69:1,2 And how could it be otherwise when that sacred humanity was enduring all the wrath of God, suffering the very pangs of hell, and wading in all the depths of guilt and terror? When the blessed Lord was made sin (or a sin-offering) for us, he endured in his holy soul all the pangs of distress, horror, alarm, misery, and guilt that the elect would have felt in hell for ever; and not only as any one of them would have felt, but as the collective whole would have experienced under the outpouring of the everlasting wrath of God. The anguish, the distress, the darkness, the condemnation, the shame, the guilt, the unutterable horror, that any or all of his quickened family have ever experienced under a sense of God's wrath, the curse of the law, and the terrors of hell, are only faint, feeble reflections of what the Lord felt in the garden and on the cross; for there were attendant circumstances in his case which are not, and indeed cannot be in theirs, and which made the distress and agony of his holy soul, both in nature and degree, such as none but he could feel or know.

He as the eternal Son of God, who had lain in his bosom before all worlds, had known all the blessedness and happiness of the love and favour of the Father - his own Father, shining upon him, for he was "by him as one brought up with him, and was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him." #Pr 8:30 When, then, instead of love he felt his displeasure, instead of the beams of his favour he experienced the frowns and terrors of his wrath, instead of the light of his countenance he tasted the darkness and gloom of desertion - what heart can conceive, what tongue express the bitter anguish which must have wrung the soul of our suffering Surety under this agonising experience? {2} A few drops of the wrath of God let down into the conscience of a child of God have made many a living soul cry out, "While I suffer thy terrors I am distracted; thy fierce wrath goeth over me; thy terrors have cut me off." #Ps 88:15,16 But what is all that Job, Heman, Jeremiah, or Jonah experienced, compared with the floods of anguish and terror which all but overwhelmed the soul of our blessed Lord? We therefore read of him in the garden, when the first pangs of his agony came on, that he "began to be sore amazed, and to be very heavy;" and this made him say to his three disciples, who were to be eye-witnesses of his sufferings, #1Pe 5:1, "My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death." #Mr 14:33,34 So great was that load that his human nature must have sunk beneath the weight his body and soul been rent asunder, but for four sustaining props: the power of his Deity, for though that purposely did not display its strength, it remained in firm union with his sacred humanity; the help and support of the Holy Ghost sustaining his human nature under the load laid upon it; the joy set before him, which enabled him in the prospect to endure the cross, despising the shame; #Heb 12:2; and the strengthening of the ministering angel sent from heaven. #Lu 22:43 Thus supported and sustained, our gracious Redeemer sank not in the deep waters, but, as our great High Priest, "offered up prayers and supplications, with strong crying and tears, unto him that was able to save him from death, and was heard in that he feared" #Heb 5:7 not as some have foolishly thought and said, fearing the miscarrying of his undertaking, or that he should sink into hell, but because he feared his heavenly Father with the reverence of a Son <>{3} for filial fear, with every other grace, was in the heart of Jesus as his treasure. #Isa 11:2,3

Let us ever bear in mind that the sufferings of the holy soul of Jesus were as real, that is, as really felt, as the sufferings of his sacred body, and a thousand times more intense and intolerable. Though beyond description painful and agonising, yet the sufferings of the body were light indeed compared with the sufferings of the soul. It is so with the saints of God themselves, when the Lord lays judgment to the line and righteousness to the plummet in their conscience, and lets down a sense of his anger and displeasure into their soul. What is all bodily suffering compared to a sense of God's displeasure and the arrows of his wrath sticking in the conscience? So it was with our great High Priest, when both as sacrificer and sacrificed, alike priest and victim, he was bound with the cords of love and obedience to the horns of the altar. #Ps 118:27 Surely never was there such a pang since the foundations of the earth were laid as that which rent and tore the soul of the Redeemer when the last drop of agony was poured into the already overflowing cup, and he cried out, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Nature herself sympathised with his sorrow, and was moved at his cry, for the earth shook, the sun withdrew his light, and the graves yielded up their dead. Yet thus was redemption's work accomplished, sin atoned for and blotted out, the wrath of God appeased, everlasting righteousness brought in, and the church for ever reconciled and saved.

When, then, the Lord had been fully baptized with his baptism of suffering and blood, when he had drunk the cup of sorrow and anguish to its last dregs, and had rendered all the obedience which the law demanded and the will of God required he cried out with a loud voice that heaven and earth might hear, "It is finished!" and then, and not till then, he meekly bowed his head, laid down his life, as the last act of his voluntary, suffering obedience, and gave up the ghost.

Footnotes:

{1} Though we have in our preceding chapters used the word "immortal" as applicable to the sacred humanity of the blessed Lord, we are well aware that it is a term not fully appropriate; for the word "immortal" strickly means "not capable of death." And is in this sense applied to the soul of man as not only not dying with the body, but not capable of dying.

In this sense, the humanity of the blessed Lord was not immortal, for it could and did die. If such a word were admissible, "unmortal," or "non-mortal," would be a preferable term - denying that it was mortal, and yet not asserting that it could not die. The main difficulty arises from the inherent defect of human language as applied to heavenly mysteries. The mind naturally contemplates only two states of existence: 1. What must necessarily die; and, 2. What cannot possibly die. The first it terms "mortal," the second it calls, "immortal." A third idea, that of a body which does not necessarily die, and yet is capable of dying, as being a conception lying out of its reach, it has invented no word properly to express.

{2} Those who deny the eternal Sonship of Jesus rob him of his grace as well as of his glory, by diminishing his sufferings, and thus really strip away the greatness, and consequently much of the merit of his sacrifice. It was because he was God's own true and proper Son he so deeply, so keenly felt his wrathful displeasure. A Son by office, by mere name - without any filial relationship but a bare title which might have been any other - could not feel towards his adopted Father what the true, the proper, the only-begotten Son of God felt to his heavenly Father. One error always lets in another, and thus we see that the denial of the eternal Sonship of Christ lowers and disparages the greatness and consequently the merit of the atonement. Let the deniers of the eternal Sonship look to this.

{3} The margin reads, "for his piety." but the truer and more literal meaning is, "on account of his reverential fear" "Had God in honour"-Luther

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