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## Chapter 3

# A Cross: Death

... He made him to be sin who knew no sin. (2 Cor. 5:21)

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At the end of the film *National Treasure*, after treasure seeker Ben Gates (Nicolas Cage) has been arrested for stealing the Declaration of Independence, Gates says to FBI agent Sadusky, 'I'd really love not to go to prison. I can't tell you how much I don't want to go to prison.' To which Sadusky plainly replies, 'Someone's got to go to prison, Ben.'

It's a rule of life, isn't it? Someone has to take the flack for the crime committed. The penalty must be paid by someone. In the same way, if 'the wages of sin is *death*' (Rom. 6:23), then *someone* has to die.

We have seen how sin reared its ugly and deadly head, cutting humanity off from intimacy with God. But the Holy Trinity had already planned to save men and women from sin's putrefaction and death sentence. *Salvation was to be executed by the execution of the incarnate Son – God made flesh.* 'For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making *peace by the blood of his cross*' (Col. 1:19-20). Paul's reference to blood here in Colossians is so important, and we shall see why throughout this chapter. The death penalty for sin has to be paid for by blood. Blood needs to be spilt. This is because life is in the blood. Leviticus tells us 'the life of the flesh is in the blood' and it is the 'blood that makes atonement by the life' (Lev. 17:11). This is echoed in Hebrews, 'without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins' (Heb. 9:22).

So how does Christ's blood have the power to save?

### *NOTHING BUT THE BLOOD*

To understand the necessity of Christ's death to redeem us from sin, we need to go back to the significant yet foreboding night of the first Passover in Egypt. Due to the famine in Canaan, Jacob and his family settled in Egypt with Joseph. In his lifetime Jacob never returned to his homeland, only his bones made it back. Yet all the other Israelites stayed in Egypt (Gen. 50:14). Four hundred years later, this ethnic minority had become enslaved by their hosts (Exod. 1:8-11). But God had seen the oppression of Abraham's descendants and because of His covenant promises

to Abraham and Jacob, He promised to set them free.<sup>1</sup> We join the story just after Egypt has endured bloody water, an onslaught of frogs, gnats, flies, boils, hail, locusts, utter darkness for three days, and the death of their livestock (Exod. 7-11). Pharaoh is stubborn; he still will not release Israel from slavery. So God tells Moses to instruct the people to take a lamb ‘without blemish’ and kill it at twilight on the fourteenth day of the first month, and use the blood to paint their doorposts and lintels (Exod. 12:5-7). God says in Exodus 12:13, ‘The blood shall be a sign for you, on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you.’ The blood was a vital and saving sign because it pointed to and indicated the people’s obedience to God.

And so it was: the angel of the Lord struck down in judgement those houses where there was no blood. Bare door posts and lintels – like gaping holes – screamed of the terror of death. Beloved sons, young or old, great or small, poor or rich, died that night. ‘And there was a great cry in Egypt, for there was not a house where someone was not dead’ (Ex.12:30).

If the blood of a spotless young lamb was dripping from the lintel, then God’s judgement passed over that door, sparing the firstborn son because the lamb had died in his place. What a night! – as the dark terror of death crept around Egypt. Imagine yourself as a Hebrew woman preparing roast lamb, tension thick in the air, painfully aware that your husband and eldest son play together in the corner of the room. You follow Moses’ instructions carefully, to make sure everyone wakes up in the morning.

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1 See Genesis 12:1-7 and Exodus 6:5-7.

### *Jesus the Passover Lamb*

After this horrific night the Passover meal was repeated every year on the first Jewish month, both as a sober reminder and a joyful celebration of the Lord saving Israel from judgement and slavery. Yet this annual celebration was blown apart centuries later in an upper room in Jerusalem, when God Incarnate declared Himself to be the ultimate Passover Lamb. We read in the gospel of Luke of the last supper between Jesus and His disciples, ‘Then came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed’ (Luke 22:7). But have you ever noticed that no lamb is mentioned at the last supper? Jesus *is* the lamb.<sup>2</sup> ‘And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” And likewise, the cup after they had eaten, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood”’ (Luke 22:19-20). The next day Jesus was killed. Except instead of a lintel His blood poured down a Roman cross. Paul testifies to this in 1 Corinthians 5:7, ‘for Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.’

This is why we sing about the blood of Jesus. To alien ears, Christian worship would sound gory and blood-thirsty.

*Oh, to see the pain  
Written on Your face  
Bearing the awesome weight of sin;  
Every bitter thought,  
Every evil deed  
Crowning Your bloodstained brow<sup>3</sup>*

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2 His ‘references to his “body”, and in particular his “blood . . . poured out”, allude to his death, which he thus sets forth as the *decisive fulfilment* of the Passover festival.’ Jeffery, Ovey, Sach, *Pierced*, 39 [emphasis mine].

3 Stuart Townend and Keith Getty, ‘The Power of the Cross’ 2005.

*There is a fountain filled with blood,  
Drawn from Immanuel's veins.  
And sinners plunged beneath that flood  
Lose all their guilty stains.<sup>4</sup>*

*What can wash away my sin?  
Nothing but the blood of Jesus;  
What can make me whole again?  
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.<sup>5</sup>*

Why would we want to rejoice in sharp thorns being pushed onto the thin skin of King Jesus' temple? Or the ruthless flogging of an innocent man? Surely Christians are pretty sick-headed to sing about His torturous death? But we joy in it because Christ's cruel death was a rescue plan, not an accident. It 'was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief' (Isa. 53:10). The Father called His beloved Son to give Himself up as 'live-bait' rescue to a hateful, murderous crowd and carry His own means of execution up a hill to a place of sacrifice, to rescue us from drowning in our sin.

### *Mount Moriah*

Many centuries before, another father had placed a heavy load of wood upon the shoulders of his only son, whom he adored. He was not a heavenly father however, but one who had waited with his wife through long years of infertility to have a child. When they finally conceived in old age it was nothing short of a God-given miracle (Gen. 21:1-2). This man and his son also slogged up a mountain because God had told the man to give up his son as an offering. The Lord had asked him to sacrifice the boy back to God, and the man obeyed. When his son asked his

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4 William Cowper, 'There is a Fountain filled with Blood' 1772.

5 Robert Lowry, 'Nothing but the Blood of Jesus' 1876.

father where the lamb was to sacrifice, Abraham answered, ‘God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son’ (Gen. 22:8). Abraham knew God was in control. He continued to obey God’s instructions and placed his son on the altar. Then a voice called to him to halt, ‘Abraham, Abraham! . . . Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, *your only son*, from me’ (vv. 11-12). At the sound of bleating from a nearby thicket, Abraham found a ram and offered it to God in worship instead. This was not just an unlucky ram in the wrong place at the wrong time; God had provided a substitute for Abraham’s son.

This unusual story of Isaac’s redemption on Mount Moriah is a picture of Christ as our redemption on Mount Calvary. Abraham reflects the heavenly Father who truly did not spare His only Son as an offering (John 3:16). God Himself has provided the lamb.

### *In Our Place*

How many times we have heard Christian speakers use sports substitution to illustrate Christ’s saving death? In truth this is an abysmal illustration of Christ’s salvation not least because biblical substitution is *penal* in nature. ‘Penal’ is a legal word for punishment. It is where we get our word ‘penalty’. A penal substitute is quite simply someone, or something, taking a punishment in the place of the guilty. I remember as a child unkindly jumping into a lovely warm bath that my twin sister had poured for herself. Her loud shrieks broadcasted the injustice throughout the house, bringing my father upstairs. I was quickly removed from the bath and just as I was about to be physically reprimanded, my twin asked to be punished in my stead. It was pretty humbling to watch her receive the penalty for my offence against her – even for something so trivial.

The doctrine of penal substitution is the biblical teaching that, at the cross, Jesus Christ took the death, punishment and curse of sin upon Himself for fallen humanity. We know ‘the wages of sin is death’, yet Scripture tells us that Jesus took on that wage Himself. ‘He made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God’ (2 Cor. 5:21). God the Father placed all of our sin on the Son and punished Him in our place. This is a pretty radical doctrine. Recently it has become fashionable to deny this in the claim that it is too abusive for a loving and just God. But, as we have seen, it is not empty, selfish abuse but a sacrifice made willingly by God Himself for the forgiveness of sin. It is the reason the gospel is good news.

How about you? Has anyone ever taken the blame for something you have done? Did their selflessness surprise you, punching you deep in the stomach with humility and gratitude? In His great love, the Lord Jesus Christ went to the cross in order to clothe us sinners with Himself (this we will see later), destroying the power of sin that entangles us. So ‘for the joy that was set before him [he] endured the cross, despising the shame, and is [now] seated at the right hand of the throne of God’ (Heb. 12:2). How can we do anything but give Him everything?

### *THE DAY OF AT-ONE-MENT*

With His people newly released from Egypt, God was ready for them to worship Him in righteousness. For this reason, at Sinai He gave Moses the Ten Commandments as a covenant gift; a wedding ring declaring Israel to be His Bride. Due to the people’s lust for idolatry in forming the golden calf, the first two tablets shattered into pieces at the foot of the mountain (Exod. 32:19). And this breaking of the law only continued. It did not make the people righteous. Yet in the whole overarching redemption story in the Bible, this was the first serious step since Eden, towards

restoration and reconciliation with God. We saw in our previous chapter that God's law was to help the people live in obedience and holiness towards Him. It wasn't given to sort the problem of sin out completely; it was never going to do that (Rom. 7:7, 13). The law exposes our sin; it doesn't get rid of it. The Ten Commandments are a God-given barometer for sin, outlining God's own righteousness and perfection still today. Without it the Israelites, and you and I, are blind to our mess.

The Lord gave more than this, however, bestowing on His people a temporary provision for forgiveness. To us the ceremonial laws may seem overly complicated and cultic. But they were given in love so that God could draw near to His beloved people. For many pages in the book of Leviticus we read of the different offerings the people could give in the tabernacle for particular sins (Lev. 1-7). These should amaze us. Our God thought of everything! His provision to the Israelites was generous and comprehensive.

The Day of Atonement is of particular importance. This special day of worship and sacrifice was set up by God to cover all sin, whether recognised or unrecognised. On only one day of the year (Heb. 9:7), the High Priest would enter a highly exclusive room behind a thick curtain – a heavy room divider that would one day be ripped from top to bottom (Matt. 27:51). Here, in obedience to God, the blood of goats and bulls was sprinkled so that God would forgive the people's sin. In this provision the Lord was 'merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love', offering forgiveness and not dealing with Israel as their sins deserved (Ps. 103:8-10). The Lord gave careful instructions for Aaron the High Priest to follow...

Kill the goat of the sin offering that is for the people and bring its blood inside the veil and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull [Aaron's personal sacrifice for him and