

*THE DOCTRINE OF THE ATONEMENT IN THE
NEW TESTAMENT.*

I. THE SYNOPTIST GOSPELS.

THE purpose of these papers is to reproduce from the documents preserved for us in the New Testament the conception or conceptions of their various writers about the death of Christ and its relation to His work and to the kingdom of God; in order thus to determine as accurately and as fully as possible the position of the Death of Christ in God's eternal purpose of salvation.

With this aim I shall in this first paper endeavour to reproduce Christ's own thoughts about His own death as these found expression in the discourses recorded in the Synoptist Gospels. This will give us one definite type of tradition about the teaching of Christ. In a second paper I shall attempt to reproduce the very different type contained in the Fourth Gospel. We shall thus obtain, from two independent sources, the conception of the purpose of His own approaching death which was attributed to Christ by His early followers. In a third paper I shall consider the teaching of the Galilæan Apostles as expounded by them in their discourses recorded in the Book of Acts and as set forth in other documents of the New Testament. This will give us Christ's teaching as reflected in the thought of His earliest disciples after He had risen from the dead.

We shall then pass to the teaching embodied in the Epistles of St. Paul, a very marked type of teaching much more developed, in reference to the matter before us, than that contained in the rest of the New Testament, and evidently moulded by the writer's mental constitution and social surroundings. This conception of the purpose and effect of the Death of Christ we must carefully study, and

endeavour to comprehend as a whole. The abundant and important teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews will next claim our attention. These various types of teaching we shall compare as we pass along. And we shall find that the teaching peculiar to St. Paul is the key to all the other teaching in the New Testament about the Death of Christ, giving to it unity and making it intelligible. This peculiar teaching of St. Paul we shall then study in its relation to whatever else we know about sin, about God's moral government of the world, and about the future destiny of man. We shall thus follow the teaching of the New Testament so far as it will guide us; and from that point we will look for a moment at the great problems which the writers of the New Testament have left unsolved for the reverent study of the servants of Christ in future ages.

We shall afterwards say a few words about certain modern opinions on this all-important subject; and conclude this series of papers by a review of the results attained.

It will not be needful to assume either the Divine authority of the New Testament or the correctness of the accounts therein given of the teaching of Christ. We shall test and use the documents of the New Testament as we should any other similar writings. This method will enable us to meet on common ground some who are not prepared to accept as decisive the teaching of the Bible. Moreover, our research will discover valuable evidence of the correctness of the picture of the teaching of Christ contained in the New Testament. Thus our study of the Death of Christ will strengthen our proof of the truth of the Gospel which He died to proclaim.

Of the Four Gospels, the First and Fourth are by all early Christian writers attributed to Apostles of Christ, and to the same two Apostles; and the Second and Third Gospels to known companions of Apostles. So expressly

Irenæus, who in A.D. 180 became bishop of Lyons, in bk. iii. 9-11 of his great work *Against Heresies*. Abundant quotations prove that he had the Gospels in a form practically the same as that which we now possess. This traditional authorship is accepted by all early Christian writers in all parts of the world from the second century onwards. Their agreement proves that the Gospels were then ancient. And that these four accounts of the life of Christ and no others were everywhere accepted as authoritative and in some sense official, and that without a trace of difference of opinion the same authors' names were always attached to them, reveals their unique position in early Christian literature. This proof is strengthened by many quotations in the writings of Justin, who lived in the middle of the second century, which show that he and his contemporaries had an account of the teaching of Christ practically identical with that contained in the Synoptist Gospels.

We now turn to these early records of the teaching of Christ.

Very conspicuous in each of the Synoptist Gospels is the incident narrated in Matthew xvi. 13-28, Mark viii. 27-ix. 1, Luke ix. 18-27. Christ has drawn His disciples far away from the temple courts at Jerusalem and from the crowded shores of the Lake of Gennesaret in order, amid the solitudes overshadowed by the snows of Hermon, to reveal to them truths not yet made known. But before doing this He inquires whether the truths already taught have been learnt. The Master asks, "Whom do men say that I am?" Peter's answer is ready: and he does but express the thought of all. "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." His reply proclaims that, although the significance of the wonderful works of Christ has not been recognised by the mass of the nation, it has been recognised by the group of disciples around Him to-day.

This satisfactory answer is at once followed by a new

revelation. "From that time began Jesus to show to His disciples that He must needs go away to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief-priests and scribes, and be put to death, and the third day be raised." Our Lord goes on to say that, not only must He be crucified, but "if any one wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me."

Here is a Man who has not yet reached His prime, and is apparently in health and strength, saying that necessity compels Him to go away from Galilee, where He has many friends, to Jerusalem, and there be put to death by the leaders of His nation. In other words, Christ not only foresees His own violent death but is resolved to make a long journey, and to put Himself in the hands of those who, as He knows, will kill Him. He thus sets aside as inapplicable to Himself a command given (Matt. x. 23) to His disciples, "When they persecute you in this city, flee to another." He did so under a special necessity, conspicuously asserted in each of the Synoptist Gospels: *δεῖ αὐτὸν ἀπελθεῖν . . . καὶ ἀποκτανθῆναι.*

We ask with reverence, Wherein lay the necessity which compelled the great Teacher to throw away, apparently, the most valuable life on earth, thus setting an example which He, Himself the great Example, forbids His disciples to imitate? To answer this question, so far as He who gave His Son to die for us may shed light upon the purpose of His own gift, is the difficult task now before us.

The words just quoted cannot be explained by the young Teacher's own foresight of the deadly hostility which He knew that His teaching would arouse. For this would not account for His going to Jerusalem, the city of His foes. By going where He knows that men will kill Him, He deliberately laid down His life. And He tells us that all this was needful. We notice also that in each of the Synoptist Gospels Christ's death is, in His own thought,

to be followed by resurrection. This suggests irresistibly that to Him death and resurrection were means needful to attain some further end. We ask what it is.

In Matthew xvii. 12, Mark ix. 12 Christ again announces that suffering awaits Him. Similarly in Matthew xvii. 22, 23, Mark ix. 31, and less fully in Luke ix. 44, He foretells that He will be surrendered into the hands of men, and that they will kill Him, and that He will rise from the dead. In Matthew xx. 18, 19, Mark x. 33, 34, Luke xviii. 31, 32, He repeats the announcement. This repetition throws into conspicuous prominence His approaching death. It is the more remarkable, because up to this point we have no indication of hostility so deadly and so powerful as to close up, even to a young and popular teacher, all hope of escape.

Immediately after the words just quoted Christ says, in reply to an ambitious request from the sons of Zebedee or from their mother, in Matthew xx. 21 and Mark x. 38, "Are ye able to drink the cup which I am about to drink?" Mark adds, "and to be baptized with the Baptism with which I am to be baptized." These words imply that to Christ and to those to whom He speaks there is no way to the throne except by drinking "the cup" and receiving "the Baptism." They are followed, and in some measure explained, by another assertion, given word for word in the First and Second Gospels: "The Son of Man did not come to be ministered to, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many."

The word *λύτρον*, or *ransom*, denotes always a price or means by which one is set free from captivity, affliction, or obligation. The cognate verb *λυτρόω* is very common in the LXX., always in the sense of setting free. Both words are common in classical Greek for the liberation of captives by a price paid. So Deuteronomy vii. 8: "The Lord brought you out with a strong hand, and the Lord *ransomed* thee from the house of bondage, from the hand of

Pharaoh king of Egypt." Also chaps. ix. 26, xiii. 5, xv. 15, xxi. 8, xxiv. 18, 2 Samuel vii. 23, 1 Chronicles xvii. 21, Nehemiah i. 10. In all these places, the idea of rescue is conspicuous, and obscures that of price. So David says, in 2 Samuel iv. 9, "The Lord liveth who has *ransomed* my soul from all affliction."

The substantive used in the passage now before us is found in Proverbs xiii. 8, "A man's own wealth is the *ransom* of his life;" *i.e.* money may save a man from death. If so, the money is the means of escape from the gates of the grave. And in all human thought a costly means is the price paid for the result attained. Still more definite is Proverbs vi. 35: an injured husband "will not give up his enmity for any *ransom*." No payment of money will pacify him.

The same substantive in the plural is sometimes, and the cognate verb is frequently, used in the LXX. in reference to that on which the Mosaic Law had a claim, but which was released for a price or substitute. For instance, God claimed the firstborn, but waived His claim on payment of five shekels each. So Exodus xiii. 13: "I sacrifice every firstborn male to the Lord; and every firstborn of my sons I will *ransom*" (*λυτρώσομαι*). Also Numbers xviii. 15, 16: "Every firstborn, so many as they offer to the Lord, from man to beast, shall be thine; except that the firstborn of men shall be *ransomed* with *ransoms* (*λύτροις, λυτρωθήσεται*): and the firstborn of the unclean cattle thou shalt *ransom*." The word may be studied in Leviticus xxv. 25, 30, 33, 48, 49, 54; xxvii. 13-33. In all these places the word denotes the liberation for ordinary use of that on which the Law had a claim.

Christ asserts in Matthew xx. 28, Mark x. 45, that He "came . . . to give His life a *ransom* for many." This can only mean that He came into the world, or less likely, that He came out of obscurity into public life, in order

to die; and in order that His death might be a means of releasing many from bondage or affliction, or from an obligation they could not discharge.

The words just expounded imply, and are implied in, the necessity for the death of Christ asserted in Matthew xvi. 21. For the idea of price always involves necessity. We pay a price because we cannot otherwise obtain the object we desire. That the life of Christ is called the ransom-price of our salvation implies that we could not otherwise have been saved. Moreover, whatever we do in order to attain a result otherwise unattainable, we speak of as a price paid for the object we desire.

The verb *λυτροῦσθαι* is found again in Luke xxiv. 21, in the lips of the disciples going to Emmaus: "We were hoping that it was He that is about to *ransom* Israel."

The murder of the Master's Son is the climax of the parable recorded in Matthew xxi. 39, Mark xii. 8, Luke xx. 15.

The institution of the Lord's Supper next claims our attention.

The great Prophet has fulfilled His purpose of going to Jerusalem. In an upper room He has had supper with His disciples. At the close of the meal, He takes a small loaf of bread, probably similar to those found at Pompeii. He breaks it, and while doing so says, "Take, eat: this is My body." Evidently He means that something is about to happen to His body like that which before His disciples' eyes was happening to the bread. He then takes the cup, and after thanksgiving hands it to His disciples, saying, as recorded in Matthew xxvi. 27, 28, Mark xiv. 23, 24, "This is My blood of the Covenant which is being shed for many"; or, as the First Gospel adds, "for forgiveness of sins." According to Luke xxii. 20, 1 Corinthians xi. 25, He said, "This cup is the New Covenant in My blood." All accounts agree in the breaking of the bread, which is

called the body of Christ. And all speak of His blood, either as being shed for many, or as the basis of a new Covenant between God and man.

Take them as we will, these words are a deliberate and forcible announcement by the young Teacher, who in health and in the prime of life, and in freedom, reclines among His disciples, that He is about to suffer a violent death. Moreover, while living and well, He institutes a ceremony to commemorate His approaching death. Such an institution, ordained under such circumstances, is unique in the history of the world. Commemorations of the death of a martyr or a hero are not unfrequent. But we never heard of one enjoined by the martyr himself; and especially while in liberty and health. Moreover, generally or always, commemorations of a violent death have been incitements to vengeance. But of vengeance we have no trace here. And the name, *Eucharist*, given to the rite from very early days, suggests only gratitude to God.

Looking again at the words of institution as recorded by Luke and Paul, we find Christ saying, "This cup is the New Covenant in My blood." These words recall at once Jeremiah xxxi. 31: "Behold, days are coming, saith Jehovah, and I will make with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah a new covenant; not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day when I took hold of their hand to bring them forth from the land of Egypt, which My covenant they broke: . . . because this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith Jehovah, I will put My Law within them, and upon their heart I will write it, and will be to them for a God, and they shall be to Me for a people: . . . because I will forgive their guilt, and their sin I will remember no more." Manifestly Christ meant to say that the day foreseen from afar by Jeremiah had at last come, that God was about to enter into a new relation with man,

and that this new relation was in some way to be brought about by the violent death which Christ was about to suffer.

Practically the same is the account given in Matthew xxvi. 28: "This is the blood of the covenant, which is being shed for many for forgiveness of sins." Here again we have reference to a covenant between God and man. Again the covenant stands in close relation to the approaching and violent death of Christ. For His blood, about to be shed, is "the blood of the Covenant." It is to be shed "for many, for forgiveness of sins." We notice also that forgiveness was promised in Jeremiah's prophecy of the New Covenant. All accounts agree to represent Christ as announcing His own violent death, and this occupying an important relation to the salvation of man.

Christ's words at the institution of the Supper shed light upon those recorded in Matthew xx. 28. For sin separates us from God, and gives us up to ruinous bondage. If Christ brings us into friendly relation to God, He thereby rescues us from the bondage of sin. That in order to do this Christ gave up His life, implies that our rescue could not be accomplished by any less costly means. And, if not, then was His life the ransom price of our salvation. From Matthew xxvi. 27, we learn that the necessity for this costly ransom lay in man's sin.

The great importance of the death of Christ is made very conspicuous by the long and detailed account of His crucifixion given in each of the four Gospels.

The absolute necessity for the death of Christ is again asserted after His resurrection by the angels at His tomb, as recorded in Luke xxiv. 7; and by the risen Saviour Himself to the disciples going to Emmaus, in ver. 26.

That salvation through the death of Christ is not mentioned in the great inaugural address which we call the Sermon on the Mount, or in the group of parables contained in Matthew xiii., is explained by the statement in

chap. xvi. 21 that Christ reserved this teaching until His hearers had learnt His superhuman dignity. He began His teaching by asserting with authority, and expounding, the broad principles of morality on which rests all religion. He then claimed authority to forgive sins, and claimed to be Lord of angels and Judge of all men. Lastly, He announced that the Judge must die for those on whom He will one day pronounce sentence. Only in this order, and at intervals, could His teaching be understood.

It is now evident that the three Synoptist Gospels present one harmonious conception of the death of Christ. They agree to represent Him as frequently and deliberately purposing to go to Jerusalem in order to put Himself into the hands of enemies who, He knows, will kill Him. He speaks of this self-surrender as a binding necessity which must determine His action. This necessity He somewhat explains by a subsequent assertion that His life is a ransom-price for many, and that He came in order to pay that price. It is still further explained by an announcement, that His blood, which is about to be shed, is to be the basis of a new covenant between God and man, a covenant offering to men forgiveness of sins. The importance thus given to His approaching death He sets in clearest light by ordaining a remarkable rite in order to keep it ever before the eyes of His servants. The importance of His death is further maintained by a full account of His crucifixion.

To sum up. The Synoptist Gospels teach that man's salvation comes through Christ's violent death; that to save us He deliberately laid down His life; and that the need for this costly means of salvation lay in man's sin.

In other papers we shall compare this conception of the death of Christ with that presented in other parts of the New Testament.

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