

CHRISTIANITY IS FOR EVER

ESCAPING FROM THE WRATH TO COME

Passage : John 3:16-21

In these studies we are going back to first principles, which is always a good and useful experience. We cannot build a Christian life individually or nationally without getting our foundations right, and this verse is great on foundations.

Jesus had been talking with Nicodemus, who was a fine representative of the old Israel. Although a religious teacher, he was bewildered, but he was open to understand the things of God. He went tentatively knocking at a new door to see if there was something he had failed to grasp about the essential reality of God, and about the relationship between God and man.

It was not easy for him to do this, for as we get older we don't like to admit to being wrong. It would be good if there were more people like Nicodemus around today- people searching for the truth, who realise that what they learned in the past has not unlocked the door to a genuine knowledge of God, and who refuse to be trapped into living in such a rush that they have no time for serious thought- sometimes not even for their families!

In our previous study we saw that the reason God sent His Son into the world was that we may not perish, but live eternally. Those who believe that

vine condemnation. John 3:36 says, "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God rests upon him." John divides human beings into two groups- those who believe in the Son of God, and those who do not obey Him (not 'those who disbelieve'!). He says that for the disobedient the wrath of God is not merely something coming in the future- it rests on them now, which is a terrifying thought.

The fundamental New Testament principle is that Jesus came into the world to save us from Hell and to open the door of Heaven to us. Other things follow from that, but it is the basic reason. How did He do it? Let us look first at some negatives which have been popular during the last 70 years:

1. Jesus did not do this redeeming work by His teaching. Some professing Christians believe that if only people could understand the wonderful teaching of Jesus, the world would be saved from all its problems. This may be true, but we all know that it is possible to receive the greatest teaching and not obey it. It is significant that most people make no attempt to obey Jesus' teaching, and those who do try fail continually. It is completely beyond human nature to obey it, which is a humbling fact.

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life." (John 3:16)

the angels' song about peace on earth meant that Christianity would produce an end to war and suffering will either be disillusioned or unbelievers. Many people thought there would be an end to wars after the 1914 War. But Jesus was not sentimental about these things; He foretold that there would be no end to wars, famines and terrible plagues in this life; and He said this was because of God's anger with the human race who have turned against Him and His Son.

What Jesus came on earth to bring us was peace with God- to remove from us individually the di-

So, mankind cannot be saved by teaching which is beyond our reach, however wonderful it may be.

2. Jesus did not redeem us by His moral example. He lived a perfect, sinless life, but He did not come to earth as a moral Pattern. We can have excellent examples before us from childhood and not follow them.

John 3:16 tells us that Jesus came to save the world by dying for it That is what the phrase "He gave His only Son" is meant to teach us. Verse 14 says, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,

so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life.” John uses the words ‘lifted up’ several times in his gospel record, and they are a remarkable description of the Cross, for Jesus was lifted up from the ground and hung up on a cross. But they also mean exalted or promoted; and Jesus was exalted and glorified on the Cross. In John 12:32 He says, “When I am lifted up from the earth I will draw all men to Myself”. The Cross was a symbol of guilt, and on it Jesus was an object of scorn; yet God’s glory was seen in the death of His Son on the Cross.

Man’s basic problem is spiritual death- eternal separation from God. A person who faces the possibility of going permanently blind may naturally panic. Imagine what it must be like to realise, after death, that you are completely cut off from God for all eternity! The solution to our problem is the death of Jesus of Nazareth on the Cross. You may ask what is the connection between the two things; how could the death of one Man on a shameful cross make salvation possible for the whole world?

In his book “The Cross of Christ”, John Stott invites us to look below the surface; and this is essential if we are to understand why Christ died. Great works of art can show us the nails, the thorns and something of the brutal agony of the Crucifixion, but they cannot reveal the meaning of the Cross. God put that task into the hands of preachers and teachers; so let us look at two examples of what the apostles recorded and taught:

1. The Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane

Just before His arrest, Jesus asked three of His disciples to pray with Him, but they couldn’t stay awake. He cast Himself on the ground and pleaded with His Heavenly Father to take the bitter cup from Him if there was any other way of redeeming the world- ending with the words, “Nevertheless, not My will but Yours be done”. Three times He prayed; and the words used by the gospel writers to describe His emotions mean consternation, horror and aversion.

Stott contrasts this with Socrates who, according to Plato, in his prison cell in Athens is supposed to have drunk the cup of poison calmly and cheerfully, without trembling or changing his expression; and when his friends burst into tears he rebuked them for their “absurd behaviour”! Stott puts the question- was Socrates braver than Jesus, or were their cups filled with different ‘poison’; and gives the answer that the poison was different.

Psalm 75:8 says, “In the hand of the Lord there is a cup with foaming wine, well mixed; and He will pour a draught from it and all the wicked of the earth shall drain it down to the dregs”. And in Revelation 14:9-10 we read that “if anyone worships the beast and its image... he also shall drink

the wine of God’s wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of His anger...” The picture is of a cup into which God pours His anger; He hands it to the wicked and says ‘Drink’. That is the cup which Jesus took from the hand of God in the Garden of Gethsemane.

We may ask how this could possibly be fair, since throughout His life on earth Jesus had done nothing which displeased the Father. There can be no explanation except the one given in the Bible; Sunday School children can understand it, and theologians cannot avoid it. Christ drank that cup “for the sins of the whole world.” “He Himself bore our sins in His Body on the tree” (1 Peter 2:24a). “He was bruised for our iniquities... the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:5-6). Jesus drank the cup of God’s wrath in order that you and I might not have to drink it. That is the reason for the agony in Gethsemane, and that is why He did not go ‘calmly and cheerfully’ to the Cross.

2. The Agony at Calvary

From the Cross Jesus cried out in desolation, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” Many explanations have been given for that cry, but the fact is that while bearing the penalty for our sins Jesus was cut off from God. John Calvin wrote that “Jesus paid a greater and more excellent price by suffering in His soul the terrible torment of a condemned and forsaken man”. The nails and physical agony could not redeem us; Jesus suffered the pains and dereliction of Hell as He bore the burden of our sins.

If these things are true, we should never again join the world in mocking

(a) The great danger of perishing spiritually, which, according to the Bible, faces every human being. Many people laugh at the idea, as though it is only a strange threat from God which need not be taken seriously. Let us never underestimate the seriousness of dying without a real faith in Jesus Christ.

(b) God’s decree that the only solution for man’s spiritual problem is the death of His Son on the Cross. This truth is not popular today. People resent the idea that all other religions are cul-de-sacs and cannot deal with man’s basic problem. If they could, it would have been unbelievably cruel of the Father not to grant the prayer of His Son in Gethsemane. If there had been some other way of saving human beings, why did Jesus have to die? If, therefore, God says there was no other way, how dare we say there is! Let us never mock the uniqueness of the Christian faith, for it is man’s only hope, and the sooner we face this fact the better. Every other hope will prove to be a delusion.

(c) The Christian evangelist, who always gets a rough time. Cartoonists delight in caricaturing a man with a sandwich board on his back, having on it words like “Flee from the wrath to come”. If there is a wrath to come- and the Bible says there is- would it not be

wise to flee from it while you can? If God loved you enough to send His Son to provide a way of escape from His wrath, would it not be foolish to ignore it?