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One



The Basis of SALVATION

*How a holy God can save
sinful people and still be holy*

*I*n eighteen years of preaching the gospel in Angola, I never met an African believer who was certain of his or her salvation. No matter how firm these believers' faith in Jesus, they seemed incapable of complete assurance. In their opinion, it was presumptuous to believe that they could or would hold fast to God. The best a believer could do, they thought, was *hope* that he or she would be believing at the moment of death and, therefore, go to heaven.

Does that sound familiar? That is the position of many sincere Christians. They combine genuine faith in God through Christ with lingering fear that they might miss heaven after all. They *hope* that they will be true to the end and qualified to pass through the gates of heaven. But they're not sure.

In every case, whether in Angola or the United States or anywhere else, that troubling uncertainty arises from an inadequate understanding of the basis of salvation. On what grounds does

God save us? How is it possible for a holy God to save unholy people without compromising His character? In other words, is there a solid biblical basis for salvation? If so, what is it?

The basis of salvation is, quite simply, the cross of Christ. What, then, is the cross? The cross was an event, and the cross *is* a symbol. Viewed as an event, the cross was an episode in history. Jesus Christ was put to death on a cross. Viewed as a symbol, the cross stands both for the death itself and *its meaning* as set forth in Scripture. The cross is the supreme symbol of Christianity—the basis of our hope.

The historic creeds of Christendom emphasize the importance of the cross. For example, the cross is the heart of the Apostles' Creed:

I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth: and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried: He descended to hell; the third day He rose from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

Only three words in the Apostles' Creed make direct reference to the cross as an event: "suffered" and "was crucified." Everything that follows—"dead," "buried," "descended," "rose," "ascended," "sitteth," and "shall come to judge"—contributes to

the meaning of the cross. For example, if Christ had not risen from the dead, His death would have been an ordinary death—and therefore meaningless. His rising invests His death with profound meaning.

The Creed says nothing, however, of Christ's life. That holy life is not an object of belief but of emulation. The main event in Christ's life was His death, and by linking His sufferings with Pilate, the Creed both fixes the time of Christ's death and underscores its historicity. Christ's death was an event in time, and the secular world is forced to confirm it. If the cross is mentioned in secular circles, educated listeners think immediately of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ under Pontius Pilate.

WHY CHRIST DIED

If the cross is mentioned in Christian circles, most listeners think about the meaning of Christ's death. The crucial question is, Why did He die? Nowhere is this aspect of Christ's death more clearly stated than in Romans 4:25 ("He was delivered over to death for our sins") and Romans 5:8 ("While we were still sinners, Christ died for us"). Therefore the answer to the question is that He died for us, for our sins.

Theologians usually express this truth by saying that Christ's death was *vicarious*, meaning that He died as a substitute for sinners—in other words, He died in our place. This answers the question Why did He die? but raises at least two other questions. First, Why did we need a substitute? And second, Why was it necessary that Christ be that substitute?

The answer to the first question is sin—human sin, which brought all humanity under the sentence of death and the judgment of God. Alone we could not survive God's wrath concerning our sin. If there were no substitute, if we had nothing to offer God but the usual excuses for sin, we would perish eternally—in hell. God's wrath would rest on us forever. We need a worthy substitute—someone who can stand in our place and endure God's wrath for us so that we need not endure it.

The answer to the second question is closely related to the first. Jesus Christ needed to be that substitute because He alone was worthy. He alone was sinless and, therefore, exempt from the universal sentence of death. So, if He would die voluntarily, His death *could* be vicarious—if that was His intention and if God agreed. He could have died in somebody's place. And that is exactly what He did.

Furthermore, because He was more than a man (He was divine), His death had infinite value. "Infinite" means that by dying He became the substitute for an *unlimited* number of persons. He died for the whole world, including you and me.

In addition, the *way* Christ died is important. He didn't die in bed; He died on a cross—as the Old Testament predicted in passages such as Psalm 22:16: "They have pierced my hands and my feet." The significance of death by crucifixion is made clear in Deuteronomy 21:23: "Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse." That text explains in part the horror Jews felt when told that Jesus was the Messiah. In their minds, that their Messiah would be crucified was unthinkable. A crucified person was under

God's curse. But that, Paul told believers in Galatia, is the point. By dying on the cross, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree'" (Galatians 3:13 NASB).

Clearly, the manner in which Christ died is theologically significant. By hanging on a cross (tree), He took upon Himself the curse of God. He was treated by God as if He were accursed, as if He were under the curse of God's law, even as if He were sin itself. The curse of the law (that is, the lethal consequences of sin, which were proclaimed in the law) was shifted from us to Him. By dying He removed the curse from those who trust Him. Now the law has no further claims against sinners who trust Jesus; it no longer pronounces a sentence of eternal death against them. As an unknown hymn writer expressed it,

*Whatever curse was mine, He bore,
The wormwood and the gall;
There, in that lone, mysterious hour,
My cup—He drained it all!*

GOD'S ROLE IN CHRIST'S DEATH

Where was God when Jesus suffered and died? This is the crucial question, because if God was just a bystander, assurance of salvation is impossible. Assurance of salvation is impossible without assurance that God was involved in all that Christ did—from Mary's womb to Joseph's tomb.

God was *there*, at the cross—overseeing a death that He Him-

self had planned before the foundations of the earth were laid. In speeches to the citizens of Jerusalem, Peter accused them of handing Jesus over to wicked men to be crucified. Peter explained, however, that Christ's death was the fulfillment of a plan that God had announced through the prophets. It was according to "God's set purpose and foreknowledge" (Acts 2:23; cf. 3:18). Thus, God had been there all the time; no matter how disordered events seem to have been, God was in control.

That is not to say that God wrote the play and moved people around like puppets. God doesn't tempt or coerce people into doing evil. He fulfills His plans by bringing to power those whose inclinations lead them to do the things that accomplish divine purposes. What this means, among other things, is that the cross was not merely a monstrous mistake. It was an accomplishment of enormous significance. On the Mount of Transfiguration, Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus, "speaking of His departure which He was about to bring to accomplish at Jerusalem" (Luke 9:31 NASB). His death was an achievement.

This point is terribly important. Assurance of salvation depends on our understanding that God was personally involved in Christ's death *and* that His death—and His death alone—is the basis of salvation. Assurance of salvation is impossible for those who believe that something else is required. If, for example, great faith is required, how can anyone know that his faith is strong enough? And if good works are required for salvation, how can anyone know for certain that he has done *everything* necessary?

Was God really involved in the cross, or was He just a specta-

tor? Paul's answer is plain. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:19–21,

God was in Christ personally reconciling the world to himself—not counting their sins against them—and has commissioned us with the message of reconciliation. . . . For God caused Christ, who himself knew nothing of sin, actually to be sin for our sakes, so that in Christ we might be made good with the goodness of God. (PHILLIPS, emphasis added)

God was not “in” Christ in the sense that He is “in” us who believe. The sentence should be punctuated to indicate that through Christ—who, though one with the Father, was nonetheless distinct from Him—God was enabled to accomplish His purpose. Thus the sentence should read, “God was, in Christ, personally reconciling the world to Himself.” God was most definitely involved in the cross—not as a small-time player but as the major participant. He produced and directed the play, so to speak. Thus, the cross was a divine production—God and Christ acting in concert to be able to offer reconciliation to a lost world.

Substitution

The statement that Christ “knew nothing of sin” has bearing on the rich meaning of the cross. An innocent victim was crucified. Jesus had no personal experience of sin. No evil thoughts existed in His heart, no bad words in His mouth, no wrong actions at any time. Hence, He was not under the sentence of death; He didn't have to die, as we do, because of personal sin. Therefore His death—which was voluntary—was different; it was vicarious,

or substitutionary. He died in our place for our benefit.

Christ died also for God's benefit, although in an entirely different sense. Christ's death gave God a satisfactory basis for exercising mercy. God can now save us, not because we deserve salvation or because He decides to overlook sin, but because Christ's death satisfied the demands of God's holiness. God demands death as the penalty for sin. Christ paid that penalty *as God intended that He should*. That is what Jesus meant when He rebuked Peter in Gethsemane: "Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?" (John 18:11). The "cup" was a figure of speech, meaning His sufferings unto death. Jesus took the cup from His Father's hand and, by dying, satisfied all that God required.

Propitiation

This is the meaning of that great biblical word *propitiation*. That word is not generally part of our everyday vocabulary; consequently, some modern Bible translations drop the word, using "sacrifice of atonement" or something similar. That is a pity. Some words, including "propitiation," are required to represent the concept the writer wishes to present. To learn the meaning of some Bible words may take a little effort, but it's worth it. Other studies and disciplines also require the learning of special words. No one expects the legal profession to rewrite its texts in simple English. Law students have to master new words if they wish to be lawyers. Why should any less be expected of people who are serious about Bible study?

Paul uses the word *propitiation* in one of the richest passages

in the New Testament. Paul said, “Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation” (Romans 3:25 NASB). John uses the word twice:

If anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins. (1 John 2:1–2 NASB)

In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. (1 John 4:10 NASB)

As used in the Bible, “propitiation” means Christ, by dying, took the full force of God’s wrath against sin and so enabled God to look on us with favor. In other words, Jesus satisfied the death penalty for our sin, so that we don’t have to. He died in our place. Christ’s death freed God to do what He wanted to do—save sinners—but could not have done without compromising His holiness. Christ’s death, a propitiation (or satisfaction of the death penalty), provides a righteous basis for a holy God to save sinners.

That is how Paul explains the propitiatory character of Christ’s death. It demonstrates God’s righteousness. It shows that God does not turn a blind eye to sin. His wrath against sin demanded that its penalty be paid in full, and it *was* paid in full—at the cross. Now, having been propitiated (satisfied) by the death of His Son, God is able to save sinners.

Christ’s death was for God’s benefit; it enabled Him to turn His wrath away from its natural objects—sinful people. Christ’s

death as a propitiation provides a meeting place for a holy God and sinful people.

God is propitiated; His character is vindicated; and sinful people are invited to draw near and be forgiven.

By dying, Christ endured God's wrath against sin. God's wrath is both His attitude of hostility toward sin and His determination to avenge or punish sin. Christ endured God's wrath by accepting responsibility for our sins and suffering the consequences on the cross. Paul said that "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us" (2 Corinthians 5:21). God and Christ acted in concert. Jesus willingly accepted responsibility for our sins. He did not become sin in the sense of committing sin, because He was at all times personally sinless. Nevertheless, God *treated* Him as if He were sin and dealt with Him as if He were the scapegoat for the entire universe.

Was the cross a miscarriage of justice? Yes, in one respect it was, because Jesus in no way deserved it. Yet at its deepest level, the cross was a manifestation of purest justice. Christ had agreed to come to the earth to be the Savior of the world. Yet He could not save the world except by assuming responsibility for the world's sins. Having assumed that responsibility, He could not escape God's wrath against sin. God's holiness demanded satisfaction, and at the cross Christ provided it by dying. Therefore the cross was a manifestation of divine justice.

It was also history's greatest manifestation of love. Paul said that "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). John says in 1 John

4:10, “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”

On the cross Jesus was the representative man—the representative *condemned* man. God’s wrath therefore burned against Him. So the cross was a divine action against the sinless Son of God on our behalf. The prophet Isaiah anticipated this crucial aspect of Christ’s death some seven centuries earlier: “It was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer” (Isaiah 53:10).

Isaiah also knew that Christ’s death would be vicarious; it would be for us. The prophet’s language is deeply moving: “He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:5–6).

The vicariousness (the in-place-of-us) nature of Christ’s death, and God’s role in that death, fill the prophet’s mind. Jesus was “stricken by God” (v. 4), but not for His own sins. Isaiah said, “The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. . . . The Lord makes his life a guilt offering. . . . He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors” (vv. 6, 10, 12).

These two ideas—God’s role in Christ’s death and the vicarious, substitutionary nature of that death—must be grasped if we are to have assurance of salvation. What they mean is that God Himself has provided for our salvation. And this is the ground of our assurance of salvation. If God is satisfied with Christ’s death on the cross, what have we to fear?

*From whence this fear and unbelief,
 If God, our Father, put to grief
 His spotless Son for me?
 Can He, the righteous Judge of me,
 Condemn me for that debt of sin
 Which, Lord, was charged to Thee?
 If Thou hast my discharge procured,
 And freely in my place endured
 The whole of wrath divine;
 Payment God will not twice demand,
 First at my bleeding Surety's hand,
 And then again at mine.
 Turn, then, my soul unto thy rest;
 The merits of thy great High Priest
 Speak peace and liberty;
 Trust in His efficacious blood,
 Nor fear thy banishment from God,
 Since Jesus died for thee.*

—AUGUSTUS MONTAGUE TOPLADY

The point is clear: adequate provision for salvation has been made. It satisfies God and, therefore, should satisfy us. That inner peace that we call assurance comes from knowing what God has done for us—and believing it. It comes from knowing and believing that the basis of salvation is what God has done for us by sending His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.