

1.1 Jesus' Death

"I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd gives his life for the sheep" "Therefore, does my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might 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"

These are two quotations from John's gospel, chapter 10; they are Jesus' own words about His death and the need to lay down His life for His sheep, His people. He talks of other sheep which are not of this fold, not of the children of Israel, and the need to gather those sheep and lay His life down for them also. John the Baptist in His declaration of the Lord Jesus says, *"Behold the Lamb of God which takes away the sins of the world"*. We understand therefore Jesus' ministry was for the whole world, and that it was necessary for him to lay down His life in order to take away our sins. His sacrifice was totally of His own will but in submission to His Father who gave Him the commandment. The commandment of His Father becomes the authority to lay down His life and to take it up again, and we will see the whole wisdom, Godly wisdom, in Jesus' death was that it would lead to resurrection. Jesus would die a death which would enable His Father to raise Him from the dead and so in His death overcome all sin, sickness, principalities and powers, and provide an eternal salvation for human beings. Earlier we mentioned Jesus being an apostle, and we were to *"Consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus"*. We now find Jesus as the High Priest, for not only was Jesus' death a sacrifice for sins as the lamb of God, but we will see that it was as a priest that He 'offered Himself without spot through the eternal spirit': He laid His own life down.

The prophets had talked of Jesus' death; Psalm 22 gives a remarkable amount of detail considering it was written 1000 years before Jesus came. *"My God my God why have You forsaken me"*, is the most obvious word, but the psalm goes on to show us the victory of the Lord Jesus. Isaiah 53 gives us the detail as to what God was doing spiritually through Jesus' death. *"He laid on Him the iniquity of us all", "by His stripes we are healed"*, are just two of the many statements of God's work in the cross of Our Lord Jesus. The Old Testament, the law and the prophets, are full of God's purpose in the sacrificial death of His son. They set out, for the Jews, and for us too now we can read them, the principles of 'a sacrifice for sins' through the offering of bulls, goats and lambs. We read in the book of Revelation, *"The Lamb slain from the foundation of the earth"*, revealing that the plan for Jesus to come and be the 'Lamb of God' was made even before the world came into being. God had foreseen sin coming into the world, had made a plan, and was therefore able to speak of it all in detail, in word and illustration, through the books of the Old Testament, preparing for Jesus coming to the earth.

In His earthly life Jesus was totally aware of the full reason for His coming, and spoke of His forthcoming death to His disciples increasingly towards the end of His life. *"From that time forth began Jesus to shew unto his disciples, how that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day"*. They did not understand then, and perhaps did so just a little following Jesus' teaching about the coming of the Holy Spirit, of which we read in John's gospel chapters 14, 15, 16, but of the real significance of it all they had no real understanding until they received the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.

Jesus' death came at the time of the Passover in Jerusalem. That was the time when, in every household, the Jews would offer a lamb in memory of the first Passover, when the children of Israel had come out of Egypt. At that first Passover, a lamb was offered for each house so that

the angel would pass over them, and not slay their first born. That was God's final act of judgment upon Egypt. In many ways it was the start of 'life' for the Hebrews, life no longer under slavery for 'the passed over ones'; in the Jewish calendar it was the 'beginning of the weeks'. Jesus' death was God bringing His Lamb, the Lord Jesus, a Lamb for His house, God's house being the church of Our Lord Jesus Christ. *"For even Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us"*. The timing of it all is very clear, identifying with all God had been speaking to the children of Israel trying to point them to their Messiah. It was to mark the 'beginning of weeks', not of a new calendar but of newness of life in Jesus Christ, a life free from the slavery of sin, to be restored to fellowship with the living God.

At the time of the Passover Jerusalem would have been a busy place and we can read of Jesus' actions during the week before His death. There had been His triumphal entry into Jerusalem on a donkey, when palms were laid in His path and the people all cried 'Hosanna', seemingly welcoming their saviour; they shouted out 'Crucify Him' just a few days later. Jesus drove the money changers out of the temple and made it a place of prayer; the people came to Him and He healed them there. The 'Last Supper' arrives when Jesus and His disciples ate the Passover together in the room prepared for them. Jesus said, *"With desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer"*. Jesus' deep love and care for his disciples comes through, He said to them that it was necessary for Him to go away. *"If I don't go away, He, the Holy Spirit, cannot come"*. *"Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in me. I go to prepare a place for you..... and I will come again and receive you to myself"* All part of the wonderful teaching in those last hours. Jesus instigates the 'breaking of bread', often called Holy Communion, a pattern of remembrance for the church to follow until His second coming. Jesus then washes His disciples' feet, such humility and love, but also leaving an example of sacrificial love to be shown in the church of Our Lord Jesus through all the generations. Judas departs to betray Jesus, and they go out into the garden of Gethsemane where Jesus is tempted not to go through with His sacrifice. Gethsemane means 'the place of the Olive Presses', where the oil was pressed out of the olives: it was here that Jesus went through such a degree of temptation that He sweat 'great drops of blood'. It was the place of untold pressure to persuade Him not to go to the cross. Jesus overcame, *"Father if it be your will let this cup pass from me, but nevertheless not my will but your will be done"*, and with the victory in the Spirit Jesus went to meet His captors, to be led away to trial.

The trial was a travesty, with everyone disagreeing on what Jesus was meant to have said or not said. In the end He is asked outright whether He is the Son of God. On His confirmation that He is, *"You said it"*, Jesus is condemned to death. *"But Jesus held his peace, And the high priest answered and said unto him, I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tell us whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God. Jesus saith unto him, you have said: nevertheless, I say unto you, Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power and coming in the clouds of heaven. Then the high priest rent his clothes, saying, He hath spoken blasphemy; what further need have we of witnesses? behold, now ye have heard his blasphemy"*

They led Jesus away to Pontius Pilate for an execution to be agreed. The Jewish leaders were not allowed to order the crucifixion, it had to come from the Roman Governor. Pilate said he could find nothing wrong with the Lord Jesus and wanted to release Him. Pilate's wife had had a dream, and together with Pilate's understanding of the Jews' real motives, he wanted to let Jesus go, so took Him out before the people and asked them, *"Who do you want me to release, Jesus or the robber Barabbas?"*. The people, being stirred up by the rulers, asked for Barabbas to be released and to have Jesus crucified. *"Crucify Him Crucify Him"* they shouted, Pilate

consented under all the political pressure, and Jesus was led away to be crucified. He was mocked, Pilate ordered His scourging, a severe beating, and Jesus carried His cross outside the city to the place called Golgotha, the place of the skull, a hill outside Jerusalem, where He was crucified with 2 others, both criminals. Simon of Cyrene, a black man we understand, had been forced to help Jesus with His cross on the way to Golgotha. Crucifixion is a very brutal means of execution, it can take 3 days to die while the crucified one is in great agony.

"Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took his garments, and made four parts, to every soldier a part; and also, his coat: now the coat was without seam, woven from the top throughout. They said therefore among themselves, Let us not rend it, but cast lots for it, whose it shall be: that the scripture might be fulfilled, which saith, They parted my raiment among them, and for my vesture they did cast lots".

We read of the soldiers and their actions; there would have been four in a group, hence the division of his clothes but the casting of lots for his coat, a one-piece garment. This fulfils the scripture of 1000 years before, in Psalm 22, *"They part my garments among them and cast lots upon my vesture"*.

From the cross, Jesus uttered seven things which help us to see the manner in which He died and help to explain why His Father was able to resurrect Him.

- I. *"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do"*. Jesus' total forgiveness of all the action against Him. This was not only for the soldiers but for all who had a part in His death, from the rulers to the ordinary people who had cried out 'Crucify Him'. This allowed Jesus to offer Himself 'without spot' as there was no stain of unforgiveness in Him.
- II. *"Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise"*. This is spoken to one of the criminals who was crucified with Jesus and had recognised, probably through the way Jesus suffered, who He really was. He asks to be remembered when Jesus enters into His kingdom and is promised an entry into Paradise. Jesus, as ever selfless and in control, is able to receive this criminal's repentance and grant entry into eternal life.
- III. *"Jesus said to his mother: "Woman, this is your son." Then he said to the disciple: "This is your mother""*. Jesus was his mother Mary's eldest son and therefore responsible for her, Joseph her husband having already died. Jesus, fulfilling that responsibility unto the end, passes it on to His disciple John. Such love such care, such selflessness.
- IV. *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* This was at the end of 3 hours of total darkness. Even astronomers, working backwards, can identify this solar eclipse at exactly the right time. It is also mentioned by the historians of the day. This is the time when Jesus wrestles in faith in separation from His Father; it is set out in Psalm 22. God covered it all in darkness so the watchers could not see. This was the time He *"was made sin who knew no sin"*: the horror of separation: the horror of knowing sin for the first time, although He had committed no sin Himself. The horror of bearing the judgement for that sin causes the cry from His depths. *"My God, my God why have you forsaken me?"* His Father, if one reads Psalm 22, hears Jesus' cry of faith. He never doubted His Father in all that time of separation, victory is near.
- V. *"I thirst"*. Almost there, they gave Him vinegar with myrrh to take away the pain, but He refused, He wanted no help, this was His work and He would fulfil all the Father had given Him to do.
- VI. *"It is finished: and he bowed his head and gave up the ghost"*.
- VII. *"Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit"*.

VI and VII go together as the ending. 'It is finished' means the debt is paid. It is what would have been put on the end of a bill, in those times, to show everything was paid. We get receipts in modern times; some places have a stamp which says 'Paid'. This is the meaning, and to quote Charles Wesley's famous hymn,

**"'Tis finished! all the debt is paid;
Justice divine is satisfied;
The grand and full atonement made;
God for a guilty world hath died"**

It was all paid; Jesus gives up the ghost, His Spirit; He offers Himself to His Father. They are reunited, the power of sin and death is broken, justice divine is satisfied, the judgement on sin is over, and Jesus commends His Spirit into the hand of His Father: such triumph. He offers Himself to God. Priest and sacrifice, Jesus Lord of all.

Even the Roman Centurion in charge of the execution says, *"Surely this is the Son of God"* seeing the way Jesus died.

As it was the Passover, they did not want to leave the bodies on the cross beyond the end of the day and, by breaking the legs of those being crucified, they would be unable to breathe and die very quickly. The soldiers were ordered to do that, but when they came to Jesus they were surprised to find Him already dead. They pierced His side with a spear to make sure, and 'blood and water' flowed out. Biologically they say Jesus died of a broken heart, the blood and plasma separating, but perhaps spiritually this declares His blood and the water flowing in cleansing power. It does mean that Jesus was physically dead; no doubt about it. Joseph of Arimathea came and asked Pilate for Jesus's body. Pilate was surprised that Jesus was dead, but once he had made sure He releases the body, and Jesus was laid in a 'new' tomb, one which had never been used before. A huge stone was rolled against the entrance, and soldiers were put on watch as there was a concern that the disciples might come and steal Jesus' body and say He had risen from the dead.

Jesus, though physically dead, was alive in Spirit and went down into hell, Hades, the place of the departed and, we are told, preached to the 'saints in prison'. There are views on who the saints in prison are, but perhaps those who 'died in faith', read Hebrews 11, and perhaps those who died before the Flood. What we can be sure of, is that Jesus, in spirit, was alive, in control, and continuing the work of His Father, ready for His resurrection 3 days later.