

CHAPTER VII

THE PLAN OF SALVATION

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is a perfect representation of the plan of salvation in action. The sin of the prodigal had been a contrary will, with the father wanting only that the son return to the father's house, and the son's contrary will set on his great aspirations for life in the far country – anything but the father's house! As a result, his relation with the father was ruptured and he was lost in the realm of the dead. There was never anything he could have done to deliver himself from this death and lostness – no penitence, no sacrifice, no confession, nothing whatever while his devotion to the far country endured. The only thing he could do, the only solution to his problem of deadness and lostness was to change his mind so as no longer to be devoted to life in the far country and genuinely to yearn for a restoration to the life in the father's house. He had to repent so as to bring his will into harmony with the single will of his father and he needed to confess the error of his way. And his father rejoiced and said, "My son was dead and is alive, was lost and is found!" He was *saved* and that's all there is to it!

Atonement Not Required

The prodigal's father did not require atonement for sin – nor does God in heaven. This father did not remain behind the locked door of his house while the weeping son petitioned from outside. He did not call out, "Where is my sacrifice whereby I may be propitiated for your sins?" Nor does God in heaven. This father did not send the innocent elder brother out into the far country to seek the lost son by shedding his blood in an atoning sacrifice – nor did God in heaven. What sort of father is it who requires the death and the suffering of bloodshed by his loyal, devoted and innocent son before he would receive and forgive his willful, wayward and guilty son? Not the father of the prodigal son, neither God in heaven! And Jesus very emphatically stated this when he quoted the prophet Hosea who first uttered these words of the Father in the world: I desire mercy, and not sacrifice (Hosea 6:6, Matthew 9:13, 12:7).

Jesus was No Sacrifice in his Death

The Father does not require a sacrifice for the expiation of sins; he never did. Our sins require no atonement or expiation. Somewhere, back near the beginning, perhaps Paul, other apostles or even John the Baptist was responsible for first uttering this reprehensible proclamation,

Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29)!

But Jesus was no sacrificial lamb. Search his words throughout the gospels and see that, whenever he resorted to this pastoral metaphor, he is always the shepherd. *We are the lambs* and the sheep of his pasture.

To be sure, he said he was "the good shepherd," and the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. That is clear enough. But there is not the remotest hint or suggestion that his death was an atoning sacrifice, a propitiation for sin or blood shed to appease an angry god. So, when Jesus came to his death, he died as the shepherd and not as a lamb. This metaphor, according to which Jesus identified himself as a shepherd in his death, absolutely annuls any thought of his

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being a sacrificial lamb. Had the latter been the case, with the central emphasis accorded to it throughout Christendom, he would never have confused the issue by identifying himself in his death with the shepherd! It is only lambs that were slaughtered on the blood altars of sacrifice – not shepherds. Far more likely is it that, knowing there would be an attempt to make of him a lamb of sacrifice, he took this occasion to absolutely rule out such ideas. As it is, the only way that Christians can preach and subscribe to this heinous doctrine of the substitutionary atoning sacrifice is by utterly ignoring the words of their Lord.

The Purpose of the Crucifixion

Then why was he crucified? How was it that he died for us if not as a sin sacrifice?

Jesus answered this question in all four gospels, directly and straightforwardly, if you are able to receive it. Please refer to the parallel arrangement of gospel texts that includes the Great Principle. Here, according to every gospel witness, he explained his approaching death. This supremely important principle warranted Jesus' response to it – he laid down his life to demonstrate its full significance to the world. That is the primary reason for his death – it proved the seriousness of the thing. Even the Son of God had to hate his life on earth to save it for eternity! If it applied to him, then it must apply to every other person on earth for, as Jesus stated,

Who ever would save his life will lose it (Luke 9:24).

That is why it is of paramount importance for all that would be his disciples to realize that Jesus did not *lose* his life. No one took it from him, as he explained, but he laid it down because he wanted to return to the Father just as would any loyal son. He chose this way to do it to make a statement to the world, a statement that would brand the pages of holy writ with this expression of the Great Principle for all time.

The Cross

The crucifixion of Jesus involved a cross – and coming as it did as the instrument of his passage from this world to the Father's house, it became symbolic of every such passage. So, whatever the details, every individual has his own cross to bear in imitation of Jesus. His cross was therefore not unique – except as the first, to show the Way so that we will know to follow. This is precisely as Jesus expressed it:

Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple (Luke 14:27, Matthew 10:38).

We cannot find salvation by trusting in the cross of Jesus while avoiding our own – this false doctrine of Christendom, which is nevertheless well nigh universal, is a delusion. We have no lesser authority for this conclusion than Jesus himself. Each one has to bear his or her own cross. Jesus set the example and showed the way, therefore his crucifixion was a demonstration to all men and women of the Way to the Father. We cannot slip through under the tails of his seamless robe!

Whatever the details of each individual's cross, it must inevitably incorporate renunciation of the life in this world, defined by Jesus as renunciation of all we have:

So, therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple (Luke 14:33).

He powerfully reinforced this statement by his injunction regarding treasure:

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...do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves cannot break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also (Matthew 6:19-21).

While the prodigal son's treasure was sited in the far country, there was his heart; when he came to himself and realized the truth of his situation, he repented of the far country's treasures and transferred his heart to his father's house. This turning from his life in the far country can be interpreted as his cross, for he had to go through it to come to his senses and turn his back on the far country and his heart away from it. But no one other than himself had to suffer for his redemption! Perhaps it was to avoid such a connection as Christendom has made – that Jesus purchased our redemption with his own blood on the cross – that Jesus' parable keeps the prodigal's elder brother in the father's house. He was not required to go to the far country and suffer for the sins of his young sibling nor did Jesus come into the world for that purpose.

The Ransom

Additionally, Jesus considered his death on the cross to be a ransom payment, as in the following synoptic utterance:

For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom (Greek, *lutron*) for many (Mark 10:45, Matthew 20:28).

The Greek word applies to the price paid for redemption of captives, whether slaves or otherwise. In its ancient context, it applied to the price paid by a defeated party to the victorious party for the redemption of captives taken during war, and also to the price paid to purchase or redeem slaves. In the modern context, the closest parallel is the price paid to a kidnapper to redeem the person kidnapped, but in all cases it carries the same idea – the price of redemption of captives. This ransom utterance of Jesus was added to the end of an instruction to his disciples to become servants of each other. The thought was that he himself was paying the price of their redemption from their prior captivity so that they would be *free* to enter into the service of their brothers and sisters in the fellowship of Jesus.

This leads us inevitably to question the nature of the prior captivity of disciples, and how it is that the life of Jesus could reasonably serve as a ransom payment to secure their redemption. The passage from Hebrews, already cited, accurately reflects the answers to these questions. There the author writes,

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage (Hebrews 2:14,15).

Clearly, the captivity is to the devil. He secures it by imposing the fear of death. This effectively gives to the devil the "power of death" as stated here. The power of death is the fear of death. Thus, if the captives are to be delivered, it must be a deliverance from the bond that holds them, which is the fear of death. Such deliverance effectively 'destroys' the devil in so far as the captives are concerned, since he has no more power over them, keeping in mind that his only power is the power of death that is the fear of death. Therefore it was necessary that Jesus partake of the same 'flesh and blood' nature as the rest of mankind so that he might confront the devil and provide a deliverance that men can understand.

In reality, the power of death is only apparent and it was necessary that one demonstrate to mankind the powerlessness of death by experiencing it willingly, then rising to show its lack of power. That is what Jesus did through the giving of his earth-life. It was a price of redemption

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that he paid to deliver us from this bondage to the devil through the fear of death. Since the devil possessed the power of death, it is in some sense to the devil that he pays the ransom even though he defeated the devil through the collection of the ransom. Furthermore, it is the slaves of the devil who are active in the ransom collection, namely persons who are acting under the motivation of the fear of death. This is of course not the first or only time that a kidnapper has lost his power in the process of collecting his ransom!

Jesus had other things to say about the plan of salvation. Here we have shown that salvation as he conceived it is simply this: the children can be saved, or go home to the Father, whenever *they want to*. That is the key. The Father awaits us, grieving for us in our lost and dead state. There must then be "joy in heaven" over one sinner who repents! We will delve into the other details later, while comparing Jesus' salvation doctrine with that of Paul.