

ALIVE TO GOD: CRUCIFIED WITH CHRIST

Study One

THE CROSS AND US

The Scriptures testify that ‘while we still were sinners Christ died for us’ (Rom. 5:8) and ‘Christ died for our sins’ (1 Cor. 15:3). We are told that ‘Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God’ (1 Pet. 3:18), and that ‘God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him’ (1 John 4:9).

This is often taken to mean that Christ took the punishment or judgement of God for our sins, so that we do not now have to face it. ‘The wages of sin is death’—Christ suffered and paid that penalty in our place and so we are forgiven and free to live—‘the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord’ (Rom. 6:23).

True as that is, it can sometimes be presented and received at arm’s length, as if it were a transaction effected somehow apart from us, which certainly affects us, but in which we are not directly involved. This can have certain grievous pastoral consequences in the lives of believers, and of the church.

There is a whole dimension of biblical witness that cannot be ignored here. The New Testament consistently speaks of Christ’s death as somehow involving our death, and that we are those who have ourselves died with Christ.¹ Among those who make much of Christ’s death for us on our behalf, many are hard-pressed to be able to say what it means to them that they have been ‘crucified with Christ’, and the part this plays in their life.

It could be that we are missing out on something quite crucial in this lack of recognition and understanding. L. E. Maxwell, founding principal in 1922 of the Prairie Bible Institute of Three Hills, Alberta, Canada, sought in his teaching to correct this lack. A missionary from Africa responded: ‘If only all of our missionaries had this teaching, it would be the solution of many of our difficulties on the field’.² We may have some difficulties on the field here for lack of this teaching. There may be those of us who think we can be Christians without ever having been crucified with Christ. Paul however says:

If we have died with him, we will also live with him (2 Tim. 2:11).

It would appear that the having died is indispensable to the being alive, and not otherwise. So what does it mean for us to say: ‘I have been crucified with Christ’?

¹ See Gal. 2:19–20; 2 Cor. 5:14–15, 17; John 12:31–33; Mark 8:34–35 and parallels; Rom. 6:3–14; Col. 2:11–12; Rom. 7:1–6; 2 Tim. 2:11; Rom. 8:10; Col. 2:20–3:6, 12; Gal. 5:24; 6:14–15; John 12:23–25.

² L. E. Maxwell, *Born Crucified*, Oliphants, London 1958, p. 7. While Maxwell promotes a particular view of sanctification that sees ‘the life of victory in Christ’ of Romans 6 as a progression upon ‘the wilderness of Romans 7 . . . the land of mixed and divided attention’ (p. 141), nevertheless what he has to say about the identification of the believer with Christ in his death, and what that entails, is not to be ignored or bypassed.

PAUL AND THE CROSS OF CHRIST

Paul spoke of his relationship with Christ's death in this way:

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal. 2:19–20).

What did it mean for Paul to say: 'I have been crucified with Christ'? For him, it had to do with the law of God:

For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ . . .

It was a death he died through the law. Before he was met by Christ on the road to Damascus, Paul thought he had kept the whole law of God:

as to righteousness under the law, blameless (Phil. 3:6).

After he was met by Christ, it was a very different story. Then he knew himself to be 'a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence'—'the foremost' of sinners (1 Tim. 1:13, 16). Then he knew that the law of God, that he had thought he was keeping so well, actually condemned him to death. His horrible sin, through the good and holy law of God, killed him dead:

I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died, and the very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good. Did what is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, working death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure (Rom. 7:9–13).

From that point of view, Paul calls this law of God 'the law of sin and death' (Rom. 8:2)—and so it is for any who have broken it. Paul cites Deuteronomy 27:26 to say:

Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law (Gal. 3:10).

This includes all sinners who 'rely on the works of the law': who think that by trying to keep the law after they have sinned they can make themselves righteous before God. This option is closed off to them—if it was ever there. The law of God was given to those who had already been saved by God and brought into a faith-relationship with Him, to spell out what it means to live in that relationship. Any notion that the law is something we can take to ourselves and perform to prove ourselves before God is an arrogant denial and defiance of that salvation and that relationship:

Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for 'The one who is righteous will live by faith' (Gal. 3:11).

To take God's law and seek to implement it as a substitute for that God-given faith-relationship is an abuse of the law, which the law itself rightly condemns. Paul came to the realisation that the law which he thought he was keeping so well actually, in that very exercise, condemned him to death.

When did this realisation happen to Paul? It happened when he saw Jesus, in all his risen glory, on the road to Damascus:

Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' He asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting' (Acts 9:3–5).

Paul's address of this one as 'Lord' indicates that he knew that he was talking to the longed-for Messiah. The shock came to Paul when he heard this one's real name. Jesus, whom Paul had thought no better than a condemned criminal, whose name and followers he was trying to stamp out, Paul now found to have been God's holy Messiah all along! Yet that then raised a serious question. Paul had been persecuting Christian believers who had the effrontery to claim what to Paul was a preposterous and dangerous falsehood: that the Messiah had died, in a way that had been cursed by God. Yet now he had unmistakably met this Messiah, and he was Jesus—and Jesus had died in this way—why? Obviously, in the light of this, not for any wrong Jesus had done. Then on whose account had Jesus died? It came to Paul in a flash: Paul was the sinner condemned by God's law—Jesus had died the death that was due to Paul: 'Christ . . . the Son of God . . . loved me and gave himself for me'.

JESUS OUR SUBSTITUTE

This is often taken to mean: Jesus died instead of me—he took the punishment for my sins—so now I do not have to die eternally, and praise God for that—I am free! Free from the law's condemnation, free from the guilt of my sin, free from the sentence of death. All of that is true, as far as it goes. All sorts of nice little stories are told of people who have substituted themselves or given their lives for another in a dangerous situation, or those who have taken someone else's punishment, to illustrate what Jesus did and convince us that it was for us, and to show us how grateful we should feel.

Janet McKenzie relates one such story in her book *Ebenezer*:³

Away in the mountains of Virginia, in America, there was a certain school that no teacher could handle. The boys (for there were no girls at this school) were so rough that teacher after teacher tried for a while, and then resigned. It certainly was a bad school.

After the school had been closed for some time because it lacked a teacher, a grey-eyed young man applied to the Committee for the position. The old chairman scanned him and then said, 'Young fellow, you know what you're asking? An awful hiding! Every teacher we have had for years has had to take it.'

'I'll risk it,' he replied.

Word was sent round: 'School's in!' and the boys gathered, ready for some fun, and certainly not with the idea of gaining any knowledge. As the young teacher walked in, one big fellow named Tom whispered, 'I won't need any help, boys. I can lick him myself.'

The teacher said, 'Good morning, boys. I have come to conduct school.' At that they all yelled at the top of their voices and laughed—certainly an unpromising start.

Again the teacher spoke. 'Now I want a good school, but confess I do not know how to have it unless you help me. Suppose we have a few rules. You make them and I'll write them on the blackboard.'

This was fun, and the boys were all attention. 'No stealin',' yelled one. 'On time,' came next, and so on, until finally ten rules appeared.

'Now,' said the teacher, 'a law is no good unless there is a penalty attached. What shall we do with the one who breaks the rules?'

The reply was rather unexpected. 'Beat him across the back ten times without his coat on.'

'That is pretty severe, boys. Are you prepared to stand by it?'

Another yell, and the teacher called, 'School comes to order!'

All went well for a couple of days—exceptionally well—until Big Tom found his lunch was stolen. Upon enquiry, the thief was found to be a hungry little fellow about ten years old.

³ NCPI, Blackwood, 1983, pp. 65–68.

The next morning the teacher announced, 'We've found the thief and he must be punished according to your rule—ten stripes across the back without his coat on. Jim, come up here.'

The little trembling frame came up slowly, wearing a big coat fastened up to the neck, and pleaded, 'Teacher, you can lick me as hard as you like, but please don't ask me to take my coat off.'

'Take your coat off; you helped to make the rules,' was the reply.

'Oh, teacher, please don't make me,' he pleaded, as he began to unbutton his coat.

Then the teacher saw that, cold as it was, the little lad had no shirt on, and only strings for braces over his bony little body.

'How can I whip this poor child?' he wondered. 'But I must do something if I am to keep control of the school.'

'How is it that you are without a shirt, Jim?' he asked.

'My father is dead,' Jim replied, 'and Mother is very poor. I have only one shirt and she is washing that today; I wore my brother's big coat to keep warm.'

There was absolute silence, and the teacher, rod in hand, hesitated, bewildered.

Just then Big Tom jumped to his feet and said, 'Teacher, I'll take Jim's licking for him.'

The teacher was dumfounded. Here was the one whose lunch was stolen, offering to take the thief's place. 'Very well, then,' he said at last. 'There is a law that one can become a substitute for another. Are you all agreed?'

Off came Tom's coat, he bent his back, and the teacher started. One! two! three! four! five!—and then the rod broke. The teacher bowed his head in his hands and thought, 'How can I finish this awful task?'

Then he heard an amazing sound; those rough boys were sobbing. He lifted his head to see a most touching sight. Little Jim had reached up and caught Tom with both arms round his neck. 'Tom, I am sorry I stole your lunch, but I was awful hungry. Tom, I'll love you till I die for taking my whipping for me. Yes, I'll love you forever.'

For all its datedness, shortcomings and sentimentality—in our ears—this story is making a point about penal substitution. The application is given:

We have all broken the rules in the school of life and deserve eternal punishment. But even as Tom took little Jim's whipping for him, the Lord Jesus Christ took our punishment for us when He died on the Cross. Even though we have sinned against Him, He willingly 'took our whipping' for us. If we will only accept Him as our Saviour, then we can know that our punishment has been taken.

Jim said to the one who took his place, 'Tom, I'll love you forever for taking my whipping for me.' Surely when we realise that the Lord Jesus took our punishment for us, we do the same.

Stories such as this one contain truth, and have been powerfully used of God to bring people to faith in Christ. Janet McKenzie concludes:

Before that story was finished, not only I, but several others, men as well as women, were weeping. We could readily picture our own selves as Little Jim, Big Tom as Jesus bearing our sins on the cross, and the Teacher as God Himself, applying the punishment for sin.

Praises, and prayers for sins yet unconfessed were raised to God that night, and led some to a closer walk with God.

God honours those with glad and humble faith, and brings them to Himself. We may ask, however, whether deep down our consciences are finally satisfied by such an account of the gospel. Amazing and humbling as it is to have someone else die for us, we are the ones who sinned. We are the ones who needed to die. Just having someone die for us does not change that. There is something still not right, something still unfinished, about Jesus having died for us while we are still walking around alive and scot-free—when we are the ones who should have died.

Could we go so far as to say that if Jesus died on that cross and we did not, then we are still walking about as unregenerate sinners, alienated from the life of God?

Talking of Jesus as our substitute, or even as our representative, only goes so far. A substitute does something *instead* of us—but that means that it happens to the substitute

and not to us, so we are still out of it. A representative does something *for* us—an Australian wins a swimming race and gets a gold medal for Australia and they play our national anthem—but we know very well that we were not in the water there and swimming that fast—we were sitting back in an armchair watching it on television! People’s faith in Jesus can be a bit like that: God had this problem with our sin, so He sorted it out by sending His Son to die for us, so that cleared all that up, and now we can get on with it. It’s all at one remove—it happened out there somewhere and, even though it was for us, we were not directly involved. And so it is possible for us to remain untouched by that, and unchanged—basically the same as we were before. Except that we may have some thought processes by which we are convinced that it was done for us, and that we should be grateful.

CRUCIFIED WITH CHRIST

Paul did not just say, ‘Christ . . . the Son of God . . . loved me and gave himself for me’. He also said, ‘I have been crucified with Christ’. Paul considered himself to have died that terrible death there with Jesus—and rightly so. The sentence of death that the law of God rightly requires—despite, and even because of, all Paul’s attempts to keep and uphold the law of God in his own self-righteousness—that sentence of death that Paul deserved was passed against Paul there, and Paul was justly executed there—in Christ. Paul was not only condemned to death: the death sentence was actually carried out—it is as if the corpse was examined, Paul was pronounced dead, and the death certificate was signed.

The problem with those stories about people taking someone’s punishment or giving their lives for someone else is that they do not come anywhere near what was happening here on the cross. What Jesus did there was unlike anything that has ever happened, or could ever happen, before or since. We have nothing to compare it with. Our love goes only so far. We can give ourselves to another person, and we can give ourselves for another person (see Rom. 5:7), but we can never in love so identify with them that we *become* that person in whatever that person is going through or needs to go through, while never finally succumbing to its power ourselves. Yet that is what Christ did there. ‘He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross’ (1 Pet. 2:24), while he yet remained ‘without sin’ himself (Heb. 4:15; cf. 1 John 3:5). Peter does not say he bore the punishment for our sins. He says he bore our sins. It is impossible to separate sins from the person who has done them. We carry them with us and in us, as part of ourselves, with all their terrible guilt and shame and confusion and burden and grief and pain and hardness of heart. Romans 1:18–32 makes it clear that to bear the wrath of God is to be given over by God to the terrible outworkings of the sin that is in us, in all its futility, darkness and confusion, impurity and degradation and perversion, and wickedness of every kind, compounded by insensitivity and brazen hardness of heart. Another translation of 1 Peter 2:24 is: ‘He himself carried up our sins in his body to the tree’—to the place of God’s curse (cf. Deut. 21:22–23; Gal. 3:13–14). He became us. God ‘made him to be sin who knew no sin’ for our sake (2 Cor. 5:21); ‘by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, [God] condemned sin in the flesh’ (Rom. 8:3)—in our flesh, that he had taken on as his. Christ became ‘a curse for us’ (Gal. 3:13).

We have nothing to compare that with. The nearest we come to it is in the Old Testament sacrifices, where you took one of your best animals, and you brought it to the priest at the temple, and you laid your hand on it, to say: ‘This animal is me, and I am this animal’. Then its throat was cut, and the blood flowed, and the animal was sliced up and placed on the burning altar, and you saw yourself there go up in flames (see e.g. Lev. 1:3–

9). Except that ‘it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins’ (Heb. 10:4)—you are still standing there, when you are the one who should have died. But now ‘a single sacrifice for sins’ (Heb. 10:12) has been made—Jesus’ death is spoken of in this way. Jesus has come and said: ‘I am you, and you are me’. ‘Christ . . . through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God’ (Heb. 9:14); and ‘the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all’ (Isa. 53:6). ‘And it is by God’s will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all’ (Heb. 10:10), such that what Jesus said is now true of us: ‘anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life’ (John 5:24). ‘For’, as Paul says, ‘whoever has died is justified from sin’ (Rom. 6:7; literal translation).

So Paul said: ‘I have been crucified with Christ’. Let us not try and work out how that might be so. Let us not try to explain it or illustrate it. Let us not philosophise about it. Let us believe that this is so—this is what God has done with us in Christ.

ALL HAVE DIED

God has done this not just with us, but with the entire human race. This is what Paul also said:

the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died (2 Cor. 5:14).

Where does he get that from? Jesus said:

Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself (John 12:31–32).

Some commentators say that ‘all’ who ‘have died’ and ‘all people’ who are drawn to Jesus here means all those who will later believe and be saved.⁴ Paul in Romans 6 says (literally) ‘our old man [*anthropos*, i.e. Adam] was crucified with him’ (Rom. 6:6). This connotes the whole human race. Jesus here is talking in similarly universal terms of ‘the judgment of this world’. The condemnation to death by God of every guilty sinner in the world is what Jesus is taking himself into, and that will include everyone, whether they later repent and believe and are saved, and so have the benefit of it, or not. Jesus is talking about an action by which ‘the ruler of this world [by which he means Satan] will be driven out’. When all of us sinners have been purged of our sin in that judgement of the cross, and our guilt removed, then Satan will have nothing any more to accuse us of, and any power he has over us will be broken. Christ is the one who has entered ‘the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone . . . so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death’ (Heb. 2:9, 14–15). This ‘fear of death’ is the fear of accusation and judgement (see Heb. 9:27). For those of us who are in Christ, this is now past. Some commentators say that Jesus being ‘lifted up from the earth’ has a reference to Jesus’ rising from death and being exalted in the

⁴ Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 40, Word Books, Dallas, 1986, p. 131: ‘“All died” . . . signifies those who accept Jesus’. This reduces the notion to ‘the “symbolic” death that Christians die to self based on Christ’s death to sin (Barrett, 169)’ and a voluntary laying down of self. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1971, pp. 598f., assumes the drawing is to faith rather than to judgement, and so logically narrows it to those drawn later to believe (as in 6:44) ‘only by virtue of that death’.

heavens, and that people will be drawn to Jesus in that.⁵ However true that may be, John is very specific as to what Jesus meant by being ‘lifted up’:

He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die (John 12:33).⁶

The drawing of all people to himself was in the cross—into that judgement of the world and that driving-out of Satan. It is this ‘love of Christ’, by which he totally identified with us so as to become us in that judgement, with us there in him—‘one has died for all; therefore all have died’—this love now constrains us, who have been thus reconciled to God in Christ, to ‘persuade others’ and take the message of this reconciliation to the world (see 2 Cor. 5:11–21).

NO OTHER WAY

There is no way around that judgement. There is no other way of belonging to Christ. Only if we have died with him, will we also live with him (see 2 Tim. 2:11). Jesus said before his death:

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me (Mark 8:34).

Jesus was not using the cross as a metaphor for daily sufferings and hard times in life. All his hearers knew what it meant to take up a cross: it meant to be on your way to execution—to be crucified with Christ. And if Jesus said, as Luke records it, ‘let them . . . take up their cross daily’ (Luke 9:23), then he meant that this reality of having been crucified with Christ is to be lived in every day. There is no way we can preserve ourselves from this—as Jesus said:

those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it (Mark 8:35).

He was not talking just about ‘the noble army of martyrs’—he was talking about every Christian believer crucified with Christ through the action of the cross and the gospel that announces it.

(In later studies we may look at when it was that we were crucified with Christ, and how that might figure in our experience, and how we are to regard and conduct ourselves in

⁵ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 36 (2nd ed.), Thomas Nelson, Nashville, 1999: ‘The lifting up is not simply on the cross, but via the cross to the throne of heaven. The thought is not that Jesus will draw all *to his cross*, but that he will draw all *to himself* as the crucified and exalted Redeemer’ (p. 214). This requires an extended interpretation of v. 33, as ‘not alone of death, but of a special form of death as one in which he will be “lifted up” from the earth in order to be “lifted up” to heaven; crucifixion is clearly in view, and Christian readers are expected to understand its pointer to the throne of heaven’ (p. 215). Leon Morris (*The Gospel According to John*, pp. 598f.) does say: ‘In this Gospel, “lifting up” always refers to the cross’; but then he says, ‘This, of course, is not to be understood as though the exaltation were excluded’. He does not say whether the ‘of course’ refers to a textual or an assumed necessity. C. H. Dodd draws attention to the double meaning Joseph gives to ‘Pharaoh will lift up your head’ in the case of the butler (preferment) and the baker (decapitation!) in Gen. 40, but this seems a little far-fetched (Beasley-Murray, p. 214).

⁶ The crowd in v. 34 indicate that they fully expected the Messiah to be exalted, and to live ‘forever’. The affront, that they did not expect, but which they understood well from what Jesus had just said, was that he would be ‘lifted up’ on a cross, and so would die.

this life, and in the life to come, because of that. This will need involve also some understanding of what it is as human beings to die, and to live truly.)

Questions for Discussion

What has it meant to us to have been crucified with Christ?

What has it meant to us to know Jesus as our substitute, or our representative?

What have been our difficulties in truly representing what happened on the cross?