

# The Scapegoat

## *The Meaning Of The Cross*

Many of you are familiar with the painting by Holman Hunt called "The Light of the World". A copy of this painting hangs in St Paul's Cathedral in London. It depicts Jesus as the light of the world, knocking at a door with no handle on the outside. The artist wanted to convey the truth that Jesus has to be invited in by a person opening the door from the inside. It's probably Holman Hunt's most famous painting.

In March 1854, Holman Hunt had been in Jerusalem, reading in the Jewish scriptures about the day of Atonement, and he was intrigued by what happened on that day. The High Priest would take two male goats as a sin offering for the sins of the whole community. One goat was killed as a sacrifice, and its blood was collected and sprinkled to cover the sins of the people. That was pretty standard practice in Jewish religion.

But it was what happened to the other goat that intrigued Holman Hunt. The other goat was brought before the High Priest. The High Priest would lay both his hands on its head, and while holding his hands on its head, he would confess all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites – all their sins - and put them on the goat's head. Then he would tie a piece of red cloth, symbolising sin, around the goat's horns and drive the goat out into the desert, a long way from civilisation. The idea was that the goat would carry all the sins of the people out to a lonely and solitary place, where it would die.

Holman Hunt was gripped with this idea of a scapegoat that carried the sins of all the people, which died instead of sinful people. So he went to the Dead Sea, to a very lonely and barren place where he believed the sinful cities of Sodom and Gomorrah had been destroyed, and did this painting, which he called "The Scapegoat."

In this painting he was trying to portray something that couldn't be seen. He was trying to show this poor innocent animal staggering under the weight of a huge unseen burden of the sins of the people of Israel. There is something else you don't see in this picture. Holman Hunt had inscribed on the frame of the painting a prophecy from Isaiah 53:4 & 5, written 600 years before Jesus was born.

***"Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But 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." (Isaiah 53:4 & 5 NIV)***

We never understand the Cross until we understand that Jesus died on the Cross as our sin bearer. One of the central truths of the Christian faith is that Jesus died in our place. He died as our substitute. When Paul was writing to the Christians in Rome he put it like this;

***"You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!"(Romans 5:6 -9 NIV)***

### **Our Problem – Our sinfulness.**

Our problem is that we are sinners and God is holy. We are sinners by birth and sinners by nature. We are sinners by choice. No matter how much we try to reach a relationship with a God who is holy, we just can't make it, because we are permanently, spiritually, disabled. In fact the New Testament says we are dead in our sin. What do we need? We need help from outside of ourselves. We need some way to become so clean within ourselves that we can relate to a God who is holy and perfect. We have to be able to get close enough to him that we can stand the sort of light that is so pure and bright it burns up everything unholy that gets close. Our problem is there is so much of the dark side within us we don't have a hope.

### **God's problem – His holiness.**

But it's not just us that has the problem. God has a problem too. How can the holiness of God come to terms with the unholy sinfulness of people? How does God express his holiness in judgement and at the same time express his love in pardon? He cannot compromise his character by turning a blind eye to our sin. He can't ignore our sin. It's too big. There is too much of it. It's so much a part of our nature. And as I said last week, our sin makes him sick.

Now that wouldn't be a problem for God, if he didn't love us. But He does. He loves us passionately. How does he show his love for us when we are so repulsive and sinful? He has to punish our sin, but to do that would destroy us, and break His heart.

Here's how Paul describes Gods answer.

***There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished-- he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. (Romans 3:23 – 26 NIV)***

### **Jesus – The Substitute.**

God's answer to the dilemma was to provide a divine substitute for the sinner so that the substitute would receive the judgement and the sinner the pardon. His answer was that Jesus would take our place, to take the punishment for our sin. We sinners still have to bear the consequences for our sins – social, psychological and personal – but the penalty of alienation from God has been paid by Jesus. God directed his wrath that we deserved against his Son Jesus. Instead of inflicting on us the judgement we deserved, God in Christ endured it in our place.

Substitution is when one person takes the place of another in order to bear their pain and save the other person from it. A life is given for a life.

In August 1941 it was thought that a prisoner had escaped from Auschwitz Concentration Camp. The Nazi guards lined up all the prisoners and decided that as punishment, a ten prisoners should die, even though they had nothing to do with the escape. One of those ten prisoners was a Polish army sergeant named Franciszek Gajowniczek, who had been sent to Auschwitz for helping Jews to escape the Nazis. As they were being led away to die, Franciszek cried out "My poor wife! My poor children! What will they do?" Watching this terrible scene was a Polish Catholic Priest named Maximillian Kolbe. Father Kolbe was a gracious, intelligent man with a Doctorate in Theology, who had been imprisoned for his courageous stand against the Nazis. As Franciszek was being led away Father Kolbe stepped forward and said "I am a Catholic priest from Poland; I would like to take his place, because he has a wife and children." The guards let him change places, and he was put in an underground cell, where he was left to die of starvation. For nearly three weeks, with no food and very little water, he encouraged the prisoners with his prayers and words of hope. Finally they killed him with a lethal injection. Father Kolbe gave his life as a substitute for a married man that he didn't even know.

We sinned when we substituted ourselves for God. We were saved from our sin when God substituted himself for us. I don't fully understand this, but I know it's true. When I asked Jesus to be my Saviour, a mysterious exchange took place. It was an exchange that was already worked out on a terrible Cross in Jerusalem 2000 years ago. In that exchange, Jesus took upon himself the curse of God, that I might receive God's blessing. He became sin with my sin, so that I might become righteous with his righteousness. He voluntarily accepted the liability for my sins. And in exchange he gave me his righteous standing before God. In the death Jesus died on the Cross he died as my substitute. Jesus died in my place. He died for me. He died for you. Are you grateful? I am.

There is a sequel to the story of Franciszek Gajowniczek and Father Kolbe. Franciszek spent 5 years, 5 months and nine days in Auschwitz and survived. Every year after the war, he used to go back to that place of horror to honour the man who gave his life so that he might live. And in 1977, at a special ceremony at Auschwitz to honour Father Kolbe, Franciszek said this "I want to express my thanks, for the gift of life." 53 years after he was given the gift of life Franciszek died in 1995.

One of the characteristics of people who understand the Cross, is gratitude. Because Jesus died, we live. He was the Scapegoat, who bore the punishment for our sins. He died in my place. For the rest of my days, I want to say "God I'm thankful that the death of Jesus gave me life."

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