

The Death Of Christ

Maurice W. Lusk, III

In the first section of this theological block of Paul's Letter to the Roman (1:18-3:20), Paul went to great lengths to show that all men everywhere were under the power of sin and that, as a consequence, the whole of humankind had become a ruined/destroyed (lost) race. In the following section (3:21-8:39) Paul takes up a discussion of God's response to the lost condition of the being called "*adam/man*" he created.

The redemption story Paul calls "the gospel" is the revelation that God himself had come into the world to effect the deliverance of his creation. He descended in the form of a son of man (a *ben Adam* - an offspring of the human one) but he was in reality the Son of God. The Messiah God promised to send was none other than God himself revealed to us as "the Son". In the person of Jesus of Nazareth God had been here, had walked upon this earth, had entered into conflict with the Satanic forces of evil, and had destroyed them by his death, burial, and resurrection, thus effecting the deliverance of man from the enslaving powers of sin and death.

The particulars of this redemption story are found throughout the New Testament writings. But the most comprehensive development of it is found in the writings of Paul and a full portrayal of it must be drawn from the totality of his writings.

For our purposes here, especially as relates to the occurrence of this theme in Rom 3:24-26 and again in chapter 5, we need only to concern ourselves with how his death, burial and resurrection (to use Paul's language of 1 Cor 15) effected man's salvation.

Christ Died for the Ungodly

According to Rom 3:24-25, man is justified by the gift of God's grace **through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus**, whom God put forth **as an atonement** (*hilastarion* [from the Classical *hilaros*, meaning to be filled with great joy or pleasure] - a cause of reconciliation) **by his blood** (Paul's metaphor for the violent death of Jesus). In 5:6 Paul tells us that **Christ died for** (*huper* means "concerning, on behalf of, or with reference to;" it does not mean "in the place of" as many Calvinistic theologians insist) **the ungodly**, and in 5:8 that while we were yet sinners **Christ died for** (*huper* - concerning, on behalf of, or with reference to) **us**. In 5:9 we read that we are justified **by his blood** (his death somehow resulted in our being declared "not guilty"), and in 5:10 that we were **reconciled to God by the death of his Son**. This theme continues through chapter 5 of Romans. What does Paul mean that Christ died for our sins. He died (he experienced human death) for our sins (*huper* - concerning, on behalf of, or with reference to) our sins (our enslavement to sin or the reign of sin over the whole human race).

It is not individual sin that is under consideration here (even though that is implied), rather, it is the power of sin or "sin as a power." Sin is consistently portrayed in the New Testament as an enslaving power that reigns over the human race (cf. Rom 6:5-5-7, 17, 20; Acts 26:16-18), which eventually consumes man in death (Rom 5:12, 21; Heb 2:14-15).

Here is where Paul's gospel becomes a redemption story. It was by means of Christ's death that he entered into conflict with Satan within his own arena (i.e., where he reigned over Hell, death, and the whole of the realm of darkness), and emerged from death in resurrection, rendering the power of death of none effect over him and thus the power death was destroyed. Jesus' conquest over death was not a conquest only for himself but for the whole of the human race, in that what he had done, by the power of belief, others could do also.

The Conquest of Death by the Power of the Resurrection

In Jesus of Nazareth, God entered into human history as a human being, and through his experience of death and his resurrection from death, he brought about the death of death. His conquest of death was accomplished by his resurrection. The resurrection of Christ was a resurrection into a realm of existence where death has neither presence nor power.

His was not a resurrection back into his old Adamic existence where sin and death reign over man (setting death in reverse as with the "deeper magic" of C. S. Lewis' *Aslan*), but his was a resurrection into "new existence" where the power of grace reigns rather than the power of sin (Rom 5:21), and where death is non-existent because it is only applicable to those who are of the old creation existence of Adam. The power of sin and death, therefore, for Christ, and for all those who have become one with him (i.e., those who are "in Christ") through their belief, has been destroyed (cf. Heb 2:14-15 and Rev 1:18). Christ, was resurrected into new existence, he is the first-fruits of a new creation - the first being of a new spiritual realm of existence called eschatological or resurrection existence.

Death to Existence "in Adam" - Life through Existence "in Christ"

Here is where his death, burial, and resurrection deliver us from the power of sin and death. Through our conversion to Christ we enter into spiritual existence with him by our spiritual participation in his death, burial, and resurrection. We die to our existence in Adam, are buried in the waters of baptism, and are raised out of the waters of baptism into new spiritual existence in Christ (Rom 6:3-14; 2 Cor 5:17).

This is what conversion to Christ is about. In conversion, one experiences transformation into new existence. He is now "in Christ" rather than "in Adam" (cf. 1 Cor 15:20-23). According to Paul, Christ's

resurrection was an event of cosmic proportion. His conquest of the Satanic powers has universal, even cosmic, implications (cf. 1 Cor 15:51-57; Rom 8:31-39). To those who believe this Christ's conquest becomes their conquest (Rom 10:9-10; 1 John 5:4-5).

All of the themes making up this redemption story are developed more fully in the continuing chapters of this letter. They are filled with wonder (awe/mystery) and are capable of challenging our intellect and emotions in a way little else can.

MWLIII