

THE MASS

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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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A fortnight ago we celebrated Good Friday. It is an unusual title, Good Friday because it is a day of such sad associations, and from one point of view it was a day of the triumph of evil. Jesus told those who came to arrest Him in the Garden of Gethsemane "This is your hour and the power of darkness. Nature itself testified to the triumph of darkness by casting the world into shadow during the three hours that preceded Christ's death at Calvary. Yet that Friday was a Good Friday because the real Victor was not Satan but the Lord Jesus.

On the cross of Calvary Christ overthrew the powers of darkness; He triumphed over them, because in it all he was completely obedient to his heavenly father. St. Paul said in Colossians 2 verses 14-15, that at Calvary Christ "blotted out the bond written in ordinances that was against us, which ~~was~~ contrary to us: and he hath taken it out of the way, nailing it to the cross; having put off from himself the principalities and the powers, he made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it."

The cross was a triumph and a victory through the obtaining of forgiveness for sins. St. Paul wrote in the same passage that God has "forgiven us, all our sins". Christ's triumph consisted in abolishing the accusation that Satan had been able to bring against us sinners at God's tribunal. As you know, the names Satan and Devil both mean 'accuser', and the evil one is pictured as bringing an accusation against us on the true ground that we are sinners and rebels, in order that he might obtain our conviction, so that he might exercise his dominion over us eternally in hell. But on the cross Christ obtained forgiveness for us by bearing our sins in His own body. Satan's claims against us at God's tribunal have now been completely nullified. This is God's supreme triumph, the supreme vindication of His sovereignty even over the powers of evil. For through the ~~cross~~ he has provided free forgiveness without ignoring the claims of justice, for He Himself became man and bore our sins, so that the schemes of the devil, by which he planned to enslave us to sin have been completely overturned by the forgiveness of the sinner, procured by the obedience of the one man, Jesus Christ, at Calvary. God's forgiveness of our sins is complete. He has blotted them all out so whether we are accused by the devil at God's tribunal, or at the tribunal of our own conscience by our sense of the moral law, the accuser cannot sustain his case. God sees those who are trusting in Christ, not as sinners but as righteous, for all our sins have been blotted out through the death of Christ; our slate is clean; Christ's righteousness covers us.

Our forgiveness is complete, because Christ's work of sin bearing is complete. That work neither has to be added

to by our own efforts, nor repeated by Christ. This is underlined by our Lord in words spoken from the Cross as He died: He said "It is finished". We are forgiven on the basis of this finished work of Christ's and we experience the joy forgiveness which shines even through our sorrow for our sins. The first Good Friday was a triumph because it brought complete forgiveness on the basis of Christ's finished work for sinners who trust in Him.

Christ's victory at Calvary was followed by His resurrection. Death is the consequence and penalty of sin; it is the outward sign of sin's inward ravages. So, resurrection from the dead is the outward sign of victory over sin. Easter is the consequence of Christ's victory on Good Friday, just as our own resurrection to which we look forward, is the consequence of the complete forgiveness of our sins which Christ has already obtained for us in His death.

The Bible says that Christ is now seated at God's right hand, reigning in His kingdom. Because we who have put our faith in Jesus have been identified by God with Jesus in His death, we also will be identified with Him in His resurrection. Indeed, St. Paul puts the matter very vividly in Ephesians chapter 2, verse 6, by saying that already we are seated with Christ in heaven. May I quote the passage: "God, being rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, quickened us together with Christ (by grace have ye been saved), and raised us up with him, and made us to sit with him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus". The Bible expects us who are Christians to live in the clear realisation of this glorious situation which God has brought us into through the death and resurrection of Christ; that already we are seated with Christ in Heaven through the forgiveness of all our sins.

On the cross our Lord Jesus Christ offered Himself as a sacrifice for sins once for all. He is now seated at God's right hand, and we who are forgiven through Him are in thought seated with Christ on His throne; so the apostle Paul testifies.

Unfortunately, the Roman Catholic teaching has obscured this fundamental Christian attitude, reflected in the pages of the New Testament, that even while conscious of our sins and being truly sorry for them we should rejoice in their forgiveness and hope firmly in the fact that we are already seated at God's right hand in heaven and that in due course through Christ's death we will enter on the reality, as certainly as night follows day, because the ground of this hope is already perfected, for the ground is the finished work of Christ at Calvary. The Roman Catholic doctrine of the Mass obscures this truth of the full forgiveness of our sins through Christ's death Who offered Himself once for all at Calvary. The Roman Catholic denomination holds that in the Mass

Jesus is offered again and again to God for the forgiveness of sins, as though Christ's sacrifice at Calvary needed supplementing. This teaching minimises the note of triumph that should be sounded on Good Friday. For how can Christ be said to have triumphed over the powers of darkness which hold man in thralldom if Calvary's sacrifice needs constant repetition. The Roman Catholic teaching is summed up in the decrees of the Council of Trent, Session 22, where it is stated that in the Mass the same Christ who once offered himself on the Cross is immolated, and sacrificed on the altar by the priest. The Council of Trent goes on to state that this sacrifice of Christ at the hands of the priest in the Mass is truly propitiatory so that by means of the sacrifice of Christ in the Mass we obtain mercy, for "the Lord, appeased by the oblation of the Mass, forgives our sins". The Council of Trent goes on to say that Christ is offered daily to the Father in the Mass not only for the sins, punishments and satisfactions of the living but also for those of the dead. But the Bible teaching on the matter is quite different; not by the daily offering of Christ in the Mass but by Christ's death, once for all, at Calvary are our sins forgiven. The Bible teaches that God does not need to be appeased or propitiated by anything that we now do. It explicitly states that Christ does not need to offer his sacrifice more than once. Any teaching to the contrary obscures the glorious truth of Christ's triumph at Calvary over sin's accusations against us; and that these are now completely nullified through the forgiveness that flows from His death. It also obscures the truth that already we have been accepted by God and seated by Him with Christ at God's right hand in heaven. Our response to Christ's death should be one of thanksgiving and praise that God has provided a way of forgiveness, and the grateful acceptance of this forgiveness - it should not be the continuous effort on our part to propitiate God through persevering in offering propitiatory sacrifices. The Church of Rome by teaching that such offering is still necessary detracts and disparages Calvary.

The Mass is the centre of Roman Catholicism, and the central doctrine of the Mass is that the priest, on behalf of the whole church, daily offers to God the Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, just as Christ offered Himself on Calvary. Thus, the Catechism of the Council of Trent says: "The sacrifice of the mass is and ought to be considered one and the same sacrifice as that of the cross, for the Victim is one and the same whose sacrifice is daily renewed in the mass, by which God is appeased and rendered propitious to us". It is this doctrine of the sacrifice of the Mass that is the central doctrine of Roman Catholicism, providentially also, it is of all the doctrines of Roman Catholicism the one that is most clearly contradicted by the Scripture. It is, for example, contradicted by our Lord's words from the cross: "It is finished".

Again, St. Peter in his first epistle chapter 3, verse 18, says explicitly that Christ suffered for sins once only, the righteous for the unrighteous that he might bring us to God. In the epistle to the Hebrews the writer frequently states that Christ's sacrifice was offered to God once for all. Let me quote from this epistle. Speaking of Christ's offering of his sacrifice to God, the writer says "Nor yet that he should offer himself often... else must he have often suffered ... but now once, at the end of the ages, has he been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself, and as it is appointed unto men once to die and after death, judgement, so Christ also has been once offered to bear the sin of many....". Notice how the writer constantly emphasises the unrepeatableness of Christ's sacrifice on Calvary. He asserts the same truth in chapter 7:27, where he states that Christ made an offering "once for all, when he offered up himself". The same once for allness of Christ's sacrifice and offering is re-emphasised in Hebrews 9:12 and 10:10. Indeed the whole New Testament is opposed to the concept that God needs further propitiation through constantly repeated sacrifices.

The message of the New Testament is the full and free forgiveness of sins through the death of Christ for all who put their faith in Him. Thus the Epistle to the Hebrews concludes its arguments by quoting God's promise, as follows: 'Their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more.' The writer adds 'Now where remission of these is, there is no more offering for sin.'

We should thank God that our sins are forgiven; we must not throw this promise into doubt by continuing to offer Him propitiatory sacrifices as the Mass purports to do. Easter reminds us that our Lord is not now offering His sacrifice any more, but rather He is seated reigning at God's right hand, His sacrifice for men having been accepted, and on the basis of its completed triumph He Himself has been raised from the dead, and we ourselves have been forgiven so that we may look forward in confidence to our own resurrection and to an eternity in God's presence, not because of our own merits or because of our offerings, even our offerings of Christ, but because of Christ's perfect sin-bearing made once for all at Calvary accepted, and on which He has set His seal, in that He has raised Him from the dead and will raise us up who by faith have been united with Him. There is no room, in this New Testament scheme, for the doctrine of the Mass, the central doctrine of Roman Catholicism, in which it is said that Christ is continually offered to God by the priest as a propitiation for the sins of the living and the dead. The doctrine of the sacrifice of the Mass contradicts the Gospel.

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