

The Government On His Shoulder

Study Three — The Cross and the Kingdom

The idea of a world leader achieving great things through his death is strange to say the least, if not, offensive. This is precisely what the Jews thought about Jesus—they were offended by the idea of a crucified Messiah (John 12:34). And this has continued to be the case. Blaise Pascal writes (17th century),

‘The Jews reject [Christ]. ... Their reason for doing so, and the only one to be found in all their writings, in the Talmud and the rabbis, is merely that Christ did not subdue the nations by force of arms. ... “Christ was slain” they say, “he was defeated and did not subdue the heathen by force. He did not give us their spoils. He offers us no riches”’ (*Pensées*, p. 200).

It remains a perennial issue for the church too because, as Martin Luther observed in his day, the church often prefers a ‘theology of glory’ that excludes the offense of the preaching Christ’s death on a cross. Days of political strength have not always been good for the church, so now, with criticism of the church and its message becoming more strident, we may be in a better place to preach the gospel than previously. The message of Christ as King comes best from a position of weakness, with the gentle strength of a Saviour who knows how to delve into the true need of his people and is willing to suffer. Preaching the cross where Christ dies is core business because it tells us who God is, and how he is going about being in charge of his creation.

We will look at this in three ways. First, Jesus makes it clear that what he has come to do will be done by him dying. Second, the passion narratives make it clear that what Jesus is doing on the cross he does as King, and with royal results. Third, the apostles, after the ascension, interpret this event as the gaining of his victory as Lord (or King). In this, they probably reflect what Jesus taught them in his 40 day ‘course’ on the kingdom after his resurrection.

Jesus’ teaching about his death

It is estimated that Jesus spends some two and a half years in public ministry, healing, exorcising and teaching. This would seem to be the ‘productive’ part of his ministry, but as soon as the disciples confess he is Messiah, he begins teaching them that he ‘must’ die and rise in Jerusalem (Luke 9:22; 17:25) and the necessity of this is reaffirmed after he rises from the dead (Luke 24:7, 26, 44). The ‘must’ relates to prophecies saying this must happen (Luke 18:31; with Isa. 53:11-12). In the Luke account, Jesus is determined to go to Jerusalem (9:51) and references to his journey punctuate the book until he arrives there (13:22; 17:11; 18:31; 19:11, 28).

Jesus says he has come to ‘give his life a ransom for many’ (Mark 10:45, reflecting Isa. 53:12). He has a baptism to undergo and is constrained until it is done (Luke 12:50). As shepherd (king), he will lay down his life for his sheep (John 10:11, 15, 17-18). On the eve of his death, he explains to the disciples that a grain of wheat cannot reproduce unless it first dies (John 12:24). Particularly, Jesus says the judgement of the world has come and that the ruler of this world will be dethroned (John 12:27-33). Satan will be thrown down, perhaps from heaven, where he would otherwise accuse us as he accused Job. He is called accuser and gains power by working on our guilt. If we are justified, forgiven, he has no power over us and we are freed from his manipulation.

Then Jesus says at his arrest, ‘But this is your hour, and the power of darkness’ (Luke 22:52). Clearly, Jesus cannot reign without doing what he will do on the cross. That is where his victory is won and our enemies are defeated.

As we shall see, the fear of death, seduction of the world, accusations of Satan, shame of sin and impotency of law have always been our enemy and prevent us and the whole creation

from coming to its goal. Christ set his face to Jerusalem, and to the 'main game', the central issue or the critical point, and, in his death, secured the future of the world. Only such a victory can give freedom to a sinner and produce the community God intends for us to be. We only know this because Jesus does it, and then brings this truth of it home to us by sending his Holy Spirit.

The passion narratives

The narrative of Jesus' trial and execution is replete with reference to his kingship. He is tried for claiming to be a king, and he affirms that he is (Luke 23:2-3). He is mocked by soldiers as a king (Matt. 27:29). He is crucified with his crime, 'King of the Jews', identified in a sign above his head (Matt. 27:37), and again, the soldiers mock this 'king' (Luke 23:37). Jeering Jewish leaders call on him to save himself, if he is king (Matt. 27:42; Mark 15:32). The thieves call on him to play the king and save them all (Matt. 27:44; Luke 23:39).

But then, one thief says, 'Remember me when you come in your kingdom' (Luke 23:42). He has seen royalty shine through this dying man. Jesus exercises executive powers and says the suppliant will be with him in paradise, today (Luke 23:43). Jesus dies announcing that his work is finished (John 19:28-30). This follows the assertion in his prayer that he had accomplished what he was given to do (John 17:4)—in context, to sanctify his people and bring them as one into the love of the Father.

From one point of view, Jesus is passive in his death. 'Shedding blood' is a phrase signifying someone violently taking the life of another. But to say no more than this and to attribute all the victory to the resurrection is misleading. The resurrection is itself a triumphant act but so is the cross. There could be no triumph if the battle was not first joined on a bloody battlefield. He is constrained until this 'baptism' is *finished* (Luke 12:50) and announces from his cross that it is *finished* (John 19:30). Satan has been bested and thrown down. Jesus has won a freedom for his people beyond the law's condemnation, Satan's accusations, death's fear, the flesh's addictions and the world's domination.

The apostles

The apostles, newly baptized in the Holy Spirit, proclaim that Christ has taken his victory and is reigning (Acts 2:24) through what he did on the cross. He has suffered the law's curse for us (Gal. 3:13), he has done everything his Father wants done (Phil. 2:8-11), and the list God has of our sins has been nailed to his cross—not my list but God's (Col. 2:15)! On this latter reference, F. F. Bruce writes,

'He took that signed confession of indebtedness which stood as a perpetual witness against you, and cancelled it in His death; you might actually say that He took the document, ordinances and all, and nailed it to His cross as an act of triumphant defiance in the face of those blackmailing powers who were holding it over you as a threat.

'There is perhaps an allusion here to the fact that our Lord's own accusation was fixed to His cross. Jesus nails the accusation against us to His cross, just as His own accusation had been nailed there. Thus His victorious passion liberates us from our bankruptcy and bondage' (*Commentary on Ephesians and Colossians*, pp. 238f).

There is no question that the vibrant certainty of Christ's victory renewed, sustained and constrained the New Testament church. Key to the whole victory was the forgiveness of sins. As Gabriel said to Zechariah, the knowledge of salvation would come through the forgiveness of sins (Luke 1:77). We are moral creatures and cannot endure living under an authority that condemns us. Guilt may be the driver of all unbelief. On the other hand, forgiveness awakens us to the kindness as well as the majesty of God's reign.

If we think this forgiveness relies on us in any way, to deserve it, to make up for our short fall, we can never be sure of God's favour. What is needed is a Saviour, a King, who deals with sin, and death, and the devil, and our own propensity to fail so that we are persuaded that nothing will ever separate us from the love of God. This is why Christ on the cross cannot be a victim but a King going out to do battle and to secure a victory in which his people can stand.

And N. T. Wright says,

‘...the best government and the highest religion the world of that time had ever known – conspired to place Jesus on the cross. These powers, angry at his challenge to their sovereignty, stripped *him* naked, held *him* up to public contempt, and celebrated a triumph over *him*. ... on the contrary, on the cross God was stripping *them* naked, was holding *them* up to public contempt and leading *them* in his own triumphal procession – in Christ, the crucified Messiah. When the ‘powers’ had done their worst, crucifying the Lord of glory *incognito* on the charge of blasphemy and rebellion, they had overreached themselves. He, neither blasphemer nor rebel was in fact their rightful sovereign’ (Tyndale *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 116).

We experience this kingdom of God, not just learn about it. We feel its dynamics because Christ has actually conquered our real enemies—sin, death, Satan, the world and the flesh, and even the law. If he has conquered these enemies, we are free of them and begin to experience a new humanity, and eternal life, realities that will come in their fullness at Christ’s return. This could be demonstrated in all of the apostles but I will limit this enquiry to the Revelation—what we might call ‘the view from above’.

Revelation 1:5-8

Jesus is ruler of the kings of the earth. He holds this place by being, not only risen from the dead but is the firstborn from the dead—not just the first of many others but the one who secures the inheritance of eternal life for many others. We have the beginnings of a new family in which death is not the determining factor. Earlier, Peter says it was not possible for Jesus to be held by death (Acts 2:24)—not possible because prophets (Psa. 16) had announced that the Messiah would not be held by death. Other kingdoms are doomed to the futility because of death; this kingdom, or King, provides grace and peace to his subjects.

Christ grants this freedom by the spilling of his blood, that is, from his death. It comes to us from him who loves us (in the present tense). The hindrance to living in God’s kingdom is our own unwillingness to have any master and the dragging effect of this guilt making us dupes of the accuser. As Jesus said earlier, ‘...everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin ... if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed’ (John 8:34-36). Jesus conquers this sin and guilt ‘by his blood’. Here is his kingly victory stretching out across the world as the gospel is preached.

There can be no kingdom without subjects, and in this case, the kingdom is us—he has made us ‘a kingdom, priests to his God and Father’. The reign of Christ through his cross is not only over us; it is through us as we take the grace of his reign to the world.

May glory and dominion be to him forever! There is no king like this King. And he will come to make good on all he has promised. Then those who have rejected his reign will lament their folly.

Revelation 5:5-8

John longs for some one who can be trusted with unraveling the events to come. An angel announces that Israel’s Messiah can do this. John seems to be unaware that the worthy one is already in the scene—a lamb, just slain, yet gloriously powerful. If we were able to see Christ now, we may see him as in chapter one, and be overawed. But then, we may see him as one just killed, and weak. Yet, it is he who is King of the kingdom.

Again, the Lamb is worthy to reign because he has ransomed people for God, that is, bought them out of slavery to sin, death, Satan, the world and the flesh, and recreated them as a kingdom of priests serving God in the creation. Where there is no guilt, Satan cannot reign. Christ does reign, and he shares his victory and reign with those who trust him.

Revelation 12:7-12

This book takes us successively deeper into the workings of God’s kingdom in its engagement with the kingdoms of this world, and their prince. Christ began his ministry by engaging with

Satan, and here, he has dethroned him (though he is still 'the god of this world'—2 Cor. 4:4). Satan has lost his place to accuse the saints. The full operation of God's salvation and power and kingdom, and the authority of his Christ have come. In fact, by the 'blood of the Lamb'—that is, by the victory Christ accomplished through his death—the saints themselves conquer Satan by giving testimony to Christ, even in the face of death. No small work to 'destroy the works of the devil' (1 John 3:8), but it is done through Christ dealing with Satan's power to accuse and by these forgiven people asserting that they stand justified before God. Jesus is King of the kingdom and frees his people to live within its protection and by its powers and with its message (Col. 1:13).

We need now to see how the kingdom of God must be understood as 'now and not yet'.