

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

THE DOCTRINES OF GRACE.

V.

THE VICARIOUS SACRIFICE OF JESUS CHRIST.

WHEN Caiaphas, the titular Jewish High Priest and the agent of a much more crafty man, the actual High Priest Annas, laid down this principle in the High Council of the nation that it was expedient one man should die for the nation, and used this principle as an argument for the judicial murder of Jesus Christ, Caiaphas afforded a remarkable illustration of how one may mean what is utterly false and may at the same time say what is profoundly true. Caiaphas in this utterance was defending the most wicked act in all human history, and he was declaring one of the most precious truths in all human experience. What he meant was that it would be a good stroke of policy to silence Jesus for ever, because Jesus was teaching unwelcome truths, and might deliver His fellow-countrymen from the yoke of the Temple exactions. What really happened as the result of his action was that Jesus overcame the power of sin upon the Cross of Calvary and achieved the spiritual deliverance of the human race. Many good things, as, for instance, the English Reformation, have sprung from the basest of motives, and one has ever carefully to distinguish between the malign scheme of the Jewish ruler, which is ever to be reprobated, and its splendid results in the redemption of Jesus Christ. For in this case also God made light to spring out of darkness, and where sin abounded grace has much more abounded.

It indeed has come to pass in this event that where sin reached its most shameless and victorious height the Grace of God accomplished His most benevolent and fruitful purpose.

Certainly it was not expedient that Christ should die in the sense that Caiaphas intended, for whatever we may think of vicarious sacrifice, we must hold fast by the principle that for a judge to send an innocent man to death is a most unjust thing and can never be excused, and also by the principle that nothing which is unjust can ever be expedient or can be justified by its results. When the Pharisees formed a dishonourable alliance with the priests, and the priests corrupted Judas Iscariot, and the priests and the Pharisees together accomplished the death of Jesus Christ, they committed the basest crime and they earned a most deserved condemnation. The crucifixion of Jesus through the plotting of these men was a colossal outrage upon the laws of their own State and upon the traditions of the nation. It ended, as by a natural consequence, in the historical and indescribable punishment of the destruction of Jerusalem. Should it happen, as it sometimes does in human life, that a crime produces good fruit, that blessing will be shared by many, but the perpetrator of the crime will only have the punishment; and so it has come to pass that the world goes on a pilgrimage to the Cross of Jesus and returns with the gift of everlasting life, but the names of the men who caused that Cross to be erected, and, using Roman hands, caused Christ to be nailed thereon, shall be a byword and a reproach unto all generations.

While this is true, and must ever be kept in mind, might it not be expedient that an innocent man, against whom no charge of sin could be proven and whose goodness deserved only the highest reward, should take his own life in his hands and lay it down of his own accord on behalf of the

people? Had the priests and Pharisees been candid and honourable men, they would have heard Christ gladly, and would have treated Him with all honour, so that He never should have known want, and they would have shielded Him from the shadow of insult, so that He would have had authority in the land. Suppose, however, that Jesus did not wish to guard Himself from suffering, and to live at ease, but was willing to be betrayed and outraged and crucified in devotion to the will of God and for the good of His fellow-men, is not this an altogether beautiful thing? and if the human race on their part, realizing the immense victory of the Cross of Jesus Christ, and feeling their constant need of Him, be willing throughout all the ages to take the gift which He has won by His Passion and by His Death, may not this also be expedient and just? This question appeals both to the intellect and to the conscience, and upon the answer depends whether we can accept the doctrine of Jesus' vicarious sacrifice.

The question has the greater weight because no one can estimate the nature and force of Christianity without discovering that in the last issue all its benefits have been won as it were at the point of the Cross and that all it offers springs from the Fountain of Calvary. When St. Paul summed up the energy of Christianity in the Cross of Christ, he not only used a very felicitous image, which will ever cling to the memory and ever inspire the heart, but he also went to the root of things, and he stated the inwardness of our religion. What is true of Christ is also true of Christ's Cross, that it is the living Way by which the human soul passes into the fellowship of the Father. It stands out in religious experience on the border between light and darkness like the frontier post between Canada and the United States in former days, so that when the fugitive slave passed this point he became a freed man and no one could afterwards enslave him. It is at the

Cross that the terror of guilt and the shackles of moral bondage fall from off a man's soul and he enters into the liberty of the sons of God, a man whose sin is forgiven and whose iniquity is cleansed. Is not the Cross also the source of all heavenly thoughts, of all spiritual reinforcements, of all gracious aspirations? By the contact of this Cross, as we are made its partakers in daily life, we are raised above the things of sense and enter into the fulness of life. Just in proportion as the disciple is crucified in that proportion is he a Christian, and just as he takes his standpoint by the Cross has he a true understanding of the life which now is, and of that which is to come. As one considers the chief doctrines of our faith, regeneration, justification, and sanctification, he must see them hanging as fruits upon the bitter tree of the Cross, which was no sooner planted than it began to grow and to bud, so that its leaf has never faded and its fruit has never failed.

Some people, however, are face to face with a certain ethical difficulty and cannot in honesty pass on without its settlement—whether in truth, if you go into the heart of the matter, this vicarious sacrifice was not unjust, and whether it is possible that any person can be saved from sin in an unjust way. This difficulty resolves itself into two questions, and the first is this: Is it right that one who has made great sacrifices should not enjoy his just reward, and one who has made none should be endowed with that reward?

Granted, it may be said, that it was an altogether becoming thing that Jesus should sacrifice Himself, and granted that immense benefit has come to the race from His death, is this sacrifice founded on any principle of justice, and had the race any right to the benefit it has grasped? When a person asks this question, it is evident that he has a certain idea of the conditions of human life, which is in the background of his mind, and to which he

is accustomed to refer. He thinks of each person as a separate unit, beginning life on his own account, living on his own account, dying on his own account. He imagines that every man stands in his own place, and that his destiny is absolutely independent of his nearest neighbour. If the man mixes a bitter cup, that cup must he drink; if it be a sweet cup, that cup shall be his. None can exchange the cup, bitter or sweet, with another man. What we sow in the springtime we must reap in the days of harvest, and there is no power of interference anywhere so that the man who sowed tares shall receive wheat any more than the man that sowed wheat shall be cursed with tares. Unto every man his due, is surely the principle of Eternal Law; and if that be the case, how can any man stand in Christ's place, or Christ stand in any man's place.

Regarding this idea of life it seems perfectly fair that if you have made your bed you must lie on it, and if you have sown the wind you must reap the whirlwind. One may admit that it not only seems right but that it is logically right, and that life ought theoretically to be constructed on this individualistic principle. Every person, however, is aware how little the logic of the schools has to do with the practical rules of life, and one is bound to enquire whether as a matter of fact life really does rest upon the independence of the individual. Perhaps it may in the planet of Mars, but it certainly does not in this world. We have no experience of this absolute individualism, this separation of one man's destiny from another, this rigid recompense whereby every one receives exactly what he has earned and nothing which he has not earned. What we do see is men, women and children so inextricably linked together that one man falling carries down twenty with him, and one man standing fast in his integrity bears the strain of twenty other lives. What we realize in our day is not individualism, but rather collectivism, which means that the race is not

made up of an innumerable number of single lives which have no connection one with another, but that the race is a huge body with common feelings both of joy and sorrow, so that if one member be injured, all the other members shall suffer; and if one member be strong, all the others shall share in the strength.

When an intelligent person takes an intellectual or ethical objection to vicarious sacrifice, one would imagine that this principle were a pure monopoly of theological speculation, and that he had never seen it acted in his own life. Has this man owed nothing to the services and to the sacrifices of others who have gone before him and whom perhaps he has never known? Was he not brought into being at the grave peril and with the bitter anguish of his mother? May he not have been a sickly child, of whom people said that he could never be reared nor reach the estate of manhood, and he has been reared and has come to be a man through the sleepless nights and weary days of his mother, through her loss of pleasure and sacrifice of ease? Is he not then a fruit of vicarious sacrifice in one of its purest and most pathetic forms? This man also is the citizen of a nation, and has a share in the government of its affairs, but he is aware that there was a day when his ancestors had no voice in government and were only bondsmen in their own land, at the mercy of every tyrant, political and ecclesiastical. How does it come to pass that this man has not only freedom of conscience but also freedom of action? Has he won his just rights by his own exertions and by his own suffering? Is it not the case that men to whom God gave the spirit of patriotism long ago were willing to sacrifice their goods and even their lives for blessings which they did not enjoy themselves and which, except with the eye of prophecy, they could not see? These blessings were bought with their blood and they are enjoyed by their children, and none of us objects

that this gain of ours is an evidence of injustice. How does it come to pass that one lad begins life in abject poverty and in moral misery while another has the advantage of good education and a careful training? That one starts as it were with accumulated capital of goodness and the other starts hopelessly bankrupt? Certainly the one has no blame, and certainly the other has no credit. Before each lad lived his father, the father of one lad a careless and selfish man, gratifying his own pleasures and his own sins, the other a hardworking and severe-living man, thinking not of himself but of his children, and willing to suffer if so be that they enjoy. They have enjoyed, and now this lad's successful career is an illustration and a vindication of vicarious sacrifice. Is it not right that a man should suffer for others, and do we not admire his suffering? Is it not allowable that another should receive the benefit of that sacrifice, and are we not all with perfect satisfaction of conscience debtors on the ordinary plane of life through vicarious sacrifice?

Some years ago, to condense the whole argument in a single illustration, a merchant vessel went out from a port on the western coast and was driven upon the rocks in one of the great storms. Boats could not live in such a sea, and it was a question whether any man could swim through the surf to the shore. One after another each man of the crew put on his life belt and jumped overboard till at last the captain only remained upon the deck of the vessel. No men in our commonwealth are more loyal to their duty, or discharge their duty in a more unassuming way, than the captains of our merchant service. They are men who are willing to sacrifice everything, even unto their life, in fulfilment of their charge, who have learnt the meaning of courage in a hard school. This man had already put on his belt and was about to make his fight for life, when out of the vessel somewhere there crept a poor lad and stood

beside him. He was simply a street arab who had stowed himself away in the vessel, and now, under pressure of danger and in terror of life, had come upon the deck a miserable, helpless, shivering atom of human life. The captain looked at him and looked at the surf, and there was not another life belt. The captain had either to give him his belt and most likely be drowned, or save his own life and leave the lad to perish. This brave man put his life belt on the lad and sent him overboard, so that the lad reached the shore while the captain himself perished in the waves. One of course may say that it had been better to let the boy perish, for what was he worth to the commonwealth, or even to himself? Would it not also have been a gain if the captain's life had been saved, for he was worth much to his family and to the State? It is, however, impossible to criticise such conduct. Our hands are not steady enough to hold the scales before such magnificent heroism. Whatever one may think of vicarious sacrifice, of its expediency or of its justice, there is no man who would not give the crown to the memory of such a gallant seaman. It is therefore perfectly clear, when one closes the Bible and turns from the life of Christ, that one does not go outside the law of vicarious sacrifice, but that in great straits of life a man still stands in the stead of his neighbour, so that he endures for him, and even dies for him, while he for whom he dies is endowed with great privileges and inestimable gifts. This is the law which runs through human life, which can be verified in every street of every city, and in every home where there is any nobility of thought.

Is not this also a beautiful law which endears unto us all the person who has obeyed it, and gives him his due reward of affection? Consider, for instance, the Divine Person who made Himself the Victim, and so wrought salvation for His race. He accepted the scourge and the nails, He

humbled Himself and became obedient unto the Cross, and now He has been highly exalted and had obtained unto Himself a Name which is above every name. Without the Cross there had been no Son of God within our knowledge, and no Son of Man within our heart; there had been no Head of the Church without the Cross. Jesus had been without His praise and without His power had He not been crucified upon Calvary. No injustice, therefore, has been done to Him who suffered our disabilities; no injustice to them who have received His benefits. No message is so swift and certain as Love; no Love has been so strong as that which has on it the imprint of the wounded hands and feet. No example is so inspiring as that of selflessness; none so quick to make us brave and pure. The greatest regenerative power in the world is love, and it was love which made Christ surrender His heavenly glory and lay down His life for the world.

It is, however, impossible to shut one's eyes to the fact that at one point the sacrifice of Christ has no illustration in human life, and, indeed, could not have any. A second question, therefore, arises. Can one who has sinned be counted righteous because one who has not sinned accepted his penalty? Jesus was without question a martyr in His devotion to the will of God and to the welfare of man, and from His martyrdom have flowed constant and inestimable blessings. We have learned the love of God, and the glory of humanity, the type of the perfect life and the unspeakable degradation of sin. We have received the example of high living and the inspiration of a great leader. Such good things have come to us through Jesus' sacrifice as on lower levels of life great benefits have come to us through political and social martyrs. No martyr, however, has ever suffered literally in another's stead, so that he took the place of the person for whom he suffered and the person for whom he suffered stepped into his place. No one in

human experience has taken upon him the guilt of a brother man, and has expiated that guilt after a legal fashion, so that the innocent was treated as guilty, and the guilty has been treated as innocent. This is the last extreme, and it is also the crown of vicarious sacrifice, and this is the measure of the vicarious sacrifice of Christ.

No person can read Jesus' life and have any doubt of His perfect sinlessness, for He was exposed to the fiercest criticism and was followed at every turn by the most watchful enemies, and yet He was able to give the challenge and ask any one to convict Him of sin. From every side witnesses arose willing and unwilling to bear witness to His innocence, not only men and women who believed in Him and loved Him, but also the traitor who betrayed Him, and the judge who sent Him to His death. Alone of all the sons of men He walked in white unstained and radiant through the miry paths of life, and when He died He died as a just man and as the Son of God.

No person can read His life without also observing that, from the beginning to the end, He was treated as an unjust person would have been, and in the end as the very chief of sinners. The consideration given to the poorest of men was denied to Him, and the justice, both of Jewish and of Roman laws, was broken that He might be condemned. By every scheme of iniquity was His condemnation secured, with every circumstance of cruelty was His death carried out. It is an outstanding fact that the most innocent of all men shared the fate of the most guilty. Jesus did not at any time complain of this transposition of lot, but throughout His whole life accepted it as His calling of God. It was for other men to live, and Jesus constantly insisted upon the glory of life. It was for Himself to die, and the only death about which He spake was His own upon the Cross. His death and the life of His disciples were connected together in His mind, inasmuch as He died that they

might live, and the cross to which He moved was the gateway of life everlasting for the world. The reader of Jesus' life will also notice that His death was invested with a mysterious pain and horror, so that not only was its shadow flung across the three years of His public life, and, it may be, earlier days, but He came to regard the approach of the Cross with sinking of heart. History records the bravery and peace of soul with which the witnesses of Christ have looked forward to the scaffold, so that they slept the night before execution, and anticipated death with a high heart. This man, braver than them all, agonized the night through before His death, so that He cried aloud and sweat great drops of blood. This cannot mean that He had not the faith and resolution of St. Peter or St. Paul; this must mean that His death had in it a shame and an agony which were unknown and never could be known to any of His disciples.

We can in measure understand why Jesus agonized in Gethsemane when we listen to what He said in the Upper Room. As He gave the bread and wine, the symbol of His love and of His death, to His disciples, He declared that His blood was to be shed not simply for their good and in revelation of the divine love, but for the remission of their sin. Because He died their sin would be forgiven, and therefore, before dying, He must have taken upon Him the load of their guilt, and in dying He must have expiated the same, according to the demands of everlasting law and according to the will of God. This Good Shepherd, as He explained, would lay down His life for the sheep. He would give His life as a ransom for many. If, indeed, the sin of the human race gathered in one huge penalty and cloud of guilt upon the head of Jesus Christ, then it is no wonder that He suffered in Gethsemane and besought the Father that the cup should pass from Him, nor that on the Cross, as He realized in His heart the horror of the world's

sin, He should have cried, " My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me ? "

This explanation of Jesus' vicarious sacrifice has, of course, raised great difficulties in the mind, and we are accustomed to ask how it is possible that an innocent person should be considered guilty, and a guilty person should be accepted as innocent. And we are constantly insisting that there is no parallel in human life to this transaction, and that such an interchange would never be tolerated in any earthly court of justice. Certainly there is no exact parallel, and human justice must not be administered after this fashion ; but there is in human life an approximate parallel which has its own significance, not so much as an argument, but rather as an illustration. Is it not the case that husbands and wives are so closely united that in society the guilt of the man casts its shadow over the woman, and she may suffer in human judgment who herself has done no wrong? Is it not also the case that a son who has done wrong and given great offence to society is pardoned and received on account of the character and services of his father? Not only have we received benefit which we have never earned through the sacrifice of other people, not only have we disabilities which we have not deserved through the weakness of other people, but there are circumstances where the shadow of a crime not his own darkens another man's life, and where the credit of goodness not his own has cleansed the shadow from a sinner's life.

We ought, however, always to remember that it is not only not necessary to show the exact parallel between the conditions of human life and the conditions of Jesus' sacrifice, but that we are rather bound to believe that if we are to enter into the heart of this sacrifice, we must be prepared to find it far transcending the province of human life. And the ground for this expectation

lies in the person of Christ. It is impossible to understand in any degree the sacrifice of Jesus at its deepest without understanding in some degree Himself, for this was not an ordinary man who suffered and died upon the Cross. This man took upon Him not simply the nature of an individual, but the nature of our race. From all ages He was the Archetype of humanity, and in the fulness of time He was revealed as its Head. In Him humanity was gathered up and fulfilled, so that He is related to every man that was ever born, and under Him as a Head all men are gathered. While it is true that He offered Himself a sacrifice for men, it is also true that in Him each member of His body was crucified and died, so that the expiation upon the Cross was the expiation not of a single person, but of the whole humanity in Him who was its Representative and Priest. As the several members of the race are intimately connected, so is the race and Jesus one. What He does for us He does as our Kinsman and Brother.

It has also been urged with much reason that, even although Jesus was willing to sacrifice Himself as many a person would be willing to do under conditions of human justice for a criminal that was loved, it is incredible that the Eternal Judge should ever consent to a transaction so unjust, and far less should give it His approving sanction. Is it not a censure on the Eternal Justice that Jesus should have been treated as the substitute for a guilty race, and should have been allowed to drink its bitter cup? One forgets that his mind is again held in bondage by the conditions and limitations of human life. Who is this Eternal Judge but the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? Who is this Victim but the Eternal Son of God? It is, therefore, God who judges, and it is, therefore, God who suffers; and if the Judge Himself be willing to expiate the penalty, then surely law could not be more splendidly vindicated, and the high ends of justice more fully gained.

If it be counted a noble thing in a lowly member of the human race to obey the law of sacrifice, is this high achievement to be denied to God Himself? In all this universe is there to be only one person, not only absolved from this highest of laws, but also forbidden its fulfilment, and that person to be God? Is it not more reasonable to suppose that if the Cross had become the condition of ethical perfection in human life, it has also been all along the condition of the perfect holiness of God, so that the sacrifice of God in Jesus Christ His Son is the very crown and glory of the highest law?

It is for every person to settle with himself what he will do with this great sacrifice which has been offered by Jesus, according to the will of God, upon the Cross of Calvary, and with the innumerable benefits which this sacrifice has won. And here we find ourselves again upon the plane of human life. We have the same liberty of choice with regard to the sacrifice of Christ that we have with regard to the sacrifice of patriots. Should it be our pleasure, we can avail ourselves of the liberty and of the right which men of old have won for our commonwealth and carry ourselves as free-born citizens, and accept the responsibility of our high citizenship. Or we can carry ourselves as bondsmen, refusing any share in the government of the country and rendering no service. We can also accept with grateful heart the spiritual blessings which are bestowed by the Cross, claiming the forgiveness of sins, and taking our place as the sons of God. Or we can prefer guilt to righteousness, and remain of our own will in the bondage of sin. Two things are certain, that no man can achieve his own salvation, and that our salvation has been accomplished by Jesus Christ. And still another thing is quite as certain, that by an act of consent any one can place himself within the merit of Jesus' sacrifice and serve himself an heir to its fulness of life. May it not be

the case that our minds are clouded with darkness in this matter, because there is darkness in our hearts? Is it not possible that we are not able to believe in the vicarious sacrifice of Christ and are apt to consider it a thing altogether incredible because we ourselves are not willing to make any sacrifice and are leading utterly selfish lives? Is it not the case that, among women throughout the Christian world, it is the rarest thing to find that any one stumbles at the sacrifice of Christ? and is it not the case that women, whether as mothers or daughters or wives, are daily making sacrifices that men will never make and which they cannot even imagine? A woman enters into the sacrifice of Christ and finds in it the expectation of her heart, since in that sacrifice God is only doing on the larger scale of His Deity what she is doing on the narrower scale of her human love. Should it be the case that any one of us is living in any known selfishness, then it will be utterly impossible for him to believe in the sacrifice of Christ, for his own selfishness will veil his mind and harden his heart. When one has given himself to the service of the Divine will, as did the Apostle of the Gentiles, without reserve, without pride, without regret, then he will pass with St. Paul into the heart of this mystery. It is in moments of self-sacrifice that the heart grows tender and darkness turns into light, and of a sudden we find ourselves beneath the kindly shadow of the Cross of Christ, which for ever stretches its arms over the human race with the benediction of its vicarious sacrifice.

JOHN WATSON.