

- **The Cross of Christ 1**
- **Why Did Christ Die? Romans 3:9-20**
- ***La mort de Christ, pourquoi? (Romains 3:9-20)***
- ***Warum mußte Christus sterben? (Römer 3:9-20)***

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RÉSUMÉ

De nos jours, peu de gens savent pourquoi Christ est mort. Il est donc important d'aborder cette question.

Il y a plusieurs réponses possibles: i. Parce que Ponce Pilate l'a condamné à mort. ii. Parce que le sanhédrin juif l'a condamné. iii. Parce que Judas l'a trahi. Bien que chacune de ces explications de la mort de Christ ait sa part de validité, la réponse que le Nouveau Testament donne à notre question est que Christ est mort pour nos péchés.

Dans notre monde postmoderne, cependant, les gens n'ont pas conscience du « péché ». On considère couramment que le péché consiste en crimes horribles tels que l'incitation à s'adonner aux stupéfiantes ou le meurtre. Pour cette raison, nos contemporains ne peuvent saisir en quoi ils auraient besoin que Christ soit mort pour eux. L'incarnation ajoute encore à la difficulté, car la gloire de Christ a été voilée par son humanité. En outre, sa mort fut un supplice infamant et repoussant. Tandis que la croix constituait pour les Juifs une pierre d'achoppement, pour la plupart de nos contemporains, la croix est folie. Mais il est mort pour les péchés du fait que nous nous trouvons tous condamnés comme pécheurs devant Dieu.

La thèse principale de Paul est la suivante: Nous sommes tous « sous l'empire du péché » (v. 9).

J'aimerais subdiviser notre texte en cinq parties:

1. Nous sommes tous « sous l'empire du péché » (v. 9). Chacun de nous appartient à l'une des deux catégories suivantes: nous sommes,

ou bien « sous l'empire du péché », ou bien « sous la grâce ». Les gens aujourd'hui ont du mal à distinguer ces deux conditions. Ils s'imaginent que s'ils mènent une vie suffisamment correcte, tout va bien pour eux. Ce n'est pas ce que la Bible enseigne.

2. Une description de la nature humaine (v. 10-12).

L'apôtre écrit tout d'abord: « Il n'y a pas un seul juste, pas même un seul ». Il reprend ici avant tout le Psaume 14, mais aussi le texte d'Écclésiaste 7,20. Il agence ses citations en fonction du message qu'il veut communiquer. Le mot « juste » est en général un terme relationnel dans l'Écriture. Mais il est aussi utilisé dans un sens forensique, ou légal, lorsqu'il se réfère à notre statut devant le Dieu saint. Paul cite divers textes de l'Ancien Testament pour démontrer que, devant Dieu, nous sommes tous condamnés car toutes nos relations sont déficientes. On peut se rapporter à cet égard aux textes de Ps 14,1 et Ép 4,18. Ceci ne peut être compris par les seules capacités de l'intelligence humaine. Paul passe en effet de l'affirmation que nul n'est juste, à celle que nul n'a d'intelligence, puis à celle que nul ne se tourne vers Dieu. Beaucoup de gens font leurs prières par habitude, mais sans véritablement se tourner vers Dieu.

Nous sommes tous profondément égocentriques (v. 12). Nous sommes par conséquent corrompus.

3. Le péché en action (v. 13-17).

L'apôtre Paul considère maintenant la nature humaine en activité. Il utilise tout d'abord une image parlante: « Leur

gosier est un sépulcre ouvert ». Ce que Dieu voit est aussi repoussant que des cadavres en décomposition dans une tombe. Voilà ce qu'est le péché en action! « Ils usent de tromperie avec leur langue » (une citation de Ps. 5,10). Malgré toutes leurs belles paroles, les gens sont profondément malhonnêtes. « Ils ont sous les lèvres un venin d'aspic » (cf. Ps. 140,4). Il suffit de penser à tant de films et de cassettes vidéo pour s'en convaincre. Paul parle de malédiction. Nous blâmons Dieu pour tant de choses.

Les versets 15 et 16 (cf. És. 59,7) n'impliquent pas que chacun de nous soit un meurtrier. C'est simplement là un commentaire d'ordre général pour souligner que la nature humaine est capable de sombrer dans les abîmes les plus profonds quant à sa manière de traiter les autres êtres humains. Que l'on pense à l'exemple de certaines belles-mères en Inde.

« Ils ne connaissent pas le chemin de la paix » (v. 17; cf. És. 59,8). Ceux qui se trouvent « sous l'empire du péché » ne connaissent pas la paix, le shalom, le bien-être et la santé qui découlent d'une juste relation avec Dieu.

4. La raison de la corruption humaine.

« Ils n'ont pour Dieu aucune crainte » (cf. Ps. 36,2). L'homme postmoderne n'a pas la crainte de Dieu. Il peut respecter Christ en le tenant pour un maître important, mais sans la crainte de Dieu, il ne peut concevoir de raisons nécessitant une expiation. Nous craignons Dieu parce que:

- nous ne sommes que cendres et poussière devant Dieu,
- nous sommes ses créatures ayant pour vocation de lui rendre un culte,
- nous avons la vie, le mouvement et l'être par sa grâce,
- et il est notre juge.

Mais les incroyants n'ont aucune crainte de Dieu et la vision du monde que donne la Bible leur est étrangère.

5. Un verdict dévastateur.

En conclusion de cette section, Paul déclare: « Toute bouche est fermée et tout le monde est reconnu coupable devant Dieu ». Il n'y a pas d'excuses devant Dieu. Devant Dieu, le pécheur n'aura rien à répliquer. Il doit être déclaré coupable.

Voilà pourquoi il fallait que Christ meure. Voilà pourquoi nous devons crier: « Ô Dieu, aie pitié de moi, car je suis pécheur! »

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Da im Schottland von heute nur wenige wissen, warum Christus sterben mußte, ist es wichtig, sich diesem Thema zuzuwenden. Drei mögliche Antworten auf die oben gestellte Frage seien an dieser Stelle genannt:

- weil Pontius Pilatus ihn zum Tod verurteilt hat;
- weil ihn der jüdische Hohe Rat verworfen hat;
- weil Judas ihn verraten hat.

Obwohl wir jeden dieser drei Gründe für den Tod Christi zu einem gewissen Grad anerkennen, gilt es, auf die Antwort des NT hinzuweisen, wonach er für unsere Sünden gestorben ist. Die Menschen unserer postmodernen Welt jedoch kennen kein Sündenbewußtsein. Der Begriff 'Sünde' wird vielmehr

lediglich auf verabscheuenswerte Straftaten wie z.B. Drogenhandel oder Mord bezogen. Folglich ist es ihnen verwehrt, die Relevanz von Christi Tod für ihr Leben zu erfassen.

Die Inkarnation ihrerseits vertieft das Problem, da Christi Herrlichkeit durch sein Menschsein verhüllt war. Darüber hinaus handelte es sich bei seinem Tod um ein überaus schändliches und abstoßendes Ende. Während den Juden das Kreuz Christi ein Ärgernis (skandalon) ist, stellt es für die Mehrheit der Menschen von heute eine Torheit dar. Und dennoch gilt, daß er aufgrund der Sünde starb und wir alle somit vor Gott als verurteilte Sünder dastehen. Ich möchte den Abschnitt aus Römer 3 unter fünf Überschriften betrachten.

1. Die Hauptaussage des Paulus: Wir alle sind 'unter der Sünde' (V. 9). Jeder einzelne von uns gehört in eine der beiden folgenden Kategorien: wir sind entweder 'unter der Sünde' oder aber 'unter der Gnade'. Die Menschen von heute können diese Unterscheidung nicht erfassen, da sie denken, daß sie, wenn sie einigermaßen rechtschaffen leben, aus dem Schneider sind. Aus der Sicht der Bibel jedoch ist dies eine Illusion.

2. Beschreibung der menschlichen Natur (V. 10–12). Paulus beginnt mit den Worten 'da ist keiner, der gerecht ist, auch nicht einer'. Hierbei handelt es sich in erster Linie um ein Zitat aus Psalm 14, doch die Worte enthalten zugleich auch eine Anspielung an Prediger 7,20 (Paulus verwendet Zitate auf eine Weise, die seiner Absicht zustatten kommt). Der Begriff 'gerecht' hat in der Schrift grundsätzlich eine relationale Dimension. Doch abgesehen davon wird er auch auf forensische bzw. juristische Weise verwendet, dann nämlich, wenn er sich auf unsere Stellung im Angesicht eines heiligen Gottes bezieht. Paulus verwendet alttestamentliche Zitate um aufzuzeigen, daß wir vor Gott als Verurteilte dastehen, da alle unsere Beziehungen unvollkommen sind (siehe Ps. 14,2 und Eph. 4,18). Dies ist rein menschlich gesehen unverständlich. Doch der Gedankengang des Paulus verläuft folgendermaßen: 'da ist keiner, der gerecht ist'—'da ist keiner, der verständig ist'—'da ist keiner, der nach Gott fragt'. Viele beten zwar aus Gewohnheit, doch suchen sie dabei nicht Gott. v. 12: wir alle sind von Natur aus egozentrisch und sind infolgedessen 'verdorben'.

3. Sünde in Aktion (V. 13–17). Paulus wendet sich nun der menschlichen Natur in Aktion zu und beginnt mit einem einprägsamen Bild: 'ihr Rachen ist ein offenes Grab'. Was Gott sieht, ist so widerlich wie eine verrottende Leiche in einem Grab. Das ist Sünde in Aktion. 'Mit ihren Zungen betrügen sie'

(zitiert nach Ps. 5,9). Ungeachtet all ihrer schönen Worte sind die Menschen doch von Natur aus betrügerisch. 'Otterngift ist unter ihren Lippen' (Ps. 140,3). Man vergleiche viele Videos und Filme. Paulus spricht von 'Fluch und Bitterkeit'—für wie vieles machen wir nicht Gott verantwortlich. V. 15f. (vgl. Jes. 59,7) besagen nicht, daß jeder einzelne von uns ein Mörder ist—vielmehr handelt es sich hier um eine grundsätzliche Bemerkung die Fähigkeit der menschlichen Natur betreffend, im Umgang mit anderen menschlichen Wesen bis in die tiefsten Tiefen vorzudringen. V. 17: 'den Weg des Friedens kennen sie nicht' (Jes. 59,8). Frieden, Schalom, Ganzheit und Gesundheit als Folge einer rechten Beziehung zu Gott sind denen, die 'unter der Sünde' sind, unbekannt.

4. Der Grund der menschlichen Verdorbenheit. 'Es ist keine Gottesfurcht bei ihnen' (Ps. 36,1). Der postmoderne Mensch kennt keine Gottesfurcht. Er mag Christus als einen großen Lehrer respektieren, doch, der Gottesfurcht ermangelnd, sieht er keine Notwendigkeit für Sühne und Wiedergutmachung. Wir hingegen fürchten Gott, denn

- vor ihm wir sind nur Staub und Asche;
- wir sind, als seine Geschöpfe, dazu geschaffen, ihn anzubeten;
- in seiner Gnade leben, weben und sind wir;
- er ist unser Richter.

Diejenigen jedoch, die noch nicht zu einem neuen Leben erweckt worden sind, haben weder Gottesfurcht noch ein biblisches Weltbild.

5. Das vernichtende Urteil. Paulus beendet den Abschnitt mit den Worten 'damit allen der Mund gestopft werde und alle Welt vor Gott schuldig sei'. Vor Gott gibt es keine Ausreden; jeder Sünder wird im Angesicht Gottes verstummen. Schuldig! Das ist der Grund, weshalb Christus sterben mußte. Das ist der Grund, weshalb wir nur flehen können: 'Gott, sei mir Sünder gnädig'.

I was brought up and educated in Scotland, a small country which lies to the north of England. Many people don't even know Scotland exists (especially Americans who tend to call the United Kingdom 'England'). In my boyhood, most people in Scotland would have been very theologically aware. They had inherited, after all, the tradition of John Knox's teaching. So if you had asked the average Scot fifty years ago, 'Why did Christ die?' you would have received a moderately competent answer. Not so today. In my country, very few people would have any idea at all as to why Christ died. I want to devote this first address, therefore, to considering this question.

When we turn to the accounts in the NT of the crucifixion of Jesus, we can identify several different answers to the question, 'Why did Christ die?' The *first* one would be that he was crucified by Pontius Pilate. Pilate knew perfectly well that Jesus was innocent¹ But he did not want to decide either for or against Jesus. He wanted to release him, but he also wanted to satisfy the crowd. Failing to solve his dilemma, he took water and washed his hands to try and demonstrate his innocence.² But the truth was he was a coward, and so his action is remembered in the Creeds, *Suffered under Pontius Pilate*.

A *second* answer to the question would be to say that Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin killed Jesus. When Jesus said to Pilate, 'the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin' (Jn. 19:11), he was perhaps referring to Caiaphas since he used the singular. The people of Jerusalem were also implicated as Peter made very clear in his early sermons.³ Christ was threatening the priests' authority and making claims for himself which they deeply resented. So they tried to get rid of him.

Yet a *third* answer to our question might be that it was Judas Iscariot who had Jesus killed when he betrayed him out of covetousness. While it is true to say that he was prompted to betray Jesus by Satan, and did so after Satan 'entered into him',⁴ nonetheless his action was 'wickedness'.⁵ He therefore carries heavy responsibility for the death of Jesus.

While there is clear biblical evidence to support all of these three answers, I want us to consider a *fourth* answer to the question, 'Why did Christ die?' **He died for our sins.** We could consider this statement as amply illustrated by the first three answers already given: Pilate's cowardice is shared by everyone of us, for we too have all tried to appease the enemies of Christ and have failed to take our stand for him; we too have acted in resentment of his imperial claims which threaten our self-reliance and self-righteousness; we too are motivated by covetousness and all of us have acted in our own material interests to the detriment of his claims upon us. The case against us is clear as sharers of the sins of those who had him killed.

However, our concern must be for men and women today who appear to have little or no awareness either of the fact of their sin or of the need of the death of Christ for their sin. In our postmodern society, sin is apparently restricted to paedophiles, murderers, rapists, terrorists, drug pushers, those who mug defenceless old ladies and those who swindle banks out of millions of pounds. Ordinary people are seemingly OK. They please themselves and do their own thing on the widely held assumption that anything and everything about their lives is quite acceptable as long as they are not paedophiles, murderers, rapists, terrorists, drug pushers, muggers of old ladies or embezzlers. It seems to me that we Christians have seriously failed in presenting to our generation the reason why Christ died.

It might be argued that part of the problem why people do not consider the death of Christ with any seriousness is the Incarnation itself. After all, our Lord made himself nothing and took upon himself the nature of a servant.⁶ As Isaiah expresses it, 'He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him' (53:2). It is not therefore immediately obvious to people that this Nazarene carpenter turned teacher might be very God!

The manner of his death increases the problem. While it has become fashionable to sentimentalise Christ's death, the reality was very different. He hung in shame, his nakedness exposed to public gaze. Scholars tell us that those who were crucified could not control their bodily functions, but urinated and defecated down their legs. Little wonder then that our modern man and woman fail to see anything of value or relevance in the death of Christ. It was truly a disgusting death. There have been plenty of deaths which have impressed the world far more by their heroism and nobility.

'The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing . . . a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles' (1 Cor. 1:18,23). Our postmodern person sees the foolishness of Christ's death. It takes a Jew to recognise in the cross 'a stumbling-block' (σανδαλον) because the Jew is far more aware than most of the nature and holiness of God. The Jew has been trained to know something at least of what constitutes sin and guilt. The Jew knows that God claims total authority over us as his creatures. He knows that God has laid down laws for human behaviour and strict regulations about the way to approach himself. The stumbling-block for the Jew is that only by this hideous, cursed death can he be justified before a righteous God.

The dominant reason for Christ's death was that Jew and Gentile alike stand condemned as sinners. In Paul's words in Romans 3:19, Every mouth is silenced and the whole world is accountable before God. We have been separated from God by our sin. Let's consider all too briefly these words we read together.

1. Paul's main proposition: *We are 'all under sin'* v. 9.

I want to divide Romans 3:9–20 into five main parts. The first is his statement in verse 9. In these words, he is summarising his argument from 1:18, but also anticipating his statement in vs. 19–20. After making certain categorical statements in ch. 1 about non-Jews, he has

discussed at length the position of the Jews. His conclusion is unequivocal: Jews and Gentiles alike are 'all under sin'. In v. 19, he uses a similar phrase, 'under the law'. For our purposes just now, we can take these two phrases as approximately synonymous. So what does he mean by this phrase, 'under sin'?

In the Bible, there are two conditions that people may be in, and only two: You are I are either 'under sin' or 'under grace'. The Bible doesn't ask whether or not we are good people, kind to our neighbours, pleasant in our temperaments, well thought of in our communities. It asks, Are we under sin or under grace? Are we citizens of the kingdom of this world, or are we citizens of the heavenly city whose architect and builder is God?

This is precisely where people go wrong today in our postmodern society. Their concern is entirely about pleasing themselves, appreciating the good in others, being tolerant of various cultures and beliefs and having mutual respect for any and everyone whatever their creed. There is of course much to be commended in that kind of tolerance. But the postmodern tolerance fails to diagnose and recognise the truth about our relationship with the Lord God. It fails to see that we all stand condemned because we are under sin. We are born that way. In Paul's phrase elsewhere, we are 'in Adam'.⁷ We are born with sin in us, our humanity contaminated by sin.

That, then, is the apostle's proposition, that as a result of the Fall, the condition of every single man and woman in this world is that all are 'under sin'. Let's hurry on to the next stage of his argument:

2. A description of human nature vs. 10–12.

He begins, 'There is no one righteous, not even one.' Here Paul is quoting mainly from Psalm 14, but also alluding to Ecclesiastes 7:20. He arranges his quotations to suit his purpose.

The word 'righteous' is complex as you well know. I hold that it generally carries a relational meaning. The person is

righteous who is in a good relationship with others. Scripture is concerned with two great relationships and possibly a third. The first is that vertical relationship between each one of us and God. The second is the horizontal relationship between ourselves and others, whether wife or husband or children or neighbours or employer or colleagues at work. The possible third relationship is the inward relationship we have with ourselves.⁸

But this whole word group is also used in the Bible in a legal or forensic sense. It then refers to our status or standing before a holy God. While I myself incline to the view that throughout this chapter the relational meaning of righteousness obtains, for reasons which will become apparent as we proceed, the arguments for a forensic connotation also are overwhelming. So the apostle uses the OT quotations to declare that before the Judge of all the earth, those under sin cannot stand before God for their relationships are all in some way deficient, most all their relationship with him.

This may seem to our postmodern person to be too sweeping a statement. But the plumb-line of the divine standards leaves us without any argument. We are to love the Lord our God with all our soul and heart and mind and strength, and we are to love our neighbours as ourselves!⁹ And however men and women may *feel* about it—and what an emphasis today on ‘feelings’!—the divine standard cannot be gainsaid.

Paul continues with his remorseless logic: ‘There is no one who understands, there is none who seeks God . . .’ (Ps. 14:2 = Ps. 53:2.) Elsewhere he states, ‘They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts’ (Eph. 4:18). He is saying that sin has affected our mental capacity to grasp the truth of God. This condition of having a darkened mind, that is, a mind clouded over so that the simplest truths of the Gospel are completely meaningless, leads to separation from God, flowing as it does from ignorance about him because the heart has been hardened.

Have you on occasion tried to explain the truths of the Gospel to people of exceptionally high intelligence? But no matter how much you try, the simplest facts of the Gospel are beyond their understanding. Truths which little children can understand are apparently beyond the grasp of highly intellectual people.¹⁰

But that is not all. This general condition of those under sin means also that men and women do not even seek God. They neither know him nor *want* to know him. See the way in which the apostle’s mind is working, and the way in which he orders his quotations from the OT. There is an inexorable logic about his thought. First, there is none *righteous*. Then, sinners are unrighteous because they do not *understand* these things. Now, sinners have no understanding because they do not *seek* God.

Those who have been pastors will know that there are many good people in the world who have been taught to pray regularly. They attend their churches conscientiously. They are very religious. But they are not seeking God. Not, that is, in the way the Psalmist was seeking God when he said, ‘As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God’ (Ps. 42:1). There are many looking for peace of mind, or for self-justification. But by nature none of us seek God. Men and women do not set their hearts to enter his presence, to find him, to come before him in worship, longing for him above everything else. I believe it would be true to say that to approach the living God and bow down in his presence is about the last thing that those outside of Christ ever want to do.

By nature we resent him. By nature we say, ‘Get out of my life and leave me to run my affairs the way I want. Keep away from me, God. I want no interference from you.’ So that when someone does begin to seek after God, there has been a complete change in direction and that can only be accomplished by the work of the Holy Spirit. But now on to verse 12.

At this point, Paul follows almost exactly the LXX in quoting from Psalm 14:2.

Look at what the Psalmist says. First that we have all gone out of the way. It follows, does it not, that if we do not seek God or understand him we are going to go in the opposite direction to that in which he commands us to go. God's way in matters of morality points along a narrow road, yet a safe road designed for our blessing. But we deliberately take a different road devoted to self-satisfaction irrespective of the effect on others. My way, my will, my opinions, me, my, mine.

The next statement is that as a consequence of this self-seeking and going our own way we have become worthless. NIV in Psalm 14 translates the Greek as 'have become corrupt', whereas here it translates the same word 'have become worthless'. In secular Greek, this word was used of food or milk that had gone off. Have you ever left something in the back of the fridge at home and forgotten all about it. Weeks later, you notice it and see it has become mouldy and foul. That's one way in which the word was used. Another way it was used was of a dog's barking when there is absolutely no reason for the dog to bark—you know how some dogs bark for barking's sake: they are a public nuisance, barking at the moon, or at shadows, or at a passing bird.

It's a strong word, amounting to a devastating comment on our human condition. However, we must not do the apostle or the Psalmist an injustice. They are not saying that people cannot perform some useful or good or noble deeds. They are not saying that those 'under sin' cannot compose beautiful music, or write fine books, or paint skilful portraits. Their concern is to speak about our standing before God. They are saying that in the sight of our Creator we are morally useless, altogether rotten and corrupt—every single one of us, without exception. No matter what handsome, pleasant, well-intentioned people we are—all we are and all we do is worthless before God.

3. Sin in action vv. 13-17

Paul now moves in his thought from his description of fallen human nature to that

fallen human nature *in action*. One commentator writes that Paul now 'holds before [us] the most terrifying mirror that [we] have ever looked into in [our] lives'.¹¹ Just brief comments on each of these devastating statements.

'Their throats are open graves . . .' (Ps. 5:9). Some years ago, some young people in my church were away for a week-end in the hills. A group of them were walking on the moors, when they stumbled on a human body that was in an advanced state of decomposition. A man had been out walking in the hills alone when he had taken a heart attack and fallen down and died. That had been many months before. Those young people, all of them still at school, were shocked and nauseated to see this rotting human corpse lying across their pathway. The smell was foul.

This little phrase says that if we look into the mouth of a man or woman and see what God sees, the sight is as revolting and nauseating as the rotting remains of some corpse. It is out of the overflow of the heart that the mouth speaks.¹² That is sin in action! Those who do not understand or seek God but go their own way and have become worthless. Their hearts are like open graves with all the putrefaction they contain.

'Their tongues practise deceit' (still from Ps. 5:9). We haven't time to bring out the tragic truth of these words. But we all know how deceitful human nature is, how we say one thing and mean another, how people seem to be so charming when in their hearts they are cursing the moment they met you! High society is the same. Lovely words of warm friendship, but as soon as the other's back is turned, the most biting, vicious comments! And oh! how we twist our explanation of events to show ourselves up in the best possible light! We are unable to help ourselves as our tongues practise deceit.

'The poison of vipers is on their lips' (Ps. 140:3). 'Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness' (Ps. 10:7). One thinks of the media, of the magazines produced for adolescents and the tv and cinema films. What venom is injected into those whom the fangs of the media bite! This modern

serpent is as cunning as the old serpent that seduced Eve. The message seems reasonable, the suggestions attractive, but hidden under the lips is deadly venom which will ultimately kill the victim.

What about the cursing and bitterness to which Paul refers? Note that we are not to understand that he is saying that those under sin constantly use foul language. Not that. Let me remind you again that his concern is our relationship to God. Here he saying that the natural man or woman does not submit to God. When something goes wrong, some disaster or illness strikes, if men's thoughts turn to God at all, it is to curse him bitterly. This is part of that resentment against God which lurks in every human soul. We blame him for our mistakes. We blame him for the suffering in the world. 'How can there be a God when the people of Sudan suffer so much?' we ask.

Verses 15 and 16 (Is. 59:7), do not mean that every one of us is a murderer. Rather it is a general reflection and comment on the capability human nature has to sink to the deepest depths of depravity and shame in our treatment of other human beings. One has only to turn on the tv news to see intense suffering in a score of places across this world as those who have the power of life and death over others inflict suffering on them. Last year I visited India and was shocked to read each week in the *Indian Times* of mothers-in-law who murdered their daughters-in-law in order to find for their sons another bride who would bring a fresh dowry with her. These were not vicious, hardened criminals, these mothers-in-law. Rather were they fallen human beings who saw the opportunity of riches by killing defenceless young women who were in their power. I understand that Indian prisons hold astonishingly high numbers of such women who have been convicted of such murders. And they are only the ones who have been caught! More recently, we have seen the devastation in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam.

The last sentence in this section: v. 17, 'The way of peace they do not know' (Is 59:8). Peace, *shalom*, that wholeness and

health which flows from a right relationship with God and permeates every level of our living and thinking—such peace is unknown to those 'under sin'. How could they have *shalom*? They do not understand the ways of God; they do not seek him; they do not know him. Rather, they resent him and are hell-bent on going their own way. How could they have peace when they are far from him?

4. The reason for this human corruption

'There is no fear of God before their eyes.' The full quotation from Psalm 36:1 reads: 'A burden is within my heart concerning the sinfulness of the wicked: there is no fear of God before his eyes.' Now this is a most significant statement of Scripture. We must not lightly pass over it. It is at this point we come to the heart of the problem in bringing the Christian message to postmodern society. Your postmodern person has no fear of God. He may respect Jesus as a great teacher. He may be interested in attending a Christian service to hear about Jesus Christ. She may even attend a home Bible Study Group to investigate the Christian faith. I have known many who have done this and have found themselves deeply impressed by the teaching of the Gospels. But there is still as yet 'no fear of God before their eyes'. And until they begin to know the fear of God, there is no reason for the Cross of Christ. Let me explain why.

'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.'¹³ You recall how when Adam and Eve first sinned, they hid themselves because they were afraid. You remember how when they were expelled from God's presence that an angel with a flaming sword which turned every way stood at the entrance to the Garden. You remember how when Abraham prayed for the two cities of the plain, he said, 'I have been so bold to speak to the Lord, I who am nothing but dust and ashes.' You remember how when Jacob awoke from his dream he was afraid and said, 'How awesome is this place. This is none other

than the house of God, the gate of heaven.' You remember how when God spoke to Moses from the burning bush, he hid his face for he was afraid to look on God. So we could go on. Why this fear of God? Why?

I would suggest four reasons. *First*, because God is God and we are but dust of the earth. We are mere worms compared to his incomparable glory and majesty. *Second*, because we his creatures are made to worship him. And remember the meaning of that word worship is 'serve'. Some Christians order God about as if he were a kind of genie of Aladdin's lamp who is there to be brought up on demand and told what to do for their comfort. How false and how wrong. He has made us for himself. Our proper posture before him is to bow low at his feet, to hide our faces and say, 'Lord, what do you want me to do?' *Third*, our lives are sustained by God and all our days are numbered in his book. If he was to withdraw from us his hand of providence for just one moment, we would cease to exist. We live and move and have our being by his grace. And *fourth*, he is the Judge of all the earth who will demand an account of how we steward our days and years and those gifts with which he has endowed us.

But unregenerate men and women have no fear of God. They may believe in him in an intellectual kind of way, assenting to the possibility or probability of his existence in some form or another. But they do not bow before him as their Creator and Lord, ever to be worshipped and adored in holy fear. And herein lies the root of sin. Whether that sin be selfishness, rebellion against the laws of God, deceit, crookedness, failure, or unbelief—whatever expression sin may take, at the root of it lies this absence of fear of God.

I was speaking to a friend recently whose parents had worked for many years in China. He told me that his father discovered there were two Bible books which when read by Chinese led them to faith in Christ—Genesis and Romans. Why these two books? Because they both present a Biblical world view. That is

what our postmodern society has lost. And that is why there is no fear of God before their eyes.

5. The devastating verdict

In conclusion, see how Paul ends this section: 'Every mouth is silenced and the whole world is held accountable to God.' There will be no excuses or arguments before the Judge of all the earth. There will be no discussion of our sins. No blaming someone else as Adam did in the Garden, and then Eve did. No protestations of innocence. Sinner man, sinner woman, standing before Almighty God will not have a word to utter. Before that sea of crystal that surrounds the throne, encircled by the heavenly beings adoring and praising God, the sinner will be utterly lost for words. Speechless, like the man without the wedding clothes.

Guilty before God! Brunner has written, 'Guilt is that element in sin by which it belongs unalterably to the past, and as this unalterable element determines the present destiny of each soul.'¹⁴ Guilt means that our past can never be made good. Indeed, we only truly conceive our lives as a whole when we see them in this dark shadow of guilt.

And that is why that terrible, hideous, shameful death of Christ had to be. That is why the Lord of Glory broke into time and history, and carried on his spotless soul all my sin, all my rebellion, my ignorance and darkness, my rebellion, my perversity, my deceit, my pride, my uncleanness, my failure, the poison and venom in my heart. He died for our sins.

Let us then prostrate ourselves before him in dust and ashes. Let us fall before him and cry, 'God be merciful to me a sinner!'

Approach, my soul, the mercy seat, where
Jesus answers prayer,

There humbly fall before his feet, for
none can perish there.

Thy promise is my only plea; with this I
venture nigh:

Thou callest burdened souls to thee,
and such, O Lord, am I.

Bowed down beneath a load of sin, by
Satan sorely pressed,

By war without and fears within, I
come to thee for rest.

Be thou my Shield and Hiding-place,
that, sheltered near thy side,

I may my fierce accuser face, and tell
him thou hast died.

O wondrous love! to bleed and die, to
bear the cross and shame,

That guilty sinners such as I, might
plead thy gracious Name!

John Newton, 1725–1807

Notes

- 1 Jn. 18:38.
- 2 Mt. 27:24.
- 3 Acts 3:12ff.
- 4 Jn. 13:2,27.
- 5 Acts 1:18.
- 6 Phil. 2:
- 7 Rom. 5:12ff, 17ff; 1 Cor. 15:22.
- 8 Acts of righteousness in Matt. 6:1 are evidently in these three areas: the horizontal, i.e., giving to the needy, the verticle, i.e., prayer, and the inward, i.e., fasting. See vs. 2–18.
- 9 Matt. 22:36–39.
- 10 Matt. 11:25–27.
- 11 D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Romans, An Exposition of Chapters 2:1–3:20*, Banner of Truth, Edinburgh, 1989, p. 210.
- 12 Matt. 12:34.
- 13 Prov. 1:7.
- 14 Brunner, *The Mediator*, Lutterworth, London, 1934, p. 443.

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