

CALVARY THE WORLD'S CRISIS

By Paul Penno Jr.

Sep. 8, 2012

Carol had discovered that her husband had been carrying on an affair with another member of their church's congregation for several years. Only by chance had she uncovered this, or who knows, it may well have still been going on to this day. The fallout, however, was enormous. The children were devastated and Carol ended up on tranquilizers to help her cope with the depression. Family and friends were torn apart trying to support both her and her husband, and the impact on the church lasted for months as they tried to come to terms with the breakdown of a relationship they believed to have been one of the strongest in their community.

Carol took legal advice and filed for divorce on the grounds of adultery so she could begin to build a new life for herself and the children. But as the initial shock and pain began to subside, she realized that her love for her husband was still overwhelming. The question she began to wrestle with was how she could win him back and rebuild the relationship that the affair had torn to shreds. There didn't seem to be any sign that her husband was willing to ask for forgiveness and return to her of his own accord. But why should she make all the effort? After all, she was the innocent person in all this, and she had never wanted the relationship to end.

With the divorce settlement agreed and become final, Carol decided she wanted to make one last effort to salvage her marriage. In an act of love, greater than any she had shown before, she wrote to her estranged husband explaining that she didn't blame him for their divorce. She further explained that she was willing to forget all the pain and suffering he had caused her if he could find it in his heart to give their marriage another chance.

There is a saying that hell has no fury like a woman scorned. But if Carol had stuck to her guns and finalized the divorce proceedings, despite the fact that she was perfectly justified in doing so, she would never have achieved a restored, healed, strong, honest and fulfilling marriage. Carol absorbed all the pain and suffering caused by her husband's betrayal in order to salvage something she believed was worth saving. And that's precisely what Jesus did when He suffered on the cross—He absorbed all the pain, all the suffering caused by the breakdown in our fellowship with God and in doing so demonstrated the lengths to which a God who is love will go to restore it.

There have been no new worlds or planets created in the universe since God kept that first Sabbath. "Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them," says Gen. 2:1. What has kept God busy since then? The answer: a work of reconciling heaven and earth, because "there was war in heaven: Michael and His angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels" (Rev. 12:7).

The great controversy has involved the universe as well as this fallen planet, for vs. 12 says that because of the victory won in this reconciliation, “Rejoice, ye heavens, and ye that dwell in them.” Finally, it will be said: “The great controversy is ended. Sin and sinners are no more. The entire universe is clean. One pulse of harmony and gladness beats through the vast creation” (GC 678). This blessed harmony will be the result of God’s work on His cosmic Day of Atonement—which means simply, His Day of Reconciliation, the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary, the ending of alienation.

I remember the time when anything about the atonement or the cross was boring to me. What was interesting was spectacular fulfillments of the prophecies. I was interested in what I thought was uniquely “Adventist.” Something about Christ’s sacrifice reminded me of the Sunday-keeping Evangelical Church. I wanted “present truth,” and that was news about the Sunday Law, or some new disaster predicted in Daniel or Revelation. Hymns about the cross were also boring. A set of studies about the atonement? Dry as dust. Over my head.

All this has changed. There has been a discovery into the meaning of *agape*. With the discovery came also an intimate acquaintance with the agent of the Gift of Prophecy, Ellen G. White. She was forced to contemplate the same “boredom” manifested by the ordained ministers of her day who failed to resonate with presentations of the cross. The ministers thought this “Cross” stuff was “Salvation Army-ism” brought into the Adventist Church to take our minds

off the real truth for the day—the Sunday Law and impending persecution. Life was about to get interesting, and this “message of Christ’s righteousness” was distracting. Long out-of-reach Ellen White statements finally came to light for me that bared her soul and made the entire issue become flesh-and-blood, heart-warming reality. There are cosmic developments involved here in this “latter rain” truth.

“The preaching of the cross [was] foolishness” to me! The reason? I was spiritually dead. Anything spiritually real is boring if you’re dead.

Is your human heart reconciled to God? Are you alert to realize that your natural human heart “is enmity against God, for it is not subject to the law of God, neither can be” except through the atonement of Christ? (Rom. 8:7). Do you still wrestle with a lingering sense that somehow you must make yourself good before He can be reconciled to you, and before He can really accept you and respect you? Do you have that nagging feeling that He cannot truly be your Friend until you are worthy? While you are sitting in the pigsty, do you wish you had a Father who would forgive and accept the prodigal?

If so, you need to know about the Day of Atonement; as never before in world history the world’s attention is directed now to the atoning sacrifice of Christ where “God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. . . . We beseech you in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled to God”! (2

Cor. 5:19, 20). But you *can't* “be” unless you first believe He is reconciled to you! So, “spend a thoughtful hour” contemplating the cross where that reconciliation was accomplished.

Is the atonement the reconciliation of God to man or the reconciliation of man to God? What we believe is indissolubly linked to the way we behave. That hypocrisy is rampant is readily acknowledged—there is a huge aspirational gap between our desires and our delivery. Our foundational beliefs filter into our responses. Our values have consequences for both our attitudes and actions. What we believe about the cross (and what God was doing there) will fundamentally shape our attitude toward, and involvement with, wider society. Inadequate doctrines of atonement lead to distorted understandings of God and humanity and result in an immature engagement in community and wider society.

Is there any connection between the public's almost universal perception of the church as judgmental, guilt-inducing, censorious, finger-wagging, bigoted, and self-righteous and aspects of its presentation of the cross? Why is it that our culture now views the death of Christ as no more than some kind of ancient myth or irrelevant religious event? Perhaps one factor is that our thinking about the cross has become distorted and thus our presentation of it is inadequate to engage the hearts and minds of our contemporaries both within and beyond the church.

The sacrifices of the heathen were always to placate the wrath of the angered gods. Quite

common among the pagans in the Middle East as well as North, Central and South America. Note their pyramids and altars.

No matter how many gods they worshiped, every civilized pagan nation has had a tradition, more or less vague and fanciful perhaps,—a tradition forgotten by the multitude, it may be, and only cherished by the elite, the educated few, and yet a tradition still,—that there is one God back of all these gods, who made them, and who made all things. Why did they not worship him?—Because they did not believe that He cared for them. They thought Him so great and so far away that the human soul was beneath His notice, that the crushing out of all the race of man would be no more to Him than the crushing of a worm to us.

And because this God was so far away, they went on inserting gods and demigods, and kings and priests between Him and the human heart, till no sorrowing, suffering soul would ever think or dare to reach up the trembling hand of faith for the soothing, sympathetic touch of Him who was truly and really divine. To such a world as this Jesus came to reveal the true God, and the God He revealed was Emanuel, God with us; and to such a people as this Paul taught the sublime truth that God is “not far from every one of us; for in Him we live, and move, and have our being; . . . for we are also His offspring” (Acts 17:28).

The same thing that Satan accomplished in paganism he has also accomplished in the papacy. To papists, God is the stern, the distant judge, incapable of human sympathy or love, and Christ

the mediator and intercessor, whose duty it is, if possible, to touch the heart of God with a feeling of our needs, and arouse His compassion. But even Christ is not touched with the feelings of all our infirmities; so He must be approached through the mediation of the Virgin, His mother, and of canonized saint, and living pope, and bishop and priest. Thus again God is placed far away, and the beautiful and living fact of His love is denied. He is no more “our Father,” who takes delight in giving good gifts to His children.

Every pagan religion has its sacrifice, and this sacrifice is derived from the true Sacrifice by which the world is to be redeemed, through degeneracy from the true type of that sacrifice which God gave to man at the gate of the forfeited Eden. But Satan has brought it around so that the pagan sacrifice means just the opposite of the true.

The meaning of the true sacrifice is this: “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son.” Every sacrifice truly offered was a revelation, an expression of that great sacrifice by which God was to give the pledge to all His intelligent creatures of all worlds that He so loved them that, if need be, He would give His life to redeem them. But the pagan sacrifice speaks of a god of wrath and anger, whose wrath must in some way be appeased, perchance by the blood of a lamb, or it may be only by the blood of a fair maid, or innocent child, or some other human victim. When He smells the freshly flowing blood, they believe His vengeance will be satisfied, He will be propitiated.

What shall we say of the false idea of the atonement, held even by many in the popular Protestant churches of today, and expressed in a late confession of faith in these words, “Christ died to reconcile the Father unto us”? It is the pagan idea of sacrifice applied to Christianity. God, they think, was angry; He must pour forth His wrath upon some one. If upon man, it would eternally damn him, as he deserved; but this would interfere with God’s plan and purpose in creating the worlds, so this must not be.

And yet God must not be cheated of His vengeance; for this reason He pours it forth upon Christ, that man may go free. So when Christ died, He was slain really by the wrath and anger of the Father. Thus Satan has transformed the truth of God’s love into a lie, and even infused this lie into the very doctrine of the atonement of Christ.

This is paganism. The true idea of the atonement makes God and Christ equal in their love, and one in their purpose of saving humanity. “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself” (2 Cor. 5:19). The life of Christ was not the price paid to the Father for our pardon; but the life was the price which the Father paid to so manifest His loving power as to bring us to that repentant attitude of mind where He could pardon us freely.

The contrast between the true and the false ideas is tersely stated by the prophet in these words: “Surely He hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we did esteem Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted” (Isaiah 53:4). A crucifixion was a gala occasion for sadists, for they could indulge

their cruelty on the helpless victim. In fact, if you were considered a “godly” person, you must also curse the wretch on the cross to prove that you agree with God, who has “cursed” him. Children hurried by on their way home from school to see the sight and to throw rotten eggs and tomatoes at the helpless victim. No one thought of the possibility of a mistaken judgment. The crucified person was a human write-off, like a trapped hyena that boys throw stones at. He was someone to be hated and despised and abhorred.

Isaiah says of Jesus on His cross, “We did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted” (Isaiah 53:4). This was why the Jewish leaders wanted Governor Pilate to sentence Him to be crucified, for the moment they saw Him on the tree they felt sure He could not be what He claimed to be—the Messiah, the Son of God. “No way! Our great leader Moses said that anyone who is hanged on a tree is automatically cursed of God! Now we know that Jesus of Galilee cannot be what He claimed to be. This proves that we have been right all along in our rejection of Him.” So they comforted and congratulated themselves when they saw Him on His cross. Yet that cross was the evidence that He was the true Lamb of God, the Prince of glory.

John’s Gospel famously declares, “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son” (John 3:16). How then, have we come to believe that at the cross this God of love suddenly decides to vent his anger and wrath on His own Son?

The cross is not a form of cosmic child abuse—a vengeful Father punishing His Son for an offence

He did not commit. Rather than a symbol of vengeance or retribution, the cross of Christ is the greatest statement of love and demonstration of just how far God the Father and Jesus His Son are prepared to go to prove that love and to bring redemption to sinners. The truth is, the cross is a symbol of love.

Mrs. White supported the view that man was reconciled to God by the death of Christ, not God reconciled to man. The Father loved us:

“But this great sacrifice was not made in order to create in the Father’s heart a love for man, not to make Him willing to save. No, no! . . . The Father loves us, not because of the great propitiation, but He provided the propitiation because He loves us.”¹

“All heaven suffered in Christ’s agony; but that suffering did not begin or end with His manifestation in humanity. The cross is a revelation to our dull senses of the pain that, from its very inception, sin has brought to the heart of God.”²

“The atonement of Christ was not made in order to induce God to love those whom He otherwise hated; it was not made to produce a love that was not in existence; but it was made as a manifestation of the love that was already in God’s heart . . . We are not to entertain the idea that God loves us because Christ has died for us . . . The death of Christ was expedient in order that mercy might reach us with its full pardoning power, and at the

¹ Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 15.

² Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 263.

same time that justice might be satisfied in the righteous substitute.”³

Briefly, such a view of the atonement requires the understanding that Christ took upon Himself our human nature indeed, and was made “in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin *in the flesh.*” In “all things it behoved Him to be made like unto His brethren” (Heb. 2:17). “He Himself also is compassed with infirmity” (Heb. 5:2), “in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15).

He took upon Him *sinful flesh*, in which “dwells no good thing,” and had to die to self just as His followers do in following Him. The “likeness” was not mere *appearance*, but reality. The Cross of Calvary was thus the culmination of a human life-time, for Him, of daily cross-bearing. “Taking human nature, fitted Christ to understand man’s trials and sorrows, and *all* the temptations wherewith he is beset.”⁴ The fact that Jesus endured temptations absolutely identical with ours proves that he sensed to the full the evil of His flesh, against which He Spirit warred. He emptied Himself of all divine power, so that He could say, “I can of Mine Own self do nothing” (John 5:30). He was powerless to work a miracle, except through faith in the Father. He even learned obedience by the things which He suffered (Heb. 5:8), “by actual experience as man, in His own flesh, the nature of that perfect obedience to the will of God which can only be

³ Ellen G. White, “Christ Our Complete Salvation,” *Signs of the Times* (May 30, 1895).

⁴ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 2, p. 201.

accomplished by man through suffering or the entire crucifixion of the flesh with its affections and lusts; and this obedience He perfected when He became obedient unto death, ‘even the death of the Cross.’”⁵

E. J. Waggoner says, “The sacrifice which God provides, and which He alone can provide, is one that will remove sin, and thus destroy the enmity that is in man’s heart against God.”⁶ That is the atonement God gives the sinner—the removal of sin by the sacrifice which He provides,—which reconciles the alienated heart.

The sinner sees the love of God in the sacrifice of Christ. He sees the sacrifice to forgive his sins. The heart is reconciled to God. Faith is working motivated by Jesus’ sacrifice of love. The soul itself exercises faith in union with Christ for the expulsion of sin from the life. Thus he experiences the atoning sacrifice because his sins are removed. He is at one with God.

The servant of the Lord says, “You may say that you *believe* in Jesus when you have *an appreciation of the cost of salvation*. You may make this claim, when you feel that Jesus died for you on the cruel cross of Calvary. . . .”⁷ “The cost of salvation” involved Jesus, the sin-bearer, 1) voluntarily laying down His life on your behalf, 2)

⁵ Jean Garnier, *The True Christ and the False Christ*, Vol. I, p. 112.

⁶ E. J. Waggoner, “Propitiation,” *The Present Truth* 9, 32 (Nov. 9, 1893), p. 501.

⁷ Ellen G. White “How Do We Stand,” *Review and Herald* (July 24, 1888), par. 5.

sensing the agonies which the wicked will suffer at the second death. 3) He chose to be separated from His eternal relationship with the Father forever. 4) He surrendered the independent use of His divine powers over to the Father. 5) He did not have the hope of the resurrection.⁸

When you can appreciate what it cost Jesus to die for you, then you can say that you have faith. When you can say that you put Him through that, then you can say you have faith. This is no superficial connection with Jesus. This is no mere creedal assent to some objective truth. This is a genuine reconciliation of your heart to Jesus' heart. It involves the crucifixion of self with Christ for it was "self" that put Him on His cross. It is an appreciation of Jesus' love for you that is genuine faith. But God can never be reconciled to sin as it reigns in the sinner's heart. This is how I understand 1 John 2:2; 4:10; Hebrews 2:17.

"Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the *propitiation* for our sins" (1 John 4:10). "He loved us and sent His Son as a sacrifice to atone for our sins" (REB).

⁸ "The Saviour could not see through the portals of the tomb. Hope did not present to Him His coming forth from the grave a conqueror, or tell Him of the Father's acceptance of the sacrifice. He feared that sin was so offensive to God that Their separation was to be eternal. Christ felt the anguish which the sinner will feel when mercy shall no longer plead for the guilty race. It was the sense of sin, bringing the Father's wrath upon Him as man's substitute, that made the cup He drank so bitter, and broke the heart of the Son of God." Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 753.

Elie Wiesel, winner of the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize wrote the book *Night*, describing his imprisonment in the Nazi camp of Birkenau, "reception center" for the concentration camp at Auschwitz. In it, Wiesel remembers many prisoners being executed, but none had more impact on him than the hanging of a young boy.

Inmates were divided into camps, and this "sad-eyed angel" had been a servant of one camp leader, who was trusted by the Germans. When he was found to have blown up the local power station, the leader was tortured and transferred to another camp. The boy was also tortured but then sentenced to hang alongside two adults. The rest of the inmates were forced to watch the execution, powerless to help.

As the three prisoners stood on the gallows, waiting to be executed, Wiesel heard a voice behind him ask, "Where is God? Where is He?"

"Long live liberty!" the two adults cried out, in defiance of their execution. The child said nothing. The signal was given and the three were hanged. The adults died instantly, but the boy was too light, and as a result, it took more than half an hour for him to die. During this time, all the other inmates were forced to march past and look at the executed men. As he passed the boy, still barely alive, Wiesel heard the same voice behind him ask, "Where is God now?"

You might have expected Wiesel, who had come to doubt God's love and justice, to have posed the same question. Yet as he recalls, "I heard a voice

within me answer him: ‘Where is He? Here He is— He is hanging here on this gallows.’”

God seems to be conspicuous by His absence as Jesus draws His last breath. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46) are hardly the words of a victorious Messiah. Jesus, the Son of God, dies apparently forsaken and forgotten by His Father. But then the crucifixion of Jesus is an event full of paradox.

The usual solution to this problem of Jesus’ cry is to suggest that God purposely turns His back on Jesus because He cannot bear to look on sin. As Jesus take on to Himself the fullness of the world’s sin, His sight becomes unbearable for a pure and holy God. The problem with this, however, is that if God is omnipresent, as the Bible clearly teaches, He cannot exclude or remove Himself from His creation but must look upon sin every day.

In truth, Jesus’ cry of abandonment mirrors those of countless millions of people who suffer oppression, enslavement, abuse, disease, poverty, starvation and violence: If God is really love, then where is He? Why Has He abandoned me? Why do I feel so alone? However, while suffering may cause us to believe that God has abandoned us, the reality is that He is always right there with us, in the suffering. The truth is, Jesus was born into a messy world and He died in a messy world. The cross is often portrayed as the bridge over the chasm that separates heaven and earth. It is our means of escape. But the reality is that it stands at the center of our decaying world—thrust into the dirt to proclaim “God is here!”