

# I believe in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ

Strands of truth imbedded in pieces of wood  
— symbols of a strange but necessary  
salvation for mankind's sin and alienation.  
by Desmond Ford

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IN A FAMOUS short story by Edgar Allan Poe a valuable letter becomes lost even though prominently displayed in a card rack beneath the middle of the mantelpiece. The police spend a week exploring minutely the nooks and crannies of each room in the house thought to contain the lost document. Even a powerful microscope is employed to no avail.

The hero of the tale tells the prefect of the Parisian police that "perhaps the mystery is a little too plain, too self-evident." Later he muses, "The intellect suffers to pass unnoticed those considerations which are too obtrusively and too palpably self-evident."

All of this is a parable of life itself. The clues to the meaning of existence are so prominent that few people "see" them. Just as we use eyes and brain, hardly aware that we do so, and gaze through windows at objects outside without perceiving the glass panes which make such perceptions possible, so some aspects of our nature and experience that give pungency and character to all the rest escape our notice.

For example, Paul Tournier reminds us that the universal phenomenon of guilt (for normal people at least) is the seasoning of all living. In the little word *ought* lies both our greatness and our misery. According to psychiatrists and physicians, a major

Desmond Ford is chairman of the theology department, Avondale College, Cooranbong, NSW, Australia.

cause of breakdown is a burdened conscience. Certain it is that guilt continually attends our failures with time, money, personal relationships, and opportunity in general. All human beings experience outrageous impulses, nonsensical inhibitions, temptations, complexes, obscene images, and vague fears. Even the best of men acknowledge that they continually betray themselves, their aspirations, convictions, and values.

Living means choosing, but the choices are too often those which seem the fruit, not of conviction, but of convenience, pressure, and selfishness. As a result, we spend much time continually in rationalization and self-justification, as well as in that criticism of others which strangely brings in its train a perverted sense of self-worth. These things in turn produce the reflex of a more subtle guilt, and thus the vicious circle whirls unceasingly.

Even those moderns who jeer at "oughts" and guilt find themselves asserting that people ought not to be intolerant and judgmental. Man can no more dodge the reality of moral absolutes than he can lose his own shadow.

Guilt is imposed from without and wells up from within. The only way to avoid criticism is to die. Occasionally we meet young men and women who suddenly are transformed by the experience of human love. They become radiant, full of joy and

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hope, and it seems they could cross the world in new ten-league boots. What has happened? They have found temporary rest from guilt in the complete acceptance extended to them by another human being. For a short time guilt subsides, and such a person inhabits a paradise bubble. But the pricking of that bubble is as certain as the sunset which follows sunrise.

To know our disease is halfway toward finding the remedy and being cured. Literature, the mirror to life, focuses with fidelity on the characteristic human symptom of guilt. Take murderess Lady Macbeth for an example. Shakespeare in *Macbeth*, Act V, puts into her mouth these words:

"Out, damned spot! out, I say! One; two.  
Why, then, 'tis time to do't: Hell is murky!  
. . . Yet who would have thought the old man  
to have had so much blood in him? . . . Here's  
the smell of the blood still. All the perfumes  
of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.  
Oh, oh, oh!"

And her husband questions the physician as follows:

"Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased,  
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,  
Raze out the written troubles of the brain,  
And with some sweet oblivious antidote  
Cleanse the stuff'd bosom of that perilous stuff  
Which weighs upon the heart?"

The melancholy answer is that no remedy for guilt is known to man. But here Shakespeare erred.

Thus the real clue to life's mystery and sorrow demonstrates Edgar Allan Poe's contention. Not the microscopic search of DNA or the atomic realm yields what is sought. The telltale element is much more conspicuous than anything like that.

**Public Enemy Number One.** He who admits his own continual burden of guilt will recognize that Public Enemy Number One is none of the scapegoats selected by man. It is not the government, the weather, or a faulty educational system primarily which plagues us. Neither is it ignorance nor stupidity.

Rather it is that ancient disease which the Bible calls sin—that thing which "blights homes, breaks hearts, and digs graves, which insulted God, killed the prophets, robbed heaven, and made hell the high capital of the universe" (F. Linicome, *The Incomparable Christ*). The giants which stalk us are sin, sorrow, and death, and they must be felled in that order.

To be an ethical animal in a nonethical universe is agony to the mind and heart, and as Carlyle asserted, the ultimate question posed by life is, "Wilt thou be a hero or a coward?" The coward endeavors to flee from the pressures of oughts and inevitable guilt by pursuing such escapes as sex, alcohol, tranquilizers, the hard drugs, or the respectable Meccas of wealth, power, and possessions. But at best all of these are but a chloroform mask, a substitute for living.

**Importance of values.** Another common approach is one which is pseudointellectual and therefore fashionable and acceptable. One can deny the reality of right and wrong and thus attempt to give the quietus to guilt. But this can be done only at the price of destroying all values. Human love becomes a mere biological sensation, and all hope a deception. It becomes impossible to use the words *good*, *better*, *best*, as we no longer have a justifiable scheme of values. Life becomes nonsensical, and with the death of hope comes the hope for death.

Should one then assert, "Let us eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die"? That sham prescription has often been exposed. Its Achilles' heel is the fact that usually tomorrow finds us alive and with a dreadful hangover. We find that he who seeks "kicks," experiences repeatedly a "kickback." Omar Khayyam, in *Rubáiyát*, voiced the supposed cure of life's concerns:

"Ah, fill the cup! What . . . [profits] it to repeat  
How time is slipping underneath our feet.

Unborn Tomorrow and dead Yesterday,  
Why fret about them if Today be sweet!"

But Robert Browning, in *Rabbi Ben Ezra*, says:

"Thou, to whom fools propound,  
When the wine makes its round,

## Christ was made what He was not that we might be made what we are not.

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'Since life fleets, all is change; the Past gone, seize to-day!'

Fool! All that is, at all,

Lasts ever, past recall;

Earth changes, but thy soul and God stand sure."

**A cure for guilt.** A vital question, then, for all men is, "How can a man be reconciled to God?" Or, put another way: "Is there a cure for guilt's alienation and sin's compulsion?"

The good news for today is that the confession of the real problem can result in an immediate discovery of healing. Every needy person can be "surprised by joy." The burden of the New Testament is that man's Maker, aware of the human dilemma, has already intervened to solve it. The Scriptures declare to guilty men that He who is both Lawgiver and Judge has lived their life (except for sinning) and died their death in order that by way of exchange we might be credited with His life and righteousness. According to William Tyndale these truths constitute the "good, glad, and merry tidings, which make a man's heart sing, and his feet to dance for joy."

Says Holy Writ, "One has died for all; therefore all have died. . . . Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself. . . . For our sake he [God] made him [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:14-21).

If One died for all, then all died! We died at three o'clock, black Friday, AD 31. We were ruined ages before, without our personal participation, by the first Adam. At Calvary, again without our personal participation, we were redeemed by the second Adam. As Adam represented the race in Eden, so Christ, the second Adam, represented humanity at the cross. In Him all men have legally died and paid the price for their sins. Thus, "whosoever will, may come." Now, "all manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men." God is "faithful and just to forgive us our sins" because the claims of the righteous, eternal law have been met, and we have died in our Substitute and Representative, Christ. God will not ask us to pay the price a second time if we abide in Him, for He tells us, "ye are complete in

him," "accepted in the beloved," and "there is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus." Christ was made what He was not that we might be made what we are not.

Therefore, despite a million sermons to the contrary, the gospel is not good advice. It is Good News! Advice is about something I should do, but news concerns something already done, and done by someone else. The gospel is the Good News that in God's sight sin—*my* sin—has been made an end of and that everlasting righteousness has been brought in, for *me*. All that God requires of me for time and eternity has already been achieved by Himself in the person of His Son. That achievement is credited to anyone, however vile, who believes the news and accepts it.

Despite my sin and selfishness, there is no need for me to try and reconcile God. He is already reconciled, and He urges us, "Be ye reconciled." God is offering something, not demanding something. I need not be anxious about what God thinks of me, but only what God thinks of Christ, my substitute. I must not blaspheme His grace by thinking that I must be free from sin before trusting His power to save. I must come to Him, just as I am—sinful, helpless, dependent.

**The divine plan involves** our complete rescue from sin and guilt, from sorrow and death. Our acceptance of Calvary brings freedom from sin's guilt; our dependence upon the living, interceding Christ brings freedom from sin's power; and His return will bring freedom from sin's very presence. The work is His, though received by our simple trust.

Objectively, Christ is all; subjectively, faith is all.

For an illustration, consider the story of the adulteress as recorded in John 8. She is the cowering center of a jabbering, accusing crowd. How she longs for an enveloping earthquake or destructive lightning. But better than either to her is the healing presence of Christ. Note the instructive comments on the situation by Paul Tournier, in *Guilt and Grace*, page 111:

"This woman symbolizes all the despised people of the world, all those whom we see daily, crushed by judgments which weigh heavily upon them, by a thousand and one arbitrary or unjust prejudices, but also by fair judgments, based on the healthiest

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morality and the most authentic divine law. She symbolizes all psychological, social, and spiritual inferiority. And her accusers symbolize the whole of judging, condemnatory, contemptuous humanity.

"It is as if the presence of Christ brought about the strangest of inversions: He wipes out the guilt in the woman who was crushed by it, and arouses guilt in those who felt none."

The scene is the world in miniature with ourselves at the heart of it—ourselves and Him. The light that shows us our sins becomes the light that heals. Christ is that light. Confronted with Him we learn that sin is not merely the transgression of a law, but it is the rejection of God Himself. Salvation also is not an abstract idea. It, too, is a Person—that same Person.

Now we can see that the purpose of the universal phenomenon of guilt is not to condemn and to destroy but to save. "Neither do I condemn thee," says Christ; "go, and sin no more."

Let it be carefully noted from this story that the woman was not the only one with a problem. Christ, too, seemed in a dilemma. He claimed to be both the Friend of publicans and sinners and the Upholder and Ratifier of the divine law. How could these be reconciled? It would seem that in this situation He must choose one role or the other. It mirrors God's eternal problem before His universe. How could He maintain His law of justice and right and yet save the transgressors of that law?

**Note how Christ dealt with the situation of the adulteress.** With His finger He wrote in the dust. Only once in the New Testament do we read of Christ writing, and only once in the Old Testament do we read of writing by the finger of God. It is as if Christ said to the woman's accusers, "You talk of the law's requirements to Me. Don't you know, I wrote the original law!" But that same law required that the witnesses of evil assist in the carrying out of the death sentence for its violation (see Deuteronomy 17:7). This, of course, implied that the witnesses were themselves innocent of such transgressions. Christ therefore admonishes the cruel crowd, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her." And the record declares that "they which heard it, being convicted by their own conscience, went out one by one."

On what grounds could Christ forgive the woman? That law of the Ten Commandments which had been written by the finger of God resided in the Sanctuary under the mercy seat, which once a year was sprinkled with the blood of sacrifice. Above the mercy seat, in the glorious Shekinah, the One who was both Lawgiver and Redeemer could look with compassion at that broken law through the mercy seat because of the sprinkled blood. And that blood was a symbol of the sacrifice at Calvary. God can be both just and the justifier of the penitent sinner because He has exacted the penalty of the violated law—He has not only required the penalty but provided it.

We close where we began. The solution to your problem and mine is not obscure. We need not climb up to heaven or down to hell to find it. No great IQ is needed. The most well-known words in the world contain all we seek. Hear them again. But not only hear—receive!

"God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

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## For further thought

1. Into what condition has sin brought the entire creation? Why does God apparently delay in dealing with the sinfulness of mankind?
  2. What is God's attitude toward the individual sinner? Can a man free himself from the dominion of sin?
  3. What statement of Christ seems to lay the responsibility for the origin of sin upon Satan and his angels?
  4. What is it that awakens us to a sense of our sinful condition?
  5. What is the only way sinners may be justified, or made righteous? What blessed experience follows upon the acceptance of Christ as our righteousness?
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