

*W*hat is Christianity all about? Can it be explained clearly? What is this business about Calvary, this vague doctrine concerning a God-human who died **for** our sins? Whether believers or unbelievers, we have a right to understand this kernel and crux of Christian theory—then decide concerning its relevance.



The Kiss of Peace and Truth

by Desmond Ford

King David's misplaced mercy toward his rebel son brought chaos to the kingdom. God's just mercy at Calvary brings rebellious sinners eternal life and happiness.

An Ancient Illustration

Consider a king whose tragic plight three thousand years ago affords a microcosm of the greatest problem in the universe.

He shifts uneasily on his throne as he worries about his two lost sons. One murdered the other. The culprit is now in exile. The harrowed father frets over his duty to punish him who has been "the apple of his eye" (Dt 32:10 KJV). He is a king as well as a father. "Ay, there's the rub."¹

The king's appointed work is to maintain the gulf between right and wrong, to uphold justice and exact the penalty for every instance of violated law. Anarchy throughout the realm would be his fault if judgment were slacked and wrongdoers permitted to escape scot-free.

But now it is his boy who deserves sentence. Mercy and love contend with truth and justice.

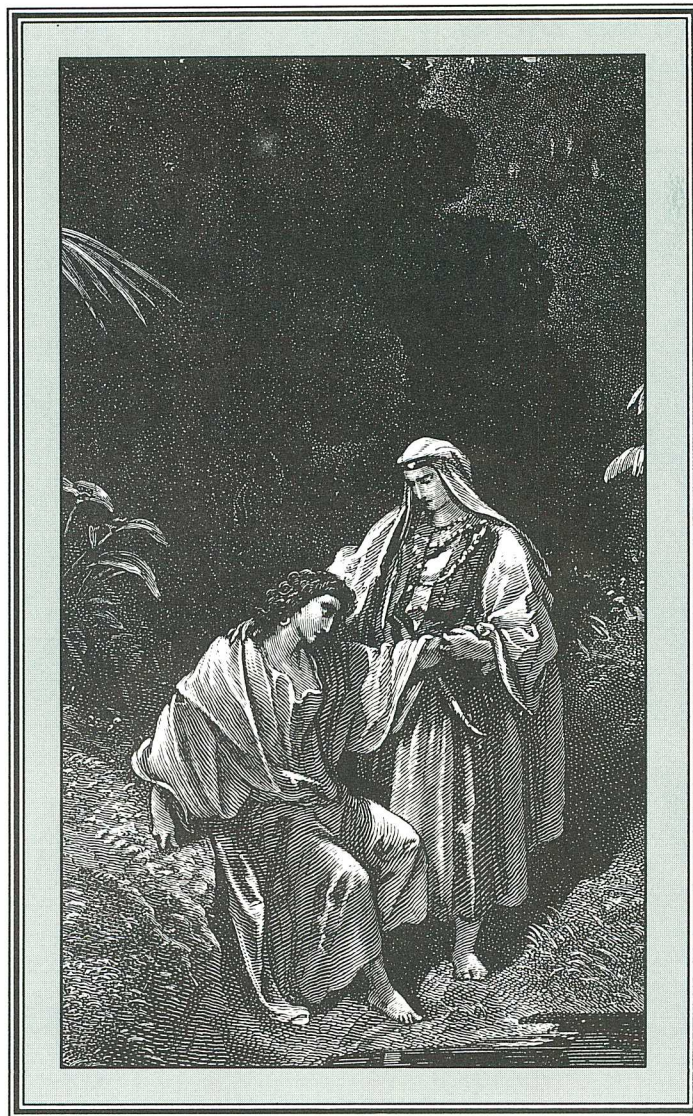
Through the window the king sees a stranger in the city. He is glad to divert his thoughts. He wonders who this woman, dressed in garments of mourning, might be. The question is soon resolved, for the stranger is determined to plead with the king for help (or so it seems).

The Widow Convinces the King

When the woman of Tekoa came to the king, she fell on her face to the ground and did obeisance, and said, "Help, O king!" The king asked her, "What is your trouble?" She answered, "Alas, I am a widow; my husband is dead. Your servant had two sons, and they fought with one another in the field; there was no one to part them, and one struck the other and killed him. Now the whole family has risen against your servant. They say, 'Give up the man who struck his brother, so that we may kill him for the life of his brother whom he murdered, even if we destroy the heir as well.'

Thus they would quench my one remaining ember ...

He [the king] said, "As the Lord lives, not one hair of your son shall fall to the ground" ... The woman said, "Why then have you planned such a thing against the people of God? For in giving this decision the king convicts himself, inasmuch as the king does not bring his banished home again. We must all die; we are



like water spilled on the ground, which cannot be gathered up. But God will not take away a life; he will devise plans so as not to keep an outcast banished forever from his presence" (2 Sam 14:4-13 NRSV).

The woman's persuasive speech was addressed, not to conscience, but to pity and affection. It aimed at giving effect, not to the convictions of duty, but to the

promptings of inclination. Glad of any excuse to make the decision he really wants, King David casts the die of royal decree. Word is given that Absalom, his son, may return from exile—unpunished.

The Scheming Prince

The years that follow are years of intrigue as the impenitent prince schemes for his father's throne. He considers no stratagem beneath him as he creates dissatisfaction with his father's rule throughout the realm. "A messenger came to David, saying, 'The hearts of the Israelites have gone after Absalom'" (2 Sam 15:13 NRSV). Rebellion was rife, and civil war imminent.

(You can read the complete story in 2 Samuel 14-18, but it is its conclusion which concerns us here.)

The decisive battle was fought in the forest of Ephraim. It seemed at the end of the day that each tree stood as a monument to a corpse, or a heap of corpses. "The slaughter there was great on that day, twenty thousand men" (2 Sam 18:7 NRSV).

Death of Prince Absalom

The Scripture tells us how David's son lost his life:

Absalom happened to meet the servants of David. Absalom was riding on his mule, and the mule went under the thick branches of a great oak. His head caught fast in the oak, and he was left hanging between heaven and earth, while the mule that was under him went on. ... [Joab] took three spears in his hand, and thrust them into the heart of Absalom, while he was still alive in the oak (2 Sam 18:9, 14 NRSV).

Killed by Misplaced Mercy

What killed Absalom? What was responsible for the blood of those twenty thousand patriots? The answer is: mercy slew them!

A mercy that was unjustified filled the kingdom with blood, bereavement,

and anguish. An irresponsible pardon brought multiplied sorrow and trouble. Had David punished his son, the rebellion could never have occurred. The king's failure to exact the penalty for his son's crime wrecked the kingdom.

And if God had met the problem of sin as did David, God would have wrecked the universe!

Now we can glimpse the significance of the cross, and the heart of the atonement.

Justice and Mercy

To every creature the Creator gave the gift of free will, in order that worship and obedience might ever proceed from loving, willing hearts. The abuse of freedom brought to God the same problem that David faced. How are justice and mercy to be reconciled? How can peace and truth kiss each other?

How can the Father of those who have become rebels be a true king, upholding right and punishing wrong? How can God forgive the sinner, and yet demonstrate that his law is immutable and that lasting peace and joy come only through perfect obedience?

The universe would have filled with anarchy had God decided, as did David, to forgive without exacting penalty. God's eternal law would have appeared to all created beings as something "optional." They would not have seen it as the warp and woof of all true government and lasting happiness.

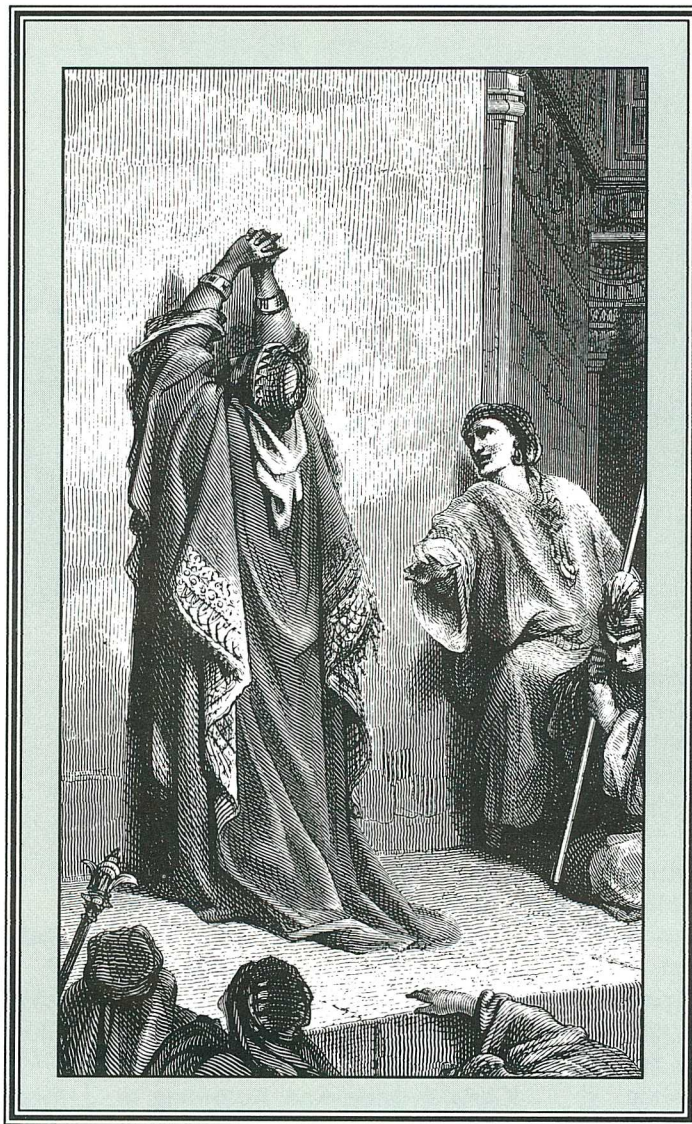
When the rebellion of sin transpired, two things were necessary to safeguard all creation: 1) The law must be vindicated by requiring punishment for its violation, and 2) the rebels must be transformed into law-loving citizens.

David's forgiveness of Absalom only confirmed Absalom in impenitence. He was a lawbreaker still. The King of the universe needed to forgive his erring children in a manner that would change their hearts and bring them into complete harmony with the divine will.

Thus, the cross!

Reconciled in Christ

The death of Christ was not the arbitrary placing upon an innocent third party the penalty belonging to another. No! It was the offended God personally accepting the guilt of sinners and paying their debt. "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor 5:19 NRSV). Thus, and thus only, could God "be just and the one who justifies" (Rom 3:26 NIV).



God honors the law by exacting the penalty; he transforms the sinner by the melting display of divine love. This way the lost may be saved, and yet the 'ninety and nine just persons' of the sinless universe not be endangered.

As we behold the cross, the primary glimpse of a dying man is replaced by our perception of a suffering God. Love and hatred, good and evil, are revealed,

by contrast, as the Creator endures what the creature deserves.

As we continue to gaze, it becomes apparent that we are all there on that cross! As Adam represented the race in Eden, so Christ—the second Adam (1 Cor 15:45)—represents humanity at the cross. "One has died for all; therefore all have died" (2 Cor 5:14 NRSV). In Christ, all people legally died and paid the price for their sins. As by the sin of Adam all were ruined, so by the righteous life and vicarious death of the second Adam all were redeemed potentially.

All Are Welcome

Now, whosoever will may come. Now all manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven. Now 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, Jesus.

God will not ask us to pay the price a second time if we abide in Christ. "Ye are complete in him" (Col 2:10 KJV), "accepted in the beloved" (Eph 1:6 KJV). "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:1 NRSV). Marvel at the wondrous means devised by God whereby we banished rebels might be welcomed anew into the heavenly courts!

If Calvary does not move us, God has no other resource. The cross is the logic and dynamic of Christianity. To refuse it is to do despite to one's own destiny. But glad-hearted acceptance begins life eternal.

"God will not take away a life; he will devise plans so as not to keep an outcast banished forever from his presence" (2 Sam 14:13 NRSV). ❖

Footnotes

1. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III, i, 65.

[Taken from *A Kaleidoscope of Diamonds*, Volume 1, pp. 99-103.]