

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Some trees of the Bible: The Tree of Salvation

Today, we conclude our series of talks on "Some trees of the Bible" by considering the subject "The Tree of Salvation", a title derived from 1 Peter 2:24 (English Standard Version): "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed". It was Rudyard Kipling who said that he had six friends who'd taught him everything that he knew. They were: Who? What? Where? When? How? and Why? So let's find out about the Gospel from this text, 1 Peter 2:24, by asking these same questions concerning the tree of salvation.

Who?

The answer to the most important of the questions: "Who was Peter writing about?" is found in 1 Peter 2:21: "Christ...suffered for you [Christian believers]". Yes, this Gospel talk is all about the Lord Jesus Christ. Romans 1:1-4 expresses it in this way: "The gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord". From scriptures such as John 1, Colossians 1 and Hebrews 1, we learn that the Son of God is the same Person who is the Creator and Maintainer of the universe, the Giver and Sustainer of all life upon earth. But the Gospel focuses on Him becoming man in order to be the Saviour of the world.

The grace of God was shown to mankind throughout the life of the Lord Jesus Christ: "God anointed [Him] with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him" (Acts 10:38). Throughout His entire life, Jesus sought the lost: "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32). And still the Lord Jesus is calling people today. Have you responded to His call and asked Him for salvation. The scriptures assure us that: "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10:13). Yes, He's the source of eternal salvation to all who will obey His voice to repent and believe.

*Oh, sweet is the story of Jesus,
The wonderful Saviour of men,
Who suffered and died for the sinner -
I'll tell it again and again!*

*He came from the mansions of glory;
His blood as a ransom He gave,
To purchase eternal redemption,
And oh, He is mighty to save!*

*His mercy flows on like a river,
His love is unmeasured and free;
His grace is for ever sufficient,
It reaches and purifies me.*

*Oh, wonderful, wonderful story,
The dearest that ever was told;
I'll repeat it in glory,
The wonderful story,
Where I shall His beauty behold.*

(CH Gabriel 1856-1932)

What?

We now enquire: "What is the tree of salvation?" Whilst preaching to the Gentiles in the house of Cornelius, Peter said: "We are witnesses of all that [the Lord Jesus Christ] did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree" (Acts 10:39). We know that Christ was crucified; therefore, the tree is the

Cross of Calvary, which we've called, "the tree of salvation" because, when He died there, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree." In fact, Paul states that the Gospel is primarily: "that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3-5).

Once, I was with a group of Christians who were conducting a service in an old peoples' home. When we sang the hymn, "The old rugged cross", an old man began to weep. Thinking about his tears afterwards, I concluded they were either: 'tears of rejoicing' in that he already knew the Saviour; or 'tears of repentance' as the truth about the tree of salvation dawned upon him there and then; or 'tears of remorse' because he'd neglected being saved all of his life, which was then ebbing away. As I quote this hymn, what kind of tears are yours?

*On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross,
The emblem of suffering and shame;
And I love that old cross where the dearest and best
For a world of lost sinners was slain.*

*Oh, that old rugged cross, so despised by the world,
Has a wondrous attraction for me;
For the dear Lamb of God left His glory above
To bear it to dark Calvary.*

*In the old rugged cross, stained with blood so divine,
A wondrous beauty I see;
For 'twas on that old cross Jesus suffered and died
To pardon and sanctify me.*

*To that old rugged cross I will ever be true,
Its shame and reproach gladly bear;
Then He'll call me some day to [His] home far away,
Where His glory forever I'll share.*

*So I'll cherish the old rugged cross
Till my trophies at last I lay down;
I will cling to the old rugged cross
And exchange it some day for a crown.*

(George Bennard 1873-1958) ©1941 The Rodeheaver Co. administered by Copycare

Where?

In answering the question, "Where did the Lord Jesus Christ obtain eternal salvation?" we must return to our text, 1 Peter 2:24, which informs us it was: "on the tree". The tree of salvation is the cross, upon which Jesus died. That cross was erected outside the walls of Jerusalem, the place where He himself predicted He would die. You'll remember that the Transfiguration of Christ (Luke 9:28-36) occurred just after Peter confessed Jesus as the Christ of God (Luke 9:18-20). At the time of that confession, the Lord told His disciples: "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised" (Luke 9:22). In Luke 9:30-31, Moses and Elias appeared along with Him in glory on the Mount of Transfiguration. They spoke together about His decease which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. When He came down from the mountain and the crowds were amazed at the mighty power of God by which He healed the epileptic boy (Luke 9:37-42), He said to His disciples: "Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men" (Luke 9:44).

Shortly afterwards, Luke records: "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51). From that point Luke traces His journey to Jerusalem. As they approached the end of this journey and the group neared Jericho, the Lord said to the twelve disciples: "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon" (Luke 18:31-32). Poignantly, Luke records the end of the journey: "And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and ... malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left" (Luke 23:33, King James Version).

*On Calvary's tree He died for me,
That I His love might know.
To set me free He died for me -
That's why I love Him so.*

(AW Edsor) © Kingsway Publications Ltd/Kingsway's Thankyou Music

Nowadays, people like to ask the question: "Where were you when such and such an event took place?" For example, I know exactly where I was when the drama of 9/11 unfolded. I was in the business lounge at Newcastle airport and the hostess suddenly dropped a tray in shock as she noticed the first news' pictures being beamed onto the TV. As to the "Where?" of the tree of salvation, the old Negro-spiritual asks: "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" - the song's way of stating that you must go to the tree of salvation to obtain salvation. It's available nowhere else!

When?

A question we've already answered. "When did He die upon the tree of salvation?" He died at the end of His ministry as the final act of His service towards sinners. "The Son of Man came ... to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). This was the sole purpose of the Son of God becoming the Son of Man: "For it was fitting that [God], for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering ... Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, [Jesus Christ] himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery" (Hebrews 2:10, 14-16).

The "when" was according to God's plan. In other words, the opportune moment, the exact time on His timetable: "When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Galatians 4:4-5). Many Bible teachers have commented upon this particular time in the world's history. They've pointed out that the efficient communication channels of the Roman Empire allowed for the rapid spread of the Gospel message. But it was also the correct time as far as our salvation was concerned. In Romans 1-3, Paul outlines the spiritual deterioration of mankind throughout history. After the Fall, the dispensations of conscience and human government were followed by the dispensations of promise and Law. Each period ended in judgment, especially that of Law, which ended at the tree of salvation. Furthermore, Romans 5 provides three answers to the "When?" question:

- Romans 5:6 says it was "while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly." Weak means we were powerless, without any strength to help ourselves. Ungodly means we had no desire either to live for God or to ask for His help.
- Romans 5:8 declares it was when we were without any relationship with a holy God: "God shows his love for us in that while we were sinners Christ died for us."
- But Romans 5:10 goes further still, and worst of all, states it was when we were enemies of God, in active rebellion against Him, that "we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son".

Now we discover for the first time in Romans the real secret of the Gospel: not only is God holy, He's also love. He offers His own love to us in our lost condition, holding it out, having proved it in the death of His only Son. The New International Version renders Romans 5:8: "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

How?

Although listeners to *Premier Radio* will be familiar with the narratives of the Gospels, it's worthwhile reiterating the main points of how Christ's death upon the tree actually happened. I have already referred to the fact that He deliberately went up to Jerusalem with this intention (see Luke 18:31-32). There was growing hostility and opposition from the Jewish authorities, especially the religious rulers. They'd decided that enough was enough and that He had to be done away with, but not during the Passover festival because they feared public reaction (see Mark 14:1-2). However, Judas Iscariot turned traitor and provided them with the ideal opportunity to arrest Jesus at night in the Garden of Gethsemane (see John 18:1-3). Even though it was the Passover Supper evening, they couldn't resist. John tells us that when the gang approached Jesus to arrest Him, He asked who they were seeking. Helplessly, they fell backwards to the ground when He verified, "I AM He" (John 18:8). However, He allowed them to take Him and the authorities quickly arranged His mockery-of-a-trial overnight. They came to their unjust verdict and early the next morning took Him in haste to Pilate to get official approval for Him to be crucified (Mark 15:1). Pilate sought to avoid reaching a decision (Mark 16:1-15), even involving Herod (Luke 23:7), but to no avail and eventually he consented to the will of the Jews to have Jesus crucified. During this time the Lord was both physically and verbally abused. Then He was forced to carry His cross to the place of the skull (John 19:17), where He was crucified like a criminal, on the centre cross between two actual criminals, by the Roman soldiers (Matthew 27:38). He was a spectacle of public abuse for three hours from 9 am. At 12 noon, there was unnatural darkness which ensued for the next 3 hours

(Matthew 27:45), during which He suffered as the sin-bearer at the hands of a holy God: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree". At 3 pm, He cried out in His abandonment: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). Then, the work of salvation being completed, He triumphantly said: "It is finished" (John 19:30) and He bowed His head in death. He gave up His spirit to God for Luke 23:46 records: "Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" And having said this he breathed his last." Finally, when the Roman soldiers discovered He was really dead, one thrust his spear into Jesus' side and His blood flowed out (John 19:34). But the good news is that three days later He rose again from the dead. After Pentecost (Acts 2:1-39), Peter and the other apostles reminded the Jewish rulers of this outcome of these events: "The God of our fathers raised Jesus [from the dead], whom you killed by hanging him on a tree" (Acts 5:30).

Why?

"Why?" Is our final question - Why did it have to happen this way? Why is the tree of salvation so necessary? The answer is found in Paul's preaching in the synagogue at Antioch: "And when [the Jews at Jerusalem] had carried out all that was written of him, [his disciples] took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb" (Acts 13:29). "All that was written of him" means the way God had prescribed Messiah's death in the Old Testament. Peter provided a fuller answer when he preached on the day of Pentecost: "Jesus [was] delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you [Jews] crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men" (Acts 2:23). The predictions of the sufferings of Christ and His subsequent glorification to God's right hand were the eternal counsels of God! Jesus Christ was the Lamb of God "foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you" (1 Peter 1:20). 1 Peter 3:18 explains the expression, "for the sake of you": "Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit." It was the only way possible that God could rescue us from our sins and make us suitable for His presence. His Son had to die for us upon the tree of salvation, as Horatio Bonar explains in one of his hymns:

*The love of God is righteous love,
Inscribed upon Golgotha's tree;
Love that exacts the sinner's debt,
Yet in exacting, sets him free.*

*Love that condemns the sinner's sin,
Yet, in condemning, pardon seals;
That saves from righteous wrath, and yet,
In saving, righteousness reveals.*

*I need the love, I need the blood;
I need the grace, the cross, the grave;
I need the resurrection power,
A soul like mine to purge and save.*

*This is the love that stills my fears,
That soothes each conscious pang within,
That pacifies my troubled heart,
And frees me from the power of sin.*

*Oh, wondrous love! For sinners given,
To save from hell, and bring to heaven:
Oh! Tell the virtues all abroad
Of love divine - the love of God.*

Finally, the particular question "Why a tree?" is answered by Paul in Galatians 3:13: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us - for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree'" Our sin and sins deserve only judgment from God. When hanging on the tree of salvation, Christ "took the blame, bore the wrath" so that "we stand forgiven at the cross." When Joseph was in prison, he correctly interpreted the baker's and the butler's dreams. About the baker, he said Pharaoh would "lift up your head - from you! - and hang you on a tree" (Genesis 40:19). Consistently throughout Scripture, hanging meant suffering capital punishment. But when Christ was crucified, the worst form of capital punishment ever inflicted upon people was in vogue. This extreme symbolism with respect to Christ's death is so meaningful it shows us how abhorrent sin is to God: "For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

A final question

At the end of every Gospel talk, there's always a final question to be asked, but by the hearers, not the preacher. It's a question you'll be asking of me at this precise moment: "so what?" for which I'll give two very different answers:

1. If you are already trusting in Christ for salvation, then my reply is that you should surrender your life entirely to the One who loved you so much: "For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died; and that He died for all, that they who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again" (2 Corinthians 5:14-15, New King James Version).
2. If you have never trusted the Lord Jesus Christ as your own personal Saviour, my reply is that you face eternal damnation if you continue to disobey the Gospel message. Christ was able to bear the wrath of God for your sins, but that's of no avail to you if you don't repent and believe! But salvation isn't just an insurance guaranteeing heaven. It's for your present life also. When Moses first took the children of Israel out of Egypt and into the wilderness (Exodus 15:22-27), they were thirsty but the waters of Marah were bitter (Exodus 15:23). The LORD told Moses to throw a tree into the waters, which became sweet (Exodus 15:25). So, also, life becomes both sweet and satisfying for the believer who understands the tree of salvation, as the hymn says:

*Redemption! Oh, wonderful story -
Glad message for you and for me:
That Jesus has purchased our pardon,
And paid all the debt on the tree.*

*From death unto life He has brought us,
And made us by grace sons of God:
A fountain is opened for sinners:
Oh, wash and cleansed in [His] blood!*

*No longer shall sin have dominion,
Though present to tempt and annoy;
For Christ, in His blessed redemption,
The power of sin shall destroy.*

*Accept now God's offer of mercy:
To Jesus, oh, hasten today;
For He will receive him that cometh,
And never will turn him away.*

*Believe it, O sinner, believe it:
Receive the glad message – 'tis true:
Trust now in the crucified Saviour,
Salvation He offers to you.*

Samuel M Sayford (1846-1921)

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