

# ***THE MYSTERY OF GOD***

## **Part 13-A**

For a number of weeks now, I have been preaching on “The Mystery of God” and by now you know that’s another way of referring to what in the New Testament is called, the gospel. I really hope you are not getting weary of hearing about this matter! That’s a worry I have whenever I get into a series of lessons. I worry that people will become bored and stop paying close attention. I hope that hasn’t happened with you, not with the subject anyway, because I don’t know of any subject that ought to be of greater interest to us. Sometimes people want lessons that are “practical,” they want something they can apply right now to their lives. And I know that’s important and I know there are a lot of practical matters that we need help with, things like marriage, family, dealing with trouble, temptations, depression.

Nevertheless, I really feel like the gospel is something we all need to understand better. We need to let it fill our minds and hearts so that it is something we think about every day, that constantly amazes us, and inspires us, and affects who we are and how we live every hour of every day. I don’t really know a more necessary and practical subject, so if you won’t hold it against me, we will look at another lesson on this subject. Okay?

In looking at this so-called “mystery of God,” we have learned how that it reached its critical moment on a small prominence outside of Jerusalem, at a place which at the time was called, “Golgotha.” Both Matthew and Mark, as well as John tell us that was the Aramaic name for it, but it meant, “the place of a skull.” Just why or how it got that name is not known for certain. Some commentators suggest that perhaps the hillside resembled a human skull. Possibly that is true, but I think it more likely it was called that because it was the place where many Roman executions were held and the area was probably littered with the bones of unburied criminals.

I would like for us to spend some time thinking about what happened that day in that place they called, Golgotha.

We know that it is because of Christ that we are saved. It was by Christ and Christ alone that we are saved. Even so, it was Christ on the cross that made our salvation possible.

- It wasn’t Jesus as a little baby laying in a manger that made that happen.
- It wasn’t Jesus’s sermon on the mount that made that happen.
- It wasn’t Jesus walking on water that made that happen.
- It wasn’t Jesus’s parable of the lost sheep or the prodigal son that made that happen.
- It wasn’t Jesus instituting the Lord’s Supper that made that happen.

It was His going to the cross and dying that made it possible for people to be forgiven of their sins and saved eternally. I know you know that! I know you understand that, but there is some understanding and teaching about the cross that is confusing. I know in the past I have not understood Christ’s death very clearly. I thought I understood it, but I think I was wrong on some things. You might think, that’s a terrible thing to admit, and it is, but it would be even worse if I continued to believe and teach something that is not right. Try to keep in mind that I’m one of

those ignorant sinners Jesus came to save! I've messed up in a lot of ways in my life. I'm not proud of it, but it doesn't do any good to act like it is any other way. I hope I never quit learning, but if I keep on learning, that means I am going to have to continue to make whatever changes and adjustments are called for by what I've learned. We all should be learning and making whatever changes are necessary in both our thinking and in what we teach, and most importantly in the way we live our lives. If you are satisfied with what you already know, and if you are satisfied with what you already are, may God help you! You may already be dead.

In the past my understanding of what happened on Golgotha was similar to what might be called **the substitution theory**. That theory holds that Jesus took our place on the cross; that because of our sins, we were under the penalty of death, and He died in our place. He took our punishment upon Himself. The idea is that somehow, He took all of our sins upon Himself; in some way they were transferred to Him. According to that theory, Christ then took the punishment those sins deserved. And, according to that theory, since Jesus did that, if we place our faith and trust in Him, then His righteousness is somehow imputed to us. He took our sins; we take His righteousness. On the one hand, all of that seems to make perfect sense. On the other hand, it makes no sense at all, and that's what I want you to think about with me this morning.

Let me begin by assuring you that I am not saying Jesus didn't bear our sins. He did. The Bible is unmistakably clear about that.

- **1 Peter 2:24** *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.*
- **Isaiah 53:6** *All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned--every one--to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

So He bore our sins, the Bible says that! God laid upon Him the iniquity of us all, the Bible says that! That is what is at the heart of what the scriptures call, the atonement, but what do we mean by the word *atonement*? I hope we are asking that! That is the kind of question that we need to be asking with regard to a number of Biblical words. How can we reason and speak intelligently if we do not know the meaning of the words we are using? This is one of those words—atonement—that too often we only have a vague idea of its meaning. We might use it but perhaps we really don't know what it means at all.

The word atonement, according to Easton's Dictionary has the idea of "*at-one-ment*." In other words, atonement means "*that which brings about reconciliation*." Paul discusses that matter for us in **Romans 5, beginning in verse 8 [thru verse 11]**:

*but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. 9) Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. 10) For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. 11) More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.*

That's what Christ came to do, and that's what He did! In **John 1:29**, the apostle records for us something said by John the Baptist. He says the immerser was out in the wilderness, preaching and urging people to prepare for the coming of the Lord, their so-called Messiah. Multitudes of people were hearing about John and they were coming and listening to him. One day John looks up, and he sees something that he had been forewarned about. One of his own relatives had come to him to be baptized. Maybe he had reason to think that his kinsman was more righteous than himself, but for some reason, John says to Jesus, *"I need to be baptized by you."* But Jesus insisted and as he was being baptized, John saw the Spirit of the Lord descending in the form of a dove, and he heard a voice speaking from heaven which said, *"This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased."* Sometime later, probably after Jesus returned from the forty-day wilderness experience, Jesus came again to where John was, and John exclaims to all who were there, *"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."*

*"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."* That idea, the *"the lamb that takes away the sin of the world,"* is one that had its roots deep in the pages of the Old Testament.

For example, think about the Passover lamb. This was the lamb which the Jews were commanded to sacrifice and eat on the night before the Lord passed through the land of Egypt. That was the tenth and final plague that finally brought release of the Israelites from Egyptian captivity. Thereafter, the Jews were commanded to keep that day—the 14<sup>th</sup> day of Nisan, which was the first month of their year. So each year the Israelites would sacrifice a lamb and engage in a Passover meal commemorating Israel's deliverance from captivity. Interestingly, Jesus was killed the day before Passover.

In addition to that, the Law of Moses also commanded that two lambs were to be offered every day in the tabernacle, one in the morning and one in the evening. This was done as a sin offering. The Jews believed that the morning offering served to atone for the sins committed during the night and the evening offering served to atone for the sins committed during the day.

In addition to those offerings, there was also the sin-offering which was offered on the Day of Atonement. It was not a lamb, however, but two goats. It is important to know that in the case of this offering, both goats represented a single sin-offering. The Day of Atonement was an annual observance on the 10<sup>th</sup> day of the seventh month. The two goats were to be taken, and lots cast to decide which one would be sacrificed and which one would be used as the scapegoat, to be sent away into the wilderness. You can read about all of this in the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter of Leviticus. After offering of a bull for himself, the high priest was to cast lots over the two goats. The one for whom the lot fell was to be sacrificed and its blood sprinkled upon the altar and the Ark of the Covenant. The priest would then come out of the tabernacle and lay both of his hands upon the head of the other goat. He was to then pray, confessing the sins of all the people, after which the goat was to be led away into the wilderness. The first goat served as the sacrifice for the sins, and the second goat symbolized the sins being removed, carried away and destroyed. When Christ died, He not only offered up His body as a sacrifice, but He also carried our sins away.

It was against this rich background of imagery that John pictures Christ as that lamb. But an even more direct connection is what Isaiah had to say about him. I wish we could take the time to read that chapter again. I know I did that not too long ago, but every time I deal with these things, that passage begs to be read and pondered yet again. All I can do is encourage you to read it again for yourself—**Isaiah 53**. In **verses 5-7**, Isaiah wrote:

*But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned--every one--to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. 7) He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.*

I am not saying Jesus didn't bear our sins. There's no doubt about that. The Scriptures make it clear that He bore our sins; that He offered His body as an offering for sin. What the scriptures do not teach, or even infer, is that somehow our sins were transferred to Jesus, or that He was punished for our sins, or that somehow, His righteousness is imputed to us

Now, you might be thinking to yourself, "Doesn't the Bible say that Jesus became sin for us?" And the answer is yes, it says those words, but those words do not mean what I use to say they meant, or what many people today are saying they mean. I know that now for obvious reasons, but first let's look at a couple of passages on which many base this idea. Look at 2 Corinthians 5:21, and Galatians 3:13.

**2 Corinthians 5:21** *For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

**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"--*

At first glance, this first passage seems to be fairly clear in declaring that *CHRIST WAS MADE SIN!* Paul said, "*For our sake he*—meaning God—*made him*—meaning Christ—*to be sin who knew no sin.*" Almost all the versions I have translate that verse in about the same way, that Christ was made to be sin. What I'm saying is that Jesus was not literally made to be sin, but rather than He was made to become a sin-offering. I believe when you think it through, you will see why that makes much more sense.

In the first place, notice that 2 Corinthians 5:21 does not say that Christ was made to be a sinner, but that He was made to be sin. Think about that. What kind of offering would that have been? If He became sin, would that even be an acceptable offering to God? *Absolutely not! Every animal offered up to God under the Old Covenant had to be what? Without blemish!* The substitution theory, the sin-transference theory would have Jesus become the most massive manifestation of sin of all history! How then, was God to be pleased by that, or find that acceptable? Listen instead to what the Hebrew writer said happened! If you don't believe me, at least believe him! Look at

**Hebrews 9:11-14:**

*But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) 12) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. 13) For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, 14) how much more will the blood of Christ, **who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God**, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.*

Christ did not become sin. The scriptures tell us that He offered himself WITHOUT BLEMISH TO GOD! What Christ did was to offer Himself for sin.

Someone might say, "But doesn't the Bible say that God had to forsake Christ while He was on the cross?" No, the Bible doesn't say that. In Matthew's gospel and also in Mark's, we find these words: "And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Many people, including myself in the past have taken those words to infer that God had to turn His back on Christ, and the reason why is because Christ had taken upon Himself all of the sins of the world? But that isn't what happened at all, but I am going to have to leave it there for now.

As I was preparing this lesson, I knew I wasn't going to have the time to adequately develop and complete my thoughts. I hate that, but in an effort to be respectful of our time, I need to ask you to come back tonight so we can finish this together. I really want you to understand that God didn't turn His back on His Son. He didn't have to because Christ didn't become sin. The Hebrew writer said, "He was without sin!" Christ didn't sin, nor did God punish Him because our sins had been laid upon Him. A just God would never punish the innocent or the righteous, and no one was ever more innocent, or more righteous than Christ was when He went to the cross. I know this isn't milk but it is so important that you see and understand what Christ really did for you. So please plan on coming back tonight. The lesson announced in the bulletin for this evening, I will bring at another time, but please come back this evening to get a fuller understanding of what actually happened that day on Golgotha.

At this time, let me close by extending to you God's gracious offer. It should be obvious that whatever Christ did, it made your forgiveness possible, made it possible for you to live the rest of your life with the hope of eternal life. Do you have that hope? If you don't have that hope, or if you have reason to believe there is something keeping you from that hope right now, I want to implore you to make a decision that you are not going to put it off any longer, but that you will accept God's offer right now. If you wish to come, please come while we stand and sing!

