

LAST JUDGMENT

Hebrews 9:24-28

The Cost of Sin

“Not all the blood of beasts on Israel’s altars slain could give the guilty conscience peace or wash the sin away. But Christ, the heav’nly Lamb, takes all our sins away, a sacrifice of nobler name and richer blood than they” (CW 128, vs. 1,2).

Zechariah woke up. He was to minister in the Temple. Groggy, he put on his vestments. He walked into the temple courts. Thick smoke wafted in the air, fueled by the first fruits of the faithful and the flesh of bulls and goats. That smell had always struck him: the mixture of something so sweet with the stench of death, of burning sinews and entrails. Dried blood paved the floor at places. In other places, puddles of red mud gathered. Bleating and bleeding, bleeding and bleating—this chorus was always striking to him, repeated as it was.

A family came forward for a sin offering. Their young child walked the lamb into the court, with tears in his eyes. His father took the lamb and went with the priest toward the altar. The father laid his hands upon the lamb, putting his entire weight upon it, as was mandated, transferring his sins upon this innocent beast. The lamb gasped for air and trembled with confusion and fear.

“I entreat, O Jehovah: I have sinned, I have done perversely, I have rebelled, I have committed (and here he named several personal sins); but I return in repentance, and let this be for me my atonement” (Edersheim).

Zechariah thought of the crying child again. Clearly, he had loved this magnificent little lamb. Perhaps he had fed it himself. Perhaps he had spoken to it of his thoughts and dreams when no one was around. Zechariah picked up the lamb and waved it before for all to see. He took a knife and slit its throat. Blood sprayed on his face as he held a bowl beneath the now screaming lamb’s neck. He could not wipe the blood away, for he was required to catch as much of the blood as possible. It was not to be wasted. He much preferred using the bowl to catch the blood, instead of his hands, which he was at times required to use.

When the lamb had bled out, Zechariah took the bowl of blood and held it up for all to see. He then dipped his finger into the blood and placed some on each side of the altar. He sprinkled it on the corners. He poured out the rest of the blood at its base. It splashed his feet. As Zechariah set down the bowl, he stopped to look at his bloody hands. It seemed like oceans of blood had bathed those hands over the years. How many beasts had died by those hands for sins intentional and unintentional, sins of thought, word, and deed, sins known and unknown, he wondered. He was reminded of his own sin, of his own blood.

Zechariah then flayed the sacrificial lamb. He removed the innards and washed the legs. He salted the meat and arranged it on the fire. The flesh started to smoke, as the aroma of death ascended to heaven. The fire consumed the sinner by consuming the substitute, bringing both judgment and redemption.

Zechariah watched as the father went back to his waiting child. They embraced tearfully. The boy asked why all this had happened. “That is the cost of our sin,” the father lovingly replied.

Christ set his eyes, clouded by blood and tears, upon the altar, the craggy top of Golgotha, the place of the skull. Children wept as they saw His bedraggled appearance. A few had heard Him speak before. A few had received His tender blessing. Perhaps they had spoken to Him of their thoughts and dreams as children do when a kind adult lends them an ear.

Here He was, High Priest, now vested in rags, fervent prayers rising as incense before the Father even as the peculiar stench of death wafted through the air on this road of crosses and crucifieds. The weight of the cross crushed down on Him with all its weight, with, it seemed, the weight of all the world. He gasped for air, with a mixture of confusion and fear.

He reached the top. He was lifted up. The cross waved for all to see as the soldiers set it in place. Blood flowed from hands and feet, back, head, and tattered knees. With the Priest's hands nailed and tied, there was no one to catch it. It rolled down the rocky head of Golgotha. Pools of red mud gathered as His blood mingled with dirt stained with the dried blood of now long-dead criminals. *"My God, My God, why..."* the Son tearfully asked His Father, but no reply was needed. He already knew the answer: "The cost of sin." "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit," the Victim who was at the same time the Priest prayed.

The veil in the Temple tore in two; the foundations were shaken with an earthquake. Darkness, like that before a tornado, but thicker, covered the Temple court. Zechariah's bloody hands trembled with trepidation. "Something's happened outside the city gates," a winded priest ran in, exclaiming. "Outside the city gates," echoed in Zechariah's ear and called to mind the Day of Atonement, when the High Priest symbolically placed Israel's sins on a goat, the scapegoat, and sent it outside the city gates, representing the sending away of Israel's sins by an innocent substitute who would bear them. What was all this, he wondered. It was the cost of sin, so often demonstrated at his hands, now paid by the hands of another.

Outside the city gates, the soldiers looked up at Christ, the Scapegoat, the Innocent Substitute, the High Priest. They wanted to find shelter from the looming storm. In a panic, a soldier was commanded to make sure the criminals were dead. As the other criminals' legs were broken, the soldier looked up at Christ. Something in Him would not let Him break this Lamb's bones. He pierced His side instead. Blood and water sprayed upon His face as it blew in the gathering wind. The soldier looked at His face and hands: bloody. How many crucifixions hadn't he seen? How much blood hadn't bathed his hands before? But this was different. *"Surely He was the Son of God,"* the Centurion said.

And, sacrificed once for all, the blood of the Son of God still flows, caught in a thousand chalices. "The cost of sin," it still shouts, "the cost of sin." When we want to set new scales for sin, "The cost of sin," His blood cries. When we want to know why a sin is a sin before we will avoid or leave it, as if God's command and wisdom were not enough, "The cost of sin," His blood cries. When we want to update God's will or clean up His standards a bit for our own convenience, "The cost of sin," His blood cries. When we want to explain away our transgressions or blame another for our failings, "The cost of sin," His blood cries.

You need not understand the rationale behind God's will. You need not like His every command. You need not obtain an accounting from God every time His law seems inconvenient. You need only hear His blood cry, "The cost of sin," a cost greater than you can pay.

Lay your hands upon this sacred Head now wounded. Cast all your sins on Him who has been sent outside the gates. He is your Substitute—His blood for your sins. He is your High Priest, standing before His Father with bloody hands that cry, "The cost of sin...now paid. The cost of sin now paid." Amen.

"If you think of sin but lightly nor suppose the evil great, here you see its nature rightly, here its guilt may estimate. Mark the sacrifice appointed; see who bears the awful load—'tis the Word, the Lord's Anointed, Son of Man and Son of God. Here we have a sure firm foundation, here the refuge of the lost; Christ the rock of our salvation, His the name of which we boast. Lamb of God, for sinners wounded, sacrifice to cancel guilt—none shall ever be confounded who on Him their hope have built" (CW 127, vs. 3,4).