

## “I Will Have Mercy, and Not Sacrifice”

The stated mission of Messiah, as reflected in the meaning of his name, is that “**he shall save his people from their sins**” (Mat.1:21). As the Apostle expresses it elsewhere: “this is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that **Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners**” (1 Tim. 1:15). Herein we see the love of Yahweh; not that we loved Him, but that He loved us first, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins (1 Jno 4:10). Truly it is written that: “when we were without strength, in due time Christ died **for the ungodly**” (Rom. 5:6).

A little reflection upon the above passages reveals a fundamental truth which it is so easy to overlook. Messiah came, and died, not for the righteous, but “for **the ungodly**”. As the Apostle continues: “for scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love towards us, in that, **whilst we were yet sinners**, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:7-8). This principle is truly humbling for the servants of Messiah. Salvation is not brought about by personal worth in the sense of a righteousness obtained by obeying laws (Tit. 3:5), but is a gift by Grace. Men who have earned death as the wages paid by Sin, can yet hope for “the gift of God”, which is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Master” (Rom. 6:23). It is only through the Father’s Grace, and a sinner’s repentance that he can become a saint, and be redeemed from his trespasses.

In our New Testament reading for the day, Matthew chapter 9, we find that the Pharisees who “had a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge”, and who sought to establish their own righteousness rather than to submit themselves unto the righteousness of God (Rom. 10:2-3) overlooked this crucial aspect of Messiah’s work. They assumed that those who sought after the righteousness that came by obedience to the Mosaic Law were the ones whom Messiah would favour – ignorant of the fact that no man could keep that law in its entirety. As it is written:

“If there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the Law. But the scripture hath concluded all under Sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe” (Gal. 3:21,22).

No man can obtain life through the righteousness of the Law, for the Law itself was a “ministry of condemnation” (2 Cor. 3:9), designed to inculcate an awareness of sin on the part of those who lived under it. The Pharisees however, went about to establish their own righteousness, and were ignorant of that fact. They beheld how “many publicans and sinners came and sat down” with Jesus and his disciple and said: “Why eateth your Master with publicans and sinners?” (Mat. 9:10). They saw the “publicans and sinners” as belonging to a class of men to be avoided and despised, and just could not perceive how the Master could have any purpose with them. But Messiah, as was his usual practice, exercised the sword of the Spirit to cut down their high pretensions:

“When Jesus heard that, he said unto them: They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick. But go ye and learn what that meaneth: I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Mat. 9:12-13).

Here is the principle being established in terms which could be no plainer: Messiah came to save those who laboured under the infirmities of sin. As the Good Physician, he was the only one able to save, and that fact was testified in his healings of folk’s afflictions and illnesses, as the removal of the effects of sinful mortality. The Pharisees did not recognise that they were in a wretched state of poverty, serving sin as manifested in their own desires, and so placing themselves outside of the scope of Messiah’s ministry. Only those who recognised their diseased state could come to the Master for succour.

This association between sin, and physical infirmities is presented very clearly in Messiah’s healing of the man sick of the palsy. When men brought the man to him, he “seeing their faith said unto the sick of the palsy; Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee. And, behold, certain of the scribes said within themselves, This man blasphemeth. And Jesus knowing their thoughts said, Wherefore think you evil in your hearts? For whether is easier, to say, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say Arise and walk? But that ye may know that the Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (then said he to the sick of the palsy,) Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thine house” (Mat. 9:2-6).

In these words, we find a parallelism between two expressions: “thy sins be forgiven thee” and “arise and walk”. The implication is that the infirmities of the flesh came as a consequence of sin, and that with sins being forgiven would come a physical healing. We know this to be so as a general principle, for the sentence passed upon Adam condemned him to a laborious and suffering existence (Gen. 3:17-19), as the Apostle commented: “the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope ... for we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now” (Rom. 8:20-22). Groaning and suffering in pain, the poor in spirit nevertheless look forward in hope for redemption and healing. Whether or not their infirmities occur as a specific punishment for a particular sin (like, say, Uzziah being smitten with leprosy in his forehead), the fact remains that this world of suffering, groaning and pain is brought about by the entrance and establishment of Sin into the world, and death by Sin.

In speaking of the Sick requiring the services of a Physician, the Master is echoing the link between sin and disease found in the Old Testament. The Psalmist David, in speaking of his need for forgiveness due to his sin with Bath-Sheba, wrote: “I said Yahweh, be merciful unto me: *heal my soul: for I have sinned against thee*” (Psa. 41:4). Again, in speaking of the future restoration of Israel to their Maker, it is written: “Yahweh doth build up Jerusalem: he gathereth together the outcasts of Israel. *He healeth the broken in heart, and bindeth up their wounds*” (Psa. 147:2-3). Israel is depicted in the Prophets, as being spiritually sick, and in need of healing as a consequence of their sin:

“Why should ye be stricken any more? Ye will revolt more and more: *the whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the*

*foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it; but wounds, and bruises, and putrifying sores: they have not been closed, neither bound up, nether mollified with ointment”* (Isa. 1:5-6).

Notice the connection here with the citation from Psalm 147 above: though Israel be filled with wounds and sores, yet Yahweh shall heal them, and “bind up their wounds”. This future healing is again spoken of by Jeremiah: “I will restore health unto thee, and I will heal thee of thy wounds, saith Yahweh” because as a leper, “they called thee an Outcast, saying, This is Zion, whom no man seeketh after” (Jer. 30:17). Rather than being a curse and an execration, the Jerusalem of the Age to Come shall be the City of the Great King, and a praise in all the earth. Through the work of her Messiah, redemption and deliverance shall be afforded her, for as the Great Physician there is no disease too great for him: he holds the keys to the Grave and shall determine who shall depart from their repose in the dust to share his Glory, and who shall descend there to inherit shame and age-lasting contempt. Rising up as the Sun of Righteousness, there shall be healing in his beams (Mal. 4:2), as the misery of those who formerly dwelt in the shadow of death shall be turned to tears of joy and gladness, whilst every work of darkness will be dispelled.

Returning to the account of Matthew chapter 9, Messiah told the Pharisees: “go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Mat. 9:13). The words he uses here come from the prophecy of Hosea chapter 6, which again has a context to do with healing:

“Come, and let us return unto Yahweh: for he hath torn, and **he will heal us: he hath smitten, and he will bind us up** ... O Ephraim, what shall I do unto thee? For your goodness is as a morning cloud and as the early dew it goeth away ... **I desired mercy and not sacrifice;** and the knowledge of *Elohim* than burnt offerings ...” (Hos. 6:1-6).

The reference here shows that the “wounds” spoken of by Isaiah, in addition to a state of disease also came as chastisement for sin. Yahweh has smitten the people for their wickedness, but in the coming Age of Glory, He shall heal them. His desire is for the people to show mercy, even as He is merciful to them, rather than to go through the ritual of offering animals up in an attempt to technically obtain redemption through a mechanical process as.

The principle forms a theme running throughout all of Scripture. Right back in Israel’s early history, when they were redeemed from the darkness of Egyptian bondage by the slaying of the Firstborn, the people had received no command regarding the offering of sacrifices. What was required instead was obedience to the Laws that they had already received. This we know, for Yahweh later spake through His Prophet Jeremiah:

**“I spake not** unto your fathers, nor commanded them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, **concerning burnt offerings or sacrifices:** but this thing commanded I them, saying, **Obey my voice** and I will be your *Elohim* and ye shall be my people: and walk ye in all the

ways that I have commended you, that it may be well with you” (Jer. 7:22-23)

By this time, Israel had conditioned themselves to assume that with the offering up of sacrifice, their worship would be acceptable, and their sins forgiven. But though they went through what we might call the “mechanics” of the Law, their hearts were far from it’s spirit. They honoured Yahweh with their lips, but their hearts were far from Him (Mrk. 7:6; cp Isa. 29:13). Though sacrifices were later commanded under the Mosaic Law, they were merely shadows of the Grace that would come to it’s fullness in the sacrifice of Yahweh’s only Son.

There are a number of illustrations in Scripture, where these principles are brought out. Consider, for instance, the character of Saul. He was given a commandment to utterly destroy the people and animals pertaining to Amalek:

“Thus saith Yahweh of Hosts, I remember that which Amalek did to Israel, how he laid wait for him in the way, when he came up from Egypt. Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass” (1 Sam. 15:2-3).

There are principles here, which are most instructive for us in our warfare against Sin. Just as Israel had to contend against the Flesh-Nations and overthrow them in order to obtain their inheritance, even so we must contend against the Flesh-Mind, and every stronghold of sin that might be found there (2 Cor. 10:4-5). And just as the Flesh-Nations had to be utterly eradicated, even so we must seek to cut down, and utterly eradicate fleshly purposes and intentions that may arise in our minds. There is a parable therefore, being enacted when Israel warred against their enemies, the principles of which must find a manifestation of our warring the warfare of faith.

But like so many before and after him, Saul could not bring himself to utterly destroy the flesh.

“But Saul and the people spared Agag, and the best of the sheep, and of the oxen, and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them: but everything that was vile and refuse that they destroyed utterly” (1 Sam. 15:9).

Here is human nature clearly being manifest. Saul was willing to destroy everything that he considered to be “vile and refuse,” but kept the rest. And how much this is like some today! It is easy to cut out of our lives those things which give us no gain or enjoyment – but what about the other things, which we find hard to let go? The commandment is to utterly extirpate every vestige of Amalek, but like Saul, we may find this to be a real test. Whatever it may be, if there is a stronghold of sin in our minds or lives, we must declare war against it, and seek to overcome it. Saul assumed that because he intended to offer some of that which he kept back as a sacrifice to Yahweh, that he would be justified. But that would be nothing more than offering something to Yahweh, that Yahweh had condemned to destruction – what folly! The foolishness of such a stand is readily perceived when we consider the example of Saul – but what of ourselves, and our own warfare against Amalek? Do we do likewise?

The words of condemnation came to Saul from Samuel:

“Hath Yahweh as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of Yahweh? Behold, ***to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.*** For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because thou hast rejected the word of Yahweh, he hath also rejected thee from being king” (1 Sam. 15:22-23).

To assume that our sins become justified because we engage in the outward show of religion is one of the gravest mistakes a man can make. That is the way of Saul – a way of certain rejection before the Throne of Grace.

Possibly alluding back to these events, is Psalm 50 where the same principles are taught. Here, Yahweh states that he will not rebuke for a failure to offer animals as sacrifices:

“Hear O my people, and I will speak; O Israel, and I will testify against thee: I am Elohim, even thy Elohim. ***I will not reprove thee for thy sacrifices or thy burnt offerings to have been continually before me. I will take no bullock out of thy house, nor he goats out of thy folds.*** For every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills ... If I were hungry, I would not tell thee: for the world is mine, and the fullness thereof. Will I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats? Offer unto Elohim thanksgiving; and pay thy vows unto the Most High” (Psa. 50:8-14)

In these words, the same point is made, that obedience is to be preferred than a mindless and heartless offering up of dead animals. But though this is the case, the same Psalm speaks of the Return of Messiah to the earth, and the gathering of his brethren to himself:

“He shall call to the heavens from above, and to the earth, that he may judge his people. Gather my saints together unto me; ***those that have made a covenant with my by sacrifice***” (Psa. 50:4-5; compare 1 Thes. 4:16-17).

Here, the “saints” are defined as being “those that have made a covenant with me ***by sacrifice***”. The “sacrifice” referred to here cannot be the offering up of dead animals, given the context that we have just examined. Rather, it relates to the way in which it is the “reasonable service” for believers to offer ***themselves*** as a Living Sacrifice. As the Apostle exhorts: “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies ***a living sacrifice***, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service (Rom. 12:1). Here is the True Sacrifice in which Yahweh is well pleased; not the substitutionary presentation of an animal, but the offering up of a life given in service to the Father. To obey is better than animal offerings, and Mercy is to be more desired than Sacrifice.

When we come to behold our Master's sacrifice, we see all of these principles coming together. In his offering, we see mercy extended in sacrifice. Not an indifferent presentation of a sheep, or a goat, but an entire lifetime in service, being emptied as a drink offering (Phil. 2:8). He suffered under the infirmities of mortal weakness, to a much greater extent than is required of most of us. Yet, as we are told, and we believe that: "he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and *with his stripes we are healed*" (Isa. 53:5).

Though we each be tainted with the disease of sin, groaning and travailing as we eagerly await the redemption of our body (Rom. 8:23), we look forward in hope. Though we suffer under the apparent vanity of a mortal existence, we trust in our Master and Elder Brother, that through his work we will be healed. With the bruising of his heel came the crushing of the Carnal Mind, and the victory of a life-long battle against Sin. Messiah was not a man who indulged with the pleasures of this life: he was not like Saul who sought to keep the best for himself. Rather, he was "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief." Giving his All, he has laid down an example for us to go and do likewise (1 Pet. 3:21-25). Being girded with a spiritual armoury, and wielding the Spirit's sword, we also must earnestly engage in the same warfare as he was, that at the end of days, we might be granted the victory – his victory over the antitypical Amalek, living and reigning with our Master in the splendour of His Glory.

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