

WOULD YOU DIE FOR THE GUILTY?

Today's Text: Isaiah Chap 53; Romans 5: 6-8

Extracts:

1. Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. ...He was wounded for our transgressions. He was bruised for our iniquities. The chastisement of our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. ... And the Lord has laid upon Him the iniquity of us all [Is. 53: 4,5,6b]
2. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us [Rom. 5: 7-8]

Charles Dickens' historical novel, *A Tale of Two Cities* [1859], is set in the period of the French Revolution (1775-1793).¹ The central characters are two men who bore very close resemblance, both of whom fell in love with the same girl, Lucie Manette. The first man, Charles Darnay came from the cruel aristocratic Evrémonde family of France. The other, Sydney Carton, a drunk, good-for-nothing lawyer, was English. Following Carton's successful defence of Darnay on treason charges in London, Lucie and Darnay moved to France where they got married. Darnay denounced the cruelty of his aristocratic lineage, especially when it became known that the Evrémondes had actually imprisoned Lucie's medical doctor father that she had presumed dead in the Bastille. In the new circumstance, Darnay planned to return to England. That night in 1789, the common people revolted, murdered Marquis Evrémonde (the then head of that family) and triggered the French Revolution. Darnay was arrested, tried and sentenced to death, even though he had been found innocent. While awaiting his death by the guillotine, his look-alike, Carton, stole into the jailhouse, exchanged clothes with him, thus enabling Darnay and his wife, Lucie, to escape to London. The following day, Carton was executed in place of Darnay.

Carton died for Darnay because he loved Lucie. Moreover, his life was of no use to himself since he was always drunk and unfulfilled in life. Finally, he died to save an innocent one. Would he have done so if he were one of the leading lawyers of his day, with wealth and influence? Would he have done it for the guilty? Would you? But Jesus did so for us! That is the subject of today's lesson.

¹ Ideas for this page are based on "A Tale of Two Cities-Charles Dickens," www.sparknotes.com/lit/twocities

1. Yes, there are numerous cases of sacrificial deaths!

Most of us make one form of sacrifice for others at the expense of our own convenience. For example, parents may borrow to pay school fees for their children even when they cannot feed themselves. Family or friends may donate blood or organs to save the lives of dying loved ones. However, giving up one's life for somebody else is of a higher order. That is sacrificial death.

People may die for others under the following circumstances:

a) *For country*

Some people love their country so much that they are ready to die for it. That is what is called patriotism. They enroll in the armed forces and do daring things during wars at the risk of losing their lives. For example, the Japanese *Kamikaze* during the Second World War were known to crash their planes into enemy targets without worrying about what happened to themselves. That was because they believed they were doing it for their country.

However, the reasons behind such actions may be more than altruistic (selfless). For example, the proportion of minorities in the American armed forces is higher than their proportion in the general population. That suggests that the economic and social opportunities offered there are the bigger draws than love of country! During the era of compulsory draft, some Americans were known to escape abroad to avoid it. We also remember the celebrated case of Mohammed Ali, then the World Heavyweight Champion, who as a conscientious objector refused to serve in Vietnam. Therefore, people do not take up arms *because* they want to die for their country. Death is incidental in that case. After all, where were the *Kamikaze* when Japan surrendered to the Allied Forces to end the Second World War?

b) *For a cause*

Some people are prepared to lose their lives for a cause. For example, the numerous knights who died in the Holy Land during the Crusades did so for their Christian religion, to reclaim Palestine from Moslem control. Today's suicide bombers among Moslems are losing their lives in the cause of their religious and political beliefs. Steve Biko, a young and articulate high school student, was killed in 1976 by the apartheid regime in South Africa, an action that radicalized the anti-apartheid movement. In the Bible, Queen Esther was prepared to die so as to save her Jewish people who had been threatened with total annihilation [**Esth. 4: 16**]. Rather than succumb to idol worship, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were prepared to die in a fiery fire [**Dan. 3: 16-18**].

Again, if we critically examine such circumstances, there were more than selfless motives. For example, most of the Christian crusaders went for adventure that had no bearing on spreading the gospel of Christ. Moslem suicide bombers have been promised a heaven that contains what they lack on earth. Steve Biko was killed by accident, not by his choice. Esther and Shadrach and his colleagues did not die. God rescued them.

c) *For love of friend or family*

In the words of Jesus, “Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends” [**Jn 15: 13**]. In the name of love, for friend or family, most of us are ready to lay down our lives. For example, in the movie, *Titanic* (1997), which tells the story of the unthinkable shipwreck of then (1920’s) biggest vessel in history, a young lover sacrificed his life by freezing to death in the cold Atlantic so as to enable his loved one to stay afloat and live before help came. Again, one can assume that if the young man had the choice, he would prefer to live, not die.

In all the cases treated above, people are ready to die for others if they consider it *just* to do so. In other words, the cause may be right or the person may be innocent. But, what if the person was clearly guilty and deserved to die? Would they still be willing to die for him or her, no matter how much they loved them? Paul answered that question as follows [**Rom. 5: 7-8**]:

Scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

2. **Jesus died for the guilty!**

You will recall that, after Adam and Eve had disobeyed God by eating the forbidden fruit and compounded it by shifting the blame instead of repenting, God “drove out the man; and He placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life” [**Gen. 3: 24**]. From that time on, Adam and his descendants became *homeless* and condemned to separation from the presence of God. Since God knows the end from the beginning, He knew that no human being could reopen His gates to the homeless Adam and his descendants “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” [**Rom. 3: 23**]. So, before expelling them from the Garden of Eden, God promised Adam and his wife a Messiah that would come as the Seed of the woman [**Gen. 3: 15**]. In today’s text from the book of Isaiah, the coming Messiah’s sacrificial death for *all of fallen humankind* is prophesied as the forerunner of His return as King and Judge.

How does Christ's death differ from those that we had discussed above? Let us get the answers from Isaiah's prophecy:

a) *He knew we were guilty!*

Isaiah wrote, "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*" [Is. 53: 6]. We had no defence because we were guilty beyond any doubts. We deserved to die for our sins. Christ knew that and yet He was still prepared to die for us. Why? It is because He knew that we were *helpless* and *hopeless*.

A helpless person cannot help himself. A hopeless person has lost hope even if she can help herself. When we were expelled from the Garden of Eden, we became homeless, hopeless and helpless. From that time even until now, those who have tried to approach God the human way (e.g., by way of the Tower of Babel, religion, science, or philosophy) have only found that all is vanity and frustration of spirit [Eccl. 1: 2, 17]. It is a vicious circle and only somebody from above can break us out of it.

The Messiah would not come to reopen our case but to suffer and die for our guilt. That is why when "He was oppressed and He was afflicted," and when "He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearer is silent," He did not open His mouth [Is. 53: 7]. You can check this out from the trial of Jesus. The only questions He answered were those that incriminated Him, not those that would set Him free. For example, when the chief priests and elders accused Him before Pilate, "He answered nothing." So, Pilate turned to Him and asked, "Do You not hear how many things they testify against You?" but Jesus "answered him not a word, so that the governor marveled greatly." But earlier, when Pilate had asked Him if He was the King of the Jews, He answered, "It is as you say" [Matt. 27: 11-14]. By admitting to being a king, He became an enemy of Rome and a good candidate for crucifixion, His mode of death as prophesied in the Old Testament [Ps. 22: 16]!

b) *He came out of God's love for us and of His own volition!*

Of all of God's creations, only the human being was made in His image and likeness [Gen. 1: 26]. That may in part explain the fact that "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son" to rescue us from death, judgment and condemnation [Jn 3: 16-17].

To appreciate the depth of this love, let us compare it with that of the Prodigal Son's father. *As long as he remained in his wayward state, the Prodigal Son's father did not look for him!* It was only when he came to himself, repented and found his way home that his father ran to him and

embraced him. In our own case, we could *never* find our way home *without help*. Out of His love, God took the initiative to reconcile us with Himself. That is superlative love.

But did He force Jesus to do it? Not at all! In the words of Jesus Himself [**Jn 10: 17-18**]:

My Father loves Me because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again

He who knew no sin became sin for our sake so that we could obtain righteousness in God through Him [**2 Cor. 5: 21**]. He emptied Himself of His divinity to take the form of a servant [**Phil. 2: 6-7**]. In that state, He was “despised and rejected by men; a Man of sorrows and acquaintance with grief” [**Is. 53: 3**]. In death, “they made His grave with the wicked” even though “He had done no violence, nor was any deceit in His mouth” [**v. 9**]. That makes Christ’s sacrificial death for us much more altruistic in that He rescued us out of a pure motive, out of love!

3. Therefore, you have to believe our report!

Isaiah opened the chapter under consideration with two powerful questions, “Who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” [**Is. 53: 1**]. Through prophet Isaiah, God revealed that for bearing our iniquities, and making intercession for the transgressors, the Messiah will have divided to Him “a portion with the great” and “with the strong” [**vv. 11, 12**].

We know that Emmanuel (‘God with us’) has come in flesh as Jesus the Christ. We know that He “was wounded for our transgressions” and “bruised for our iniquities” and “by His stripes we *are* healed” [**v. 5**]. We know that for bearing that humiliation, God “has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is *above every name*, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that *every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father*” [**Phil. 2: 8-11**]. But have you believed that report?

You have believed the report if you:

a) *Accept Jesus as your Lord and Saviour*

In the world, we honour the memory of our heroes. That is why you will find a Martin Luther King Boulevard, a John Kennedy Airport or a Nelson Mandela Way. But have you ever seen *Jesus Christ Lane* anywhere? Well, He does not need it! To demonstrate that you have accepted Him, all you need to do is to believe on His name and accept Him as your Lord and

Saviour. If you do, you will become a son of God [**Jn 1: 12**] and receive eternal life, failing which you are already condemned [**Jn 3: 17**].

b) *Live for Him*

Jesus “died for *all*, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again” [**2 Cor. 5: 15**]. Your lifestyle is the best demonstration of whether you have in deed accepted Christ as your Lord and Saviour. Therefore, *practise* Christ!

c) *Die for Him*

Are you sharing the benefits of your faith with the less privileged as Christ has done for you? Have you climbed down from your pride and self-importance to stain your hands with the labour in the Lord’s vineyard? Are you ready to uphold the way of God when you face persecution? Is your conduct user-friendly or God-fearing? Remember, he who loses his life for Christ’s sake will find it [**Matt. 10: 30**].

4. Conclusion

In the movie version of the trial of Jesus, we come to the point where Pilate asked the people to choose whom to set free between Christ and Barabbas. Barabbas had been put in prison for sedition and murder [**Lk 23: 19**]. The people preferred him to Jesus and he was set free. When he was released, he looked at Jesus with scorn, not with appreciation for being the instrument of his own freedom. In deed, there is nowhere in the Bible that it was ever mentioned that he gave his life to Christ. Rather, he might have used his freedom to do more harm.

You were once rebellious and criminally minded. You were once a cheat and a robber. You were once morally bankrupt. Now, the blood of Jesus shed for you on Calvary has set you free. But what have you done with your new- found freedom?

Only you can answer that!