

MEDITATIONS  
ON  
THE CROSS

# MEDITATIONS ON THE CROSS

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Bishop, Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

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# CONTENTS

* Chapter One	
The Transformed Holy Cross .....	9
* Chapter Two	
Contemplations on the Historical Significance Of the Cross .....	17
* Chapter Three	
A Reflection of Love .....	23
* Chapter Four	
Continuing to Keep the Feast .....	31
* Chapter Five	
The Passover Lamb .....	37
* Chapter Six	
Sour Wine and Gall Was it a Merciful Gesture or Mockery .....	41
* Chapter Seven	
Meditations on the Cross .....	51
* Chapter Eight	
The Cross Revealed in the Old Testament Offerings .....	65

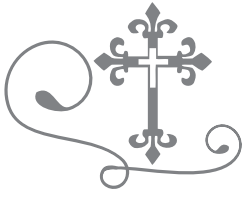




## **His Holiness Pope Shenouda III**

117<sup>th</sup> Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch  
of the See of St. Mark



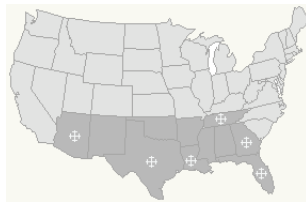


## ABOUT THE DIOCESE

*H*is Holiness Pope Shenouda III is the 116 Successor of St. Mark the Evangelist. His Holiness' era is marked by a remarkable growth in the number of Coptic churches abroad. To address the needs of these churches, His Holiness felt the urgency to establish dioceses abroad. Thus the first Coptic Orthodox Diocese to be established in the United States is the Diocese of the Southern United States in 1993. H.H. Pope Shenouda III appointed His Grace Bishop Youssef to oversee this Diocese.

The Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States is composed of the following states:

- \* Alabama
- \* Arkansas
- \* Georgia
- \* Mississippi
- \* Oklahoma
- \* Texas



- \* Arizona
- \* Florida
- \* Louisiana
- \* New Mexico
- \* Tennessee

There are currently 33 priests serving the 27 churches, and 26 Coptic communities located in the Diocese.

**[www.suscopts.org](http://www.suscopts.org)**







## Chapter One

# THE TRANSFORMED HOLY CROSS

*C*rucifixion was an ancient form of capital punishment. It was degrading and humiliating, and it caused agonizing pain. Ultimately the CROSS symbolized absolute failure and death. Due to its barbaric nature, crucifixion was reserved for the lowliest of criminals: the slaves' death or the murderers' punishment. Today, many still look upon the CROSS with profound horror as a cruel way to inflict punishment or bring about death.

It probably took our Lord Jesus Christ's followers years to accept the symbol of Him on the HOLY CROSS as a symbol of their faith. Now, accepted as a symbol of faith by all Orthodox Christians, the HOLY CROSS has come to mean limitless love, triumph of good over evil, and hope for eternal life. From the past to present day, the HOLY CROSS steadfastly remains the cornerstone of our Orthodox faith.

How important is the HOLY CROSS?

Made of wood, not glittering gold, nor shining silver, the HOLY CROSS represents the Savior's greatest and most

wonderful blessing. This blessing is threefold. First, through the HOLY CROSS we can attain the ultimate of treasures, the gift of our salvation. Secondly, the HOLY CROSS allows us to realize the true glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. A third significant fact about the HOLY CROSS is that it is a strong motivator for service as it makes us keenly aware of the Lord's service and sacrifice. Indeed, this was a transformed HOLY CROSS. St Paul tells us, *"For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified"* (1 Corinthians 2:2).

Ever mindful of these three points, let's examine the magnificent gift of salvation in terms of the suffering thief crucified on the cross beside our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The thief on the right side of the Lord Jesus Christ's HOLY CROSS did not perform outstanding good works during his lifetime nor did he face adversity and strife for his salvation. How then, did the thief on the Lord's right side receive salvation? Was there something other than his faith that we need to consider regarding the crucified thief receiving the gift of salvation?

The thief believed in the Lord Jesus under the most difficult and dire circumstances. He was nailed on a cross beside the Lord watching people hit Him, mock Him, spit upon Him, and ridicule Him. At the time the Lord Jesus Christ had three nails and a spear driven into His Holy body, people despised and disdained Him. The pain of the Lord Christ's crucifixion was amusement to the crowds on Golgotha.

The thief must have fought many doubts and had great conflict within him to believe on the Lord seconds before his own painful death. With astounding phenomena occurring all around-the veil of the temple was rent, the sun was darkened, and the rocks rent-most did not believe. While the chief priests, priests, elders, scribes, and Pharisees did not believe; this thief near death, drawing his last breath, believed! Most of the people continued to be offended at witnessing the events of the HOLY CROSS.

St. Mark tells us in his Holy Gospel, *“All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night for it is written: I will strike the shepherd. And the sheep will be scattered”* (Mark 14:27). Only the three Marys and the beloved St John stood near the Holy wood of the Lord Jesus Christ’s HOLY CROSS offering consolation and support during the crucifixion.

The faith of this thief was inspirational. The thief not only believed but also confessed his faith publicly. He confessed his sins. His last thoughts were of the eternal salvation not salvation from the death of the flesh. The thief also with his dying breath defended the Lord. The Lord and Savior with a crown of thorns, nails hanging his flesh, having been scourged and slapped, and finally bleeding from His right side had not one person blessed by His miracles to defend him, not one of His apostles or followers to glorify His name. But the thief on the cross beside Him defended Him to the death saying, *“But this man has done nothing wrong.”* Without a doubt, he

deserved to hear the Lord Jesus Christ say, *“Today you will be with Me in Paradise.”* (Luke 23: 41 & 43)

Truly the Lord’s HOLY CROSS not only brought salvation to the repentant thief but also through the dying voice of the thief brought even more glory to His name. This thief perhaps has brought more glory to the name of the Lord Christ than anyone else recorded in Biblical history. Also through the thief’s solemn awareness of our Lord’s sacrifice, he leaves us motivated to do good works in His Holy name. The thief crucified near the Lord’s transformed HOLY CROSS leaves us contemplating his own transformation.

What happened to our beloved HOLY CROSS? Has history recorded the HOLY CROSS as a lost and forgotten treasure? On the seventeenth day of the blessed month of Thout, Orthodox Christians celebrate the Feast Day of the Appearance of the Honorable Cross. St Helena, a devout Christian queen and mother of Emperor Constantine, is credited with the discovery of the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Can you imagine that a once spiritless piece of lumber sent a Queen in search of its blessing? This only endears to our hearts even more, the significance of the HOLY CROSS. The story of her search and discovery of the Honorable Cross is one of enduring perseverance.

When she came to Jerusalem, she inquired of the Jews in that town as to the whereabouts of the HOLY CROSS. They

would not disclose to her the information she requested but instead told of an aged Jew named Judas who might assist her. At her persistence, he told her of a pile of dirt and rubbish that the HOLY CROSS could be found beneath. How did this pile of dirt and rubbish come to cover our sacred HOLY CROSS? The Jewish leaders in those days following the crucifixion, when they saw all the signs and wonders made manifest from the HOLY CROSS, wished to do away with the HOLY CROSS. They commanded all of Judea and Jerusalem to cast the sweepings and dirt from their houses over the HOLY CROSS in which our Messiah carried to Golgotha after He was condemned to death. Tradition tells us the dirt continued to be placed upon the HOLY CROSS for more than two hundred years. How frightened the Jewish leaders must have been of that wooden HOLY CROSS!

Queen Helena ordered the immediate removal of the Lord Jesus Christ's HOLY CROSS from the trash heap. She then built a church for it and consecrated the church. The actual appearance of the Cross was on the tenth of Baramhat but because this date is always during fasting, the early church fathers substituted the seventeenth of Tute, for the Feast of the Cross, which is the date of the church consecrated in honor of the appearance of the HOLY CROSS.

What profound meaning has come from a simple piece of wood! Our Master was not only willing to carry His HOLY CROSS but He loved us so much that He was willing to die on His HOLY CROSS for us. The HOLY CROSS, utilized to hold

the nails necessary to crucify our Lord Jesus, deserves much reverence. In dying Lord Jesus Christ gives us the example of living.

The Lord Jesus Christ told His disciples, *“If any one desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his Cross, and follow Me”* (Matthew 16:24). Self-denial is for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ. If we grasp the earthly, we will lose sight of the eternal. With the faith of the thief, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Live like the Lord Jesus Christ. Reverently, with the transformed HOLY CROSS before us, love the Lord Jesus Christ.

*St. Athanasius said:*

“Being by nature intangible, the Word yet said: “I gave My back to the stripes, and My cheeks to blows, and hid not My face from shame and spitting” (Isaiah 50 : 6). For what the human Body of the Word suffered, this the Word, dwelling in the body, ascribed to Himself, in order that we might be enabled to be partakers of the Godhead of the Word. And verily it is strange that He it was Who suffered and yet suffered not. Suffered, because His own Body suffered, and He was in it, which thus suffered; suffered not, because the Word, being by Nature God, is impassible. And while He, the incorporeal, was in the possible Body, the Body had in it the impassible Word, which was destroying

the infirmities inherent in the Body. But this He did, and so it was, in order that Himself taking what was ours and offering it as a sacrifice, He might do away with it, and conversely might invest us with what was His, and cause the Apostle to say: “This corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal put on immortality” (1 Corinthians 15: 53)”









## Chapter Two

# CONTEMPLATIONS ON THE HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CROSS

*C*rucifixion, as a method of punishment, was in use among the Egyptians in the Old Testament, “*Within three days Pharaoh will lift off your head from you and hang you on a tree and the birds will eat your flesh from you*” (Genesis 40:19).

The Holy Book of Esther reveals that the Carthaginians and Persians also utilized crucifixion to punish their criminals. “*So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the kings’ wrath subsided.*” (Esther 7:10).

It is commonly known that the Greeks and Romans used crucifixion from the earliest of times. That is why perhaps many scholars believe that the Jews learned the concept of crucifixion from the Romans.

In addition to its being documented in the Old Testament as a painful instrument of death the cross is also documented

in the New Testament and in the writings of Church Fathers.

In the New Testament times, in particular, crucifixion was purposefully meant to be a demeaning way in which to die. It was reserved for the vilest of criminal acts, as an emblem of a disparaging slave or servants' death, and a murderers' punishment. Degradation was an added dimension of the cruel infliction. The cross was to all a symbol of the profoundest horror.

There are many now who thought to be three different forms of crosses used for crucifixion during Biblical times. The first resembled the small letter "t", the second form the capital letter "T", and the third was in the form of an "X".

Most Biblical scholars believe that the cross, which the Lord Jesus Christ suffered upon, was a Latin cross in the form of the small letter "t". The Latin cross, "t", had an upright beam above the cross bar, on which a "title" could be placed. There was a projection from the central stem of the cross, which the body of the sufferer could rest upon. This was not to provide occasional relief from suffering but the purpose of the projection was to prevent the weight of the body from tearing the hands away.

Other scholars refer to the Lord Jesus Christ's Holy Cross as in the form of the capital letter, "T". No one alludes to His cross as being in the form of "X".

Barnabas (c.70-130) writes, *"The cross was to express grace by the letter "T"*.

Victims were flogged and then forced to walk to the site of their impending death dragging the beam of the cross in which they were to be hung on. No one could bear to carry the full weight of the heavy crosses prepared for the purpose of crucifixion. The one to be crucified was also stripped naked of all his clothes to further add to the humiliation. At the designated crucifixion site the victim was nailed through his wrists and feet to the wooden cross, which they had been forced to drag.

Tertullian (c.197) writes concerning the Lord Jesus Christ's crucifixion, *"And the Lord said to him, 'Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sign and cry over all the abominations that are done within it'"* (Ezekiel 9:4). Now the mystery of this sign in which the foundation of life was prepared for mankind, was in various ways predicted.

The Greek letter "TAU" is equivalent to the English capital letter "T" which is in the shape of the cross.

Death upon the cross was meant to be mercilessly slow and agonizing. Death by crucifixion usually occurred from suffocation after the crucified became too exhausted to pull himself up in order to breathe. Crucifixion could entail pain, dizziness, abdominal cramps, muscle cramps, thirst, starvation, fever, tetanus, tormenting crowds, and prey attracted to unattended wounds. It has been documented that

the consequences of crucifixion could potentially be body rot as a result of the sun and rain or to be devoured by the birds and surrounding countryside's beasts.

With the crown of thorns upon the Lord Jesus Christ's Holy head and a mocking crowd below Him anxious to witness His death,, the humiliation of the Lord Jesus Christ was completed on the Holy Cross.

Besides the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, the Apostles St. Peter, St. Andrew, St. James the Less, and St. Simon were also crucified.

On the Feast Day of the Discovery of the Holy Cross by Queen Helena, mother of Emperor Constantine the Great, underneath amassed accumulated rubble on Golgotha, let us reverently remember the circumstances of our Lord's death and His great and surpassing love for us all.

Let us all take a moment to lift up our eyes toward the Holy Cross in remembrance of St. Helena's finding of the True Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ:

*“Pilate answered, ‘What I have written, I have written’. Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took His garments and made four parts, to each soldier a Part, and also the tunic. Now the tunic was without seam, woven from the top in one piece. They said therefore among themselves, ‘Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it, whose it shall be’ that the scripture might be fulfilled which says:*

*“They divided My garments among them, And for My clothing they cast Lots”*

*Therefore the soldiers did these things. Now there stood by the cross of Jesus His mother and His mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.*

*When Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple whom He Loved standing by, He said to His mother “Woman, behold your son!” Then He said to the disciple “Behold your mother!” And from that hour that disciple took her to his own home. After this, Jesus, knowing that all things were now accomplished that the scripture might be fulfilled said “I thirst !”.*

*Now a vessel full of sour wine was sitting there; and they filled a sponge with sour wine, Put it on hyssop, and put it to His month. So when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said “It is finished” And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit” (John 19: 22 - 30).*

The cross, as the bearer of the humiliation of the Lord Jesus Christ, remains with us today still bearing the same message as it did the day of the Lord’s most Holy death, *“The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God”* (1 Corinthians 1:18).

*St. Cyril the Great said:*

*“When the weak aspects of his emptiness seem to you to be difficult to understand, wonder rather*

at the great love of the Son for us. For what you say to be improper, this He made voluntarily for your sake. He wept as man that He might stay your tear; He feared, economically committing to His flesh to suffer what belonged it, that He might make us of fairest courage; ... He is said to be weak in His humanity that He might end your weakness. He prolonged prayers and supplications in order that He might render the Father's ear open to your prayers."





## Chapter Three

### A REFLECTION OF LOVE

*“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”* (John 3:16).

Love is an act of giving, *“love does not seek its own”* (1 Corinthians 13:5). The Father gave His Only Begotten Son. The Son, the Lord Jesus Christ gave too. His most endearing acts of giving were while upon the Holy Cross. He gave forgiveness to His persecutors, gave Paradise to the thief on His right side, gave His blessed mother a spiritual son, gave St. John the blessing of accommodating His mother, and gave the Father the price of Divine Justice.

The Lord Jesus Christ first asked for forgiveness of His enemies. He even gave them an excuse, *“for they know not what they do”*. Although this did not impact the people who were mocking Him, it can be postulated that perhaps it did to the thief on the right who saw the Lord tormented and in great

pain. Perhaps the hard-hearted thief on the right observed and then felt the Lord Jesus Christ's love for His persecutors and was transformed. It could have been that the Lord's loving kindness overpowered the thief's fierce nature and he believed.

The thief on the right also demonstrated his great love for the Lord Jesus Christ. The very few hours this thief spent on the cross beside the Lord Jesus Christ were probably the most valuable in his earthly life. It can be surmised that the thief on the right experienced his happiest times while next to the Savior. He was free of personal sins, torment, and of an unscrupulous soul.

John (3:16) further summarize the New Testament Scriptures. The Holy Gospel of St. John clearly states that "*everyone*" (all people, each and every one of us) "*who believes*" (recognizes and accepts) "*in Him*" (In the Lord Jesus Christ, in the Incarnation and the Resurrection) "*may not perish*" (will not be separated from God, will not be lost, will have their names written in the Book of Life) "*but have eternal life*" (will be forever united with God).

An example of "*believing in Him*" before the Resurrection can be found with the centurion at the Holy Cross. St. Mark tells us that "*when the centurion who stood opposite Him, saw that He cried out like this and breathed His last he said, 'Truly this Man was the Son of God.'*" (Mark 15:39). Love and compassion



must have filled the centurion's heart. He witnessed the Lord breathed His last breath and voluntarily give up His life to death. He heard the Messiah's cry, not one of defeat but of separation between the soul and the body; the cry of One trampling down death by death.

The Resurrection brought forth many more instances of love. The Lord Jesus Christ appeared to Mary Magdalene first. Many have often questioned why. The Holy Scriptures tell of her being healed by the Great Physician of seven demons. No one can imagine the depth of her pain with seven demons abiding in her. When the Lord Jesus Christ healed her, she must have felt immeasurable love for Him. Maybe more than any other, she loved the Lord most. It has often been thought that those deemed incurable, having been blessed with a cure are indeed the most thankful.

The Lord Jesus Christ shows great love toward St. Peter following the Resurrection. St. Peter denied the Lord three times prior to His Crucifixion *"Now Peter sat outside in the courtyard. And a servant girl came to him saying "You also were with Jesus of Galilee". But he denied it before them all, saying "I do not know what you are saying and when he had gone out to the gateway, another girl saw him and said to those who were there "This fellow also was with Jesus of Nazareth". But again he denied with an oath "I do not know the Man!" And a little later those who stood by came up and*

said to Peter *“Surely you also are one of them, for your speech betrays you”*. Then he began to curse and swear, saying *“I do not know the Man!”* Immediately a rooster crowed. And Peter remembered the word of Jesus who had said to him *“Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times”* so he went out and wept bitterly” (Matthew 26:69 - 75). Following the Resurrection the Lord asks St. Peter three times to confess his love to the Him. Thus, the Lord’s love for St. Peter restored him to leadership in the early church. The Lord Jesus Christ told Simeon Peter to *“feed My lambs”* (John 21:15).

We are told of Holy Scripture where love brings about spiritual insight. The disciples were at the Sea of Tiberias and the Lord Jesus showed Himself unto the disciples. States, *“therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, ‘It is the Lord!’ Now when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment (for he had removed it) and plunged into the sea.”* (John 21:7) The beloved disciple was the first to perceive that the stranger on shore was the Lord.

Lastly, faith in the Lord Jesus Christ’s Resurrection was not implanted into the hearts of those who were closest to Him, witnessed His miracles, and listened to His teachings. If this was not true then why were the women returning to the tomb with prepared spices and fragrant oils? Even His own disciples doubted the Resurrection and did not believe. When the Lord came upon the disciples from Emmaus, they did not believe

either. When the Lord Jesus actually stood in the midst of His followers, they did not believe.

The Lord Jesus Christ embraced their weakness with love. He condescended to the weakness of the eleven and said to them, *“Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Behold My hands and My feet. That It is I Myself! Handle Me and see, For a spirit does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have”* (Luke 24:38-39). The Lord Jesus Christ loved the eleven and convinced them of whom He was and stayed with them until they became sure and believed. He did not leave them but stayed with them a period of forty days and spoke about the Kingdom of God.

The Lord Jesus Christ’s Resurrection was a reflection of true love. Resurrection restored faith to the hearts of many. The Lord did not face doubts with admonition but love. He condescended to the weakness of those who gave up everything to follow Him. They did not remember the deeds done by Him, which no one had carried out prior to Him. Through His love, the disciples were challenged to return to God and also to spread the love of the Lord to the world.

*“God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him”* (I John 4:16).

The Lord Jesus Christ came not to destroy the Old Testament commandments but to fulfill and amplify them. He

compressed all the regulations of the Law of Moses into a new commandment found in these verses. We are to love God with everything we are and have.

*“Then one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question testing Him. And saying ‘Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?’ Jesus said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment”*  
(Matthew 22:35 - 38).

*St. John Chrysostom said:*

“The Cross is for our sakes, being the work of unspeakable Love towards man, the sign of His great concern for us.

“For to this end Christ both died, and rose, and revived...” And so let us at least convince you that He is thoughtful for our salvation. ... He then that has shown so much anxiety about our becoming His, as to take the form of a servant, and to die, will He despise us after we have become so? This cannot be so, assuredly it cannot! Nor would He choose to waste so much pains, “For to this end (he says) he also died,” as if any one were to say: Such an one will not have the heart to despise his servant. For he minded his own purse. For indeed

we are not so much in love with money, as is He with our salvation. Wherefore it was not money, but His own Blood that He gave as bail for us. And for this cause He would not have the heart to give them up, for whom He had laid down so great a price.”







## Chapter Four

# CONTINUING TO KEEP THE FEAST

*“Therefore let us keep the Feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.”* (I Corinthians 5:8)

Keeping the Feast of Unleavened Bread following the Passover symbolized living the Christian life in dedication and service to God. How does this apply to us today? Living the Christian life in this context means allowing the Lord Jesus Christ to be Lord of every area of our life. We are expressly told in I Corinthians 5:8 to continue celebrating the holiness of life in dedication to God.

Holy dedication means avoiding such sins as malice and wickedness. Faith should express itself in obedience. Service should accompany our believing and thinking. Sincerity and truth are the nourishments on which the faithful believer will be sustained.

As the Lord Jesus Christ our Passover was sacrificed for us, we should continue to offer ourselves as living sacrifices unto Him. St. Paul in his letter to the Romans said, *“I beseech you*

*Therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service and do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (Romans 12: 1 - 2).*

Many Ante-Nicene Fathers wrote about the continual offering of spiritual sacrifices.

Athenagorus, a second century apologist and prior Greek philosopher (c.175) said,

“The noblest sacrifice to Him is for us to know who stretched out and vaulted the Heavens and who fixed the earth in its place Yet, indeed, it does behoove us to offer a bloodless sacrifice and “the service of our reason.”

Tertullian of Carthage, North Africa (c. 197) said,

“It is not earthly sacrifice, but by spiritual, that offering is made unto God. Therefore we read ‘Offer to God a sacrifice of praise, and render to the Highest your vows.’ Thus, accordingly, the spiritual “sacrifices of praise” are pointed to.”

Mark Minucius Felix, a Roman lawyer who converted to Christianity (c.200) said,

“He who cultivates innocence, supplicates God. He who cultivates justice, makes offerings to



God. He who abstains from fraudulent practices propitiates God. He who snatches man from danger, slaughters the most acceptable victim. These are our sacrifices; these are our rites of God's worship."

The Holy Book of I Peter 2:5 further illustrates that it is essential the symbolism of the feast be kept at all times in that believers derive their very life from the Lord Jesus Christ and the *"life-giving spirit:"* *"You also, as living stones are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."*

(1Peter 2: 5).

The Eucharist is an important specific type of spiritual sacrifice. The Eucharist is an ongoing continuance of the feast. The Didache tell us,

"But every Lord's Day, gather yourselves together, and break bread, and give thanksgiving after having confessed your transgressions, that your sacrifice may be pure. But let no one that is at variance with his fellow man come together with you, until they are reconciled, so that your sacrifice may not be profaned. For this is the thing that was spoken of by the Lord, "In every place and time offer to me a pure sacrifice; for I am a great King, and My name is wonderful among the nations."

*Irenaeus* (c. 180) a bishop of the Church at Lyons, states of the necessity of the spiritual sacrifice,

“Therefore sacrifices do not sanctify a man. For God does not stand in need of sacrifices. Instead, it is the conscience of the offerer that sanctifies the sacrifice when it is pure. This moves God to accept it as from a friend. It behooves us to make an oblation to God and in all things to be found grateful to God our Maker. We should do this in a pure mind, in faith without hypocrisy, in well-grounded hope, in fervent love, offering to Him the first-fruits of His own created things. And the Church alone offers this pure oblation to the Creator.”

Following the Holy Great Fast, the Holy Week, and the Glorious Resurrection we must continue to keep the feast. We must offer our lives as living sacrifices unto the Lord. We must hear and pay heed to the Holy Scriptures. We must open our heart to hear and apply the Biblical truths to our lives. Life for the Lord Jesus Christ should be like fertile soil. Keeping the feast does not mean, “*Will I be fruitful?*” but “*Just how fruitful can I become?*”

*St. Cyril the Great said:*

“Just as death was brought to naught in no other way than by the Death of the Saviour, so also with

regard to each of the sufferings of the flesh: for unless He had felt dread, human nature could not become free from dread; unless He had experienced grief, there could never have been any deliverance from grief; unless He had been troubled and alarmed, no escape from these feelings could have been found. And with regard to every one of the affections to which human nature is liable, you will find exactly the corresponding thing in Christ. The affections of His Flesh were aroused, not that they might have the upper hand as they do indeed in us, but in order that when aroused they might be thoroughly subdued by the power of the Word dwelling in the flesh, the nature of man thus undergoing a change for the better. For the Word of God made one with Himself human nature in its entirety, that so He might save the entire man. For that which has not been taken [by Him], has not been saved.”







## Chapter Five

### THE PASSOVER LAMB

*“Therefore Purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover was sacrificed for us.”* (I Corinthians 5:7)

Most Biblical references apply the term “Passover” to the Paschal meal and the Feast of Unleavened Bread which followed. The Hebrew word for Passover, “*Pesach*,” is derived from the verb that means “*to pass over*”.

The celebration of the Passover and the correlating feast was instituted by God Himself to commemorate the deliverance of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage and the sparing of their firstborn when the destroying angel smote the firstborn of the Egyptians.

*“It is the Passover sacrifice of the Lord, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt, when He struck the Egyptians”* (Exodus 12:27).

History would also record this deliverance as the birthday of the Hebrew Nation. It was to be Israel’s freedom day celebration.

The celebration of the Passover entailed either a lamb or kid being selected from the Israelite flock, of the first year, without blemish. The lamb was to be killed while the sun was setting. The blood was to be caught in a basin and with a sprig of hyssop the blood was to be placed upon the two side posts and the lintel of the door of the Israelite house. The whole lamb was then roasted to be eaten with bitter herbs and unleavened bread. Not one bone of the lamb could be broken. The lamb's flesh was to be entirely consumed and if it was not, the flesh had to be burned.

Within the Lord Jesus Christ's death upon the Holy Cross the true meaning of the Jewish sacrifice of the Passover lamb was fulfilled. At the time of Passover, it was the custom to release one prisoner of the people's choice. Pilate, the Roman governor, offered the people the choice of releasing the Lord Jesus Christ or Barabbas. The people chose to have Barabbas, a man imprisoned for sedition and murder, released and the Lord Jesus Christ crucified.

The Prophet Isaiah said, *"He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter and as a sheep before Its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth"* (Isaiah 53:7).

St. John the Beloved uses the figure of the lamb in his expression *"Lamb of God"* in his Holy Gospel twice. Church fathers believe this expression to be in reference to the lamb offered at Passover. This expression, *"Lamb of God,"* is only found in St. John's Gospel and signifies that the Lord Jesus

Christ would be the TRUE sacrifice (The Lamb) which would atone for the sins of the world.

*“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”* (John 1: 29).

When the Lord Jesus Christ entered into Jerusalem on Hosanna Sunday more than likely He was greeted by those traveling early to purify themselves for the Passover sacrifice. *“And the Passover of the Jews was near, and many went from the country up to Jerusalem before the Passover, to purify themselves”* (John 11:55).

The Lord Jesus Christ celebrated Passover with His disciples Thursday evening (The Last Supper). On Friday during the Passover, the Lord Jesus Christ would be crucified in Jerusalem. The Glorious Resurrection would follow on the Sunday after His Crucifixion.

Therefore, our beloved Lord Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, was crucified on Passover day, a celebration that began the evening before when the Passover meal was partaken of.

*“Christ is called a Sheep and a Lamb who was to be slain Christ is also called a Stone He Himself is both Judge and King”* (Cyprian c.250).

From this the Passover can further be personally viewed for those of us today as a type of deliverance from the bondage and slavery of sin. Through the Lord Jesus Christ we are passed over from the darkness and doom we rightly deserve for all our many sins.

The Passover meal was eaten with bitter herbs and our bitter herbs should be those of repentance and confession. The Passover was not complete unless the lamb was consumed and so our lives are not complete unless we partake of His Body and Blood through the Sacrament of Holy Communion following repentance and confession of our many sins.

Last, as the Israelites ate their Passover meal in anticipation of a journey to come so we must all joyously anticipate our journey of thankfulness, worship, and active service to the Lord Jesus Christ on route toward the Heavenly life.

*St. Cyril the Great said:*

“One Lamb died for all, bringing the whole flock on earth back safely to God the Father; one for all, that he might bring all under subjection to God; that he might gain them all; “that for the future they might all no longer live for themselves, but for him who died and rose again for them” (2Co 5: 15). For when we were guilty of many sins, and for that reason were liable to death and destruction, the Father gave his Son a ransom for us, one for all, since all are in him, and he is greater than all. One died for all, that we all might live in him: Death devoured the Lamb on behalf of all, and then vomited all in him, and with him. For we were all in Christ, who died and rose again on our account, and on our behalf.”





## Chapter Six

# SOUR WINE & GALL WAS IT A MERCIFUL GESTURE OR MOCKERY

*“They gave Him sour wine mingled with gall to drink. But when He had tasted it, He would not drink” (Matthew 27:34).*

Punishment by crucifixion was not applicable to, nor executable on Roman citizens. It was designed for non Roman violent criminals, murderers, rebellious slaves and those convicted of high treason. Our Lord Jesus Christ did not belong within any of those categories punishable by crucifixion and yet he was falsely convicted and sentenced to death by it.

### **Poison in lieu of Water**

When the Lord Jesus Christ was crucified upon the Holy Cross, He was offered a sour, less than desirable, thin wine laced with gall. This happened right after our Lord’s loud agonizing cry, *“Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? That is My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”* (Matthew 27:46) after which, one of those standing beside the cross ran and *“took a sponge, filled it with sour wine and put it on a reed, and*

*offered it to Him to drink*" (Matthew 27:48). Why did the Roman soldiers give our Lord wine mingled with gall to drink? Did the Romans consider the most repulsive crimes worthy of mercy; or was the act of crucifixion more bearable to observe and hence bearably executable by intoxicating the crucified?

Sour wine, a staple in the Roman soldier's diet commonly used by poor people, was certainly considered unpalatable for the Jewish and the Roman upper class to partake of. The sour wine, offered to the Lord Jesus Christ during His crucifixion, has been frequently referred to as vinegar. Vinegar was a drink consisting of wine or a strong drink generally turned sour. In the Old Testament Holy Book of Psalm, vinegar is associated with poison, "*They gave me gall for my food, and they gave me vinegar for my drink*" (Psalm 68:22).

Gall, a substance usually associated with bitterness and misfortune, was thought to have been derived from a berry producing plant, often attributed to the poppy plant. The Old Testament Book of Job (Job 20:14). Refers to gall as the "*gall of an asp*". The prophet Hosea associates gall with hemlock "*They have spoken words swearing falsely in making a covenant. Thus judgment springs up like hemlock in the furrows of the field*" (Hosea 10:4). In the Pentateuch Book of Deuteronomy, Moses the prophet declared of the wicked, "*Their grapes are grapes of gall*" (Deuteronomy 32:32).

Offering sour wine combined with gall to our suffering, crucified Lord Jesus may have been a medicinal and merciful

gesture to dull the intense pain; but St. Luke in his Holy Gospel implies that the drink offered to our Lord Jesus at His crucifixion was part of the torture. *“The soldiers also mocked Him, coming and offering Him sour wine”* (Luke 23:36).

St. Mark in his gospel states that the sour wine mixed with myrrh was believed to have narcotic effects *“Then they gave Him wine mingled with myrrh to drink, but He did not take it”* (Mark 15:23). Perhaps sour wine and myrrh were given to a crucified person to intoxicate him in an attempt to diminish his suffering. By combining myrrh or gall with sour wine, an anesthetic herb is created that could be utilized indisputably to lessen the pain of those crucified.

Whether out of routine performance, an impulsive thoughtless act or even the remote possibility of it being out of a merciful act towards the criminal during his last breathing moments; sour wine and myrrh seemed to have had the potency of making the execution of crucifixion somehow bearable.

So, it seems it had only been in accordance with the Roman custom that our Lord Jesus Christ was offered sour wine and gall to reduce His agonizing pain. It is worth noting that the timing of offering the sour wine and gall to our Lord was of significance and hence utmost importance. It came right after the extended benevolent deeds that our Lord had continued to offer to those around Him.

First, our Lord Jesus showed mercy to all by asking His Father forgiveness for them, *“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do”* (Luke 23:34).

Secondly, the soldiers were so eager to possess His clothes that they divided His garments and cast lots among them. Nevertheless, and after the good deeds they reaped both in heaven (forgiveness) and on earth (material possessions); the soldiers did not hesitate to offer the Lord Jesus Christ sour wine mocking and deriding Him and telling Him, *“If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself”* (Luke 23:37).

Whether pleading for water or just stating that He was thirsty, our Lord is recorded by St. John to have cried, *“...I thirst!”* Now a vessel full of sour wine was sitting there; and they filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on hyssop, and put it to His mouth. So when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said *“It is finished”* (John 19:28-30).

Hyssop is a plant with stalk- like qualities that commonly grow three to four feet long. It was on the stalk of this plant that the sour wine was held up to our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus the Lord Jesus Christ assumed our human weakness and thirst in order for us to partake of Eternal Salvation and thirst no more. It is of significance for St. John to register that our Lord bowed His Holy Head prior to dying.

*St. Cyril the Great* reveals in this context:

What does He mean then by saying “My God. My God. why have you forsaken Me?”

We say that when Adam our first father trampled the commandment given him and ignored the divine laws, human nature, in a way, was forsaken by God; rather for that reason it was cursed deserving death. When the Word the Only-begotten of God dwelt in the afflicted body so as to renew it and took hold of Abraham's offspring to resemble to His brethren (Heb 2: 16-17), He had to set a limit to this forsaking that had befallen human nature and bring to an end the old curse and the evil within us. For that reason as one of the forsaken having participated with us resembling us in flesh and blood He said: "Why have you forsaken Me?" These are the words of someone who actually annuls the forsaking that befell us, inclining the Father to Himself, asking Him to accept us, as if asking Him to first accept Himself. For Christ became for us a beginning and source for all blessings. Whenever it is said that He receives, in his capacity as human, something from the Father, it is to convey it to our own nature. As for Himself, He is perfect and does not need anything whatsoever, as He is God.

Thus our Lord demonstrated His total inclusive comprehensive deity as the Lord of all; unlike humans who when dying, expire first and then bow their heads.

It seems plausible that our Lord's loud anguished cry had led the one who offered Him the mixture of sour wine and gall to assume that the Lord was despaired, distressed and in overwhelming pain. We can rest assured that naturally and without a grain of doubt that the Lord Jesus Christ, in His humanity, was in pain and horrific suffering during the horrific act of Crucifixion. Yet, most Biblical scholars do not believe that the Lord despaired, nor was angry at the unjust suffering inflicted upon him. Logically, as God, He could not have been forsaken by the Father.

The Lord Jesus Christ was crucified by the Romans, and they were Roman soldiers who drove nails through His Holy arms and legs and hung Him up upon the Holy Cross to suffer and die in a certain way prescribed by them. Thus it was the Roman rulers, followers and Jewish sympathizers of the Roman rule who had designed, dictated and implemented the Crucifixion of our Lord Jesus Christ.

On the other side of the scenario, the Roman leaders were willing and ready to grant freedom to a murderer, Barabbas by name, but murder on a cross an innocent man Who was without sin, malice or any evidence of wrong doing. This horrible incident was to become a blatant failure of both the Roman and Jewish judicial systems that fell short of executing justice in an obvious case of an innocent, falsely convicted person, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ "*Who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth*" (1 Peter 2:22).

Our precious Lord had endured great pain having been beaten, flogged, struck, tortured, and crucified. It was with a purpose and intent that He had to suffer greatly rather than just simply be “put to death”. Surely, a man of weak faith could not have survived the initial beatings. A crown of thorns encircled His Holy Head and a sign with the deriding words, *“This is Jesus the King of the Jews”* (Matthew 27:37) hung above His Head mockingly yet prophetically identifying Him as a king.

Equal to the Lord Jesus Christ’s strength of humanity was His courage in service. The Lord Jesus Christ was strong in faith; therefore He was dead to the world even before His Holy Crucifixion. The Lord was ready to endure any difficulties, even unto death (in His humanity), due to His strong faith. His service to humanity continued upon the Cross; for while upon the Cross, He continued to save souls and serve those around Him.

The repentant criminal hung to the right side of the Lord Jesus Christ was served; and became the first person to enter Paradise. St. Luke records his rebuking words to the criminal to the left side of our Lord *“Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong. Then he said to Jesus. Lord, remember me when You come into Your Kingdom’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Assuredly I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise”* (Luke 23:40-43).

## Courage in Tribulations

Every generation since the inception of humanity up to the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus Christ required much of a courageous servant. God instilled quality courage required of a servant as early as the Old Testament prophets. History records examples of the strongest in faith that were not afraid to rebuke even kings. Elijah the Prophet rebuked King Ahab without giving heed to the consequences of his actions. Such type of faith ascended Elijah into Heaven in a fiery chariot; while dogs licked up Ahab's blood.

St. John the Baptist rebuked King Herod for not following the law. God told Isaiah the prophet to, *“Cry aloud, spare not lift up your voice like a trumpet, tell My people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins”* (Isaiah 58:1).

The Lord instructed Ezekiel to *“And you Son of man, do not be afraid of them nor be afraid of their words, though briers and thorns are with you and you dwell among scorpions; do not be afraid of their words or dismayed by their looks, though they are a rebellious house. You shall speak My words to them, whether they hear or whether they refuse, for they are rebellious”* (Ezekiel 2:6-7).

Although St. John the Baptist was beheaded, yet his saintly voice still rings true today with the same message, *“It is not lawful for you to have her”* (Matthew 14:4).

Following the crucifixion and the Glorious Resurrection of the Lord, courageous servants have been martyred for the



Word of God and for their faith in upholding it and sticking fast to it. The apostles' courage is evident in their writings and the history of the early church writers.

The Lord Jesus Christ was a courageous servant in word and deed; the most courageous of all servants and an example left for others to follow. Perhaps courage is the message conveyed in the refusal to drink of the sour wine and gall. The Lord said, "*Fear not, for I am with you. Be not dismayed, for I will strengthen you; yes I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand*" (Isaiah 41:10; LXX). King David often praised the Lord, "*The Lord is my light and savior; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the defender of my life; whom shall I dread?*" (Psalm 27:1).

So, for what purpose or reason was the Lord Jesus Christ's cry "*why have You forsaken Me?*" (Matthew 27:46) uttered? One can postulate that it was a definite assurance that although Humanity can be forsaken; yet man will not be isolated from God; but accepted and saved through the Lord Jesus Christ's willing humanity and loud cry. The Lord Jesus Christ refused both sour wine and gall desiring to remain conscious throughout His crucifixion without any pain relieving agent. Such was the strength of His humanity.

Our Lord Jesus Christ, the most courageous of servants, with His strength in service acknowledged and glorified God's power, care, and promises of eternal life even while at the height of His pain hanging upon the Holy Cross with nails

driven through His arms and His legs.

May we all be courageous servants who would hold steadfast to our faith no matter what just as did the Lord Jesus Christ who was willing to bear the pain of crucifixion to ensure God's saving Grace to all. Glory be to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; now and forever and to the ages and ages to come. Amen.

“...Fasting and prayers of the martyrs, gave them the power to stand the pain Knowing that even losing their lives is nothing compared to their heavenly gain. Blessed are those who have mercy, who give to the poor and fast and pray. The Holy Spirit will fill their hearts and the Son will show them mercy on Judgment Day” (Distribution Melody for the Great Fast).





## Chapter Seven

# MEDITATIONS ON THE CROSS

*As* we approach the Holy Week, let us meditate on the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, and prepare ourselves to receive the spiritual benefits that lie ahead for those who believe in the cross. For *“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life”* (John 3:14,15). Therefore, let us reflect upon the Cross, and as we do so a lot of powerful revelations concerning the nature of God will begin to unfold to us. Some of these things are:

### **1. The power of God.**

*“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God”* (1 Corinthians 1:18).

Every time we look at the Cross, it brings to our mind the might and ultimate power that God has. Although the Holy Bible records incidents of how powerful Satan could get; for example, he was able to hinder Archangel Gabriel from delivering a message to Daniel the prophet to the extent that

Archangel Gabriel had to call upon Archangel Michael to help him deliver the message yet *“Then he said to me “Do not fear Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart to understand, and to humble yourself before your God. Your words were heard; and I have come because of your words. But the Prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days; and behold Michael, one of the chief Princes came to help me, for I had been left alone there with the kings of Persia”* (Daniel 10:12-13).

The only One that could defeat Satan was our Lord Jesus Christ with the Cross, crushing him under His feet and stripping him off of all power and dominion *“Having disarmed principalities and power, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it”* (Colossians 2:15).

In addition, our Lord Jesus Christ granted His followers the same power to defeat Satan with the same means which is the sign of the Cross. Thus Satan will remain defeated for ever as long as we keep this powerful tool before us; and every time Satan launches his attacks through evil thoughts and temptations, we should be able to defeat him with the sign of the Cross, reminding him of his utter annihilation in the battle that took place at Calvary; and how our Lord was able to bind him, and limit his authority.

## **2. The love of God.**

*“When I passed by you again and looked upon you, indeed your time was the time of love; so I spread My wing over*

*you and covered your nakedness. Yes, I swore an oath to you and entered into a covenant with you, and you became Mine, says the Lord God”* (Ezekiel 16:8).

When we look at the Cross we remember how God’s ultimate love for man, promised in the Old Testament through Ezekiel’s prophetic word has been fulfilled by our Lord Jesus Christ on the Cross and recorded by John, the Evangelist, *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life”* (John 3:16). The Cross is a concrete vivid manifestation of God’s love for us.

When God wanted to reveal His love for us, He did not do it by words, but by deeds, by dying on the cross; for *“Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends”* (John 15:13).

That is why in time of despair, when Satan tries to poison our heart with feelings of despair instigating such negative emotions of being rejected and forsaken by God, the best remedy is to look up to the Cross. This is because when I look to the cross, it reveals to me the greater love of our Lord. The Lord hates sin, but loves sinners, so much so that He came personally to save them. When our Lord stretched His arms on the Cross, He sent a message to each one of us that if we return to Him, there is always a place for each one of us between His arms, and in His heart.

### **3. The Holiness of God.**

*“For such a High Priest was fitting for us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners and has become higher than the heavens; who does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people’s, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself”* (Hebrews 7:26-27). Here St. Paul is telling us that our Lord was a Holy sacrifice, undefiled, able to save us. Since our sin was against God, it required someone like God to atone for it. Salvation could not have been fulfilled except by a Holy one without blemish, and without sin.

“Neither an angel nor an archangel, nor a Patriarch nor a prophet you have entrusted for our own salvation, but you yourself came down, and was incarnate and saved us” (St. Gregory’s Divine Liturgy).

Every time we look at the Cross we remember the Holiness of God for *“In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the Angel of His presence saved them; in His love and in His pity He redeemed them; and He bore them and carried them all the days of old”* (Isaiah 63:9).

St. Peter in his first epistle urges us to conduct our lives in a holy way as our Heavenly Father in order to gain fellowship with Him. This explains further why during the trial, of our Lord Jesus Christ, our Lord said to the one that slapped Him, why did you slap me? One might think that this saying

contradicts our Lords teaching of turning the other cheek. However, it does not, because during the trial our Lord had to defend Himself against the accusation of breaking the Law. But when the soldiers started slapping Him, He neglected His cheeks to those who smite.

Under those circumstances, our Lord was before a double-fold task: that of proving He is a Holy sacrifice without blemish or sin in order for His sacrifice to be accepted, and that of implementing His own teaching of leaving His cheeks to the soldiers to be smitten after the trial.

#### **4. The salvation of God.**

*“Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away. For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard him”* (Hebrews 2:1-3).

Every time we look at the cross we remember what our Lord had to endure in order to grant us salvation. Salvation is a free gift from God to us, and the main purpose of the incarnation was for our Lord to save us. He became man, suffered, shed blood, and died on the cross only to save us. We sometimes find it hard to labor, strive, and fight against sin in order to maintain this salvation. However, every time we fall away through sin we need to return and go back to the

Lord and receive this free gift of salvation from Him. In the Divine Liturgy we pray, You taught us the ways of salvation. We have to utilize the means, and go through the channels of baptism, repentance, and communion in order to be worthy of accepting this free gift.

### **5. The forgiveness of God.**

*“And you being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross”* (Colossians 2:13-14).

Every time we look at the cross we know that there is no condemnation on us, and that our Lord Jesus Christ forgave us all our sins. Satan tries to deceive us by convicting us of our sins and unforgiveness causing us to fall in the sin of despair.

In this effect, Mar Isaac the Syrian says,

“There is no sin without forgiveness except the sin without repentance.”

All sins are subject to the free gift of forgiveness provided they are preceded by and crowned with repentance. When we become fully aware that the crucifixion of our Lord is the sole means by which our sins are forgiven then we should be very careful and watchful not to commit sin, because sinning will



renew the suffering of our Lord. This time the suffering is far beyond the physical suffering of the crucifixion. During our Lord's moment of grief in Gethsemane, sweating blood and breathing pain, He asked the Father if He could take this cup away from Him, That cup was not just the physical pain He was about to undergo, but in essence it was the load of sin that was about to be put on Him. At that moment He knew he had to carry our sins in His body, becoming a sin and a curse so that we could be forgiven.

St. Paul says, "*Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree)*" (Galatians 3:13) and also "*For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him*" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

## **6. The Humility of God.**

*"Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death even the death of the cross"* (Philippians 2:5-8).

Thus St. Paul exhorts us to acquire the same humble mind of our Lord Jesus Christ. When we look at the Cross, we remember God's greatness shrouded in humility. The sin of Adam and Eve was a sin of pride since they wanted to exalt

themselves. That is why humility is the only remedy to pride; and it was only through His humility that our Lord was able to save us, and crush Satan. Such lowliness confused Satan; so much so, that he kept asking the same question, If you are the Son of God? He could not comprehend the language of humility, and how God could become a man. Satans pride created confusion in his mind disabling him from understanding the mystery of humility which is the mystery of the cross. When we acquire humility and lawlessness of spirit, and accept to decrease, letting others to increase, we will then be able to defeat Satan and escape his traps.

St. Paul says that if we humble ourselves before God, He will exalt us, and give us a name above all names *“Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name”* (Philippians 2:9).

The first daughter of humility is obedience. If we are stubborn, arrogant, and opinionated, all these being signs of disobedience and pride, we will not be able to attain salvation. The Bible teaches us that *“God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble”* (James 4:6).

## **7. The wisdom of God.**

*“But we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews, a stumbling block and to the Greeks, foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser*

*than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men”*

(1 Corinthians 1:23-25).

Israel was waiting for an earthly king. However, when the Lord declared that his Kingdom is not of this world, they were stumbled. On Hosanna Sunday they greeted Him with palms shouting This is the King of Israel. But when He went in the temple, and preached about His kingdom, they refused Him and ended up crucifying Him on Friday. This way they had proved that they did not comprehend the wisdom of God that through the Cross He will become a heavenly King and not an earthly one.

Although the Greeks were well known for their intellect and philosophy, their minds could not understand the mystery of the Cross, nor the wisdom of God, thus considering the incarnation and the crucifixion foolishness. What we perceive foolishness is actually wiser than our wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. Whenever God does not make sense to us we turn to our wisdom and intelligence and start to rely on them, then gradually we convince ourselves of the credibility of our intellect as a sole source of wisdom, and so the wisdom of God becomes mere foolishness in our sight.

That is why a lot of God’s commandments do not make much sense to us at the time being until we start to apply them. For example, in the matter of tithing, our human reasoning will never be able to comprehend how after paying

the 10%, the 90% will be more than 100%.

For the same reason St. Peter was not ready to allow our Lord to wash his feet because he could not understand how the master would wash the feet of the servant. However, our Lord came up with the right answer in the right context *“What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this”* (John 13:7).

Under the same precept and in an attempt to subject God’s mind to their human understanding, many denominations have shunned the early church teachings concerning the doctrines. So to them, the Holy Eucharist is not the real body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ but only symbolic commemoration of them. This is because in spite of all the biblical evidences especially the Holy Gospel of St. John 6, and the Holy Book of 1 Corinthians 11, they still cannot comprehend with their mind how the bread and wine through the descending of the Holy Spirit are changed to the body and blood of Christ. How true is the proverb *“lean not on your own understanding.. Do not be wise in your own eyes”* (Proverbs 3:5, 7).

## **8. My value to God.**

*“Knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot”*

(1 Peter 1:18 - 19).

When we look at the Cross, we see our priceless value in the eyes of God. Because our Lord Jesus Christ has paid a very costly price, His Body and Blood, to redeem us, we are very precious in the eyes of our Lord. Knowing that, we should have no worries about anything in the world. St. Paul says *“He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?”* (Romans 8:32).

Realizing the value of the human being in the eyes of God, servants and clergy are to be filled with holy love for, zeal and desire to search for the lost sheep with patience and persistence, and work hard towards the salvation of everyone.

## **9. The vanity of the world.**

*“But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world”* (Galatians 6:14).

Every time we look at the Cross we know that we are crucified to the world, and the world to us. In Baptism which is a fellowship and participation in the crucifixion and death of our Lord, we are buried with our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus it is no longer we who live, but our Lord Jesus Christ who lives in us *“I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me”* (Galatians 2:20).

If the world is crucified to us, it follows that the world is dead to us, and accordingly we should not desire anything from the world, and the world would not tempt dead people. The Cross reminds us that we are dead with our Lord Jesus Christ in order to live with Him. If we still pursue the pleasures of the world, then we are putting ourselves in a position of enmity to God.

The Holy Bible says, *“Friendship with the world is enmity with God”* (James 4:4). But those who crucify their desires and passions with our Lord Jesus Christ *“And those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with its Passions and desires”* (Galatians 5:24), they will live and be glorified eternally with Him. So every time I look at the cross I forget the vanity of the world and remember that I am dead with our Lord Jesus Christ.

### **10. The wickedness of sin.**

*“Who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness by whose stripes you were healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls”* (1 Peter 2:24-25).

Here St. Peter says, every time I look at the Cross I remember how wicked sin is, how our Lord Jesus Christ had to suffer, and was crucified because of my sins. In that sense we should deal with sin very seriously without compromising or adopting a laid back attitude towards it.

May God who was crucified on the Cross for our salvation put His Cross in our heart, so that we can say with St. Paul, *“It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me”* (Galatians 2:20).

*St. Cyril the Great said:*

“We must closely examine what is our old man, what is the body of sin that is done away with, and how it was crucified with Christ (Cf. Rom 6: 6)... The Apostle means by the body of sin and our old man the body of dust that has the inevitability of decaying according to its obsolescence in Adam. For we were condemned as such at the beginning through Adam. The ill was aggravated by our carnal appetites, for this was an inbred condition of the flesh according to nature.

How was it crucified with Christ? The Only Son became man and acquired the body made of dust, that was condemned to death, as I have already mentioned, in accordance with its obsolescence in Adam, and became as if in labor, due to its ingrained appetites having an overwhelming tendency to sin. But the law of sin was incompatible with Christ’s totally holy body. We do not say at all that anything due to the human passions stirred within Him except that for which there is no blame, such as hunger, thirst, fatigue, and every thing the law of nature creates in us without fault. Although the law of sin did not stir whatsoever in Christ due to His superiority through the power and strength of the Logos in Him; yet we find nature’s body in itself, even when we consider it in Christ, no different to ours.

We were crucified with Him when His body, with all our nature in Him, was crucified, like that which happened in Adam when he was cursed; all nature suffered the curse. It is thus said that we were also raised with Christ and were made to sit with Him in the heavens, because although Emmanuel is above us as God, but in that He became like us, He is considered one of us raised and seated with God the Father. In the same way the old man was crucified with Him and through His resurrection the power of the old curse was broken “that the body of sin might be done away with” (Rom 6:6). I do not mean the body unrestrictedly, but the ingrained carnal appetites within it, that always disturbed the mind with shameful matters, casting it in the mud and mire of the delights of dust.

As for these matters that were fulfilled in Christ to the benefit of human nature, how can anyone doubt it when St Paul clearly declares: “For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh. God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh” (Rom 8:3).

Do you see then how the flesh of sin was done away with? The thorn of sin was condemned in the flesh and first died in Christ, then through Him and by Him this grace was also transferred to us.”







## Chapter Eight

# THE CROSS REVEALED IN THE OLD TESTAMENT OFFERINGS

One of the most interesting and intriguing topics in the Old Testament is the sacrifices or offerings that God the Almighty had ordered the Israelites to present to Him; and their direct relation to the grand offering of our Lord Jesus Christ on the Cross.

The Holy Book of Leviticus deals extensively with this issue. In it we come across the terms: offering, sacrifice, and oblation (Korban).

**Offering:** is a general term that refers to anything offered to God whether in worship or only in fulfillment of His command. For example, anise and cumin were to be offered according to God's command and not for the sake of worship.

**Sacrifice:** is the term given to the offering when it involves shedding of blood.

**Oblation:** is the term given to the offering when no blood shed is involved but the oblation here is meant for worship only. Korban which is derived from the verb kureb is also used and it means bring to God in worship.

The Holy Book of Leviticus distinguishes five types of sacrificial offerings. Each of which typifies an aspect of the Cross. In addition, each sacrifice along with the accompanying rites (which are typically the same for all types of animals) is a reference to the Cross. These five offerings are:

1. **Burnt Offering:** offered with an animal, a male without blemish. This offering symbolizes the divine aspect of the Cross Offering.
2. **Peace Offering:** offered with an animal also, either male or female. This offering symbolizes the human aspect of the Cross in the sense that the Cross accomplished peace between God and humanity. That is why the offering could be either male or female.
3. **Sin Offering:** offered with an animal, either male or female.
4. **Trespass Offering:** offered with an animal either male or female. This offering is assigned for those who have sinned unintentionally or out of ignorance; or anyone who felt was in such a situation that required a sacrifice of that kind.

5. **Grain offering:** offered with grain or wheat. This article will be concerned with the first type of offering which is the Burnt Offering and its symbolic relevance to the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

### **Nature of the Burnt Offering**

When God gave Moses the rites that go with the Burnt Offering, He took into consideration the economic situation of the people. Thus, a cow was offered only by those who could afford it. Otherwise, a goat, a sheep or a bird could do. As a matter of fact, the Blessed Virgin Mary was among those who had birds for their offerings because that was all the Mother of God could afford “*And to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the law of the Lord ‘A pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons’*” (Luke 2:24).

In all of this, what God was concerned with the most, was the amount of love people were ready to put into their offerings to Him. We see this attitude clearly stated in the New Testament. The Lord Jesus Christ praised the widow who had offered the two mites over those who had offered a lot of money. That is because in her two mites she invested much more love than the other rich people who had given much more. Therefore, it behooves us to understand God’s mind which is obviously set not on the offering as a means in itself, but on the end result which is the amount of love that the offering carries.

St. Paul saw this mind of God best manifest in the behavior of the Galatians, *“For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your own eyes and given them to me”* (Galatians 4:15). Love will not offer just the minimum requirement, but over and above.

### **Characteristics of the Burnt Offering:**

#### ▣ *Male*

*“Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: When any one of you brings an offering to the Lord, you shall bring your offering of the livestock-of the herd and of the flock. If this offering is a burnt sacrifice of the herd, let him offer a male without blemish; he shall offer it of his own free will at the door of the tabernacle of meeting before the Lord”*

(Leviticus 1:2,3).

The Burnt Offering has to be chosen from male animals only because the burnt sacrifice represent the **Divine aspect** of the Cross. *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son”* (John 3:16) and *“and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross”* (Philippians 2:8).

The ultimate obedience and love of the Son to the point of shedding His blood on the wood of the Cross smelled a sweet aroma which appeased the heart of God. Our Lord Jesus Christ

is the bridegroom of the Church. As the Apostle Paul said, “*For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ*” (2 Corinthians 11:2).

The word male also indicates seriousness and courage (manliness). “*Watch, stand fast in the faith, be brave, be strong*” (1 Corinthians 16:13). Here St. Paul is urging believers, both men and women to be serious in their spiritual quest. Our Lord was quite serious in His pursuit of our salvation to the point of death, death on the Cross “*for this purpose I came to this hour*” (John 12:27). The Cross was His clear goal, and He went to it in manliness. That is why He rebuked Peter harshly when he tried to stand between Him and the cross “*But He turned and said to Peter ‘Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men’*” (Matthew 16:23).

A male sacrifice, therefore, represents our Lord Jesus Christ, the bridegroom of the church, and the seriousness of spiritual life.

#### ▣ *Without blemish*

The Burnt Offering represents the Lord Jesus Christ, the Holy One who is without sin. That is why it has to be without blemish. He testified for Himself by saying, “*Which of you convicts Me of sin?*” (John 8:46).

St. Peter says, “*knowing that you were not redeemed with*

*corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot”* (1 Peter 1:18,19).

He is a Lamb without blemish and without spot as St. Paul said *“For such a High Priest was fitting for us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and has become higher than the heavens; who does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people’s, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself”* (Hebrews 7:26,27).

So the lamb without blemish symbolized the Lord Jesus Christ who too was without blemish. When one of the servants of the High Priest struck the Lord Jesus Christ; our Lord replied, *“If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil; but if well, why do you strike Me?”* (John 18:23). This might be misinterpreted by some as being contradictory to the Lord’s teaching of turning the other cheek, *“whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also”* (Matthew 5:39). However, under the circumstances in which these words of our Lord were said, we find him defending His deity as being without blemish. Thus our Lord proves that He is innocent, without blemish an acceptable sacrifice (on the Cross).

On the other hand, when Pontius Pilate sent him to the soldiers, where he was struck and mocked against, with the

words prophesy! Who struck you? He did not reply back at all *“Saying Prophecy to us Christ! Who is the one who struck you?”* (Matthew 26:68). *“And having blindfolded Him, they struck Him on the face and asked Him, Saying Prophecy! Who is the one who struck you?”* (Luke 22:64).

The difference between the two situations is that, in the first case (before the high priest); He was being blamed of wrong; but in the second case (before Pontius Pilate); it was only a matter of shame and mockery.

▣ *“He shall offer it of his own free will at the door of the tabernacle of meeting before the Lord”* (Leviticus 1:3).

The explanation for this is that when a person entered the front door of the tabernacle, the first thing he would meet would be the altar of the burnt sacrifice. The person would offer his lamb (or animal) at the door of the tabernacle, so that the priests could examine it. If it is acceptable, they would enter the tabernacle and offer it on the altar. But if not approved of, the offering would not enter the tabernacle. This is why God strictly rebuked the priests of the Old Testament, because they became slack and began accepting imperfect sacrifices to offer to Him.

In the first chapter of the Holy Book of Malachi, He says, *“A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am the father, where is My honor? And if I am a Master,*

*where is my reverence... O you priests who despise my name. Yet you say, In what way have we despised Your name? You offer defiled food on My altar, but say, In what way have we defiled You?"* (Malachi 1:6-7). What God the Almighty wants to convey here is that are we not despising His name by offering the blind or lame on His altar?

Then God tells them in the Holy Book of *"You also say, Oh, what a weariness! And you sneer at it, says the Lord of hosts. And you bring the stolen, the lame, and the sick; thus you bring an offering! Should I accept this from your hand? Says the Lord. But cursed be the deceiver Who has in his flock a male, and takes a vow, but sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished. For I am a great King, says the Lord of hosts, and My name is to be feared among the nations."* (Malachi 1:13 - 14).

These words are harsh words which should make us stop and reflect over the quality of our offerings to God be it our time, strength, energy. Do we offer God our best time? Our strength; do we offer the best of it? When we give someone a gift, we endeavor to give him the best. But when you offer to the Lord's brothers (the needy), what do we give? Do we give old things! We tend to give our old things to the church; e.g. an old desk, old clothes, old furniture etc.

The Holy Book of Malachi is a conscience shaking verse in the Holy Bible *"But cursed be the deceiver who has in his flock a male and takes a vow, but sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished"* (Malachi 1:14). It says that when someone



has something good, but gives God what is less, he is *cursed*. This goes to show us how much less concerned God is with the type of the offering and more concerned with the quality of the offering. If you have a good offering, but give God what is blemished, He is grieved because He takes it as contempt to His name.

Let us tie this Burnt Offering with the sacrifice of the Cross. St. Paul says in the Holy Book of Hebrews He suffered “*outside the gate.*” (Hebrews 13:12). In the same manner as the burnt Sacrifice was examined before the gate so was He examined before Herod and Pilate. Then He was offered up upon the altar the Cross. As the Holy Gospel of St. Luke says, “*having examined Him in your presence I have found no fault in this Man.*” (Luke 23:14). This was a fulfillment of the Old Testament examination of the sacrifice to see if it was without blemish, to be offered on the altar.

In yelling, Crucify Him, crucify Him none of the Jews knew that they were applying the law. In other words, the people were confirming His right to be offered as an acceptable sacrifice. Just as in the Old Testament, after the priests found the sacrifice without blemish, they entered it onto the altar; so was He examined, found without blemish and then taken to the Cross.

During the Divine Liturgy, which is the sacrifice of the Cross, just as the lamb was brought before the door of the tabernacle, the oblations (offerings) are presented to the priest

to be examined before the door of the altar. So the priest along with the deacons examines the loaf of bread (lamb) and wine. The deacons then declare them good and precious (without blemish). Then and only then and once approved, are they to be brought inside the altar. That is why it is wrong to bring in the oblation inside the sanctuary before examining it. It is also wrong to store the wine inside the sanctuary. The oblations should not enter the altar except after the examination process.

During the examination process, the people say, Lord have mercy forty-one times, representing the scourging of our Lord. This is because just as our Lord was examined with whips, so the church examines the oblations by proclaiming, Lord have mercy.

▣ *The putting of the hand*

*“Then he shall put his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it will be accepted on his behalf to make atonement for him”* (Leviticus 1:4).

1. It is identification with the sacrifice, attesting to the fact that, just as this lamb is about to die, so does the person offering it deserve this sentence of death.
2. It is a transferring of the sins from the person to the sacrifice; the sacrifice becomes a replacement or substitution for the person. So when its blood is shed, it is a proof that the redemptive work has been done on my behalf.
3. It confirms the punishment of sin being death.

The Holy Book of Isaiah says, “*And the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all*” (Isaiah 53:6).

And also St. Paul says, “*For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him*” (2Corinthians 5:21).

In the same way, just as the person became one with the sacrifice by placing his hand upon its head; so did the Lord Jesus become one with us through His incarnation. And in His Body we were all represented. This sacrifice was a redemptive sacrifice for us all, for we all were in the body of our Lord Jesus Christ on the Cross.

In the Divine Liturgy this is clearly represented. When the priest chooses the bread, he places his hand on it, praying on behalf of all believers, Remember, O Lord, all the Orthodox Christians, from North to South and from East to West, everyone according to his name and her name. Then he prays for his family, those who wish to be prayed for. So those wanting to put prayer requests on the altar ought to offer them before the examination of the Lamb so that the Lamb (sacrifice) will be offered *for them*.

After the priest remembers everyone, he finally remembers himself in so doing, the church teaches him humility that he should come last.

#### ▣ *The Sprinkling of the blood*

*“He sprinkles the blood all around on the altar”*

(Leviticus 1:5).

This is a symbol that this sacrifice is killed for the whole world. It is sprinkled in a circle, so as to show that there is no limit to its redemptive work. Likewise the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ has no limit it is offered for all sins, all people, at all ages. In the Divine Liturgy, after the examination process, the priest takes the Lamb and goes around the altar in a circle.

▣ *The giving of the skin to the priests:*

*“And he shall skin the burnt offering and cut it into its Pieces”* (Leviticus 1:6).

This shows us that the first sacrifice offered was that of Adam and Eve because we read in the Holy Book of Genesis that God clothed them in skins. How? *“Also for Adam and his wife the Lord God made tunics of skin, and clothed them”* (Genesis 3:21). And from where did God get the skin? It is obvious that they had offered a sacrifice of animals and God used this skin for their covering.

This is why God was disappointed with Cain who offered a bloodless sacrifice; for *“without shedding of blood there is no remission”* (Hebrews 9:22) so God refused his sacrifice. The skin was given to the priests, symbolically, in the New Testament, the skin stands for the work of priesthood in the forgiveness and covering of sins, that is, through the mystery of Confession.

### ▣ *Division of the sacrifice into four parts*

*“The sons of Aaron the Priest shall put fire on the alter, and lay the wood in order on the fire”* (Leviticus 1:7). The sacrifice was divided into 4 parts:

1. The parts of the body with the *Heart* being the most important organ.
2. Blood representing the soul (sprinkled all around)
3. Head representing the mind, thoughts
4. Fat representing energy or strength. When you do physical exertion, you burn fat. God is saying that your sacrifice should be offered *“with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength”* (Mark 12:30).

### ▣ *Sprinkling of the water*

*“But he shall wash its entrails and its legs with water. And the Priest shall burn all on the alter as a burnt sacrifice, an offering made by fire, a sweet aroma to the Lord”* (Leviticus 1:9).

The water symbolizes cleanliness. When a person offers God a sacrifice, he must offer it with a pure heart just as the Lord was pure from without and within. God is not just concerned with the outward purity. This is why all the inner

organs were cleansed with water before being placed upon the altar. It also symbolizes Baptism, which cleanses us from our sins. The priest, during the Divine Liturgy, wipes the Lamb with water during the offertory, representing the cleansing of the sacrifice (OT), as well as the baptism of our Lord in the River Jordan (NT).

Thus is the link between the burnt sacrifice and that the Divine Liturgy. The sacrifice of the Divine Liturgy is the *same sacrifice* of the Cross; as in the Confession at the end of the Divine Liturgy, the priest prays It is one sacrifice.

▣ *Burning the sacrifice completely*

God commanded that the sacrifice be burnt completely. This is so in order to show, first, that the Son accepted in full the fire of the divine wrath against sin, drinking the cup of sufferings to its full. In Gethsemane, He said, “*My soul is exceedingly sorrowful even to death*” (Matthew 26:38). And on the Cross, He experienced sufferings in its fullness. So since this burnt sacrifice showed the divine aspect of the Cross, it must be burned completely. In addition, our Lord fully surrendered Himself by His own will as it is mentioned in the Holy Book “*of his own free will.*” (Leviticus 1:3)

These were the exact rites in which the burnt sacrifice was to be offered to God; an exact prelude and a replica of the Burnt Offering of the New Testament, our Lord Jesus Christ Who has offered himself willingly and obediently as a sweet aroma

to the Lord out of sheer love for mankind, *“Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma”* (Ephesians 5:2).

May God smell in us the sweet aroma of obedience and submission to His will, to love Him, and serve Him all the days of our life on earth.



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