

The Water and the Tree

**A look at the connection between
the humanity of Jesus and water baptism**

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This paper was written as a response to two groups: the first is those who say that water baptism is not part of New Testament salvation, and the second is those who say that Jesus Christ had 'divine flesh.' "

THREE DAYS AFTER THE ISRAELITES passed through the waters of the Red Sea, they came to a place called Marah. But they could not drink the water there because it was bitter. When the people complained to Moses, the Lord showed him a tree, which he cast into the waters and the waters were instantly made sweet.

The tree of Marah points directly to the cross of Jesus Christ, for the New Testament describes Jesus as having borne our sins in His own body on the tree " (1 Peter 2:24). Moreover, it is the cross that transforms the bitterness of life into sweetness. As Paul declared, the message of the cross is the power of God to those who are being saved (1 Corinthians 1:18). But just as the tree of Marah had no power at all until Moses cast it into the water, the cross of Jesus has no power until it is applied to a person's life.

The Mediator

The Bible tells us that ever since the rebellion of Adam and Eve, all human beings have been born outside of Paradise. Because of this, we are all acquainted with the bitterness of life, though to differing degrees. But the Man Christ Jesus has the power to transform every bitter life into sweetness by bringing us to God, having died for our sins to remove them as a barrier between us and our Creator.

The power of God is delivered to us through mediation, for the Bible tells us that there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time... (1 Timothy 2:5-6). Jesus has done His part by giving Himself on the cross as our ransom, but we must do our part by testifying about it. This testimony is what Paul referred to

as the gospel or the message of the cross. But for the power of this message to be released, it must be declared, received, and believed on an individual basis, for the gospel of Christ is “the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16).

The message of the cross is the testimony of all that Jesus accomplished for the redemption of man, not in the realms of His glory, but “in the days of His flesh” (Hebrews 5:7). The cross, therefore, stands as an emblem for the humanity of Jesus, including all that He endured as a Man. When we speak of the cross, we are speaking of His agony, His intercession, His sorrows, His humiliation, His obedience, His suffering, His bleeding, and finally His death. The message of the cross encompasses all that Jesus was and all that He did as “one of us.”

Speaking to His apostles as the Mediator between God and men, Jesus declared, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6). Throughout the ages, people have attempted to come to God through many pathways, but according to the Bible, a person can only come to God by way of the Mediator, the Man Christ Jesus. As Peter explained, “Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit...” (1 Peter 3:18).

It is important to recognize that the flesh of Jesus was fully human. When He suffered and was put to death in the flesh, He experienced real pain; He bled real blood; He tasted real death. It is also important to recognize that the word “flesh” pertains to more than just His physical body. Jesus was more than God in a body: He was God in a Man. The “flesh” of Jesus pertains to *everything* that made Him a human being: His physical body plus His thoughts, His emotions, His longings, His limitations, His expressions, His heartaches, and even His fears. This is why the cross is sometimes called His agony. When we contemplate the reality of His humanity, we must conclude that the death of Jesus was the same as it would have been for any one of us...or, considering His sinless life, perhaps even worse.

The Mediation is Forgiveness

How does Jesus fulfill His role as the Mediator, the Ransom, and the Way? How is the power of the cross manifested? The answer is forgiveness. Having borne our sins in His own body on the tree, He brings us to God by means of forgiving our sins. As He declared, “The Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins” (Matthew 9:6). The word “forgive” means to cancel a debt, to do away with completely, to fully remove. The tree does a thorough work.

Notice Jesus’ assertion that on the earth, it is the Son of Man who exercises the power of forgiveness. Yet in the Old Testament David cried out to God, “Against

You, You only, have I sinned (Psalms 51:4). According to the Bible, all sin is ultimately against God, which is why the people said to Jesus, Who can forgive sins but God alone? (Mark 2:7).

What then did Jesus mean when He referred to Himself as the Son of Man? In Hebrew this title means literally the Son of Adam. As a direct descendent of Adam, yet simultaneously God Himself, Jesus was telling us that the authority to forgive sins, which belongs exclusively to God, is divinely ordained to be administered on earth by a Man. In other words, God has brought His forgiveness into the lives of men by means of a Man.

As the One the Bible calls the last Adam, the Man Christ Jesus inaugurated God's New Testament plan to bring forgiveness and salvation to man (1 Corinthians 15:45). At the Last Supper He told His apostles, For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins (Matthew 26:28). The word remission is the same word that is frequently translated forgiveness. In other words, the purpose of the shedding of Jesus' blood was that our sins could be forgiven, for without shedding of blood there is no remission (Hebrews 9:22).

The connection between the shedding of blood and the forgiveness (or remission) of sins was well established in the Old Testament. The Levitical Law decreed, The priest shall make atonement for him with the ram of the trespass offering before the LORD for his sin which he has committed. And the sin which he has committed shall be forgiven him (Leviticus 19:22). In the tabernacle system, the priest was the mediator between God and the Israelites. He was the one who shed the ram's blood and offered up the sacrifice to God.

But under the New Covenant, we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all (Hebrews 10:10). As the writer explained, Every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God... (Hebrews 10:11-12). The Man Christ Jesus was both the priest and the sacrifice, the Offerer and the Offering.

Jesus had to be a true Son of Adam to serve as the ultimate High Priest: for if all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest... (Hebrews 2:17). Moreover, He had to be a true Son of Adam to be offered up as the ultimate sacrifice for sins: for inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death (Hebrews 2:14). To serve as the priest and to die as the sacrifice, Jesus had to be a genuine partaker of flesh and blood.

All of mankind can now receive forgiveness of sins and stand unashamed before the presence of God by means of the mediatorial work of the Man Christ Jesus. Everything pertaining to our redemption was accomplished by this Man. It was His pain, His blood, His cross, and His death that provided us with access to the glory of God. It was the Man who suffered, the Man who bled, the Man who died and was buried.

The Bible tells us that we are justified by His blood (Romans 5:9); we have redemption through His blood (Ephesians 1:7); we have been brought near by the blood (Ephesians 2:13); we have boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood (Hebrews 10:19); and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:7). All of our hope for salvation rests entirely on what Jesus did for us on the tree.

Forgiveness in the Hands of Man

After His resurrection, Jesus began the process of casting His tree into the water; that is, He placed the power of forgiveness in water baptism in His name. Appearing to His apostles He said, "As the Father has sent Me, I also send you" (John 20:21). He then commissioned them to continue the work He had begun by authorizing them to forgive sins, saying, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (John 20:23). The basis of this forgiveness was His own blood, His own cross, His own sacrificial death; but they, His followers, were to serve as His earthly instruments to deliver it to the people.

How were the apostles to actually impart the forgiveness of sins? In the book of Luke, Jesus told His apostles that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations (Luke 24:47). Matthew records these instructions: "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them..." (Matthew 28:18-19). The mission of making disciples was to begin with water baptism. In the Book of Mark Jesus instructed: "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved..." (Mark 16:15-16). The apostles were to exercise their authority by declaring the gospel and baptizing those who believed. From a biblical perspective, believing cannot be divorced from water baptism.

We find that the apostles did exactly as Jesus instructed, for on the inaugural day of the New Testament plan of salvation, Peter preached, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). The authority to forgive (or remit) sins was applied by water baptism in the name of the Mediator, the Man

Christ Jesus.

When the Bible speaks of the Son of Man, it is clearly speaking of the Man, the human being born of Mary; but when it speaks of the Holy Spirit, it is speaking of the Divine Being, the eternal God. As Jesus stated, God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth (John 4:24). We know from Matthew 1:20 that the Holy Spirit was literally the Father of the Man Christ Jesus, for the angel told Joseph that the child conceived in her [Mary] is of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, when Jesus said that no one can come to the Father except through Him, He was saying that to receive the Holy Spirit a person must come through water baptism in His name. Hence Peter's command to repent and be baptized as a prerequisite to receiving the Holy Spirit.

This is not to say that God will never give His Spirit to a person prior to water baptism. He clearly did so in the case of the Roman centurion Cornelius. Notice, however, that the Holy Spirit fell immediately after Peter told Cornelius that through the name of Jesus, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins (Acts 10:43). In other words, it was right as Peter was telling him that the forgiving power of the tree is in the water that the Spirit fell. We know that this is what Peter meant because immediately after they began to speak in tongues, he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord (Acts 10:48).

As a minister of the gospel, Peter understood his responsibility to preach the message exactly the way Jesus had instructed. But on this occasion he learned that sometimes God, on His own initiative, comes to man in His own way, which of course is His prerogative. This, however, in no way alters the settled truth that Jesus has left us water baptism in His name as a replacement for His human presence. What He did on earth as the Son of Man, He now does by means of His human representatives baptizing people in His name. He has cast His tree into the water!

Baptism Relates to Humanity

When the Bible says that God was manifested in the flesh, it is saying that the invisible Deity was made visible in the Man Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 3:16). This is confirmed by Jesus' statement, He who has seen Me has seen the Father (John 14:9). This concept is further explained by Paul, who wrote that God's invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead (Romans 1:20). This is why he can also declare that in the Man Christ Jesus dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily (Colossians 2:9). To look upon the Man is to look upon the Godhead. In Jesus Christ we have at once the eternal God and begotten Man, the invisible Father and His visible Son, the omnipresent Spirit and His fleshly manifestation.

To come to God, we must have our sins forgiven by repenting and being baptized in water in the name of Jesus. This is how we come to the Father through the Son. Jesus said, "No one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him. Come to Me..." (Matthew 11:27-28). We can only come to God by coming to His human manifestation, the Man Christ Jesus.

Throughout the New Testament, water baptism is associated exclusively with things that pertain to the humanity of Jesus, not His Deity. For example, Romans 6:3 says, "As many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death?" Clearly the death of Christ pertains to His humanity. Romans 6:4 says, "Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism. Just as clearly the burial of Christ pertains to His humanity. 1 Corinthians 12:13 says, "We were all baptized into one body. The word "body" always pertains to humanity, since a Spirit does not have bodily components.

Water baptism in the name of Jesus is the means of mediation through which we come to God. To repent and submit to baptism is to be brought to God through the Man Christ Jesus. We know we have made contact with God when we receive the gift of His Spirit and speak in other tongues as the Spirit gives utterance. Through this experience the Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God (Romans 8:16). Speaking in tongues is Deity and humanity joining together in an earthly manifestation of heavenly power.

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When a person speaks in tongues, it may be evidence that he has made contact with the Deity of Jesus, but it does not guarantee he has made contact with the humanity. Simply repenting and receiving the Holy Spirit does not connect a person to the power of what Jesus accomplished on the cross as Man. Forgiveness of sins can only be secured through immersion in water in the name of the Savior.

Water baptism is God's solution for the human condition. In baptism our weak humanity is immersed into the death of the Man Christ Jesus and the power of the cross is applied to our lives (Romans 6:3). We then rise, as Christ rose from the dead, empowered to "walk in newness of life" by the "glory of the Father," which is the "gift of the Holy Spirit" (Romans 6:4; Acts 2:38). We connect with the Spirit, which is the Father of the Man Christ Jesus, through repentance, believing, and water baptism in His glorious name.

Just as Moses had to cast the tree into the water before the bitter waters could be made sweet, so must we be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, for the power of the tree operates only in the waters of New Testament baptism. The tree and all

that it represents –the shedding of blood, the death of Christ for our sins –all become effectual in the life of a believer only as he is plunged into the waters of baptism. As Peter affirmed, it is baptism that now saves us (1 Peter 3:21). We must not attempt to bring people to God without affirming to them the necessity of repentance and baptism in the name of the only Mediator, the Man Christ Jesus.

The tree is in the water!