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2020

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Recommended Citation

Davidson, JoAnn, "Shaken at Shechem" (2020). *Faculty Publications*. 3422.
<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pubs/3422>

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Shaken at Shechem

I enjoy celebrating both Christmas and Easter. I especially like the decorations and music. I don't even mind listening to Christmas music for a whole month! And though modern Christmas merchandising has little if anything to do with the birth of the Christ Child, Christmas time is surely a highpoint of the year. Celebrating Easter is much shorter, usually lasting only a weekend.

However, this timing is reversed in Scripture. Matthew's gospel only has two chapters of his 28 dealing with the birth of Christ. Mark's gospel begins with the ministry of John the Baptist and Christ already as an adult. Luke opens with the birth of Christ, but again there are only the first two chapters out of 24 on that topic. John's Gospel commences with Christ's adult ministry.

I then noticed how all the Gospel writers move quickly to recount the events leading up to and including the crucifixion. From one-third up to a half of each of the four gospels is devoted to one week of Christ's life, riveting attention on the Cross. Even the celebration of the Last Supper instituted by Christ doesn't commemorate His birth, nor His life, only His death. Christ wished, above all else, to be remembered by His death. As well, the great Reformers focused on the Cross. In fact, they contended that a person's faith would be faulty if they misunderstood what happened at the Cross.

I thought I understood all this—until I had a certain experience when in Israel.

My husband, Dick, and I were in Israel during Spring a few years ago. As Easter approached, Dick thought we should travel to Shechem and witness the Samaritan Passover. He had learned that they still sacrificed sheep in their tradition this one time each year and thought we should go.

I must admit I was reluctant. Tensions between the Arabs and Jews were high at the time. We were going to need a special government permit to travel to Shechem—and I didn't think it was worth all the trouble and possible danger. But what was really happening was that I was finally having to honestly face my feelings about the Old Testament sacrificial system, and the times I had "secretly" questioned it. You know, those hidden thoughts one foolishly hopes God will never notice as He tends a universe. I have questioned why the Creator couldn't have taught what He wanted us to learn about sin and forgiveness some other way.

As we waited for the Passover service to begin on that windy hillside of Mt. Gerizim, I was alternately furious with myself for coming, yet somewhat curious, then again experiencing more negative feelings against the God-ordained sacrificial system.

Following the ceremony, I was more upset than ever. It was horrible, ugly, repulsive. I spent much of the evening stroking my contrarian attitude when a different perception abruptly jolted my thinking like a lightning bolt as we rode the taxi back to Jerusalem. And this thought stunned me—SIN IS THAT TERRIBLE.

Suddenly I realized that the sacrificial system was not something we did for God, but something God used to try to teach a desperately difficult lesson. For

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how else could He rivet in our minds the horrible offense and extreme costliness of our sin? How else could He portray His own innocent Self suffering the judgment and death that our sin causes? How else could He show the depths of His own love for sinners? For just as the innocent lamb there on Mt. Gerizim had struggled against the death knife, so the sinless Messiah, in the prime of His manhood, wrestled with the horror of death until blood seeped from His forehead. With an agonizing cry He fell prostrate, clutching the cold earth in Gethsemane: “Father, if You are willing, take this cup from me; yet not My will, but Yours be done” (Luke 22:42, NIV).

My troubled thinking forced me to admit that my sin is not a trite matter, which hurts the feelings of the God of Heaven. And Christ’s atoning sacrifice was not an artistic crucifix between two candles on an altar. It was an awful torturing death that tore apart God from God. It was an execution—the death sentence on my sin. This was the most inconceivable event in the history of the universe—Christ bearing God’s holy wrath against sin to the utmost upon Himself because God loved me more than His own life.

And as these concepts washed over my soul on our return trip back to Jerusalem that night, I kept crying, “But, God, how can you love us that much? How can You love us that much?” I finally realized how much I need to learn about real loving, and real forgiving. The Holy God against whom I sinned drank the dregs of the punishment for sin that I deserved.

I also thought about Ellen White’s counsel that it would be “well for us to spend a thoughtful hour each day in contemplation on the life of Christ. . . especially the closing ones.”¹ She also exhibits the same concentrated focus on the Cross in *The Desire of Ages*, as do the four Gospels. Almost two-thirds of her book centers on the last week of Christ’s life that led to His death.

The Cross was the ugliest, most horrible instrument of torture that was ever devised. But the pain of crucifixion is not what killed Jesus. My sins did. And Christ was willing to do this for my salvation. Realizing this changed my life, my understanding of salvation—and my love for Jesus.

“In this life we can only begin to understand the wonderful theme of redemption. With our finite comprehension we may consider most earnestly the shame and the glory, the life and the death, the justice and the mercy, that meet in the cross; yet with the utmost stretch of our mental powers we fail to grasp its full significance... The cross of Christ will be the science and the song of the redeemed through all eternity.”¹

¹Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 651.

Reflection Questions

1. Can you pause and spend some reflective journal moments on the cost of the sacrificial system, both old and new, and what it means to you?
2. What was your reaction to the author’s words that Christ’s sacrifice “tore apart God from God”?
3. When, if ever, did Christ’s suffering and death for you become a living reality to you?



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