

He Bore Our Sins

The Second Sunday After Easter
(From the Epistle: 1 St. Peter ii:19)

19. For this is thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully. 20. For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? but if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God. 21. For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: 22. Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: 23. Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously: 24. **Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree**, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed. 25. For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls.

Lev. 16:21. And Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions in all their sins, putting them upon the head of the goat, and shall send him away by the hand of a fit man into the wilderness: 22. **And the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities** unto a land not inhabited: and he shall let go the goat in the wilderness.

Isaiah 53:4. Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows... 5. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. 6. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and **the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all**. 8. ... for the transgression of my people was he stricken.

Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree... (1 Pe. 2:24a). This remarkable phrase is perhaps so much a part of our Christian-speak that we cease to wonder at the amazing nature of such a statement. But I want to consider it closely, in hopes of reviving our appreciation for this event.

Stand back for a moment and look at it: this assertion that my sins, and your sins, and *the sins of the whole world* (1 Jn. 2:2) were somehow transferred to Jesus Christ, who bore them in His own body on the Cross, thus removing them altogether from us, along with their ultimate consequence: eternal spiritual death. This act of transference was brought to pass sovereignly and divinely by God Himself, without human agency, since it is impossible for us to have had even the slightest hand in such an accomplishment.

By what means, after all, can I even get hold of my sin, let alone rid myself of it by shifting its burden to another? Sin is immaterial. It cannot be measured nor weighed. It is spiritual. "Ah, exactly!" scoffs the world, in response. "This concept of 'sin' which so preoccupies you Christians and your Holy Book is a thing of your own construct. It has no more force nor weight than whatever one chooses to give it. It possesses no objective, actual existence. It is the projection of your guilt-inducing religion, your arbitrary commandments for which you claim divine authority. It is easily eliminated by naturalistic explanations. Its dominion and reality are only

guaranteed by the traditions that insist upon it, whose perpetuation depends upon making a very big thing of it.”

Sin certainly *is* a very big part of Scripture. If “love”, “grace”, “holiness”, and “righteousness” are topics invariably associated with God, “sin” bears the same place of intimate connection with man. For something that the modern guns of science and reason claim to have effectively blown to bits, it commands great focus in the Bible. It compelled an elaborate sacrificial system which occupied the very heart of the national worship of Israel. Dealing with it involved an unbelievably complex series of sacrifices, carried out with holy fear and reverence, within a temple constructed for that singular purpose according to strict architectural specifications. To fail in the proper discharge of any of these ordinances invited the sentence of death. Furthermore, a principal theme preoccupying the entire body of the Prophets is the devastating power and effect of sin, and the judgments of God that invariably follows the failure to turn from it. The whole historical narrative of the Chosen People can be properly condensed to one recurring theme: sin, and repentance from sin.

And it is sin, paradoxically, that highlights the goodness of God, because it is God that chooses to forgive it, something He can neither be obligated, nor compelled, nor bribed into doing. The love that prompted such a good response to something so bad finds its completion and fulfillment in the extraordinary claims of the New Testament and today’s Epistle.

It should be obvious now that there is a vast disagreement between two opinions about the very existence of sin, let alone its significance and consequence. The world esteems it as meaningless, a moot point at best. But for the Christian, it looms so terribly large and universal that the story of Christ’s victory over it occupies the core of his entire worship.

We must return with wonder, then, to these few words: *Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree*. My sins, your sins, must be *something*, or how else could Christ bear them in His body? He didn’t bear *nothing*; He bore *something*, no less than a horse bears a rider, or a man bears a backpack, or a bridge bears a load. Sins, therefore, have substance. They exist in time and space. They have a real, tangible effect. They create a measurable consequence, they set forces in motion, just like the ringing of a bell, or turning on of an electric switch, or detonating an explosive. Each and every sin, therefore, possesses the quality of true existence. This is an extremely unnerving concept for sinners --for you, and me, and everyone else-- and surely is the reason that the world rushes so desperately away from it. We say, “It’s just a thought, or a desire, or a fancy, or an issue of temperament. No one else knew about it.” Or, “It was just a night of fun and partying, and no different than ten thousand other parties going on in thousands of other American towns. No one noticed. No one cared. I forgot about it. The people I was involved forgot about it. Besides, we no longer call this particular activity... ‘sin’”. It was...nothing. *Nothing!*”

But it was *something*. It came to birth, and we were the agents of its existence. If not another soul on earth was affected, to our knowledge, there were two who were: both us, and the God who is everywhere present. Even our private sins edge us ever closer to spiritual death, and are a willful misuse of something that God created for His own use and pleasure: ourselves. It is like arguing that a tree that falls out of earshot creates no sound, since there is no ear to hear it. But no sin goes without effect. Christ had to *bear* it; it had to be *something*.

How, then, did God collect these invisible entities called sins whose existence I am responsible for? How did He remove them from me, and put them on Christ, who *bare them in his own body on the tree*? How could the sins of all people, of all times, both before and after the Crucifixion, be brought together at one moment of time and put upon God's Son, who took them away from us, and though He had no sin (2 Cor. 5:21), accepted them as if they were His own?

We have no way of answering this, or even imagining an answer. We could imagine collecting, say, the visible articles and tools of our various vices, whatever they may be, and dragging them off to one place, and making a great bonfire of them. But our *sins* --actual, present, substantive, as real as the moment they were committed; amassing, as it were, an ever more airtight case against us which, but for repentance, will in the Day of Reckoning become very, very public-- how did He bear them away?

I cannot say. I cannot say, at all.

But I am thankful He did so.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.