

THE REMOVAL OF SIN (I JOHN 3:5)

Christianity is not mere morals, it is not a case of turning from idols to a new religion, from one religion to another; there is a spiritual obedience to the law required (3:4), a striving after holiness (3:3) and a shunning sin (3:4-10); anything else is unnatural to the Christian and by these the Christian is known (2:3). In this paragraph John deals very practically with these Christians and gives three arguments why the Christian cannot go on sinning; 1. sin is rebellion against God (3:4), 2. the principle of sin has been put away by Christ (3:5), 3. the practice of sin is being destroyed by Christ (3:8).

The two aspects of this destruction of sin, in relation to Christ, are found in V's. 5 & 8. Christ was manifested to take away sin (Vs. 5), and to destroy the works of the Devil (Vs. 8). These two verses deal with the finished work of Christ on Calvary and the continued work of Christ in glory on behalf of those who struggle with sin. There is a sacrifice that is continually efficacious on the part of the believer (Revelation 5:6; Hebrews 10:20). This is exactly what John said previously in 1:9; continually cleansing, removal of sin.

The word "manifest" deals with the incarnation from man's perspective. John does not say that God sent him (Galatians 4:4; John 3:16) or that Christ came (John 16:28; 18:37), but he focuses on the fact that he was "revealed" to man for a particular purpose; to remove sin. The word manifest, as in other places, includes the entire person and work of Christ, his birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension. It implies also his pre-existence; that which was before is now revealed.

What exactly John meant by the phrase "*to take away our sins*"? In what sense is sin being "taken away" legally or morally? The answer to this question hinged on the understanding of the word *αἴρω* (*airo*). This word has different meanings or nuances "to lift up in order to bear" or "to lift off and carry away." Now we understand that the gospel has different elements to it. There is the fact that Christ bear our sins on his own body on the tree (I Peter 2:24) the expiation of sin, and that he also, by that cross-work, carried our sins away from us. Is John here focusing on the former or the later? Is he saying that Christ bears our sins as a sacrifice or that he is removing our sins from us today? Is this speaking of justification or sanctification?

I argue that both aspects are in view. It is evident that the general tenor of the passage is dealing moral purification; our sanctification. But while John deals with that he does so with the cross-work of Christ in mind as the foundation of moral purity. John cannot point to the source of moral purity (3:3, 5, 7) without having in his mind the material part of that process by which that object is attained, i.e. the cross work of Christ. It is not only the guilt and punishment of our sin that has been removed but sin is so heinous in itself that Christ was manifested to extract it from the heart and mind of the Christian.

The same phrase is used in John 1:29 "*which taketh away the sin of the world.*" There is an important distinction between John 1:29 and I John 3:5. In the former humanity in general is spoken of ("*sin of the world*" Jew and Gentile), in the later John uses the personal pronoun "our" sin. And so John says here that He bore our sin on his body in order that he might take it away from us. Now that brings us to answer a more potent question. If Christ carried the guilt of our sins away on the cross, in what sense, or how does he take away sins for us now on a daily basis? How does this apply to my situation now, for the particular sins of today?

John is dealing with people here who are struggling with sin. He is aware that there are those who are struggling with sin because they are children of Satan. Those he warns. But there are also those genuine saints struggling against the flesh who have the seed of salvation in them (Vs. 9), those he comforts (3:5). John says there is an answer; Christ "*was manifested to take away our sin.*" He is the propitiation for our sin (2:2), he bear our sins on his own body on to the tree, (I Peter 2:24) that dealt with the legal satisfaction of God's wrath. But John goes further and says he is now taking away our sins; he is our sanctification (I Corinthians 1:30). Paul, having struggled with the wretchedness of the flesh came to the same conclusion as John does here; (Romans 7:24-8:1). This is the answer to sin in the life of the Christian; Christ has died to take away sin, not by you struggling in the flesh to over-come it - but by you coming to Christ, to find free grace and sovereign mercy (Psalm 119:11). By this He removes sin!