

GABBATHA BEFORE GOLGOTHA

Back in 1961, long before anyone had dreamed of actually producing popular religious musicals for the general public – like *Jesus Christ Superstar* or *Godspell* – Helen Kromer and Frederick Silver wrote a musical for the North American Ecumenical Youth Assembly. It was called *For Heaven's Sake*. If you were not among the two thousand young people who met in August at the University of Michigan in 1961, you have probably never heard of it. I would never have heard of it either, except a friend of mine gave me the soundtrack and made me listen to it.

I do not know if you remember what the church was like in the early '60s, but through the late '40s and most of the '50s, it was boom time for the liberal churches. People came out of the war dreaming of a peaceful town with a church on the corner, and getting back to an idyllic American life – whether they had ever known one before or not. As resources became available after the war, churches sprang up like weeds across the land. You could hardly plant a seed “so poor that it wouldn't grow” in those days. But by the late '50s, and with increasing volume, some voices were suggesting that it was mostly fluff and feathers; that there was little commitment or purpose behind the glitter of success; that the churches were full of people, but carried little spiritual content or discipline in their gatherings and programs; that, in short, there wasn't much religion among the religious. Of course, that made church members angry and hurt their feelings, so they left the church in droves during the '60s and '70s. At least that proved the point – the charges were true. Christians do not *leave* the church – they *are* the church.

The satire that came out of that period was frequently scathing. Even when it was funny, true, and clever, it was still scathing. It is no wonder that we ended up losing thousands of “fair-weather” friends. Those who lived through that time laughed and cried their way into new awareness, and often into new faith and commitment. *For Heaven's Sake* had some tender songs, but satire was not neglected. It started out with a song entitled “A Mighty Fortress Is Our Church,” and it went on to give some helpful advice about how to keep all the undesirable people out. It was a lot clearer back then who the undesirable people were, and most mainline churches did a

very effective job of keeping them out. The song did not really give us any new techniques, it just brought out into the open what we were really like.

Another delightful little song was entitled “I Want You To Use Me, O Lord – But Not Just Now.” *After*. And it went on to list all the important things we had to accomplish before we had any time for God. A lot of us could have written the words to that song ourselves, but we somehow just hadn’t gotten around to it yet.

My personal favorite went something like this: “I got the gimme God blues. I got the gimme God blues. ’Cause God won’t give me, what I want him to give me ... I got the gimme God blues.”

But what I really want to talk to you about are the first two sentences of one three-sentence ditty from that musical, a winsome little thing called “The Rap”: **“He took the rap for me. But I don’t see what I ever did to deserve the rap they say He took for me.** Or can it be that *that* is the rap pinned on me – that I don’t see what I ever did to deserve the rap they say He took for me?” That was it. That’s all there was to it. A brief lead-in to all the crossfire of all Christology: **“He died for me. But I don’t see what I ever did to deserve the death they say He died for me.”**

I suspect everybody here has felt some consternation, at one time or another, about the apparent assumption of enormous guilt that Christianity attaches to all of us. The Garden of Eden story comes from ancient Babylon via Abraham, who was an ancient Babylonian – a Chaldean from the city of Ur – before there was any Judaism. But leave it to the Christians to take the story from Judaism and turn it into a doctrine called “The Fall of Man.” “In Adam’s fall, we sinned all.” And so, despite the fact that the fruit of the story is the knowledge of good and evil – the power of choice, the dilemma of free will – most of the Christian population has heard and understood the story on a very different level for many generations now. They do not know that the story is about our relationship with God, and how fear, ignorance, and pride lead to separation – a vast chasm of alienation – between us and God. It is not about bad behavior, though of course that is often a by-product. It is about a condition of the heart and soul – a great and crippling loneliness. The creature is *not* okay apart from the Creator. But that is too big – too profound and true. So people want to keep turning it back around –

reduce the “apple” to some dastardly deed ... a mere reckless moment ... a temporary lapse of goodness – but mostly we’re just fine (I’m fine, how are you?); we just have to stop making so many mistakes.

We will never understand anything about God, Jesus, or ourselves if we keep putting it on that level. We are built far better than we think. We are so much more than we know. That only makes the loneliness more unbearable. And it does not matter how well we are designed if we are lost, cut off from our Source, and estranged from the One who knows us best and loves us most.

But that is far too big and too scary, and something we cannot fix by ourselves. So we prefer the comic-book version. When Adam and Eve ate the fruit, it was very, very naughty. They were bad, bad people. God said “DON’T” and they did it anyway, so they became ugly, depraved, and abominable – egregious to God. And since we are the children of Adam and Eve, we are bad, bad people too. Daddy has to spank. It is then assumed that Jesus had to die on the Cross because we are so despicable, and that God is somehow appeased by Jesus’ sacrifice and decides not to kill us after all, however richly we deserve it. Meanwhile, this gives Jesus some time to clean us up and get us presentable – it is called “sanctification” – before God’s spotlight comes back around again. That’s the good part. Only, some of us cannot figure out why Jesus’ death on the Cross would appease God on the one hand, or make any difference to us on the other hand. And more than a few of us figure that if God is the sort of Being who would be pleased or mollified by the death of his own Son, then why would we want to have any more to do with him anyway? If he thinks we were estranged before ...

The problem of the human condition is not that we *like* to be bad or *want* to be bad. Our problem is that things keep going wrong no matter how hard we try to be good. It is not *natural* for us to feel or know the will of God – to be in tune, to be on the same wavelength, to live in the flow of God’s purpose and power. Everything we touch or try to accomplish seems to twist away from its rightful shape and purpose. We have all the gifts and tools, but we somehow keep seeming to misuse them. We love each other, but it keeps fraying around the edges – or turning into anger at the most inopportune moments. We work hard and accomplish many things, but along the

way some people had to be laid off; or the ecology suffered; or the advertisers made it sound a little naughty so it would sell better; or the department next to ours cut some costs we didn't know about, so the product isn't really what we thought it was going to be when we got so excited about it in the first place, etc. And somehow we aren't really in control of everything and everybody, so we can't always fix it even when we know how and want to. So do we take the flawed product off the market and all go bankrupt because of our principles? Or do we sell it as is and hope to keep improving it along the way? How many products have you bought so far in your life that were *not* flawed? How many perfect people have you known? It is a broken, limited, imperfect realm. *That* is THE FALL – not some nameless sex atrocity symbolized by an apple and overcome by a virgin birth. It is a world estranged from its Creator and his ways. And we are caught in it – we are part of it – we were born into it. This is boot camp. And it is not easy for us to forgive God for putting us here, even if it *is* giving us training which is absolutely essential for all that is to come.

So like it or not, it is true: We do not start out here knowing the presence of God clearly enough, or trustingly enough, to be truly obedient. Some very terrible things happen because of that. But “The Fall” does not mean that we are egregious or ugly or abominable. The very point and purpose of Jesus' coming is to make that perspective unbelievable for all of us, for all time. Only, in doing that, Jesus also makes it clearer than we want it – clearer than it has ever been before – that life apart from God's presence, life unaware of God's love and purpose, life lived our way instead of God's WAY ... is not okay, is not going to work, and is not going to end up pleasant for us or anybody else, at least not for very long. So our willfulness and rebellion stick out like a sore thumb whenever we notice how Jesus lives. Our greed, and the fear behind it, is illumined not by His accusations but by His actions – by His WAY. He heals, even when it gets Him into trouble. He cares, when nobody else could be bothered. And He gets angry, when everyone else is willing to accept things the way they are. Walking with Him is like walking through minefields – things we thought were normal and natural keep blowing up in our faces. Only, our lack of trust and our unwillingness to give our lives over to God's care and guidance are seen by *contrast* – not by rejection or scolding.

The only time we see Jesus angry is when we are putting each other down or writing each other off. But He is not angry with us for who or what we are. He knows we are lost, or hurt, or wrong, or stupid, or confused. He is not surprised that we do things really hurtful – even betray, forsake, crucify. He works with that kind of thing all day long without showing impatience or hating us for it – that is, as long as we are willing.

“He took the rap for me. But I don’t see what I ever did to deserve the rap they say He took for me.” The very mindset of that statement – the attitude and stance out of which it is phrased – twists our thinking into wrong patterns before we can even deal with it. “He took the rap”? “He died for you”? There are enormous assumptions behind such phrases: You were just fine, until you did something really bad. And now you are about to be severely punished for doing such a bad thing. The punishment is so great that you will not be able to survive it. Then He comes along and takes the punishment aimed at you, so you can go scot-free.

All of it is wrong – wrongly put, wrongly phrased, wrongly implied. The truth of God is bigger than our words, and will go on saving us despite ourselves. But the way we phrase and describe things is the way we comprehend them. Though that does not limit God, it certainly does limit how we consciously relate and respond to God.

SO YOU COULD GO SCOT-FREE

No! Jesus is not interested in freedom as we think of it. He is interested in bonds: love-bonds, covenant relationship, total obedience to God. The Kingdom of God is a Great Fellowship – a family of people under disciplines they trust and love, for purposes so beautiful and eternal that nobody who gets the slightest glimpse of it would want to miss it or be apart from it – for even a moment – ever again. Freedom is important because it allows us to choose – to choose our bondage – to choose which God we will serve. The moment you choose your God, your freedom is over. And *until* you choose your God, freedom is a terrible, empty, meaningless place to be.

Jesus does not take away any of the overt repercussions of our sins. Jesus does not tell us that we can go on sinning because He has us covered, or that we do not have to make amends or pay the

penalty for our wrong deeds. No one who knows Jesus, or who comes awake and alive to His WAY, or who gets even the tiniest glimpse of God's Kingdom wants to go on doing wrong or being wrong. **It hurts too much!** We long to make amends, to repair damage, to undo the wrong we have done, whenever that is in any way possible. What Jesus "takes away" is our self-loathing – our fear that we are beyond help, our paralysis because we think God has rejected us. We get new chances – to live without making the same errors and mistakes, and to live without doing the same evil. So much of Christian language makes it sound like forgiveness means the *price* of evil is canceled, or even like it somehow is not evil anymore. If you blind me and I forgive you, does that mean I can see again? Forgiveness does not cancel the price – it restores the relationship. Have any of you *ever* found that the love of Jesus meant you did not do what you did? Or that your memories of doing damage are now pleasant? Or that you now think what you did was okay? Sometimes it amazes me that anybody ever comes back to church anymore, when its truth has been so twisted beyond all recognition.

Anyway, Christians are not interested in freedom. They are interested in discipleship, service, commitment, usefulness, love-bonds, obedience to God, patient endurance, courage. Most of the world doesn't know it yet, but that is where all the hope and joy really are.

YOU DID SOMETHING REALLY BAD, AND YOU HAVE TO BE PUNISHED

There is a lot to be said about this, and I am not going to say most of it (at least not on this Good Friday). But maybe a couple of things:

In the first place, God does not punish. God corrects. "*As I live, says the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?*" (Ezekiel 33:11 – we are not even into the New Testament yet.)

In the second place, we are not punished *for* our sins. We are punished *by* our sins. God does not have to lift a finger. God does not need or want to "get even." We get to live with who we are and with what we become. There is no escape from that kind of justice.

Mercy and forgiveness cannot change that. Nobody can “take the rap” for you – not even the Christ of God. No matter where you go – there you are. Neither Heaven nor Hell can alter the truth of who we are and what we have become. Why do we keep worrying about *the place*? How typical! It is not the *address* that will make the difference. Our character, the condition of our souls, what we really live for and how we live for it – these are what matter, and what will go on mattering.

I know some of you. If God put you in Hell, you would just think it was God’s next assignment and you would go around helping anybody you could – just like you do here – praying every day for strength and guidance. And I know some other people. If God put them in Heaven, they would bitch, moan, complain, criticize, and be in crisis – just like they do here. Why do we keep worrying about the place? It is who we are and what we become that matter.

HE DIED FOR YOUR SINS – HE TOOK THE RAP FOR YOU

“He took the rap for me. But I don’t see what I ever did to deserve the rap they say He took for me.” Do you see it? The phrase is so pathetically small – so mired in a minuscule comprehension of the real issues – that it obscures the very question it pretends to ask. Jesus did not come here to stand in for some event-based “rap” – as if you have overspent your cosmic credit card and cannot pay it off, and Jesus is paying off the debt with His blood so you can go on with life. How often I have heard it put that way. How often I have wondered how *anybody* could be moved or persuaded by the notion of such a ludicrous, one-dimensional transaction. Jesus came to change our entire orientation: to transform everything we have ever experienced or known; to deal with a “condition” of the heart and soul and mind that is stuck and lost in a tiny physical reality that is too small and limited for us, and which corrupts us more and more the more we try to get along here – the more we settle for what things are like here.

Did Jesus take upon Himself a punishment that was aimed at you? A punishment you deserved? Did Jesus die in your place so that you would not have to die? And if Jesus did not die on the Cross for you – or if you cancel its validity by not accepting and believing that He died on the Cross for you – will that mean that you do not get to participate in the Resurrection? That He will not take you into eternal life? Do you ever *think* about what you believe?

Many Christian concepts and creeds are based on this substitutionary construct. Many dire threats are made about what happens to us if we do not believe and appreciate it sufficiently. Many words are employed that carry at least overtones of such meanings: atonement, sacrifice, redemption. I know many liberal Christians, even many clergymen, who are so offended by the language and so appalled by the message that they throw it all out, put nothing in its place, and reduce Christendom to a plea for heightened social consciousness – as if we do not need a Savior in the first place, just the will to try a little harder to take care of our problems. They figure that if we cannot find any reason to love God, at least we ought to love our neighbors, and maybe it will turn out that God – if there is a personal God – will be pleased if we work hard for “good” causes. And I ask: Why not just get honest and turn atheist – or at least agnostic?

The creeds were not made by Jesus. Paul struggled to comprehend what Jesus’ life and death and Resurrection mean to us – things not easily put into words. But Paul did not write creeds. The people and the groups that shaped and worded the creeds and locked them in – do you assume they were brighter, better educated, more sincere, more inspired by God than you are? Do you even know their names? Do you know what kinds of lives they lived, or if you admire their way of walking the Path? Would you assume that their counterparts – doctors, dentists, lawyers, or craftsmen of the second, third, fourth, or fifth century A.D. – were automatically superior in comprehension and understanding of their fields to doctors or dentists of today? None of them walked with Jesus. None of them walked with anybody who had walked with anybody who had walked with anybody who knew Jesus in the flesh. Not that this would have made them automatically right or brilliant ... any more than it did Peter, or Judas.

It is Good Friday. I know that Jesus died on a cross. I know it changed the world. I know it cannot change *me* unless I get close enough to let it. I say that because lots of people do not get close – they will not let it get through their shields – and so it does nothing for them. It has gotten past my shields over and over, but the experience and the changes I have from that do not match with the words I hear from the creeds. Lots of people, from the very beginning until now, have felt the power of it, but they have not put it like the

creeds insist. And I even dare to suggest that you may not be able to settle for the words of the creeds – *or* for my words – if you really want the Cross to move you from death into LIFE. Get over the fear. Stop being a puppet. It is a Living Word, and a Living Lord. Stop letting third-century thoughtframes be your only way of letting Jesus into your life.

It does not matter what I think – it matters what He did. But I have to *think* about what He did, and so do you, or it cannot register very deeply. I only tell you what I think because I do not know how else to encourage you to get real about what He means and does for you.

Jesus did not take the rap for you. That puts it the wrong way around. In more familiar words, Jesus did not die *for* our sins. He died *because* of our SIN – our alienation from God. No God wanted us nailed to the cross in His place. Most humans do not want us nailed there either, because we haven't threatened them as badly as Jesus did – at least not yet. In any case, Jesus did not stand between us and the wrath of God – He did not die because otherwise God would kill us. Stop swallowing creeds – keep reading The Story. Jesus was not killed by God. Jesus was killed by us. That is the terrible reality we never want to face. God did not kill Jesus, we did! He did not die *for* us – that is, not in our place. He died *because* of us – because our level of life could not stand HIS level of LIFE, and that threatened us so badly that we had to get Him out of here – out of our way. That is the real story: His WAY – or our way.

For all of our lives, for many centuries now, we have tried to pretend – we have built vast systems and religions to help us pretend – that we really love God and want to serve God and want to be God's people, and that we are willing to do anything at all – anything in our power – to please God and be his faithful people. Underneath the pretense, our rebellion and distrust run rampant. In ways large and small, from great crimes to petty pouting and passive resistance, we run our lives without giving God very much say in them. We spend our money and our time the way we want to. We eat and drink the way we want to. We run our relationships the way we want to. And secretly, but deeply, we believe that if God gets into a position of real influence with us, our lives will be ruined. Not only that, but life is hard and full of suffering, and we have a lot of animosity toward God

because of that – both for ourselves, and maybe even more for some of the people we love.

So God came – manifested in human flesh – sent His Son (however you best say it). And God’s Message was made really clear, people were healed, and the Kingdom was proclaimed and revealed. In other words, God called our bluff: “Here is your chance. I am here! Follow me. If you do, I really will change things around to how they ought to be. Everyone will be blessed.”

And we know what happened. We could not stand The Presence. It threatened us beyond endurance. Jealousy was rampant. Fear rose off the scale. People were arguing, choosing sides. And all He was doing was teaching, healing, helping ... only, it was a little bit more than that: He was putting up a mirror for us to see ourselves, our resistance, our values, our fear and hatred – how close we *really* wanted to be to God, which turned out to be not very close at all. It did not take long for a whole nation to erupt, to react. And the leadership – the leadership of the most sincerely religious, devout, scripturally based, prophetic, “chosen” people in the world – decided it was imperative to kill Him. He did not die for our sins. He died because of our SIN – because of our alienation, our distance, our mistrust, our lostness ... from God.

And on that day, and ever since that day, people, individuals – human beings – of every background, nation, language, and culture have seen that Cross, and they have seen Him dying there. And they have dropped to their knees as the blinders – the veil of denial – have dropped from their eyes, and they have cried out, “Oh my God! I had *no* idea! How far away we have been from home!”