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Christ's Incredible Cross

By David Servant

FOUR The Savior Presented

Thus far we've learned that the death of Christ was preordained from the foundation of the world, prefigured by millions of animal sacrifices spanning thousands of years, and predicted by the prophets for centuries. There was no halfhearted preparation for the event that would make it possible for God to justly offer a free and full pardon to billions of sinners!

Finally, God's chosen time out of all eternity arrived—the time for the fulfillment of His eternal plan; the time when God would become a man. The apostle Paul refers to that very special period of history as “the fullness of the time”:

But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive adoption as sons (Gal. 4:4-5).

The birth of Jesus in Bethlehem of Judea was not the beginning of a new life, as in the case of every other human birth, but was the continuation of an eternal life. The Son of God did not begin His existence in a stable but existed from eternity past. He became a man but was still fully God. As the prophet Isaiah said, “For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us”(Is. 9:6). The human child was born, but the divine Son was given.

Why the Incarnation?

Why did Jesus become a man? The simple answer is that He had to become a human being in order to die for humanity's sins. As the above quoted scripture states, Jesus was “born of a woman.” That is another way of saying that He became a human being. His purpose in becoming a man, as Paul stated, was to redeem us. Of course, our redemption was accomplished by His sacrificial death, but unless He had lived as a man, He could not have died as a man.

Jesus was born to die. Certainly, Jesus did many wonderful things during His earthly ministry, but those were not the primary reason for His incarnation. As He Himself proclaimed, He came “to give His life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

The primary purpose of the incarnation was so that the God-man could suffer and die. This truth is contained in other scriptures as well. For example, we read in the book of Hebrews:

Since then the children [those of us who would believe in Him] share in flesh and blood [we have human bodies], He Himself likewise also partook of the same [a human body], that *through death* He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil..."(Heb. 2:14-15, emphasis added).

Jesus "partook of flesh and blood" so that He could physically die. Through His death, Satan was rendered powerless. (We will study Satan's demise in a later chapter.)

His Birth a Revelation

Even the story of Christ's conception helps us understand the purpose for His incarnation.

We read that an angel appeared in a dream to Joseph and instructed him to name Mary's Child *Jesus*, or the Hebrew *Yehoshua*, which means "Jehovah saves." The angel gave the reason for this name when he explained, "It is He who will save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21).

Looking back, we realize that it was only through Jesus' death that we have been saved from our sins. It's easy for us to see the prediction of the death of Christ even in the disclosure of His miraculous conception. The angel didn't say, "Jesus will heal and teach and deliver people from demons." All of those things were significant in themselves, but none compares with the primary purpose of His incarnation—to die for our sins as a man.

On the night of Jesus' birth, an angel also appeared to some shepherds and once again proclaimed the reason for the Messiah's birth:

"For today in the city of David there has been born *for you a Savior*, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11, emphasis added).

Notice the angel said Jesus had been born *for them*. In addition, notice He had been born for them *a Savior*—the one who would accomplish salvation. Again, we realize that salvation was accomplished through His death. For that reason, Jesus became a man.

The apostles Paul and John respectively add their testimonies to this fact:

It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus *came into the world* to save sinners (1 Tim. 1:15, emphasis added).

And you know that *He appeared* in order to take away sins (1 John 3:5, emphasis added).

According to Scripture, the incarnation was essential for our salvation. Unless God became a man, there would be no way we could hope to escape the punishment we deserved.

Fully Tested

Not only was it essential that God become a man, but it was also crucial for that God-man to live for an extended period of time on earth. He had to be proven sinless in order to qualify as our substitute. The only way He could be declared sinless was to be tempted with the temptations that all other people have faced.

Only one without guilt could justly serve as our substitute, otherwise He would be deserving of the same condemnation as we. If a man on death row volunteered to die in

place of his friend who was also on death row, his offer would be unacceptable for the simple reason that he is under sentence of death for his own offense. It would take someone who was without sin to redeem us.

If it had only been necessary for God to become a man and then die, without living a life full of temptation, Jesus could very well have completed His mission by dying with the other babies of Bethlehem who were killed by Herod's cruel decree. It was necessary, however, for Jesus to be fully tested and proven sinless before dying.

As we examine Scripture, it seems safe to say that God does not consider a man to have been sufficiently tested until he has reached at least the age of thirty. For example, Joseph, after many trials, was exalted in Egypt at age thirty.¹ David, after years of difficulties, was exalted to kingship at age thirty.² The Levites entered their priestly responsibilities at age thirty.³ Very possibly, Ezekiel began his ministry at age thirty.⁴ Jesus entered His ministry at about age thirty after first being led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness to be severely tempted by the devil.⁵

Moreover, we must not think that the wilderness temptation was the first and last time Jesus ever faced temptation. Scripture plainly states that after Jesus' temptation episode in the wilderness, the devil "departed from Him until an opportune time" (Luke 4:13). It is clear that Jesus was further tempted later.

Jesus had also been tempted prior to His episode with Satan in the wilderness. The writer of Hebrews stated that Jesus was "tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15b). Jesus was tempted in every way, all through His life, just as we are. We have been tempted as children, as teenagers, and as adults. So was Jesus.

No doubt He was tempted to perform slipshod work in His father's carpentry business or to cheat a customer in some other way. Jesus was tempted to lie, to lust, to hate, but He never yielded. In so doing, He proved Himself sinless. He demonstrated His qualification to die for humanity as the sinless substitute, which God's righteousness required if anyone was to be saved.

Think about it: If Jesus had yielded to a single temptation during His lifetime it would have meant that none of us could be saved. *Praise God that Jesus never sinned!*

Why Was Jesus Water Baptized?

After thirty years of living the life of a human being, after thirty years of facing daily temptation, after thirty years of sinless submission to God's will, Jesus entered into His ministry. It seems strange, however, that His first act was to be baptized by John in the Jordan River.

John initially objected to Jesus' request for baptism, saying, "I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?" (Matt. 3:14). At that point in time, John didn't know that Jesus was the Messiah (see John 1:33). Thus his remark reveals that he knew how perfect Jesus was. John, a holy man, felt unworthy because Jesus was much holier.

¹ See Gen. 41:46.

² See 2 Sam. 5:4.

³ See Num. 4:2-3, 22-23, 29-30, 46-47.

⁴ See Ezek. 1:1.

⁵ See Matt. 4:1.

Jesus answered John's objection by stating, "Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt. 3:15).

If sinless Jesus had nothing of which to repent, why did He insist on being baptized? There can be only one reason: He was identifying Himself with sinners—a foreshadowing of the primary purpose of His coming, which would be fulfilled on the cross when He would bear every person's sins. His death would truly "fulfill all righteousness" by providing the means whereby God could righteously forgive undeserving sinners.

Concerning Christ's baptism, James Denney wrote:

Here in the baptism we see...*Jesus numbering Himself with the transgressors*, submitting to be baptized with their baptism, identifying Himself with them in their relation to God as sinners, making all their responsibilities His own....It was no accident that now, and not at some other hour, the Father's voice declared Him the beloved Son, the chosen One in whom His soul delighted. For in so identifying Himself with sinful men, in so making their last and most dreadful responsibilities His own, Jesus approved Himself the true Son of the Father, the true Servant and Representative of Him whose name from of old is Redeemer.⁶

The foreshadowing of the cross at Jesus' baptism is further substantiated by a later statement Jesus made concerning His death, which He metaphorically referred to as a baptism:

"But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is accomplished!" (Luke 12:50).

It seems quite reasonable to surmise that Jesus was referring here to His death. This becomes especially clear in light of a later statement in which He used the same metaphor (baptism) as a reference to the sufferings He would shortly endure on the cross (see Mark 10:36-40).

We therefore see that not only was the purpose of Christ's incarnation revealed at His conception and birth, but also His sacrificial death for sinners was foreshadowed at the inauguration of His ministry. It was then that John the Baptist introduced Him as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29b).

"I Lay Down My Life"

Throughout the three years of His ministry, Jesus made numerous references to His death. In fact, such statements became more frequent as the final day approached. Many of the early references were purposely vague, but nevertheless, are clear to those of us who read them from a post-crucifixion view.

For example, in His discourse with Nicodemus, Jesus predicted both His crucifixion and its accomplishment: "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; that whoever believes may in Him have eternal life" (John 3:14-15).

When the Pharisees complained to Jesus that His disciples never fasted, He replied that the bridegroom's attendants do not fast as long as the bridegroom is with them. Jesus went on to predict that one day the bridegroom would be taken away; then the attendants would fast (see Luke 5:33-35).

⁶James Denney, *The Death of Christ*, p. 15.

When the scribes and Pharisees requested a sign from Him, Jesus replied that there would be no sign given but the sign of Jonah. What did that mean? He would spend three days and nights in the heart of the earth just as Jonah did in the belly of the fish (see Matt. 12:38-40).

In John 6 we read of Jesus telling His Jewish audience, “I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he shall live forever; and the bread also which I shall give for the life of the world is My flesh” (John 6:51).

Later in John’s Gospel, Jesus proclaimed, “I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep....For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again” (John 10:11,17).

These statements alone make it clear that Jesus viewed His death as His most significant work.

Predicting His Own Death

Anyone who surveys the four Gospels can’t help but notice what seems to be a disproportionately large amount of space devoted to Christ’s final days and crucifixion. Of a combined total of eighty-nine chapters, twenty-six concern themselves with the events of Jesus’ final week.

Potentially, the Gospel writers could have recorded incidents of any of the twelve thousand days of Jesus’ life, yet they were inspired to devote almost one-third of their writings to reporting the final six or seven days of His earthly life. Obviously, the Holy Spirit wants to draw our attention to Jesus’ death.

As the culminating day of history drew closer, Jesus predicted His death much more frequently and plainly than any time previously, underscoring its necessity. It would be no accident that He would die a horrible death. It was God’s preordained plan. It was the primary purpose for His coming.

Mark’s Gospel records eight separate occasions when Jesus predicted His death.⁷

The first, recorded in chapter eight, occurred directly after Peter had made his impressive confession of Jesus’ messiahship and divinity. Now that His disciples knew who He was, it was important that they understand what He came to accomplish.

After commending Peter and then warning His disciples not to reveal His identity, Jesus “began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again” (Mark 8:31).

The Scripture goes on to say that “He was stating the matter plainly,” with the result that “Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him” (Mark 8:32). That the divine Son of God, the Messiah of Israel, should die was unthinkable to Peter. Surely, Jesus had made a misstatement. Peter was so certain that the death of Jesus could not possibly be God’s will that he boldly rebuked the Master, first taking Him aside so as not to embarrass Him!

But Jesus’ response surely must have shocked Peter. Having been commended just a minute before for his divinely-given understanding of Jesus’ identity, now Peter finds himself being rebuked for adopting a humanistic perspective of God’s ultimate purpose in sending Christ:

But turning around and seeing His disciples, He rebuked Peter, and said, “*Get behind Me, Satan; for you are not setting your mind on God’s interests, but man’s*” (Mark 8:33, emphasis added).

⁷Mark 8:31-33; 9:12; 9:31; 10:32-34; 10:45; 12:1-8; 14:7-8; 14:22-28

It is clear that Jesus wanted to leave a lasting impression upon Peter and the disciples' minds concerning God's viewpoint of His imminent death: *It was God's intention for Him to die*. Any other perspective was unacceptable.

And why was it God's intention that Jesus die? Because only then could the holy God, the Judge of the universe, justly offer a free pardon to the human beings He loved so much.

“The Hour Has Come”

John's Gospel, although not recording Jesus' specific predictions of His death, does include a repeated use of what is first a cryptic phrase, but which later is revealed as an obvious reference to the hour of His crucifixion. I list the first four references below:

And Jesus said to her, “Woman what do I have to do with you? *My hour has not yet come*” (John 2:4, emphasis added).

“Go up to the feast yourselves; I do not go up to this feast because *My time has not yet fully come*” (John 7:8, emphasis added).

They were seeking therefore to seize Him; and no man laid his hand on Him, because *His hour had not yet come* (John 7:30, emphasis added).

These words He spoke in the treasury, as He taught in the temple; and no one seized him, *because His hour had not yet come* (John 8:20, emphasis added).

It becomes clear in the third and fourth references that “the hour” of which John wrote had something to do with Jesus falling into the hands of men. The fifth, sixth, and seventh references listed below all occurred during the final few days of His earthly life, and “the hour” becomes obvious as a reference to His death:

Now before the Feast of the Passover, Jesus knowing that *His hour had come* that He should depart out of this world to the Father... (John 13:1, emphasis added).

These things Jesus spoke; and lifting up His eyes to heaven, He said, “Father, *the hour has come*; glorify Thy Son, that the Son may glorify Thee...” (John 17:1, italics mine).

And Jesus answered them, saying, “*The hour has come* for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains by itself alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:23-24, emphasis added).

“The hour” cannot be anything but the time of Jesus' death. It would be “the hour” He had spoken about for three years and which none of His disciples understood.

In the seventh-listed saying above, Jesus quietly lifted the edge of the shroud that hid the unimaginable results of His dying: Just as the planting of a dead grain of wheat insures a harvest of grain, so the death of the Son of God would produce a harvest of sons. *We would be born again*.

And how significant was that “hour” of which John repeatedly wrote and to which Jesus referred? Jesus continued:

“Now My soul has become troubled; and what shall I say, ‘Father, save Me from this hour’? *But for this purpose I came to this hour.* Father, glorify Thy name” (John 12:27-28a, emphasis added).

The hour of His death was the purpose for His coming.

The synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) all record one very important event that occurred just a few days before Jesus’ crucifixion. We read that Peter, James, and John climbed an unnamed mountain with Jesus. There He was transfigured before them, and Matthew tells us that “His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light” (Matt. 17:2).

At the same time, Moses and Elijah appeared, apparently having been taken from paradise for this special occasion. Mark tells us only that they were conversing with Jesus, but Luke tells us the subject of their conversation:

Moses and Elijah, who, appearing in glory, *were speaking of His departure which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem* (Luke 9:30b-31, emphasis added).

Their topic comes as no surprise, as certainly Moses and Elijah would be supremely interested in the event that would make possible the forgiveness of the sins of the world. Indeed, it would be the event that made it possible for their own sins to be forgiven during their lives “on credit” for that which Jesus would achieve.

It is also interesting that Luke speaks of Jesus’ departure as an *accomplishment*. His death was much more than an exodus from this world.

If the reason for Jesus’ conception and birth was to save people from their sins; if the purpose of His incarnation and earthly life was primarily to qualify Him to be our sinless substitute; if the Holy Spirit obviously inspired the Gospel writers to spotlight the final week of Jesus’ life and the events surrounding His crucifixion; and if Jesus Himself repeatedly predicted His sufferings and death, going so far as to proclaim that they were the reason He came into the world, should not we then view Christ’s death as the most significant aspect of His earthly life?