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Christ's Incredible Cross

By David Servant

FIVE Salvation Procured

We've journeyed from before time began, when God preordained that Jesus would one day die for the sins of the world, through the centuries of preparation to the most important weekend in history. The Savior had become a man and been fully tested for thirty-three years, having lived a life of sinless perfection. Now His "hour had come." The Lamb of God was ready to be sacrificed.

On the evening before His crucifixion, Jesus gathered His disciples together to celebrate their last Passover meal together. He knew He would be dead in less than twenty-four hours, and that through His death, salvation would be procured for all who would believe. After that night, there would never again be a need for anyone to kill another Passover lamb. The Passover would be fulfilled by the sacrifice of the Lamb of God. He would be "smitten of God," and we would thus be spared the wrath we deserved. Jesus would become "Christ our Passover" (1 Cor. 5:7).

Interestingly, Jesus did not instruct His disciples to terminate their practice of the Passover. Instead, He modified the ritual to suit the revelation that His death would bring.

At His final Passover meal, He first took bread and broke it, saying that it was His body broken for them. Next, taking a cup, He instructed them to drink from it, explaining it was His blood, the blood of the new covenant, shed for the forgiveness of sins. They were to "do this in remembrance of Him." The apostle Paul later commented, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes" (1 Cor. 11:23-26).

Under the old covenant, God gave numerous rites to the Israelites that He expected them to practice repeatedly. The Passover was just one example. All of these rituals served as reminders of spiritual truths and past events that God did not want His people to forget. Their repeated practice insured that those spiritual truths and events would be consistently brought to bear on the Israelites' minds. Even if adults permitted the rituals to lapse into meaningless ceremonies, God could trust the inquisitiveness of children to evoke discussion as to the spiritual significance of what was being practiced.

For example, we read God's words in Exodus at the institution of the Passover:

“And it will come about when your children will say to you, ‘What does this rite mean to you?’ that you shall say, ‘It is a Passover sacrifice to the Lord who passed over the houses of the sons of Israel in Egypt when He smote the Egyptians, but spared our homes’” (Ex. 12:26-27).

A Constant Reminder

In contrast to the old covenant, under the new covenant there is only one ritual given that every believer should repeatedly practice throughout his Christian life—the Lord’s Supper. It reveals to us the one fact, above all others, that God wants to be brought repeatedly to our minds, lest we ever let it slip away. The Lord’s Supper recalls the one truth that is preeminent above all other truths. In fact, every other biblical truth is built on this truth’s foundation. It is a reminder of the one event that towers over every other event in history. It is a memorial to the Lord’s death and a revelation of what was accomplished through His death. God wants us to remember always that Jesus died for our sins. We might neglect other important facts of the Bible, but this one fact we must never forget.

Is it any wonder that the apostle Paul wrote, “For I delivered to you as of *first importance* what I also received, *that Christ died for our sins* according to the Scriptures”? (1 Cor. 15:3, emphasis added).

Certainly there are other wonderful truths brought to light in the Lord’s Supper, but primarily it serves to remind us of Jesus’ atoning sacrifice. Jesus did not institute the Lord’s Supper at the beginning of His ministry—or in the middle—but at the last possible moment, just a few hours before His death. When we partake of the Lord’s Supper, we should be thinking about what happened on the cross of Calvary for us.

The substitutionary aspect of Christ’s death was plainly revealed at the Last Supper when Jesus gave the bread and wine to His disciples while telling them that the elements were His own body and blood. As they ate what represented the Lord’s body, they were becoming one with Him. His body was thus united to their bodies, foreshadowing the blessed truth that, from God’s reference, when Christ died we died with Him. We can say with Paul, “I have been crucified with Christ” (Gal. 2:20a).

Was Jesus Afraid of the Cross?

After supper, Jesus led His disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane, a place where they had frequently met. The Scripture says that “He withdrew from them about a stone’s throw, and He knelt down and began to pray” (Luke 22:41).

Next, we read something that baffles those who don’t understand what would transpire on the cross. Three times Jesus prayed a prayer that seemed so suddenly out of character:

“Father, if Thou art willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Thine be done” (Luke 22:42).

This passage presents a problem. Here is the one who had never before exhibited the least bit of fear. Jesus had faced hostility, hatred, and near-death on other occasions, yet He had always remained composed. Why now was He praying, albeit predicated on God’s will, that the cup He was about to drink be removed?

Even more puzzling, Luke goes on to say that,

An angel from heaven appeared to Him, strengthening Him. And *being in agony* He was praying very fervently; and His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground (Luke 22:43-44, emphasis added).

Certainly contemplating being scourged and crucified would evoke anguish in any normal human being; but was it the dreaded anticipation of those things that brought such a degree of emotional torment to Christ? Was this not why He had been born? Was He not going to the cross because of His great love for humanity? Had He not wholeheartedly agreed to submit to suffering and death before the world began? Have not many Christian martyrs faced torture and death fearlessly, even with exuberance? Then why not Christ? Was He not God in the flesh? Had He become a coward?

We ask reverently: Were the two thieves who would be crucified with Jesus undergoing the same kind of agony as they considered their crucifixions? Moreover, we realize that Jesus, unlike the two thieves, knew what would happen after He died. They had to fear the unknown; Jesus didn't. He knew that on the third day He would be resurrected and ascend to His Father in glory. So why this strange episode in the Garden of Gethsemane?

We must conclude there was something Jesus dreaded that was even more foreboding than the terrible agony of the cross. And there was. Something far more horrible.

Jesus would endure the full wrath of God.

He would bear upon Himself all the guilt of the human race, accepting liability for the punishment. God's raging fury against sin would be poured out upon Him.

There is no way we could comprehend or describe the intense agony Jesus endured on the cross. If you or I could imagine all the combined torments of hell that the unsaved will suffer forever, then perhaps we could imagine what Jesus experienced during His crucifixion. The pain in His back, hands, and feet was nothing in comparison to the "anguish of His soul" of which Isaiah wrote (Is. 53:11).

The Cup

Jesus prayed that if God was willing, that He would "remove this cup." Of what was He speaking? What was "the cup"?

The cup to which He referred was no doubt "the cup of God's wrath," which is often mentioned in the Old Testament. For example, we read in Isaiah 51:

Rouse yourself! Rouse yourself! Arise, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk from the Lord's hand *the cup of His anger*; the chalice of reeling you have drained to the dregs (Is. 51:17, emphasis added).

God commissioned Jeremiah with a message for the nations:

For thus the Lord, the God of Israel, says to me, "Take *this cup of the wine of wrath* from My hand, and cause all the nations, to whom I send you, to drink it. And they shall drink and stagger and go mad because of the sword that I will send among them" (Jer. 25:15-16, emphasis added).

The identical expression is found in the New Testament as well. For example, we read in the book of Revelation:

If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives a mark on his forehead or upon his hand, he also will drink of *the wine of the wrath of God, which is mixed in full strength in the cup of His anger*....And Babylon the great was remembered before God, to give her *the cup of the wine of His fierce wrath* (Rev. 14:9b-10a; 16:19b, emphasis added).

The cup from which Jesus recoiled was the cup of God's terrible wrath upon sin. What you, I, and every other person deserved to suffer, He suffered in our place. Jesus bore the

penalty for our rebellion against God. His shed blood provided the way for God to offer us forgiveness justly.

If nothing else, Jesus' agony in the garden communicates to us that truly, just as the Bible says, "It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31). Jesus was severely distressed at the prospect, yet He was God Himself, the exact representation of the Father's nature (see Heb. 1:3). He was God about to suffer the wrath of God.

If God Himself greatly agonized over the prospect of encountering His own wrath, how much more should the person who has not yet received Christ and believed the gospel be terrorized at the thought of suffering God's wrath?

Fulfilling the Father's Will

Jesus' time in the Garden of Gethsemane finally ended. He had resolved to fulfill His Father's will.

Judas the betrayer, along with a group of Roman soldiers and officers from the chief priests and Pharisees, arrived to arrest Him. Predictably acting on impulse, Peter drew his sword and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear in the process. Immediately Jesus commanded Peter to sheath his sword as He amazingly healed the servant's ear.

Peter still had not grasped the fact that it was the Father's intention for Jesus to die, and therefore, there was no point in defending Him from arrest. Jesus couldn't have made it more clear as He declared,

"Do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels? How then shall the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must happen this way?" (Matt. 26:53-54).

Jesus was not forced to go to the cross. He went by His own volition.¹ He went to fulfill the preordained, prefigured, prophesied plan of God. He went to save us from our sins. John recorded Jesus' final statement to Peter in the garden: "The cup which the Father has given Me, shall I not drink it?" (John 18:11).

Innocence on Trial

We must not consider any incident of Jesus' passion as purely incidental. Not only was His death preordained by God, but the circumstances that immediately preceded His execution also served a divine purpose.

We know that Jesus had numerous opportunities to be killed prior to His crucifixion, but in each case, God prevented it.² So we ask: Was there a divine purpose for Jesus to be brought to trial before the Sanhedrin, Pontius Pilate, and Herod Antipas in the early hours of the day of His death?

As we study history in light of the Scriptures, we can certainly see the hand of God working so that His Son would have to be tried before Jewish *and* Gentile tribunals. Certainly it was not by accident that Israel was an occupied territory of the Roman Empire at the time of Christ, as those who have read Daniel's prophecies about the rise

¹ See also Jesus' statement in John 10:17-18.

² Luke 4:28-30; John 7:20; 8:20

and fall of Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and finally Rome have discovered. Daniel predicted that during Rome's rule the Messiah would be "cut off" (see Dan. 9:26).³

Was it by accident that Rome permitted the Jewish Sanhedrin to exercise its own judicial process, except in the cases of capital punishment, when Roman authorization was required? Because of this arrangement, Jesus had to be brought before Jewish *and* Gentile courts, and, for this reason, He was crucified by the Romans rather than stoned by the Jews.⁴ As we will soon learn, it was imperative that Jesus die by "hanging on a tree."

Certainly it was no accident that Pontius Pilate was then governor of Judea. God had foreknown this man's cowardly character and exalted him, just as He had exalted Pharaoh of old for the fulfillment of His own divine purposes. Jesus Himself spoke of God's sovereignty over Pilate's life when He said to his face, "You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above" (John 19:11a).

So, what was God's purpose that His Son "be delivered into the hands of men" as Jesus prophesied? (Mark 9:31). Why was it necessary for Jesus to have His day in court?

Over one hundred and thirty years ago, Scottish theologian George Smeaton wrote:

Christ was tried and sentenced at a human tribunal, which was but the visible foreground of an invisible trial in which the righteous God was judging righteously, for human guilt was laid upon the person of the Substitute. For wise reasons... God arranged the events of the atoning sacrifice in such a way that Christ was not to be cut off by the immediate hand of God, but by men who were His hand, and only gratifying their malice against the representative of God. The human judge [Pilate], who in the most unprecedented way absolved and yet condemned, declared Him faultless and yet passed sentence against Him, represented in the transaction the Judge of all the earth, who regarded Christ in a similar way. The human judge could only pass a sentence that would affect His body; but another sentence from a higher tribunal took effect upon His soul, and brought home the wrath of God. And under this invisible infliction the Lord experienced agony and desertion; under this He poured forth His complaint, His strong crying and tears, and endured that penal death which rescues us from the second death."⁵

Not only did Pilate and Herod find Jesus innocent,⁶ but Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin also proved His blamelessness. The record of that incident is the divine means of forever validating that Jesus was without any guilt. Why is that so important? So all who would study the story would be convinced that Jesus was crucified only for claiming to be the divine Son of God.

Cursed of God

The apostle Paul informed us that even the mode of Jesus' execution unveiled something of its significance. In his letter to the Galatians, he quoted part of a passage from Deuteronomy 21, which says:

³ See also Dan. 2:1-45.

⁴ See John 18:31-32.

⁵ George Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Atonement According to the Apostles*, p. 182.

⁶ See Luke 23:13-15, 22; John 19:4-6.

And if a man has committed a sin worthy of death, and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his corpse shall not hang all night on the tree, but you shall surely bury him on the same day (*for he who is hanged is accursed of God*) (Deut. 21:22-23, emphasis added).

Paul explained that we have been redeemed from the curse—or penalty—of the law because Jesus was made a curse for us (see Gal. 3:13-14). Through the means of ordaining His Son’s public hanging on a tree, God was publicly testifying to all that, according to His own word, His innocent Son was cursed of God.

It is obvious that if God sent His sinless Son into the world and then permitted Him to be cruelly crucified (when God could have easily prevented or stopped it), then there must be a very significant reason why He did so. Jesus was publicly exhibited as one cursed of God.

Why would the God of perfect justice curse His sinless Son? The only possible reason, as Scripture repeatedly confirms, is because Jesus was bearing the liability for our sins.

We will bypass describing all the gory details of the act of crucifixion that Jesus endured for our sakes. However, we do take note that just before the soldiers were about to hammer the nails through Jesus’ flesh, He was offered a pain-killing narcotic, wine mixed with gall. Drinking it would have considerably numbed His senses.

He innocently tasted it, but upon realizing what it was, refused to partake. It is only natural to question why He would turn down this one act of mercy when He was, no doubt, ravaged by thirst.

We understand that Jesus came to suffer in our place, and He refused the narcotic drink because He would have nothing to do with anything that would lessen His pain or diminish His sacrifice. His faculties would not be clouded when He faced God’s wrath upon sin. And so the soldiers performed their gruesome task, impaling Christ to the cross and then hoisting it up.

Through the eyes of Scripture we see Jesus hanging with a sign contemptuously posted over His head, dictated by Pilate, which read, “This is Jesus the King of the Jews” (Matt. 27:37). Just as Caiaphas, the high priest, had unwittingly prophesied before the Sanhedrin that it was expedient that one man should die on behalf of the people,⁷ so Pilate had unknowingly inscribed a true title above the dying King.

That King wore a crown upon His head, not of silver or gold and precious gems, but a crown of thorns pressed into His brow. Of that hideous crown James Stalker wrote,

Of all the features of the scene, the one that has most impressed the imagination of Christendom is the crown of thorns. It was something unusual, and brought out the ingenuity and wantonness of cruelty. Besides, as the wound of a thorn has been felt by everyone, it brings the pain of our Lord nearer to us than any other incident. But it is chiefly by its symbolism that it has laid hold of the Christian mind. When Adam and Eve were driven from the garden into the bleak and toilsome world, their doom was that the ground should produce for them thorns and thistles. Thorns were the sign of the curse; that is, of their banishment from God’s presence and of all the sad and painful consequences following from it...But it was the mission of Christ to bear the curse; and, as He lifted it on His own head, He took it off the world. He bore our sins and carried our sorrows.⁸

⁷ John 11:50; 18:14

⁸ James Stalker, *The Trial and Death of Jesus Christ*, p. 60.

When Darkness Prevailed

Jesus was crucified at nine o'clock in the morning. After He had hung on the cross for three hours, there descended a darkness "upon all the land" (Matt. 27:45) that remained during His second three hours on the cross—from noon to three o'clock. Luke tells us the sun was obscured.

Although we are informed in the Gospels of certain things that took place before noon—the dividing of Jesus' garments, the mocking of the bystanders, and so on—we are not told of anything that occurred during the three hours of darkness. What happened then is shrouded in silence as far as the four Gospel writers are concerned.

From our perspective, having the revelation of the epistles, there is little doubt as to what happened. Paul wrote:

He [God the Father] made Him [Jesus] who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Cor. 5:21).

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree." (Gal. 3:13).

Obviously, these are strong metonymical expressions, as no person could literally become sin or a curse. They simply mean that Jesus bore our sin. That is, He became liable for the penalty and took the curse we deserved as sinners.

When exactly did Jesus become sin and a curse? It must have been during those three hours on the cross when darkness prevailed. At that time, God poured out His judgment upon sin in the body of His Son. This mysterious period ended when Jesus cried out, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" just moments before His death (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34).

Jesus' cry of dereliction only makes sense once we understand that Jesus died as our substitute. How could the One who had experienced intimate fellowship and mutual love with the Father from eternity past now cry out as one forsaken by God?

How could He, who had declared the day before, "I am not alone, because the Father is with Me" (John 16:32b), now declare Himself abandoned by His Father?

The answer lies in the fact that He "bore our sins in His body on the cross," (1 Pet. 2:24a) and thus God, whose "eyes are too pure to look at evil" (Hab. 1:13) turned His back upon Him. Jesus was literally God-forsaken.

Luther's commentary on Galatians 3:13 vividly explains how Christ was made a curse for us:

When the merciful Father saw that we were being oppressed through the Law, that we were being held under a curse, and that we could not be liberated from it by anything, He sent His Son into the world, heaped all the sins of all men upon Him, and said to Him: "Be Peter the denier; Paul the persecutor, blasphemer, and assaulter; David the adulterer; the sinner who ate the apple in Paradise; the thief on the cross. In short, be the person of all men, the one who has committed the sins of all men. And see to it that You pay and make satisfaction for them." Now comes the Law and says: "I find Him a sinner, who takes upon Himself the sins of all men. I do not see any other sins than those in Him. Therefore let Him die on the cross!" And so it attacks Him and kills Him. By this deed the whole world is purged and expiated from all sins, and thus it is set free from death and from every evil.⁹

⁹Martin Luther, translated by Jaroslav Pelikan in *Luther's Works*, Vol. 26, p. 280.

“It Is Finished!”

After Jesus’ cry of dereliction, only three other utterances escaped His lips before He quickly expired. The first was, “I am thirsty” (John 19:28). Jesus was then offered and accepted some sour wine in a sponge.

The final two statements were spoken just before His final breath, the first being, “It is finished!” (John 19:30).

Obviously, Jesus had achieved something. What was it?

Jesus had accomplished what He had come to do—to bear our sins as our substitute. God’s righteousness would be completely satisfied in just a matter of seconds when Jesus would breathe His last. Jesus had borne the full penalty. Although He would still need to be resurrected and ascend to His Father, His sufferings were finished. Salvation had been procured for all who would believe in Him.

Then Jesus spoke His final words, crying out with a loud voice, “Father, into Thy hands I commit My spirit” (Luke 23:46).

Jesus was not at this point a spiritual child of Satan, as has been popularized by some. He referred to *God* as His *Father* with His last breath. His body died, and His spirit descended into Hades, the abode of the righteous and unrighteous dead, where He remained until His resurrection.

He did not descend into hell to continue suffering the torments of the damned; His sufferings ended on the cross. How could He declare “It is finished!” if He anticipated further sufferings in hell?

The Bible states that Jesus has reconciled us “in His fleshly body through death” (Col. 1:22). After His death, no further suffering was necessary. Jesus descended to the section of Hades known as Abraham’s bosom,¹⁰ or “Paradise,” just as He had promised the repentant thief who died on a cross beside Him (see Luke 23:43).

Further proof that Jesus did not descend into hell to continue suffering is found in all of the synoptic Gospels. They tell us that, when Jesus cried out with His final breath, the veil in the temple dividing the holy place from the Holy of Holies was ripped in half from top to bottom.

The symbolism is plain: Through His death, Jesus had provided sinful humanity access to a holy God. If Jesus had needed to suffer further in hell for our salvation, then, quite obviously, God would not have sent an angel to tear the temple curtain at the moment of His Son’s death.

Now we’ve just barely passed the apex of history. Many of the mysteries that shrouded the death of Jesus to those who witnessed His sufferings have been unveiled to us. The most amazing truth is that Jesus was dying on the cross as our substitute, suffering God’s judgment for our sins and fulfilling a preordained plan.

Unlike those who attended His final hours, we have the privilege of understanding the central significance of the Lord’s Supper, the reason for Jesus’ great agony in the garden, and the answer to why He didn’t request a legion of angels to prevent His arrest. We see God’s invisible tribunal represented by the earthly judge who found Jesus innocent and yet condemned Him. We can understand the necessity of His death by hanging on a tree and comprehend His refusal of the narcotic drink. In addition, the meaning of the three hours of darkness, His cry of abandonment, and His declaration of accomplishment become clear. In addition, we can see that history can best be divided into two segments: everything that led up to the cross and everything that followed it.

Next, we’ll look at what happened after the cross.

¹⁰See Luke 16:19-31.