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Forgive Me for Waiting so Long to Tell You This
by David Servant

SIX

Born to Die

Have you ever seen the classic movie, *The Ten Commandments*, directed by the legendary Cecil B. DeMille? Even if you're among the few who have somehow missed seeing it, more than likely you're familiar with the story of Moses and the exodus of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery. Remember the various plagues-frogs, locusts, hailstones, and so on-that came upon Egypt? Through ten terrible disasters God eventually convinced Pharaoh it was in his best interest to release all his Israelite slaves.

I always liked the scene in the movie when Moses held up his staff, and God split the Red Sea so the Israelites could journey across on dry ground. Today, however, as I reminisce of watching that movie as a child, I realize that I missed the most important aspect of the story of Israel's exodus. The drama contains the secret of God's plan for humanity. Let me share it with you.

The Fairness of God's Judgment

The book of Exodus begins with the report of Pharaoh's savage plan to reduce Israel's growing population through infanticide. Fearing that Israel would become mightier than Egypt, Pharaoh decreed that every newborn Israeli boy was to be cast alive into the Nile River.

Into such tragic times, Moses was born. You may remember how his mother's floating basket made it possible for him to be rescued by Pharaoh's daughter.

About eighty years later, God captured Moses' attention through a burning bush and called him to the task of leading the Israelites from Egypt to the promised land. There was only one problem: Pharaoh didn't want to free his cheap foreign labor force.

Consequently God sent increasingly severe plagues upon Egypt, culminating in the midnight death of all the first-born sons of every Egyptian. Finally, that night Pharaoh and the Egyptians decided to allow the people of Israel to depart from their country.

Some people, who have never thought about it deeply, have questioned the fairness of God's judgment upon the Egyptians. They ask, "What was so special about the Israelites that God favored them above the Egyptians?"

But the answer isn't so difficult: God was acting in perfect love, and, therefore, perfect justice. The Egyptians had selfishly mistreated the Israelites for decades, using people who were created in God's image as their slaves. They had also enforced a barbarous system of infanticide that must have brought untold suffering to the families of Israel. The loving God could not remain passive.

What did the ancient Egyptians deserve? They deserved to die. People who kill other people's babies deserve to die. Still, God showed them mercy for years, giving them time to repent. Finally He had to act. *Love and justice demanded it.*

God sent Moses to demand Israel's release. When Pharaoh refused, and, in fact, actually increased Israel's labors, God sent the first plague-the waters of Egypt turned into blood. Incredibly, Pharaoh hardened his heart, and God sent a second, and then a third, and then a fourth increasingly severe plague.

After each plague was lifted, Pharaoh repeatedly hardened his heart, and finally the last judgment arrived: all the first-born sons of Egypt died in one night.

All of God's Judgments Contain Mercy

Too many people only see God's judgments in this story. But can you see the incredible mercy of God? Pharaoh could have averted God's final judgment if he had heeded the warning of God's initial, more minor judgments. But he didn't.

I think we'd all agree that Pharaoh and the people of Egypt deserved even worse punishment than they received. In fact, there isn't any doubt that if the death of their first-born sons hadn't convinced them to release the Israelite slaves, God would have sent a more severe judgment. Ultimately, they would have received what they really deserved: complete annihilation.

Was it fair that all the first-born sons of Egypt died? Yes, the Egyptians were only reaping what they'd sown. Still, they got far less than they deserved.

Every score that is not settled in this life is settled in the next one. In fact, the partial settling of the scores in this life serves to warn us of that very fact because God is *perfectly* just. As the Bible states, God "will render to every man according to his deeds" (Romans 2:6). Of that you can be certain.

No one, and I mean no one, has a right to complain that God has treated him unfairly. Not only has God *not* treated us *unfairly*, but He *has* treated us *very mercifully*.

It's not that we *have* received what we *haven't* deserved, but rather, that we *haven't* received what we *have* deserved. All of us have been shown much more mercy than we've ever deserved-just like the people of ancient Egypt.

When a suffering person says, "What have I done to deserve this?" he is revealing his inherent pride. He should be asking, "Why have I gotten off so easily?"

When the water turned to blood in Egypt, no Egyptian could justifiably say, "What have we done to deserve this?" Only two questions would have been justifiable in God's ears: "Why has God been so good to delay this present judgment for so many years?" and "Why is it that now, when God's judgment has fallen, we haven't received the fullness of what we really deserve?"

The Egyptians should have been on their knees confessing, "We've been so selfish, but we thank God for all the mercy He has shown us for so many years. And we appreciate His warning us of eternal judgment by means of this present judgment. Now we know that if we don't repent, we will ultimately get *everything* we deserve."

No one, ever, has any right to be angry with God.

Why Bad Things Happen to Good People

During one of His teachings, Jesus mentioned two contemporary tragedies that clearly present, from God's standpoint, what our attitude toward suffering should be-especially when it seems unjust:

Now on the same occasion there were some present who reported to Him [Jesus] about the Galileans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And He answered and said to them, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered this fate? I tell you, no, but, unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:1-5).

Jesus indicated that those who died in the two tragedies He mentioned were sinners, but no greater sinners than anyone else. The sinners who died received what they deserved. The sinners who were still alive hadn't yet received what they deserved. They were mercifully being given time to repent. And if they didn't repent, they, too, would get what they deserved.

Jesus' listeners, just like people today, were asking the wrong question. Rather than asking, "*I wonder what those men did to deserve to die?*" they should have been asking, "*I wonder why I'm still alive?*"

If we will be honest and view ourselves as God does, then the proper question we should all be asking is: "Why have I not suffered *more* for my selfishness?" Actually, an even more appropriate question would be, "*Why am I not burning in hell right now?*"

The answer, of course, is that God has shown all of us undeserved mercy. When we question God's fairness, our pride is unmasked. We think we deserve better treatment, and surely God must groan.

Why do bad things happen to good people? That question contains a faulty assumption. We ought to be wondering, "Why does *anything* good happen to *anyone*?" According to Jesus, *no one* is good except God alone (see Mark 10:18). Since none of us are good, we all deserve only bad.

Jesus continued His lesson on God's undeserved mercy:

And He began telling this parable: "A certain man had a fig tree which had been planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it, and did not find any. And he said to the vineyard-keeper, 'Behold, for three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree without finding any. Cut it down! Why does it even use up the ground?' And he answered and said to him, 'Let it alone, sir, for this year too, until I dig around it and put in fertilizer; and if it bears fruit next year, fine; but if not, cut it down'" (Luke 13:6-9).

Here is a perfect picture of the justice and mercy of God. The fruitless fig tree deserved to be cut down-yet it was shown mercy for one more year-in the hope that it would bear fruit. If it bore no fruit in the fourth year, it would be cut down. When that time arrived, the question wouldn't be, "Why is it being cut down?" but "Why wasn't it cut down last year?"

Israel's Undeserved Mercy

How about the people of Israel? Did they deserve, because of their holiness and purity, to be released from Egyptian bondage? No, the Israelites were no doubt selfish in their dealings with others. They certainly weren't as cruel as the Egyptians, but neither did they lead lives of self-sacrificing service to one another. We know for certain that Moses once attempted to stop a fight between two Israelites (see Exodus 2:13). Furthermore, a certain Jewish tradition states that the reason God permitted Israel to become enslaved to Egypt was because of their sins. Beyond that, numerous times after their deliverance from Egypt, the people of Israel displayed traits of selfishness and greed (see Numbers 11:4, 31-34, 12:1-10, 14:1-4, 16:1-3).

So why did God free them? Was their suffering over the years—the death of their little babies, the hardships of their labor—sufficient payment for their sins? Had they received everything they deserved? Was God obligated to release them because their accounts with Him were all settled?

Emphatically no.

And if God made anything clear on the night of the exodus, He made it clear to Israel that they, too, were receiving undeserved mercy.

On the very day before the midnight exodus, God decreed that each Israelite family was to take a one-year-old lamb and kill it at twilight. Then they were to take some of the blood from their lamb and smear it on the doorposts and lintels of their houses, because He was going to pass through Egypt and kill all their first-born sons. However, when He saw the blood on the Israelites' doorposts, He promised to pass over them. Thus, they would escape His judgment.

This, of course, was the first Jewish Feast of Passover. Christians celebrate Easter at the same time of year, and rightfully so, as we will soon see.

What was the significance of the Passover ceremony? First, we note that God commanded each family to slit the throat of a *one-year-old lamb*—all white and fluffy and the picture of innocence—not a full-grown sheep.

It sounds a little barbaric, especially to those of us who are only familiar with buying a leg of lamb at the grocery store. As we're enjoying our meal, we'd rather not think about how that cute little lamb had to be slaughtered before it was cooked.

Why would God command such a thing? If something had to be killed, why not an old ground hog or a worn-out pig? Why an innocent little lamb?

God was teaching Israel the principle of *representative substitution*, that is, the innocent dying for the sins of the guilty. *The lamb was chosen because it exemplified innocence.* It was killed because it was receiving what each Israelite deserved—death. And the blood that was smeared on the doorposts protected those within the house from the due wrath of God, obliging it to “pass over.” The blood indicated that justice had already been executed on behalf of those inside.

The Perfect Sacrifice

How could the death of a lamb justly pay for the sins of a human being? The answer is that *it couldn't*. In fact, the New Testament teaches that it is impossible for the blood of animals to take away sins (see Hebrews 10:4).

Those little lambs only served to *represent* the Perfect Sacrifice that would one day completely satisfy the claims of divine justice on behalf of all people.

That Perfect Sacrifice couldn't be an animal, but a human being. Only a human being's death could justly recompense for a human being's sins.

Yet that person would have to be more than just a human being, because the death of one human could justly pay to redeem only one other human. The Perfect Sacrifice would have to be someone who was of much greater value than all human beings combined in order to provide atonement for them all.

That person had to be sinless, perfectly innocent, without selfishness. A sin-stained person could never atone for the sins of others because he himself would be a debtor to God.

That person who would be the Perfect Sacrifice could only be God in the form of a human being.

That person was Jesus Christ.

It was Jesus whom the angel announced to Joseph would "save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).

It was Jesus whom John the Baptist introduced as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

It was Jesus whom the apostle Paul declared was "our Passover" (1 Corinthians 5:7).

It was Jesus who willfully walked to Jerusalem and who was crucified *during the Passover Feast* there in A.D. 32.

That event was the culmination of God's foreordained plan to provide a means whereby self-condemned men and women could escape the due wrath of God. On that day divine justice was executed upon a willing sinless substitute. Now undeserving sinners could justly be offered eternal mercy from God.

It was Jesus' death on the cross that fulfilled what every Passover lamb's death for over a thousand years only foreshadowed: the ransom price for our deliverance from God's wrath had been paid in full.

When Jesus cried out from the cross with His last breath, "It is finished!," our salvation was purchased, once and for all. This is the central theme of the Bible.

Turning Away God's Wrath

Too many have thought the purpose for Jesus' coming was to "show us how to live." Others think His death was just another unfortunate case of a good person being martyred for a worthy cause. Certainly Jesus did teach us how to live, and yes, He died for a worthy cause. But the foremost reason Jesus came to earth was to give His life as payment for our sins.

Jesus was born to die.

He knew it and proclaimed it:

"For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, *and to give His life a ransom for many*" (Jesus-Mark 10:45; emphasis added).

This was God's foreordained plan. Seven hundred years before Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the prophet Isaiah predicted His arrival and the purpose for His coming:

But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but *the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to*

fall on Him...[He] will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities (Isaiah 53:5-6, 11b; emphasis added).

The apostle Paul wrote that Jesus' sacrificial death as our substitute is the most important spiritual truth of the Christian faith:

For I delivered to you as of *first importance* what I also received, that *Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures...* (1 Corinthians 15:3; emphasis added).

One biblical term used to describe Jesus' work on the cross is *propitiation*. It means "to turn away wrath." The apostle John explained that God's love was preeminently demonstrated through the *propitiatory* work of His Son:

By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the *propitiation* for our sins (1 John 4:9-10; emphasis added).

The principle benefit that Jesus' sacrifice makes available to us is the turning away of God's wrath (see Romans 5:9). That in turn, makes available a multitude of other blessings to every person who receives the reconciliation God has made possible.

Does Jesus' sacrificial death automatically guarantee that every person will escape hell and live forever in heaven? No, every person must meet certain requirements if he is to experience what Christ made possible.

Notice the scripture below states that even though Jesus' death has provided our reconciliation with God, we have a responsibility to *receive* that reconciliation:

For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. And not only this, but we also exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, *through whom we have now received the reconciliation* (Romans 5:6-11; emphasis added).

How do we receive the reconciliation that has been provided? In the next chapter I'll answer that question, as we examine what God requires of every one of us.

The Demonstration of the Cross

In Jesus' death on the cross, we see God's holiness, justice and love perfectly blended into one event. God's love was demonstrated in that Jesus died in *our* stead, so we wouldn't suffer our due punishment.

Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). How could God have demonstrated greater love?

God's justice was demonstrated in that He didn't pardon us without punishment. If He would have, He could be rightly accused of injustice, and, therefore, imperfect in love and immoral. So God meted out the due penalty-His wrath fell to the just degree-but upon a Sinless Substitute, who willingly went to the cross for us.

But how did God's wrath fall upon our Substitute?

First of all, God's wrath fell upon Jesus in the agony of scourging and crucifixion.

As blood streamed down His face from the puncture wounds of a crown of thorns pressed into His head, the flesh of Jesus' back was lacerated to shreds by the Roman cat-o'-nine-tails. Each leather strand of that whip was tipped with pieces of metal and sharp bones that imbedded themselves and tore without mercy. They each ripped into Jesus' back *thirty-nine times*. History records that weaker men died from suffering the same trauma. But that was just the beginning of Jesus' sufferings.

Jesus was then forced to carry His own cross upon His bleeding back until He dropped to His knees from exhaustion. At the crucifixion site, the executioners stripped Him naked and stretched out His arms that were already splattered with blood. With cruel precision they hammered heavy nails through His wrists and both of His feet.

Finally the cross upon which He was impaled was lifted up and dropped into a supporting hole that would keep it standing upright.

In crucifixion, all of the victim's weight rested on the place where the nail went through his feet and where the nails went through his wrists. The pain, of course, was excruciating. Breathing became a constant struggle. If the condemned wanted a breath, he'd have to push up on the nail through his feet in order to relax the tremendous cramping pressure his body weight placed upon his lungs.

It would have been even worse for one whose back was lacerated from scourging. The cross would have scraped the already gapping wounds as the victim pushed up for a breath and, then, collapsing in agony, slid back down the cross, once more hanging from his hands.

Most who were crucified died of asphyxiation, since they were eventually unable to muster the strength to push up and get one more breath. That is the reason the Roman soldiers eventually broke the legs of the two thieves who were crucified on either side of Jesus. It accelerated their deaths.

Jesus had been so abused beforehand that there was no need to break His legs-He was dead after only a few hours on the cross.

Forsaken For You

The torture of the crucifixion is almost too horrible to imagine, but Jesus suffered infinitely more and in a way that is inconceivable to our human minds.

In an inexplicable way, God's wrath fell upon Jesus and inflicted much greater pain and suffering than the physical torment of the cross. All the guilt of the human race-for all of the hatred, the lust, the envy, the pride, the selfishness-was placed upon Jesus.

In dreadful anticipation of just that, Jesus had fallen on His face and fervently prayed that if it were possible, to let the cup pass from Him. But rather than say "Amen," He added, "Yet not My will, but Thine be done" (Luke 22:42).

We cannot begin to understand the agony Jesus experienced on the cross-as the torments of an eternal hell were compressed into three hours and laid upon one single man. He felt the intense loneliness, the hopelessness and despair, the guilt, the regret, the horror, the raging thirst, of those who suffer the never-ending torments of the damned.

Worst of all, He felt the panic of those who realize there is no hope for their reconciliation with God, abandoned forever, cast into outer darkness. As the crushing reality of being abandoned by His Father crescendoed within His consciousness, Jesus gasped with horror,

“My God, My God, Why hast Thou forsaken Me?”

His own Father had turned His back upon Him, pouring out His fury against the sin of the world until His wrath was spent-and Jesus' body hung limp on the cross.

There hung the Lamb of God. Beaten, kicked, spit upon, mocked, scourged, stripped, impaled, and covered with dirt, sweat and blood.

That is how much God hates selfishness. That is how just and righteous God is. And that is how much God loves you.