

The Sacrifice of Jesus

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In our recent Sunday-evening trek through the epistles of 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus, one of the things that I've noticed is that Paul and the Holy Spirit's notion of structure is much looser than mine. In all three of those books, there is no linear argument that stretches from beginning to end. Instead, there are many digressions, and most of those digressions have to do with Jesus. It's like Paul is writing along, discussing some subject, and happens to mention the name of Jesus. Then, for the next several verses, he feels compelled to glorify Jesus and His great salvation for us.

That might not pass muster in some English teacher's ideal conception of the five-paragraph essay, but it occurs to me that Paul there isn't being logically sloppy. He's being spiritually wise. The New Testament is full of important things, but there is nothing more important in it than the story of Jesus. Even when Paul was addressing some important aspect of conduct in the church, he still felt the need to continually remind his readers about the Lord, because if it wasn't for those continual reminders, a discussion of all those other subjects might lead Christians to forget.

On a much larger scale, that's a problem that we face in our assemblies. Recently, in some of our weekly schedules of worship, we've had Bible classes on Old Testament stories from the united kingdom, Sunday morning sermons on authority, and Sunday evening sermons on 1 Timothy. Once again, all of those things are important, but we need to make sure that our focus on those things doesn't take our focus away from our Savior.

There are two things we do to address this problem. First, every week, no matter what, we partake of the Lord's Supper. This weekly observance is not common in the denominational world, but for us, it ensures that every worship service, we spend some time reflecting on Christ and His love. Second, from time to time, we have entire services focused on remembering Him. Now is an appropriate time for one, so we're going to consider the sacrifice of Jesus.

The Need.

Naturally, we can't understand His sacrifice without understanding the need for it. The need for all of us is defined in Romans 3:23. God has established a law that governs all of our conduct, and when we violate that law, we sin. The penalty for our sin is eternal suffering in hell, forever banished from the light of God's presence. No sane being would voluntarily undergo such torment, which leaves all of us looking for a way out, and we need that way out desperately. One of the temptations associated with being a Christian is the temptation to minimize our own sin, to think that because we don't drink or swear or commit adultery, that we're basically pretty good people. In reality, though, none of us come anywhere close to meeting God's standard for righteousness. Our biggest problem may well be not when we do things we shouldn't, but when we don't do the things that we should. How many of us can claim that every time we are presented with an opportunity to love, we max that opportunity out? How many of us can claim that we take advantage of every door that God opens in our lives for the word? We are all agonizingly far from being sinless.

We see the first attempt at finding forgiveness for sin in the Law of Moses. The ancient Israelites hoped to achieve this forgiveness through an elaborate system of animal sacrifices. We see one such sacrifice described in Leviticus 4:27-29. Here's what the basic theory was: when a man sinned, he incurred guilt toward God. He now stood under a death sentence. If he didn't want to die himself, he could show up at the temple with the appropriate animal sacrifice, in this case a young female goat. This goat couldn't have any defect. Instead, it had to be unblemished, perfect as the worshiper himself knew he was not. Such a sacrifice would have been extremely expensive for most Israelites, so just to show up with the animal would have cost them something. Then, the sinner had to lead the goat to the altar, lay one hand on its head, and cut its throat with the other. This would have been a gruesome business. By the end of the process, he would have been covered with the animal's blood. It was a ritual designed to emphasize how awful sin was in God's eyes. However, in theory, the goat died in the place of the sinner so that the sinner didn't have to.

The problem with this theory, though, was that it didn't really work. The Hebrews writer elaborates on this in Hebrews 10:1-4. Even if the worshiper came to the temple, just as the Law prescribed, and cut the animal's throat, and got its blood all over him, that blood didn't have the power to take away sins. After all, how can the sin of a thinking, reasoning human being possibly be atoned for by the sacrifice of some poor unreasoning animal, no matter how perfect it was? The sacrifice was just a reminder, an acknowledgment to God that yes, I sinned. The next time that Israelite sinned, he had to come back with another goat and repeat the process. Every year, the priests themselves offered all kinds of other sacrifices for the sins that fell through the cracks. For 1500 years, except for the time when the people were in captivity, this process continued without a break. In all likelihood, the devotion of the Israelites led to millions of animals having their throats cut at the altar, millions of gallons of blood being shed. And yet, the sin of the people still remained. All of their piety, all of their offerings, did not and could not make them perfect in conscience.

The Sacrifice.

The Israelites' problem was a basic one. The sacrifices that they hoped would cleanse them from their sins weren't good enough to get the job done. They needed a better sacrifice. However, the only One who could provide such a sacrifice was God. We see the way that God began to prepare this offering in John 1:1, 14. This verse reveals something that was hinted at from the very beginning, but had never yet been fully disclosed. Even as far back as Genesis 1, God refers to Himself as an "us", and here, John explains that in the incomprehensible unity that is God, God the Father had a Son, His eternal Word. This Word, who had existed since before the foundation of the world, was sent to live among the people that He had helped create. Through the intervention of the Holy Spirit, Mary the virgin conceived and bore a child with a unique nature. This child, Jesus, was neither only God nor only man. Instead, in one of the great mysteries of Scripture, He was both. Somehow, He contained the fullness of deity in bodily form. That's an awe-inspiring thing to contemplate, friends. What could a Man gifted with such understanding and such power do? What amazing things could He accomplish? Although God planned for Jesus to do many things, on the most fundamental level, Jesus was born to die. He was sent to earth to be the better sacrifice that mankind so desperately needed.

However, during His days on earth, Jesus also had to live in a way that fitted Him to be that sacrifice. We learn about His conduct from Hebrews 4:14-15. As we saw earlier, all of the sacrifices offered under the Law of Moses had to be perfect. The animals that were killed had to be without blemish. Otherwise, they couldn't stand in the place of one who was imperfect. In the same way, Jesus had to be without blemish. However, because He was human, the blemishes that God was concerned about weren't things like lameness or blindness. Instead, for Jesus to be an appropriate sacrifice, He had to be without sin. He had to be someone who knew right from wrong, who was tempted, who had the capacity to sin, yet refused to sin in favor of obeying God. Jesus lived on the earth for slightly more than 30 years, and during all of that time, He never sinned even once. He saw every single temptation, and He refused the bait every time.

Paradoxically, Jesus' perfect righteousness destined Him not for earthly glory but for death. Peter describes this death in Acts 2:22-24. As we discussed earlier, for Jesus to be perfectly righteous, God required Him not just to avoid evil but to seek out every opportunity for good. During His life, Jesus did exactly that. He carried out His Father's work perfectly. In response, the religious leaders of His day hated and envied Him, and with the consent of the Jewish nation, they took Him and had Him crucified. This is hard to fathom. How could people who were only human take and kill the Son of God? The answer is that they could do it because that's what God planned for them to do. In their judicial murder of Jesus, those chief priests and elders offered the perfect sacrifice that God's plan required. However, God couldn't let such an injustice stand. He vindicated Jesus by raising Him in triumph from the dead.

The Effects.

This sacrifice had several astounding effects. Paul outlines how it dealt with mankind's problem of sin in Romans 5:6-9. Just like under the Old Law, the unblemished animal was a stand-in for the sinner, who took the sinner's punishment, our unblemished Savior is a stand-in for us who took our punishment. This wasn't a sacrifice that we had any right to demand. We weren't good people who somehow deserved to have the Son of God die in our place. We deserved to die, but Jesus died instead. Just as the worshiper at the temple was covered with the blood of the sacrifice he killed, we are covered with the blood of Jesus. Just as the priest poured some of the blood on the temple altar, Jesus took His own blood and offered it in heaven before the throne of God Himself. God now sees that a death has taken place for our sins, and in that death, His wrath is satisfied. His thirst for vengeance has been quenched. From the day of the crucifixion onward, all of God's people for all time are sanctified through the death of Jesus Christ.

This raises an extremely important question for us. How do we become one of those people who are made holy through the death of Jesus? Paul reveals the answer a little bit later on in Romans, in Romans 6:3-5. The answer is baptism. When we are baptized, we are buried in water, and that burial unites us with the death of Jesus. God looks at us and says, "Yes, there is a sinner who has died for his sins. Through my Son, the penalty has been paid." Then, when we are lifted up out of the water, we leave that body of sins behind. We have risen from the dead just like Jesus was raised from the dead. Like Him, we have been given new life by God. That is our spiritual resurrection, and it gives us hope of an eventual bodily resurrection, when God will raise us up to spend eternity in heaven with Him.

This is the most amazing spiritual transformation imaginable. Without Christ, we are dead in our sins. However, when we enter His kingdom through baptism, we are given spiritual life and the hope of eternal life. This is not due to our own works. It is entirely due to the love of Jesus and to His willingness to offer Himself on the cross for us. In exchange for all of this, Jesus asks us to observe a simple ritual every week. We see Him define it in Luke 22:19-20. This simple observance is carried out with the humble elements of bread and fruit of the vine, which we see on the table before us. This is intended to be a memorial, not a meal. As we eat the bread, Jesus asks that we remember His body, which He so freely surrendered on the cross for us. As we drink the cup, He asks that we remember His blood, which, even though He was sinless, He poured out for our sins. Let us remember His sacrifice now, as we partake of the Lord's Supper.