THE beart OF THE CHURCH

THE GOSPEL'S HISTORY, MESSAGE, AND MEANING

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Chapter 3

THE DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF CHRIST

eath is God's curse on sinful humanity. Death is not good, yet Christians often refer to the death of Jesus as "good." How can the death of a righteous person at the hands of wicked men be good?

OUR SUBSTITUTION

The death of Christ was horrific. Yet, God was working behind the scenes to make this act of unrighteous violence something redemptive. What makes the death of Jesus good is that it was a willing, substitutionary sacrifice for sinners.

From the very beginning, God's plan was for the Son to die. Peter explains,

Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.

(ACTS 2:22-23)

Evil men murdered Jesus. They were not coerced to do so, and yet all of it was part of the plan of God. For salvation to come to the world, a Savior needed to die.

The Jewish Scriptures, the Old Testament, promised Christ's birth, His miracles, and His message. But all of this led up to the moment of His crucifixion, which Scripture also foretold. His betrayal did not catch Him off guard, and His crucifixion was no surprise to Him, though it was to nearly everyone else. Jesus came into the world to save sinners and take away their sin.

Not only was Jesus' death planned, but He was also ready and willing to lay down His life. No one forced Him to do it. Though a fearful and agonizing path, the journey to the cross was what Jesus came to walk.

The death of Christ was necessary, for it was the only means by which One could pay for the sins of many. Just as He was our substitute in His life, so He was in His death. He lived in our stead so we could be counted righteous, and He died on our behalf so we would be forgiven. In taking our place on the cross, Jesus received the just punishment for the sins that we all deserved. The righteous willingly suffered for the unrighteous so we could be made righteous. In this sense, we can say that Jesus died *for us*, to save us. But there is another sense in which we can say that Jesus died *for God*.

OUR SATISFACTION

God is both forgiving and just. This means that He does not forgive sins by waiving their punishment. He cannot simply overlook our corruption. Our transgression and rebellion against God must be punished. This is why Jesus died on the cross. He died to satisfy God's wrath against us. The word that the apostle John uses to explain God's love for us on the cross is *propitiation* (1 John 2:2). The word essentially means "to satisfy." But more specifically, propitiation is the satisfaction of God's wrath against our sin through the death of Jesus Christ (see also Rom. 3:25; Heb. 2:17). Thus, Jesus' death on the cross is the clearest expression of God's justice, because in it He was punishing sin.

Yet Jesus' death is also the clearest expression of God's love for us, and that makes Jesus' death good. Many Christians are assured of God's love through His gentle actions and generous providences. Many believe the proof of God's love can be found in the blessings He gives us in this life. Prayer answered in the way we desire or provision in a time of need might make us feel that God cares for us. Beautiful sunsets, delicious food, a happy family, and a successful career can lead us to believe that God loves us. While these certainly testify to God's love and goodness, we must ask: does God not love those whose lives are characterized by loss, affliction, sorrow, and need?

God's benevolence is seen in the many ways that He provides for both the righteous and the unrighteous (Matt. 5:45), but we cannot look to our circumstances for assurance of God's love. Not only would that lead us to believe that God loves some more than others, and perhaps the wicked more than the righteous, but it also undermines faith.

When we assure ourselves of God's love through what He provides for us, we will then question His love when our needs go unmet. God might appear temperamental, unfair, or uninvolved if we allowed our changing circumstances to be the grid through which we see God's love.

If we cannot base our understanding of God's love for us on our circumstances, what do we base it on?

The apostle John declares, "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him" (1 John 4:9).

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The love of God was manifested, and presented publicly, in the sending of His Son, Jesus Christ. When it comes to the "sending" of the Son of God, this does not merely mean His appearance on earth, but everything from His incarnation to His crucifixion and resurrection (Rom. 8:1, 3; Gal. 4:4–5; 1 John 4:10). God's love is ultimately seen in what He did for us nearly two thousand years ago. And what did God do in sending Jesus? He sent a substitute who would accomplish the righteousness required of us and atone for the sins we have committed.

How do we know God loves us? Because Jesus died for us. Through His sacrifice, sin is paid for and God's wrath against us has been satisfied. When we wonder what God thinks of us as His people, when we are in doubt of God's affection for us, all we need to do is look back. God's love cannot be measured by the worldly gifts received today, but by God's ultimate gift given two thousand years ago in His Son. God's love is seen best not in His providence in our lives, but in the divine propitiation Jesus made for our sins.

OUR VICTORY

The death of Jesus is the message of the church. We preach Christ crucified (1 Cor. 1:23). The church is called to bear witness to Jesus, and the central act in His earthly life was His death.

But the death of Jesus would be nothing more than the death of another prophet or preacher if it were not for His resurrection from the grave. Jesus' resurrection demonstrates His authority and victory over death. It was also a promise to us.

The Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead will also give life to our mortal bodies by raising us from the dead, reuniting soul and body and leading us into eternal paradise. The resurrection of Jesus gives us hope that we, too, will be resurrected. But there's another promise given to us in the resurrection of Jesus, the promise of power to live a godly life.

The Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead is the same Spirit that made us alive when we were spiritually dead. The Holy Spirit caused us to be born again and now dwells in us, teaches us, leads us, fills us, and sanctifies us.

There is no good news for sinners if Jesus did not live a perfect life on our behalf. Nor is there good news for us if He did not die on the cross for sins. Nor is there any good news if Jesus did not also rise from the dead. All this is the gospel. It is history, and it is foundation for our doctrine.



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