

GOSPEL MATTERS

The death of God for the life of man
1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Hebrews 1:1-4
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THE GOSPEL'S CENTRAL CORE

Inside any electronic device, every living creature, or epic storyline there is a central operating system, a living heartbeat or climactic arc. Without these critically essential components those things don't work. The same is true for the message of the Gospel! In our current study on Gospel Matters, we arrive at the pinnacle teaching point where all Christian hope hinges on the accuracy and authenticity of this doctrine. Distorting or misunderstanding the work of Jesus Christ on the cross and His resurrection unravels the whole gospel message and it's power of salvation for your eternal hope.

In preparing to preach this message, it is very humbling and frightening as I consider the weight of responsibility to do so accurately. It feels like being handed the keys to my parent's car for the first time after receiving my license. As a kid you're somewhat oblivious to the responsibility and liability you're incurring when taking your parent's car out for the first time. As a parent, you might feel hesitant and anxious because you know what's at stake! Sharing the gospel should feel a lot like that, both exciting and exhilarating while at the same time being conscientious of the responsibility to rightly handle the truth.

"IN THE CROSS OF CHRIST I GLORY"

The symbol of the cross is the most significant symbol of Christianity throughout church history. It has been reproduced and designed in many forms on many buildings throughout the years. One particular cross was placed on top of a towering cathedral overlooking the harbor of Macao, on the South China coast. The cathedral had been built by Portuguese colonists centuries ago, but was soon afterwards destroyed by a typhoon. Only one wall, which was topped by the huge metal cross, remained. The hymn writer, John Bowring, after visiting Macao and seeing this sight, was inspired to write the hymn "In the Cross of Christ I Glory."¹

*In the cross of Christ I glory,
Towering o'er the wrecks of time;
All the light of sacred story
Gathers round its head sublime.*

*When the woes of life o'ertake me—
Hopes deceive, and fears annoy,
Never shall the cross forsake me,
Lo! it glows with peace and joy.*

*Bane and blessing, pain and pleasure,
By the cross are sanctified;
Peace is there that knows no measure,
Joys that through all time abide.*

¹ Kenneth Osbeck, *Amazing Grace: 366 Inspiring Hymn Stories*, 118

The message of the cross and the empty tomb in the words of the apostle Paul are "*of first importance.*"² The succinct summation Paul delivers in **1 Corinthians 15** is the basis of every believer's hope, "*For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.*"

Yet within this simple summary there is a deep mine of rich theological treasure to be discovered. As is often stated the gospel is simple enough for young children to grasp, but rich enough for mature saints to continually be amazed. The actual events of Jesus' death on the cross, burial and resurrection from the grave are essential to understanding why the gospel matters. Salvation does not come by just knowing about historical events; it comes by faith in believing the reason Jesus died and the power of His resurrection which provides you His righteousness in order to have fellowship with a holy God. In exploring the depths of these truths, we'll answer three questions:

- **WHY THE CROSS?**
- **WHAT HAPPENED ON THE CROSS?**
- **WHAT IF THE TOMB WASN'T EMPTY?**

I. **WHY THE CROSS?**

ROMANS 1:18 "*For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.*"

GOD'S HOLY DEMAND FOR JUSTICE

God's perfect and holy nature sets Him apart from all things. As the holy, supreme Being of His creation, He decides how His universe is governed. He wisely designed both the natural laws of creation and moral laws for mankind. Since Adam's fall into sin and the subsequent sin nature of humans, God's holiness necessitates a just punishment for sin (Rom.3:23; 5:12). God's just punishment for sin is death - *physically* and *spiritually* (Rom.6:23; Eph.2:1). Since our sin is against a holy, eternal God the just penalty for sin is eternal, righteous judgment. There is no amount of good deeds, good living, penance, prayer or religious commitment to eradicate the stain of sin or reverse the guilty sentence (Rom.3:20; Gal.2:16-17). Because of the holy nature of God and the sinful nature of man, God is not obligated to save anyone and is perfectly just in His judgment upon everyone for their sin (Rom.2:1-3).

GOD'S MOTIVATING LOVE AND MERCY

JOHN 3:16-17 "*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*"

"GOD IS LOVE." AMEN! Since God's character is love, His will to extend mercy acts consistently with His nature. God's motivating plan to save you from the penalty of sin was directed by His merciful love.

² 1 Corinthians 15:3

"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. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." **1 John 4:9-10**

"But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus..." **Ephesians 2:4-6**

God's love is not based on how *loveable* you are, but on His gracious character. The dilemma that seems apparent is *how can a holy, just God show mercy to sinners deserving judgment? How can He execute right judgment without just ignoring sin or dismissing guilt without penalty?* God's plan to save mankind began in eternity past within the triune Godhead (Eph.1:4-5). It was determined, agreed upon and executed by the Godhead to make the only way possible for sinners to be reconciled to Himself. The method may seem peculiar to us since you weren't invited into God's council when He determined the plan. But the purpose is clear when you understand how it was accomplished.

"It was not necessary for the divine Judge, after pronouncing the just sentence against sin, to move from behind the bench and take upon himself the penalty of the accused. God's decision to save was a free movement of love and grace."³

The genius plan of the cross was to charge our guilt and sin against Himself. By bearing your sin and paying the punishment for your guilt, God the Son would satisfy the demands of God the Father's justice while providing merciful forgiveness to sinners. Only Jesus Christ could accomplish this because of His perfect sinless nature as man to meet God's righteous requirement; and as the Divine infinite holy One to receive and satisfy the wrath of God. In this way God's holy demand for justice was satisfied, while at the same time His motivation of love and mercy is displayed. Each of these attributes is of equal importance, and none can be exalted above another without making God less than He is.

II. WHAT HAPPENED ON THE CROSS?

ISAIAH 53:5 *"But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed."*

CHRIST, YOUR SUBSTITUTE

Anyone who has been saddled with debt often feels the burden of owing what remains. The greater your debt is the heavier the burden and any accompanying guilt and shame. However, the feeling you experience once your debt has been paid off, removed and forgiven brings a sense of freedom and release. Sin isn't just "bad debt" waiting to be paid off; instead, your transgressions are what condemn you and cannot be "paid off" by your efforts. If it were not for the work of Jesus Christ on the cross, you would be eternally paying for your debt of sin.

The great exchange of Jesus Christ taking upon Himself your sin and paying the penalty you deserved, then granting you His righteousness through faith is what theologians refer to as PENAL SUBSTITUTION. It's the fancy phrase of simply stating *"Christ paid the penalty of our sin (penal) as*

³ Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation*, 188

*he died in our place on the cross (substitution)."*⁴ This practice of **Penal Substitutionary Atonement** is learned through the Old Testament sacrificial system. The system set up by God then implemented by Moses was a foreshadowing of the final sacrifice God would make for sin (Heb.8:5; 10:1). As the writer of Hebrews explains, "*For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins... ¹⁰And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all... ¹⁴For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified*" (Heb.10:4-14).

At significant moments in Biblical history God demonstrated His plan for a substitute sacrifice. He tested Abraham on Mt. Moriah by requiring the sacrifice of his son, Isaac; but then graciously provided a ram in Isaac's place. He instructed the Israelites to sacrifice a Passover lamb to spare the first-born in their households on the eve of the Exodus from Egypt. Yet when it came to providing the final sacrifice for our sin, God did NOT spare His own Son but instead offered Him up as our Passover Lamb for salvation.

One of the most clear and descriptive passages in providing understanding of this divine drama is **Isaiah 53**. This OT prophecy dramatically explains the divine interchange that happened between God the Father, His Son, and ourselves. According to verses 4-6, you learn it is Jesus Christ who personally bears your grief and sorrows. It is God Himself who smites, afflicts, and crushes the Son for your iniquities. Due to our sinful way and going astray, God placed on Jesus Christ all your iniquitous transgressions. Yet it was through this punishment and wounding that brings peace with God and healing your sin-curse. Both **Isaiah 53:11** and **2 Corinthians 5:21** echo the same message:

"Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities."

*"For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."*⁵

One of my favorite illustrations of a substitute sacrifice comes from C.S. Lewis' classic story, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. In the story one of the brothers, Edmund Pevensie, had been deceived by the White Witch and became an enslaved follower. Near the end Edmund is to be rescued from her power but not without cost. The lion Aslan instead makes an exchange with the White Witch, his life for Edmund's. In a poignant scene Aslan surrenders himself to be sacrificed by the Witch and her hoard.⁶

CHRIST, THE WRATH-SATISFIER

Jesus Christ's role as substitute would not be complete unless He was able to satisfy the demands of God's judgment. If God's wrath is to be eternally poured out on deserving sinners, then the satisfaction of that judgment requires an eternal-bearing payment. This is why Jesus is uniquely qualified as the God-Man to meet the eternal payment requirement. The biblical term to describe satisfying God's wrath is **PROPITIATION** (Rom.3:23-26; Heb.2:17; 1 John 2:1-2; 4:10). It is more than just a matter of dying in someone's place, it's the fact that the perfect life of Jesus Christ along with His body and blood offering, and His capability to absorb the full measure of God's infinite wrath poured upon Him for three dark hours is what ultimately met God's expectations in pacifying the payment for sin (Matt.28:45-46; Luke 23:44-46; John 19:30).

⁴ Bruce Ware, *Big Truths for Young Hearts*, 130

⁵ MacArthur Study Bible notes, 2 Corinthians 5:21, "*God treated him as if he committed believers' sins, and treats believers as if they did only the righteous deeds of the sinless Son of God.*"

⁶ C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, chapter 14

“For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person-though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die - but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.” **Romans 5:6-9**

Imagine you live in a town at the base of the Hoover Dam. One day you receive a warning that the dam has suffered irreparable damage and will burst within the hour. The news of the impending disaster leaves no time to escape its widespread destruction and no hope for human intervention. As the historic dam collapses, unleashing a deluge of destruction before its path, a massive earthquake opens a giant gap in the ground capable of swallowing all the water stored behind the Hoover Dam. It was a divine miracle to save your town from certain disaster. Likewise, it was a Divine Master Plan motivated by merciful love to rescue you from eternal judgment.

Whose sin did Christ die for? There has been historically long debate as to whose sin Christ actually paid for. Mature Christian saints have stood strong on both sides of the argument. Sadly, it has also been a teaching that has divided many churches throughout the ages. The biblical texts seem to provide persuasive arguments for both positions – *limited vs. unlimited atonement*.

Suffice it to say, an answer to this question could be phrased in terms of PROVISION and APPLICATION.⁷ Familiar texts such as John 1:29, 3:16-17, 4:42, Hebrews 2:9, 1 John 2:2 and 4:14 indicate that Christ’s atoning sacrifice has made **Provision** for all sinners in all times. At the same time, passages such as John 10, 17, Romans 8, Hebrews 7:25 affirm that Christ’s atonement **Applies** only to His own, the elect. Therefore it could be stated that as part of the general will of God, Christ *provided* for all people’s sins and this must be preached to all nations (Matt.28:19-20). Further still, as part of the special will of God, the benefits of Christ’s atonement are *applied* to those who come to regenerate faith.

III. WHAT IF THE TOMB WASN'T EMPTY?

LUKE 24:2 *“And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel. And as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, “Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.”*

CHRIST’S VICTORY OVER THE PENALTY OF SIN

The work of Christ on the cross would have been incomplete if He had remained in the grave. If the penalty for sin is death (Rom.6:23) and Jesus paid that penalty, then His resurrection from death shows His payment was received (Rom.5:12-17). A resurrected Christ proves God the Father accepted His atoning work (Rom.4:25), thereby securing assurance that you will not perish for in sin (1 Cor.15:16-19). If the tomb wasn’t empty, it would mean that Jesus was still paying the penalty for sin – *which is the reason for Hell*. This is why the Apostles from Peter to Paul made such adamant declarations that Jesus was resurrected, appeared to many as proof, and has returned to His rightful position in heaven (Acts 2:32; 4:10; 10:40-41).

⁷ Demarest, 189-193

CHRIST'S VICTORY OVER THE POWER OF SIN

Sin's greatest power is death – *physically and spiritually*. Under sin's curse, we are enslaved to its power and rule within us. Sin's mastery keeps you under the curse of the Law (Gal.3:10-14) and entrapped in unrighteousness, resulting in death and eternal separation from God. But the resurrection of Jesus Christ breaks your bondage to sin and its enslaving nature. The theme of REDEMPTION is recognized in Paul's explanation,

"We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin." **Romans 6:4-7**

Jesus Christ's work was accomplished in its finality on the cross and in its fullness at the resurrection. The benefits of salvation are applied at the moment of regeneration when you are justified by faith, receive peace with God and are now being sanctified by the Holy Spirit (Rom.5:1-5). The reward of redemption is enjoyed as you are freed from being a slave to sin and freed up to become a righteous servant of God (Rom.6:15-23).

CHRIST'S VICTORY OVER SATAN

Lastly, if the tomb wasn't empty it would mean Satan had won. Satan has temporary, delegated power in this present world (Job 1, 2). His current position as the prince of the air means he has influential power to deceive the minds of men and wage war against God's people (Eph.2:1-2; 6:10-17). But his power is limited (John 14:30) and his destiny was determined back in the Garden of Eden (Gen.3:15). Even though the cross appeared to be a moment of victory for Satan, it turned out to be the disarmament of his rule and authority.

"And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him." **Colossians 2:13-15**

If Satan's hold on us is through the guilt of sin, then Christ's triumphant resurrection cancels your debt, delivers you from bondage, removes your guilt and liberates you from the power of Satan!

The climactic moment in C.S. Lewis' tale comes after Aslan had been slain. Susan and Lucy are heartbroken and discouraged. But in the midst of their grief, a miracle takes place. *"The rising of the sun had made everything look so different – all colors and shadows were changed – that for a moment they didn't see the important thing. Then they did. The Stone Table was broken into two pieces by a great crack that ran down it from end to end; and there was no Aslan."*⁸

**Because He lives, I can face tomorrow,
Because He lives, all fear is gone,
Because I know He holds the future,
And life is worth the living,
Just because He lives!**

⁸ C.S. Lewis, pg.161