

Jesus' Death For Us—A Sacrifice

A) Jesus' death—the ransom for us

When two of Jesus' disciples came to him, requesting a "ministerial office" in the future Kingdom of God, he rebuked them, making reference to his own mission:

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many. (Mark 10:45)

As he celebrated his final Passover with his disciples on the evening before his death, presumably not long after he had spoken these words, he inaugurated the Lord's Supper as a lasting legacy, showing, in his words about bread and wine, how he himself interpreted his death from God's perspective:

And when He had taken some bread and given thanks, He broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me." And in the same way He took the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood." (Luke 22:19-20)

Jesus was fully aware that his death was not merely an accident or unexpected tragedy. He was also conscious that he was not simply the victim of a judicial murder.¹ He gave his body and his blood for us.

He was sent by God to give his life:

For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it again. No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father. (John 10:17-18)

Jesus was not suicidal—he did not initiate his own death—but he offered no resistance to the wickedness of men who, in their hatred and murderous contempt, despised the love and kindness of God which came to them in Jesus. He was so deeply rooted in God's love that he transformed the evil done to him by his enemies into good by willingly bowing to it, as an expression of his devotion to the Father and his love for mankind. Jesus, whose very life was love and devotion, demonstrated his devotion to the point of death.

His aim was our freedom:

Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin... So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed." (John 8:34+36)

Jesus viewed his death as serving this aim. That is why he called his death a "ransom for many". In antiquity, when somebody wished to liberate a slave, he had to pay a ransom. Jesus died for our freedom. That is why his death is a ransom for us. Trying to determine who the ransom is paid to – God or Satan – misses the point, taking the metaphor literally and misunderstanding the intention of the statement. When God "purchased"² his people Israel out of slavery in Egypt, the question did not arise as to whom the price was paid to.

In Psalm 49:15 the psalmist prays:

But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me. (ESV)

Full of confidence, the psalmist looks forward to being freed from death to resurrection and eternal fellowship with God. Yet he did not ask with what ransom God would set him free from the power of death. He probably would have been astonished at such a question.

To whom ought Jesus have paid this ransom? To Satan?³ That would be to presuppose on the one hand that Satan is the rightful owner of fallen mankind, while on the other hand assuming that God regards Satan as an equal counterpart in a business transaction. For the first idea there is no biblical foundation. The second thought (viewing Satan as an equal business counterpart of God) is blasphemy.

Can we imagine that Jesus paid the ransom to God? Should he have ransomed mankind from the wrathful grip of God? An even greater blasphemy than the previous idea! Why should God, who is love himself, keep mankind bound in slavery?

Surely though, God's righteousness requires the just punishment of sin, does it not? Did not Jesus, by his death, bear the due penalty for all sin, satisfying the righteousness of God?

The concept of a God who can only overcome his "split-personality" of loving mercy and wrathful indignation by slaughtering his own son is a product of (in)human fantasy and has nothing to do with the God whom Jesus revealed to us.

Finally he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son." But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance." And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. (Matthew 21:37-39)

God sent his son to reconcile us to himself because through our sins we had become his enemies. It was not to resolve his own inner conflict between his righteous anger and merciful love! God is love through and through, and his righteousness is none other than his self-giving love which he made known in Jesus' devotion.

That is why precisely in his suffering and death God was closest to Jesus:

Behold, an hour is coming, and has already come, for you to be scattered, each to his own home, and to leave Me alone; and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me. (John 16:32)

... namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. (2 Corinthians 5:19)

...For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself... (Colossians 1:19-20)

What then do Jesus' words mean in Matthew 27:46?

About the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "ELI, ELI, LAMA SABACHTHANI?" that is, "MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?"

We have to view these first words of Psalm 22 in the context of the rest of the Psalm. In the midst of extreme desperation in which it appears that God has forsaken his righteous one, the persecuted righteous man turns with complete trust to God who sets him free. The Psalm concludes with gratitude and praise:

For He has not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; Nor has He hidden His face from him, But when he cried to Him for help, He heard. (Psalm 22:24)

Psalm 22 is not talking about a righteous man being separated from God (either through his own or other people's sins), but about his persecution by evil people. Even in misery and tribulation – in which there seems to be no evidence of God's presence – God is very close to his own.

B) Jesus—the Passover Lamb

Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed. Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. (1 Corinthians 5:7-8)

With these words Paul admonished the church in Corinth as they had failed to exclude a person from the church who was living in grave sin. Paul applied the symbolism of the Jewish Passover festival – also called the Feast of Unleavened Bread – to the church. What did he intend to say?

In the first instance, his intention was to demonstrate the purity of the church. Just as all the old leaven had to be removed from the Israelite houses before the festival, in the same way all malice and wickedness must be removed from the church of God and from the life of every individual Christian. Secondly, by referring to Jesus as the sacrificed passover lamb he alludes to our liberation. The Passover festival was the celebration of the liberation of the nation of Israel from slavery in Egypt. Our Passover lamb, Jesus, has liberated us from the slavery of sin. It is therefore neither possible for Christians to remain in their former sins, nor for the church to tolerate someone in her midst who disregards the freedom which Jesus grants us.

Here it is not about the concepts of paying a ransom for, or punishing sins. The Israelites did not associate these concepts with the passover lamb. The Passover was the festival of liberation. As Christians we should also now live in the freedom which Jesus has granted us through his devotion.

C) Jesus—sacrifice, priest and mercy-seat

c.1) Jesus—the sacrifice

In the New Testament there are numerous passages in which Jesus' death is compared with a sacrifice:

... and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma. (Ephesians 5:2)

... who does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the sins of the people, because this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. (Hebrews 7:27)

...how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? (Hebrews 9:14)

Therefore it was necessary for the copies of the things in the heavens to be cleansed with these, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ did not enter a holy place made with hands, a mere copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us; nor

was it that He would offer Himself often, as the high priest enters the holy place year by year with blood that is not his own. Otherwise, He would have needed to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now once at the consummation of the ages He has been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment, so Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time for salvation without reference to sin, to those who eagerly await Him. (Hebrews 9:23-28)

Therefore, when He comes into the world, He says, "SACRIFICE AND OFFERING YOU HAVE NOT DESIRED, BUT A BODY YOU HAVE PREPARED FOR ME; IN WHOLE BURNT OFFERINGS AND sacrifices FOR SIN YOU HAVE TAKEN NO PLEASURE. "THEN I SAID, 'BEHOLD, I HAVE COME (IN THE SCROLL OF THE BOOK IT IS WRITTEN OF ME) TO DO YOUR WILL, O GOD.'" After saying above, SACRIFICES AND OFFERINGS AND WHOLE BURNT OFFERINGS AND sacrifices FOR SIN YOU HAVE NOT DESIRED, NOR HAVE YOU TAKEN PLEASURE in them" (which are offered according to the Law), then He said, "BEHOLD, I HAVE COME TO DO YOUR WILL." He takes away the first in order to establish the second. By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. Every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, SAT DOWN AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD, waiting from that time onward UNTIL HIS ENEMIES BE MADE A FOOTSTOOL FOR HIS FEET. For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. (Hebrews 10:5-14)

Passages like these are found mostly in the letter to the Hebrews. The author's intention is to demonstrate to his Jewish Christian readers that the sacrificial cult of the Old Testament has been invalidated through the salvation brought by Jesus. Thus, Barnabas⁴ compares the death of Jesus with the sacrifices of the Old Covenant, especially the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), showing that Jesus' sacrifice is the only one which can really take away sins, unlike the Old Testament sacrifices. What was it about Jesus' sacrifice that made real forgiveness possible? Barnabas answers this question with a quote from Psalm 40:

"Behold, I have come to do your will." (Hebrews 10:9)

Jesus' death was the result of his holy life. He came to do God's will from his first to his last breath on this earth. It is not his death in itself, nor his shed blood that saves us. Rather it is his loving devotion which he demonstrated by setting us free from our sins.

Paul's reference to Jesus' sacrifice in Ephesians 5:2 needs to be understood in context.

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma. (Ephesians 5:1-2)

His love is the example for how we should love; His devotion is the example for our devotion. In the following verses Paul explains the details of what this life of devotion consists of. It is a life of purity, modesty, sobriety, honesty – a life in which God is glorified. The comparison with a sacrifice conveys how everything Jesus did in life and in death fully pleased and glorified God.

Accordingly, we find various passages in the Bible that compare our Christian life with a sacrificial offering, without needing to conclude that every Christian ought to die as a martyr.

Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a

living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. (Romans 12:1)

Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name. And do not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is pleased. (Hebrews 13:15-16)

A fitting passage in this context which does not use sacrificial terminology is the following from 1st John:

We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. (1 John 3:16)

Also Ephesians 5:25-27:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless.

When we consider the comparison here of Jesus' devotion with that of a loving husband, it is obvious that the essential thing is not his death but his daily devotion to his wife. A husband's purpose in devoting himself is not to die, but to share his life with his wife. Of course, in a life-threatening situation he will be willing to risk his own life in order to save his wife. In the same way Jesus risked his own life to save us.

c.II) Jesus—the priest

In the Letter to the Hebrews Jesus is not only compared with the sacrifice of the Day of Atonement, but also with the High Priest who was allowed to enter the Most Holy Place once a year on this day.

It was the task of the Old Testament Priests to be mediators between God and the people. They brought the requests of the people to God through the sacrifices. They also offered sacrifices for sin in order to bridge the gap between God and man which was brought about by man's sin. The fact that the priests themselves were sinners meant that they were only able to fulfil this role in a very limited sense. Only Jesus, who is God and man in one person and who never sinned, was able to build the perfect bridge between God and man. He himself is the bridge between God and man - the only mediator.

For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all, the testimony given at the proper time. (1 Timothy 2:5-6)

As man, Jesus is fully on our side. He knows all of our weaknesses and temptations.

For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. (Hebrews 4:15)

That is why he is the one who can help us in our afflictions and weaknesses. He never sinned, despite being tempted in every way, and so he can empower us to overcome sin in our lives. He is a holy High Priest.

For it was fitting for us to have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled,

separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens; who does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the sins of the people, because this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. (Hebrews 7:26-27)

In his resurrection he overcame death and lives in all eternity.

Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them. (Hebrews 7:25)

Jesus is the Immanuel, “God with us” (Matthew 1:23). He is God incarnate.

And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

c.III) Jesus—the mercy-seat

In the New Testament the image of the Old Testament Day of Atonement (see Leviticus 16) is used in various ways to express different aspects of Jesus’ work of salvation. Jesus is not only compared with the sacrifice and the High Priest, but also with the Mercy-seat.

In Romans Paul writes:

But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a mercy-seat⁵ in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. (Romans 3:21-26)

Here, Paul describes Jesus as the “mercy-seat” (according to J.N. Darby’s 1890 translation of the New Testament), in Greek “hilasterion”. This is a reference to the cover of the Ark of the Covenant which, in the Old Testament ritual, was the place where the High Priest sprinkled the blood of the goat slaughtered as a sin offering on the Day of Atonement (compare Leviticus 16:15-16). Luther called this cover a “Gnadenstuhl”, i.e. mercy-seat. The sprinkling of blood on this cover symbolised the reconciliation brought about by God’s forgiveness offered to Israel.

So the text of Romans 3:25-26a describes how God appointed Jesus as the place of encounter with God - His self-revelation - and as the reconciliation which is effective through the power of his devoted life, that is, through his blood. Through Jesus’ death and resurrection God has shown himself to be the one who meets with us and reconciles us.

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Hebrews 4:14-16)

In the New Testament the various aspects of the Jewish rituals of the Day of Atonement are applied figuratively to Jesus. So, depicting him as a High Priest, a sacrifice, and even a mercy-seat expresses that we have been reconciled to God through him, while also revealing that we should not take any of these passages too literally.

Interestingly, the New Testament does not utilise the analogy – which some have used – of comparing Jesus with the goat that was driven into the desert after the High Priest had “put” the sins of the nation on it (Leviticus 16:21-22). In the Old Testament too, reconciliation was brought about through the sacrificed goat, not through the goat sent into the desert. This goat “for Azazel” (Leviticus 16:8) illustrates the removal of sins, nothing more. Jesus is not our scapegoat; he is our Priest and Lord.

Supplement 1: The blood of Jesus

At the institution of the Lord’s Supper, Jesus spoke of his “blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins”. (Matthew 26:28). In keeping with his example, there are many passages in the writings of the apostles that also refer to the blood of Jesus, such as the following:

... whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed. (Romans 3:25)

In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace... (Ephesians 1:7)

... having made peace through the blood of His cross. (Colossians 1:20)

... how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? (Hebrews 9:14)

... but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ. (1 Peter 1:19)

... but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. (1 John 1:7)

And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.” (Revelation 5:9)

And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even when faced with death. (Revelation 12:11)

This incomplete selection of New Testament passages which refer to the blood of Jesus shows what great importance the apostles attached to the blood of Jesus. Through the blood we have salvation, the forgiveness of sins; we have been ransomed and cleansed. Through the blood of the Lamb we overcome. Here, it is obvious that “blood” does not refer to the bodily fluid. This is also apparent in the formulation, “through the blood of his cross” (Colossians 1:20). Blood loss during crucifixion – cruel though it was – was not very severe in comparison with other forms of execution such as beheading.

Two Old Testament passages can help clarify this point:

For the life of every creature is its blood: its blood is its life. Therefore I have said to the people of Israel, You shall not eat the blood of any creature, for the life of

every creature is its blood. Whoever eats it shall be cut off. (ESV) (Leviticus 17:14)

Only be sure not to eat the blood, for the blood is the life, and you shall not eat the life with the flesh. (Deuteronomy 12:23)

Neither of these passages speak about the blood of humans, but the blood of animals. The reason given for the Old Testament prohibition of eating blood is that the life of every creature is in its blood. That is to say, that the blood is its life (or its life force or vitality). This relationship between blood and life probably forms the basis for the understanding of blood in the Old Testament sacrifices. A sacrifice is an expression of a person's desire to give God his very best, that is, his life. The purpose of animal sacrifices was not to have an animal killed instead of the sinner himself, but for a person to give God the very best he can. To the creator of all life, something of that life was given back.⁶

This thought helps us to understand the value of the blood of Jesus. His blood represents his life, which he gave for us. He shed his blood, that is to say, he gave himself completely for us, to the point of death. Through his devotion we have forgiveness, we have been cleansed and he gives us the strength to overcome.

Jesus was not only human. In him, God came to us in human form. The blood, as a symbol of life, is consequently a symbol of the divine life that has been given to us in Jesus.

...seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature⁷, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust. (2 Peter 1:3-4)

Does not Hebrews 9:22 speak of the absolute necessity of the shedding of blood in order for sin to be forgiven? For it says:

Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins. (Hebrews 9:22 ESV)

The expression "under the law" gives us a hint that the author's aim is not to formulate a universal principle, according to which God is incapable of forgiving without the shedding of blood.⁸ Barnabas points out that in the Old Testament ritual, blood played a major role, and also that, by and large, forgiveness of sins was connected with the shedding of blood. Even in the Old Testament we find examples in which God forgave sins without the shedding of any blood, as for example in the sin offerings of the poor (Leviticus 5:11), or following David's sin when the prophet Nathan pronounced forgiveness without requiring any sacrifice at all (2 Sam 12:13). In addition, Psalms 32 and 103, which praise God for his forgiveness, completely omit any mention of sacrifice or the shedding of blood.

In the New Testament too, we find that John the Baptist proclaimed forgiveness of sins on only one condition - repentance, expressed by the sign of baptism (Luke 3:3-18).

Jesus, too, forgave sins without pointing out any need for a bloody sacrifice (Mark 2:1-11, Luke 7:47-48). Jesus repeatedly showed that God can only forgive us our sins if we are prepared to forgive others (Matthew 6:14-15, 18:21-35).

There is an interesting episode in the life of David:

And David said longingly, "Oh, that someone would give me water to drink from the well of Bethlehem that is by the gate!" Then the three mighty men broke through

the camp of the Philistines and drew water out of the well of Bethlehem that was by the gate and carried and brought it to David. But he would not drink of it. He poured it out to the LORD and said, "Far be it from me, O LORD, that I should do this. Shall I drink the blood of the men who went at the risk of their lives?" Therefore he would not drink it. These things the three mighty men did. (ESV) (2 Samuel 23:15-17)

David's mighty men risked their lives to bring David his desired water. That is why David calls this water their blood. These men gave their blood for David without losing so much as a drop of it.

Jesus gave his blood for us. The value of salvation is found in the love, devotion and holiness of our Lord. God is not interested in a couple of litres of bodily fluid. He is not a bloodthirsty idol who has to be appeased through a barbaric, murderous ritual. His whole being is love, and out of this love he gave himself for us in his Son. He is waiting for us to reply to his love with our own love and devotion which he wants to work in us.

Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord, equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen. (Hebrews 13:20-21)

Supplement 2: A human sacrifice?

Not only in the 21st Century is human sacrifice considered to be a barbaric atrocity. Long ago the Old Testament strictly forbade the Israelites from performing any such rituals.

Just one example is Jeremiah 7:31:

They have built the high places of Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command, and it did not come into My mind.

The widespread Canaanite practice of human sacrifice was strictly forbidden for the Israelites. It was in absolute contradiction to the will of God. Such a thing never even entered God's mind. Even the story of Abraham's sacrifice in Genesis 22 demonstrates that God did not want Isaac's death. What God required was Abraham's readiness to renounce even the very son promised to him – not his son's literal slaughter.

He said, "Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me." (Genesis 22:12)

Abraham had to learn that his son was not his own possession, but the God-given bearer of the promise whom he should devote completely to God's service.

The only "human sacrifice" pleasing to God in the Old Testament is in Numbers 8:

Aaron then shall present the Levites before the LORD as a wave offering from the sons of Israel, that they may qualify to perform the service of the LORD. Now the Levites shall lay their hands on the heads of the bulls; then offer the one for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering to the LORD, to make atonement for the Levites. You shall have the Levites stand before Aaron and before his sons so as to present them as a wave offering to the LORD. "Thus you shall separate the Levites

from among the sons of Israel, and the Levites shall be Mine. Then after that the Levites may go in to serve the tent of meeting. But you shall cleanse them and present them as a wave offering. (Numbers 8:11-15)

Here, the Levites are offered as a “wave offering” to Yahweh. The wave offering did not consist of killing the bulls, but of the service of the Levites. The Levites were the special possession of the Lord – their whole service was the offering pleasing to God. A far more perfect offering than the Levites, who needed to sacrifice for their own sins, was Jesus. His service surpassed that of the Levites by far.

Even if people had followed Jesus’ call to repent – and if he had not been murdered by criminals – his life still would have been the perfect sacrifice for the salvation of the world – a bloodless human sacrifice.

Supplement 3: Was Jesus’ death necessary?

Numerous passages in the New Testament speak of our salvation through Jesus’ death. Does that mean that without the judicial murder of Jesus, God would have been unable to save us? The New Testament writers take Jesus’ death and resurrection as a given fact. They do not speculate about possible alternative ways God could have brought about salvation. We would like to mention just a few thoughts here which should prompt us to think.

Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; but we speak God’s wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory; the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. (1 Corinthians 2:6-8)

If the “rulers of this age” had understood the wisdom of God, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. This clearly means that God’s wisdom would not have been contradicted if Jesus had not been murdered. God’s will was and is the repentance of all people (1 Timothy 2:4). If the Jewish rulers had listened to and obeyed the God’s voice speaking through Jesus and if the nation of Israel had put their faith in their Messiah, salvation would certainly not have failed as a result. God does not need evil in order to do good!

And why not say (as we are slanderously reported and as some claim that we say), “Let us do evil that good may come”? Their condemnation is just. (Romans 3:8)

Jesus himself also clearly expressed that his aim in coming was to lead people back to God, as shown in the parable of the vine dressers:

But afterward he sent his son to them, saying, “They will respect my son.” (Matthew 21:37)

Or in Matthew 23:37:

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling.”

Jesus was fully aware of the wickedness of the people his Father had sent him to. His answer to this wickedness was love – love that was ready to die. Yet, how much better would it have been for God’s love to be answered by the love of people! Through Jesus’ death we too are challenged to give up

our enmity towards God and to stop running away from him.

Be reconciled to God! (2 Corinthians 5:20)

How then, are we to understand the following words of Jesus?

And He said to them, "O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?" (Luke 24:25-26)

It was necessary for Jesus to suffer and enter into his glory. Not because he had to shed his blood in order to appease God's wrath and pay the penalty for our sins. Jesus did not want to establish his kingdom in this world by force, but by service and devotion. When absolute goodness comes into this world - a world living in rebellion to God's goodness - and evil people refuse to listen to the Good One, their reaction is hatred and violence. Jesus remained consistent in his love. That is why it was necessary for him to go the way of suffering and death, for by doing so he overcame their hatred.

...but put to death the Prince of life, the one whom God raised from the dead, a fact to which we are witnesses...

But the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled. Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord... (Acts 3:15, 18-19)

d) Jesus - the victor

Jesus' death only makes full sense in connection with his resurrection. His resurrection demonstrates to us that Jesus was not one of numerous idealists who was ultimately defeated by man's wickedness. The resurrection is the divine confirmation that Jesus' words and his claim to be the incarnate God were true. The resurrection demonstrates that death does not have the last word, but that Jesus overcame death through his devotion to the point of death. He bore the wickedness of sinners and by being united with him we experience freedom from sin.

When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the handwriting⁹ consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him. (Colossians 2:13-15)

...but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord. (1 Corinthians 15:57-58)

Footnotes:

1. Judicial murder is the unjustified execution of death penalty.
2. Exodus 15:16 ...till your people, O LORD, pass by, till the people pass by whom you have purchased. Compare also Psalm 74:2, Isaiah 50:1, 52:3
3. This was a widespread explanation in the first millennium AD.
4. According to Tertullian, Barnabas was the author of the Letter to the Hebrews.
5. At this point in the text we have replaced the word "propitiation", as quoted in the NASB,

with “mercy-seat” as translated by Darby. The rendering “propitiation” implies the thought that God requires compensation or satisfaction to be paid for the offence committed against him – a thought that is foreign to the biblical concept of God, who himself is the one who takes away our sins. It is not God who needs to be reconciled to us, but we to God. Wycliffe translated hilasterion as “forgiver”.

6. This explanation seems to be fitting for both sin offerings and thanksgiving offerings. The explanation that the animal dies a substitutionary death for the guilt of the person who is sacrificing cannot be applied to sacrifices that had no connection with sin, but were offered purely out of gratitude. Furthermore, it is important to note that for very poor Israelites, the concept of an animal’s substitutionary death as a sin offering did not appear, because according to Leviticus 5:11 their sacrifice consisted of a tenth of an ephah (approx. 2.2 litres, according to another explanation, 4 litres) of fine flour. When we consider this sacrifice as a gift, we can understand why it was possible for poor people to replace the blood with flour.
7. The expression “partakers of the divine nature” of course does not mean that we are no longer human, but points to the close connection with God which has been given to us in Jesus.
8. Some fundamentalists hold the opinion that the reason God rejected Cain’s offering was because he offered only plants and did not shed blood.
9. This is the literal meaning of the Greek word cheirographon. We have thus amended the NASB’s rendering of “certificate of debt” to read “handwriting” as in KJV and Darby.

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