

Jesus' Death for Us: A Sacrifice

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⚓ 1 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 came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as 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 he took bread, and when he had 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 likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup that 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 that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have 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 a slave to sin.... So if the Son sets 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.

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, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me. (*John 16:32*)

...that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. (*2 Corinthians 5:19*)

...For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.... (*Colossians 1:19-20*)

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

And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lema 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 or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted, and he has not hidden his face from him, but has heard, when he cried to him. (*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.

✠ 2 Jesus: The Passover Lamb

Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, 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.

3 Jesus: Sacrifice, Priest and Mercy-Seat

✚ 3.1 Jesus: The Sacrifice

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

And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (*Ephesians 5:2*)

He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this 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, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God. (*Hebrews 9:14*)

Thus it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgement, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him. (*Hebrews 9:23-28*)

Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, 'Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.'" When he said above, "You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings" (these are offered according to the law), then he added, "Behold, I have come to do your will." He does away with the first in order to establish the second. And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being 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, Barnabas [4] 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.

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, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (*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.

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual 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 acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. (*Hebrews 13:15-16*)

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

By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. (*1 John 3:16*)

Also Ephesians 5:25-27:

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

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.

⚓ 3.2 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 there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is 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 is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted 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 indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself. *(Hebrews 7:26-27)*

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

Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost 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 have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. *(John 1:14)*

3.3 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 the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a mercy-seat [5] by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might 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.

Since then 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 is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, 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 put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was

to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. (*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*)

...making peace by 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, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God. (*Hebrews 9:14*)

...but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. (*1 Peter 1:19*)

But if we walk in the light, as he 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 scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation...." (*Revelation 5:9*)

And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto 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 body 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. (*Leviticus 17:14*)

Only be sure that you do not 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.

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, [7] having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. (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)

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. (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 body 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 may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever 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:

And 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, nor did it 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 lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing 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:

...and Aaron shall offer the Levites before the Lord as a wave offering from the people of Israel, that they may do the service of the Lord. Then the Levites shall lay their hands on the heads of the bulls, and you shall offer one for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering to the Lord to make atonement for the Levites. And you shall set the Levites before Aaron and his sons, and shall offer them as a wave offering to the Lord. Thus you shall separate the Levites from among the people of Israel, and the Levites shall be mine. And after that the Levites shall go in to serve at the tent of meeting, when you have cleansed them and offered 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: In Which Sense 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 among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, 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 do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying. 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:

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

Or in Matthew 23:37:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!

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 ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and 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.

...and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses.

But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled. Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.... (*Acts 3:15,18-20*)

✠ 4 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.

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 cancelling the handwriting [9] 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*)

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

Your Email*

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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 (*De pudicitia*), 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 ESV, 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 ESV's rendering of "record of debt" to read "handwriting" as in KJV and Darby.

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