



The Death and Resurrection of Jesus

Lesson 9

At the center of the New Testament lies a cross and an empty tomb. Several thousand years of biblical history led up to death of Jesus, and all of human history since has been that message crashing into the various cultures of the world. At the heart of the gospel is this simple message: “That Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures:” (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). This simple reality holds up the entirety of the Christian religion. Knowing what Scripture has to say about this critically important issue is central to our Christians lives today.

At this point in our study we’ve looked at the person of Christ, seeing that he is both God and man. We’ve spent several weeks looking at the works of Christ – specifically in his role of prophet, priest, and king. Now we will dive down on a couple of issues of great importance: the meaning and significance of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

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I. The Death of Jesus¹

¹ Although the word itself isn’t used, this section will cover the doctrine of the atonement. The atonement is a hotly debated area of systematic theology in at least two ways. Some debate the **significance** of the atonement, that is, they seek to answer the question, “What does Jesus’ death accomplish?” Several theories have been put forth **1) substitution theory** – Christ died in the place of sinners and satisfied God’s wrath by taking their punishment **2) ransom to Satan theory** – Jesus’ death was a payment to Satan and then the resurrection broke the power of Satan (think *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*) **3) moral influence theory** – Jesus’s death was necessary to accomplish salvation necessarily, but simply shows how much God loves us by showing that Christ is willing to die for his people **4) example theory** – Jesus death was a wonderful example of sacrificial love that inspires us to be better people **5) governmental theory** – God need not punish each individual sinner, but he needs to uphold justice and keep people from sinning and he does that by showing how seriously he takes sin by crucifying his own Son. While many of these views have some truth (Christ’s death does overcome Satan and his forces and it is a wonderful example and a demonstration of God’s love), the view that Jesus’ death is a satisfaction of God’s wrath is the view that best aligns with Scripture and will be assumed for this lesson.

Jesus' death was always the plan. Jesus in wrestling through his mission asks "Now is my soul troubled; and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour: but for this cause came I unto this hour" (John 12:27). In studying the death of Jesus, we want to seek to answer two questions: How does Scripture describe Christ's death, and what difference does it make?

A. The Scriptural perspective on the nature of Jesus' death

So how does the New Testament (and the Old Testament) think of the death of Jesus? What metaphors and pictures are used to describe this all important event? In this section we will see how it was that the writers of Scripture understood what was happening as the God-man died on a cross.

1. Jesus's death was a sacrifice (Hebrews 9:26; 10:11-14).

The basic understanding of Christ's death is that it was a sacrifice. Hebrews develops this most clearly, but John (John 1:29) and Paul (1 Corinthians 5:7) also allude to this concept. Just as in the Old Testament a blood sacrifice was required to atone for or to cover one's sin, so Christ's death is the ultimate atonement, the ultimate covering for our sin. While the Old Testament sacrifices pointed toward the need, they themselves were unable to fix the fundamental problem. Only Christ's death could truly deal with the sin problem.

2. Jesus' death was a substitution (2 Corinthians 5:21; Isaiah 53:5-6).

How does Jesus' death address our sin problem? The answer we are given in Scripture is that Jesus became our substitute. He took the penalty we deserved by standing in our place. Paul says that "[Christ was] made ... to be sin for us... so that we might be made the righteousness of God in him."

How will thinking of Christ's death as dying in our place impact our worship? Our life?

3. Jesus' death was a propitiation (Romans 3:23-26; 1 John 2:1-2).

Finally, God's Word teaches that Christ's death was a propitiation. Propitiation is a big theological word that means "the appeasement of wrath." God's holy, righteous anger against sin could not be ignored. Sin must be punished. And so when Christ took our place, he also endured the wrath of God for our sins.

How will this understanding of wrath and sin change the way we think about sin?

The other issue of debate is the **extent** of the atonement. This asks, "Who benefits from Christ's death?" The main options here are that **1) Christ died for the elect** (called *limited* atonement), **2) Christ died for the world** (called *unlimited* atonement), or **3) some kind of mediating position between the two**. This question is much more controversial among conservative theologians and will not be addressed in this lesson.

B. The Scriptural perspective on the purpose for Jesus' death

If Jesus' death is a sacrifice that functions as a substitution and a propitiation, then what exactly does this sacrifice accomplish? What is the end result of his suffering and death on our behalf? The Bible describes this relationship using several different words that overlap and reinforce one another.

1. Jesus' death accomplished forgiveness of sins (Hebrews 9:22; Ephesians 1:7).

Most simply, Jesus' death means that our sins are forgiven. We can have confidence before God that we do not stand before him condemned, but rather we stand before him in the holy righteousness of Jesus.

What should a believer do if they continue to struggle with guilt from sins that they have confessed to God and have been covered in the blood?

2. Jesus' death accomplished redemption (1 Corinthians 6:20; Ephesians 1:7).

The concept of redemption is one of buying something back. The idea is that we were slaves to sin, but through the death of Jesus God has "reacquired" us. The concept of redemption often focuses on the price that must be paid. In this case, it was the precious blood of Christ that was paid so that God could have us back as his children.

3. Jesus' death accomplished reconciliation (Romans 5:10-11; 2 Corinthians 5:18-21).

The final result of Jesus' death is that we have now been reconciled, to God and ultimately to others. Reconciliation means that hostilities have ceased and now there is peace where there used to be conflict. We were once the enemies of God because of the sinful and rebellious choices we made. Now, we are right with God and because of that we can be right with others as well.

In what ways would the death of Jesus lead to reconciliation with our fellow man?

II. The Resurrection of Jesus

The cross without the resurrection is just another execution in a long line of Rome's tyrannical grip. But the resurrection transforms the cross from a symbol of utter defeat to paradoxically being the power of God to salvation (1 Corinthians 1:18).

A. How do we know the resurrection happened?

The greatest evidence for the truth of Christ's claims to be the Messiah of Israel is his resurrection. Christ told the religious leaders of his day when they wanted a sign that they

would receive no sign – except for the resurrection (Matthew 12:38-40). That sign continues to be the strongest evidence of the miraculous nature of Christianity.

What evidence for the resurrection do we see in Scripture and in history?

1. The statements of the New Testament (1 Corinthians 15:3-8).

Tucked away in the corner of your Bible are six verses that provide an incredible testimony to the resurrection. Skeptics who deny the historicity of Scripture will often give very late dates to the gospels (“they were written long after the fact, and were essentially fiction”). They will deny that many of the letters of the New Testament were written by who they claim to be written by and again assign them very late dates (“1 Peter and 2 Peter couldn’t have been written by Peter, and were obviously the work of someone writing much later under intense Roman persecution”). But at least one book they don’t do this with is 1 Corinthians. Even those who deny the authenticity of most of the New Testament letters will usually acknowledge that Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, probably sometime around A.D. 52-55. This would have been around 20-25 years after Christ had died and risen again.

In 15:3-8 we find what was likely an early Christian creed. Paul says it was delivered to him and he delivered it to others. The compactness and the cadence causes many theologians and historians to think this was designed to be a summary of the gospel, and was probably very early in the history of the church if Paul is taught it shortly after his conversion. In these verses Paul argues for the reality of the resurrection on testimony of three groups.

- **The testimony of the apostles (vv 5, 7)**

The first group that saw Jesus was the apostles, specifically Peter (Cephas), James, and the twelve. It’s important to remember that Peter had denied ever knowing Christ, James didn’t believe his brother during Christ’s earthly ministry, and the twelve had scattered when Christ was crucified. Yet this group had a major change of heart and began instead to boldly proclaim that Jesus is the Messiah. What made the difference? According to them, the difference maker was that they saw Jesus risen from the dead.

- **The testimony of five hundred (v 6)**

Another statement that is almost a throwaway statement is that five hundred people saw Christ at one point post-resurrection. Paul says that some have died (“sleep”) but many are still alive. Implication being, if you have questions go ask them!

- **The testimony of Paul himself (v 8)**

Finally, we have to take into account the testimony of Paul himself. Paul was somebody who had tried to destroy Christianity, but one day went from being its main persecutor to its main promoter. And again, if you asked him what made the difference, he would tell you the difference was that he saw the risen Jesus.

2. **The impossibility of alternative explanations.**

Those who seek to deny the historical reality of the resurrection find themselves scrambling to come up with alternative solutions that make sense. Several theories have been put forward, but all of them have major problems.

For each theory, consider simply explaining the theory and then ask if your group can spot the problems with the different theories.

- **Swoon theory**

This theory argues that Jesus never actually died. He was laid in a cold tomb and while there ended up reviving after a couple of days. He then came out and met with several of his followers before dying a few days later because of the injuries. This view directly contradicts the record we have in scripture that there was a massive stone in front of the tomb, that there were guards stationed there, and that the Romans had made sure that he was dead before taking him off the cross. This theory also struggles to explain why it is that the disciples went from being terrified to being bold if the only difference was that they saw a weak, anemic, and brutalized Jesus.

- **Grave robbery theory**

Others will argue that this was interception, plain and simple. The disciples stole the body of Jesus, then claimed he had risen from the dead. The problem here is that this doesn't make sense with the picture of the disciples that we find in the New Testament. And it doesn't make sense that they would lie for something that cost them their life. People will often lie to get ahead, but there was nothing to be gained from trying to convince the world that a deceased Jesus was actually the coming King.

- **Hallucination theory**

The final view that is sometimes promoted is the idea that Jesus' resurrection was just a hallucination. The disciples wanted Jesus back so badly, they imagined they saw him. But Paul said that five hundred saw Christ at one time. Hallucinations are private experiences, hallucinations aren't shared by five hundred people.

In the end, skeptics must face several very uncomfortable facts. Jesus died, was buried, and was put in a tomb. Jesus' followers launched a worldwide movement just over a month later after running in fear for their lives during Jesus' life. The central claim of this movement was that Jesus had come back to life from the dead, and this movement did not start off in obscurity several countries away where no one could check. The movement began in Jerusalem under the same people who had once fled in terror, and their reasoning was that Jesus was alive again. Of all the explanations offered, the most realistic is still the biblical one – Jesus really did rise from the dead.

B. What difference does the resurrection make?

1. Christ's resurrection is necessary for salvation and sanctification (1 Peter 1:3; Romans 4:23; 6:4).

We often think of the cross as being necessary for salvation, and it is. But the New Testament also teaches that there is no salvation without a resurrection. The good news is not just that Jesus died, but rather that he died and is alive again!

Why is the resurrection necessary for our salvation? What does the resurrection accomplish that the crucifixion alone would not?

2. Christ's resurrection demonstrates God's acceptance of Christ's sacrifice (Acts 17:31; Romans 4:23; Philippians 2:8-9).

The resurrection is seen by the writers of the New Testament to be proof that Jesus was who he said he was, and that God accepted his salvific work. Many people have made crazy claims throughout their lives, and they have all died and remained dead. The fact that Jesus was raised by the Father² is proof that the Father really did approve of his mission and that Christ's work was accepted.

3. Christ's resurrection guarantees our resurrection (1 Corinthians 6:14; 15:20; Colossians 1:18).

Jesus came down to earth and took a bodily form, and when he was raised from the dead he continued to have a bodily form. For all of eternity Christ will have a body, and for all of eternity we will have a body. The goal for the Christian is not to no longer have a physical body, but to have a glorified body free from weakness and sin.

² In the New Testament, all three members of the trinity are seen as participating in the resurrection. The Father is described as having raised Jesus (Galatians 1:1; Ephesians 1:20), the Spirit is described as having raised Jesus (Romans 8:11), and Jesus is described as having raised himself (John 2:19; 10:18).

Why do many believers fail to consider the fact that God will give them an actual body for all eternity? Why would believing this be important?

Jesus' death and resurrection are core truths of the Christian faith. As believers, we will find great encouragement and hope as we return to these themes often in our own private Bible study and meditation. The fact that Jesus died and rose again is simple enough for an elementary student to grasp, yet the complexity is deep enough that theologians continue to wrestle through all that these simple statements mean. For all believers, though, the sacrifice of the cross and the victory of the empty tomb should change us; they should motivate us to live for Christ no matter the cost and inspire us because the life we are living for Christ is not in vain.