

DG Topical Studies: The Cross

Introduction

The God of the Bible is living and active. Since the beginning of time, he has been upholding, governing, and guiding history toward its appointed conclusion. According to Scripture, the central event in history is the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. To the unbelieving world, the execution of a Jewish peasant outside of Jerusalem 2000 years ago is nothing more than one more unimportant occurrence in history. Some mock the notion that this death matters for us today. Others reject the idea that God's Son could ever be killed. Surely God would not allow his Son to undergo such suffering and shame?

These responses are not new. Nor would they have surprised the apostle Paul who wrote, "The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing..." (1 Corinthians 1:18). To the Jews of his day, the message that Christ was crucified was a stumbling block. To the Greeks, it was foolishness. But those were not the only responses. To those called by God, the message of the cross provoked a very different reaction. To them, this simple message displayed the power and wisdom of God.

The word of the cross is the central message of the Christian faith. As a result, it is vital that pastors and churches have a solid and growing grasp of the cross in all of its glory. Apart from a firm grounding in the cross of Christ, the church will grow weak, preaching will cease to be powerful and effective, and the kingdom of God will suffer. But where the cross is known and loved and celebrated, God has promised to bless his church with his Holy Spirit and with power so that he receives glory in the praise of his people.

To that end, we have designed these six lessons to highlight key features of the cross of Jesus Christ. Each lesson is built around a primary biblical text and a sermon preached by pastor John Piper. Ten study questions are scattered throughout each lesson in order to aid you as you read, reflect, and meditate on the Scriptures. While these lessons have been designed for individual study, they could easily be adapted for groups who desire to study the cross of Christ together. Whether you are studying alone or in a group, our prayer is that these lessons will increase your faith, awaken a deeper love for God, and cause your heart to rejoice in Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Lesson 1

The Cross: Behold The Lamb of God

Introduction

Most Christians know about John the Baptist. He is the one who prepared the way for the Lord. But what exactly was John's testimony? What did he say about Jesus? This lesson will closely examine John's testimony in hopes of discovering more about Jesus' purpose on earth. In the process, we will see three amazing aspects of John's testimony as well as two truths that shocked the Jewish audience of John's day and still shocks the world today. In the end, our prayer is that you would respond to John's testimony the way that he desired: with a renewed faith in the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

John 1:19-34

¹⁹ And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" ²⁰ He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." ²¹ And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." ²² So they said to him, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" ²³ He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said." ²⁴ (Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) ²⁵ They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" ²⁶ John answered them, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, ²⁷ even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." ²⁸ These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing. ²⁹ The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰ This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.' ³¹ I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel." ³² And John bore witness: "I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. ³³ I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' ³⁴ And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God."

1. According to this passage, what is John the Baptist's testimony about Jesus? List as many pieces of this testimony as you can find.

You need to decide whether you are going to listen to John the Baptist's testimony in this message. Here's what is at stake. In John 1:33, John said, "I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water [namely, God] said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.'" John the Baptist said, "My testimony about Jesus does not come from what I know about him naturally. It comes from God. God told to say what to say about Jesus."

You don't have to believe that, of course. But if you are wrong, you may miss the way of truth and life entirely. I appeal to you to make your judgment on the basis of understanding and not ignorance. There is a lot at stake for you. God has you here for a reason. You can know if John is telling the truth. But in order to know, you need to listen to what he has to say. That is what we will be talking about this week and next week.

A Great, Protruding Root

John the Baptist appears at the beginning of John's Gospel (and the other Gospels) and then falls to the background because he is a link or a bridge between the Old Testament and the New Testament. He is prominent at the beginning of the Gospel because he is part of the roots of the Gospel. The roots of Jesus go back to eternity (John 1:1), and his roots go back to the Old Testament. John is like one of those great tree roots that protrudes above the ground a few feet out from the trunk of the tree.

Over and over we will see in this Gospel that John the writer explains Jesus in terms of the Old Testament. Jesus doesn't appear on the scene of history without historical preparation. God had been at work in Israel for two thousand years, and even before that, putting in place a historical backdrop that would make Jesus' life and ministry more intelligible.

John the Baptist is a root partly under ground in the Old Testament and partly exposed in the New Testament. He has a foot in both worlds—a prophet something like Elijah (but not Elijah reincarnate, 1:21) and voice crying that the long-expected Messiah has come.

2. What is unique about John the Baptist? How does he bridge the gap between the Old and New Testaments?

Three Amazing Testimonies

One of the purposes of John the Baptist's ministry is to make sure he is not confused with Jesus—and to make sure that Jesus is seen as utterly amazing. John got a running start in verses 6–8 and verse 15, but now in verses 19 and following, he launches with three amazing testimonies that we will look at today.

1) Jesus Is Yahweh Come

He says, first, in verse 23, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of *the Lord*.'" That's a quote from Isaiah 40:3–5:

A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. . . . And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

In other words, in Isaiah "the LORD" (note the all caps in the ESV) refers to Yahweh, Jehovah, the God who is the Creator and Ruler of the world, and the Covenant God of Israel. Now here is John the Baptist saying that he is that voice crying in the wilderness, and the Lord whose way he is preparing is Jesus Christ. That's his first witness in these verses. The man coming after me is more than anyone ever dreamed. He is the God of the Old Testament—only now he is man as well as God.

2) Jesus Is Superior

Second, when they ask John the Baptist why he is baptizing, he answers in verses 26–27, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." We will say more next week, Lord willing, on the meaning of John's baptizing with water and Jesus' baptizing "with the Holy Spirit" (John 1:33).

But for now notice this. They ask why he is baptizing, and he answers simply by saying the one I am preparing for is so superior to me that I am not worthy to untie his sandals. So his second witness is: *My baptizing is not about me. It's about Jesus, and he is infinitely superior to me.*

3) Jesus Ranks Before

Third, in verses 29–30, John the Baptist says the main thing about why Jesus, the Lord of glory, has come to earth. “The next day [John] saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, “After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.”’”

Verse 30 repeats verse 15: “This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.’” The point is that John is emphasizing Jesus’ rank. He is absolutely before John. Jesus is from eternity. “In the beginning was the Word” (John 1:1).

And the reason for saying it here is that John wants to underline what it takes for Jesus to be “the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.” No ordinary human being can be “the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.” Everything he has told us is essential to Jesus being the sin-removing Lamb of God. Jesus is the Lord God of Isaiah 40. Jesus is so infinitely superior to John that John isn’t worthy to untie his sandals. Jesus is absolutely before John and therefore ranks infinitely above him. And because of all this, he can be “the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.”

3. Consider each of the three amazing testimonies about Jesus. Which one speaks most clearly to you right now?

“Behold the Lamb . . .”

So verse 29 is the highpoint of John’s testimony: “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” He will repeat it in verses 35–36: “The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples, and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God!’” This testimony caused the two disciples of John the Baptist to leave him and become followers of Jesus. That is what John’s witness is supposed to do. That is why he is saying, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” He wants people to leave him and follow the Lamb (see Revelation 14:4).

So the emphasis in John’s witness to Jesus falls on this amazing designation: “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” And all the other superlatives show what it takes for Jesus to be the Lamb of God who can take away the sin of the world. So John warns us against thinking that any mere man can take away the sin of the world. What Jesus had to do to take away the sin of the world required that he be more than a man. He was the Lord God of Isaiah 40. He was so great that the great John the Baptist was not worthy to untie his sandals. And he was absolutely before John in time and rank.

Taking Humanity to Take Away Sin

In other words, Jesus was able to be the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world because he was the God-man. The Word became flesh (1:14). And now we see the central reason why: to take away the sin of the world.

When John wrote his first letter, he put it like this in 1 John 3:5: “You know that he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin.” The reason why the Son of God appeared—the reason the Word became flesh—was to take away sin. John is witnessing to the central reason for the incarnation.

4. According to John Piper, what is the highpoint of John’s testimony? How does this testimony relate to Jesus’ purpose on earth?

A System Pointing Forward

Why did John add in 1 John 3:5, “And in him there was no sin”? Because the lambs that were offered in sacrifice to take away sin in the Old Testament had to be spotless, without blemish. Listen to what the law demanded:

If he brings a lamb as his offering for a sin offering, he shall bring a female without blemish and lay his hand on the head of the sin offering and kill it for a sin offering in the place where they kill the burnt offering. Then the priest shall take some of the blood of the sin offering with his finger and put it on the horns of the altar of burnt offering and pour out all the rest of its blood at the base of the altar. . . . And the priest shall make atonement for him for the sin which he has committed, and he shall be forgiven. (Leviticus 4:32–35)

But every serious believer knew that the blood of animals could not really take away sin (Hebrews 10:4). That whole system was pointing forward to what would happen someday in a final sacrifice for sin. And John is saying: *It's happening now. God is sending his own Lamb into the world to take away sin, once and for all.*

The Lamb Without Sin

When Peter, another eyewitness, described how Christ ransomed us, this is the language he used. He said, “You were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot” (1 Peter 1:18–20).

How could Jesus be without sin? Every person born in the ordinary way inherited Adam’s sin. That’s why Paul said, “Just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned” (Romans 5:12). Every man born in the ordinary way is a sinner. And sinners can’t take away the sins of sinners.

5. Why does John call Jesus “the Lamb of God?” What does this title tell us about the purpose of the Old Testament sacrificial system?

Because He Is God

How could Jesus? Because he was not born in the ordinary way. He was not born of two humans. He was the God-man because God ordained that the way the Word would become flesh would through a virgin birth. Remember the way Luke describes his birth:

And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.” (Luke 1:30–35)

Jesus was holy. He was without sin. No original sin. And no active sin in his own behavior. Jesus asks in John 8:46, “Which one of you convicts me of sin?” The answer was, *No one has ever been able to convict Jesus of sin.* “He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth” (1 Peter 2:22; cf. Hebrews 4:15; Romans 8:3).

And the reason he was without sin is that he was God. In the beginning was the Word and the word was with God and the Word was God . . . and the Word became flesh (John 1:1, 14). Everything about Jesus in this Gospel shows how he could be the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

6. How is it possible for the man Christ Jesus to take away our sins?

Two Shocking Meanings

So what does it mean when John said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world”? It meant two shocking things for the Jews—and both of them are relevant for us today.

First, it meant that the God-man would die. And not just die, but die like a lamb dies—be *slaughtered* (see the Greek *sphazo* in Revelation 5:6, 9, 12; 13:8). Second, it meant that the whole world would benefit from this and not just Jews. This God-man was the Jewish Messiah (see John 1:41). But his death would take away the sin of the world, not just the sin of Israel.

1) Death and 2) Worldwide Sin-Bearing

He was called the Lamb of God, because he would die. That is why God sent him. And that is why he came. That’s why the Word became flesh. Otherwise, he could not die. And he was God’s Lamb for the world—not just a Jewish lamb for Israel.

Those two truths—death and worldwide sin-bearing—are summed up together in John 11:50–52. The high priest Caiaphas spoke prophetically like this:

“Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.” He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.

He will die for Jews. But not just for Jews, but for people scattered all over the world. John put it like this in his first letter: “He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2). Propitiation means that his death removes the wrath of God because it takes away sin. That’s what propitiation means. The Lamb takes away sin and removes God’s wrath, not just for Jews but for Gentiles scattered among all nations. “By your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe . . .” (Revelation 5:9).

7. What does the word “propitiation” mean? Why would the Jews be shocked by the two meanings of the death of Jesus?

No Status Excluded

And we see this precious wrath-removal in John 3:36: “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him” (John 3:36). This means that when John says, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,” he doesn’t mean that every person in the world is saved. He means every person in the world—Jew or Gentile—will be saved if they

believe in Jesus and follow him. If they believe, their sin has been taken away by the Lamb. If they believe, God's wrath has been removed by the Lamb.

There is no race, no nationality, no ethnicity, no socio-economic status excluded. To as many as receive him, who believe on his name (John 1:12), their sins are taken away (John 1:29; 1 John 3:5) and the wrath of God is removed (John 3:36; 1 John 2:2) and they are made the children of God (John 1:12) and given eternal life (John 3:16).

8. Consider your own community. Why is it important that people understand that Jesus takes away the sins *of the world*? How does this challenge the normal, worldly way of looking at other races, nationalities, and classes?

Jesus: Our Lamb and Our Lord

Everyone in this room is a sinner deserving of God's wrath. There is only one way to have your sins taken away and find favor with God—not working for God. Not cleaning up your life first. That comes later. That's fruit, not root. The one way is believing in Jesus as the glorious Lamb of God. Jesus said in John 8:24, "Unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins" (John 8:24).

Therefore, believe in Jesus as your Lamb and your Lord. And you will say with the apostles, "The blood of Jesus [God's] Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7).

9. Summarize the main point of this sermon in your own words. What response does this message call for? Have you made this response personally?

Application

10. Choose one truth from this passage and share it with someone you know this week. Show them the truth in the Bible and explain what it means. Ask them what their response to this truth is. Record any observations below.

Lesson 2

The Cross: Joy Purchased

Introduction

Most Christians know that the death of Christ demonstrated the love of God for us. The passage of Scripture below tells us as much. But *how* does the death of Christ demonstrate God's love for us? How should we think about what Jesus actually accomplished for us? This sermon will explore three ways that we can understand the death of Jesus on our behalf and how those three ways lead us to greater joy in God.

NOTE: The sermon below was the fourth sermon in a series on the basic gospel message called "Quest for Joy." The three previous sermons are summarized in the opening paragraphs. These sermons ("The Joyful Purpose of God," "The Joyful Duty of Man," and "Joy Exchanged and Forfeited") and the two final sermons in the series ("Joy Recovered" and "Irrevocable Joy") may be found at the Desiring God website by performing a title search.

Romans 5:6-8

⁶ For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— ⁸ but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

1. According to this passage, what is so surprising about Christ's death? What does the death of Christ show us about God?

This morning we focus directly on the heart of the gospel—the good news of Christianity. Up till now we have looked at four biblical truths that make the gospel understandable. Let me review those four truths and then show how the fifth truth is God's merciful answer to our greatest need.

Review of the Four Truths Discussed So Far

Truth #1 described the joyful purpose of God—GOD CREATED US FOR HIS GLORY. His design in creation was that his own beauty and excellence and wisdom and justice and power and love be displayed for the enjoyment of his creatures. God himself is the central reality in the universe, not man. We exist for his glory.

Truth #2 described the joyful duty of man—EVERY HUMAN SHOULD LIVE FOR GOD'S GLORY. In other words our reason for living comes from God's reason for creating. I received a letter from John Jenstad recently in which he said, "Being human truly is an awesome thing." Called to live for the glory of God by trusting and thanking and loving and obeying him—and our own eternal destiny hanging in the balance. It is an awesome thing to be created in the image of God—to eat and drink and work and play for God's glory. That's our joyful duty as human beings.

Truth #3 described how we have all exchanged that joy for the fleeting pleasures of sin—ALL OF US HAVE FAILED TO GLORIFY GOD AS WE SHOULD. We have not loved God or trusted God or thanked God or obeyed God anywhere near the way we should. Whether people think that they are good people or not, they have to admit this. God has not been the center of their lives. They have not done everything they do for his glory. None of us has.

Therefore Truth #4 described how the joy for which we were created has been forfeited—ALL OF US ARE SUBJECT TO GOD'S JUST CONDEMNATION. God is a just God. His righteousness is absolute and there is not compromise in his commitment to do all things for his glory. And so when we exchange the glory of God for other things, and don't live for his glory, we put ourselves under his righteous wrath. In other words if we insist on belittling his glory by indifference or unbelief or ingratitude or disobedience, then he will vindicate the worth of his glory by punishing us in hell forever.

So what we have seen from these four truths is that the greatest danger for mankind is not nuclear war or AIDS or communism or the greenhouse effect or racial strife. The greatest danger for mankind is the wrath of God. Our biggest problem is that God's righteousness demands our condemnation because we have all—every one of us—scorned his glory.

2. What is God's design for us as human beings? Why did he create us?

3. What is the greatest danger facing us as human beings? What is the source of this danger?

God Sent His Only Son to Provide Eternal Life

Now we are ready to understand Truth #5. This truth is the very heart of the gospel—GOD SENT HIS ONLY SON JESUS TO PROVIDE ETERNAL LIFE. Or, as 1 Timothy 1:15 says, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners."

So what we want to do this morning is make as clear as we can, in the few minutes we have, how Jesus saves sinners. The focus in Truth #5 is not on what we must do to be saved (that's [next week](#)). The focus here is what God did to save sinners.

In Romans 5:6–8 Paul says,

While we were yet helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Why, one will hardly die for a righteous man—though perhaps for a good man one will dare even to die. But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.

Notice three things in this text.

The way Jesus saves sinners is by dying for them. "Christ died for the ungodly." When 1 Timothy 1:15 says, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners," it means he came into the world to die for sinners. The first answer to the question, How does Jesus save sinners is that he saves sinners by dying for them.

The second thing to notice in Romans 5:6–8 is that you and I did not initiate this saving work. We didn't deserve and we didn't cause it. Paul says we were all helpless, ungodly, and sinners. The initiative is entirely God's.

Which leads to the third thing to notice here, namely, that the death of Christ for sinners is a demonstration of God's love. Verse 8: "But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." Don't ever get the impression that God the Father is merely a wrathful God, God the Son, Jesus Christ, is a merciful God. That is not true. God the Father planned our salvation and sent his only Son because he is a God of love as well as a God of wrath.

He is our Judge and we stand under his just condemnation because of how we have degraded his glory. But the wonder of God's love is that while he is Judge, and while his righteous condemnation rests upon us, he is also a Savior who has designed a way of salvation from his wrath.

4. What three truths do we learn from Romans 5:6-8? Which truth speaks most powerfully to you right now?

Three Ways the Death of Jesus Saves Sinners

Now can we understand how it is that the death of Jesus, God's Son, saves his people from the wrath of God? Let me mention three ways the Bible describes how the death of Christ saves sinners.

1. A Ransom

The death of Christ is called a ransom for many.

Jesus said in Mark 10:45, "For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." 1 Peter 1:18–19, says, "You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ like that of a lamb without blemish or spot." 1 Corinthians 6:19–20 says, "You are not your own, you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body." Revelation 5:9 says, "Thou was slain and by thy blood didst ransom men for God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation."

So one way to understand the death of Christ is to see it as the payment of a ransom. If you ask, To whom was this ransom paid, you might possibly answer Satan or you might answer God—that he paid it to himself.

I think it would be very wrong to suggest that God paid Satan to redeem his people. It is contrary to God's sovereignty to think that he would have to meet the demands of his arch-enemy and it's contrary to his holiness to think that he would let the arch-evil one dictate the terms of salvation. Besides that, in Mark 3:27 Jesus describes how he releases people from the bondage of Satan—it says he binds the strong man and plunders his household. In other words he does not negotiate with Satan as a terrorist holding hostages. He invades, binds, and delivers.

I think, then, it is right to say that in sending his Son to die for our sins God paid a ransom to himself. In other words we don't owe anything to Satan, and God doesn't owe anything to Satan. The great debt that hangs over our head is a debt to God. He is the one we have offended by our sin. He's the one whose honor has been defamed and whose name has been desecrated by our distrust and disobedience.

It's not hard to see, then, that if we are going to be delivered from God's righteous wrath, some kind of recompense would have to be made. So the first way the death of Christ saves sinners is by ransoming them from the wrath of God.

Did you notice when I read 1 Corinthians 6:19–20 what God's aim was in purchasing us or ransoming us in this way. It says, "You were bought with a price. Glorify God therefore in your body." The reason you have been ransomed is so that now you can return to the purpose for which you were created. In other words the reason Jesus died is to put us back on the joyful track of knowing and reflecting the glory of God. So I hope you can see how all five of these truths hang together.

5. If we think of the death of Christ as a ransom, there are two options for the person to whom the ransom is paid. What are the two options? Which one does John Piper choose? Why does he choose this option and reject the other option?

2. A Substitution

The second way the Bible describes how the death of Christ saves sinners is by showing us that he is a substitution for us.

Because of the way we have dishonored God and belittled his glory, there hangs over every one of us now a curse, a righteous and just sentence of condemnation. And what Christ did was to take that curse and that condemnation upon himself and become a substitute for all who trust him.

- 1 Peter 3:18 says, "Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God."
- 2 Corinthian 5:21 says, "For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."
- Galatians 3:13 says, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law having become a curse for us."

So the way Christ saves us from our sin is by becoming a substitute for us. He bore the curse we should have born and he bore the sin that would have brought us everlasting condemnation. He stood in our place and God laid on him the iniquity of all who believe (Isaiah 53:6).

6. What does it mean that Christ was our "substitute?" How would you explain this concept to a child?

3. A Vindication of the Righteousness of God

Finally the death of Jesus saves because it is a vindication of the righteousness of God. This is perhaps the most neglected and yet most fundamental meaning of the death of Jesus. And it may be that this is neglected because the first four truths are neglected.

Let's turn together to Romans 3:25–26. Unless you begin with the glory of God, this aspect of the death of Jesus will make no sense.

So let me set the stage for understanding these two verses from Romans 3. God created the world for his glory. God's righteousness is his unswerving commitment to uphold the worth of his glory—which means to support everything that magnifies his glory and to oppose everything that diminishes his glory.

And since we have all diminished and desecrated his glory, his righteousness commits him to oppose us with omnipotent wrath. How, then, can he save sinners like us and still uphold the worth of his glory? How can he acquit guilty sinners and still be a righteous judge.

Romans 3:25–26 make very plain this meaning of Jesus' death.

. . . whom God put forward as an expiation [or: 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; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus.

Notice carefully that the reason Jesus was sent to die was to show God's righteousness. Now why did God's righteousness need to be shown? Answer (v. 25): "because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins." In other words when God passes over sins—when he forgives you or me—it looks as though he is not righteous. It looks as though he is putting no infinite value on his glory which we have scorned by our sin. And in fact it would be a horrendous unrighteousness if God were to simply sweep the sin of the world under the rug of the universe as though it were no awesome thing to acquit a guilty sinner in God's presence.

So what happened when Christ died was that God demonstrated once and for all that he is not indifferent to the scorn we have brought on his glory. When Christ died, he died to repair the injury we have done to God's name and God's honor. What Christ did when he died was to vindicate the righteousness of God in the salvation of sinners. If Christ hadn't died in our place, the righteousness of God could only be vindicated in one way—by our eternal condemnation.

7. How does John Piper define God's righteousness? Underline the appropriate sentences in the section above.

8. What question does this definition of God's righteousness raise, if we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God?

9. In light of this understanding of sin and righteousness, what did the death of Christ accomplish?

Summary

So let me summarize the three ways we have seen that the death of Christ saves us from judgment and gains for us eternal life. First, it is a ransom that repays the tremendous debt we owe to God for our sin. Second, it is a substitution. He bears our sin and our curse in himself so that we can be freed from guilt and punishment. Third, it is a vindication of God's righteousness so that he can be both just and the one who justifies him who has faith in Jesus.

My prayer now is that this would be clear to all of you—that the death of Jesus Christ is the only way that any of us can escape the wrath of God and find peace with God. And I pray not only that it be clear but that it would be compelling. My heart's desire and prayer to God is that you might be saved. The way is open. The provision is full and free. He justifies those who have faith in Jesus. Put your whole trust in him and he will be a whole Savior for you.

Application

10. Compose a prayer based on the truths that you learned in this lesson. Include in your prayer the three ways that we can understand Christ's death for us. Pray this prayer each morning this week, and if possible, teach the prayer to someone you know.

Lesson 3

The Cross: Did Christ Die for Us or for God?

Introduction

The cross of Christ was no accident. God sent him to the cross for a purpose. There was divine design behind the execution of the Son of God at Calvary. In fact, we might say that God had many purposes for the cross. John Piper has written a book in which he explores fifty different reasons why Jesus came to die (The book is entitled *50 Reasons Why Jesus Came to Die* and may be found by performing a title search at www.desiringgod.org). But is there a main reason, an ultimate reason? Is there a purpose in the cross that is deeper than all other purposes? In this lesson, John Piper explores what one writer has called “the innermost meaning of the cross.” As you read and answer the questions, evaluate your own views on why Christ came to die. Pray that God would reveal himself to you in deep and fresh new ways as you search the Scriptures.

Romans 3:25-26

²⁵ God put [Christ] forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; ²⁶ it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

1. According to this passage, why did God put Christ forward as a sacrifice of atonement?

Introduction

One of the reasons it is hard to communicate biblical reality to modern, secular people is that the biblical mindset and the secular mindset move from radically different starting points.

What I mean by the secular mindset is not necessarily a mindset that rules God out or denies in principle that the Bible is true. It's a mindset that begins with man as the basic given reality in the universe. All of its thinking starts with the assumption that man has basic rights and basic needs and basic expectations. Then the secular mind moves out from this center and interprets the world, with man and his rights and needs as the measure of all things.

What the secular mindset sees as problems are seen as problems because of how things fit or don't fit with the center - man and his rights and needs and expectations. And what this mindset sees as successes are seen as successes because they fit with man and his rights and needs and expectations.

This is the mindset we were born with and that our secular society reinforces virtually every hour of the day in our lives. The Apostle Paul calls this mindset “the mind that is set on the flesh” (Romans. 8:6-7), and says that it is the way the “natural person” thinks (1 Corinthians 2:14, literal translation). It is so much a part of us that we hardly even know it's there. We just take it for granted - until it collides with another mindset, namely the one in the Bible.

The biblical mindset is not simply one that includes God somewhere in the universe and says that the Bible is true. The biblical mindset begins with a radically different starting point, namely, God. God is the basic given reality in the universe. He was there before we were in existence - or before anything was in existence. He is simply the most absolute reality.

And so the biblical mindset starts with the assumption that God is the center of reality. All thinking starts with the assumption that God has basic rights as the Creator of all things. He has goals that fit with his nature and perfect character. Then the biblical mindset moves out from this center and interprets the world, with God and his rights and goals as the measure of all things.

What the biblical mindset sees as basic problems in the universe are usually not the same problems that the secular mindset sees. The reason for this is that what makes a problem is not, first, that something doesn't fit the rights and needs of man, but that it doesn't fit the rights and goals of God. If you start with man and his rights and wants, rather than starting with the Creator and his rights and goals, the problems you see in the universe will be very different.

Is the basic riddle of the universe how to preserve man's rights and solve his problems (say, the right of self-determination, and the problem of suffering)? Or is the basic riddle of the universe how an infinitely worthy God in complete freedom can display the full range of his perfections - what Paul calls the "riches of his glory" (Romans 9:23) - his holiness and power and wisdom and justice and wrath and goodness and truth and grace?

2. Make a chart listing the basic characteristics of the secular mindset and the basic characteristics of the biblical mindset. In light of John Piper's summary, add your own additional characteristics to each list. How do you think the secular mindset would define "sin"?

3. In light of John Piper's introduction and your summary, answer the following question from both the viewpoint of the secular mindset and the viewpoint of the biblical mindset: what is the ultimate reason why Jesus came to die on the cross?

How you answer that question will profoundly affect the way you understand the central event of human history - the death of Jesus, the Son of God.

I introduce our text (Romans 3:25-26) with this long meditation on the power of our starting points, because the deepest problem that the death of Jesus was designed to solve is virtually incomprehensible to the secular mindset. That is why this truth about the purpose of Christ's death is scarcely known, let alone cherished, as part of everyday evangelical piety. Our Christian mindset is so skewed by natural and secular man-centeredness that we can barely comprehend or love the God-centeredness of the cross of Christ.

"The Innermost Meaning of the Cross"

Our focus is very limited. We will go beneath the issue of justification and reconciliation and forgiveness to the bottom and foundation of it all - to what C.E.B. Cranfield calls "the innermost meaning of the cross" (*The Epistle to the Romans*, Vol. 1, I.C.C., Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1975, p. 213).

What you should listen for as we read this text is the problem in the universe that the biblical mindset (God's mindset) is trying to solve through the death of Christ. How does it differ from the problems that the secular mindset says God has to solve?

God put [Christ] forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed. (Romans 3:25)

Boil that down to the most basic problem the death of Christ is meant to solve. God put Christ forward (he sent him to die) in order to demonstrate his righteousness (or justice). The problem that needed solving was that God, for some reason, seemed to be unrighteous, and wanted to vindicate himself and clear his name. That is the basic issue. God's righteousness is at stake. His name or reputation or honor must be vindicated. Before the cross can be for our sake, it must be for God's sake.

But what created that problem? Why did God face the problem of needing to give a public vindication of his righteousness? The answer is in the last phrase of verse 25: "because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed."

Now what does that mean? It means that for centuries God had been doing what Psalm 103:10 says, "He does not deal with us according to our sins or repay us according to our iniquities." He has been passing over thousands of sins. He has been forgiving them and letting them go and not punishing them.

4. What is the most basic problem that the cross of Christ is meant to solve? What created this problem? How would you explain this problem to a young child so that they could comprehend it?

How David Despised God

King David is a good example. In 2 Samuel 12, he is confronted by the prophet Nathan for committing adultery with Bathsheba and then having her husband killed. Nathan says, "Why have you despised the word of the LORD?" (2 Samuel 12:9).

David feels the rebuke of Nathan, and in verse 13 he says, "I have sinned against the LORD." To this, Nathan responds, "The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die." Just like that! Adultery and murder are "passed over." It is almost incredible. Our sense of justice screams out, "No! You can't just let it go like that. He deserves to die or be imprisoned for life!" But Nathan does not say that. He says, "The LORD has put away your sin; you shall not die."

5. Imagine that you are the father of Uriah the Hittite, the man whom David killed (You can read the whole story in 2 Samuel 11-12). Imagine that you are in the king's court the day that Nathan confronts the king. You witness the conversation between David and Nathan in which the king admits that he committed adultery with your daughter-in-law and had your son murdered. You then witness David's repentance and Nathan's assurance that God has forgiven him. As Uriah's father, what is your reaction to these events? What emotions are you experiencing? What is your opinion of God, the judge who has just forgiven your son's murderer? Record your reflections below.

Why is Forgiveness a Problem?

That is what Paul means in Romans 3:25 by the passing over of sins previously committed. But why is that a problem? Is it felt as a problem by the secular mindset - that God is kind to sinners? How many people outside the scope of biblical influence wrestle with the problem that a holy and righteous God makes the sun rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust (Matthew 5:45)? How many wrestle with the apparent injustice that God is lenient with sinners? How many Christians wrestle with the fact that their own forgiveness is a threat to the righteousness of God?

The secular mindset does not even assess the situation the way the biblical mindset does. Why is that? It's because the secular mindset thinks from a radically different starting point. It does not start with the Creator-rights of God - the right to uphold and display the infinite worth of his righteousness and glory. It starts with man and assumes that God will conform to our rights and wishes.

Sin is a Belittling of God's Glory

Notice verse 23: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." What's at stake in sinning is the *glory of God*. When Nathan confronts David, he quotes God as saying, "Why have you despised *me*?" We could imagine David saying, "What do you mean, I despised you? I didn't despise you. I wasn't even thinking of you. I was just red hot after this woman and then scared to death that people were going to find out. You weren't even in the picture."

And God would have said, "The Creator of the universe, the designer of marriage, the fountain of life, the one who holds you in being, the one who made you king - that One, I the Lord, was not even in the picture! That's right, David. That's exactly what I mean. You despised me." All sin is a despising of God, before it is a damage to man. All sin is a preference for the fleeting pleasures of the world over the everlasting joy of God's fellowship. David demeaned God's glory. He belittled God's worth. He dishonored God's name. That is the meaning of sin - failing to love God's glory above everything else." "All have sinned and fall short of *the glory of God*."

Therefore the problem when God passes over sin is that God seems to agree with those who despise his name and belittle his glory. He seems to be saying it is a matter of indifference that his glory is spurned. He seems to condone the low assessment of his worth.

6. What does God's passing over of sin communicate to the world? What conclusions might people draw about God's commitment to his own worth and value? What conclusions might people draw about God's commitment to justice and righteousness?

The Insult of Acquitting Anarchists

Suppose a group of anarchists plot to assassinate the President of the United States and his whole cabinet, and almost succeed. Their bombs destroy part of the White House and kill some staff, but the President narrowly escapes. The anarchists are caught and the court finds them guilty. But then the anarchists say they are sorry, and so the court suspends their sentences and releases them. Now what would that communicate to the world about the value of the President's life and the importance of his governance? It would communicate that they are of little value.

That is what the passing over of sin communicates: God's glory and his righteous governance are of minor value, or no value.

Apart from divine revelation, the natural mind - the secular mind - does not see or feel this problem. What secular person loses any sleep over the apparent unrighteousness of God's kindness to sinners?

But, according to Romans, this is the most basic problem that God solved by the death of his Son. Let's read it again: "He did this [put his Son forward to die] to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance (or patience) he had passed over sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous . . ." (verses 25b-26a) God would *be* unrighteous if he passed over sins as though the value of his glory were nothing.

God saw his glory being despised by sinners (like David) - he saw his worth belittled and his name dishonored by our sins - and rather than vindicating the worth of his glory by slaying his people, he vindicated his glory by slaying his Son.

God could have settled accounts by punishing all sinners with hell. This would have demonstrated that he does not minimize our falling short of his glory - our belittling his honor. But God did not will to destroy. "Indeed God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world through him might be saved" (John 3:17).

7. What are the two ways that God could have demonstrated that he values his own glory and takes sin seriously?

Do We Know (and Share!) God's Deepest Passion?

This truth, we know well. We know well that God is for us. We know that our salvation is his goal in sending Jesus. But do we know the foundation of it all? Do we know that there is a deeper goal in sending the Son? Do we know that God's love for us depends on a deeper love, namely, God's love for his glory? Do we know that God's passion to save sinners rests on a deeper passion, namely, God's passion to vindicate his righteousness? Do we realize that the accomplishment of our salvation does not center on us, but on God's glory? The vindication of God's glory is the *ground* of our salvation (Romans 3:25-6), and the exaltation of God's glory is the *goal* of our salvation. "Christ has become a servant to the circumcised . . . in order that the Gentiles might *glorify God* for his mercy" (Romans 15:8-9).

8. Carefully read the paragraph above. What is your reaction to the truth that God's love for you depends on his deeper love for his own glory? What questions are prompted in your mind?

Can Self-exaltation Be an Act of Love?

Someone may ask, "How can it be loving for God to be so self-exalting in the work of the cross? If he is really exalting his own glory and vindicating his own righteousness, then how is the cross really an act of love to us?"

I fear the question betrays a common secular mindset with man at the center. It assumes that, for us to be loved, God must make us the center. He must highlight our value. If our worth is not accented, then we are not loved. If our value is not the ground of the cross, then we are not esteemed. The assumption of such questioning is that the exaltation of the worth and glory of God over man is not the very essence of what God's love for man is.

The biblical mindset, however, affirms the very opposite. The cross is the pinnacle of God's love for sinners, not because it demonstrates the value of sinners, but because it vindicates the value of God for sinners to enjoy. God's love for man does not consist in making man central, but in making himself central for man. The cross does not direct man's attention to his own vindicated worth, but to God's vindicated righteousness.

This is love, because the only eternal happiness for man is happiness focused on the riches of God's glory. "In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forever more" (Psalm 16:11). God's self-exaltation is loving, because it preserves for us and offers to us the only all-satisfying Object of desire in the universe - the all-glorious, all-righteous God.

9. How is it possible that God's self-exaltation in the work of the cross can also be an act of love to us? Do you feel *loved* by God when he exalts himself and frees you to exalt him? Record your reflections on this perspective on God's love for us.

Why Is the Cross Folly?

The root reason for why the cross is folly to the world is that it means the end of human self-exaltation, and a radical commitment to God-exaltation. No - "commitment" is not quite the right word. Rather the cross is a call to radical "*exultation*" in God-exaltation. The cross is the death of our demand to be loved by being made the center. And it is the birth of joy in God's being made the center.

How Is the Cross Your Joy?

Test yourself. What is your mindset? Do you begin with God and his rights and goals? Or do you begin with yourself and your rights and wishes?

And when you look at the death of Christ, what happens? Does your joy really come from translating this awesome divine work into a boost for self-esteem? Or are you drawn up out of yourself and filled with wonder and reverence and worship that here in the death of Jesus is the deepest, clearest declaration of the infinite esteem of God for his glory and for his Son?

Here is a great objective foundation for the full assurance of hope: the forgiveness of sins is grounded, finally, not in my finite worth or work, but in the infinite worth of the righteousness of God - God's unswerving allegiance to uphold and vindicate the glory of his name.

I appeal to you with all my heart, take your stand on this. Base your life on this. Ground your hope in this. You will be free from the futile mindset of the world. And you will never fall. When God's exaltation of God in Christ is your joy, it can never fail.

Application

10. How has your perspective on the cross of Christ changed as a result of this lesson? How has your perspective on the love of God changed? Share any changes in perspective with a friend or family member some time this week.

Lesson 4

The Cross: Perfected for All Time by a Single Offering

Introduction

In the book of Romans, Paul tells us that “whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction so that through the endurance and encouragement of the Scriptures, we might have hope” (15:4). The Old Testament was written so that Christians would be encouraged and possess a deep and abiding hope. But does this really apply to the whole Old Testament? What about the lengthy regulations and laws describing the sacrificial system? Are we supposed to be encouraged by *that*? Thankfully, the book of Hebrews helps us to better grasp the meaning of the Old Covenant sacrificial system. In this lesson, John Piper unpacks how we can grow in our understanding and appreciation for the cross of Christ by comparing and contrasting it to the Old Testament sacrifices.

Hebrews 10:1-18

¹ For the Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, can never by the same sacrifices year by year, which they offer continually, make perfect those who draw near. ² Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins? ³ But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins year by year. ⁴ For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. ⁵ Therefore, when He comes into the world, He says, "Sacrifice and offering Thou hast not desired, but a body Thou has prepared for me; ⁶ in whole burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin Thou hast taken no pleasure. ⁷ Then I said, 'Behold, I have come (in the roll of the book it is written of me) to do Thy will, O God.'" ⁸ After saying above, "Sacrifices and offerings and whole burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin Thou hast not desired, nor hast Thou taken pleasure in them" (which are offered according to the Law), ⁹ then He said, "Behold, I have come to do Thy will." He takes away the first in order to establish the second. ¹⁰ By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. ¹¹ And every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; ¹² but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God, ¹³ waiting from that time onward until his enemies be made a footstool for his feet. ¹⁴ For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. ¹⁵ And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying, ¹⁶ "This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws upon their heart, and upon their mind I will write them," He then says, ¹⁷ "And their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more." ¹⁸ Now where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer any offering for sin.

1. In this passage, what is the main difference between the Old Testament sacrificial system and the work of Christ on the cross?

What Happens When We Turn Our Eyes Upon Jesus?

I would like us to turn our eyes upon Jesus especially in verse 14 of Hebrews 10. We need to remember what happened when Peter turned his eyes on the power and grace of Jesus in Luke 5:8, "When Simon Peter saw [the power of Jesus in the great catch of fish], he fell down at Jesus' feet, saying, 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!'" In other words seeing Jesus clearly causes us to be deeply conscious of our sinfulness and our unworthiness.

This is a wonderful thing. Most of us are in a deadly dream world most of the time when it comes to how seriously we are in trouble with God because of our sin. We worry more about being stopped by a policeman for speeding than we do about the seriousness of sin. But sin is infinitely serious. And God's anger at sinners is the biggest problem in everyone's life, whether we know it or not.

2. Make a list of things that you often worry about. Is worry about the seriousness of sin against God on your list? Why or why not?

Several times in the book of Hebrews we are warned about the anger of God against those who turn from him in sin. For example, Hebrews 3:10-11, "I was angry with this generation, and said, 'They always go astray in their heart; and they did not know my ways;' as I swore in my wrath, 'They shall not enter my rest.'"

To be blind or oblivious to this wrath of God against sinners is incredibly dangerous, like not being able to smell the gas leak gathering around the pilot light of your water heater, ready to blow your basement to smithereens and burn your house to the ground. It is so dangerous not be aware of the anger of God against those who turn from him in sin. And the reason it is so dangerous is that, if you are blind to this reality of God's wrath, you won't take steps to find a remedy for sin and an escape from God's anger.

So I say again, this is wonderful what happened to Peter when he fell at Jesus' feet and said, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O, Lord." This is not an experience to be avoided, but to be cherished. O that God would do it this morning, as we turn our eyes on Jesus! Because when it happens, the Lord gives relief.

Glimpsing the Lord in Hebrews 10:14

One great glimpse at the Lord Jesus is given in Hebrews 10:14. So let's focus on that verse this morning: "For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified." Now let's do some very preliminary clarification of the words themselves. The word "offering" refers to the death of Christ, the offering of his own body in death on the cross. You can see that in verse 10: "By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." The "He" who does the perfecting is Jesus Christ. We know this simply by following the line of thought from the previous verse (13) where Christ sat down at the right hand of God and waits there, triumphantly, until all his enemies are put under his feet.

Thirdly, the tenses of the words "perfected" and "sanctified" are extremely important. The NASB says, "He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. This is not the best translation of the Greek tenses. The translation of "has perfected" or "has made perfect" is good, because the act of perfecting is viewed as complete: He has perfected a group of people by means of his sacrifice for sins. This perfecting is viewed as having been accomplished and finished and completed. It is done "for all time." We'll come back to that awesome reality in a few minutes.

3. Why are the tenses of the verbs in v.14 so important? What do they tell us about the work of Christ?

But the translation, "those who are sanctified," at the end of the verse, could also look in English as if the sanctifying is also complete. They "are (now, already) sanctified." But that is not what the tense in the original Greek means. It is the present tense and signifies an ongoing process. So this time the NIV gets it exactly right, not the NASB. The NIV says, "By one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy." "Are being made holy", that's exactly right. The process of sanctifying is continuing now in their lives. So the NIV makes the process idea of the tense much clearer and this is going to be very important in understanding

what this verse is teaching. So let's step back now and put the whole verse before us again in its context: "For by one offering [the sacrifice of his own body on the cross] Jesus Christ has perfected for all time those who are being made holy [or: are being sanctified] now progressively in this life."

Repeated Animal Sacrifices Were Not Once-for-All

Up to this verse (14) in chapter 10 the point has been that Christ's death for sin replaces the provision for sin in the Old Testament Law. It's an elaborate argument which we don't have time to look at in detail, but the point is fairly clear and straightforward. The law prescribed repeated animal sacrifices for sin. And the very repetition of the sacrifices showed that they did not perfect the sinners. Nothing decisive and once-for-all happened to deal with sin. Because if they had perfected the people once for all, the sacrifices would have stopped being offered. Verses 1-2: The Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, can never by the same sacrifices year by year, which they offer continually, make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered?

4. What is the main point of Hebrews 10:1-4? What do we learn about the Old Testament sacrificial system?

So the point is clear: the prescribed repetition of sacrifices for sin in the Old Testament Law was a built-in testimony to their inadequacy. They did not perfect the people. They did not deal with sin decisively, finally, once for all.

Then the writer refers to Psalm 40 (in verses 5-8) and shows that already in the Old Testament itself, it is plain that the sacrifices and offerings of animals were not God's main plan for dealing with sin, because, as verse 4 says, "It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins." God knew that from the beginning when he commanded that bulls and goats be offered. They were "shadows," as verse 1 says. The main plan was always Christ. That is what all the shadows were pointing to. So at the end of verse 9 it says, "He takes away the first in order to establish the second." The first will of God was that there be an age of shadows, a kind of 2,000 year lesson book (historical flannelgraph) to prepare us to understand what Christ really did for us on the cross.

5. What do you think John Piper means when he calls the time before Christ a "2,000 year lesson book"? What lesson or lessons were we supposed to learn from the "age of shadows?"

Great Differences Between Christ and the Old Testament Priests

The great difference between what Christ did and what the priests of the Old Testament did is summed up briefly in verses 11 and 12: 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.

6. Make a list of the contrasts that you notice in v.11-12 between the Old Testament priests and Jesus Christ.

Notice the contrasts: many priests vs. Christ as our one High Priest; many sacrifices vs. the one sacrifice of himself; repeated offerings vs. one offering for all time; and one you might have missed: notice that (verse 11) "every priest stands daily;" but when Christ has made his single sacrifice he (verse 12) "sat down at the right hand of God."

The sitting of Christ at God's right hand means at least three things here: one is that the work is done. He does not "stand daily" to offer sacrifices for sin. The one sacrifice of himself was perfectly complete.

Second, it means that God is satisfied with the sacrifice. God honors Christ with the seat at his right hand to show how fully he is satisfied with the debt paid for sin. This is a great picture to encourage us that our sins are fully dealt with. Third, it means that Christ, together with his Father, is the sovereign ruler over all his enemies. They will be defeated. That's what verse 13 stresses: He is "waiting from that time onward until his enemies be made a footstool for his feet." In other words, everything Christ died to accomplish will be accomplished. No enemy can hinder his work in the end. The atonement was utterly complete; the Father was utterly satisfied; and all the enemies will fall utterly before the reigning Christ in heaven.

7. Why does John Piper regard the fact that Christ sits down at God's right hand as very important? What does Christ's sitting down mean for us?

Two Things That Relate Directly to Your Life

Now we come to our focus in verse 14: "For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified." Turn your eyes upon Jesus here and see two things about Jesus that relate directly to your life today.

1. First notice that Christ has perfected his people, and it is already complete. "For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified." He "has" done it. And he has done it "for all time." The perfecting of his people is complete and it is complete forever. Does this mean that Christians don't sin? Don't get sick? Don't make mathematical errors in school? That we are already perfect in our behavior and attitudes?

There is one clear reason in this very verse for knowing that is not the case. What is it? It's the last phrase. Who are the people that have been perfected for all time? It is those who "are being sanctified." This is why the tense is so important. Now "those who are being sanctified" are not yet fully sanctified in the sense of committing no more sin. Otherwise they would not need to go on being sanctified. So here we have the shocking combination: the very people who "have been perfected" are the ones who "are being sanctified." Besides, you can also remember from chapters 5 and 6, that these Christians he is writing to are anything but perfect. For example, in 5:11 he says, "You have become dull of hearing." So we may safely say that "perfected" does not mean that we are sinlessly perfect in this life.

Well what does it mean? The answer is given in the next verses (15-18). The writer explains what he means by quoting Jeremiah again on the new covenant, namely, that in the new covenant which Christ has sealed now by his blood, there is total forgiveness for all our sins. Verses 17-18 "Their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more. Now where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer any offering for sin." So he explains the present perfection in terms of forgiveness. Christ's people are perfected now in the sense that God puts away all our sin (9:26), forgives them, and never brings them to mind again as a ground of condemnation. In this sense we stand before him perfect. When he looks on us he does not impute any of our sins against us, past, present or future. He does not count our sins against us.

8. Verse 14 says that God has "perfected" his people. Does this mean that God's people are sinless and no longer sin at all? If not, what does it mean that he has perfected us?

2. Verse 14 tells us plainly: "By one offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified." So notice, secondly, for whom Christ has done this perfecting work on the cross. You can put it provocatively like this: Christ has perfected once and for all those who are being perfected. Or you could say (and the writer does say as much in verse 10): Christ has fully sanctified those who are now being sanctified. Or Christ has fully accomplished and guaranteed the holiness of those who are now being made holy.

What this means is that you can know that you stand perfect in the eyes of your heavenly Father if you are moving away from your present imperfection toward more and more holiness by faith in his future grace. Let me say that again, because it is full of encouragement for imperfect sinners like us, and full of motivation for holiness. This verse means that you can have assurance that you stand perfected and completed in the eyes of your heavenly Father not because you are perfect now, but precisely because you are not perfect now but are "being sanctified", "being made holy", that, by faith in God's promises, you are moving away from your lingering imperfection toward more and more holiness. (See Hebrews 10:32-35; 11:24-26 etc. for examples of how faith in future grace sanctifies.)

9. According to this passage, how can we have assurance that we are perfect in God's eyes?

Does Your Faith Make You Eager to Make Progress in Holiness?

Last week we asked: does your faith make you eager for the second coming of Christ. Today I ask: does your faith make you eager to forsake sin and make progress in holiness? That is the kind of faith that in the midst of imperfection can look to Christ and say: "You have already perfected me in your sight." This faith says, "Christ, today I have sinned. But I hate my sin. For you have written the law on my heart, and I long to do it. And you are working in me what is pleasing in your sight. And so I hate the sin that I still do, and the sinful thoughts that I contemplate. And in this hatred of my sin, and in my meager advancements in holiness I rejoice that, according to your promise in Hebrews 10:14, I have been perfected for all time by a single offering, your precious self."

This is the true and realistic faith that saves. It is not the boast of the strong. It is the cry of the weak in need of a Savior. I invite you and urge you to be weak enough to trust Christ in this way.

Application

10. At the conclusion of this sermon, John Piper asks a very important question. What is that question and how would you answer it for yourself?

Lesson 5

The Cross: The Son of Man Came to Give His Life a Ransom for Many

Introduction

Should Christians serve Christ? This seems like an obvious question. Of course, we should serve Christ. That's why he came to earth, isn't it? However, the answer is not as simple as it appears. Serving God may seem like a noble and virtuous duty, but there are great dangers for us if we fail to grasp what God is requiring of us. Jesus was very clear about the reason for his coming, and in this lesson we will explore whether his primary purpose was to get us to serve him, or if it was to accomplish something infinitely greater.

Mark 10:45

⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.

1. In this passage, Jesus gives one reason why he did *not* come, and one reason why he did come. List them both below.

Introduction and Review: Don't "Serve" Jesus

Last week we focused on the spectacular truth about the coming of the Son of Man—that he came NOT to be served, but to serve. The reason this is so important to see is that in the preceding verses Jesus had just laid some radical expectations on his disciples. He had told James and John that they would be required to drink the cup of his suffering (v. 39), and he had told the other ten disciples that, if they want to be great in the kingdom, they must become servant of all (v. 44). So he is expecting them to be radically different from the way humans ordinarily act. They are to serve each other and all people, even non-Christians, and in that service drink the cup of whatever suffering it will cost. And it will cost.

The Heart of Christianity

Now if that were the only message of Christianity, it would not be good news. There would be no gospel. I need more than for someone to tell me what I should do and should be. I need help to be that and do that. This is why Jesus says what he says in verse 45. "The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve." What a horrendous mistake it would be if we heard Jesus' call to be the servant of all in verse 44 as a call to serve him. It is not.

2. Why would it not be good news if Jesus Christ came to be served?

It is a call to learn how to be served by him. Don't miss this. This is the heart of Christianity. This is what sets our faith off from all other major religions. Our God does not need our service, nor is he glorified by recruits

who want to help him out. Our God is so full and so self-sufficient and so overflowing in power and life and joy, that he glorifies himself by serving us.

3. According to John Piper, what is the “heart of Christianity?” How would you explain the “heart of Christianity” to a young child?

He does this by taking on a human nature and seeking us out and then telling us that he did NOT come to get our service, but to be our servant. In other words, he is saying that the demand that we be servants and that we drink the cup of suffering in service—that demand is where he wants to serve us.

Jesus Wants to Serve Us

Here is a general truth I give you to ponder and believe: every time Jesus commands something for us to do, it is his way of telling us how he wants to serve us. Let me say it another way: The path of obedience is the place where Christ meets us as our servant to carry our burdens and give us his power. When you become a Christian—a disciple of Jesus—you do not become his helper. He becomes your helper. You do not become his benefactor. He becomes your benefactor. You do not become his servant. He becomes your servant. Jesus does not need your help; he commands your obedience and offers his help.

4. In this paragraph, John Piper gives a general truth about obedience to Christ. Put this general truth in your own words.

This is why becoming a Christian is a humbling thing. We admit that we need help. And we turn to Christ and say, "I can't be or do what I know I am supposed to be and do. I am desperate. I need something way beyond what is inside of me or in any other ordinary person. I need you. I turn to you. I have nothing to offer in trade or purchase. I trust you to show me mercy. I trust you to be my servant."

When we do that, when we submit to him in that way, Christ becomes our servant. And when he does, all of his other radical commands are no longer things we do for him, but things he enables us to do for others. The Christian life is a life of serving others in the strength that he supplies as our servant. It is loving others with the love he gives us as our servant. It is sacrificing and suffering with the hope and joy and patience that he gives us as our servant.

Christian living is walking in the shadow of our servant King. It is making sure that we stay in the path where he loves to serve his people—the path of faith and love.

I know that the apostle Paul called himself the "servant of Jesus Christ" (Romans 1:1). This is not a contradiction of what Jesus is teaching here in Mark 10:45. Jesus himself called us his servants in other contexts: "The servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him" (John 13:16). The idea of servant is being used in two different ways. We are the servants of Jesus in that we submit to his authority and his right to tell us to do whatever he pleases. But we are not his servants in the sense that he needs our help and that his enterprise in the world is sustained by our energy. He is not our servant in the sense that we command him how to live. He is our servant in the sense that he uses all his divine resources to help us and strengthen us and guide us and support us and provide our needs.

5. The Bible says that we are “servants of Jesus.” Does this mean that Jesus needs our help to accomplish something? Explain your answer.

He Gives to All Men Life and Breath and Everything

Acts 17:25 shows what is bad about "serving" God:

He is not served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything.

In other words God does not want to be served in any way that implies we are supplying his need or supporting him or offering him something that he does not already own by right.

Therefore we simply cannot negotiate with God. We have nothing of value that is not already his by right. We cannot service him. His car never breaks down. It never runs out of gas. It never gets dirty. He never gets tired. He never gets depressed. He never gets caught in traffic so that he can't get to where he wants to go. He never gets lonely. He never gets hungry.

6. According to Acts 17:25, why is it bad to serve God?

In other words, if you want what Jesus has to give, you can't buy it. You can't trade for it. You can't work for it. He already owns your money and everything you have. And when you work, it is only because he has given you life and breath and everything. All we can do is submit to his spectacular offer to be our Servant. And this submission is called faith—a willingness to let him be God. Trust him to be the Supplier, the Strengthener, the Counselor, the Guide, the Savior. And being satisfied with that—with all that God is for us in Jesus. That's what faith is. And having that is what it means to be a Christian.

Jesus Came "to Give His Life as a Ransom for Many"

But now let's take the specific act of Jesus' service that he mentions in Mark 10:45. "The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many." Jesus came to "give his life as a ransom for many." This is what Christmas is about. He came. He did not come to be served. He came to give his life a ransom for many. Let's think about this act of service.

It Was Intentional

First of all, let it sink in that this act of giving his life as a ransom was intentional. It says he came to do it. Christ did not come to earth for other reasons and then get caught up in a plot that resulted in his death. He came to die. Hebrews 2:14 puts it plainly:

Since then the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil.

Jesus came to die.

Look back in this very context to Mark 10:33–34. Jesus is on the road going up to Jerusalem. There is fear and amazement in the air, because everyone suspects something tremendous is going to happen. Jesus tells them what he is walking into, willingly:

Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death, and will deliver Him to the Gentiles. 34 And they will mock Him and spit upon Him, and scourge Him, and kill Him, and three days later He will rise again.

So Jesus is knowingly walking into the jaws of suffering and death. Verse 45 says why: He came to give his life a ransom for many. Don't miss this. Jesus is choosing to suffer. He is choosing to die. He is participating intentionally in his own execution.

7. If someone told you that Jesus' death on the cross was an accident, how would you respond to them? What Bible verses would you show them?

His Death Is a "Ransom"

Now why is his death called a ransom? "The Son of Man came to give his life a ransom for many." Ransom is a good translation. The Greek word here (*lutron*) meant just that—a payment to release someone from some kind of bondage: prisoners of war, slavery, debt. So the implication is that Jesus sees his death as a ransom to release many from bondage. He is paying what they cannot pay so that they may go free. He is substituting himself for them. And at the cost of his life, they get freedom.

So this ransom is describing a substitution. Jesus in the place of the many. Sometimes people say that the word "for" doesn't have to mean substitution. "Ransom *for* many," they say, may only mean, "for the benefit of many," not, "in the place of many." But listen to this compelling word from Leon Morris:

Even if . . . we take the substitutionary meaning out of the preposition ["for" = *anti*], we have not taken it out of the passage, for the situation [in view] is one in which the many are condemned, their lives are forfeit. If Jesus gives His life "a ransom for many" and thereby they are released from their condemnation, then a substitutionary transaction has taken place, understand the individual words as we will. (Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* [Grand Rapids; Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955], p. 36)

That seems exactly right to me. But what is the bondage or slavery that the many are in that they need to be ransomed from?

What Are "the Many" Ransomed From?

Jesus describes us in John 8:34 as enslaved to sin: "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin." He did not see us as occasionally sinning, but as under the power of sin. We are slaves of sin and we need to be ransomed from its power.

But that's not the worst of it. Jesus taught that the penalty for sin is eternal punishment. In Matthew 25:46 he says, "These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." Sin brings the wrath of God. It brings judgment. If we don't find rescue from the guilt of our sin, we will be punished, Jesus says, forever, because sin is an infinite offense against an infinitely holy God. *So the slavery and the bondage that we need ransoming from is the slavery of sin and eternal punishment.*

8. According to John 8 and Matthew 25, what does Jesus ransom us from?

How Do We Know We Need Ransoming?

That is what Jesus comes to do: ransom many from the guilt and power of sin and the penalty of eternal punishment. That is our condition. How do we know this is so?

First, our *conscience* tells us that we are sinners. We know that we have fallen short of our own standards, and therefore how much more must we have fallen short of God's. But what about the penalty of that? It is amazing how we excuse ourselves here. Some say, "I am not worse than others." Some say, "My sins are only small, compared to the sins of others." Some say, "God would not condemn me, because he is loving." Some say, "Eternal punishment would be unjust."

But what are all these? They are opinions of men. How can you know how God will respond to your sin when you die? The answer is written by God in your heart (Romans 1:32); and written plainly in his Word. Therefore, do not let your own mind make up an answer to this. Way too much hangs on it. Search the Word of God. Seek for his answer and he will show you. I believe the answer is plain in Scripture: our condition of sin will bring judgment and wrath on us after we die if we do not find a rescue. "The wages of sin is death," said the apostle Paul, "but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). There are two destinies: eternal life, and eternal death. Eternal death is what we need to be saved from because of our sin.

How Does Jesus Ransom Us?

So what then is the way Jesus rescues us? Jesus says, "The Son of Man came . . . to give his life as a ransom for many." He gives his life for the many. That is, he dies for many. *The ransom price is his life.* This is why the Bible says again and again that Christ *died* to save us. "While we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). We were "justified by his blood" (Romans 5:9). "We were reconciled to God by the death of his Son" (Romans 5:10). "He bore our sins in his body on the cross" (1 Peter 2:24). "Christ died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust" (1 Peter 3:18).

The heart of the Christian message is that Christ came to give his life a ransom for many. That is, to die for many. That is: to save many from their sin and from its guilt and power and penalty in eternal punishment.

Are You in "the Many"?

Now the last question is: who are the many? Are you in the many? Were you ransomed when Christ died? Are you still under the guilt and power of sin when you might be free? Are you moving toward eternal life or eternal punishment? Who are the many that were ransomed by the Son of Man when he gave his life?

Turn with me to John 15:13. Here Jesus answers the question about whom he ransomed. He says, "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends." He says that he will lay down his life for his friends. He will ransom his friends. So here is the question for us this Christmas: Are you a friend of Jesus? If you are, you were ransomed. If you aren't, you can become one this morning. What does it mean to be a friend of Jesus?

The next verse explains (John 15:14): "You are My friends, if you do what I command you." This is not how you become a friend. This is the way you act when you are a friend. *This is not the way you become his friend.* It is the *evidence* that you are ransomed. The ransom is what frees you and empowers you to do what Jesus commands you to do. First you know yourself ransomed, then you enjoy the freedom and power and fruit of the ransom.

9. A person you know thinks that the way that you become Jesus' friend is by being obedient to him. How do you correct this person? What is the proper understanding of becoming a friend of Jesus?

So we have come back to where we started. Jesus did not come to be served but to serve. You can't serve your way into the friendship of Jesus. If you want to earn wages from Jesus, you are not his friend. Right in John 15:14–16 he makes clear that you can't be a slave and a friend at the same time:

You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. 16 You did not choose me, but I chose you.

Jesus did not come in search of slave labor. He does not need it. He came in search of those who would become his friends. That is, he came in search of those who would *trust him to serve them*. TRUST HIM TO SERVE THEM! For these he laid down his life. For these he gave his life as a ransom. These are the many in Mark 10:45. Everyone who trusts the servant Christ as Satisfier, Supplier, Guide, Forgiver.

What creates the friendship is that Jesus chooses you and opens his heart to you and reveals the glory of the Father. (John 15:15: "All things that I heard from my Father I made known to you.") In fact, this is the essence of becoming a friend of Jesus: you hear in the *words* of Jesus and you see in the *work* of Jesus the revelation of God the Father. That revelation changes you. It causes you to be born again. It wakens in you faith that Jesus is the final revelation of God, and that God loves you in Christ, and that he will serve you for all eternity. This is what it means to become the friend of Jesus: seeing in him the all-satisfying glory of God, and trusting him to be your servant-guide and your servant-helper, forever.

Application

10. Think carefully about the fact that Jesus does not want you to serve him. How does this change the way that you view your ministry? How does this change the way that you approach Jesus?

Lesson 6

The Cross: Surely He Has Borne Our Grievs

Introduction

Biblical prophecy is one of the most intriguing subjects of theology. Many Christians love to study books like Revelation and Daniel in hopes of uncovering God's plan for the future. But some of the most fruitful and edifying biblical prophecies address, not Christ's second coming, but his first. 700 years before Jesus was born, Isaiah the prophet wrote a depiction of a suffering servant who would bear the sins of his people through the shedding of his own blood. In this lesson, John Piper examines Isaiah's prophecy in detail with the hope that we will come to share Isaiah's vision of the glorified and triumphant Servant of the Lord.

Isaiah 52:13-53:6

¹³ Behold, my servant will prosper, he will be high and lifted up, and greatly exalted. ¹⁴ Just as many were astonished at you, my people, so his appearance was marred more than any man, and his form more than the sons of men. ¹⁵ Thus he will sprinkle many nations, kings will shut their mouths on account of him; for what they had not been told they will see, and what they had not heard they will understand.

^{53:1} Who has believed our message? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? ² For he grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of parched ground; he has no stately form or majesty that we should look upon him, nor appearance that we should be attracted to him. ³ He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and like one from whom men hide their face, he was despised, and we did not esteem him. ⁴ Surely our griefs he himself bore, and our sorrows he carried; yet we ourselves esteemed him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced through for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon him, and by his scourging we are healed. ⁶ All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on him.

1. List five truths from this passage that relate to the death of Christ.

Introduction

Nowhere in all the Old Testament does the gospel of Jesus Christ shine more clearly than in Isaiah 53. Seven hundred years before Jesus came into the world, God opened the eyes of his prophet to see into the very heart of Christ's saving work. And the heart of that saving work is substitution. The Messiah is pierced and crushed in our place. The righteous in the place of the unrighteous. The loving shepherd in the place of the lost sheep. The exalted king in the place of the rebel subjects.

So when we look at Isaiah 53 for the next several weeks, what we have is not only a beautiful revelation of Christ's saving death in the place of sinners, but also a stunning validation of its truth. Christ not only died for sinners so that we could be saved, he died for sinners in fulfillment of explicit prophecy so that we could know more surely that we are saved. When you read the story of your salvation in detail 700 years before it happened, you have not only revelation, but validation.

And so I invite you this morning not only to revel in the great substitutionary work of Christ that takes away your condemnation, but also to be strengthened in your confidence that this is no myth, but the historical work of God who told his story long before it happened.

2. According to John Piper, what is the heart of God's saving work? How does Isaiah 53 validate God's saving work?

This passage of Scripture is about the "servant of the Lord." Notice 52:13, "Behold my servant will prosper . . . " (cf. v. 11).

Who Is This Servant?

Sometimes in the book of Isaiah the servant of the Lord is the people of Israel. Isaiah 41:8, 10: "But you Israel, my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen . . . fear not for I am with you." Sometimes Israel is pictured as the servant of the Lord.

Sometimes the servant is the prophet Isaiah himself. Isaiah 49:5 "And now says the Lord, who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring back Jacob to him . . . " Here the prophet Isaiah serves the people.

Neither Israel Nor Isaiah

But in Isaiah 53 the servant can't be the prophet or the people because the servant is pictured as substituting himself for both the prophet and the people. Verse 4: "Surely he [the Servant] has born our griefs and our sorrows he carried." Verse 5: "He was pierced through for our transgression, he was crushed for our iniquities." "Our" means "me, Isaiah" and the people of Israel who will believe on this servant of the Lord. So the servant is not the people and not Isaiah, because he is the substitute for Isaiah and the people. He is their servant.

3. How do we know that the "Servant of the Lord" in Isaiah 53 is not the people of Israel or Isaiah the prophet?

Jesus the Messiah

Who then was this servant of the Lord? The New Testament answer is that he was Jesus the Messiah. Peter, for example, quotes Isaiah 53:5 ("by his stripes we are healed" in 1 Peter 2:24) and applies it to Jesus. He says in 1 Peter 1:11, "The prophets sought to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow."

And in Acts 8 the Ethiopian eunuch was reading Isaiah 53 when Philip joined him in his chariot. The eunuch asked, "Of whom does the prophet speak, of himself, or of someone else?" And Luke tells us that "Philip opened his mouth and beginning from this scripture he preached Jesus to him" (Acts 8:35).

In all the history of Israel, no one comes close to fulfilling this prophecy besides Jesus. He himself said, "The Son of man did not come to be served, but to serve [that is, to be the suffering servant] and to give his life a ransom [a substitute!] for many" (Mark 10:45).

So let me try to open this prophecy for you this morning so that you may enjoy its revelation of Christ, and be strengthened by its validation as prophecy, and, I pray for some not yet persuaded, be drawn into the salvation it offers.

4. How do we know that the Servant in Isaiah 53 is Jesus the Messiah? What New Testament passages indicate that Jesus is the Servant in Isaiah 53? Look up each passage to confirm that this is indeed what each passage teaches.

Five Stages of What Isaiah Sees

Let me try to take you with me through five stages of what Isaiah has seen.

1. Rebel Subjects

Chapter 53 begins, "Who has believed our message? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" The answer to those rhetorical questions is: scarcely anyone. Why not? Why did Isaiah then, and why do we today, find such unbelief when the message of salvation is preached?

One answer is given in verse 6: "All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way." This is the essence of rebellion and unbelief—a people going their own way.

Just think of it! Think of the weight of it and the ungrateful rebellion of it. God created all people for his glory (Isaiah 43:7). But how many today keep this before their eyes and ask each day, let alone each hour: How shall I not go astray from the way of God? How shall I escape the pride and presumption of going my own way when God made me for his way and for his honor?

Not many? In fact the easiest way not to feel like a rebel against the King is not to think about the King (or the Shepherd). If you can manage to put him out of your mind, then nothing in the world seems more natural than to do your own thing and go your own way. It doesn't feel like rebellion. It feels like responsibility.

So this is the condition that Isaiah begins with. This is what makes substitution necessary. All of us are rebel subjects. We don't like anyone telling us what to do. And to keep God's will from conflicting with our own, we just don't think about him. "All of us like sheep have gone astray. Each of us has turned to his own way." My own way. Give me my own way! That is our condition. We are rebel subjects.

5. How does Isaiah depict our rebellion against God? Describe some ways that you see rebellion against God displayed in your own life and in your culture?

2. Rejected Servant

The next glimpse into what Isaiah sees is a glimpse of the rejected Servant. Verse 3: "He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and like one from whom men hide their face, he was despised and we did not esteem him."

When God sent his Servant to save the rebel subjects, we despised him. Why? The answer is given in verse 2: "He grew up before him [God] like a tender shoot, and like a root out of parched ground; he has no stately form or majesty that we should look upon him. Nor appearance that we should be attracted to him."

In other words, his whole demeanor, his style, his view of life and money and possessions and lust and prayer and worship and pride and humility and fear and faith—none of it endorsed our own rebellion. We didn't feel endorsed around Jesus. He was so lowly and unimpressive that our aspirations for power and reputation felt

evil. His happy poverty made our wanting more and more feel foolish. His willingness to suffer for others made our craving for comforts feel selfish.

And so to protect ourselves we despised him. We even hoped it was God that struck him. That would be a good endorsement of our rejection. And we rejected him. He was an offense. A rejected Servant.

6. Why did people reject the servant? What did he fail to do? What was our response to his refusal?

3. Ransoming Substitute

But he knew that would happen. It didn't take him off guard. He did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many. And so the next glimpse we get through Isaiah's eyes is a glimpse of the rejected Servant as a ransoming Substitute.

Verse 4a: "Surely our griefs he himself bore, and our sorrows he carried . . ." Verse 5: "But he was pierced through for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon him, and by his scourging we are healed." And verse 6b: "But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on him."

This is the heart of the gospel of Jesus—substitution. This is the great message of good news that God has for rebel subjects who are willing to lay down their rebellion. Instead of collapsing in grief over our rejection, he bears our griefs. Instead of increasing our sorrows, he carries our sorrows. Instead of avenging our transgressions, he is pierced for them in our place. Instead of crushing us for our iniquities, he is crushed for them as our substitute. And all the chastisement and whipping that belong to us for our rebellion he takes on himself in order that we might have peace and be healed.

You don't have to understand all the intricacies of how this works in order to be healed and forgiven any more than you have to understand how a computer works in order to write poems on your word processor. God tells us what we need to know. His rejected Servant is in fact a ransoming Substitute for rebel subjects. That's the gospel.

7. Must we understand all of the details regarding substitution in order to be forgiven by God? If not, what is necessary in order to be forgiven?

4. Restored Sight

But that's not all of it. There's more. The gospel doesn't save unless we see it and grasp it for our own. But rebel subjects don't do that. At least not on our own. But Isaiah says that something will happen—and this is the fourth stage of Isaiah's message: there will be restored sight to the rebel subjects.

Isaiah 52:15: "He [the Servant] will sprinkle many nations, kings will shut their mouths on account of him; for what had not been told them they will see, and what they had not heard they will understand."

Even though Isaiah 53:1 says that scarcely any have believed Isaiah's message, because the arm of the Lord had not been revealed, nevertheless 52:15 says that the arm of the Lord will be revealed.

God will not let the work of his Servant be done in vain. He will bare his arm and sprinkle the nations with the healing blood of his Servant (v. 15a) and the kings of the earth will see and understand. Their eyes will be opened. Their sight will be restored.

Paul quoted this verse in Romans 15:21 to justify his hope in the success of frontier missions. "I aspired to preach the gospel not where Christ was already named . . . But as it is written, 'Those who had no news of him shall see, and they who have not heard shall understand'" (cf. Acts 26:18).

In other words, the gospel of Isaiah—the gospel of Jesus Christ is good news not only because the heart of it is God's rejected Servant dying as a ransoming Substitute for rebel subjects, but also because God guarantees that he will bare his arm and open the eyes of kings to see and believe. He will restore sight.

Isaiah 52:13 begins, "Behold, my servant shall prosper!" He will succeed. His substitutionary ransom will not abort. God has sent the servant; God will make sure that people see the servant. He will restore sight so that rebel subjects see the servant no longer as rejected but as the glorious ransoming substitute that he really is.

8. According to Isaiah 52-53, should we be optimistic or pessimistic about the success of the gospel of Jesus Christ? Why is this the case?

5. Reverent Silence

Which brings us to one last glimpse through Isaiah's eyes (again in 52:15). When God sprinkles the nations with the blood of his Servant and grants the kings of the earth to see what they had not been told and to understand what they had not heard, the result will be reverent silence: "The kings will shut their mouth on account of him."

And why do they do this? Isaiah 52:13 gives the answer: "Behold, my servant will prosper, he will be high and lifted up, and greatly exalted."

The kings will be silent because the suffering servant is the sovereign of the universe. He is high. He is lifted up. He is greatly exalted. This is what God grants them the eyes to see—the majesty of Jesus. The despised and rejected servant is the Lord of glory. Let there be a reverent silence before him.

Though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

9. The last paragraph in this sermon is a quotation of Philippians 2:5-11. Compare this passage to Isaiah 52-53. What similarities do you notice? What aspects of Christ's work are emphasized in each passage?

Application

10. According to Isaiah, the proper response to the Suffering Servant is reverent silence. Take 5 minutes and reflect on what you have learned about Jesus Christ in this sermon. Prayerfully consider the testimony of Isaiah 700 years before Christ was born. After you have silently meditated for 5 minutes, write down any reflections you want to remember.