

28 _ WHY DID JESUS DIE ON THE CROSS?

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Sharp Faith: talks on ‘soteriology’ (how are we saved):

“Why is blood so important in Scripture?” (January 21)

“Did Jesus die to expiate our sins?” (January 28)

“What is the real meaning of sacrifices in Scripture?” (February 4)

“Can Jesus’s death on the cross be called a ‘sacrifice’?” (March 3)

“Why did Jesus die on a cross?” (March 17)

Summary of what we have seen so far

1. The Last Supper and the Cross contain references to the three blood sacrifices:
 - 1.1. *paschal lamb*: cf. the time of the crucifixion in John (when the Paschal Lamb was sacrificed) and the paschal context of the last supper in the synoptics (Jewish Passover)
 - 1.2. *covenant sacrifice*: Christ refers to it explicitly by speaking of his blood as the ‘blood of the new and eternal covenant’
 - 1.3. *the sacrifice of expiation*: cf. Mt 26:28 “For this is my blood, the blood of the covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins”
2. The meaning attributed by the Old Testament to the use of blood for “expiation” is that of a *purification* of the person, ultimately of a *change* in the heart of the person .
 - 2.1. This excludes the interpretations of ‘penal substitution’ or ‘satisfaction’.
 - 2.2. The meaning of ‘expiation’ is not that of ‘satisfying’ God’s displeasure by punishing the sinner, directly or indirectly,
 - 2.3. but of overcoming the cause of our separation from God by leading us to thanksgiving
Psalm 50 [22](#) “Mark this, then, you who forget God,
lest I tear you apart, and there be none to deliver!
[23](#) The one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies me;
to one who orders his way rightly
I will show the salvation of God!”
Psalm 51 [16](#) For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it;
you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.
[17](#) The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.
3. This is why the fundamental form of sacrifice is the *meal* in which we acknowledge that all we have and all we are is a gift from God and we renew, celebrate, strengthen our communion with him.

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1 Timothy 4. ⁴For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, ⁵for **it is made holy** by the word of God and prayer.

4. Here lies the connection between the Last Supper and the cross: using the symbolism of lamb, sacrificial meal (bread), and blood (the wine) Jesus gives a sacrificial meaning to his death
 - 4.1. Thus even if the cross has *nothing* that looks like a sacrifice (it is an execution)
 - 4.2. it becomes a sacrifice because of what happens and what Jesus says during the Last Supper: “this is my life given for you”, “this is the blood of the covenant shed for you”
5. The same symbolism is at work in our worship, each Sunday, when to the priest who presents us the chalice and says “The Blood of Christ” we reply “Amen” that is “I believe it”, “I say yes to it”.
 - 5.1. We are no more sprinkled with the blood of animals, but we drink the wine which Jesus gave us as the “blood of the New Covenant”, as he declares at the Last Supper and as the celebrant repeats each Sunday during the prayer of consecration.
 - 5.2. The word ‘covenant’ and the word ‘atonement’ have the same exact meaning: to become one with God and with each other.
 - 5.3. And Jesus’ blood has this power for one reason and one only: not because it is a price, but because it is the sign of his *life given out of love* for the Father and for us all (whenever ‘blood’ is mentioned in connection with Jesus we should understand ‘love’).
6. Whenever we hear the words “propitiation” and “expiation” we should remember that
 - 6.1. the meaning of appeasing the divinity or paying a price applies to pagan or animist sacrifices
 - 6.2. on the contrary, in relation to the sacrifices of the Old Testament this term refers to the way in which God establishes and renews the *covenant*, the communion between himself and his people.
7. Then we have seen how the *Aqedah* (the ‘binding’ or sacrifice of Abraham/Isaac) played a decisive role in the formulation of the sacrificial nature of Christ's death:
 - 7.1. It emphasizes the act of love and obedience on the part of the Son
 - 7.2. And the Father’s love who gave his beloved Son.
8. New Testament texts can be better understood in light of the sacrifice of Abraham/Isaac:

Rom 8:32 “He who did not spare his own Son but delivered him up for us all, how will he not with him show us all favor? »

John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. »

 - 8.1. The expression “only son” recalls Gen 22: 2.16
“Take your son, your only son, [...] because you have done this, that you have not withheld your son, your only son from me”.
Cf. Hb 11:17 By faith Abraham, when tested, offered Isaac, and he offered his only son as a sacrifice, he who was the keeper of the promises, 18 he to2

whom he had been said: It is through Isaac that you will have descendants. 19 God, he thought, is able even to resurrect the dead; this is why he covered his son, and it was a symbol”.

9. Finally, we have seen the role played by the prophecies of the Deutero-Isaiah on the “suffering servant”

- 9.1. The Gospels of Mark and Luke suggest a connection between service and the gift of one's life in two passages of Palestinian origin:

Mk 10:42-45 Jesus called them to him and said to them, “You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. 43 But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, 44 and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. 45 For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Luke 22:25-27 24 A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. 25 And he said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. 26 But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. 27 For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves.”

- 9.2. Jesus speaks in the third person and explains the deep meaning of his mission as an instruction to the disciples.
- 9.3. he establishes a link between his life and his death: both are ‘for others’. He came ‘to serve others’ and ‘to lay down his life for others’.
- 9.4. This understanding of sacrifice as ‘service’ is developed in Jn 13 (washing of feet).
- 9.5. Clear reference to Is 53:10-12

10 Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him;
he has put him to grief;
when his soul makes an offering for guilt,
he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days;
the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.
11 Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied;
by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,
make many to be accounted righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.
12 Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong,
because he poured out his soul to death
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
and makes intercession for the transgressors.

- 9.6. Mk 12:45 "giving one's life a **ransom** for many"
- i. reflects the formulation of Is 53:10 “his soul makes an offering for guilt” (in the Hebrew text it says “truly he gave his life as an atoning sacrifice”).
 - ii. It appears to combine this text of Isaiah with Ps 49:7-9

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Ps 49:7-9 Truly no human being can ransom another,
or give to God the price of his life,
8for the ransom of their life is costly
and can never suffice,
9that he should live on forever
and never see the pit.

9.7. Mc 10:45 is a very ancient text and this suggests that very early on Jesus' gift of himself was interpreted as a service for others.

9.8. This is echoed by the mentions of the forgiveness of sins during the last supper
Mt 26:27f 27And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, 28 for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

9.9. Then in 2 Cor 5:21

21For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

- i. just as the Servant did not commit any injustice (Is 53:9: "although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth) – so Jesus "knew no sin".
- ii. just as the Servant gave his life as a sin offering (Is 53:10 "Yahweh wanted to crush him with suffering; if he offers his life as an atoning sacrifice") so Jesus was made a victim for us to blot out our sins;
- iii. just as the Servant by his suffering justifies the multitude (Is 53:11 "By his knowledge the righteous one, my servant, will justify multitudes") so Jesus gave his life so that we may "become the righteousness of God".

Did Jesus have to die?

- 1. The reference to the Suffering Servant seems to contains the ideas
 - 1.1. that Jesus had to die and
 - 1.2. that his death somehow was a ransom.
- 2. According to the Gospels Jesus's death and even the details of how he was going to give his life for us were preordained:
Mt 16:21: "From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life"
- 3. From the viewpoint of history though nothing was more unlikely that this course of events.
 - 3.1. None of the actors the Gospels indicated as the perpetrators of Jesus' murder would have been able to do it separately from one another.
 - 3.2. Elders, priests, and teachers of the law wanted to kill him, but they did not have the power to put anyone to death;
 - 3.3. Judas wanted the money or maybe provoke Jesus into action – impossible to speculate on his motives-, but did not want him to die;

- 3.4. The crowd was made up of people who relinquished their agency and comfortably hid behind group mentality;
- 3.5. Pilate wanted just to shake off a political problem that risked degenerating and perhaps jeopardizing his career.
- 3.6. In short,
 - i. those who wanted to kill Jesus did not have the power of doing so,
 - ii. and those who did *not* want to kill him let themselves to be the material executors of the murder only because they were too lazy, corrupt, or simply too self-absorbed to bother taking a stance.
- 4. The shipwreck of Jesus' utopistic message might have been predictable, but the modality of his murder depended on an improbable and extraordinary conjunction of misfortunes and missteps, anything but the outcome of something ordered, intended.
- 5. It wasn't the Father who wanted Jesus dead.
- 6. There was no mythical evil entity that manipulated clueless agents to play a role in Jesus' assassination (cf. Mel Gibson's movie!).
- 7. It was a purely political murder, similar to so many others, included in our days, for "the greater good":

John 11:49 "Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, "You know nothing at all! You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish".
- 8. The fact that Jesus' death was *foreseen* by God does not mean that it was *planned* by God.
 - 8.1. Jesus' death was entirely the result of human beings rejecting him
 - 8.2. He did not have to die – but he knew that people would have found his message a threat to the established political and religious order – and that this might cost him his life
 - 8.3. In a way analogous to how MLK knew that his message of love could cost him his life: the fact that he knew does not mean that he had or wanted to die – although his death gave even more power to his message.

Transactional theories

- 9. Then the reference to the Suffering Servant also contains the idea that Jesus' death somehow was a ransom, an exchange, a 'transaction'.
- 10. Did Jesus conclude a pact with the Father? "Forgive them and punish me instead", "In your anger, do not spare me, so that you can spare them".
 - 10.1. This might seem confirmed by Paul when he says that the Father "did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all"¹ and that
 - 10.2. we are "saved from God's wrath through him" because "while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son"²
- 11. Also this seems echoed by the NT vocabulary of 'redemption', *apolutrosis* in Greek.

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¹ Romans 8.xx

² Romans 5.9ff

- 11.1.** This image refers to the paying of a ransom to emancipate slaves and is mentioned by Peter in his first letter:

“For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were rescued from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect”.³

- 12.** As a result, many theologians have interpreted salvation as a *transaction* between the Father and the Son:

- 12.1.** a ransom is paid, the Father’s honour is restored, his wrath is placated, his justice is satisfied.
- 12.2.** Several doctrines spawned from this approach to the cross: satisfaction, penal substitution, vicarious atonement, ransom theory.
- 12.3.** These interpretations say less about God than about the mindset that came up with them.

- 13.** Cf. in particular the so called ransom theory: a price was paid, and this price is Christ’s blood on the cross, that is his death. And yet, as soon as one probes this image, countless difficulties arise:

- i.** Who were we enslaved by?
- ii.** To whom was the ransom paid?
- iii.** Was it paid to the devil? Would not this entail that the devil has rights, is an equal legitimate contender with God, has a rightful claim over us?
- iv.** And how could blood benefit the devil?

- 14.** Even the term ‘sacrifice’ has become synonymous with ‘doing or offering something costly to get something else in exchange’ – again the same transactional mindset.

- 15.** We have seen that even according to the OT the only thing that can expiate for us is not the paying of a price but a change in the inclination of our heart.

Dt 6:4f Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

- 16.** The only authentic ‘sacrifice’ is a ‘contrite heart’, that is a heart which knows its shortcomings, its wrongdoings, its deviousness, and yet wants to adhere to God, love God, be ‘at one’ with God.

Atonement

- 17.** These ‘transactional’ theories have obscured the original meaning of the very word often used to express what salvation is, how it works, and how it happened, that is ‘atonement’ (often used as a synonym or translation of ‘expiation’).

- 18.** Even the pronunciation of this word hides its etymological meaning.

- 18.1.** The presence of ‘at’ and ‘one’ is obscured when we say ‘atonement’.

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³ 1 Peter 1:18f.

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- 18.2.** It is helpful to pronounce it differently and say “at-one-ment” to recover its original meaning, namely that Jesus saved us because he was ‘at one’ with the Father and that being saved for us means becoming ‘at one’ with the Father and with each other.
- 19.** The Father and the Son are ‘at one’ in their love for us
 - 19.1.** Nobody has had greater love for us than the Son who gives his life for his friends, that is for all of us.

John 15:13: “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends”.
 - 19.2.** Nobody has greater love than the Father who “so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (John 3:16).
 - 19.3.** They are totally at one in this, as Jesus was not tired of repeating “I and the Father are one’ (John 10:30).
- 20.** The word ‘covenant’ and the word ‘atonement’ have the same exact meaning: to become one with God and with each other (through love and forgiveness).
- 21.** Win back our love, make us feel that we can trust him – this is the heart of Jesus’ salvation.
 - 21.1.** Not to punish us, or someone for us.
 - 21.2.** Not to reclaim his rights over us.
 - 21.3.** Not to satisfy some form or justice.
 - 21.4.** But to make us ‘at one’ with the Father in the only way that matters: namely that we should trust him, have faith in him, and love him.