

WHAT'S SO "GOOD" ABOUT GOOD FRIDAY?

INTRODUCTION

What's so good about Good Friday? This question deals with what Jesus of Nazareth accomplished over 2000 thousand years ago on Calvary's bloody cross—demonstrated both God's justice and love. Since its inception, the Church has celebrated the grueling, horrific death of an innocent man who by virtue of his ontological status (His nature as the God/Man) secured rescue from God's just white hot wrath toward rebels born of Adam.

But how can this be good? One could argue, and many have, that this act was unjust, cruel, and an act of child abuse (i.e., the heavenly Father sent his one unique Son to die for those who hate God). Who would ever treat their own sons and daughters in such a way by ordaining them to be brutally murdered by the Jews and the Romans on Calvary's cross?

God did. He's the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who makes covenant with His chosen ones and does nothing wrong. He's the God who sets the standards of what is true, beautiful and good. He's the God of creation who spoke the worlds into existence out of nothing, sustains its order, and is taking history into a glorious reality never before known or imagined.

What's good is that His wrath has been satisfied, and hopelessly lost sinners through His grace and kindness have the opportunity to enter into the family of God through Jesus Christ's, life, death, resurrection, and ascension. In Christian theology, this topic of the cross comes under the heading of *The Atonement*.

WHAT IS THE ATONEMENT ALL ABOUT?

This theological concept attempts to understand the many nuances of the cross of Jesus Christ. The term *Atonement* means "to cover over" and comes from the basic idea that man as a sinner cannot stand before the Holy, Self-existent, all powerful, all good, all wise God and not be destroyed. In order for the sinner, who is hell bound, to be in a peaceful joyous relationship with this Holy God, the sacrifice of a life has to be made.

This is seen in Genesis when after disobeying their creator, God covered Adam and Eve with skins (i.e., these animal skins point to the need for the innocent to die on behalf of the guilty) so that they would not be destroyed. Furthermore, this concept of substitutionary death is demonstrated through the

Old Testament sacrificial system (Lev.1:14; 4:20,; 7:7; 16) where yearly on the Day of Atonement sins were covered through the death of innocent animals. These sacrifices were pointing to Jesus Christ whom John the Baptist called, “the Lamb of God which takes away the sins of the world”. Consider what the Hebrews writer penned:

²² And according to the Law, one may almost say, all things are cleansed with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

²³ Therefore it was necessary for the copies of the things in the heavens to be cleansed with these, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. ²⁴ For Christ did not enter a holy place made with hands, a mere copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us; ²⁵ nor was it that He would offer Himself often, as the high priest enters the holy place year by year with blood that is not his own. ²⁶ Otherwise, He would have needed to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now once at the consummation of the ages He has been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself.
(Heb. 9:22-26)

Paul says that, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself” (2 Cor.5:19), which he accomplished through Jesus’ death on the cross (Rom.5:10). This reconciliation is multifaceted involving Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, and ascension. And central to it all is the doctrine of salvation through the cross. Consider the following passages:

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

“He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” (2 Cor.5:21)

Of all the great minds and figures of history, only Jesus of Nazareth was born for the purpose of dying so that those who are dead in trespasses and sins may come to life eternal in Him. This life comes through the substitutionary

death on the cross Jesus Christ endured for sinners. Regarding Jesus' death on Calvary, Christian Theologian Leon Morris notes that:

*"This [the cross] is distinctive of Christianity. Other religions have their martyrs, but the death of Jesus was not that of a martyr. It was that of a Savior. His death saves men from their sins. Christ took their place and died their death."*¹

Good Friday is about Christ's death on the bloody cross of Calvary—the atonement. The atonement has three aspects to it (the cause, the necessity, and the nature) which help clarify the scope and expanse of this biblical concept. It answers for us, *"What's so good about Good Friday?"*

THE CAUSE OF THE ATONEMENT

There are many ways of describing and defining the term "atonement". For our purposes, we will simply define it as: *the work Christ did in his life and death to earn our salvation.*² Here both God's love and justice are displayed for the watching world to ruminate.

God's Love is too often cheapened by the de-emphasis of His wrath. That is, what we get saved from—God's wrath; is not explained nor considered, so when we hear of God's love, it's diluted and weak—not in actuality, but in the minds of those hearing the message.

Nevertheless, we must understand that the cause of the atonement is first wrapped in his love. John.3:16-18 reveals:

¹⁶ "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. ¹⁸ He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

¹ Leon Morris, *Atonement, EDT*, pg.97

² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Pg. 568 also, we could speak of Christ's resurrection and ascension, but for our purposes we will concentrate on his life and death

And secondly, this cause is draped in God's Justice. Listen to what Paul says in Romans 3:21-26:

²¹ But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, ²² even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; ²⁵ whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; ²⁶ for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

The concept of justice biblically is massive, a core aspect of it deals with the righteousness of God who not only gives the Law but is the Master of that law and is faithful to uphold its precepts.³ The essence of this righteousness flows from the perfections of God's unchanging attributes which are the measure of all that is true, good and beautiful. In order for true justice to be executed, the guilty must be punished for their transgressions.

In the case of humanity's sins, the offense is against the Holy One who demands justice. This is only accomplished through "propitiation" which speaks of a sacrifice offered that bears God's wrath so that He becomes favorably disposed toward us.⁴

Thus, when we consider the cause of the atonement, it is generated by God's love for sinners and His passion for justice. What about the need for the atonement? What's the big fuss anyway, did Jesus really have to suffer and die such a brutal death?

THE NEED OF THE ATONEMENT

When we speak of the need of the atonement, we must clarify that God did not need to save us, as though he needed anything from us in order to complete some lack in Him. After all, He is the "I AM" who is self-existent and perfectly joyous in the Triune community. We must remember that as He did not spare the angels, but cast them into hell for their rebellion, so too will He execute the same

³ Onesti & Brauch, *DPL*, Pg.829

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.568

justice on sinful humanity (2 Pet.2:4). Somehow, in God's economy, it was not only *impossible* for Christ not to die on the cross:

(Garden of Gethsemane Mt. 26:39), "*...My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not as I will, but as You will*"

It was also *necessary* for the Messiah to die for the sins of his people as told to the two travelers on the road to Emmaus:

*"And He said to them, "O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ Was it not **necessary** for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?" ²⁷ Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures."* (Lk.24:25-27)

The term "necessary" has to do with something that is indispensable for a purpose to be accomplished⁵; it is what's inevitable for a future event to develop.⁶ This is true in the case of the Messiah's suffering so that many may come to life through his sacrificial death. This was a moral obligation on the part of God the Son to be incarnate so that the eternal divine plan may be accomplished.⁷ That suffering is presupposed by a further necessity; namely that Jesus had to be made like us:

*¹⁷ Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make **propitiation** for the sins of the people. ¹⁸ For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted. (Heb. 2:17-18)*

He was made like us in his humanity (i.e., he was born, grew and developed onto adulthood, ate, slept, drank, etc. as we all do), all the while completely retaining his divinity. As Adam represents damned humanity before the throne of justice, Jesus represents redeemed humanity before the court of heaven. By

⁵ L&N §54:48

⁶ L&N §71.36

⁷ Leon Morris, *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, Vol.12, Pg.29

becoming fully human, Jesus identified and assimilated into the human experience, rather than simulating it.⁸ That means that one can't get any more human than Jesus was, and remains unto today. When the text says mentions Jesus making "propitiation" it points to his sacrificial death on the cross. Jesus as our high priest put away just divine wrath by absorbing it himself, he satisfied the necessary payment required for sinners to be set free from assured death.⁹ The writer of Hebrews accentuates the necessity for Christ's propitiating sacrifice; "For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins." (Heb.10: 4) and in Hebrews 9:23-26 says:

²³ Therefore it was necessary for the copies of the things in the heavens to be cleansed with these, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. ²⁴ For Christ did not enter a holy place made with hands, a mere copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us; ²⁵ nor was it that He would offer Himself often, as the high priest enters the holy place year by year with blood that is not his own. ²⁶ Otherwise, He would have needed to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now once at the consummation of the ages He has been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself.

Unlike the tabernacle in the wilderness (which housed the holiest place and the Ark of the Covenant representing the presence of God, a shadow of things to come) which the High priest could only enter once a year to make atonement for the people's sins, Jesus went into the actual presence in heaven. The blood of bulls and goats were all pointing to the reality which is Christ.

The cause for the atonement was God's love and justice, the need of the atonement was God's moral obligation to His law which God the Son fulfilled through his incarnation and subsequent death and resurrection. Now we turn to consider the actual nature of the atonement.

⁸ Reinecker & Rogers, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, Pg.670

⁹ *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, Vol.12, Pg.30

THE NATURE OF THE ATONEMENT

The nature of the atonement seems to be grounded on Christ's obedience and suffering.

CHRIST'S OBEDIENCE FOR US

Why did he need to be obedient for us, or for me? Jesus had to obey the whole Law on our behalf so that the positive merits of his obedience would be counted for us (Rom.5:19) *"For as through one mans disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous."*

CHRIST'S SUFFERING FOR US

Why did Jesus need to suffer so much, couldn't God have rescued us any other way? Why was it also necessary for him to pay for the penalty for our sins? The short answer is that this is God's story, He's the author of life not us. When considering the sufferings of Christ, three aspects of it are core: the physical pain on the cross, the abandonment of the disciples and the heavenly Father, and the wrath of God unleashed on him.

Jesus' suffering involved the entirety of his being: *body and soul*. Remember that he endured tremendous suffering in the wilderness during his temptation, *"And He was in the wilderness forty days being tempted by Satan; and He was with the wild beasts, and the angels were ministering to Him."* (Mk.1:13). When the text says that Jesus was "being tempted", in the language of the New Testament it indicates that he was continually being tempted throughout the forty days in the wilderness.¹⁰ The kingdom of darkness was soliciting its evil to Jesus relentlessly.¹¹ The Adversary was on a mission to make the Son of God fail.

Growing up, Jesus went through the process of learning to obey and this involved suffering as the Hebrews writer notes; *"Although He was a Son, He learned obedience through the things He suffered (Heb.5:8)"*. That is, Jesus went through specific experiences and particular sufferings¹² of ridicule, rejection and finally death because of his resolve to love and obey the Father. Recall the great opposition endured from the Jewish leaders (Heb.12:3-4) who while being God

¹⁰ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Pg.571-572

¹¹ Reinecker & Rogers, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, Pg.89

¹² *Ibid.*, Pg. 679

incarnate, in his humanity allowed these rulers to mock and misrepresent his very nature. This had to be, it was all part of God's plan to rescue sinners like us.

Jesus is known as the man of sorrows acquainted with grief. The Messiah, according to Isaiah the prophet, would be one accustomed to grief *"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."* (Is.53:3)

Jesus' pain and sufferings would finally culminate and climax on the cross for it was there that he paid for the penalty of our sins. In (Mt.26:38) while undergoing the agony in the garden of Gethsemane, he says, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death". This pain he was about to endure, first involved the physical agony of crucifixion and death (Mk.15:24). Mel Gibson's portrayal of the crucifixion in his movie "The Passion" portrays a glimpse into that horrific reality.

As if the physical pain wasn't enough, Jesus also endured the psychological pain of bearing the guilt for our sin as Isaiah 53:6 says; *"v-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."* This and other passages demonstrate that it was God the Father who put our sins on Christ" (2Cor.5:21; Heb.9:28), it was the Father's plan to rescue sinners through His son's sacrifice.

Abandonment is a very real human suffering that causes deep emotional consternation. Jesus was abandoned by his disciples and by his heavenly Father. Those who were dearest and closest to him...left him at his greatest hour of anguish.

In the Garden of Gethsemane he told the disciples that he was in agony, he was very sorrowful (Mk.14:34), yet when Jesus was arrested the disciples fled (Mt.26:56). Nevertheless, Jesus loved them to the end (Jn.13:1). What a friend! What a Savior! Everyone experiences rejection to some degree or another, Jesus experienced it too in his darkest moment.

To be abandoned by the disciples was painful enough, but to be deprived of the sweet fellowship he had throughout his life with the heavenly Father was far worse as Mathew 27:46 notes; *"About the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "ELI, ELI, LAMA SABACHTHANI?" that is, "MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?"* Jesus knew exactly what was occurring (the sacrifice for sinners to be saved). His cry was not one of ignorance, but one of unfathomable sorrow which culminated in his "cry". In this forsaken event, the "furnace of affliction" was intensified as God's wrath was unleashed on the Son of righteousness. It is

here where Jesus bore the pain of God's just, holy fury due to us. Paul in Romans 3:21-26 puts it well:

“But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets,²² even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction;²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,²⁴ being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus;²⁵ whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed;²⁶ for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

Christ's work of suffering to rescue God-haters so that God may be glorified and His people forever rejoice in His truth, beauty and goodness are not accidental. As the author of life and this story we are living, God has from eternity past planned it to be so. How then ought we to live? We ought to live for the One who on Calvary's cross "paid-in-full" the debt we could never pay when he finally uttered "It is finished!" Having opportunity then, we ought to rejoice in the "goodness" of this "Friday".
(SDG)