

What Does “Jesus Died for Us” Mean?
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Opening

Text: Romans 5:6-8.

First, let me offer a disclaimer about my false advertising. I could never cover the full meaning of the statement, “Jesus died for us.” What I want to do is address one model of understanding that statement that is popular, but, I believe is non-biblical; and then I want to point us in the right direction for understanding the language about his death.

I have always warned ALPS students that I am a teacher and not a preacher, so this time will be no different. But, I think it is OK, because thinking more deeply about Jesus is also worshipful and encouraging.

I have a difficult topic tonight, but one that is important to me. I help my wife teach a 1st-2nd grade SS class. (She is the expert.) It caught my attention that a couple of the children would say that Jesus died for their sins, when they had no clue what that meant. I got to thinking about how many adults also probably could not give a good explanation.

As an OT scholar, I try to look at the words of Jesus or of someone like Paul from a Jewish perspective. I am always pursuing the issue of what the text meant to the original audiences. But, as I finite and fallible person, my conclusions may be wrong. So, please, bear with me, think about it, and particularly seek God about it.

Prayer: “O God, you are aware of my foolish sins; my guilt is not hidden from you. Let none who rely on you be disgraced because of me, O sovereign LORD and king! Let none who seek you be ashamed because of me, O God of Israel! (Ps. 69:5-6, NET)

Overview

I have been thinking about how people look at the atoning work of Jesus. Some of the early Church Fathers drew on concepts from their culture. Anselm in 11th century drew on his model of the feudal system to explain that Jesus was a substitute for us to restore to God the honor he deserves. In the 16th cent. Martin Luther viewed Jesus as a substitute who bore our punishment for failure under the Law; and, John Calvin, a lawyer, further defined the atonement in terms of criminal law; Jesus bore our criminal penalties. These models seem to me to be straying from what a 1st century Jewish Christian would have thought.

I want to make two main points. The first is that the contemporary Church, particularly on a pop-level, focuses too much on the death of Jesus to the exclusion of the broader range of the whole work and ministry of Christ. The second is that to better understand the meaning of the statement, “Jesus died for my sins,” we need to try to understand what a good Jew like Paul would have thought.

Focusing on Death to Exclusion of Full Ministry

The first point is simple. There is too much of a focus on the death of Jesus to the exclusion of his whole work. Obviously, we talk about the resurrection, because without it Jesus' death would be meaningless. I am not minimizing that. I am expanding. There is more. Scripture tells us that through Jesus, the Word of God, all things were created. But, there is more. Jesus emptied himself of his divine status, humbled himself, became incarnate and dwelt among us – the Light of the World in our midst. But, there is more. Jesus pronounced and taught about the newly inaugurated era of the Kingdom of God, in which you and I now participate. God's rule had begun in a new way. And, Jesus performed signs and wonders that demonstrated that God's Kingdom was indeed here in his person. But, there is more. He showed himself to be the perfect Adam, the perfect Israel, the perfect offering a new covenant, the perfect sin offering, and the perfect High Priest. But, there is more. His death was followed by the first fruits of the Resurrection, which proved his words, and which demonstrated his victory over death, sin, and Satan. But, there is more. Jesus dwells in believers through the Person of the Holy Spirit, and we dwell in Him as members of His Body. But, there is more. Jesus, in his humanity, having been tested and tempted in all ways, identifies with us in our weaknesses and at this very moment and intercedes for you and me before the throne of God. His goal is that you and I might be made perfect in him and so be prepared for his Second Coming.

A whole year's worth of sermons could be preached on each of these points and this is a partial list. So, I'm sure you get the point: the whole work and ministry of Jesus must be proclaimed to your congregations.

Better Understanding “Jesus Died for My Sins”

The second point is to address the statement, “Jesus died for my sins.” Again, we need to look view this holistically. Through the combined work of Jesus incarnation, his life and ministry, his death and resurrection, etc. Jesus receives a wide variety of titles that use the figurative language of the OT to capture who he is. Jesus is savior, redeemer, one who pays a ransom, one who pronounces forgiveness, the seat of atonement, a sin offering, Passover lamb, perfect sacrifice, high priest, the new Man, the victor over death, victor over this world, victor over Satan and the principalities, etc.

One issue that I repeatedly find in NT studies is that people tend to group most of those titles under the category of “atonement,” but atonement is used in a narrower sense in the OT. The second issue is after having called most of that “atonement” some people try to settle on the mechanism of atonement in a very narrow way, and one that I do not find to be biblical.

Penal Substitution

I want to address this model: Jesus is the penal substitute for my sins. As I mentioned, this model, which has some antecedents that go back to Anselm, was mainly promoted by some leaders in the Reformation. They held a legal notion of atonement that is foreign to the Temple language of atonement. For them, God is a Judge, for whom every infraction against his holiness demands a legal penalty, which, because God is so holy, is the legal penalty of death. In this view, our sins demanded our deaths; they were transferred over to the Son of God; and then God executed justice on Jesus by killing him. As a result, this model holds, we can have a right relationship with God. I understand that this model is supposed to show the grace of God: God is both the executioner and the victim. However, as a scholar who reads the NT through the lens

of the OT, my point is that the NT writers, and particularly Paul, would not have thought about atonement in terms of penal substitution.

Covenant Language Vs. Atonement Language

The first point is that in the OT there is a difference between the language of God offering a covenant relationship and God providing a means of atonement for sin. We must not overlook the language of covenant. We need to separate the two. When God offers a relationship to Abraham, God does not first cleanse him of sin. There is no judicial punishment for his sinfulness. God meets Abraham on his level and offers relationship. It is all about grace. God “cuts a covenant” with him. In Gen. 15, the sacrificial animals are cut in half and placed opposite each other; and God, represented by a smoking firepot, passing through the bloody pieces to seal his covenant with Abraham. Jesus, in the Eucharist refers to his blood as the blood of a new covenant. This is not atonement language. Then to keep his promises to Abraham, God later saves, rescues, ransoms, Abraham’s descendent from slavery in Egypt. This is not atonement language. Then, later God offers a covenant relationship to the rescued Hebrew slaves without any punishment of sin, or sacrifices, or cleansing. God lowers himself to their level to offer a relationship with him without precondition. It is all about grace.

This is important: What then made Abraham righteous in God’s sight? It was not some substitutionary sacrifice. We are told clearly in Gen. 15:6 that when Abraham believed God – or better, entrusted himself to God, God counted that as righteousness. This becomes a key point in Paul’s argument about how the Gentiles, the nations, are included. In Romans 3 and Galatians 3, Paul argues that those who are of the faith of Abraham, who entrust themselves to the God who raised Jesus from the dead, are children of Abraham, recipients of the promises. The main point to remember is that God’s offer of relationship is purely by grace and not based on first punishing sins or cleansing someone.

Atonement Language

The second point is that atonement language follows covenant language. Atonement language deals with our failure to be faithful to our relationship with God. It is about restoring our covenant relationship with God when it is damaged by our sin. The atonement language of the Temple system was symbolic. Sin is real, but it is not tangible. Sin breaks our rapport with God, but again, it is not material. The symbol system of the Temple was heuristic, educational; it graphically demonstrated the reality of sin. The Temple represented God dwelling in the midst of his people, but God did not literally dwell there. Sin symbolically polluted God’s dwelling place and threatened their relationship with God. So, that pollution, or rot, symbolically had to be cleansed, and that was done through blood because it is the strongest tangible symbol of life. Blood cleanses pollution. Life overcomes death. The person providing the animal did so as a gesture of wanting to be forgiven and restored. So, a sacrificial animal was killed for that lifeblood. But, the killing of the animal is not the main part. The animal was not a substitute being punished by death for the sinner. The important part of the ritual was taking the pure, lifeblood of an unblemished animal and wiping it on the altar to cleanse away the pollution. The ritual was symbolic of God’s mercy and grace.

Let me give you another example, that of the scapegoat on the Day of Atonement, which appears close to the concept of penal substitution. Apparently, the Israelites borrowed this ritual from

someone like the Hittites and changed it. The Hittites believed that a person could magically transfer the sins of a person onto a goat, drive that goat into the desert, and fool the offended god or goddess who went chasing after that goat. But, the Israelites did not believe that. They did not believe that sins were somehow material and could be transferred by magic onto another person. God is against magic. God cannot not be fooled. They adopted and changed this ritual symbolically to point to the grace of God.

In this sermon/teaching, I cannot go into all of the NT passages that speak about the death of Jesus and show how they are based on OT language and concepts, but I want to emphasize the symbolic nature of the language. I am not minimizing sin. Sin is real. Sin has consequences. But, God does not literally forget sins. God does not literally move our sins as far as the east is from the west. God does not literally cast our sins into the sea. God does not literally cover over our sins. God does not literally blot our sins out of the ledger. This language was meant to help people realize the reality and seriousness of sin, and, most of all, to illustrate the unfathomable grace of God.

In Isaiah 43, God is mad at Israel for not understanding this, and God says, “I, I myself, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake; your sins I do not remember.” (Isa. 43:25 Duke). God forgives for God’s sake; God’s character is merciful and graceful.

But, again, sin is seriously burdensome. The main term in the OT that gets translated by the verb “forgive” is *nasa*. It means to lift, to bear. Our sins weigh us down and God lifts them; God bears them. When Peter states in 1 Pet. 2:24 that Jesus bore our sins on the cross, he is not thinking some kind of magical manipulation of sins for penal substitution. He is using good OT language. [This also takes us into language that is borrowed from the Suffering Servant passages in Isaiah. That is another concept. Israel could see how the generation of those who suffered the Babylonian Exile bore the sins and punishment of many generations. Paul picks up on that language as well in 1 Cor. 15:3-4 and Rom. 5. But, I can cover the main concept but not every text.

I want to come back to some atonement language in the NT and point out how rich the language is that Paul borrows from the Temple system. For instance, in Rom. 3: 25, Paul calls Jesus the *hilastarion*. Some translators have “expiation” or “propitiation,” but I am convinced that Paul knew the Jewish sacrificial system. He is thinking of the Day of Atonement. The *hilastarion* in the Greek version of the OT was the lid of the ark of the covenant, call the mercy seat. It was the closest point symbolically connecting God to God’s people. It was where the lifeblood of the sin offering was applied on the Day of Atonement to rid the pollution of deliberate sin. That is Jesus. However, later in Rom 8:3, Paul shifts his language and refers to Jesus as the sin offering itself that provided the cleansing blood that was put on the mercy seat on the Day of Atonement. [Hamartia, can be translated as “sin” in some places, but was also the technical term for “sin offering” which is clearly what Paul means here.] To blend language from John and Paul: Jesus, who is the Life, Jesus both provides the perfect, pure, cleansing lifeblood of the sin offering and is the point of mediation between God and humanity, the mercy seat. That is wonderful language of grace.

Summary

Let me summarize the main points. The first simple point is that we need to preach the fullness of the work and ministry of Jesus, the fullness of his identity and roles. Second, when we distinguish between the language of covenant relationship and that of atonement, we see the biblical model that God offers relationship with himself as pure grace. He does not cleanse the person first. There is no judicial punishment. God, in humility condescends to offer himself in communion with us. When people entrust themselves to God in that relationship, that is considered righteousness. Third, when we do talk about the NT atonement language borrowed from the OT, we have to be careful and ask what it meant to a Jew of that time. When some people hear this pop-Christian model that everyone's sins have been transferred to Jesus, who is then executed to exact the price of justice, they do not hear the Good News of the grace of God. The bottom line of what I am saying is that all of this language of the NT that draws on the OT is about God's grace and mercy in Jesus. It is grace from the beginning to the end.