

Lesson 11: Why did Jesus have to die?

Memory Verse: We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. (Romans 6:4)

We have learned that in order to fix the human race God decided to come to earth as a human and live a sinless life, thus developing a perfect human character which he could then give to any human who wanted it. We know that God did this in the person of Jesus. We also know that Jesus died and that our hope of salvation is based on that death AND his resurrection.

But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection from the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.... And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. (1 Corinthians 15:12-14, 17)

The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! (Hebrews 9:13, 14)

These two passages make it clear that we can not remove sin from our characters without both the death and the resurrection of Jesus. The passage from Hebrews, from a book that links the Old Testament religion of the Jews to the New Testament belief in Christ, calls Jesus an “unblemished” offering to God. We recognize that Jesus' sinless life is what made him unblemished.

In our last lesson we read a text from 2 Corinthians that said God made Jesus to be sin for us. What happened when Jesus “drank the cup” he prayed to avoid in Gethsemane? God laid on him the sins of the whole world and those sins, not the crucifixion, took Jesus' human life in a matter of a few hours.

So how can humans last so long when their lives are full of sin? We can now see that God has made arrangements to miraculously sustain our lives despite the sin that would ordinarily kill us in short order. Each heartbeat, each breath, is a gift from a God who wants to save us if we will only let him. We should have died because of our sin, but Jesus died because of our sin instead. Thus he becomes our substitute.

It is common for people to speak of the blood of Jesus as if it represents his death. But here's what the Bible says about blood:

For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for ones life. (Leviticus 17:11)

The Hebrew word translated “life” in that verse is *nephesh*, which means “breath.” For the Jews the primary way to determine if someone was dead was to check for breathing. So the blood of Jesus represents his sinless life, not his death, which is how he gave his life. The New Testament makes much of this life/death part of God's plan to save us.

If we have been united with him in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be rendered powerless, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.

Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.

In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace. (Romans 6:5-14)

Christ's death and resurrection make it possible for God to replace our broken, defective characters, which are stained with sin and which lead to death, with the perfect and sinless character of Jesus. We are no longer stuck doing the things we used to do, when sin held us captive. We are now free to do the things Jesus did, things that lead to life.

Many Christians are tempted to make the atonement of Jesus primarily about forgiveness. It has become such a common theme that most modern English translations of the Bible read like the NIV, quoted below:

In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. (Hebrews 9:22)

The Greek word translated “forgiveness” there is *aphesis* which means “a sending away.” The King James translators did use “forgiveness” for this word six times, but nine times (including in the verse above) they used the word “remission.” Forgiving is part of God's character, as we saw in Exodus 34. Nothing needed to be done so God could forgive. But removing the sin that was bound up in the character of the human without destroying the human took something very costly, the life of the God-man Jesus.

Today we use the term “remission” when talking about cancer. If someone who had cancer gets cured and there is no sign of cancer in them, the doctors say they are “in remission.” This is an apt metaphor for the healing God made possible when he “gave his one and only son.”

Possible thought papers:

1. If salvation is only about forgiveness, how are we to start living a righteous life?
2. What evidence does the apostle John give us that Jesus didn't die of crucifixion?
3. The memory verse mentions baptism. How can baptism represent death and resurrection? Does that say anything about what kind of symbols should be used in the ceremony?