

“The Purpose of Christ’s Death – Part 1”

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Dr. Ritch Boerckel

Scriptural Foundation: 1 Peter 3:17-22, ESV

I am excited to talk about the suffering of Jesus and the purpose of Christ’s death in this study. This is the very center of the Christian faith. This is why the symbol of Christianity is the cross. It is an interesting symbol and it is a means of execution. It would be similar to a company choosing an electric chair as their symbol to promote their company. This would be interesting to choose an instrument of death, yet over 2,000 years of time that understanding of the cross has softened. It is gold plated. We put flowers around crosses, but in the end it is a means of very ugly, very painful execution. Yet, that is the very center of who we are and we glory in the cross. We will discuss this glory in the next two studies.

Suffering for Righteousness’ Sake

¹⁷ For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God’s will, than for doing evil.

¹⁸ For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, ¹⁹ in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, ²⁰ because they formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. ²¹ Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.

A little boy and his sister were singing their favorite Christmas carol in church the Sunday before Christmas. Near the end of "Silent Night" the little boy sang out the words, "Sleep in heavenly beans." His sister was so embarrassed. She shushed him, "No, it is not beans its 'peas'. It is 'sleep in heavenly peas!'" Children often miss the meaning of sacred truths. That is why God calls us as parents to instruct our children and correct them through His Word, but they are not the only ones who miss the meaning of sacred words; adults do as well. Our minds are as finite and flawed as little children. For this reason, we must study the Scriptures diligently and follow Paul’s counsel in 2 Timothy 2,

⁷ Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.

Christianity is a thinking person’s faith, but this is not rationalism for Paul says, "The Lord, spiritually, will give you insight, or understanding, in everything." It is important for us believers to know thinking is a godly activity. We do not assume God mystically makes His truth known to our minds and heart in some sort of epiphany. But, rather, through prayer and then careful study, meditation, and deep thought upon Scripture, God promises us He will give understanding in everything He has revealed to us.

In this study we begin a section of Scripture that is difficult to understand and it will require much thought. We will do right to pray over this passage and think deeply on it so we might glean from it all God intends for us and that we might be encouraged in the good news of the Gospel. We are planning to focus on just Verses 17 and 18 in this study, leaving the very debated and difficult Verses 19 through 22 for the next study.

I love 1 Peter 3:18! Every time I read it I feel so very, very small. There is so much mystery, so much wonder, and so much joy in God’s infinite wisdom and grace! This verse causes me to think deeply about the atoning work of Jesus. No doctrine is more practical, more profound, and more vital to the life of the Christian than the doctrine of Jesus’ atoning work on the cross.

As we enter the Christmas season I believe there is no better way to prepare to celebrate Christmas than by meditating on Jesus’ death. You may say, "Isn’t that for Easter, Pastor? Is that not what Easter is about?" Looking at Jesus’ life backwards then toward the beginning of His earthly start helps us to understand the whole, for the story of Jesus’ birth is told by the evangelists in the Gospels with Jesus’ death in full view. Jesus was born for the very purpose that He might die. That is the reason the Gospels tell us, in Matthew 1, the angel told Mary she is to name her baby Jesus,

“for He will save His people from their sins.” A Jewish person knows there is no salvation and no forgiveness of sin apart from the shedding of blood.

It is why old Simeon spoke of Jesus’ purpose to Mary, even when Jesus was eight days old, having entered the Temple with His parents. In Luke 2, Simeon told Mary Jesus, this little baby, would be come into the world and be the cause of the rise and fall of many and a hurt would come into her heart as a result of her baby’s life.

Jesus understood this, looking back upon His life, He would say to His disciples, in Mark 10,

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.”*

That was the very purpose of His birth and the very purpose of His life.

When we think of Jesus being born in Bethlehem, we should see the shadow of the cross falling upon the baby as He lies sweetly in the manger wrapped in swaddling cloth. If we want to understand the meaning of Christmas, we must get clear on the meaning of the cross. The Apostle Paul proclaimed the centrality of the priority of the cross when he wrote, in 1 Corinthians 1,

^{1:23} ...but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ^{2:2} For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

Yet, in spite of the New Testament emphasis upon Jesus’ cross, the volume is turned down today on the theme of Jesus’ cross. The modern church seems to hold the cross with not so much contempt as disregard. Attention, instead, is given to certain social issues, to attention to deeds of compassion, to solving the world’s problems, to individual emotional healing, and to mystical rituals. These all seem to trump the cross in the hearts of the day, but I desire to stand with Paul, the Apostles, and upon God’s Word and preach nothing other than Jesus crucified.

In our text, Verse 17 connects us to the context,

¹⁷ For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God’s will, than for doing evil.

Peter is writing to persecuted believers to encourage them in the faith. He has just encouraged them, in Verses 13 through 17, they are blessed if they suffer for doing right and exalting Jesus. Peter communicates two important truths about the Christians suffering. First, when we suffer for righteousness, it is God’s kind, wise, and good will for us. When we suffer is it right to consider God sovereign control over the affairs of everything which happens in our lives and in this world and His designed to bring about good through it. Secondly, he is saying God rewards those who entrust themselves to Him in the midst of this kind of suffering.

How do we know Verse 17 is true? How do we know it is God’s will for us to suffer for doing right? And, how do we know God will bless us and reward us when that happens? The answer is found in Verse 18 – we look to Jesus as our example. Christ Himself suffered for doing good, not for evil, and His suffering was designed in the eternal plan of God for Him to experience it. God, in His infinite and wise and sovereign plan, designed Jesus to enter this world for the very purpose of suffering for the sake of righteousness.

Jesus is the supreme example of one who suffered for doing what is good and being righteous. When Jesus voluntarily endured this suffering, what happened? Did His life fall apart when He fulfilled the Father’s plan for Him? Did He end up in nothingness? No, He was exalted through His resurrection; He was exalted through His ascension; He was exalted by being seated at the right hand of God the Father; and He will continue to be exalted at the end of the age when He returns in glory to establish Himself as King of kings and Lord of lords. Jesus is the Supreme Example if we want to know, when we are in the midst of suffering, “Is my suffering, when I suffer for righteousness, is it really according to God’s will?” We look to Jesus as our ultimate example of being a person who suffered as a result of being in God’s will. And, when we ask the question, “Will this end well for me?” we look to Jesus again as the ultimate example. Yes, absolutely yes, it will end in glory and great reward.

The point is there is assurance when we suffer for the will of God we will be blessed. Christ's exaltation proves this. If Jesus is our example, we should also expect our suffering for doing good will bring benefits, but not the same benefits of His suffering. His suffering brought the benefit of the redemption of mankind, but nonetheless there will be great reward. That is the main message Peter is driving home.

Once Peter sets Jesus' suffering and triumph before us as an example for us to follow, he cannot help himself but drive it deeper into the very meaning of the suffering of Jesus. He drives deeper by proclaiming Jesus as our Sin-Bearer who died for the purpose of bringing us to God. That is the idea Peter earlier presented in 1 Peter 2,

²⁴ He Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed.

Peter cannot get far from this central message, the core, of the Gospel. Peter rejoices in the suffering of Jesus, not only as an example, but in its achievement of taking us out of the arena of sin and into the arena of righteousness and now bringing us to God so our relationship with God can be restored. Peter focuses, in Verse 18, and our thoughts revolved around the atoning work of Jesus in His death. As I think with you regarding the atonement, I feel unequal to this task. My thoughts and words cannot do justice to the majesty of God's wise plan. My prayer is a little, tiny bit of light will shine through this dull window and into your hearts.

We are going to observe six key aspects regarding the death of Jesus. First, Jesus' death was unjust,

¹⁸ For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous...

If ever anyone endured truly unjust suffering, it is Jesus. He never once committed any sin. Peter has already made that point in 1 Peter 2,

²¹ For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: ²² *"Who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth"*¹

We do not have to ask Jesus' friends, "Of course, Peter is going to say that. He is one of His disciples." We do not have to ask Jesus' friends to be a witness regarding His complete innocence; we can go to His enemies as well. As we read the Gospel story of Jesus' death and burial, we read of Witness Number One: Pontius Pilate.

Pontius Pilate ultimately gave authority for Jesus to be crucified. He was no friend of Jesus. We remember the encounter between Jesus and Pilate in John 18. The Jewish leaders brought Jesus to Pilate with trumped up charges. Ironically, the Jewish leaders refused to enter Pilate's palace because the Passover was going to be the next day and they did not to cause themselves ceremonially unclean. Is that not ironic? How easy it is for a faith to become so centered upon external things, we completely miss the internal life of the whole thing. That is where the Pharisees were. They were concerned about being ceremonially unclean, all the while they were plotting the unjust crucifixion of the Son of God!

Pilate asked the, "What charges do you bring against this man?" He wanted to know. He was the governor and ruler and he has a responsibility to the state. The question left the religious leaders dumbfounded. They had no formal charge or evidence or witnesses to bring in defense of their claim Jesus is worthy of the death penalty. They stumbled over themselves saying, "If he were not guilty, we would not have brought him to you". Do you believe that satisfied Pilate's curiosity, "You say I should believe you? Without any witness and without any stated charge I am supposed to have that person crucified?" "That is right, because if he were not guilty, we would not have brought him to you."

Pilate then asked Jesus and in his interview of Jesus, not once, not twice, but three times, publically, Pilate is going to announce "I find no reason whatsoever to execute this man." In fact, at the very end, as a result of political pressure, Pilate was being squeezed to move in this direction, and he ultimately did, and he was so distraught over this. Here is this tough, Roman guy who is used to sending people to the death penalty, and we know that because two others were crucified next to Jesus that day, yet he was so distraught he took a bowl of water and publically washed his hands and said, "I am innocent of this man's blood!" He knew this man was innocent and this was his public declaration.

¹ Leviticus 11:44, 45; 19:2; 20:7

Pilate is not the only witness. We also have Judas the betrayer. Consider the sour scene in Matthew 27, right after Jesus was condemned to die. Judas came back to the Jewish leaders and he was filled with bitter remorse for his betrayal. He wanted to give back the thirty pieces of silver, which is remarkable. Here is a man whose whole life was enslaved to the love of money and now he has it and he is overcome by remorse at what he has just done when he recognized Jesus is condemned and will go the cross. He is wanting to, hopefully, some way give some comfort to his conscience. The religious leaders' response to him is interesting. Judas comes saying, "I have sinned in betraying innocent blood!" The betrayer is announcing Jesus' innocence. The Jewish leaders' response was very interesting. They simply said, "What is that to us? That is your problem."

This is interesting because they did not say, "He is not innocent!" They did not defend the guilt of Jesus before Judas. They did not say, "No, Judas, you have it all wrong. Let us talk about this because we believe you have missed the whole point. He is guilty." No, they said, "What is that to us that you have sinned against innocent blood? That is your problem, not ours." Judas threw the thirty pieces of silver on the floor and went out and hung himself.

Then there is the third witness, the criminal who hung next to Jesus on the cross. He began the day, with the other thief, mocking Jesus, ridiculing Him, cursing Him, but by the end of the day, after having seen the Son of Glory and how He acted and what He said from the cross, he recognized Jesus' innocence. In the mockings of the other, he called out to the other thief, "We are being punished justly, but this man has done nothing wrong!"

The last witness we will call to the stand is a Roman centurion. If you read Luke 23, you will meet this hardened Roman soldier who was an officer. He had seen and participated in numerous crucifixions. They did not soften his emotions whatsoever, but at the end of the day, the Centurion walked to Jesus lifeless body hanging on the cross and he said, "Surely this was a righteous man!" That is interesting is it not? God had the enemies of Jesus record the innocence of His Son so we might know this was unjust.

The text tells us,

¹⁸ For Christ also suffered once for sins...

Whose sins? It was not Jesus' sins. It was for your sins and for my sins.

What thou my Lord has suffered
Was all for sinner's gain
Mine, mine was the transgression
But Thine the deadly pain

Lo, here I fall, my Savior
Tis I deserve Thy place
Look on me with Thy favor
Thou save me with Thy grace²

The second aspect is: Jesus' death is necessary,

¹⁸ For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God...

Why is Jesus' death necessary? Why must it happen? It is because of the power of sin. Do you realize the power of sin to destroy our soul is inviolable? That is to say, there is nothing we can do about it; it is a sure consequence. Apart from Jesus' death there is no other solution to the power of our own sin to destroy our soul forever and ever and ever. No other remedy could bring us hope and that is why Christmas is filled with such hope because hope is born in Bethlehem.

Now, as a result of Jesus' death there is hope we might be reconciled to a Holy God and avoid His vengeful judgment against our sin. Our sin is so grievous in offense to an infinitely, holy and righteous God, there is certain retribution placed upon our life if we do not find a means to be free of it. God is not unrighteous so as to look past sin and treat it

² "O Sacred Head Now Wounded," Paul Gerhardt, 1607-1676.

casually, as though they were small things. Our problem is too severe for a small solution to suffice.

Do you believe if Jesus did not have to die, He would have and suffered under the cross not just the physical pain, but the pain of being separated from His Father, broken in fellowship? Some say, “Yes” to that question, “I believe He would. I believe Jesus died upon the cross to show how much He loved us. End of story; that is why He died, not as a Sin-bearer, but as a person who simply wanted to show us how much He loved us.” If Jesus had no necessary purpose in His death, His death would not have served as an example of love, but it would have served us as an example of lunacy.

Imagine a man who takes his family to the Niagara Falls to see that beautiful place. They get near the top of the falls as they can and suddenly the man turns to his wife and children and says, “I love you so much!” and he jumps over the rail into the falls and to his death. Do you look at that man and say, “Wow, that guy really loved his family!” Is that a response? No, you say, “That guy was crazy! That guy was the biggest fool!” That is not an example of love is there is no necessity underneath it.

The reason why the cross is a demonstration of God’s love for us is it was necessary in order for us to be saved, to be rescued, to be delivered out of death and into life. Our problem is acute.

A doctor says to his patient, “I am afraid I have bad news.” The patient asks, “How serious is it, doc?” When one hears those words from a physician, one gets rather sober and somber. God is our Physician who gives us the diagnosis in the clearest of terms. He says, “I have some bad news.” How serious is it? I feel fine.” Listen to the words of Jeremiah the prophet, in Jeremiah 30, as God says,

^{11b} ‘I will by no means leave you unpunished.’ ¹² “For thus says the LORD: ‘Your hurt is incurable, and your wound is grievous. ¹³ There is none to uphold your cause, no medicine for your wound, no healing for you.’”

Do you see what God is saying about the necessity of Jesus' death? There is no medicine for our wound and no healing for us. Our wound is grievous. It is fatal. We are going to die. That is the message. The consequences of our sin are deep and lasting, but we treat the wound of our soul as though it was not serious, and it is. Our hands are stained with the guilt of past sins and our spirit is corrupted so our heart itself is deceitful and desperately wicked. It is not, simply, we have the symptoms which strike against us and we must to mediate and find solutions, but at the very core of our being and the very core of life, by nature, we have an offended a holy God and we are condemned. As a result, we are alienated from God completely and cut off from Him in the most restrictive of senses. He did this in order to bring us to God.

We are not born in closeness to God in right relationship. In Isaiah 59, we read,

² ...but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.

How bad is it between us and God? We are dead to Him. We cannot communicate with Him in any meaningful way. It is so bad, He says He will not hear even one of our prayers.

In order to teach this truth of our desperate condition, I often take people to Romans 3,

¹² All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.

After reading that, I often ask the question: “Before we read that verse, if I were to ask, ‘Have you done any good in this life, what would you have said?’ ‘I would have said, “Yes, I believe I have done good in this life.”’ ‘Then why is there is such a big discrepancy upon what God’s Word says and what you think, because, on the one hand, here is what God’s Word says, “There is no one who does good. Not even one. On the other hand, you believe you have done good. Why is there such a discrepancy?”’ That is the question we must ask ourselves. Until we get tot the bottom of that issue we will not be able to move forward toward Christ.

The answer is: our standards for what is good are completely different than God’s.

Imagine I had some vegetables and fruit at home and they have been lying on the shelf for weeks and months and they have grown rancid, soft, stinky, and smelly. I take them and put them in a bucket and I go out to the farm and I throw it out to the pigs. What are they going to do? They are going to love it. They are going to eat it up. This is good stuff! I ask them, in pig-language, "Is that good?" "Yes, it is great! Give us some more."

Later that afternoon you come over and I still have some of that left and I say, "It is snack time," and I put it in front of you. Are you going to eat it? No way. Why? It is horrible and you are not going to eat that stuff. It is rancid and smelly. Why do the pigs love it but you do not? It is because your standards are different. Why do we believe we have done good when God says, "No one has done good, not even one." We must come to the point of understanding the condition of our soul. The cross of Christmas will mean nothing until we do.

I want to begin the third point, and I will finish it in the next study: Jesus' death is vicarious. That means He took our place as a substitutionary,

¹⁸ For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous...

Who is the righteous? It is Jesus, the Innocent One. Who are the unrighteous? You are and I am. One took the place of another. One acted so another would benefit. One suffered so another might have life and might be free of suffering.

The sin of God's people was taken from us and He bore our sins in His body upon the tree.³ Is that not remarkable! When God convinces a man or a woman of the seriousness of the condition of their soul, that their wound is incurable and there is no medicine and no hope of healing, and then they hear this message that is where they come to believe Jesus really is the means, the medicine, and the solution.

Have you trusted in Jesus Christ as your Savior? Do you recognize the plight of your life is so very, very grave apart from Christ? Then, o you realize the absolute sufficiency of Jesus to provide a medicine which infuses, not just a cure to get you back a modicum of health, life so you are able to mount up with wings like eagles, to run and not be weary, to walk and never faint.⁴ That is the offer of the Gospel for us, that we would enjoy God and we would be brought to the living and true God. If you have, and if that has happened, what else is there to live for but to live it out, to share it, and to proclaim it?

Go tell it on the mountains
Over the hills and everywhere
Go tell it on the mountains
That Jesus Christ is born⁵

³ 1 Peter 2:24

⁴ Isaiah 40:31b

⁵ "Go Tell It On The Mountain," American Folk Hymn, adapted by John W. Work, 1940.