

“Why Did Jesus Have to Die?”

a sermon by

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Text: “He sternly ordered and commanded them not to tell anyone, saying, ‘The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised’” (Luke 9:21-22).

On Wednesday this past week Mel Gibson’s movie, “The Passion of Christ,” opened in theaters across the country creating what the *Washington Post* has called the “most talked about movie event in America.” Reactions to this movie have been varied. Some people, particularly Roman Catholics and evangelicals, have seen it as a vivid and moving portrayal of the suffering and death of Christ. Others have objected that the film is too violent and that it fails to do justice to the other aspects of Jesus’ life: his teachings, his miracles, and his remarkable way of relating

to those to whom he came in contact. Still others have cautioned us about falling victim to the hype and enthusiasm over this film, reminding us that the Protestant Reformers of the 16th Century removed from the sanctuaries paintings and statues, and even replaced the Catholic crucifixes, with their graphic descriptions of the bloody body of the crucified Christ, with empty crosses that signified the resurrected Christ.

But whether a person likes or doesn't like this movie, or even chooses not to see it, there is one central point that is indisputable. At the heart of our faith is the conviction that the death of Jesus is related to our salvation.

I.

That is certainly true in Luke's gospel. Although Luke does not place this "passion prediction" of Jesus in Caesarea Philippi, he nonetheless follows Mark's gospel in its insistence that the death of Jesus was a necessity. Immediately after Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ, Jesus replies by saying, "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised"(Luke 9: 21-22).

II.

Through the centuries the church has understood the death of Christ in a number of ways. For some it was a victory over sin, death, and the forces of evil. For others Jesus' death was an "atonement" for our sins. He paid the price for our sins. For Anselm and Calvin the heart of salvation is to be found in the death of Christ, a death that brought our salvation. In all of these so called "theories of atonement" there is one thread that runs through them, namely, that Jesus took upon himself our sins, and that by his death he brought about for us something that we could not do for ourselves. In his death the words of the prophet Isaiah were fulfilled: "He was wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities, and on him are the stripes by which we are all healed" (Isaiah 53:5).

One of the most famous and beloved hymns of the church is the hymn "Amazing Grace," which was written by John Newton in the 18th Century. In many ways the life of John Newton paralleled the words of the hymn he wrote. His mother died while Newton was a boy. Raised by his father, he soon found his way to the life of a sailor. In his later life John Newton became a part of the ruthless slave trade from Western Africa to Europe. He was a cruel and crude captain of a slave ship when something happened to him that changed his life. The faith of his mother, which he had so strongly resisted, became his faith as he experienced God's grace while in the middle of a severe storm. John Newton, the slave trader, became one of the most outspoken opponents of slavery. He was later ordained a priest in the Church of England and became one of the most influential ministers in all of England.

On his tombstone John Newton asked that the following words be placed: "John Newton, clerk, once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa, was, by the rich mercy of our

Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the faith he had long laboured to destroy.”

III.

Then, too, one of the things that makes the cross so powerful is voluntary nature of Jesus’ death. When Jesus went from Gethsemane to Calvary, he did something that no one could require of him. To the contrary, he was taking on himself something that no one could demand of him.

That was the nub and essence of the spirit of Jesus. In John’s gospel Jesus says, “For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down and I have power to take it up again” (John 10:17-18).

That is the extraordinary beauty of what Christ has done for us. He always went beyond the expected. “Whosoever compels you to go one mile,” says Jesus, “go with him two”--that is his philosophy in a nutshell. Jesus always went beyond what was required of him. “If you love those, who love you,” he asked, “What reward do you have? Even the gentiles do this.” Jesus went on to say, “Love your enemies”--that is something beyond what Moses taught.

That is what Jesus was doing in that last week of his life. He was voluntarily taking on himself what no one possibly could have demanded.

That is true of every great person who has ever lived. The mark of real greatness is something that comes from within. Over the past several weeks I have watched with interest the special on Public Broadcast System “In Search of Shakespeare.” One of the things that struck me about Shakespeare was his great courage. He used the art of the theater to address some of the most important issues of his day. In his great play, “King Lear,” which was performed before James I, Shakespeare describes the role of the poet:

“The weight of these sad times we must obey.
Speak what we feel and not what we think
We ought to say.”

That is true not only of great artists, but of great public servants. When Abraham Lincoln was once warned by one of his advisors against making a certain speech against slavery, Lincoln replied by saying, “If I am to go down, then let me go down linked to the truth.”

That is an act of voluntary service and that is one of the reasons that Jesus had to die.

IV.

Then, too, we believe that Jesus had to die in order to secure our salvation. Whatever theory of atonement one subscribes to, there is one thing they all share in common; namely the conviction that Christ died for our sins and for our salvation.

Reinhold Niebuhr once observed that God's grace is experienced not only as forgiveness, but also as power. God's grace is forgiveness in the sense that God gives us a second chance. If anyone has ever been lost in the woods at night or on the sea in a fog in a small boat without a compass, and then help has come, that person ought to know what it feels like to be saved. If any person has been out of job for a long period of time and then suddenly employment returns, that person knows what it is like to be saved. If anyone has been under the power of an addiction and then somehow found a way out of that power, he or she knows salvation. St. Augustine once commented on the power of sin in his life: "The worst that I knew so well had more power over me than the better that I knew not." Who of us has not failed in some area of our life only to discover God's grace to forgive us and to give us a second chance?

But grace is not only forgiveness; it is power as well. In his autobiography, *The Living of These Days*, Harry Emerson Fosdick relates a powerful experience he had as a young man. During the time he was a seminary student in New York, he became terribly depressed and one night in a fit of despair, he took a razor and slit his wrists. For almost a year he was hospitalized. It was, he said, the most frightening time of his life. His life was shattered and his future unsure. Fosdick said that he knew that unless he was able to find a power greater than himself, he knew he was lost. He found that power and out of that experience came his great book, *The Meaning of Prayer*.

That is salvation—forgiveness--a second chance, and power and that is why Jesus had to die.

V.

Then too, the death of Christ reminds us of something else; namely, that because Christ has died for us that we have a great compulsion to serve him. The Christian life begins when we acknowledge that we have been bought with a price. Call it personal Christianity--call it what you will, but when something has been done for us that we cannot do for ourselves, we realize that we can never pay back the debt. Our lives are no longer our own. We have been bought with a price.

Sometimes there is great injustice in life, but that is not the major element of life. Sometimes life is very rewarding, but that too is not the major element. The major element of life is when we feel some beauty, goodness, love, and truth poured out on us by the sacrifice of others beyond our own merit and deserving. Parents and martyrs, seers, prophets and friends put us under an obligation we can never pay. So at last we stand before the cross of Christ and see that it is not solitary and unique. It is the symbol of one of the most towering facts in life, the realm of grace, the sacrificial gifts bought and paid for by those who did what we had no right to ask.

Now compulsion is a part of every life. One way or another life coerces us and none of us can escape the word “must.” So it is with all the great artists and musicians. Why did Beethoven and Mozart and Bach compose music? Why did Michelangelo and Rembrandt paint? No one made them. But they had a need inside them that only their art could fulfill.

So Paul said, “I must see Rome.” No one made him take that trip that ended in his death.

That is what the death of Christ means to us. We are not our own. We are bought with a price. That is something that the saints of all ages have seen:

“Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.”