

May 13, 2012

Living Out The Gospel In Real Life

Dying to Gather the Children of God

John 11:45 – 57

Therefore many of the Jews who came to Mary, and saw what He had done, believed in Him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them the things which Jesus had done. John 11:45-46 These people had just witnessed the most stunning event in their lives – a man dead for four days suddenly comes back to life. And you might think that there would be no question in anyone's mind that the man who made this happen was truly the Son of God. Who else could do this? But notice the two different reactions: on the one hand there were many who saw what Jesus did and believed in Him – but on the other hand, there were some who saw the very same thing and didn't believe. Now John doesn't specifically say that they didn't believe – but his wording leaves no doubt that their report to the Pharisees was not because they became believers.

Some people believe that all it takes for someone to believe in Jesus is for them to witness a miracle. But John makes it clear that miracles are not the determining factor. Miracles attest to the truth of the message – but they are not the message. Pharaoh saw the miracles worked through Moses and yet he hardened his heart time after time, until one of the biggest miracles drowned his whole army. In Luke 16 Jesus told His disciples the story of the rich man and a poor man, coincidentally named Lazarus. And when Lazarus died, he was carried away to Abraham's bosom – and when the rich man died he went to a place of torment in Hades. And when the rich man saw what an awful place he was in, he pleaded with Abraham to send Lazarus back to warn his brothers about what was awaiting them if nothing changed. *'Then I beg you, father, that you send him to my father's house - for I have five brothers -in order that he may warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.'* *'But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.'* *But he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent !'* Luke 16:29-30

In other words, the rich man put more faith in the persuading power of miracles than in the word of God. But Abraham set him straight: *'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.'* Luke 16:31 Miracles—signs—do not produce belief; they do not produce faith. If anything, miracles are **anti-belief**, working against belief. Jumping ahead in John just a bit in chapter 12, John says this: *'But though He had performed so many signs before them, yet they were not believing in Him.'* John 12:37 And then John says: *"so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: Lord, who has believed what he heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said, "He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them."* John 12:38-40 The Jewish authorities, the Pharisees, were **blinded** by the miracles Jesus did. The miracles didn't open their eyes – they blinded them.

In many ways, a miracle only confirms what someone already believes. The miracles that Jesus did only confirmed to the Pharisees that He was of the devil, while the same miracles confirmed to His disciples that He was the Son of God. *Therefore the chief priests and the Pharisees convened a council, and were saying, "What are we doing? For this man is performing many signs. If we let Him go on like this, all men will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation."* John 11:47-48 The fact that a man four-days-dead was now living and breathing and walking around Jerusalem wasn't even a major consideration here – but only to the extent that his existence posed a threat to the Pharisee's control. You see they acknowledged that Jesus performed many signs – but seeing the signs did not lead them to the right conclusions – namely that here was the Son of God – the long-awaited Messiah – the Savior. Instead the signs, the miracles for them pointed in the exact opposite direction. *'If we let this guy go on, we are going to lose everything'.* Their two biggest fears were losing their place and losing their nation.

And you might ask, 'How would they lose their nation?' And the answer is that now there is a growing sense among the Jews that Jesus could be the long-awaited King of Israel come to deliver His people. And if enough people believe this, then that would spark a Zionist frenzy that would spark a rebellion against Rome and then the Romans would come in and crush them like bugs. So Jesus isn't just some minor rabble-rousing, itinerant preacher who needs a good stoning – He has become a threat to the very existence of the nation of Israel. The Romans would come in and take their nation away.

And not only their nation, but notice their chief concern: '*...the Romans will come and take away...our place.*' The Pharisees' place was their position of authority in Palestine. They were afraid of losing their jobs – and people get crazy when you mess with their pocketbooks. But Caiaphas, the high priest comes up with a solution – and it is a solution that has some interesting and significant dimensions: *But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all, nor do you take into account that it is better for you that one man die for the people, and that the whole nation not perish."* John 11:49-50 From his point of view it made perfect sense: Kill one man – save the nation – and our jobs. And evidently the rest of the Sanhedrin agreed with him: *So from that day on they planned together to kill Him.* John 11:53 Up to now they had been trying to trap Him into saying something with which they could discredit Him in the eyes of everyone. Now their bloodlust is up and they want to kill Him. I'm not sure how they thought they could kill a man who had just demonstrated He could raise the dead, but no one ever said that prejudice and animosity are necessarily coherent states of mind.

And just for a moment we'll skip John's commentary in verses 51 and 52 on the significance of what Caiaphas said, and see how this story plays out to the end of the chapter: *Therefore Jesus no longer continued to walk publicly among the Jews, but went away from there to the country near the wilderness, into a city called Ephraim; and there He stayed with the disciples.* John 11:54 This was the end of Jesus' public ministry and He leaves because it was not yet time for Him to die. The time was not far off – but the perfect spotless Lamb of God was going to be put to death during the Passover and not before. And then John sets the scene for us: *Now the Passover of the Jews was near, and many went up to Jerusalem out of the country before the Passover to purify themselves. So they were seeking for Jesus, and were saying to one another as they stood in the temple, "What do you think; that He will not come to the feast at all?"* John 11:55-56

The reason some came to Jerusalem early was to make themselves eligible to participate in the coming Passover. You couldn't eat the Passover lamb if you were defiled and there were many causes of ceremonial defilement – like if you touched a dead animal or a dead person, or if you recently gave birth, or had contact with a Gentile and many others. And the nature of the defilement dictated the length of time and the sacrifices necessary to become ceremonially clean. So it sounds like a lot of Jews needed to get an early start on this. And as they came they were wondering if this guy who had shown up at the last two Passovers was going to be at this one. They were no doubt thinking that it had been pretty exciting when He had been there before, and perhaps they were looking forward to another confrontation of Jesus with the religious leaders.

And for their part, those religious leaders were looking for Him too, but they didn't want to simply confront Him anymore: *Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that if anyone knew where He was, he was to report it, so that they might seize Him.* John 11:57 Crowds were swelling in Jerusalem, people were talking about what Jesus had done – people were looking for Jesus – the atmosphere was highly charged. This was like dry kindling waiting for the match of messianic fervor to land and the authorities knew it. They would have preferred no doubt to kill Jesus before the festivities began so they could celebrate the Passover without any distractions. And the irony of that was simply lost on them.

But the main point of this text is the solution of Caiaphas and John's explanation of that solution. Caiaphas may have thought he was very clever to propose that they kill one man and save a nation. But what does John say about this? *Now he did not say this on his own initiative, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but in order that He might also gather together into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.* John 11:51-52 There are at least three significant truths in this text we need to understand. These are truths that will give you strength in difficult times; they will offer hope and comfort for you in the light of your own sin; they will give you great confidence and trust in the promises of God; they will give you joy in the knowledge of God's personal and particular love for you.

The first truth is that God is sovereign. He did not just turn this evil into good, but He was in it from the beginning. Caiaphas' thinking was that he thought up a solution to the problem. John's thinking was that God gave him a prophesy. In other words, God brought the solution to mind. At one level, these are Caiaphas' words with Caiaphas' meaning poured into them. At another level these are God's words, with God's meaning. Remember, these are the words that sealed Jesus' fate – these are the words that ultimately sent Him to the cross. Caiaphas wanted Jesus dead and out of the way. God wanted Jesus crucified, dead, buried and resurrected and reigning forever, and so He gave Caiaphas those words. Caiaphas was prophesying – '*...better that one man should die for the nation*'. And God was saying '*...better that one man should die for the nation, and not just for the nation, but for all the children of God*'.

Jesus' death was not a tragic set of circumstances which God managed to somehow turn into good for us. He planned it from the beginning. The greatest sin in history was brought about by the hand and plan of God. Now before you get all excited and agitated at me, turn to Acts 4 and read with me verses 27 and 28: *"For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur."* Acts 4:27-28 Here the young church in Jerusalem was praying in the face of threats from the Jewish religious leaders over the healing of a lame man – and their conscious realization was that the death of Jesus was no accident but was effected by the hand and plan of God Himself.

This was no accidental evil that God had to somehow change into good. It was rather a loving arrangement of events that God had planned for our good from the start. He brought it about – He unleashed it – this word of prophecy finally tracked Him down in the garden of Gethesemane and put Him in shackles, brought Him before Pilate, turned Him over to the Romans for a brutal beating, and nailed Him to the cross. This was the word of God – 'It is better that Jesus die...' This was the fulfillment of an earlier prophecy in Isaiah: *'But the Lord was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief...'* Isaiah 53:10

The second truth is that Jesus died so that I don't have to. Substitution is at the heart of the Christian faith. Caiaphas said: *'...it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.'* And that was a prophecy. Caiaphas meant: Let's substitute Jesus so the Romans won't kill us. We kill Jesus and save ourselves. But God meant: I will kill My Son so I don't have to kill you. God substitutes Jesus for the sinners. And I know that sounds shocking put that way – but those are not just my words. Listen again to Isaiah: *Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities* Isaiah 53:4-5 God struck Him – God afflicted Him – God crushed Him. This is the heart of our faith – God substituted Jesus for us. What hope, what comfort for sinners! That God would sacrifice His own Son so that we might live and not die.

Because substitution, more accurately, **penal substitutionary atonement**, is at the heart of the Christian faith, it is no wonder that it has come under fire throughout church history, but never more so than in this day. There are more and more pastors and authors every day that are loudly denying that Christ endured the cross to satisfy the wrath of God against sin. These people are not denying that Jesus died on a cross. Nor are they suggesting that the gospel can exist apart from what Jesus did on behalf of sinners in His life, death, and resurrection. What they are denying, with ever-increasing frequency and fervency, is that in His death he was a substitute for sinners, personally bearing and absorbing in Himself the punishment demanded by our transgressions. What they are denying is that He endured the wrath of God and satisfied the demands of divine justice on behalf of those for whom He suffered.

Some have gone so far as to call this doctrine 'cosmic child abuse'. The phrase was first coined by Giles Fraser in 2007, a writer for the London Guardian, regarding comments by the Very Reverend Dr. Jeffrey Philip Hywel, who, incidentally is also the first person to have openly been in a same-sex relationship to be nominated as a Church of England bishop. Philip Hywel said: *What sort of God was this, getting so angry with the world and the people he created, and then, to calm himself down, demanding the blood of his own Son? And anyway, why should God forgive us through punishing somebody else? It was worse than illogical, it was insane. It made God sound like a psychopath. If any human being behaved like this we'd say they were a monster.* And Giles Fraser, priest-in-charge at St Mary's Newington in south London commenting on this said: *For, once again, what [John] has been saying is nothing other than a truth known by most people in the pews: that the idea of God murdering his son for the salvation of the world is barbaric and morally indefensible. It turns Christianity into "cosmic child abuse".*

But I want you to see that the Bible actually teaches that there was a substitution that took place on the cross, that the Father poured out His anger on the Son, as if guilty of our sins. The Scriptures speak of this in a number of places. 2 Corinthians 5:22 makes this very clear: *"He made Him who knew no sin, to become sin on our behalf that we could become the righteousness of God in Him."* Paul talks about a certificate of debt in Colossians: *When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.* Colossians 2:13-14 There are decrees against us. We owe God perfect obedience. We violate that. Now we stand in His debt and He must be paid. That's just another way of saying justice is due. He took the certificate of debt that amounted to decrees against us of those crimes that describe the rebellion against the Father, and He took that and nailed that in Jesus to the cross. He is our substitute. And that ought to set our hearts rejoicing. As one hymn puts it: ***'You bore the wrath reserved for me – now all I know is grace!'***

The third truth expressed here in this text is that **dying is the means for the spread of the gospel**. Caiaphas *'...prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but in order that He might also gather together into one the children of God who are scattered abroad*. When Jesus died, one of the designs of His death—one of the particular purposes—was to gather His children. It wasn't simply providing a way for all people to be saved. It is that. But it is more than that. The cross of Christ is the power and plan of God to overcome the rebellion of His people, scattered throughout every tribe and nation and tongue and people, and bring them to faith – to gather the children of God. Christ died not only to offer the world salvation—“*God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life*” John 3:16. But he did more. He died to overcome the rebellion of the elect children of God and gather them victoriously to Himself. **Dying was not a just a consequence of Jesus' obedience and mission – it was the central strategy of His mission.**

Dying is the means for the spread of the gospel. We don't have enough time to detail all the examples of this, but from the beginning Christians recognized what in this century Pastor Josef Tson of Romania said to his torturers in the 1980's. When Joseph Tson was arrested by the secret police for publishing a sermon calling for the churches to refuse to submit to the Communist government's demand for control over their ministries and told that he must renounce his sermon, he replied, "No, sir! I won't do that!" The official, surprised that anyone would respond so forcefully to the secret police, said, "Aren't you aware that I can use force against you?" "Sir, let me explain that to you," Ton said. **"You see, your supreme weapon is killing. My supreme weapon is dying.** . . . You know that my sermons are spread all over the country on tapes. When you kill me, I only sprinkle them with my blood. They will speak 10 times louder after that, because everybody will say, 'That preacher meant it because he sealed it with his blood.' So go on, sir, kill me. **When you kill me, I win the supreme victory.**"

You may have heard the phrase: **'The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church'**. In fact, the phrase, itself, is a paraphrase of a statement made by an early church leader called Tertullian in 197 A.D. in a book he entitled **The Apology**. In it, Tertullian writes to the Roman governor of his province, refuting various false charges being made against Christians and the Christian faith, arguing that the followers of Christ were loyal subjects of the empire, and thus, should not be persecuted. At any rate, Tertullian observes, the persecution was failing to destroy Christianity. He writes, **"kill us, torture us, condemn us, grind us to dust; your injustice is the proof that we are innocent. Therefore God suffers (allows) that we thus suffer....The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed."**

In Colossians, Paul gives us some remarkable insight into this principle: *And you, that were formerly alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now has He reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unproveable in His sight: If you continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which you have heard, and which was preached to every creature which is under heaven; of which I Paul am made a minister; who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is lacking of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for His body's sake, which is the church'* Colossians 1:21-24

In other words, what the sufferings of Christ were lacking for the goal of bringing life to the nations, the same kind of sufferings of the saints, as they proclaim the gospel, are sufficient to fulfill. It is not as though the sacrificial death of Christ was insufficient to accomplish new life, and that the ministers of the gospel have to add their own sacrificial deaths to the purchasing power of Christ's redemptive work. It would be blasphemous even to consider such a possibility. But Paul is teaching us that, just as Christ's death was necessary and sufficient to **accomplish** redemption; so the dying of his witnesses is necessary and sufficient to carry out to the nations the **application** of that substitutionary, life-giving accomplishment of Christ. **In other words, Christ's death was for propitiation; the death of His saints is for propogation.**

Christ **had** to suffer in order to purchase our eternal life; and now we as his witnesses **have** to suffer in order to spread the effects of that fully-accomplished redemption. Without suffering and dying, the great effects of Christ's great success will never be fully realized. We are graced with the ministry of a **necessary**, bloody witness to the nations, so that all of God's children, from every people, tribe, tongue, and nation, might be gathered together to God. In 1839 James Harris and John Williams from the London Missionary Society landed on the island of Erromanga and were killed and eaten within minutes after going ashore. Forty-eight years later, John Paton wrote: **'Thus were the New Hebrides baptized with the blood of martyrs; and Christ thereby told the whole Christian world that He claimed these islands as His own'**.

And you might be thinking at this point: 'What have I gotten myself into here?' This isn't what I signed up for. But if you have embraced the gospel –if you call yourself a follower of Christ – this is exactly what you signed up for. Although every saint of God will not be killed by evil men for the sake of the gospel, Jesus calls us to join Him on the Calvary road, to deny ourselves, to take up our cross daily, to hate our lives in this world, and to fall into the ground like a seed and die, that others might live. It is a profoundly other-centered view that the gospel promotes. Yes Jesus died for me – so that I might in turn spend my life dying for others so that He might gather into one all His children who are scattered abroad.

How do these truths help us in our walk? First of all we can be strong and confident in tough times and tragedy knowing that God is not simply reacting to bad events and calamities – He is in it from the beginning having planned it for your good and His glory. We can know that our suffering is not in vain and that the very pain that may dishearten and discourage us is the road to triumph and victory – even when we cannot see it.

Secondly, we can take heart and not be overcome by our ongoing sinfulness because at the heart of faith stands our substitute. When Satan and your own conscience condemn you, when you feel like sin on a stick, nothing will have more power to resurrect your faith this truth – God condemned your sin in His Son. And in that truth we can seek His forgiveness and restoration and new life.

Finally, we can encourage our hearts that it is in dying we win. It will give us an unshakeable confidence in the global purpose of God to gather into one all His people, wherever they live, and nothing can thwart that purpose. The truth that He gave His only Son to die for you, not only means that God loves you personally, individually, intimately, but that this love is an open invitation to all who will believe in Him. This should fill us with gospel boldness to not consider our lives of any account but for the sake of spreading this joy to more and more people.

Our great God and loving Father,

My we never doubt Your sovereignty, even in the most painful times and in the darkest places. Grant us the grace to trust that You are good in all Your works and in all Your ways, and that our suffering is not in vain. How we thank You for Your plan and purpose to send Your Son to die in our place so that we might live. When our conscience and the devil rise up to overwhelm us with condemnation, let the truth that You condemn our sin in Your Son grant us bold hearts to lay hold of Your blood-washed promises and find forgiveness and cleansing at the cross. Give us the unshakeable confidence that it is in dying that we win. Let these truths cause our hearts to delight in You through Jesus Christ and spread His joy through the gospel to all people we pray in the precious and powerful name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.