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WHY JESUS' DEATH WAS FITTING

Hebrews 2:10

By

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Hebrews Lesson 6

Why Jesus' Death Was Fitting Hebrews 2:10

Although there are many that oppose capital punishment, when a notoriously evil person, such as a terrorist or mass murderer, dies, most of us would say, "It was fitting that he die." After all, he was responsible for the deaths of many innocent people. Capital punishment serves justice and warns those who may consider committing a similar crime that they will be executed. And so we can rightly say, "It was fitting for that despicable man to die."

But we would be shocked if someone whose father had died of natural causes said, "It was fitting for him to die." Or, consider a good man who never did anything to hurt others. To the contrary, he did many good deeds to help those in need, even at great personal cost. He always took kind interest in those whom society rejected. He had a special love for children. He labored to the point of exhaustion in serving others. If *this* kind of man were executed, how could anyone say, "It was fitting that he die?"

But that is precisely what the author of Hebrews says about the death of Jesus Christ. He says that it was fitting for God to put His own Son to death (2:10). This verse must have jarred his Jewish Christian readers! They were struggling with the offense of the cross. Although they had believed in Jesus, they were being tempted by unbelieving Jews who said, "How could Jesus be the Messiah if He died? Our Messiah will conquer all our enemies, not die. Your Messiah didn't die a heroic death or even a normal death. Rather, He died as a common criminal, in the most shameful death imaginable, on a Roman cross! You want us to believe that this Man is our Savior? You've got to be kidding!"

So the author is showing why Jesus' death did not disqualify Him as Messiah and Savior. It did not mean that He was inferior to the angels, who do not die. In fact, Jesus' death was God's very means not only to glorify Jesus, but also to bring many sons to glory. It was part of God's eternal plan. So the author wants to remove the offense of the cross for his readers so that they will not

be ashamed to proclaim it as the very power and wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:23-24) and to rejoice in it. Our text shows that...

It was fitting for Jesus to die in order to effect our salvation in line with God's eternal plan and His perfect attributes.

Before I started studying this passage, I had planned to cover verses 10-18 in one message. After I dug into it, I shortened it to verses 10-13. But further study made me think, "There's more than enough in verse 10 alone for one message!" The author gives us five reasons why it was fitting for Jesus to die. I hope to deepen our understanding of the glory of the cross of Christ.

1. Jesus' death was fitting because it works for God's glory in accord with His eternal purpose.

The author could have just referred to God as God. Why does he here add, "for whom are all things, and through whom are all things"? Leon Morris explains, "The words show that the sufferings of Jesus did not take place by chance. They have their place in God's great eternal purpose" (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank Gaebelin [Zondervan], 12:26). The cross did not thwart God's plan; it fulfilled it.

Peter emphasized this same truth in his sermon on the Day of Pentecost: "This Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death" (Acts 2:23). God's foreknowledge does not mean simply that God knew in advance what wicked men would do, and passively endorsed their behavior as His plan. Rather, in His eternal purpose God the Father determined to put His Son to death, and yet He is not responsible for the sin of those that did the horrible deed.

This truth is important enough that Luke saw fit to repeat it again in Acts 4:27-28, where in response to the threat of persecution, the early church prayed, "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." The cross did not catch God or Jesus off guard. To the contrary, it was the very reason that He came to earth. In John 12:27 He said, "Now My soul has become

troubled; and what shall I say, 'Father, save Me from this hour'? But for this purpose I came to this hour."

When I say that the cross works for God's glory, I mean that it displays the splendor and majesty of God's perfect attributes more than anything else in the universe. Glory is a somewhat elusive word to define. The Hebrew word has a root meaning of "heaviness," and thus of inherent worth or excellence. In the Bible, God's glory is often portrayed by a bright light, the *Shekinah*. Thus His glory is the outward, visible manifestation of His inward excellence and infinite worth.

Jonathan Edwards, in his treatise, "The End for Which God Created the World," gives a four-fold definition of glory (in John Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory* [Crossway Books], pp. 231-239). First, it denotes a person's internal excellence or greatness. Second, it refers to the exhibition of the internal glory, often seen as brightness in the case of God. Third, God's glory is the honor that we, as creatures, accord Him because He has imparted a knowledge of His excellence to us. Fourth, God's glory is the praise that we give Him. The third point emphasizes our *perception* of God's excellence, whereas this point emphasizes our *proclaiming* it.

When the author says that all things are *for* God and *through* God, he means that *God is the first and final cause of all that is* (see Piper, p. 184). Colossians 1:16 proclaims of Christ, "For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him." In Romans 11:36, Paul exults, "For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen." (See also, Proverbs 16:4.)

While we must never say that God is the author of evil (1 John 1:5; Hab. 1:13), we must not fall into the error of saying that evil is somehow not under God's sovereign decree or that evil operates outside of God's sovereign control. As we have already seen, the worst evil ever committed in the history of the world, the crucifixion of Jesus, was predetermined by God, and yet those who did it are fully responsible. While our finite brains cannot reconcile these things logically, we must accept them as God's revealed truth.

Also, the phrases, “for whom are all things, and through whom are all things,” teach us that *God actively governs His creation*. Nothing can happen apart from His governance. He is working “all things after the counsel of His will” (Eph. 1:11). As the humbled King Nebuchadnezzar put it (Dan. 4:35), “He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, ‘What have You done?’”

A. W. Pink wrote, “To believe and affirm that ‘for Him are all things, and by Him are all things’ is simply owning that He is God—high above all, supreme over all, directing all. Anything short of this is, really, atheism” (*An Exposition of Hebrews* (electronic ed., 2000), Ephesians Four Group: Escondido, CA, p. 112).

And yet there are many Christians who deny that God is sovereign in salvation. They claim that to affirm this is to deny so-called “free will” and turn people into robots or puppets. Asahel Nettleton, a preacher whom God used in the Second Great Awakening to bring thousands to Christ, has a sermon on Psalm 97:1, “The Lord reigns, let the earth rejoice” (*Asahel Nettleton: Sermons from the Second Great Awakening* [International Outreach], pp.371-376). He raised the objection against the doctrine of election, that it robs people of free will. Then he said,

We will drop the doctrine of decrees—How is it then? Does God operate on the hearts of men, or does he not? If not, then we must not pray that he would do it.

No person can pray for himself without admitting that God can operate on his heart, and yet he be free.... [He then cites several verses that ask God to change our hearts.] But persons ought not to have prayed in this manner, if God could not answer their prayers without destroying their free agency. Ought we to pray that God would destroy our freedom?—that he would make us machines? This no one will pretend. How then can we pray that God would work in us that which is well pleasing in his sight, if as the objection supposes, he cannot operate on our hearts without destroying our freedom? ...

It is a doctrine clearly taught in the scriptures, that a change of heart is absolutely necessary to prepare sinners for heaven. "Except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." We are also taught that God is the author of this change. "Born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." But if God cannot operate on the hearts of men without destroying their freedom, then we ought not to pray that God would renew the hearts of sinners. Surely we ought not to pray that God would convert men into machines. However wicked mankind may be, we cannot pray that God would stop them in their career of sin, because he cannot do it without destroying their freedom. When sinners have proud stubborn and rebellious hearts, we cannot pray that God would make them humble, submissive and obedient; because he cannot do it without converting them into machines.

He goes on to ask the question, "does God govern all his creatures and all their actions? Does he govern the actions of wicked men and devils?" He shows that God not only does this—without removing the freedom of sinners and without becoming the author of evil—but that this is a desirable thing, and a cause for rejoicing. Because if God does not govern all creatures, then we are in a desperate situation.

Thus it was fitting for God to put Jesus to death, because it works for His glory in accord with His eternal purpose.

2. Jesus' death was fitting because it displays God's perfect attributes.

Have you ever heard someone say, "Why can't God just forgive sins without the cross? Why does He need to have blood shed in order to forgive? If someone wrongs me, I don't demand blood to be shed in order to forgive. Why can't God do that?"

The person saying that does not understand God's attributes. If God forgave sins without the shedding of blood, it would compromise His perfect righteousness and justice. Justice demands that the penalty for sin must be paid. On a human level, if a man broke into your parents' home and murdered your mother so that he could steal a few dollars for drug money, you would be outraged if

the judge said, "We all make mistakes. Let's just let it go." That is not justice! So Jesus' death was befitting to the character of God.

Consider this a bit further. It befit God's righteousness and holiness to put His Son on the cross. God never winks at sin or lowers His standard of holiness. He hates sin so much that every wicked thought must be judged. All of the sins of God's elect were put upon His Son, so that it could be said, "[God] made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:21). God's forgiveness never means that He just shrugs it off. Forgiveness means that Jesus bore God's awful wrath that I should have borne.

Also, the cross befit God's power (1 Cor. 1:24). The wrath of God is described as the lake of fire burns forever and ever without exhausting His wrath (Rev. 20:10-15). Jesus bore that wrath not on behalf of just one person, or a small group, but on behalf of the many sons that He would lead to glory! All of the sins of all of God's people for all time were piled on Jesus for those three hours of darkness on the cross, and yet, by God's strength, He endured!

Also, it befit God's wisdom (1 Cor. 1:24). How could God uphold His holiness and the just demands of the law, and yet be merciful to sinners? As Paul shows in Romans 3:21-26, the cross allows God to be both just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

But the cross also befit God's love and grace. "God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). F. F. Bruce (*Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], p. 43) wrote, "It is in the passion of our Lord that we see the very heart of God laid bare; nowhere is God more fully or more worthily revealed as God than when we see Him 'in Christ reconciling the world unto himself' (2 Cor. 5:19)." "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10). Charles Wesley wrote, "Amazing love, how can it be, that Thou my God shouldst die for me!"

Thus Jesus' death was fitting because it works for God's glory in accord with His eternal purpose, and because it upholds God's perfect attributes.

3. Jesus' death was fitting because it confirms His perfect humanity.

God perfected the author of our salvation through suffering. What does that mean? Wasn't Jesus already perfect? Yes, He is perfect in His divine attributes and He is perfect in His moral obedience. But to be qualified as the *Captain* or Leader of our salvation, He had to experience the suffering that humans go through as a result of the fall. To be our perfect *substitute*, He had to be without sin Himself, but He had to experience life as a human in this fallen world. To be our perfect *sympathetic high priest*, He had to be tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin (4:15).

I will deal with this more when we get to 2:18 and 4:15, but when we talk about Jesus being tempted, we must be careful not to project the pattern of our temptations onto Jesus. When we are tempted we are carried away and enticed by our own lusts (James 1:14). But Jesus did not have a sin nature as we do. In His humanity, He was like Adam and Eve *before* the fall. The trials that Jesus endured were real temptations in the sense that He experienced enticement from Satan to disobey God (Matt. 4:1-11). (The question of whether or not Jesus *could have sinned* will have to wait until chapter 4. My brief answer is, No!) But, He experientially learned obedience through the things that He suffered (Heb. 5:8). His suffering and death confirmed His perfect humanity and qualified Him as the Captain of our salvation.

4. Jesus' death was fitting because it confirms Him as the Captain of our salvation.

The word translated "author" (NASB) is used only four times in the New Testament, every time with regard to Jesus (Acts 3:15; 5:31; Heb. 12:2). It is one of more than 300 titles given to Jesus in Scripture (Pink, p. 112). It refers to one who "himself first takes part in that which he establishes" (B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], p. 49). Thus it can be translated "Captain," "Leader," or "Pioneer." Jesus blazed the trail of salvation before us (Bruce, p. 43). As the captain, He did not stay in the rear of the battle, giving orders to His troops on the front lines. Rather, He led the troops out in front, giving us the example to follow. Like Joshua leading Israel into the Promised Land, Jesus goes before His people, leading them to salvation.

John Owen (*An Exposition of Hebrews* [The National Foundation for Christian Education], 3:387-388) pointed out that Jesus went before us in three ways. He went before us *in obedience*, completely obeying and fulfilling God's holy law. He went before us *in suffering*, leaving us an example to follow in His steps (1 Pet. 2:21). And, He went before us *into glory*. Through His resurrection He has shown us that death is a defeated foe. Because He went through suffering into glory, He will take His people through the same course. He is leading many sons to glory.

5. Jesus' death was fitting because it results in God's bringing many sons to glory.

"Many" emphasizes the great number of the redeemed. Critics of the doctrine of election falsely accuse those who hold to it of believing that only a "select few" will be saved. But the Bible says no such thing! Charles Spurgeon and B. B. Warfield, who both vigorously defended the doctrine of election, also believed that the number of the saved will be greater than the number of the damned (see *C. H. Spurgeon Autobiography* [Banner of Truth], 1:171; and B. B. Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies* [P & R], pp. 334-350). Jonathan Edwards wrote, "*As much fruit is the glory of the seed, so is the multitude of redeemed ones, which should spring from his death, his glory*" (in Piper, p. 236, italics in original).

Jesus prayed that we might be with Him to see His glory (John 17:24). Paul said, "When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory" (Col. 3:4). What does it mean to be brought to glory? No one can say, this side of heaven. It means, at the very least, that we will have glorious resurrection bodies, free from sin, sickness, infirmities, and death. It means that we will have a glorious purpose, to be with Christ and to praise and serve Him throughout eternity. "We will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is" (1 John 3:3).

We can be assured that the Father will succeed in bringing many sons to glory, because it is *His* work that gets us there. The word "bring" is used in Luke 10:34 of the Good Samaritan, who brought the wounded man to an inn and took care of him. The man was too weak and wounded to bring himself there. The Samaritan did for him what he could not do for himself. "He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Je-

sus" (Phil. 1:6). Since salvation is God's work, secured for His people by the death and resurrection of His Son, He will succeed in spite of the onslaughts of the world, the flesh, and the devil against His sons and daughters.

Conclusion

I like the way John Calvin expressed it (*The Institutes of the Christian Religion* [Westminster], 2:1362):

This is the wonderful exchange which, out of his measureless benevolence, he has made with us; that, becoming Son of man with us, he has made us sons of God with him; that, by his descent to earth, he has prepared an ascent to heaven for us; that, by taking on our mortality, he has conferred his immortality upon us; that, accepting our weakness, he has strengthened us by his power; that, receiving our poverty unto himself, he has transferred his wealth to us; that, taking the weight of our iniquity upon himself (which oppressed us), he has clothed us with his righteousness.

Have you experienced this wonderful exchange personally? It is available to all who will come to the cross of Christ. Let go of the filthy rags of your own righteousness. Confess to God that you are a sinner deserving His wrath. Trust in the death of Jesus as the only acceptable payment for your sins. Then the cross will not be a stumbling block or foolishness to you, but rather the power and wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:23-24). You will boast only in the cross (Gal. 6:14).

Discussion Questions

1. Why is the blood of Christ essential to our salvation? Why couldn't God just forgive us apart from the cross?
2. How would you respond to a critic who asked, "Does God govern a world that includes child molesters and evil murderers? If He does, He is not good"?
3. In what sense was Jesus perfected through suffering? In what sense did He not need to be perfected?

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