



grow. pray. study.

### March 23, 2025 *Penal Substitution or Selfless Offering?*

Scripture: Colossians 2:13b-14 (CEB), Romans 3:25a (CEB) and Hebrews 10:10-14 (CEB)

### Even through exile's pain, God created redemption

#### MONDAY 3.24.25 Isaiah 53:4-6

Isaiah 53 occurred in a section of the book many mainline scholars call “Second Isaiah,” because it spoke first to Israelites returning from exile in Babylon. The prophet wrote about a divine servant whose suffering could bring redemption in ways most people couldn’t imagine. Scholar David Payne observed that Christians “unconsciously fill in any ‘gaps’ in the account. The prophet himself never named the Servant, nor even identified him plainly as the Messiah.” \*

- The unnamed servant in Isaiah 53 didn’t suffer for his own wrongs. He suffered to change people who “have turned to other gods, trusted in politics rather than God, and let people with power and resources take advantage of people without power and resources.” \*\* How have God’s faithful servants, ancient and modern, at times suffered for nothing more than seeking to turn such people back to God’s ways?
- In [Luke 22:37](#), Jesus quoted Isaiah 53:12 about being “counted with criminals.” The first Christians followed Jesus’ lead (cf. [Matthew 8:17](#) quoting Isaiah 53:4 about Jesus’ healing power). Jesus intentionally lived this truth: “The only ultimate way to conquer evil is to let it be smothered within a willing, living human being. When it is absorbed there... it loses its power and goes no further.” \*\*\* What does Jesus’ choice to defeat evil as the Suffering Servant tell you about the kind of God you serve?

**Prayer:** Dear Jesus, thank you for being the ultimate suffering servant. Please let your power at work in me transform any suffering I endure into a creative, life-giving force as well. Amen.

\* David F. Payne on *Isaiah* in F. F. Bruce, gen. ed. *New International Bible Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1979, p. 756.

\*\* John Goldingay, *Isaiah for Everyone*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015, p. 206.

\*\*\* Yancey, Philip, *The Jesus I Never Knew*. Zondervan. Kindle Edition, p. 204.

## Cross Illuminated What Prophets Couldn't Fully See

### TUESDAY 3.25.25 1 Peter 1:10-12, 1 John 2:1-2

We saw last week how much Jesus' teaching about his death puzzled his disciples. The apostle Peter wrote that if anything that was even more true for the prophets as they delivered their usually partial and often cryptic messages. And the apostle John avoided trying to spell out all the details of how Jesus' death worked, while emphasizing the central truth that in Jesus God dealt not just with individual sins but with "the sins of the whole world."

- 1 John 2:2 used a word (*hilasmos*) that Greeks used for sacrifices to appease angry pagan gods. John used it to describe what God did for us: "The Greek translation of the Old Testament... uses it for "sin offering," or "atoning sacrifice" ([Ezekiel 44:27, Numbers 5:8](#)).... in Hebrew thought it is also possible (as never among the Greeks) that God performs the action." \* How did Jesus make it plain that forgiveness was God's wish all along (cf. [John 14:9](#))?
- "God's future has been displayed, as we saw, in and as his son, Jesus. But Jesus is, of course, the one who died on the cross; and from the very earliest days of Christian faith, his followers believed that his death had been the very thing the world had been waiting for. It was the ultimate sacrifice.... that blood, that sacrificial death, that God-life given on our behalf and in our place, is available for all who 'walk in the light'." \*\* Have you claimed the new life Jesus made available for you?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, you were a healer whether the illness and its healing were physical or spiritual. I sometimes need both, and so does the world around me. I thank you for your healing sacrifice. Amen.

\* C. Haas, M. De Jonge, J. L. Swellengrebel, *A Handbook on the First Letter of John*. New York: United Bible Societies, 1972, p. 36.

\*\* Wright, N. T., *Early Christian Letters for Everyone* (The New Testament for Everyone) (p. 147). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

## Dying For Us: Christ's Ultimate Exchange

### WEDNESDAY 3.26.25 1 Corinthians 15:3, 2 Corinthians 5:19, 21

Was Jesus, in some sense, a substitute for us? Yes, he was—the apostle Paul, building in part on the language of [Isaiah 53:4-6](#), left no doubt about that. There was no possible way that Jesus died for his own "sins"—even the Roman authorities could see through the specious charges the Judean rulers brought against Jesus (cf. [Mark 15:12-15](#)). Even better, in dying for our sins Jesus made it possible for us to live the new life of the kingdom of which he is the resurrected king.

- "This densely packed statement describes a divine interchange whereby the sinless Christ assumes the human condition so that sinful humans might become the righteousness of God. In the words of the 2nd-century bishop Irenaeus, 'Christ became what we are, in order that we might become what he is.'" \* The "substitutionary" theory of the atonement captures that divine interchange well. How grateful are you that Jesus was willing to die for your sins?
- As scholar William Barclay noted, the "penal" part of the theory goes beyond the Biblical witness. "The New Testament never speaks of God being reconciled to men, but always of men being reconciled to God. There is no question of pacifying an angry God. The whole process of salvation takes its beginning from him. It was because God so loved the world that he sent his son." \*\* Why is it vital to understand that, in Jesus, "God was reconciling the world to himself"?

**Prayer:** Living Lord, you are just that—LIVING. Help me trust and live in the promise of your reconciling resurrection power today. Amen.

\* David J. Downs, study note on 2 Corinthians 5:21 in *The CEB Study Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013, p. 343 NT.

\*\* William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians* (Revised Edition). Westminster John Knox Press, 1975, p. 211.

## **God's Forgiveness: Gift, Not Transaction**

### **THURSDAY 3.27.25 Galatians 1:3-4, Colossians 1:10-14, 21-22**

God did not “execute” Jesus any more than the Romans did. The apostle wrote that “he gave himself for our sins,” a message consistent with what we read in John 10:17-18: “I give up my life so that I can take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I give it up because I want to. I have the right to give it up, and I have the right to take it up again.” And Colossians 1 said Jesus was “the image of the invisible God,” carrying out the gracious, saving divine purpose.

- Jesus came to earth, not to change God, but to change us. As today’s reading said, “Once you were alienated from God and you were enemies with him in your minds, which was shown by your evil actions. But now he has reconciled you by his physical body through death.” What positive results of Jesus’ self-giving did today’s Colossians passage list? In which of those ways has Jesus changed you, and drawn you closer to God?
- In Galatians, “responding to a severe challenge to his gospel and apostleship, Paul defends ‘the truth of the gospel’: A person is made right before God on the basis of what God has done in the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ rather than on the basis of doing the works of Moses’ Law.” \* It doesn’t make sense to believe that some type of “law” bound God to require a death to forgive. How does Jesus’ self-giving sacrifice fit better with what Scripture tells us about God’s character?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, you came to earth, not to convince God to change, but to convince us that God was eager to forgive and extend grace. Guard my thoughts and understanding to value God’s powerful love and grace. Amen.

\* Frank J. Matera, introduction to Galatians in *The CEB Study Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013, p. 353 NT.

## Grace Alone: God's Saving Love Revealed

### FRIDAY 3.28.25 Ephesians 2:4-5, Romans 11:5-6

“When God acted in Jesus the Messiah, he not only revealed himself fully; he revealed fully what genuine human life was like—and it turns out to be deeply self-sacrificial.... The main thing Paul wants to stress about all this is the sheer, almost unbelievable, magnificent kindness of God.... Whenever anyone says, or implies, that God is after all a bit stingy, or mean, or small-minded, look at these verses and think again.” \* Sadly, to insist that God **needed** a death before being willing to forgive makes God look both stingy and mean.

- Maybe unawares, some versions of the atonement that stress how vital it was for Jesus to “pay the penalty” for our sins leave hearers with the idea that Jesus needed to “earn” God’s forgiveness for humanity by being willing to die. Paul’s words about God’s grace in Romans 11 made it plain that he did not believe that at all. Instead, he stressed that God’s grace wouldn’t be grace if it came about “by what’s done.” How did Jesus’ death reveal God rather than changing God?
- Scholar Timothy G. Gombis summed up the essence of Paul’s message in Ephesians 2 with these clear, simple words: “Nothing that we possess or don’t possess, nothing that we do or don’t do moves God to save people. God saves because of God’s love.” \*\* That’s why a “transactional” view of the atonement can be so hurtful if we apply it like a mechanical formula. How do Paul’s words help you grasp that God offers the fully unconditional love we all need?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, you didn’t accept me because I’m such a superior specimen. Thank you for your grace. Help me extend your grace to all the people with whom I share your world. Amen.

\* Wright, N. T., *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters* (The New Testament for Everyone) (pp. 18-19). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

\*\* Timothy G. Gombis, study note on Ephesians 2:8-9 in in *The CEB Study Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013, p. 367 NT.

## Jesus Died from Love, Not Divine Anger

### SATURDAY 3.29.25 Hebrews 2:9, 12:15

Philip Yancey wrote a book in 1997, and updated it in 2023, pleading for Christians to value the power of God's grace: "I have presented grace as a powerful force.... It conveys the best news possible, that the God of the universe loves us—news so good it bears the scent of scandal.... If grace is so amazing, why don't Christians show more of it? How is it that Christians, called to dispense the aroma of grace, instead emit the noxious fumes of ungrace?.... as Jesus pointed out to the Pharisees, a concern for moral values alone is not nearly enough. Moralism apart from grace solves little.... I think back to the prostitute's comment that originally prompted me to write this book. 'Church! Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They'd just make me feel worse!' And I think back to the life of Jesus, God's Son, who attracted the most unsavory of characters, the moral outcasts. He came for the sinners, not the righteous. And when he was arrested it was not the notorious sinners of Palestine, but the moralists, who called for his death." \*

- In 2013 Yancey wrote another book, *Vanishing Grace*, and began by quoting Hebrews 12:15: **"Make sure** that no one misses out on God's grace." That's why our Lenten study of the meaning of Jesus' death on the cross is so important: some ways of explaining the meaning of Jesus' death run the risk of obscuring rather than casting light on how that death expressed God's grace. The letter to the Hebrews went to a group of Christians tempted to give up their faith under the pressure of social and political persecution. The letter let God's grace shine out, not as the opposite of holiness but as the only path to true holiness. Yancey said at Resurrection that he was moved to write because "we're perceived more as guilt dispensers than as grace dispensers." Our central mission as Christ-followers is to share God's grace in all we do, including what we tell people about why Jesus died. How can you "Lift High the Cross" as the supreme demonstration of God's generous, self-giving grace?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, I would not be the person I am had you not dispensed your grace so generously to me. Help me keep growing into a grace dispenser for all the people around me. Amen.

\* Yancey, Philip, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* Revised and Updated (pp. 249-254). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

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