

New Year's Series: "Jesus: Myth, Madman or Messiah"

Sermon #3: "The Meaning of Christ's Death"

Scriptures: Romans 5:6-8, 1 Corinthians 1:18 (to be read during the sermon)

Source: Rev. Adam Hamilton at the Church of the Resurrection in Kansas City, MO

<http://www.cor.org/worship/sermon-archives/show/sermons/I-Just-Dont-Get-It-Jesus-Death-and-Resurrection/>

Opening Video Clip

PP#1: "Jesus: Myth, Madman or Messiah"

"The Meaning of Christ's Death"

"The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are being destroyed. But it is the power of God for those of us who are being saved." - 1 Corinthians 1:18 (CEB)

"Jesus: Myth, Madman or Messiah" "The Meaning of Christ's Death"

1 Corinthians 1:18 "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are being destroyed. But it is the power of God for those of us who are being saved."

Since New Year's we've been taking a closer look at this Jesus, whom we celebrated was born at Christmas. We call ourselves Christians, people who follow Jesus. But we follow Him not just because He's a good teacher and good man. We claim that He's our Savior and God.

Few people deny that Jesus was a real person. Secular historical accounts even claim that Jesus was crucified in Jerusalem sometime around AD 30, during the reign of Pontius Pilate. But for Christians, it is not so much THAT Jesus died, as it is WHY Jesus died.

PP#2: *Image of Jesus on the cross, and His followers gathered around looking at Him.*

A big part of the Christian faith hinges on the meaning of Jesus' death. But it's hard to explain. What does it mean? The first disciples wrestled with it, too. As they watched Him die on the cross, they wondered what was going on. They became discouraged: Is Jesus cursed, forgotten by God, not the Messiah He claimed He was? How does this make Jesus our Savior? The Gospels were written, to a large degree, to address this question. In John's Gospel, half of the whole story is about Jesus' last week of life. In Luke's Gospel, it is even more than that. Paul, who wrote perhaps 13 of the other books in the New Testament, also takes it up, over and over again.

There is something uniquely important going on with Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection. Lots of people have been killed for their beliefs, and principles. Remember Socrates? So, what is so important about Jesus' sacrifice?

PP#3: *Same picture of Jesus on the cross, subtitled, "Who do you say that I am?"*

You may be able to just take it in faith. Good for you. But others around you stumble on this. We need to be able to share with them why Jesus is uniquely significant. We need to be able to answer Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" We need to be able to say—share—who He is.

PP#4: "Atonement" = "At-one-ment"

The reconciliation of people with God through the sacrificial death of Christ.

The word that is used to describe the meaning of Jesus' death is "Atonement." It's an English word invented by the people who first translated the Bible into English in the early 1500s. When they

were translating this concept in the Bible, they created a word in English to describe it. It says exactly what it means: “at one-ment.” It is people being restored—being put “at one”—with God.

Now, we get the idea of atoning...at least anyone who has been married gets it. (OK, anyone in any meaningful relationship!) You mess up. There’s a separation, a break in your relationship. You have to make it right. You can’t just say “Sorry.” You have to do something to repair it. It comes in the form of buying a dozen roses, or agreeing to go sit through a chick flick, or go shopping for shoes. You have to do something to earn back your good standing. (Have you seen the price of a dozen roses lately? It’s like double from last year! Trust me, I know!)

The idea of atonement is a way of talking about how our relationship with God is broken, that there is a separation between us and God. We’ve messed up. The problem is that we can’t fix it ourselves. We can’t do anything good enough to make amends with God. We’re stuck in a broken relationship. The Christian teaching of atonement is that Jesus came to fix our separation from God. He came to make it right, to repair the relationship, on our behalf. We can’t, but He could.

So, once again, how? How does Jesus’ death 2000 years ago, which Christians claim as atonement, help me today?

PP#5: Understanding the Atonement of Jesus

1. There is no one way to explain it

Well, before we take a closer look at this, I want to set up three ground rules. First: there is no one way to fully understand it. We are talking about something that is ultimately a mystery. The Bible incorporates many different ideas and images for it. It is when we hold the ideas together that we get a more real understanding of it. Each idea, on it’s own, is only a part.

PP#6: Understanding the Atonement of Jesus

1. There is no one way to explain it
2. The death of Jesus works less like a lawbook and more like a dramatic story

Secondly, be careful when we bring our modern, western reasoning to this. We’re tempted to try to make it a legal, economic, or mathematical transaction. But atonement is a form of love, and love can’t be explained in those terms. It breaks down when you try. It’s more of a narrative drama, that seizes your heart. It captures you into it. It changes you.

PP#7: Understanding the Atonement of Jesus

1. There is no one way to explain it
2. The death of Jesus works less like a lawbook and more like a dramatic story
3. It’s not about God’s problem, it’s about ours

Thirdly, it’s helpful is to put the focus on the right place. Biblically, the atonement is not so much about a problem that God has with us—how can God save sinful people—and more about a problem people have with God—how can we get back right with God? We’ll come back to this.

OK, by now you can tell that this whole atonement thing is pretty hard to get your brain around. At some level, it doesn’t matter. It’s not one of those “you’ve got to get it right” kind of things. But we do need to offer some insight to those who want to know more about why Jesus is so important. And as we wrestle with this, we find ourselves captured by it. So will others.

So, here we go. Here are some leading theories of the atonement.

PP#8: Theories of Atonement

1. Penal Substitutionary Theory

Romans 6:23 “The wages that sin pays are death, but God’s gift is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Romans 3:23ff “All have sinned and fall short of God’s glory, but all are treated as righteous freely by his grace because of a ransom that was paid by Christ Jesus....”

One of the more prevalent theories in America over the last couple of hundred years is what can be called the Penal Substitutionary Theory. Penal means punishment. People sin, and the wages of sin earn the sinner a penalty of death. But Jesus comes to take that punishment in our stead. We are guilty and cannot pay the price. Jesus is innocent, and pays the price for us. He dies the death that we deserve on our behalf. We are cleared because Jesus pays the price. This is what God’s love for us looks like. This is why Jesus suffering and death are often called His “Passion.” He is showing His passionate love for us. And this amazing drama captures us into it.

This theory is all over the Bible. But it is only one way of talking about it. It can only go so far. One way this theory breaks down is that God’s holiness can become more important than God’s love. God can be seen to be a wrathful, punishing God, who has a problem with sinful people. God has to be appeased, has to get His pound of flesh. And He gets it when Jesus dies.

But that’s not the kind of God Jesus shows us. God is not angry with us, God loves us! Our sin is something that God helps us overcome. God does have anger towards evil and sin. God is holy and cannot accept sin. But God always loves people, and it saddens God when we suffer from our sin. It saddens God that we are separated from Him. And, it is we, when sinful, who cannot approach God. Jesus shows us that God comes to our rescue and helps restore us back into healthy relationship with God. So, be careful not to make God the bad guy, the mean guy, the angry guy. God is love.

The problem is ours. And when we look at Jesus dying on the cross, we see just how real, and how destructive, and how deep our problem is. There is something wrong with us. I recently saw the movie, “American Sniper.” It showed, in such a vivid way, how awful some people can be. Afterwards, as I sat in the theater silently as the credits scrolled, I shook my head and thought, “How inhumane humans can be. There is an evil within humanity.” Unfortunately, I am a student of history. And I’ve studied how all kinds of people, in all times and places, have done such terrible things, to others, to their surroundings, to themselves. What an indictment against people!

When we look at Jesus dying on the cross, we see a mirror held to humanity. This is the cost of fixing our problem. Our problem cannot be fixed with God simply saying, “Oh, I forgive you.” Easy forgiveness makes us not take our sin seriously. The cross shows us how costly the repair is. Jesus did pay the price for us. It wasn’t an easy fix. Grace is expensive. But it is for you. God can forgive you. And God does. You mean that much to Him. You cannot earn that. You just accept God’s grace. This is for you!!

Romans 3 “All have sinned and fall short of God’s glory, but all are treated as righteous freely by his grace because of a ransom that was paid by Christ Jesus. Through his faithfulness, God displayed Jesus as the place of sacrifice where mercy is found by means of his blood. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness in passing over sins that happened before, during the time of God’s patient tolerance. He also did this to demonstrate that he is righteous in the present time, and to treat the one who has faith in Jesus as righteous.”

PP#9: Theories of Atonement

1. Penal Substitutionary Theory

2. Moral (Subjective/Ethical) Influence Theory

John 15:13 “No one has greater love than to give up one’s life for one’s friends.”

Romans 5:8 “God shows His love for us, because while we were still sinners Christ died for us.”

You know, there is something about looking at Jesus dying on the cross that changes us on the inside. When we absorb that He did this for us, it does something in us. This is explained in what is called the moral or ethical influence theory.

When Jesus gave His disciples the new commandment, to love one another, He said, “No one has greater love than to give up one’s life for one’s friends.” Later, they would see Jesus do just that, on the cross. Jesus showed them what love looked like, and seeing Jesus die for them, moved them, compelled them, to live out the command of loving each other. It was a divine drama that captured their hearts. Seeing someone sacrifice for you, out of love for you, causes a change in you.

A true story. Brannon Manning was born Richard Manning. He served in the Korean Conflict along with Ray Brannon. As they were together in a room, a North Korean threw a grenade into the room through a window. Without thinking, Ray threw himself on the grenade. As Richard watched his comrade die for him, he was changed. When he got back to the States, he legally changed his name to Brannon, in order to honor the great sacrifice Ray Brannon had given for him. It changed his identity and how he lived every day thereafter.

Seeing Jesus death on the cross does this in us, too. Jesus gave Himself for us. Galatians 2:20 “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. And the life that I now live in my body, I live by faith, indeed, by the faithfulness of God’s Son, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

Romans 5:6-8, “While we were still weak, at the right moment, Christ died for ungodly people. It isn’t often that someone will die for a righteous person, though maybe someone might dare to die for a good person. But God shows his love for us, because while we were still sinners Christ died for us.”

Now again, this moral theory can only explain part of what’s going on when Jesus dies.

PP#10: Theories of Atonement

1. Penal Substitutionary Theory
2. Moral (Subjective/Ethical) Influence Theory
3. Christus Victor Theory

1 Corinthians 15:55-57 “‘Death has been swallowed up by a victory.’ Thanks be to God, who gives us this victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!”

Perhaps the most prominent theory throughout history has been the Christus Victor theory. It was the dominant way of explaining Jesus’ atoning death for 800 years, starting in the second century. It explains that on the cross there was a great battle going on between God and evil. Jesus came and took Satan on directly. He battled evil by absorbing it all, taking it all in Himself. He let Satan do his worst, letting evil wield all its power in full. And Jesus dies in the battle. But, on the third day, Jesus steps out of the grave as the victor. Satan was not strong enough. Satan won the battle, but lost the war. What seemed like a victory for evil actually becomes its failure. The cross and resurrection go together. Jesus wins. Jesus defeats Satan, evil, hate, ignorance, sin, death. All that is bad, all that is evil, all that is death, are defeated. Jesus wins.

This understanding still has great power and importance for us. And it becomes so important to us as we face our own death in this life. As I have been with Christians as they were dying, we clung together to 1 Corinthians 15, “And when the rotting body has been clothed in what can’t decay, and the dying body has been clothed in what can’t die, then this statement in scripture will happen: Death has been swallowed up by a victory. Where is your victory, Death? Where is your sting, Death? Thanks be to God, who gives us this victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!”

Don’t let go of this one! You’ll need it whenever you face the ugly reality of death!

PP#11: Theories of Atonement

1. Penal Substitutionary Theory
2. Moral (Subjective/Ethical) Influence Theory
3. Christus Victory Theory
4. Others: Ransom Theory, Incarnational Theory, Priestly Theory, New Covenant Theory, Paschal Lamb, Recapitulation Theory, etc.

There are dozens more in the New Testament. There’s the Ransom Theory. When we sin, our ownership goes from being God’s to being Satan’s. Jesus comes and offers Himself as a swap, Himself for all of humanity. Satan agrees, takes Jesus, and has Him killed. But on the third day he discovers he loses, because he cannot hold on to an innocent Jesus, and Jesus is raised again.

There’s the Incarnational Theory. Jesus becomes a real human, experiencing all the horror and ugliness of humanity. He experiences it all, so that we can know that our God understands what life is really like for us, even when we experience all that is bad. Jesus understands.

There’s the Priestly Theory, largely developed in the book of Hebrews. Jesus comes as a high priest, offering everything on behalf of His people to redeem them - even Himself. He is High Priest and the Sufficient Sacrifice.

There’s the New Covenant Theory. We see this at the Last Supper. Jesus said, as He lifted the cup, “This is my blood of the new covenant, given for you, for the forgiveness of sins.” His is the blood of the new covenant. Jesus makes a blood promise. The prophet Jeremiah had promised, “The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah. It won’t be like the covenant I made with their ancestors...They broke that covenant with me...this is the covenant that I will make with the people...I will put my Instructions within them and engrave them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.” (Jeremiah 31:31-33)

There’s the Paschal Lamb Theory. Jesus is the Passover Lamb, that is killed so that His blood shed will shield the people from the coming death.

There’s the Recapitulation Theory, or the 2nd Adam Theory. The first Adam, in the Garden, rebels against God’s command. Adam eats from the forbidden tree, and says “Not your will, but my will be done.” Then, Jesus comes, and in a garden, prays, “Not my will but yours be done.” Jesus hangs on a tree—that’s what John calls the cross—to undo that initial wrong. He takes that original curse on Himself, and breaks it. And when He appears after His resurrection, Mary sees Him as the gardener. He comes to create a new garden, to restore paradise.

There are many more theories. The key is that each one, by itself, is incomplete. But when we hold them together, our understanding grows. When we see them, one after the other, our appreciation, our love for Jesus, grows and grows. Each show us a bit more what love looks like.

PP#12: *Image of Jesus dying on the cross, subtitled,*

- 1 Corinthians 1:18 “The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are being destroyed. But it is the power of God for those of us who are being saved.”

And the more I ponder this mystery, it moves from my brain to my heart. The divine drama captures me. I am caught up into it. It is not what I understand, it is what I experience. The more I ponder on it, the more I realize I need it. My sins are paid for. There is nothing blocking me from God. I have forgiveness, earned by Jesus. I have a new future. Although I have brokenness and failings in my life, I am given a new life, a changed life. I have a new life right now. Although I experience evil and death, it has no power over me. The worst thing is never the last thing. I have victory.

This becomes my message. This becomes my faith sharing. I don't share this with others because it is interesting information. I share this because this is who I am. It is my defining story. "I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." "The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but for us who are being saved, it is life." I am captured up into it. And others need to know they can be, too.

I want to close by praying one of my favorite hymns. Charles Wesley struggled to explain the meaning of the cross. This was his attempt. As I pray, this time I want you to keep your eyes open, and look at the image of Jesus on the cross. Let the Holy Spirit transport you there. Let it be applied to your own soul. Let's pray.

And can it be that I should gain
An int'rest in the Savior's blood?
Died He for me, who caused His pain?
For me, who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love! how can it be
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

'Tis mystery all! The Immortal dies!
Who can explore His strange design?

He left His Father's throne above,
So free, so infinite His grace;
Emptied Himself of all but love,
And bled for Adam's helpless race:
'Tis mercy all, immense and free;
For, O my God, it found out me.

My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.

No condemnation now I dread;
Jesus, and all in Him, is mine!
Alive in Him, my living Head,
And clothed in righteousness Divine,
Bold I approach the eternal throne,
And claim the crown, through Christ my own.
Amen.