

The Heart of the Gospel: Gethsemane to the Burial of Christ

Chapter 20: The Death of Christ

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When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, “It is finished”; and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost [spirit] (Jn. 19:30).

And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit”: and having said thus, he gave up the ghost [spirit] (Lk. 23:46).

Immediately after our Lord said, “It is finished,” He delivered up His spirit to the Father and died. There are a number of things to note regarding the death of Christ.

(1) It is important to note that Jesus, acting as a high priest, was completely in control of His own death. Thus, we could say that there never, ever was a death like Christ’s. His control over His own death is demonstrated by the following points.

First, all three synoptic gospels say that the Redeemer cried out with a loud voice the moment before He died. Luke’s account tells us what the Savior cried out. This means that our Lord did not die from a slow exhaustion or from His wounds but that He willed His death. Normally, when a man is on the verge of death his voice is feeble not strong. This reality was especially true of crucifixion where the blood is drained from the body and the lungs are sore pressed for a full breath of air. But, having completed the task of redemption, Jesus now boldly commends His spirit into the hands of His Father. He finished His redemptive suffering and was now ready to return to God. “No wonder his voice rose to its loudest pitch.”¹ “‘He gave up his life because he willed it, when he willed it, and as he willed it’ (Augustine).”² “[T]his loud voice signified the great strength and ardency of affection wherewith we have to do with God, to put forth our utmost vigour, and to perform all the duties of religion, particularly that of self-resignation, with our whole heart and our whole soul.”³

Second, that our Lord’s death was a voluntary act is indicated by the expressions used to describe it. John says that Jesus “gave over (up) His spirit” (Gk. *paredoken to pneuma*). Likewise, Matthew says “He yielded up His spirit” (27:50). Mark and Luke simply say that the Savior “breathed His last” (literally, “breathed out”). “The word rendered *breathed his last, exepneusen*, is not the normal one for saying that someone has died. In fact none of the Evangelists says ‘Jesus died’, which may be part of the way they bring out the truth that in Jesus’ death there was something most unusual.”⁴ The words, “He gave up His spirit,” remind us of His own remarkable statement in John 10:17-18: “I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again.” “The uniqueness of Christ’s action here may also be seen by comparing His words with those of Stephen’s. As the first Christian martyr was dying, he prayed, ‘Lord Jesus receive

¹ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Gospel*, 1308.

² Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 1:235.

³ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:565.

⁴ Leon Morris, *Luke*, 360.

my Spirit' (Acts 7:59). In sharp contrast from Stephen, Christ 'gave up the spirit'; Stephen's was taken from him, not so the Saviour's."⁵

That our Lord as a high priest sovereignly laid down His life and chose the time of His death is proven by the Redeemer's last statement while on the cross, found only in Luke: "Father, into your hands I commit My Spirit" (Lk. 23:46). Jesus committed, entrusted or deposited His human spirit over to the Father in heaven. Schilder writes,

If we compare the several usages which the Greek has the word "to commit" ("commit my spirit") as found in the New Testament, we will see that in every case it means a conscious, active assertion of faith, in which, with faith in God, one commends some specific desire to Him, or leaves the decisive turn of one's life in His hands. Thus we read of committing a certain task to someone (Luke 12:48), or of committing elders of the souls of believers to the Lord (Acts 14:23; 1 Peter 4:19), or of commending a number of Christians to God and to the word of His grace (Acts 20:32), or, similarly, of entrusting and transmitting the content of preaching to faithful witnesses (II Timothy 2:2), or of enjoining a command (I Timothy 1:18). Christ therefore performs an *active deed*.⁶

The Mediator delivered up His spirit into His Father's loving hands. He committed His human soul over to God's special presence for divine care, protection and fellowship, while He awaited the resurrection.

The Redeemer's last statement is an allusion to Psalm 31:5 with some alterations. He uses the expression "Into Your hand I commit My Spirit," but adds the word Father, which makes it very personal and Christological. He omits "the clause that immediately follows in the psalm, namely, 'Thou hast redeemed me.' In the case of Christ the Sinless One, no such redemption was necessary or even possible."⁷

Before the land descended into darkness and Jesus experienced being forsaken by God, He had always addressed God as Father. Now that the dreadful agony of the abandonment was over, He once again addresses God as Father. By depositing His spirit with the Father, Christ shows us His dependence upon the Father for the reunion of His soul and body and resurrection from the dead. This passage is clear proof that our Lord had a real human body and genuine human soul. It stands as a witness against the many errors regarding the person of Christ and the heresy of full preterism which denies the future bodily resurrection of believers.

This passage (along with Luke 23:43, "Today, you shall be with Me in Paradise") is clear proof that the human spirit of the Mediator went to heaven immediately after death. The idea that His soul had to suffer in hell after death or even that He went to Hades to preach to the imprisoned spirits has no support in Scripture (see the section on Lk. 23:43 above). "[T]he Father could not keep back from His bosom one who had so perfectly done the will of His Father."⁸

⁵ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, 3:246. "None of the Evangelists say that Jesus died, although that expression is ever after used of His death, when stated as one great fact. Matthew says that He 'yielded up the ghost.' Mark, Luke, and John, though in different Greek words, say much the same, 'He gave up the ghost.' In all the five Old Testament passages which our translators have rendered 'giving up the ghost,' the Septuagint Greek translators have not used the expressions applied in the Gospels to our Lord's death, nor any thing like them. Gen. lxi.33; Job x.18, xi.20, xiv.10; Jer. xv.9. The Greek expression about Saiphira, which is rendered, 'yielded up the ghost,' Acts v. 10, is totally different from those used about our Lord's death." (Alfred Nevin, *Popular Commentary on the Gospel According to Luke*, 671)

⁶ Klaas Schilder, *Christ Crucified*, 473.

⁷ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Luke*, 1036.

⁸ Lampe as quoted in E. W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, 2:423.

“[H]is spirit, or soul, belonged to God, the father of spirits, and now returned to him that gave it.”⁹

The person who believes in Jesus and lives his life for Him can with full assurance at his death ask God to receive his spirit because of the merits of His dear Son. Only true believers in the person and work of Christ can call upon God as Father to take care of their souls at the hour of death. Given the indisputable fact that all men must eventually die, it is sad and tragic that very few men are prepared to meet the jaws of death. People go on living as though the time of death will never come; they go about their lives as though God did not really exist. Then when the sting of death comes upon them they are completely unprepared. Those who live without Christ will die without Him also. If we are to die with the peace, joy and calmness that the Redeemer exhibited at His death, then we must trust in His suffering, blood and death. “He died for our sins, as our Substitute. His death is our life. He died that we might live. We who believe on Christ shall live for evermore, sinners as we are, because Christ died for us, the innocent for the guilty.”¹⁰ The soul of believers upon death immediately goes before Jesus in the paradise of heaven. Are you ready to die? Are you ready to meet your Maker? Are your sins covered by the blood of the Mediator?

(2) As a sacrifice for sin, our Lord’s atoning work was brought to completion by His death. The statement, “It is finished,” includes the Savior’s yielding His spirit to God. Jesus “became obedient to the point of death” (Phil. 2:8). Paul says that “we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son” (Rom. 5:10). God was angry with us because of our sins, but the Mediator removed God’s wrath by suffering unto death. Because the penalty for sin is death, “no degree of suffering would have been sufficient as an atonement for our sins without the actual death of the sacrifice.... Jesus Christ might have suffered all that He did suffer without a total extinction of life; but He must not only suffer,—He must also die.”¹¹ The death of Christ was necessary to satisfy divine justice. Redemption is not by truth, or example, or ethical living, or moral influence, but by the Redeemer’s blood or death.

Our Lord came for “the suffering of death” (Heb. 9:15). Hughes writes,

The basis of Christ’s mediatorship of the new covenant is a death which has occurred. This association of a covenant and its solemnization with death, particularly in the form of a sacrifice with the shedding of blood, appears to have prevailed from the earliest times. Thus the slaughter of animal victims accompanied the establishment of the covenant between Jacob and Laban involved the offering of a sacrifice (Gen. 31:54); the Mosaic covenant was inaugurated with the building of an altar, the offering of sacrifices, and the sprinkling of the people with “the blood of the covenant” upon their acceptance of the terms of the covenant (Ex. 24:3ff.; cf. Zech. 9:11 and vv. 19ff. below); and an altar was built again, for the offering of sacrifice, when the Israelites reaffirmed their allegiance to the covenant on the passing of the leadership from Moses to Joshua and the crossing of the Jordan into the land of promise (Dt. 27:1ff.). The new covenant has this in common with the old, that it too came into operation through the sacrificial death of an innocent victim on behalf of the people.¹²

By the suffering and death of Christ (which inevitably led to His glorious resurrection) Jesus forever conquered death for His people. “For He must reign till He has put all enemies

⁹ John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, 1:723.

¹⁰ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:364.

¹¹ Robert Haldane, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1874] 1958), 197.

¹² Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 366.

under His feet. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death. . . . So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?' The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 15:25, 26, 54-57). The resurrection of believers is completely dependent upon union with Christ in His resurrection. But, in order to be raised, the Savior first had to suffer and die. Our immortality and incorruptibility had to be earned by the Redeemer. The Mediator had to die and be placed in the earth to be resurrected and bear great fruit unto God. We will receive resurrected bodies at the second coming of our Lord that are glorious, incorruptible, spiritual, and powerful because Jesus submitted to death and was raised. Christ died to save our bodies as well as our souls. The resurrection of the dead in Christ is called by Paul the "redemption of our body" (Rom. 8:23). The salvation which Jesus achieved by His suffering and death is comprehensive. He restores life to the dead first spiritually in regeneration and then physically at the resurrection. The Mediator had to die to make His victory over death complete and final. As Spurgeon so eloquently puts it,

As to death, ye know how our Lord vanquished him! By death he conquered death. When the hands were nailed, they became potent to fight with the grave; when the feet were fastened to the wood, then began they to trample on the sepulchre; when the death pangs began to thrill through every nerve of the Redeemer's body, then his arrows shot through the loins of death, and when his anguished soul was ready to take its speedy flight, and leave his blessed corpse, then did the tyrant sustain a mortal wound. Our Lord's entrance into the tomb was the taking possession of his enemies' stronghold; his sleep within the sepulchre's stony walls was the transformation of the prison into a couch of rest. But especially in the resurrection; when, because he could not be held by the bonds of death, neither could his soul be kept in Hades, he rose again in glory, then did he become the "death of death and hell's destruction," and rightfully was he acknowledged the plague of death and the destruction of the grave. As if to prove that he had the keys of the grave, Jesus passed in and passed out again, and he hath made free passage now for his people, free entrance, and free exit.¹³

Christ has conquered. His people are redeemed. Death is vanquished. The death and resurrection of the Redeemer give us a full participation in the glories of the blessed resurrection. Thanks be to God!

By His death on the cross, Jesus destroyed the prince of darkness and death, the devil. "Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage" (Heb. 2:14-15). Christ had to die on the cross to strip Satan of his power. He had to take upon Himself a true human nature to suffer and die as man in order to render the devil inefficient and powerless with regard to the children of God.

The devil is frustrated in two major ways. First, he goes about as a roaring lion seeking to spiritually devour the Savior's people. But, because of the blood of the Redeemer he cannot prevail. "[T]hough the devil still lives, and constantly attempts our ruin, yet all his power to hurt us is destroyed or restrained."¹⁴ The death of the Mediator has chained the great beast and now the gospel can triumph in all the nations of the earth. Jesus has power over the powers and

¹³ Charles H. Spurgeon, "Christ with the Keys of Death and Hell," 15:560.

¹⁴ John Calvin, *Commentaries of the Epistle of St. Paul to the Hebrews*, 72.

principalities of darkness (Col. 2:15). They have been definitively defeated at the cross. The devil is entirely disappointed, baffled and defeated in all his attempts to strike at the elect. The cross of Christ has placed them safely in the hands of the Son and the Father (cf. Jn. 10:28-30).

Second, by enduring God's judgment on the cross which is the sting of death, the Redeemer has liberated us from the fear of death and its bondage. What the devil had helped to create as an entrance into hell by the overthrow of the first Adam, the Savior by His expiatory death has converted into a gate of heaven. "Just as the scars which a soldier carries are no discredit or dishonor to him if received in an honorable cause, so the cross-sufferings of Christ instead of marking His defeat were, actually, a wondrous victory, for by them He overthrew the arch-enemy of God and man."¹⁵ While it is true that we must experience the first death, the death of our bodies, we do so with the assurance that we will be standing face to face with Christ; that Jesus' resurrection guarantees our resurrection unto life eternal and incorruptible. Therefore, with Paul we can say, "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.... To depart and be with Christ...is far better" (Phil. 1:21, 23).

We can approach the death of our bodies with a completely different attitude than the heathen who are stepping into the jaws of darkness, forsakenness and suffering. Because Christ went before us and conquered death and Satan, we face death without fear. Although unbelievers are usually unwilling to admit it, they go through life with a perpetual anxiety regarding death. Deep down they have a consciousness that the judgment of God rests upon them because of their sins and guilt. Their souls are tormented by the curse that will come upon them. They are perpetually stalked by the sting of death. Believers, however, know that because of Jesus, nothing, not even death, has the power to separate them from the love of God. "He who fears death or is not willing to die,' says Luther, 'is not sufficiently Christian. As yet such people lack faith in the resurrection, and love this life more than the life to come.' Calvin writes similarly: 'Although we must still meet death, let us nevertheless be calm and serene in living and dying, when we have Christ going before us. If anyone cannot set his mind at rest by disregarding death, that man should know that he has not yet gone far enough in the faith in Christ.'"¹⁶ If you do not believe in Christ the prospect of death should fill you with fear and trembling. But, if you place your faith in the Savior you can rest assured because "death has been swallowed up in victory" (1 Cor. 15:54).

By His death on the cross Jesus breaks the power of sin in the life of the Christian. Paul writes, "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? Or do you know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together with the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin" (Rom. 6:1-6).

The New Testament emphasizes that our Lord's suffering, death and resurrection are the source of a believer's sanctification. There is a very real sense in which the decisive events that determine the Christian life all occurred in the past in redemptive history. There is a covenantal and vital union between Christ and His people. This vital union determines our death to sin and our life of holiness. The ethical imperatives in the epistles arise out of and are rooted in the

¹⁵ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1954), 134.

¹⁶ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 114.

gracious indicatives of the gospel. Jesus' past is our past. His death is our death. His resurrection is our resurrection. Thus, Paul often bases his exhortations on the accomplished fact of union with Christ in His death and resurrection. "If then you were raised with Christ seek those things which are above where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.... Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry" (Col. 3:1-3, 5; cf. 1 Pet. 1:2-4; 4:1-2; Rom. 6:1-7:6; 1 Cor. 1:2, 30; 6:11; Eph. 5:25-27; Tit. 2:13-14; Heb. 13:12; etc.).

Jesus not only atones for our sins and frees us from the law, but by virtue of our union with Him in His victory over sin and death, He also delivers us from the power of sin in us. Our union with Christ guarantees that we will receive the Holy Spirit who enables us to bear fruit unto God. Therefore, holiness does not come through legalism, self-helps or autonomous efforts to achieve holiness through law-keeping, but through Christ whose Spirit raises, renovates and works in our hearts so that we are enabled to more and more obey the moral law. "The letter kills but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor. 3:6). The Savior had to suffer, die and be raised to become "a life giving Spirit" (1 Cor. 15:45). We are indwelt by the Spirit and sanctified because of our union with Christ. "But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption—that as it is written, He who glories, let him glory in the LORD" (1 Cor. 1:30-31).

Paul says that through the death of Christ we have died to the law. "Therefore, my brethren, you also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ, that you may be married to another—to Him who was raised from the dead, that we should bear fruit to God" (Rom. 7:4). Believers have become dead to the law as a means of justification. Hodge writes,

He was put to death, and we in him. To be slain to the law, means to be freed from the law by death. Death, indeed, not our own, but ours vicariously, as we are crucified in Christ, who died on the cross in our behalf, in our stead. It is therefore added by the body of Christ, i.e. by his body as slain. He redeemed us from the law by death; "by being a curse," Gal. iii.13; "by his blood," Eph. i.7, ii.13; "by his flesh," Eph ii.15; "by the cross," Eph. ii.16; "by the body of his flesh," Col. i.22. These are all equivalent expressions. They all teach the same doctrine, that Christ bore our sins upon the tree; that his sufferings and death were a satisfaction to justice, and, being so intended and accepted, they effect our deliverance from the penalty of the law.¹⁷

When we meditate upon the death of Christ, theologically, it is important that we keep in mind two important thoughts. First, the whole life of Jesus is part of the work of redemption and, therefore, the obedience, suffering and death of the Redeemer must be viewed organically as a seamless garment. Every aspect of His atoning work is absolutely essential. Second, there is a comprehensiveness to the Mediator's atoning work that is often ignored or overlooked. The Savior's redemptive work not only secures the removal of sin and the declaration that the believing sinner is justified or declared righteous before God, it also merits the *application* of redemption to the sinner as well (regeneration, sanctification and glorification). We are always to be looking to the person and work of Christ for *everything*.

(3) Is there any significance to the time that our Lord expired? As we have seen, Jesus was in complete control of the moment in which He died. There are three reasons why He yielded up His spirit at that particular time (around 3:00 pm). The first (which we have already

¹⁷ Charles Hodge, *Romans* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1864] 1972), 216-217.

considered) was that His redemptive sufferings were completed. The Savior endured exactly what was required to drink the cup of God's wrath set before Him, no more and no less. Second, it was important that the death of Christ and the attending miraculous signs were public. If Jesus had died at 3:00 am instead of 3:00 pm very few people would have witnessed His death. The public nature of the Redeemer's execution as a common criminal was important as an aspect of His humiliation. The reason the signs attending the crucifixion were public was that a non-public sign is a contradiction. Third, our Lord had to die on the cross sometime before sunset on Friday to fulfill the Old Covenant typology regarding an eighth day or the new first day of the week Sabbath. The Redeemer had to rise from the dead on Sunday; no other day would fulfill the many ceremonial ordinances regarding the number "8" which points to a new beginning--Christ's redemptive recreation (read, Gen. 17:12; Lev. 14:10; 15:14; 23:36-40; Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 15:20; Col. 1:15-18; Heb. 12:33; 1 Pet. 3:20; 2 Pet. 2:5; Rev. 3:14).

(4) Regarding the actual physical reason that Jesus died, the Scriptures are silent. The Bible simply says that "He bowed his head, and gave up his spirit" (Jn. 19:30). There has been speculation that the agony of separation from the Father caused a broken heart. That is, the strong mental emotions lacerated or ruptured the walls of the Savior's heart. Some doctors even argue "that the rupture of the heart would go far to account for the flow of blood and water from our Lord's side, when pierced with a spear."¹⁸ It may be that when Jesus dismissed His spirit that His heart simply stopped beating. In any case the important thing that God wants us to know is that Christ died for our sins. If God wanted us to know the precise physical cause of the Redeemer's death, then He would have revealed that information to us in His infallible Word.

Conclusion

The death of Christ marks the end of the achievement of our redemption and is the focal point of history. What the first Adam had done because of his sin, Jesus gloriously overturned by His suffering and death. This is the gospel, or good news, for sinners. What the Savior did must always be in our thoughts. It must permeate our whole worldview and manner of living. It is the most important thing in the whole world. As Paul says, "And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:1-2). Like Paul we should be obsessed with a clear biblical knowledge of and faith in the person and work of Christ. The centerpiece or axis for all of Paul's thought and preaching was the Savior suffering and dying for our sins. "Paul had brought the message of salvation in simple terms that everyone in his audience could understand."¹⁹ This should be a lesson to all of us that, as we apply the Word of God to every area of life—whether art, engineering, agriculture, ethics, or even politics—the cross of Christ must remain central. If you are not a Bible-believing Christian then you need to ask yourself, "What are all the riches, glories and pleasures of this present world compared with Christ and His gospel?" "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?" (Mk. 8:36). If you believe in Christ you will be saved, but if you do not believe you will be condemned.

¹⁸ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3:365.

¹⁹ Simon J. Kistemaker, *1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 72.

