

It Was For You

Today, followers of Jesus all around the world get together to commemorate, and even *celebrate* that a man was executed over 2,000 years ago. *Brutally* executed, in fact. Why is that, exactly? What is it about the death of a first century working class, Middle Eastern man that *matters* to you and I today? And more than that—matters for people all around the globe, today? What makes Good Friday *good enough*, to celebrate? That's the question I want us to explore together tonight.

So I'll give you the *short version* of the answer first, and then we'll spend the remainder of our time exploring the *long version*. The short version is that it wasn't just about his death—it was about what was accomplished *through* his death. It wasn't just that he died—it was that he died *for* us. Theologians have called Jesus' death on the cross *substitutionary*: meaning that he died, in *our* place. That's what makes Good Friday good. *Romans 3, verses 23-25* put it like this:

For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.

The story of the bible is that we—*every single one of us* have *sinned*. We have each fallen short. *Most* of us have fallen short of even the types of people *we claim* to be. But *all* of us have fallen short of the types of people *God made* us to be. And in falling short, we have each caused considerable harm and hurt to ourselves, to others, to creation, and most of all, to God himself. The reality is that no one sins in a vacuum. Every sin carries with it lasting repercussions and collateral damage to the world around us, even when we don't think it does. And left on our own, we will *continue* to cause that sort of damage.

But that at the same time, *what we remember tonight* is that *God has not just left us* on our own. **He sent Jesus to be** (in the words of Romans 3 and other places) **the propitiation for our sins, on our behalf**. Now my guess is that *propitiation* is probably not a word you used in casual conversation earlier today. It's a very technical, theological word. At its core, it operates out of the understanding that you and I are deserving of some sort of *wrath* because of our sins. Propitiation has to do with the *wrath* of God.

Now, it wasn't too long ago that I would have to spend a lot of time unpacking an idea like wrath whenever I brought it up. People would just be immediately repelled by that idea—that God might have wrath at all, and especially have wrath towards people. And while the idea of a wrathful God might still be a difficult concept for some, I don't think wrath on its own is difficult for us to understand at all. Wrath is actually everywhere in our society today.

If you take one quick look at social media or the news, you'll find wrath being expressed everywhere. People are constantly expressing their unfiltered rage towards all the things that they think are the problems with the world. You'll find wrath from the Left towards the Right, (you'll find) wrath from the Right towards the Left. Wrath from men towards women and wrath from women towards men. Wrath from the religious towards the irreligious, wrath from irreligious towards the religious. Wrath from one religious tradition towards other religious traditions. If you're paying attention, you will see wrath towards any number of things, from any number of sources. Wrath is actually a regular occurrence in our world.

We as human beings are aware of everything that is wrong with our world, many of us are outraged by it, and in that wrath, we demand that something be done about all of that. That, in a nutshell, is what wrath is. It's a demand that people be held accountable for their actions. **It's a cry for people to have to pay for what they've done.** We want something to be done about the things we are mad about. We want to take it all out on someone. Whether we want to take it out on them physically, legally, or just emotionally and verbally—we demand that something be done. We want someone, somehow, to make it right. And things will not be okay within us until that happens. Until our wrath is satisfied.

So my question for you is this: if we are angry and dissatisfied with everything we see as broken and unjust about our world, doesn't God have a right to be angry about the sin that causes all of that? **Does it really make sense that we think our anger is justified and his isn't?** The story of the bible is that God too has wrath. Romans 1:19 reads:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

Now, maybe some of us flinch at the mention of a "wrathful" God because we've been told that "God is love." And that's true. But God's wrath is not at odds with his love. You see love—at least real love—actually necessitates wrath. If you love something, you are

going to instinctively *hate* anything that threatens what you love. If we love someone or *something*, we automatically *hate* anything that threatens that person or that thing. **We love our friends and family, and therefore we *hate* things like Covid and cancer that threaten to harm them. If you love *peace*, you will hate *violence*. If you love *justice*, you will hate *injustice*.** This is just what love *looks* like. **Loving *anything* will cause you to have strong, emotional reactions to whatever threatens those things.** As the well-known saying goes, “the opposite of love is *not hate*, it’s *indifference*.”

So, here’s **the story of the bible**: God *loves* the world. That includes the world *itself*, it includes the way he designed things to *function* in the world, *and* it includes the people *in* the world. **God *loves* the world. And because he loves the world, he *correctly* has *wrath* towards anything that threatens to *harm* that world. Because God *loves* justice, he *hates* injustice. Because God *loves* people made in his image, he *hates* things like *racism* that *deny* the image of God in people. Because God *loves* healthy, whole, functioning human beings, he *hates* the sin that turns us into selfish, greedy, cruel, and *corrupt* human beings. God has *wrath* precisely *because* he has *true* love.**

Now that said, there *are* some very **significant differences between our anger and God’s**. One of them is that God’s anger is *slow*. In Exodus 34, the first place in the bible where God explicitly describes what he’s like to human beings, it says that he is “slow to anger.” He’s not hot-headed, he’s not quick-tempered like we often are—he *doesn’t fire off a passive-aggressive tweet at the blink of an eye like we often do*. **God is only angry at exactly the right things and in precisely the right proportion, at exactly the right time.** He’s not angry at anything and everything that inconveniences him or bothers him. He’s not out *looking* for things, *seeking out* things to be offended by like we are. He’s *slow* to become angry. That’s one significant way that God’s anger is different than ours.

Another is that **God’s anger is entirely *unbiased***. God is not *selective* in the types of people he is angry at and thinks are the problem—he thinks we *all* are the problem. Sometimes in *our own* anger, we have this tendency to believe that the problem is somewhere “out there.” “We’re the good guys,” we think, “and the problem is the *bad* guys out there doing *other* stuff.” **The problem is Republicans. The problem is Democrats. The problem is my circumstances, my upbringing. The problem is my parents’ generation. The problem is the generation *after* mine.** Right?! It’s always somewhere *out there*. **We are absolutely *tireless* in our efforts to locate the problem somewhere—*anywhere*—out there.**

But God knows much better. You see, he knows that **the problem isn't *out there* at all—it's actually *in every single human heart***. The problem isn't in *those* people, it's in *us*. Every single *one* of us. The things that we hate—the greed, the selfishness, the injustice, the entitlement, the prejudice—*all of it* starts in *here*. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, a Russian novelist, put it this way:

If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. (If only we could do that, right?) But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?

You have to know that the things we are angry about in the world **aren't just *out there*, they're *in here***. **In other words, there truly aren't bad people and good people. There are bad people and Jesus, who came to save them all.**

You see, God's anger is *different* than ours in quite a number of ways. **But one similarity is that God's anger, like ours, also cries out for something to be *done about it***. **Something must be done about the things that God is angry about.** And the word the bible uses for what must be done is the word **atonement**. Now, *atonement* also might be an ancient-sounding *word*, but it's actually a very practical, common-sense type of concept. In life, whenever a wrong occurs, in any setting, *atonement* must always be made, whether we use that language to refer to it or not.

For example, imagine that I let **you borrow my car**. And while you're driving my car, you're not paying attention, and you wreck it, and my car is no longer driveable as a result. Now to make things right, one of two things has to happen. Theologically speaking, *atonement* has to be made. One way it could happen is that *you* could *pay* for the damage to my car—that'd be *you* atoning for the damage. In other words, *restitution*: you pay me back for the damage that you caused. That's one thing that could happen. Another thing could happen is that I could say "you know what, I *forgive* you, so *I'll* pay for the damages. I'll pay, so that you don't have to." And the word for that, theologically is *propitiation*. It's me *atoning* for the damage on your behalf.

And **that's the way the bible says our *sin* is atoned for**, via *propitiation*. **Propitiation is God atoning for our sins, on our behalf.** And here's why: *in* the situation we find ourselves in with *God*, *restitution* simply will not work. It's not as if we could just sit down and make a list of all the ways that we have sinned against God and against others, all

the way back to when we were born. That wouldn't even be *possible* for us to do, and even if it *was*, how could we ever begin to pay God back for that mountain of wrongs? We would spend the rest of our life trying, and still come up short. But one way or another, there must be *atonement*.

So what God does instead is **sends Jesus to atone for sin** on our behalf. He makes Jesus our *propitiation*. We see this throughout the New Testament, always referring to Jesus' death on the cross. What Jesus' death was about was him being the *propitiation* for our sins. About him becoming the *atonement* that we couldn't offer. **Isaiah 53** describes it:

[4] Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. [5] But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. [6] All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Isaiah, speaking hundreds of years before Jesus died on the cross, is **describing both vividly and theologically** what would happen on the cross. It says that on the cross, Jesus bore *our* griefs and our sorrows. *He* was pierced for *our* transgression. Everything that happened to Jesus was him *atoning* for *our* sin. It was *him* making right the wrong that *we* caused. It was *him* receiving the justice and judgment *we* deserved.

That's **the heart of propitiation**: God subjecting *himself* to the wrath that *we* deserved. God did not hold back the justice and the judgment that was due us, but in a twist no one saw coming, *he himself* chose to endure it. That is how we can look at the gory, brutal execution of a man two thousand years ago and ever, in a million years, be able to say that it is "good." Because it wasn't just any *death*—it was a death *for* us.

Before he took his last breath on the cross, the gospel of John tells us that Jesus cries out the words, **"it is finished."** Now, most of us who follow Jesus attribute that language exclusively to him at the cross, but what's interesting is that that phrase wasn't *unique* to *Jesus*. **There have actually been tax records and various bills unearthed from around that time period, with that same exact phrase written on them: "it is finished."** Back then, when you would pay off a bill or submit a tax payment, they would stamp those words on top of your record as a way of saying "this is done, this is paid for." So what Jesus meant

when he cried out those words on the cross was that he had *paid* our debt. He had *atoned* for it—it was finished.

So I'm sure you've heard **people who often ask questions like**, "if God exists, why doesn't he do something about evil? If God exists, why is there so much injustice? If God exists, why does he let evil people get away with such horrible things?" But **in the cross and the events leading up to it, we see precisely how much God hates sin, evil, and injustice**. We see precisely how opposed to it he is. And we see just how determined he is to do something about it.

But in the cross, we also **see God address injustice in a way that only he himself could orchestrate**. In the cross, God turns all the forces of evil back inwards on themselves. You see, Jesus' death, at a *surface* level, simply happened because all the unjust people and systems of his day aligned against him. The hypocritical religious elite. The cruel, power-hungry Roman government. And the public onlookers, many of them complicit in the whole process. All of these various parts of society together put Jesus to death by their corruption and injustice.

But in a **jarring twist, Jesus harnesses all their injustice and wields it against itself. He makes their sin its own demonstration of just how much he despises it all**. He shows the world just how disgusting and broken sin is, by letting it nail his body to a cross. **He turns evil and injustice back on itself. Ironically, the world's own sin became the means by which Jesus atoned for their sin. He uses evil against itself**. That is part of what makes Good Friday so very Good.

And in the cross, we see vividly **the length to which Jesus goes to demonstrate his love for us**. There's a lot of talk about *love* these days—how we all just need to love each another more, how the world just needs a little more *love* in its midst. And I agree. But I can't help but think that when we say things like that, we're defining love a lot *cheaper* than Jesus defined it. To Jesus, love isn't just feeling pleasant feelings towards someone being kind to them. To Jesus, **love is the length to which you will go to put the good of another above yourself. It's the degree to which you will suffer for another person's good**. Jesus says in the gospel of John "greater love has no one than this: than to lay down one's life for their friends." And **if the cross is how Jesus gave up his life, how great is his love for us?**

And what we're here to **remember tonight** is just that: that he did all of that *for* us. It wasn't just that Jesus died—it was that he died *for* us. On *our* behalf. To *atone* for our

sins. To be our *propitiation*. **It's the best news that this world has ever heard. And it's incredibly good news for us.**

Tonight, we're here simply to **remember and celebrate** that reality. To take a long hard look at the cross and all that was accomplished there. And then to take a long, hard look at our own lives and ask ourselves if we've received that reality. **You see it's one thing to understand what happened at the cross as an *idea*, a *concept*. It's another thing altogether to live each and every day in the wake of what happened there.** So it's a good night to celebrate, and as we do that to investigate. It's a good night to lay all of our sins at the feet of the crucified Jesus. Because he has made it possible for us to do just that.

- **Maybe you're here tonight and your tendency is to **downplay your sin**.** You think of it as just a character flaw, or a small shortcoming, or just something you're working on, but not to think of it as an offense against God. But that is in essence to say that Jesus going to the cross wasn't necessary for you. That at the end of the day, you could've figured it out on your own. It *belittles* the cross.
- **Maybe you're here tonight and your tendency is to be **overcome by your sin**.** Maybe you think it's all too dark, too serious, too constant to ever not completely define your life. But *that* is in essence to say that what Jesus went through on the cross wasn't *enough* for you, that it wasn't *adequate* to grant you freedom and new life out of your sin.

The reality is that **as a follower of Jesus, you can make one of two errors: you can ignore your *sin*, or you can ignore your *savior*.** You can pretend your sin isn't really all that bad, or you can pretend that your sin is *the thing* that defines you. But what I'm telling you tonight is that the cross gives you something better than either of those. Both of those are ways of looking right *past* the incredible reality of the cross. Tonight, instead, I want us to look right *at* the cross, and allow it to change us from the inside out.

Let me pray for us.