

This morning marks the beginning of holy week, the final week of Jesus' life, and so I am taking a break from going through Philippians to help us to understand the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection. Next week is Easter, where we celebrate Jesus' resurrection from the dead, but today I want to do an overview of the final week of Jesus' life and why he came to die. Quick summary of the events of Jesus' final week: he will enter Jerusalem on a donkey to a crowd cheering his entry. He will go to the temple and teach and get involved in many confrontations with the religious leaders there, who will resolve to have Jesus arrested and killed before he leaves Jerusalem. Jesus will celebrate the Passover with his disciples at what comes to be known as the Last Supper. Jesus will go out to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. And there he will be betrayed by Judas, arrested by the Jews, denied by Peter, abandoned by his disciples, put on trial by the Romans, humiliated, rejected by the Jewish crowd, tortured, and then brutally crucified.

But is there more to the story than just a tragic end to a beautiful man? Are we just here this morning to remember a tragedy? Or was there a meaning behind Jesus' death?

Before we read, I would ask you to take to heart these words of A.W. Tozer in his book "God Tells the Man who Cares": *"The Bible was written in tears and to tears it will yield its best treasure. God has nothing to say to the frivolous man."*

Before Jesus came, there were many prophecies written about his coming, his birth, life, and death. And I think that the best place to go in the Bible in order to understand why Jesus died is to a passage that was written 600-700 years before the birth of Jesus. That passage is Isaiah 52:13- 53:12.

The brief context of the book of Isaiah is this: the kingdom of Israel has split into two: Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Because of their lack of trust in God and their injustice and false worship, Israel and Judah have been taken into captivity by foreign nations. Chapters 40-66 of Isaiah's prophecy are directed to Israel in exile, encouraging them that after this time of discipline is over, God will restore them to their land. **And as we read Isaiah, we see that Israel's physical exile points to a larger exile, the separation from God due to their sin.** And throughout this section come prophecies about a figure called the Servant of the Lord, a Messiah figure who God will raise up to bring salvation and justice and an eternal kingdom of peace not only to Israel but to the world. And this prophecy about the Servant of the Lord culminates in the section we will read this morning:

Isaiah 52:13-15 - See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. ¹⁴ Just as there were many who were appalled at him--his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness-- ¹⁵ so will he sprinkle many nations, and kings will shut their mouths because of him. For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand.

Isaiah 53:1 – 12 - Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? ² He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. ³ He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. ⁴ Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. ⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. ⁷ He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. ⁸ By oppression and judgment he was taken away. And who can speak of his descendants? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken. ⁹ He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth. ¹⁰ Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand. ¹¹ After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. ¹² Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

Remember, the question we are asking this morning is why did Jesus die? Was it just a tragedy, or was there some meaning or purpose to it? In this prophecy from 600-700 years before Jesus lived, we see over and over language of substitutionary atonement – one taking the punishment that another deserves for their sins as a substitute in their place:

⁴ Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. ⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

*For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken. ⁹ He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth. ¹⁰ Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and **though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering**, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand. ¹¹ **After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied**; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities.*

For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

The audacious claim made by Isaiah in this prophecy is that this Servant of the Lord, this Messiah, will die a violent death, but it will not just be some senseless tragedy. Somehow, it will be a death in the place of others, bearing their sins, taking their guilt onto his shoulders.

This idea of substitutionary atonement goes back to the beginning of the Bible, and I want to take some time this morning to trace the thread through from the beginning to the cross. We can begin with Passover. Remember that thousands of years ago, the people of God, the Israelites, ended up as slaves in Egypt. And the people cried out to God in their slavery, and God raised up Moses and Aaron to go to Pharaoh and tell him to let the people go. God sends plague after plague, but Pharaoh refuses to let them go until the tenth plague:

Exodus 12:3,5-7,11-14 - *Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a **lamb** for his family, one for each household...⁵ The animals you choose must be year-old males without defect, and you may take them from the sheep or the goats. ⁶ Take care of them until the fourteenth day of the month, when all the people of the community of Israel must slaughter them at twilight. ⁷ Then they are to take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses where they **eat the lambs...**¹¹ This is how you are to eat it: with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand. Eat it in haste; it is the LORD's Passover. ¹² "On that same*

*night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn-- both men and animals-- and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD. ¹³ The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you **when I strike Egypt.** ¹⁴ "This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD-- a lasting ordinance.*

The tenth plague is that every firstborn son will be killed, except for those households where a lamb has been slain and its blood put on the doorposts. And so, this lamb was slain so that the nation could go free. The lamb's blood saved them from slavery, rescued them from death. And to commemorate, the people of God were to eat the Passover meal every year, to remember that they have been set free by God, to look on the lamb and remember that **this lamb died instead of me, so that I could go free.**

And so God delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, and they traveled to Mt. Sinai, where God gave Moses the covenant and the law. When God gave Moses the law at Mt. Sinai, he instituted something called the **sin offering**. There is a lot of language of **animal sacrifice** in the Old Testament, which sounds weird to us, but had a point back then. There is evil in the world, and we have each contributed to that evil. If God were to get rid of evil, therefore, he would have to get rid of us. But God loves us and does not want to get rid of us, and so he made a way for sinful people to be made right with Him. An animal would be killed in their place as a sin offering, as an atonement, to cover over their sins, to pay the penalty for our sins. And the high priest would sprinkle the blood of the animal throughout the temple to purify the land, to clean away evil in the community.

***Leviticus 5:5-6** - When anyone is guilty in any of these ways, he must confess in what way he has sinned ⁶ and, as a penalty for the sin he has committed, he must bring to the LORD a female lamb or goat from the flock as a sin offering; and the priest shall make atonement for him for his sin.*

And then there is the **Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur**, the annual day set aside for confessing sin and receiving forgiveness. When Isaiah uses the phrase **"laid on him our iniquity of us all,"** that would call to mind for an Israelite the idea of the scapegoat. In Leviticus 16, in the instructions for the Day of Atonement, the high priest would choose two goats: one would be sacrificed as a sin offering, and the other would make atonement by being sent out into the desert.

Leviticus 16:20-22 - When Aaron has finished making atonement for the Most Holy Place, the Tent of Meeting and the altar, he shall bring forward the live **goat**.²¹ He is to lay both hands on the head of the live **goat** and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites-- all their sins-- and put them on the goat's head. He shall send the **goat** away into the desert in the care of a man appointed for the task. ²² The **goat** will carry on itself all their sins to a solitary place; and the man shall release it in the desert.

And as we mentioned in the beginning, in the prophets we see the prophecy about the Messiah, the servant of God who would bear the sins of his people. When Jesus begins his earthly ministry, he is baptized by John the Baptist, and right away there is a recognition of who He really is:

John 1:29-30 - The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the **Lamb** of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"³⁰ This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'

John sees Jesus, and calls him the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. Jesus is the Lamb that Isaiah spoke of.

And Holy Week is full of the imagery of substitutionary atonement:

On the beginning of holy week, we read in Matthew 21 about Jesus entering Jerusalem on a donkey, bringing to mind **Zechariah 9:9** - Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a **donkey**, on a colt, the foal of a **donkey**.

The crowd that has gathered for Passover believes that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah King who has arrived to deliver them from their Roman oppressors and restore the kingdom of Israel to glory once again. Now, Passover takes place on the 14th of the month Nisan (Nice-Ann). Jesus enters Jerusalem four days before Passover. **Remember what we read earlier** in Exodus 12: God told the people of Egypt that on the 10th day of (Nice-Ann) Nisan, they are to take a lamb without defect, and care for it until the 14th day, when the lamb would be killed and its blood put on the doorposts so that the angel of death would pass over their house.

Exodus 12:3,5-6 - Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a **lamb** for his family, one for each household...⁵ The

animals you choose must be year-old males without defect, and you may take them from the sheep or the goats. ⁶ Take care of them until the fourteenth day of the month, when all the people of the community of Israel must slaughter them at twilight.

Every year the Israelites celebrated Passover, and what that meant is that on the 10th day of Nisan, thousands of lambs would be driven up to Jerusalem throughout the day. The historian Josephus tells us that one year a census was taken of the number of lambs slain for Passover and the figure was **256,500**. That means that Jesus is entering Jerusalem on the 10th of Nisan, on a donkey, surrounded by lambs who are about to be slain for the Passover. Symbolism, anyone? And just like the Passover lamb, Jesus would go to the temple to be “examined” to ensure that he was without defect, without sin, so that he could be an acceptable sacrifice.

And then we have the Last Supper, where Jesus gathers with his disciples to celebrate the Passover. But as he takes the bread and the wine, he changes the story to make it about him. Typically, a presider would explain the Passover ritual, telling through the elements of bread and wine, how God rescued their forefathers from slavery in Egypt. This is the bread of affliction, which our forefathers ate in the wilderness. The cup represents the deliverance that God has brought to His people. **But Jesus changes the story to make it about himself.**

***Matthew 26:26-28** - While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; **this is my body.**" ²⁷ Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. ²⁸ This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.*

Who does that? Imagine taking the story of the 4th of July, of our independence, and saying that it is really about you? That is the closest parallel to what Jesus is doing here. Jesus says that the bread and wine are about him – his body, and his blood. He will suffer and die so that they might go free. He is saying that **there is a greater Exodus about to happen**, to which that first Exodus pointed. Not deliverance from slavery to a nation, but deliverance from slavery to sin and death itself. He will die to rescue them from slavery to sin, and then enter into a new covenant with them. Notice once again the language of substitutionary atonement, of one dying to cover the sins of others.

And then after supper, he goes out to the Garden of Gethsemane, where we read this:

Matthew 26:37-39 - He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.” Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.”

And in Luke’s account of Gethsemane, we find this:

Luke 22:42-44 - “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.” ⁴³ An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. ⁴⁴ And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and **his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.**

As Jesus leaves the last Supper to go out to pray to the Father, he says that he is “overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.” The phrase “overwhelmed with sorrow” comes from a Greek word which is used to denote the most extreme anguish which the soul can feel—excruciating anxiety and torture of spirit. And Jesus is in such agony that he is sweating blood, a phenomenon called hematomidrosis that only happens under extreme stress and anguish. Why is Jesus experiencing such sorrow, such anguish, such torture in His spirit?

We find the answer in what he prays. Listen again to v. 39: “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.” He asks the Father to take away from him “the cup.” At first glance, that phrase may seem to simply refer to a difficult ordeal. But when you look back through the Bible, you discover that the cup has a more precise meaning:

Psalm 75:7-8 - But it is God who **judges**: He brings one down, he exalts another. In the hand of the LORD is a **cup** full of foaming wine mixed with spices; he pours it out, and all the **wicked** of the earth drink it down to its very dregs.

Isaiah 51:17 - Awake, awake! Rise up, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk from the hand of the LORD the **cup** of his **wrath**, you who have drained to its dregs the goblet that makes men **stagger**.

Jeremiah 25:15-16 - This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, said to me: “Take from my hand this **cup** filled with the wine of my **wrath** and make all the nations to

whom I send you drink it. When they drink it, they will stagger and go mad because of the sword I will send among them."

Ezekiel 23:33-34 - *You will be filled with drunkenness and sorrow, the cup of ruin and desolation, the cup of your sister Samaria. You will drink it and drain it dry; you will dash it to pieces and tear your breasts.*

Revelation 14:9-10 - *A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: "If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, he, too, will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb*

Are you getting the picture? The cup is more than just a simple metaphor for a difficult ordeal. **The cup is a metaphor for God's wrath, God's righteous judgment on human sin, God's punishment for evil and wickedness.** It causes men to stagger, to beat their breast, to go mad. When Jesus asks the Father to remove the cup from him, if at all possible, he is asking the Father if there is any other way to save us that would not involve having to bear the wrath of the Father on human sin. Can you understand why Jesus was overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death, why he was sweating blood?

Jesus was overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death because in the garden, he began to experience the Cup – the wrath of God, separation from the Father. And it caused him to stagger, to sweat blood. **In Gethsemane, the Father gave Jesus the choice.** This is just a taste of what you will experience on the cross – do you still want to do this? Will you still do it? Will you love me even though I will crush you? Will you do it for these people who can't even stay awake with you?

And Jesus says, **"Not my will but yours be done."** And He drinks the cup of God's wrath for us.

Hebrews 2:9 - *But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.*

And taste death he did as he went to the cross to die for our sins. The sacrificial system, the lamb, the cup was of course pointing to the once for all sacrifice of the Servant, Jesus, who took up our sins upon himself and paid the penalty once for all.

Mark 10:45 - *For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

He was the ransom for sin, the atoning sacrifice, by his death covering the debt we owed for contributing to evil and death in the world.

2 Corinthians 5:17-21 - *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. ²¹ God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

Jesus became sin and we gain his righteousness. The sacrificial system, the lamb, the cup was of course pointing to the once for all sacrifice of the Servant, Jesus, who took up our sins upon himself and paid the penalty once for all.

Hebrews 10:1-4,10-14 - *The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming-- not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. ² If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. ³ But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, ⁴ because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins... ¹⁰ And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. ¹¹ Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹² But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. ¹³ Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, ¹⁴ because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.*

He has made us perfect forever by His death for us. Holy week is about substitutionary atonement, the highest form of love, by which the perfect Son of God gave His life for you, taking your place, taking on himself the punishment that you deserved, that you might be forgiven, that you might be right with God, that you might have eternal life.

Isaiah 53:4-6 - Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

This is the highest form of love. This is what moves the heart, what captures affection. Nothing moves us and captures our heart like substitutionary atonement, sacrificial love, one dying in the place of others. Think of Titanic. If Jack had just thrown himself off the boat early in the movie to prove to Rose that he loved her, that would have been foolish and stupid. But because he died for her, letting her stay on the floating door, people were moved. He dies in order to save her. There is no greater love than substitutionary sacrifice.

Or maybe you have heard the true story about World War II that Ernest Gordon tells in his book *Miracle on the River Kwai*:

A group of Prisoners of War were working on the Burma Railway during World War II when one of the Japanese guards shouted that one of the shovels was missing. The soldier demanded to know which prisoner had stolen or hidden the shovel.

The guard began to rant and rave, working himself up into a paranoid fury and ordered whoever was guilty to step forward. No one moved. "All die! All die!" he shrieked, cocking and aiming his rifle at the prisoners. At that moment one man stepped forward, and the guard clubbed him to death with his rifle while he stood silently to attention. When they returned to camp, the tools were counted again, and no shovel was missing.

That anonymous soldier sacrificed his life so that his companions could live.

Or think about the school shooting in Nashville this week, and the school head Dr. Katherine Koonce, and the police officers who ran to trouble.

There is no love greater than substitutionary sacrifice, being willing to suffer and even die for another, in the place of another. This is the love that Jesus has for you. This is the same love you show whenever you forgive someone or treat someone not according to what their sins deserve. This is the love you show when you take

on the hard work and bear the burden for others. How can you lay down your life for others?