

Heaven Met Hell on Earth in the Death of Jesus (Pt 1) (The Cross Was Hell on Earth)

SUBJECT: The theology of human destiny (20)

Introduction: By a strange irony, at a time when the word ‘*Hell*’ has almost dropped from the language of the Church, and from its preaching in particular, ‘*Hell*’ is the staple of every day communication and expression for the non believing world. A terrible time of suffering or persecution is often referred to as ‘*hell on earth*’ but that is not hell on earth. **Only once in all history has there truly been ‘*hell on earth*’ – when Jesus Christ took our place on the cross and bore the wrath of God due to us for our sins.** From this event at Calvary we can learn some glimpses about hell. We cannot claim to describe ‘hell’ (or ‘heaven’) in its fullest experience but up to a point as found in biblical language. Since hell is a state experienced after death, only God the Creator of “*Hell*” knows and, He has informed us of it in the Scriptures.

However, we may validly speak of ‘*hell*’ (and ‘*heaven*’) because **at one point in time and space, one unique moment in Jerusalem 2000 years ago, both hell and heaven made their appearance on earth.** *What light does this crucifixion scene throw on the enigma of Hell?*

The death of Jesus must be viewed through the lens of three interpretative phrases. Each will enlighten us to the revelation of hell in this historical event.

FIRST, IS THE PRINCIPLE OF SUBSTITUTION

No other deaths in history grip the heart and imagination of man but that of the crucifixion of Jesus. Here is Jesus at the end of a consummate service and self-giving, pursued and finally overtaken by his jealous enemies (sinful mankind). Despite his arrest and inevitable execution, He faces His final, agonizing moments with deep dignity and courage, even to the point of expressing forgiveness for those who have maliciously plotted His crucifixion. It is a unique and impressive death.

I. God Was In Christ.

The death of Jesus is not merely a personal event of an ordinary man, the final chapter in the unique life of Jesus. The biblical writers claim this is also a universal event. Jesus is more than a private individual, He is a corporate person. Like Adam before Him, He represents the entire race (**Rom 5: 18, 19**). Thus the death of Jesus Christ is to be understood as *God’s deed for all humanity.* Adam acted for all people when he sinned, thereby making sin and realities in every human life. Jesus acted for all when He died, thereby making righteousness and eternal life possibilities for every human being.

How did the death of Jesus achieve this?

II. Christ Was In Our Place (Our Substitute)

The key that unlocks this mystery is the word *substitution*. Christ in His death stood in our place and bore on our behalf the just judgment of God against our sin (1 Cor 15: 3; 1 Pet 3: 18). *That is:*

1. Because God is merciful, He willed to forgive sinful humanity.
2. But He had to do it without in any way condoning our sin.
3. So He purposed to direct against His own self in the person of His Son the full weight of that righteous wrath which we deserved.

The notion of *substitution* is rooted deeply in the Old Testament.

1. It appears in the sacrificial *rituals* whereby slain animals were presented on behalf of worshippers, the forfeited life of the animal substituting for the forfeited life of the sinner (e.g. Lev 1-7).
2. It is expressed in the *Passover ritual* based on Israel's remarkable liberation from Egyptian oppression when the lamb 'without blemish or spot' died in substitution for the life for the life of the firstborn of every Jewish household (Exod 12-13).
3. The concept of substitution arises again in the *Day of the Atonement ritual* (Lev 16). That is the giving of two sin-bearing goats on the worshippers behalf, one to be slain and the other set free in a solitary place (Lev 16: 21-22).

Substitution finds *its* climax in the self-giving ministry of '*the Servant of the Lord*,

who was to be '*pierced for our transgressions*', upon whom was '*the punishment that brought us peace*', and upon whom '*the Lord has laid...the iniquity of us all*' (Isa 53: 5-6). The New Testament is clear that all of this was fulfilled in Jesus (Jn 12: 38; Mt 8: 17; 1 Pe 2: 22f; Ac 8: 30-35).

Jesus Himself claimed it in 2 crucial sayings:

1. "*The Son of Man...(came)...to give His life a ransom for many*' (Mk 10: 45): and,
2. At the Last Supper, '*This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many*' (Mk 14: 24). Paul reiterates: '**God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us**' (Rm 5: 8). The sense of bearing a penalty on behalf of another is so clearly present in these references that this interpretative key is often referred to as '**penal substitution**'.

In the death of Jesus, God acts for us. Jesus takes our place and bears Himself what is due us – the just penal retribution which God is bound to exact for the sin which is an ineradicable part of our lives.

III. Christ Endured Hell for Us on The Cross

Crucially, since the final content of that penal retribution is banishment to hell, His substituting Himself for us to bear the full effects of God's wrath implies that His substitutionary suffering *must have included this hell experiencing element*. To bear all the other implications of our sins but not bear the experience of hell would void His claim to be an all-sufficient Savior of sinners. Only if Jesus' death includes the equivalence of hell can it be properly and effectively be the means of our salvation.

Christ's saving us through the cross must mean that He endured hell on the cross.

The cross was 'hell on earth'.