

Analysis of the Crucifixion of Jesus

Introduction

Biblical teachers need to be challenged to make them think. Far too many church leaders live in a spiritual vacuum, or sounding box, whereby they are treated with huge respect and deference and never receive any significant challenges. They should have debates with non-Christians to hone their thinking; these folk will be sure to ask original questions that require deep thought.

This week I was talking to an intelligent non-believer (but spiritual seeker) about a range of Biblical issues. We talked about salvation, about hell as eternal punishment, about atonement, about the Trinity and the dual nature of Christ. I answered his many questions. One however, was interesting. In the light that eternal condemnation is warranted for sins committed in this life, and considering that Jesus took the weight of the elect's sin on his shoulders and atoned for them on the cross, then why did Jesus not need to suffer eternal condemnation as well to purge those sins?

I answered this question but it peaked my interest about the theological connection between the dual nature of Christ and the process of atonement. How did Jesus satisfy God's judgment on sin?

This question necessarily raises theological speculations and involves matters far too deep for human minds to fully understand. But, as apologists for the truth, it behoves us to try to explain (even the inexplicable) to those interested parties who are seeking for the truth as revealed in the Bible. Difficult issues must not be avoided.

An analytical exposition of the events of the crucifixion

We must first explain all that happened during the crucifixion.

The pre-crucifixion suffering

- The mental anguish revealed in the Garden of Gethsemane praying. Matt 26:36ff.
- The betrayal of Judas. Matt 26:46ff.

The trial by the priests

- Trial by Caiaphas, the High Priest. Matt 26:57ff.
- Trial by the chief priests, scribes, elders in the Sanhedrin (council of 71 members). Matt 26:59; Mk 14:55.
- The priests assault Jesus and hold him all night. Matt 26:67; Mk 14:65.

Trial by Pilate

It was six o'clock in the morning (Roman time) when the trial occurred before Pilate. [John uses Roman time, writing at the close of the century when Jewish time was no longer in vogue.]

- Jesus is bound and taken to Pilate, the Roman governor. Matt 27:2; Mk 15:1. [Pilate had come from his residence at Caesarea to Jerusalem, staying in Herod's palace, to preserve order during the time of the Passover.]
- On learning that Jesus was from Galilee sent him to Herod who had jurisdiction over that area. Lk 23:7.

Mockery by Herod

- The chief priests accuse Jesus to Herod. Lk 23:10.
- Herod, with his men of war, treated Jesus with contempt and mocked Him, arrayed Him in a gorgeous robe, and sent him back to Pilate. Lk 23:11.

Further trial by Pilate

- Pilate tries to avoid dealing with an obviously innocent person by offering to release him as part of the custom during the Passover feast. Matt 27:15; Mk 15:9.
- Pilate's wife (Claudia Procula) warns him to avoid any guilt in dealing with Jesus having been warned in a dream. Matt 27:19.
- The chief priests direct the crowd to demand the release of the criminal Barabbas instead of Jesus. Matt 27:20; Mk 15:11.
- The chief priests and the crowd demand that Jesus be crucified. Matt 27:23; Mk 15:13.

The suffering in the Praetorium garrison

- Jesus is taken by the governor's soldiers to the Praetorium. Matt 27:27; Mk 15:16. ['Praetor' means a guard of soldiers.] In Jerusalem it was in the governor's palace. The judgment seat had been placed in front of this hall.
- They stripped Jesus and put a scarlet robe on him (probably an old discarded robe of state). Matt 27:28; Mk 15:17.
- They twisted a crown of thorns, they put it on his head, Matt 27:29; Mk 15:17.
- They put a rod in His right hand and bowed before him to mock him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' Matt 27:29; Mk 15:18.
- They spat on him, and took the rod and struck him on the head. Matt 27:30; Mk 15:19.
- After they had mocked him, they took the robe off, put his own clothes on him, and led him away to be crucified. Matt 27:31; Mk 15:20.

The scourging

This was done as part of the suffering inflicted by the cohort of soldiers.

Pilate sent Jesus away to be scourged. Matt 27:26; Mk 15:15; Jn 19:1.

This scourging was usually done by *lictors* but as a procurator, Pilate had none. So the soldiers did this appalling punishment themselves. Many people died from scourging alone, so brutal was it.

Scourging was not just simple whipping. It utilised a whip that contained lumps of metal and bone tied into it. Each strike ripped out large lumps of flesh; often exposing bones. In no case were the stripes to exceed forty (2 Cor 11:24). In the scourging of Jesus the prophecy of Isaiah 53:5 was fulfilled.

[In the time of the apostles, in consequence of the passing of what was called the Porcian law, no Roman citizen could be scourged (Acts 16:22-37).]

The march to Golgotha

- Jesus had not slept for two days.

- His suffering, especially the scourging, rendered him exhausted, weak and badly injured.
- Jesus was unable to carry his cross (part of the punishment). Simon of Cyrene is forced to carry it for him. Matt 27:32; Mk 15:21.
- Jesus refuses sour wine mingled with gall and/or myrrh – which had a narcotic effect. Matt 27:34; Mk 15:23.

Jesus is crucified

The crucifixion began at the third hour (Mk 15:25) Jewish time or nine a.m.

- Jesus is placed on a cross. We are not told that he was nailed to it in the Gospel narrative of the crucifixion. Both nails and ropes were used in crucifying victims. However, after the resurrection the interlude between Jesus and Thomas reveals that nails were used: 'The other disciples therefore said to him, "We have seen the Lord." So he said to them, "Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe." And after eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, "Peace to you!" Then He said to Thomas, "Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing".' Jn 20:25-27
- The robbers crucified with him revile him. Matt 27:44.
- People passing by derided him. Mk 15:29.
- The chief priests derided him. Mk 15:31.
- From the sixth hour until the ninth hour there was darkness over all the land. Matt 27:45. The darkness began at noon, the sixth hour Jewish time, and lasted till 3pm. Roman time, the ninth hour Jewish time. Matt 27:45; Mk 15:33; Lk 23:44.
- The darkness for three hours was not an eclipse of the sun. Darkness sometimes precedes earthquakes and there was one at this time. Another explanation is dense masses of clouds.
- At the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice in Aramaic, saying, 'Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?' that is, 'My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?'¹ This closes the three hours of darkness. Matt 27:46; Mk 15:34.
- Jesus thirsted. Jn 19:28.
- Jesus is offered a drink. Matt 27:48; Mk 15:36.
- Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, saying 'It is finished' (Jn 19:30) and gave up His spirit. Matt 27:50; Mk 15:37..
- Then the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth quaked, and the rocks were split. Graves were opened and bodies of dead saints were raised, appearing to many in Jerusalem. Matt 27:51-53; Mk 15:38.

Post death events

- Jesus' early death prompts a soldier to check that he really has died by placing a spear into Jesus' side. Blood and water comes out proving that Jesus died before this. The spear pierced the left side of Jesus near the heart showing Jesus had died literally of a broken heart since blood was mixed with water. Jn 19:31.
- Joseph of Arimethea petitions Pilate for the body of Jesus. Permission is granted and Jesus is covered in linen and placed in a new tomb reserved for Joseph. Matt 27:57ff; Mk 15:43.
- A large rock is placed at the entrance. Matt 27:60; Mk 15:46.

¹ El"i, el"i, lema sabachthanei (Vatican Ms B). Some MSS. give the transliteration of these words from Ps 22:1 in the Hebrew Eli, Eli, lama Zaphthanei.

The Bible is silent about the condition of Jesus until the resurrection. This covers the period from later in Friday to early on Sunday.

Jesus' sufferings

- Betrayal by a friend.
- Trial by people not interested in justice or innocence.
- Beating and being spat on by religious leaders.
- Trial by a Gentile despite no Roman law being broken.
- Mocking and castigation by Herod and his retinue when he should have been released.
- Scourging ordered by Pilate, despite being innocent of any crime.
- Mocking of the soldiers, the crown of thorns, being beaten with a rod.
- Exhaustion.
- Being nailed to a cross.
- Suffering constant derision while being crucified by the people who should have received him as their Messiah.
- Thirst.
- Having the weight of the elect's sins placed upon his innocent body and suffering the pangs of death for such.
- Having the despair of losing fellowship with the Father.

Initial observations

The period of darkness in the Earth appears to be the period of Jesus' deepest suffering. Thus from noon until 3pm Jesus suffered the most. This terminates at 3pm when Jesus declares that God the Father had left him. This is the point of the weight of sin coming upon Jesus forcing the Holy God to separate from the human nature of Jesus. Within moments Jesus died. That is: humanity's sin is placed upon Jesus. The Father immediately leaves him for the first time in an eternal relationship of love. Shortly after, the weight of this sin kills Jesus. Jesus does not die from being crucified. In fact many crucified people lasted three days on the cross.

Since death pays for sin, the payment of the elect's sin must have been completed by this time, just after 3pm.

The darkness and the earthquake reflect the suffering of the Son of God on the Earth. Jesus could not undergo this pain and the Earth not react.

The resurrection of the dead saints and the tearing of the temple curtain reveal that Jesus' death was successful; sin had been remitted by his death. OT saints were released from Hades and taken to heaven and the curtain, symbolically showing that man could not meet with God in the holiest place, was removed thus opening up fellowship.

The technical aspect of remission of sins

So, the question remains: how did Jesus pay for sin without suffering eternal condemnation – which all sinners will have to undergo?

The scope of atonement

It is limited

The atonement of Christ is limited, not in power but in scope. It is limited to the elect alone, not every single human being. Only those chosen by God in eternity are eligible to receive the benefits of the atonement.

It covers many people

Atonement is the covering of, or satisfying of, sin. It is reparation for sin so that God is satisfied; remission of sin. God is reconciled to sinful man as a result of the propitiation (putting away of wrath, appeasing) of Christ.

In quantity terms, Jesus' death paid for the sins of all the elect, those chosen by God in eternity. This still comprises millions of people. How did one man's death pay for this huge number?

The reason is that Jesus' person is God and therefore infinite. The value of his person is infinite and therefore the death of this person is infinite and worth millions of people.

Note that Jesus lived as a man upon the Earth, under the law, and lived a completely righteous life (Jn 7:18; 8:46). Unless he did this he could not atone for sin and would have died for his own sins. He had to die as a personally righteous man. This, in turn, means that Jesus did not live during the incarnation in his divine nature. If he did then he would also have nullified the atonement. Jesus had to live as a man, under law, with no divine advantages.

He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him. Isa 53:4

Christ died for the ungodly. Rm 5:6

The death that He died, He died to sin once for all. Rm 6:10

For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. 2 Cor 5:21

Our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins. Gal 1:3-4

Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us. Gal 3:13

And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight. Col 1:21-22

Not that He should offer Himself often, as the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood of another -- He then would have had to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now, once at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. Heb 9:25-28

Christ also suffered for us. 1 Pt 2:21

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust. 1 Pt 3:18

Christ suffered for us in the flesh. 1 Pt 4:1

He was manifested to take away our sins, and in Him there is no sin. 1 Jn 3:5

Jesus is God and man. He is one Person but with two natures. Thus he has two wills, two souls and a human body.² His human body suffered and died (1 Pt 3:18) but his divine nature did not suffer and could not die. [God cannot suffer because suffering implies change and God is immutable.] Yet his human nature is the nature of an infinite Person and thus has infinite value.

It has an infinite time value

Why did Jesus not have to suffer eternal condemnation in paying for the sins of millions?

The answer is again because his Person is infinite. The value of Jesus' death not only covers many people in terms of quantity, but also the satisfaction of the wrath of God that normally comprises eternity.

Hell is a place of eternal punishment (Matt 9:43-44). All sins require never-ending torment (2 Thess 1:9) because they are an affront to an eternal, infinite God who created men to reflect his glory. This is why all sinners are raised up at the end in a body suitable to sustain hell forever (Jn 5:28-29). They are given an immortal body to go with their immortal soul. There is no annihilation on death. This is not a resurrected body like that of the saints but a body suitable for punishment. Thus sinners pay for their sins eternally.

Christ, however, paid for the sins of the elect in such an intense and infinite manner that it comprised the eternal weight of punishment in a single moment (1 Pt 3:18, 'For Christ also suffered once for sins'). This was in the period between the Father removing himself from fellowship and the moment Jesus died. This means that the gravity of suffering that Jesus underwent is truly off the scale.

Claims that Jesus paid for sin while dead for the best part of three days in hell is not Biblical for these reasons:

- The lake of fire (Hell) was prepared for the Devil and his angels and all those who followed him (Matt 25:41; Rev 20:10, 15, 21:8). It was not prepared for Christ.
- It is not occupied or in use before the Day of Judgment (Rm 2:5; 2 Pt 2:9; Jude 1:6).
- There is no clear statement that Jesus was placed in Hell (see later).
- Theologians claiming that Christ descended into Hell confuse Hades with Hell.
- Christ entered Hades (the place of departed spirits) and led captive saints out of Hades and into heaven (Eph 4:8). Hades is not Hell. [Even this is disputed by most Reformed theologians who merely state that Christ was buried. However, all the dead enter Hades after death. Christ did so but arose from it in triumph (Col 2:15). It is also a fact that dead OT saints were taken from Hades into heaven after the cross. Christ promised to escort saints personally (Jn 14:3, 18).]

Regarding the descent of Christ

Therefore He says: 'When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men'. (Now this, 'He ascended' -- what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.) Eph 4:8-10

This is not telling us that Christ descended into Hell.

Hell is not a place under the Earth. It is a spiritual dimension separate from God's material creation so that the universe is not stained with the effects of sin. OT statements about hell

² Denial of this is the old heresy of Monothelitism, that Jesus only had one will.

being below the earth downwards (Ps 55:15; Ezek 31:16) or the dead going down (Ps 30:9, 115:17) are referring to dead corpses being buried. In the OT 'hell' is frequently a mistranslation of *sheol* which should be translated as Hades or the place of departed spirits; the grave not Hell.

This misunderstanding of Hell being below is further amplified by the Saxon derivation of 'hell' meaning to cover or hide, as in burial under the earth.

This passage in Ephesians is contrasting the ascension of Christ with his descent. What is this descent? It is his descent from heaven to Earth. In fact it states this specifically, 'He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth'. In the incarnation Christ descended from heaven to the Earth, which is lower than heaven.

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while *the* ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water. 1 Pt 3:18-20

This does not teach that Christ, before the resurrection and after the cross, preached to certain disobedient dead souls in Hades for many reasons.

- Disobedient souls in Hades cannot be saved (Heb 9:27); they are already under judgment and awaiting final condemnation for sin. Preaching the Gospel to such would be pointless.
- Why would Christ only preach the Gospel to a few ante-deluvian people and not the rest of dead humanity?
- This preaching is by the Spirit of Christ in the days of Noah to people who were disobedient and later judged in the flood. At the time of Peter's writing, they were 'in prison' ('under guard'); that is, in Hades awaiting condemnation.
- Neither is this a preaching to demons (evil spirits) who are not in Hades or under guard but in the realms of the air above the Earth (Eph 2:2). Peter elsewhere calls this Tartarus (2 Pt 2:4; wrongly translated as 'Hell').

Conclusion

Difficult questions from non-believers must be addressed and answered properly. This question about the scope of the atonement is important and rarely considered by Christians, and almost never expounded.

There is a direct correlation between the mystical relationship of the two natures of Christ and the impact of this in the matter of the atonement. Understanding of the atonement requires some understanding of Christ's dual natures.

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