

Was It Not Necessary?

Isaiah 25:6-9, Luke 24:13-35 (ESV)

January 22, 2006

“Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” “Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer?” Here is the question, in our next to the last reading from this gospel, which reaches back over everything that has happened to Jesus up to this point and which gathers it all together into the overarching plan of God. “Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer?” Necessary. Required. Part of the divine will, the eternal decrees, God’s good plan for the salvation of the world. And all this time we have been suffering under the illusion of freedom.

This is not at all to say that the evil which men did to Jesus was not evil. It is not at all to say that, for what they did was very evil. But it is to say, as I have often heard Mrs. Thomas say, that God both rules the world and overrules the world. I take that to mean that God both rules the world directly and overrules the world indirectly. God works in obvious ways such as the faithfulness and orderliness of the universe, and he works in hidden ways such as the rise and fall of empires and even through the evil deeds of evil men always to accomplish his own purposes.

“Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer?” Yes, of course it was. Consider with me the implications of this question about the necessity of the suffering of Christ. Of all the evil things that were done to Jesus, none of them were outside the will of God. That is to say, none of them caught God by surprise. None of them undid the good purposes of God. None of them overwhelmed or overcame God. None of them defeated the eternal will of God for the salvation of the world.

In fact, quite the opposite, God used the greatest evil in the history of humanity for the salvation of humanity. The suffering of Christ was not pointless. The suffering of Christ was not capricious. The suffering of Christ was not arbitrary. Instead, the suffering of Christ was designed, willed, and intended by God, and also freely entered into by Christ, precisely in order to be able to absorb, to conquer, and to defeat the agents of suffering, even sin, death, and evil themselves.

Another way of saying this is that the gospel is not a tragedy in which evil deeds undid a good man. The gospel is a love story in which Jesus Christ gave himself to the forces of evil in order to win us to himself. And it was the only way to accomplish what he did. Sin, death, and evil did their worst to him, and, in fact, he died. But he did not sin. He did not abandon his faith in God. He did not disobey

God. He did not return evil for evil. His love was not broken. And so he won the victory.

The power of evil was spent upon him, exhausted, emptied, defeated, and forever undone. The power of sin was rendered impotent. And though Jesus was given to death as a part of the test by sin and evil, death was not allowed to hold him, and God raised him back to life. Was it not necessary? That was the only way that sin, death, and evil could be defeated. The only way. And so he did it. Thanks be to God!

To give evidence of the divine plan and to demonstrate the necessity, Jesus walked these two disciples through all of what we know as the Old Testament. “Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.” How many times have I wished that we had those interpretations! Why did not Luke record them for us? And yet, surely the Holy Spirit has opened them to us. For instance, Genesis 22 tells the bizarre and horrible story of Abraham being ordered to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, and this makes sense only in context of God later sacrificing his only son, Jesus. Genesis 45 and 50 tell of Joseph forgiving his brothers who had sold him into slavery with the assurance, “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good,” which Jesus could just as well have said to those who crucified him.

It was from Psalm 22 that Jesus quoted the cry of dereliction, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” and from which his detractors received their taunt, whether they realized it or not, “He trusts in the LORD; let him deliver him; let him rescue him, for he delights in him!” Isaiah 42 tells that God put his Spirit upon his chosen servant. Isaiah 50 tells that the Lord God helped his servant so that he was not disgraced. Isaiah 52 tells that his appearance was marred beyond human semblance. Isaiah 53 tells that he was wounded for our transgressions, that he was crushed for our iniquities, that he bore the chastisement that brought us peace, and that with his stripes we are healed. Those stripes, of course, were the wounds made by a whip. Page after page, all of scripture points ahead to Jesus Christ. “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?” Thanks be to God!

But this suffering is not the whole story. “Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” “Was it not necessary that the Christ should...enter into his glory?” Here is the question, in our next to the last reading from this gospel, which points ahead not only to the resurrection but also to the ascension, to the glorification, and to the return of Christ, and which gathers it all together into the overarching plan of God. “Was it not necessary that the Christ should...enter into his glory?” Necessary. Required. Part of the divine will, the eternal decrees, God’s good plan for the salvation of the world. “Was it not

necessary that the Christ should...enter into his glory?" The question has a second half, equally necessary, a goal and a purpose toward which the first half tends.

Consider with me the implications of this question about the necessity of Christ entering his glory. Death did not have the last word. The crucifixion was not the end of the road. The tomb could not hold Jesus very long. God raised him from the dead, as the promise of your resurrection and of mine. God lifted him into heaven, establishing the fellowship into which we shall be drawn. God promises his return, when Jesus shall reign forever and ever, and when God's overruling shall become his explicit ruling. All of this was just as much a part of the plan, just as important, just as necessary, as all the previous suffering. It was necessary for Christ to be raised from the dead for death to be conquered. It was necessary for Christ to ascend to heaven to be restored to God. It was necessary for Christ to return to fulfill his kingdom and to gather us unto himself. Even as the first half of the plan has been completed, so are we given ever increasing confidence that God shall complete the second half, also.

All of this, too, was foretold by scripture. "Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself." Exodus 14 and 15 tell of Israel's escape through the sea, even as Christ escaped the tomb. Joshua 24 tells of Joshua calling the people of Israel to faith, even as Jesus, his namesake, calls us to faith. Samuel tells of David ruling the people of God, even as Jesus would rule the kingdom of God. Psalm 46 tells of the victory of the Lord, even as Jesus won the victory.

Isaiah 25, which we have read today, tells of God's victory over death, and he made that come true in Jesus Christ. Isaiah 43 depicts the return from the exile as a new exodus, and it points ahead to an even greater exodus. Isaiah 65 tells of God creating a new heaven and a new earth, and it all started in Jerusalem. Amos 5 calls for justice to roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Surely that has come true in Jesus Christ. Malachi 4 tells of the great and awesome day of the Lord. Surely that day has begun in Jesus Christ. Page after page, chapter after chapter, it all points ahead to Jesus Christ. "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?" Thanks be to God!

The impact of this necessity of both suffering and glory was that it led the disciples to both faith and witness. "When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him." That is faith. "And they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem. And they found the eleven and those who were with them gathered together, saying, 'The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!' Then

they told what had happened on the road, and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread.” That is witness.

Luke has recorded both of these not so much for historical interest as for your sake and for mine, as encouragements to us to be led to faith and to witness, indeed as the very instruments to lead us to faith and to witness. That is the point of this reading. That is the point of this gospel. That is the point of the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, that we should both believe in him and also bear witness to him. May God let our eyes be opened! May God let us recognize Jesus as the Christ! And may God grant us to grace to proclaim to all the world, “The Lord has risen indeed!”

With this good news of the resurrection, God has given us the word of hope we have needed to go on living. We have needed the word of forgiveness to cleanse us from the filth of our sin and guilt. We have needed the word of acceptance to restore us to right relationship with God and with each other. We have needed the word of challenge to urge us along the way. And most of all we have needed the word of reassurance that this world is not all there is, that this life is not the end of it all, that there is something more, beyond this, where the unclarities of life are made clear, where the errors of life are made correct, and where the gaping incompletenesses of life are made whole.

This is the word we receive with the resurrection, for the good news that Jesus is alive is also the promise that God will make us alive, that we shall join Jesus in the resurrection, and that the table fellowship of the kingdom of God is forever. One day there shall be no more Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church, or United States of America, or planet Earth, or Sun, but you and I shall continue to live eternally in the presence of God our Father and of his son Jesus Christ our Lord. That is at least part of what the resurrection means.

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To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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