



YEAR 3—The God Who Pursues Relationship: A Story of God's People

Module 6—Jesus and His Church

Lesson 3: The Death, Burial and Resurrection of Jesus—Matthew 26-28

BIBLICAL REFLECTION

(A theological and biblical reflection on today's Scripture passage.)

From my earliest days in Sunday school as a kid I remember asking the question, “Why did Jesus have to die?” Of course the reasons why haven’t changed since then, but my question has. I no longer ask, “Why did Jesus have to die?” I now ask, “Why would Jesus die for me?”

As I have grown and become more aware of God’s love and my sin and helplessness I found myself asking more and more questions about the events of Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection. I know Jesus had to die because the punishment for sin is death and because sin entered into the world when Adam and Eve exercised their free will and rebelled against God. I know God promised to make an offering, but it had to be a perfect offering. The promise of God to restore the world to its intended wholeness (Genesis 3:15) required an innocent death and Jesus is the only innocent, sinless person to walk the earth. Finally, I know prophets foretold Jesus’ death and all of God’s promises get fulfilled. I guess in my knowledge I find a sense of gratefulness that makes me shake my head and turn my palms up when I think about Jesus’ death.

Jesus’ death, or His atonement, refers predominantly to the fact that Jesus died as a replacement or substitute for sinful humankind. As a means of reconciliation that provides reunion, the atonement of Jesus makes restoration between God and humanity possible. The Bible does not teach of God being reconciled to humans, but always of humans being reconciled to God. We are reconciled to God through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus.

When Jesus died, He died for all. Although there are many views of the extent of Jesus’ atonement, most pastors and scholars agree that Jesus’ sacrifice for sin does not universally save all people, but is applied to all who place their faith in Christ. Restoring the harmonious relationship between humans and Himself was God’s gracious gift to all humanity. God sent His son to shed His blood for our sins. This is why Jesus came to the earth, to be given as a ransom for all.

I also remember as a kid wondering how in the world a man who died on a cross could come alive or be resurrected. To this day, I still get goose bumps when I think about this wonderful event.

Without the resurrection of Jesus after His death, Christianity would be a farce. The bodily resurrection of Jesus is essential to salvation of all those who believe. Without the resurrection we have death and death alone. With the resurrection we have new life, hope, expectation and possibility for all to be reconciled with God.

The resurrection of Jesus is what sets Christianity apart from other religions and it is the apex, or core, of the gospel. If the resurrection is not real then:

- Proclaiming and performing the gospel is useless
- Faith in anything, including self, is worthless

- All those recorded as eyewitness are either liars or lunatics
- People are not Christians at all and they merely believe in a man who was unable to remove sin and conquer death
- There is no such thing as eternal life or everlasting fellowship
- God does not have to love, even though God is love
- The church is useless and a joke
- Christ is not the head of the church
- Baptism means nothing
- Communion is merely remembering a dead man

Do you see how important the resurrection is to Christianity? Without it, we have nothing. The power that the resurrection brings to the believer allows each of us to live with hope that the world will be restored and all things will be made new.

GOD'S STORY

It is hard to discuss the death, burial and resurrection and not take a moment at the very least to reflect on the love of God. God's love is truly outside of human comprehension. Love is the essence of God. God without love is not God. God cannot choose not to love you and me. Because God is love, God must love.

God's love is comprehensive in that it is for all of humanity. Everyone has the opportunity to choose to love God back. Everyone has been invited to be loved by God and express that love to others through the power of the Holy Spirit. God's love, therefore, is personal. By the act of adoption, we are sons and daughters of God. We have been taken up in God's arms. This love of God for all of humanity seeks to awaken a response in humanity. Just as a shepherd seeks his sheep, so does God seek humans all for the purpose of the redemption of humanity. It is through this love that we must view the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, our Lord and Savior.

OUR STORY

In today's Scripture narratives we encounter Peter. Peter is known for many things. He is known for walking on water with Jesus albeit for a short time. Peter is known to have initially refused for Jesus to wash his feet and then later allowed, of course. He is also known for being the first to walk into the empty tomb of Jesus. Peter is known for all of his work to spread the gospel and built the church as outlined in the book of Acts. Peter was a martyr. He was killed on a cross, upside down. We know a lot about Peter. Well, which factoid did I not mention? You guessed it, Peter is also known for having disowned Jesus three times (as was predicted by Jesus). Peter, although he loved Jesus very much (John 21—Do you love me, Peter?), protected his own safety when questioned about his involvement and relationship with Jesus.

Peter was a complicated human, like us. Peter had his failures and his successes. He was very involved in the life and ministry of Jesus. We are like Peter—we have successes and failures in our relationship with Jesus. I know that each of us at one point or another in our life has done as Peter did in denying our participation with Jesus. We do this when we straight up deny Him, but we also do this when we choose not to participate in Jesus' mission as we know we should. Why does the story of Peter's denial remind us of ourselves? It is simple—because each of us has in some way withdrawn ourselves from our faithfulness to Jesus in the presence of confrontational skeptics or perhaps in front of vocal critics—sometimes by openly disowning Jesus, but often also by our silence.

OTHERS' STORY

I've been known to ask people to pray with me. When I am facing a tough decision, a trying financial time, a physically or emotionally draining time or I know someone who is in the middle of something similar, I am eager to involve the help of others in praying with me.

Jesus asked His disciples to pray with Him. The night before He was facing His death in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus invites the help of His closest friends. In the still and lonely time that came with awaiting His death, Jesus longed for the presence and participation of His friends. Why would Jesus want His friends with Him in this fear-filled moment? Quite simply, Jesus (in His humanity) was in need of strength and support before what He knew was going to be His death.

THE WORLD'S STORY

In some churches I have experienced Communion (the Lord's Supper) in rote fashion. For many, Communion has become merely worship service filler or an untaught religious practice. Still in other churches, I know from first-hand experience, that Communion has become nothing more than a personal time of reflection regarding the holy status of people's hearts. This is not what Jesus intended when He gave us Communion and taught us to "remember Him" in our practice of Holy Communion.

Jesus established this sacrament with His disciples at the Last Passover on the eve of His arrest (Matthew 26:17-30). This last supper narrative in Luke 22 records Jesus saying "Do this in remembrance of me." Remembrance is to be of Christ's person and work, specifically His birth, ministry—teachings, miracles, and so on—His sacrificial death on the cross and of course victory over death (although the disciples wouldn't know what that was until sometime after Jesus had ascended into heaven). This sacrament is a sign of God's grace whereby:

- Jesus gave His body and blood for our sins
- Jesus entered into a covenant with us
- Jesus joined us into one body, His church
- Jesus commissioned us for His ongoing work in the world

When Jesus was ready to establish the practice of Communion He:

- Took the bread
- Broke the bread
- Blessed the bread
- Gave the bread

This is a pattern for our life. It is not merely a worship service component or a private reflective practice to gauge one's holiness. Jesus has taken us, chosen us. Jesus has broken us, helping us get past self.

We are here for the world, not merely for ourselves or for the church for that matter. We are here on this earth, given to serve the world. This is what is sometimes referred to as the "Eucharistic life." So, the next time you participate in Holy Communion remember this; you have been taken, broken, blessed and given for the sake of the world.