

Jesus' Physical and Spiritual Deaths

Admittedly, I am rushing in where angels fear to tread when I propose that Jesus died spiritually as well as physically and that, in his spiritual death, he experienced hell. Though I may entice others into this forbidden concept also, you are still my brother if you are too wary for such.

Jesus suffered bodily upon the cross. We flinch at his pain as we read of his being whipped, stricken, pierced by thorns and nails, and suspended on the cross. His extreme thirst brought on by his wounds and trauma tenses our throats. We can understand why he would dread this ordeal and fervently pray about it in Gethsemane. We appreciate and sympathize with his dreadful suffering of bodily pain.

Please do not consider me to be irreverent when I ask if men have not faced death with more courage and have not endured extreme physical agonies for longer periods of time than Jesus did. Heroic men have faced death without flinching and have endured torture willingly, as painful as the human body can feel, for days. Even the thieves endured longer than Jesus did. The fact that Jesus was bearing our sins would not make physical suffering more intense, because guilt of sin is spiritual rather than fleshly.

It is most difficult, if not impossible, for us as earthly beings to comprehend any truth without having some physical concept with which to relate it. For instance, can you think of love, peace, or pain totally in the abstract? Man has little capacity to comprehend what spirit or spiritual death is. Logically, we can explain that spiritual death is separation from God who is the source of life, that ultimate separation is hell, and that hell is eternal cessation of life, but who can truly comprehend and appreciate those realities?

God accommodates our physical concepts in many ways. For instance, he gave our Savior a physical body as a point of identity with man, even though he is an eternal spirit. He permitted that body to bear the same kind of pains that we feel, and to die as we die, so we would have a point of reference by which to discern and to translate into that which is spiritual and abstract. Thus, the crucifixion is depicted to us, but not with all the grotesque description that some men use. The Scriptures speak of his death on the cross, his suffering there for us, and his bearing our sins in his body, yet these are accommodative in order to direct our minds to the more abstract and spiritual concepts. Who could comprehend and appreciate the suffering of a divine Spirit for us without our having any physical concept to tie it to?

Jesus bore our sentence of death. Our penalty for sin is death of the soul, not of the body. That death is separation from God. It is stated that Jesus made his soul an offering for sin (Isaiah 53:10-13). Jesus' sorrows, wounds, stripes and chastisements of Isaiah 53 were not physical endurances alone, which are powerless to atone, but they were the spiritual wounds received in mortal combat in which Jesus died, as predicted in Genesis 3:15. In that battle he was separated from God because of sin, abandoned temporarily into the jaws of death. This horrible experience brought forth the most agonizing and awesome cry of all history, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" It was the cry of the damned in hell, of him who became sin and accursed in our place. Anticipation of this

experience caused Jesus to pray fervently that he might avoid the cross. His knowledge of what alienation from God is like induced such trauma as to cause sweat to pour from his body as freely as though he were bleeding. He went to hell for us, and the Gethsemane and the cross experiences were the most explicit revelations in the Bible of the horrors, not of physical death, but of hell. Jesus' physical suffering and death gave us an acceptable framework for understanding and believing in the atonement as an escape from the most awesome fate, that of eternal separation from God.

"He was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption." The physical resurrection of Jesus has far greater significance than that of offering us hope of a similar rescue from physical death. It is the physical evidence that the Father brought Jesus back from death, breaking the power of sin. It offers us a basis of hope that we can also be brought into eternal fellowship with God in spite of our sins. Now, in baptism we are painlessly and symbolically buried with him in Joseph's tomb and raised with him, free from the effects of sin. Thus, the resurrection is a physical reinforcement of our faith.

Jesus' blood was shed for our atoning. This is another accommodation to our earthliness. The blood represented his life, even as the blood represented the life of the animal of atonement under the law. The animal died in place of the offender. Blood shed without the death of the animal would have been ineffective. So, it was the life represented by the blood that counted. The blood of Jesus represented the life of his body which, in turn, in its death depicted the spiritual separation from God which he experienced because of our sin, so that we may avoid eternal abandonment by God.

Persons like Enoch and Elijah had avoided physical death, and others like Lazarus and the widow's son had escaped from its clutches. No one, however, had bridged that chasm back to God after having been separated by sin. The redeemed of all ages owe their reconciliation to being in Jesus symbolically as he bridged the chasm of alienation for them. All who are saved owe it to his grace.

Even as the burying and raising of my body in a baptistery depicted an unseen and spiritual transaction, so the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus involved the spiritual being far beyond what the eye could see or the mind of man could discern without such a physical accommodation to our thinking. My faith and appreciation are reinforced by the physical demonstrations. []

This article is adapted from my *"Free To Speak,"* Chapter 4.

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(Cecil Hook; May 2004)

"I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24).