

Jesus: Liberator and King

Advance in Faith 1 — Unit 2

Week 5 — Jesus' death and resurrection



Introduction

Why did Jesus have to die? When you think about Jesus' death, what does it mean? Discuss.

Death: it's the ultimate threat to human life. The first recorded human death was a murder—one person taking power over the life of his brother (Gen 4). Abel died; Cain lived on and had children. If the evil live on and the righteous die, is there any justice?

Death is the ultimate weapon of the tyrant, the terror by which evil rulers hold power. How do you fight death and evil? Ultimately it will subsume us all. God breathed his own life into Adam (Gen 2:7), but the world is now in the grip of death. We all decay back into the ground (Gen 3:19). Murderers and tyrants use that power for their own twisted ends.

When Jesus was put to death, it wasn't a new thing. As Jesus himself pointed out, rulers have done this so often to those who had dared to critique those in power (Mt 23:29-37). Even those who worshipped the true sovereign had been cut down by the earthly rulers (Lk 13:1).

Jesus was not content to stay in his village and "be nice." As the king responsible to deliver his people, he needed to go to the capital and provoke a confrontation with its oppressors. He had planned this for months (Lk 9:31; 13:33f). He was quite sure what the outcome would be: those who held power in Jerusalem would kill him (Mk 10:33).

This is very different from how we often talk about Jesus' death. Christians often think of Jesus dying "because he had to", "as a sacrifice" "for our sins." We think that Judas had no choice: he had to betray him so that Jesus could die to cover our sins. Sometimes we even imagine that God wanted Jesus to die: otherwise he could not accept us and we couldn't go to heaven. This approach paints a terrible picture of God. If we depict God as someone who wanted to kill his own son, people we talk to will think of God as some kind of cosmic child-abuser.

There is a better way to talk about why Jesus died. God didn't kill Jesus. We did. Humanity had grasped the power that belonged to our heavenly sovereign, and there's a complete history of how we abused that power through slavery, wars, conquest, and killing the prophets who dared to speak out against the abuse of power. Our heavenly sovereign acted to resolve this hostility against his authority not by warring against us but by sending his own son—the prince of heaven—to restore the peace. Those who wanted to keep their own power killed him. God didn't kill Jesus: we did. That's the way Jesus told it.

Jerusalem as God's vineyard (Mt 21:33-46)

Jesus rode into his capital city, and enacted judgement against the temple. He insulted those who ran the temple by calling them *robbers* (21:13, quoting Jer 7:11). This Greek word—*lēstēs*—described thugs like Barabbas (John 18:40). Jesus accused the temple leaders of using the sanctuary as a thug's hideout (den) where they could hatch plans against the Romans (since Gentiles could not enter). They should have treated the temple as their heavenly sovereign's house—the place to make appeals regarding their Gentile oppressors to the one who rules the nations (Mt 21:13, quoting Isaiah 56:7). If he intended to provoke a confrontation with Israel's rulers, he succeeded.

So Jesus told them a story about the owner who planted a vineyard and leased it out to tenants (Mt 21:33-46). The owner is God. The vineyard is the nation of Israel, the people entrusted by God with representing their sovereign to the nations.

This was a familiar picture in Jewish literature. In Isaiah 5, the land-owner finds only wild (inedible) grapes in his vineyard, so he turns it over to the Gentiles who trample it underfoot so God's people will learn their lesson. Isaiah was talking about the demise of Israel to Assyria (722BC) and Judah to Babylon (587BC). Jesus compares that history to what he believed Rome would do (and did do in 70 AD).

In Jesus' story, the owner sends servants to collect the fruit, and the tenants mistreat and kill the owner's messengers. They have abused and killed the prophets throughout Israel's history. Finally, the owner sends his son. He hopes his tenants will recognise and respect his son. They care nothing for the owner and his son, only their own power:

Matt 21 ³⁸ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.' ³⁹ And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

The owner doesn't give up on his vineyard. He evicts the servants who refused his authority and killed his son. He gives the vineyard to other tenants. The Jerusalem rulers realise that Jesus has prophesied their doom (21:45).

They are determined to kill Jesus, and Jesus will not conduct a war against them. He trusts the architect of history will raise up his rejected son, making him the cornerstone of his entire project (21:42, quoting Psalm 118:22-23). What a staggering reversal!

That's how Jesus understood what his death meant: it was a confrontation with the evil rulers of God's world.

Fighting evil

Why does God permit evil? Why doesn't he step up and sort it out? There is so much evil in the world: rulers who oppress their subjects and make war on other countries, terrorists who fight and kill, rapists and murderers and paedophiles, ... Why doesn't God stop it?

When we ask that question, what do we imagine God ought to do? To obliterate all the evil people? The stories of Noah and of Sodom inform us that this approach does not solve evil. Evil runs through all of us, and God is not willing to obliterate the whole of humanity. He's not that kind of ruler.

Evil rulers force themselves on people, but our heavenly ruler's character is different. Human rulers force themselves on people, but that is never God's way. Earthly rulers won't just give their power back to God, so how does God ever regain control of the world that is under the power of evil?

God steps into the story, in the person of Jesus. Humans have tried to become gods (by grasping at God's power). God responds by becoming human. It's the strangest strategy: God sets aside his power, and comes in without his heavenly forces, without even being armed. If history teaches us anything it is that humans gain and keep power by killing. It's a strategy that goes all the way back to Abel.

So, Jesus approaches his capital city ready to take on its rulers. He rides in on a donkey, to the adulation of the crowds. He symbolically enacts judgement against the temple and its leaders. This is the showdown, the confrontation between good and evil.

But evil is so ingrained within us. In children's stories, the world is divided between goodies and baddies. This simplistic approach lets us create the mirage of "us" (goodies) versus "them" (baddies). The reality is that evil runs much deeper. One of Jesus' disciples (the goodies?) colludes with the evil rulers to betray Jesus. Yes, evil runs right through the middle of us!

Why do the Jewish leaders who are supposed to be God's representatives on earth arrest Jesus under the cover of darkness? Why bring weapons against him? Why treat him as if he was a rebel (*lēstēs*)?

Luke 22 ⁵² Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple guard, and the elders, who had come for him, "Am I leading a **rebellion**, that you have come with swords and clubs?" ⁵³ Every day I was with you in the temple courts, and you did not lay a hand on me. But this is your hour—when darkness reigns."

Jesus is not the rebel! The actions of the Jewish officials demonstrate that they are the ones rebelling against God's authority, enforced by violence, under the cover of darkness. Jesus is what Adam should have been: the genuine human, in the Garden, talking with God about managing his world.

The disciples don't understand. They are not about to allow Jesus to be taken like this. They will put their life on the line and fight for their king, just as David's mighty men had done. They draw swords. Peter swings and his target ducks—losing his ear, rather than his head.

Jesus rebukes his followers. They just compromised him! They are behaving like rebels! Jesus is now “numbered with the transgressors” (Isa 53:12, quoted in Lk 22:37), as his followers use the weapons of injustice for God's justice! Their approach only furthers evil! [By the way, that's what's wrong with all the Hollywood Westerns and action movies: might doesn't make right.]

Evil runs through Jesus' own disciples. Jesus' mission is to heal the wounds inflicted by injustice. He enacts that mission by restoring the ear that Peter cut off (Lk 22:49-50).

This is really confusing for the disciples! If they don't fight, Jesus will surely be captured and killed and once again, the tyrants will win! Surely this cannot be a solution for the evil of the world! If they kill him, he will be just one more failed Messiah in a long list of those who failed to deliver God's people. Can love ever really win over injustice?

Yet, Jesus seems to believe this is not the end of the story. Remember what he told his disciples at the Passover meal earlier that evening? He said he was offering his body and blood for his people. He would be the Passover lamb, the lamb that dies for the people so the “angel of death” would “pass over” them.

Judgement day

And so, judgement day arrives. Jesus is arrested, taken before the high priests (Annas and Caiaphas), and condemned. They lead him to the Sanhedrin—the Jewish council that confirms the judgement that he must die. He is judged as unfit to live, and sentenced to death.

But they need Roman approval to execute him. Watch what happens! The Jews don't want Jesus as their king. They reject the Davidic king God has promised. So, they collude with their Gentile oppressors to get rid of the king God sent them!

Pilate doesn't see any reason to condemn Jesus, so the Jews literally declare that they want Caesar, not this son of David, as their king:

John 19¹² From then on Pilate sought to release him, but the Jews cried out, “If you release this man, you are not Caesar’s friend. Everyone who makes himself a **king** opposes Caesar.”¹³ So when Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judgment seat ...
¹⁴ He said to the Jews, “Behold your **King!**”¹⁵ They cried out, “Away with him, away with him, crucify him!” Pilate said to them, “Shall I crucify your **King?**” The chief priests answered, “**We have no king but Caesar.**”

So here it is: God’s nation rejecting the Messianic king, and colluding with the Gentile rulers to use the ultimate weapon of the tyrant to maintain their own power: death!

Jesus is handed over to the evil religious and political powers that carve up the world between them. He is a threat to their power, so they judge him unfit to live. The cross was the ultimate torture weapon that Rome used to maintain its power.

Surely this is the ultimate **injustice!** Even the Roman centurion supervising Jesus’ death declares, “Certainly this man was innocent.” (Lk 23:47) Is this just another great travesty of justice—the victory of evil in a cruel world where love loses to brutality and death rules?

It has been this way for centuries in Israel’s history—oppressed and crushed by evil rulers who obtain their power by war and maintain their power by the real threat of death. Death’s reign goes right back to Genesis 3:

Death—the corruption and decay of the good creation, and of humans who bear God’s image—is the ultimate blasphemy, the great intruder, the final satanic weapon ...¹

The day death died

Jesus had come to Jerusalem knowing he was to die. He had spoken of giving his life as if he expected that God would somehow use this travesty to release Israel and humanity.

What if death could not hold him? What if death crushed all life out of his body, but God stepped in and recreated life, giving him a resurrected body that would never die again? That would be the beginning of the end for death. Never again would it be the ultimate weapon that destroys all! This would be the birth of God’s new creation — a restored creation where love does ultimately overcome

¹ N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (London: SPCK, 2006), 74.

injustice, where sin is dealt with, where injustice is not the last word, where life rules instead of death!

Many Jews did expect a resurrection. They believed that at the end of time, Yahweh would step in to set the world right, to fix the injustice of the world, and that would mean raising those who had died unjustly back to life (Dan 12:2). The resurrection of the righteous was a key part of their understanding of God's ultimate justice.

The problem with that view was that Israel had failed to live up to God's righteous expectations, so for century after century they remained oppressed. They needed a faithful Israelite, a righteous representative who could do this for them. And here he was—the faithful Israelite, the Righteous one, the Servant of Yahweh whom death could not hold!

So here he is: the resurrected Jesus, alive from the dead. Ever since the fall, sin had held humanity down and death has crushed them. Now the righteous one has defeated sin and overcome death! It really is the birth of an entirely new world—a world where everything is ultimately set right.

We are still living in a world where people die and death perpetrates injustice. But the world can never be the same! Death has lost its grip. It is a defeated foe. The world will be set right. The dead will rise. God's reign is established, exactly as described in Psalm 2.

Restored creation

And that's the way the gospel writers tell the resurrection story. The reign of sin and death is broken. Jesus declares that all authority is now his over the whole world, and he invites us to share the good news that God's reign over earth has been restored (Mt 28:18-20).

We do not yet see everything restored, but we do see Jesus as Lord. The sting of death is gone: it is already defeated in the resurrection, and Jesus is Lord. We are part of the community who celebrate our king and anticipate the day when he will fully restore God's world.

Luke tells a unique story about a couple walking away from Jerusalem. They are confused over Jesus' crucifixion, despondent that the one they hoped might be the Messiah had failed. They don't expect a resurrection, so they don't recognise Jesus as he joins them and talks about what has just taken place.

Arriving at Emmaus, they convince the traveller to stay for a meal. As they sit down, the guest takes the bread and plays host. They look at him, and for the first time they see what they do not expect: the resurrected Jesus.

It changes everything for them: they turn around and head back to Jerusalem to share the good news. Jesus is alive, and knowing that makes the world is a different place.

Throughout Luke, meals are significant moments, but why is this one so significant? What is Luke saying? Luke gives us a hint, by echoing words from the very first meal.

The first meal described in the Bible tells how everything went wrong. The perfect couple in God's beautiful garden ate the forbidden fruit, and the text says, "**the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew** they were naked." (Gen 3:7) From that moment, nothing is the same. They are sinful. Death ensues. The world is a cruel and broken place.

Luke takes the exact words from the Greek translation of the Gen 3:7, and supplies a different ending: "the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew *him*." (Lk 24:31) Instead of knowing they were broken, devastated, undone, unworthy, they know *him*—the resurrected Christ, the one who has undone sin, who changes their devastation, the one who has broken the power of sin and death, who has come back from the dead to tell us the good news!

The world is a different place now, for Jesus is alive. Love overcame injustice. Death's days are numbered. Jesus entered our death, and rose as the victor over death. He is the King who re-introduces God's rule. He is the liberator of the world.

Group Questions:

1. What does the death of Jesus mean for the world?
2. What does the death of Jesus mean for you?
3. Believers still die. In some places, believers are killed by evil people. How can we say the resurrection changes everything when this still happens? In what sense is the world different following the resurrection of Jesus?
4. In what ways should believers fight evil? Discuss in the light of how Jesus and his disciples did and did not do in approaching Jerusalem for the last time in his life.
5. If the resurrection of Jesus is the first part of God's restoration of his entire creation, what can Christians do that will inspire the wider world to catch that vision?

[*The Story of Jesus, Disk 3*: 30:09 – 33:45 “breathed his last”.
40:39 – 42:04 “tomb was empty”]

Memory Work:

John 20:21–22 (NIV)

Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”
And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

Take Home Exercise:

If you have received the forgiveness Jesus provided, what will it mean for you to live in that forgiveness?

‘This cup,’ he said, ‘is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.’ The atonement is not simply an abstract transaction, making God’s forgiveness available to those who want it. It was and is the stunning, towering achievement by which evil itself was defeated so that God’s new age could begin. And we who claim to follow Jesus can make that claim good only insofar as we live by the rule of forgiveness—serious forgiveness, not the cheap imitations I discussed above. Only so can we live out the proper Christian answer to the problem of evil, which is not a theory but a life, a life which will be vindicated or validated in the age to come when evil is finally abolished altogether.²

What will this mean for you? Who do you need to give forgiveness to, or to share the good news of forgiveness with?

Meditate on *The Message* translation of Colossians 1:20-21:

All the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe—people and things, animals and atoms—get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies, all because of his death, his blood that poured down from the cross. You yourselves are a case study of what he does.

² N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (London: SPCK, 2006), 102.