



## Thoughts from the Bible and Books Devotions from The Heidelberg Catechism

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37 **Q.** *What do you understand by the word "suffered"?*

**A.** That during his whole life on earth, but especially at the end, Christ sustained in body and soul the anger of God against the sin of the whole human race. This he did in order that, by his suffering as the only atoning sacrifice, he might set us free, body and soul, from eternal condemnation, and gain for us God's grace, righteousness, and eternal life.

38 **Q.** *Why did he suffer "under Pontius Pilate" as judge?*

**A.** So that he, though innocent, might be condemned by a civil judge, and so free us from the severe judgment of God that was to fall on us.

39 **Q.** *Is it significant that he was "crucified" instead of dying some other way?*

**A.** Yes. This death convinces me that he shouldered the curse which lay on me, since death by crucifixion was accursed by God.

Womb to tomb, that's how quickly the Apostles' Creed covers the life of Jesus. Last week we read that Jesus was born of the virgin Mary. This week we are already at his crucifixion. We've skipped over his public ministry and gone right from his birth to his death. The Creed does not make this leap to denigrate Jesus' teaching and miracles, but because those who wrote the Creed, and the Catechism, not to mention Peter, John, and Paul in the Acts of the Apostles, understood that the main thing about Jesus' life was his death.

We sometimes miss the obvious: that the gospels are mainly about the gospel. Already in Matthew 1 we read that Jesus will save his people from their sins. Already in John 1 we read that Jesus was the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Three times in Mark and three times in Luke, Jesus predicts his death prior to passion week. Nine of the 28 chapters in Matthew deal with the last week of Jesus' life – the events leading up to his execution, his death on a cross, and his resurrection from the dead. Passion week accounts for 6 of Mark's 16 chapters, 6 of Luke's 24 chapters, and 9 of John's 21 chapters. So out of 89 chapters in the four gospels, 29 (almost a third) are about the climatic final week of Jesus' life. If we figure Jesus was 33 years old when he died, he lived around 1700 weeks. And his four biographers spend a third of their time on only one of those weeks. Have you ever read a 300 page biography where 100 pages dealt with the subject's death? Not even for Lincoln, JFK, or MLK do we have such lopsided attention paid to the end of the story. But for Jesus, the ending of his life is the story.

Yet, the Catechism makes clear that the ending of Jesus' life, with its severe affliction, was but an intensification of the entire life he lived. Although our pain-averse, comfort-prizing natures would like to forget it, we worship a Savior whose life was marked by profound suffering. Ursinus, Heidelberg's chief author, lists seven ways Christ suffered. 1) He gave up the joys of heaven. 2) He experienced the infirmities of our nature (hunger, thirst, sadness, grief, etc.). 3) He knew deprivation and poverty (i.e., he had no where to lay his head). 4) He endured insults, treacheries, slanders, blasphemies, rejection, and contempt. 5) He faced temptations from the devil. 6) He died a shameful and painful death. 7) He experienced the bitter anguish of soul as one accursed of God and forsaken by his heavenly Father.

This last point is especially important because it reminds us that Jesus was not merely another tragic hero whose unjust punishment elicits our pity. As much as I was thankful for many aspects of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, I couldn't help but think that without a theological interpretation of Jesus' passion, most people watching the movie would end up simply feeling sorry for a good man who suffered so violently. But the scourge of whips and nail marked hands don't begin to show us all that Christ suffered as he sustained, in body and soul, the anger of God against the sin of the human race. More than just another tragic human martyr, Jesus was the unique Son of God who suffered once for all for the sins of the world and shouldered, as no one else ever did, could, or will, the curse of God for us.

There is one more issue we need to touch on in this Lord's Day, the so-called "L" in TULIP – limited atonement. Did Jesus die for everyone or just for the elect? Answer 37 seems to go against Calvin and the Synod of Dort (1618-19) when it states that Christ sustained the anger of God "against the whole human race." Does this mean Jesus died for everyone? Sort of, but not in a way that undermines limited atonement. Ursinus didn't take Answer 37 to be a rejection of limited atonement, which is pretty significant since he probably wrote the answer! Ursinus explains in his commentary that Christ's death was for all "as it respects the sufficiency of satisfaction which he made, but not as it respects the application thereof." In other words, the death of Christ was *sufficient* to atone for the sins of the whole world, but it was God's will that it should *effectively* redeem those and only those who were chosen from eternity to salvation and given to Christ by the Father (cf. Canons of Dort II.8).

Particular redemption is actually a more helpful term than limited atonement, because the point of the doctrine is not to limit the mercy of God, but to make clear that Jesus did not die in the place of every sinner on the earth, but for his particular people. The good shepherd lays his life down for the sheep (John 10:11). This is why John 6 says Jesus came to save those the Father had given to him, and why Matthew 1:21 says he died for his people, and John 15:13 says for his friends, and Acts 20:28 says for the church, and Ephesians 5:25 says for his bride, and Ephesians 1:4 says for those chosen in Christ Jesus.

The doctrine of particular redemption is worth talking about because it gets to the heart of the gospel. We do not say "Christ died so that sinners might come to him." We say, "Christ died for sinners." There's a big difference. Did Christ's work on the cross make it possible for sinners to come to God? Or did Christ's work on the cross reconcile sinners to God? In other words, does the death of Jesus Christ make us save-able or does it make us saved? If the atonement is not particularly and only for the sheep, then either we have universalism – Christ died in everyone's place and therefore everyone is saved—or we have something less than penal substitution. If Jesus died for every person on the planet then we no longer mean that he died in place of sinners, taking upon himself our shame, our sins, and our rebellion so that we have the death of death in the death of Christ. Rather, we mean that when Jesus died he made it *possible* to come to him if we will do our part and come to him. But this is only half a gospel. Certainly, we need to come to Christ in faith. But faith is not the last work that finally makes us saved. Faith is trusting that Jesus has in fact died in our place and bore the curse for us – effectually, particularly, and perfectly.

We talk of "limited" atonement not because Reformed people have an interest in limiting the power of the cross,

but in order to safeguard the central affirmation of the gospel that Christ is a Redeemer who really redeems. "We are often told that we limit the atonement of Christ," Spurgeon observed, "because we say that Christ has not made a satisfaction for all men, or all men would be saved." But, Spurgeon argues, it is the view of the atonement which says no one in particular was saved at the cross that actually limits Christ's death. "We say Christ so died that he infallibly secured the salvation of a multitude that no man can number, who through Christ's death not only may be saved, but are saved, must be saved and cannot by any possibility run the hazard of being anything but saved."

Likewise, J.I. Packer maintains that if we don't "limit" the extent of the atonement, we end up cheapening it:

It comes about this way. We want to magnify the saving grace of God and the saving power of Jesus Christ. So we declare that God's redeeming love extends to every man, and that Christ has died to save every man, and we proclaim that the glory of divine mercy is to be measured by these facts. And then, in order to avoid universalism, we have to depreciate all that we were previously extolling, and to explain that, after all, nothing that God and Christ have done can save us unless we add something to it; the decisive factor which actually saves us is our own believing...This is a hollow anticlimax. But if we start by affirming that God has a saving love for all, and Christ died a saving death for all, and yet balk at becoming universalists, there is nothing else we can say. And let us be clear on what we have done when we have put the matter in this fashion. We have not exalted grace and the Cross; we have cheapened them.

I belabor this point not to belittle Arminian brothers and sisters, but to give Jesus Christ his full glory. Christ does not come to us merely saying, "I've done my part. I laid down my life for everyone because I have saving love for everyone in the whole world. Now, if you would only believe and come to me I can save you." Instead he says to us, "I was pierced for your transgressions. I was crushed for your iniquities (Isa. 53:5). I have purchased with my blood men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation (Rev. 5:9). I myself bore your sins in my body on the tree, so that you might infallibly die to sins and assuredly live for righteousness. For my wounds did not merely make healing available. They healed you (1 Peter 2:24)."

"Amazing love!" a great Arminian once wrote. "How can it be that you, my Lord, should die for me?!" Praise be to our Good Shepherd who sustained the anger of God in body and soul, shouldered the curse, and laid down his life for the sheep.