

The Consequential Substitute
Isaiah 53:5-6, Matt 27:11-26

Friends, there's an episode of CSI New York where one of the Crime Lab detectives notices that she has someone following her around town. This fellow has been spying on her in the coffee shop,, trailing her on the subway and follows her into a clothing store – pretending to be just another customer.

So she casually strikes up a conversation with him, not letting on that she's aware he's following her and then confronts him and informs him that she's a police detective and wants to know why he's following her!

He won't tell her at first, but instead convinces her to go out for dinner later that evening where he promises to reveal why he's been following her around - and she agrees.

Now I've never found this method to be a successful way to get a date but it worked on TV so there must be some merit to it 😊

So, later on that evening they meet at some restaurant – order dinner and some wine and soon they are chatting and laughing like old friends. Eventually she reminds him that he's promised to tell her why he had been following her and he becomes serious and pauses before he gives the explanation.

He tells her that a while back he discovered that he was diagnosed with a terminal heart condition and that his only hope was to receive a transplant, and on a particular date a little over a year ago a suitable donor was found and he received the heart transplant he needed to live.

She listens attentively at first - she's happy for this man and his good fortune – but something about the date on which the donor became available triggers a recollection for her and she asks him to remind her where he said he was from...

When he tells her, her expression slowly changes in shock as she begins to put the pieces of this puzzle together.

“My sister who lived in that town” – she says slowly – “and she died in a car accident on the day you said your donor became available...”

And then it all comes together for her in a shocking realization
“You... you have my sister’s heart!”

“Yes” – he confesses – “and I’ve wanted to find you and meet you so that I can learn more about your sister. Her death has given me a second chance at life and I want to try to say thank-you for your sister’s heart”

Friends – it would not be an understatement to say that this fellow really knows what it means to say that someone died so he might live.

But I wonder - do we know what it means that Jesus died so that we might live? We confess this phrase, or a variation of it, all the time don’t we...?

“Amazing love, how can it be, that you my King would die for me....” but what exactly does Jesus’ death do for us... and why do we say that Jesus died in our place?

The recipient of an organ donation knows very specifically that someone’s death meant that doctors had a healthy organ they could substitute in place of their diseased and failing organ...

So what do we get out of Jesus’ sacrifice, out of his death?

How would you explain this to a co-worker who is wondering why Good Friday is such an important holiday for Christians, or maybe to a child who is struggling to understand why Jesus had to die?

Not easy to do is it? And the answer we are most likely offer is that Jesus sacrificed himself to pay for our sins.

And if we are pushed for further explanation we would say “because... our sins separate us from God, because they offend God, he is angry about them and they deserve

punishment. We could never survive such a punishment... so thankfully Jesus stepped in on our behalf and underwent the punishment we should have received and gives us his life instead.”

And simply put in this way – it seems to be what scriptures like Isaiah 53 are referring to: *“he was pierced **for our** transgressions, he was crushed **for our** iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace **was on him**”* (Is 53:5)

But as is often the case, when we try to make something simple and easy to understand - we end up making it simplistic... and it gets distorted and misunderstood.

If you’ve seen the movie – the Life of Pi, you might remember the part where the Catholic Priest tries to answer Pi’s question about why a perfect God would send his Son to pay for all the sins of humanity...

The priest tries to give his best answer to explain – and Pi confesses later on as an adult that it made no sense at all. He totally misunderstood it.

Or worse it can distort things. People often frame our explanation of Jesus’ death with a context which sees God the Father like an abusive parent who has to resort to violence as punishment because he’s so upset about the things we’ve done wrong.

And thus Jesus is the one who steps in to take the beating for us – which means that we’ll love Jesus because he sacrificed himself for us – but what are we going feel for God the Father? Not love or any sense of a desire for a relationship that’s for sure...

Yet Jesus said that there is no other way to the Father except through him? So... Jesus took the abuse in order to connect us with an abusive God? You can see how this distorts things.

And this is because, friends, our simplistic answers leave out the context – and thus the people who hear our explanations are left to create their own context to frame what we’ve said.

Now, if you’ve ever framed a picture or a piece of art – you know that while the picture or the piece of art is the focus, choosing the right frame will make it or break it... and it works the same way with explaining the death of Jesus - It has to be set in the right context.

And the proper context, the right frame is the Covenant – not our sin, not God’s justice, not the suffering and agony of crucifixion, not Jesus’ innocence... but the Covenant.

To be sure all those things I just mentioned are important elements in Jesus’ death, and they play an important role in actually constructing the picture of it, but the frame which draws those things out in the proper way that is the covenant.

Are you with me so far? We need to know the context that frames Jesus’ death so that we have the same specific sense of benefit as an organ donor would.

We need that concrete knowledge so that it gives us the reason to put our faith and our trust in Jesus.

So much of what we do with Jesus’ death involves recounting how horrific and terrible it was. We go into all the gory detail about it and then we cap it all off by saying... “He did this for you! You deserved this but Jesus went through it for you...”

But this doesn’t produce faith and trust friends. It produces sympathy and sentiment – “oh that’s horrible that Jesus went through that! Gosh I love him.”

It produces guilt “Man if I wasn’t such a bad person Jesus wouldn’t have had to endure all the agony and suffering! I really have to try to be a good Christian...”

It can even produce resentment “Look I didn’t ask him to do that for me, I’m a pretty good person - not a murderer, I haven’t done anything significantly bad – I won’t be emotionally manipulated into feeling like I should follow him just because he did this”

Friends none of these reactions are of faith and trust, and they certainly aren’t faith and trust IN Jesus Christ – who is supposed to be our substitute.

Ok I think the point has been made - We need to understand how important it is that we grasp the context of the Covenant in order to truly build up our faith and trust **in Jesus** as our substitute.

So let’s talk about that context then – let’s talk about Covenant. For starters what is it?

In scripture a Covenant is a type of relationship – it’s a binding legal agreement between un-equals, with conditions and stipulations that carry blessings or consequences. Faithfulness

to the stipulations ensures blessing and unfaithfulness brings about the consequences.

Covenants were made to formalize important relationships between Kings and Nobles, business deals, peace treaties and the like- so the Covenants themselves were considered very important.

When you entered into a Covenant with someone, to formalize the seriousness of what you were doing and your intention to keep the terms of the Covenant you swore on your life.

And to symbolize this, animals were taken – cut in half and both parties would walk between the halves of the animal to state – If I break this covenant may it be done to me as has been done to these animals. (Gen 15)

Thus a covenant could be said to be “sealed in blood,” (also where we get the phrase “to cut a deal”)

Now when God formalized his Covenant with the nation of Israel, Moses had a number of bulls sacrificed in honor of God – as fellowship offerings, kind of a divine BBQ if you will –

and he collected the blood from these bulls and he went and sprinkled it on the people of Israel saying *“This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.”* (Ex 24:8)

So God’s relationship with Israel was sealed in blood, meaning that if any of the Israelites or their descendants, or their descendants’ descendants did not keep the stipulations and was not faithful to the covenant agreement – they had to pay with their life.

So the first question that comes to mind is probably – “why would anyone agree to this?” We put up a fuss about signing a three year contract for a cell phone! We have pre-nup’s. Why would I agree to forfeit my life if I even think I won’t be able to keep to the agreement?

Well friends, quite frankly it’s because the benefits package rocked! Think about it – the Creator of the Universe, the God above all gods has stepped into your life and offered to be in a relationship with you – blessings, protection, provision – he’s all that you will ever need.

In return – worship and obey me, my laws are beneficial and life giving – no child sacrifices, no bizarre rituals, I’m straight forward and I’ll even write down a ten point summary for you to make it easier to follow.

Oh and if you do happen to screw up – I’ll let you substitute an animal’s life in place of your own and I’ll forgive you.

So... from that perspective, who wouldn’t want to sign up right? And anyone could, that was God’s intention. His Covenant relationship with Israel was so they could be a light to the nations around them.

And you would think that with this great package they would have all the motivation and inspiration to stay faithful and

obedient to the Covenant! But no – they didn't, they couldn't and so eventually their lives were forfeit and the Covenant was broken.

Now there's lot more detail in Israel's story that we can get into – but we've covered enough of the Covenant Context now so that we can frame Jesus death and specifically articulate what it is that we receive from it.

And quite simply it's this – Jesus' death gives us a new Covenant with God.

So - why is Jesus' death important, why did Jesus have to die? Because, through his death Jesus established a New Unbreakable Everlasting Covenant Relationship with God... for our benefit!

A Covenant Relationship is established between two unequal parties – Jesus, in his humanity enters into a relationship with God and represents us.

A Covenant Relationship is of such importance that its participants agree to never break it – on pain of death... so it must be sealed in blood and Jesus spilled his own blood to seal this Covenant for us.

This means we get all the benefits of knowing the Creator God who made us, having him providing for us, protecting us, blessing us, giving us our life, and moving us towards the day when He will make all things new and destroy evil and sin forever – and Jesus sealed this deal for us... pretty amazing! Praise God! Amen!!!

Now that's a pretty good deal to start with but... when Jesus seals the new covenant through shedding his blood, his death also functions as a payment for all the previous violations committed under the Old Covenant.

Now we understand Isaiah 53:5 in context when it says "*he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him.*"

But wait... that's not all... In addition to sealing the new covenant and paying the past due penalties of the old covenant He also offers his life as a substitute payment for all the inevitable disobedience and unfaithfulness and idolatry and immorality that is yet to come from us...

His death was an advance payment for all the sins we had yet to commit.

This is why Paul says - *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Rom 5:8)*

That's mind blowing isn't it! Starting and Sealing an unbreakable new covenant, paying the past debt from the old one and paying in advance for all the future violations of the new one – all accomplished in Jesus' death!

So it's no wonder that the Cross where Jesus died has come to have such significance

It's no wonder that we tell people "Jesus died for you" and we sing "Amazing Love how can this be, that you my King would die for me"

Because we get some pretty specific amazing actual benefits from his death and like any organ donor recipient it should leave us full of gratitude and wanting to say thank-you!

And we should be seeking out the one who gave his life for us to find out more about him and why He did this for us...

And it should leave us trusting in Him, putting our faith in Him – because of the specific things He's accomplished – not believing that we are saved because we feel sympathetic or guilty for his suffering!

But because of what he accomplished through his death – trusting that it is truly on our behalf!

So...friends, as we anticipate and celebrate Good Friday – where you are once again presented with the picture of the

sorrow, the suffering, the pain and the desolation Jesus
endured in the crucifixion – keep it framed in the
understanding of Covenant, and put your faith in what you see
display there – for you!

Let's pray...