

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

Brothers and sisters, the challenge of the Easter Season is not convincing people that Jesus rose from the dead... the challenge is explaining to them why Jesus' death was necessary and how it benefits us.

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

It's not easy to do is it - and the answer we are most likely to give 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 explained 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.

And misunderstanding can lead to distortion. More and more people are hearing our simple explanation of why Jesus had to die and they put it in a context which compares God the

Father to an abusive parent who resorts to violence for punishment because he's so upset about the things we've done wrong.

And they see Jesus as the one who steps in to take the beating for us – which means that they will love Jesus because he sacrificed himself for us to protect us – but what are they going to feel for God the Father? It won't be love or any desire for a relationship with Him that's for sure...

And brothers and sisters, this is because our simplistic answers leave out the context – and allow the people who hear our explanations to create their own context for 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 - is the covenant.

Are you with me so far? We need to understand what context properly frames Jesus' death so that we are able to correctly understand why Jesus died, what it means, how it benefits us and why we can put our faith and our trust in it.

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..."

Now this may technically be true – but presenting it in this manner doesn't produce faith and trust friends.

It produces sympathy and sentiment – *“oh that’s horrible that Jesus went through that for me! 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”*

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

This is why we need to understand how important it is that we grasp the context of the Covenant so that can put our faith and trust **in Jesus** as our substitute and show others how to do the same.

So let’s look at how the Covenant is the Context and start with what a Covenant actually is.

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 blessings, but 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 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 was 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 something where I would forfeit my life if I even thought I wouldn’t be able to keep the agreement?

Well brothers and sisters, on one hand when God chooses you – you are chosen, He’s God and we’re not. But – the benefits package of being God’s chosen is pretty good.

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 – He requires worship and obedience, but his laws are beneficial and life giving. There’s no child sacrifices, no bizarre rituals, God is straight forward and honest and He even write down a ten point summary of his laws to make it easier for people to follow.

Oh and if they do happen to screw up – He will allow you to substitute an animal’s life in place of your own and will offer you forgiveness.

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 this great benefit package they would have all the sentimentality and inspiration to help them stay faithful and obedient to the Covenant! But no – they didn’t, they couldn’t and they wouldn’t - so eventually the Covenant was broken and their lives were forfeit.

Now there’s lot more detail in Israel’s story that we could get into – but we’ve covered enough to understand the basics of the Covenant context to help us 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 on our behalf and He represents us – he’s our substitute.

A since a Covenant relationship is of such importance that its participants agree to never break it – on pain of death... so that it must be sealed in blood, 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 –we get this all through Jesus and He sealed this deal for us with His life... pretty amazing! Praise God! Amen!!!

Now that’s a pretty good deal which Jesus secures with his death but it gets better. When Jesus seals the new covenant through shedding his blood, his death is **simultaneously** 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 at the same time 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 benefits from his death and if we understand how this works it should leave us full of gratitude and wanting to say thank-you!

It reminds me of a TV show where a lady detective notices that she's being followed around by a strange man.

Eventually he follows her into a store and she confronts him and wants to know why he's following her!

He doesn't want to tell her right away, but promises that if she goes out for dinner with him that evening where he will reveal why he's been following her around - and she agrees.

At diner he tells her that he was diagnosed with a terminal heart condition and a heart transplant was his only hope – the good news was that a suitable donor was found a year ago and he received the heart transplant he needed to live.

When he tells her this, she begins to connect the date of the organ donation and the town where he was from and she says "My sister lived in that town... and she died in a car accident on the day 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 – this man really knows what it means that someone died so he might live, and when we understand the covenant we also come to understand what it truly means that Jesus died so we might live.

So we should be seeking out the one who gave his life for us to find out more about him, and how we ought to respond...

And it should leave us trusting in Him, putting our faith in Him because of the specific things He has accomplished in establishing a new covenant and fulfilling the old covenant.

We can trust that we are saved because we are included in the new covenant through Him – and it's not our feelings of sympathy or guilt that assure us of salvation – rather it's the good news that Jesus is our substitute which we can believe and trust in with all of our heart, and mind and strength.

So...friends, as we start the Easter Season and get ready to celebrate Good Friday – where we will take a closer look at the sorrow, the suffering, the pain and the desolation which Jesus endured in the crucifixion...

Remember - keep it framed in the understanding of Covenant, and put your faith in how this presents Jesus dying – for you... for your benefit – so you can have a life-giving relationship with your Creator God!

Amen - Let's pray...