

JESUS (PART TWO)

SALVATION IN CHRIST – DEATH, RESURRECTION AND ASCENSION

(C 571-667, USC Ch. 8)

... *For our sake he was crucified
under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered, death and was buried,
and rose again on the third day
in accordance with the Scriptures.
He ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.*
(Nicene Creed)

In suffering and death his humanity became the free and perfect instrument of his divine love which desires the salvation of men. (C 609)

Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat, but if it dies it produces much fruit. (Jn 12:24)

In this article we will look at:

- Death of Jesus - was it God's will?
- "He descended into hell"
- Resurrection and its meaning
- Ascension and its meaning
- "Are you saved?" - a Catholic response

Chapters 1 and 2 of Genesis tell us about the creation of the first man and woman. God created them not because he needed them but in order to share his divine life with them. Paradise is the image often used to speak of the peace and harmony that Adam and Eve enjoyed before they sinned.

Chapter 3 of Genesis recounts the sad story of their fall from grace. They choose to allow Satan, imaged as a cunning serpent, to trick or seduce them into disobeying God. The result is that they are banished from paradise. They have broken their relationship with God. Gen 4-11 tells the story of the spread of sin. "*God saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that the thoughts in his heart fashioned nothing but wickedness all day long*" (Gen 6:5-6).

History of salvation. "History of salvation" is the phrase often used to describe God's plan to redeem the human race that had forgotten its Maker and rebelled against him.

- The first step in God's plan to save humanity was the call of Abraham, as recounted in Gen 12:1-4.
- The high point in the history of our salvation is the Incarnation, death and Resurrection of Jesus. In some of his writings, Paul calls Jesus the New Adam (1 Cor 15:45).

The Church teaches us that Jesus saved and reconciled humanity to God in and through his death and Resurrection. Since God could have saved humanity in any number of ways, one may wonder why he would choose the cruel death of his Son. We may wonder what kind of a God would save his people by having his only Son die like a criminal. In Rom 11:33, Paul reminds us of the "inscrutable and unsearchable ways of God."

To be executed on a cross even though one is innocent is *the worst* thing that can happen to a human being. God is willing to allow this to happen to his only Son to show his solidarity with suffering humanity. Only the worst criminals are crucified and now the all-holy God is executed between two of them. Such is the extent of God's outreach to humanity. "*As the mediator of salvation, Jesus endured torment of body and anguish of spirit. He knew agony, terror and depression... He was truly one with the human condition*" (Diane Bergant).

Pause: Can you see that God's decision to allow Jesus to die a cruel death is not an act of cruelty, but rather an act of solidarity with all people who experience terrible things in their lives? What strikes you most about Jesus' death?

In what sense was it not God's will for Jesus to die on the Cross? (C 606-623, USC pp. 91-94)

Jesus is executed because he is a big threat to the Jewish establishment (C 574). *Some* of the leadership want to get rid of Jesus and they manipulate Pilate into doing their dirty work. Needless to say, it would be a gross error to blame *all* the Jewish people for the death of Jesus. So Jesus is executed because his enemies want to get rid of him. In this sense, his death is an evil act. It would be a contradiction to say that our all-good God would desire such an evil act. Secondly, it would be wrong to say that God wants a human sacrifice as a price for the sins of humanity. We know from the incident with Abraham and his son, Isaac, that God is very much opposed to human sacrifice (Gen 22:1-19).

In what sense is Jesus' death God's will?

It is God's will that Jesus be faithful to his mission even if it means dying a cruel death. Jesus could easily have escaped death by *not* saying or doing things that threatened the religious leaders. He could have preached a safe gospel. But then he would not have been faithful to his mission. A true prophet says and does what he believes to be true even if it will cost him his life. We see this with the Old Testament prophets.

The examples of Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King and Archbishop Oscar Romero, will be helpful here. All three felt called by God to carry out a certain mission—to be liberators of their people and to speak truth to power. All three were assassinated or executed for their “crime.” All three knew that they, like Jesus, would most likely pay the ultimate price for their fidelity to their mission. They could easily have escaped death by preaching a safe message. But in doing so, they would be unfaithful to God and to their mission. So they continued to preach a message that endangered their lives.

Did God will for them to die? “No” and “yes.” All three people died because their enemies wished to get rid of them. It certainly was not God’s will that evil people kill good men. God’s heart would be deeply grieved by such an event. But it was God’s will that all three be faithful to their mission even if it meant sacrificing their lives for the liberation of their people. In this sense God willed the death of Gandhi, King and Romero. But we also know that God always turns the table on such evil acts. The deaths of Gandhi, King and Romero brought about significant progress in the liberation of their people from oppression.

Their sacrificial deaths give us some glimpse into the significance of the death of Jesus. Because he is God in human form, his death is infinitely more valuable for all of humanity. Looking at the death of Jesus in this way does not make God a bloodthirsty God. Rather, it makes him someone who wants us to be faithful to the truth we know. Looking at Jesus’ death in this way helps us to see that we are saved by an act of *sacrificial love*. God takes what is intended as an evil act and uses it to save the world.

In one of his poems, Irish poet William Butler Yeats uses the phrase “Terrible Beauty” to speak about the death of Christ. It is *terrible* in the sense that it symbolizes what evil people will do to stop goodness from moving forward. The Cross is *beautiful* in that it symbolizes what Jesus is willing to do to show his love for sinful humanity.

Pause: What speaks to you most in the section that we have just read? Do you have any questions or problems with what is stated above? Can you think of a time in your life or in the life of a family member when sacrificial love led to personal transformation?

The meaning of the Cross for us

- Never again need we look upon sacrificial love as useless. Sacrificial love always bears fruit whether we live to see it or not. The world is always better because of sacrificial love.

- The Cross might scare us from speaking truth to power. But it should also *inspire* us to do so. St. Rose of Lima once said: “Apart from the Cross, there is no ladder by which we get to heaven.”

“He descended into hell.”

The Apostles’ Creed states that Jesus “descended into hell.” What does this mean? When addressing this issue, we need to distinguish *Sheol* or *Hades* (the realm of the physically dead) from *Gehenna* (the realm of the spiritually dead, the eternally damned). The *Catechism* states: “*Jesus, like all people, experienced death and in his soul joined the others in the realm of the dead* (632).

The *Catechism* further states: *Scripture calls the abode of the dead, to which the dead Christ went down, “hell” —Sheol in Hebrew or Hades in Greek—because those who are there are deprived of the vision of God. Such is the case for all the dead, whether evil or righteous, while they await the redeemer: which does not mean that their lot is identical, as Jesus shows through the parable of the poor man Lazarus who was received into “Abraham’s bosom.” “It is precisely these holy souls, who awaited their Savior in Abraham’s bosom, whom Christ the Lord delivered when he descended into hell.” Jesus did not descend into hell to deliver the damned, nor to destroy the hell of damnation, but to free the just who had gone before him* (633).

So the phrase “descended into hell” means that Jesus really died and rested among the dead for some time.

In addition, Jesus in his spirit went to preach the good news to all who had died prior to his Resurrection (1 Pt 3:18-19). Commenting on these strange verses in Peter’s letter, the *Catechism* states: “*The gospel was preached even to the dead.*” *The descent into hell brings the Gospel message of salvation to complete fulfillment. This is the last phase of Jesus’ messianic mission, a phase which is condensed in time but vast in its real significance: the spread of Christ’s redemptive work to all men of all times and all places, for all who are saved have been made sharers in the redemption* (634).

Understanding how Jesus went to preach to deceased spirits is probably beyond our comprehension.

Resurrection – an historical and transcendent event (C 639-647, USC pp. 94-95)

*“If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain ... and you are still in your sins” (1 Cor 15:14-19). The Catechism calls the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead an *historical and transcendent* event (639-647).*

A *historical event.* The Resurrection was a *historical event* in that it really happened. Even though Jesus, during his earthly life, did speak about his Resurrection from the dead, his Apostles were in no way expecting it to happen. In fact, it took them some time to believe what seemed unbelievable (C 644). In 1 Cor 15:5-8, Paul testifies to the many appearances of Jesus: to Peter, to the Twelve, to more than 500 people, to James and to himself. His Resurrection was so real for these people that many of them were willing to be martyred rather than deny the truth which they witnessed.

A *transcendent event.* While the Resurrection of Christ is believed by Christians to be a real historical event, it is also regarded to be a transcendent event, one beyond the realm of history. No one witnessed the Resurrection; none of the evangelists described it. Though Jesus could be seen, heard and touched, his Resurrection is, in the end, a religious mystery which requires the gift of faith to accept.

Christ’s glorified body—what was it like? Christ’s glorified body was both the *same* and *different* from his pre-Resurrection body. It was the same in that he could be seen and touched and able to eat a meal (Jn 21:12-14). In Lk 24:38-39, 41, the disciples are startled when Jesus appears to them. Jesus says to them: *“Look at my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me and see, because a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you can see I have.”*

Yet Jesus’ glorified body is *very different* in that he is not limited by time and space. In Jn 20:19-20, Jesus appears to his disciples even though the doors are locked. As he walks with the two disciples on the journey to Emmaus, they do not know who he is (Lk 24:16). But a little later, when he breaks bread in front of them, “their eyes are opened” as to who he is. But then he suddenly “vanishes from their sight” (ibid.24:31).

The Resurrection—its meaning for Jesus, for the Apostles and for us (C 651-55)

For Jesus: If Good Friday is the world’s big “No” to Jesus and all that he said and did, Easter morning is God’s big “Yes” to Jesus and all that he said and did. It is God’s affirmation of Jesus’ life, passion and death. *“The Resurrection above all constitutes the confirmation of all Christ’s works and teachings” (C 651).*

For the Apostles and disciples of Jesus, the Resurrection is, among other things, hope restored. In the alter-nate *Opening Prayer* for Easter Sunday Mass, (1973 translation) we find these words: *God our Father, creator of all, today is the day of Easter joy. This is the morning on which the Lord appeared to men who had begun to lose hope and opened their eyes to what the scriptures foretold: that first he must die, and then he would rise and ascend into his Father’s glorious presence.* For the Apostles and for us with the eyes of faith, Christ’s Resurrection is the great testimony to his divinity (C 652).

For us, Christ’s victory over sin, evil and death gives the promise and power to share in his victory. Baptism is our participation in Christ’s victory. Fidelity to our baptism gives us the promise of sharing in Christ’s life here on earth and sharing his life forever in heaven. We may only realize how great this promise and gift is when we meet a person who has no faith in Christ and no belief in an afterlife.

Christ’s passion, death and Resurrection are the pattern for our own journey. With the eyes of faith, we find meaning for our sufferings in the sufferings of Christ. We trust that at the end of every dark tunnel, Christ’s light awaits us. Furthermore, as we lay down our lives in the service of others, we open ourselves to receiving God’s abundant life. In the same way, as we empty ourselves of all selfish tendencies, we are filled with the life of the risen Christ. As we struggle to overcome addictions and sin in our lives, we share in Christ’s victory over sin and destruction.

Pause: Any questions about Christ’s Resurrection? Does the attempt to apply the pattern of Jesus’ dying and rising to our lives make sense to you? If so, in what way?

Ascension into heaven (C 659-662, USC p.96)

“So then the Lord Jesus, after he spoke to them, was taken up into heaven and took his seat at the right hand of God” (Mk 24:19). When we hear the phrase “took his seat at the right hand of God,” it is not intended to paint heaven as some place in the sky where Jesus is seated by God’s right hand. The phrase is intended to convey that Jesus, the glorified Christ, is Lord of the universe and is equal in power and dignity to God the Father. From there he constantly intercedes for us with his Father.

The Ascension event concludes Jesus’ ministry on earth. It brought his human body and soul into the Trinity. As a result of the Ascension, the second Person of the Trinity is forever human as well as divine.

The Ascension event does not mean that Jesus has abandoned us. The last words of Matthew's Gospel has Jesus saying: "Know that I will be with you always until the end of time." Jesus is present to us through the Holy Spirit, in and through the liturgical celebrations of our Church, and wherever two or three are gathered in his name.

What is the paschal mystery? (C 571-573, USC pp.93-94). In Catholic theology, *paschal mystery* refers to Jesus' passion, death, Resurrection and Ascension. The term "paschal" refers to his "passover" from death to new life. The term "mystery" reminds us that when we speak and write about these events, we are dealing with events too profound for the human mind to grasp. Finally, theologians remind us that Jesus' paschal mystery, his dying, rising and glorification, should be seen as one event. They are interconnected. Without the Resurrection, Christ's death would have been in vain. In our Christian journey, there can be no Easter without Calvary. Death to sin and selfishness is the precondition to sharing in the new life in Christ (Jn 12:24-26). We live the paschal mystery when, in cooperation with God's grace, we do the hard work of dying to sin and selfishness so that his new life can grow in us.

What is salvation in Christ? We often say that Jesus saved us or brought us salvation by his death and Resurrection. What do we mean by this? In his book *This is our Faith*, Michael Pennock answers the question in this way:

"When we speak of salvation we mean the good and happiness that God intends for us, the healing of our hurts, the attainment of God's peace. Salvation is the mending of broken relationships that keep us alienated from God and other people. It is the showering of God's blessings and attention, God's grace, adoption into the divine family, the sharing of his life with us. Salvation means the forgiveness of our sins and redemption from the power of evil and death" (p. 64).

Are you saved? —a Catholic response

Many Protestants can tell you the date they were saved. And most of them believe "once saved, always saved." What about Catholics—what do we believe about this issue? To the question: "Have you been saved?" Catholics have a threefold answer:

- *Yes, I have been saved* by Jesus in whom I have placed my faith. In and through Baptism, I am a new creation in Christ.
- *Yes, I am being saved* by the grace of my Lord whom I look to for the grace of perseverance.

- *Yes, I hope to be saved* and trust that I will if I remain faithful to my God. Having said that, many Catholics today can point to some experience or period of time when God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit became real and personal to them. In fact, we can say it is essential that everyone baptized as an infant ratify or say a personal "yes" to their baptism into the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

As to the phrase "once saved, always saved," Catholics believe that one can lose one's salvation. It only makes sense to believe that if one can freely choose Jesus as Lord and Savior, one can also reject him. In the book of Ezechiel, we read these words: "*If the virtuous man turns from the path of virtue to do evil – he shall die*" (18:34). In Ph 2:12, Paul encourages his readers to persevere, "to *continue* to do as I tell you and work for your salvation in fear and trembling."

Pause: Has anyone ever asked you: "Are you saved?" If so, how did you answer or how would you answer that question? When did God's or Jesus' presence in your life become real for you? What difference did the new relationship make in your life?

Action suggestions

1. Spend sometime this week praying before the Cross of Christ.
2. Be aware of times when you are asked to die to yourself for the sake of a better good.
3. Be aware of little victories or triumphs or resurrections in your life, e.g. victory over a selfish tendency or over an addiction, resurrection from dark moments.

Meditation

Let us stretch ourselves, going beyond our comfort zones to unite ourselves with Christ's redemptive work. We unite ourselves with Christ's redemptive work when we make peace, when we share the good news that God is in our lives, when we reflect to our brothers and sisters God's healing, God's forgiveness, God's unconditional love. Let us break bread together. Let us relive the holy and redemptive mystery. Let us do it in memory of him, acknowledging in faith his real presence on our altars. (Words from Sister Theresa Bowman, a week before she died of cancer.)

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