



CAMPUS
MINISTRY
TODAY

THE GOSPEL UNPACKED

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The Gospel Unpacked is a four-part tool series consisting of four excerpts from C.J. Mahaney's *Living the Cross Centered Life*.

This series can be helpful in processing through the gospel with a student who doesn't know Christ. Once you to pinpoint their personal hang ups with faith, these articles might be useful. Print out two copies of the appropriate article (one for you and one for them). Read through it together and continue to discuss the thoughts presented.

Part 1: The Reality

Adapted from "The Cross Centered Life" by CJ Mahaney

Part one, The Reality, addresses the idea of Christ's substitution. If someone doesn't grasp the seriousness of the penalty of sin and why Christ dying on the cross is that big of a deal, this might be a great article to discuss.

Isaiah 53:4-6 says "Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed."

Isaiah 53:4-6 puts us squarely beneath the scene of the cross.

These verses speak first of our condition- yours and mine. At least ten times we read the pronouns our, we, and us. But it isn't a pretty picture. It's about "our griefs," "our sorrows," "our transgressions," "our iniquities"; it's about how "we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way." That's our part in the divine drama unfolding here. We're mentioned only as contributing to the sin that makes the suffering necessary- and unimaginably excruciating.

We discover here as well that this totally unimpressive One, this suffering Servant, is suffering for us, and He's suffering as our substitute. That's His part in this divine drama- and He does it not at our request, and not with our encouragement and support, but while being despised and rejected.

The language of substitution- one person taking the place of another- pervades these verses, interwoven through the language of suffering. Isaiah tells us that the Servant bears our griefs, carries our sorrows, is wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; "and the Lord

has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” Isaiah is showing us what the New Testament will later teach us in profound detail.

Earlier in this passage, Isaiah also shows us this about the Servant: “His appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance.” Because of the suffering the Servant endured for us, He became disfigured, deformed.

John Calvin wisely instructs us, “When we behold the disfigurement of the Son of God, when we find ourselves appalled by his marred appearance, we need to reckon afresh that it is upon ourselves we gaze, for he stood in our place.”

Discuss:

1. According to Isaiah 53:4-6, who did God place the sin of the world upon?
2. In the last paragraph, what does John Calvin say we look like if we could see ourselves in sin through God’s eyes?
3. Why is it important for us to realize OUR contribution to the suffering of Christ?

“ALL DIE!”

In World War II, Ernest Gordon was a British captive in a Japanese prison camp by the River Kwai in Burma, where the POWs were forced to build a “railroad of death” for transporting Japanese troops to the battlefield. They were tortured, starved, and worked to the point of exhaustion. Nearly 16,000 died.

Gordon survived the horrors of that experience and wrote about it in a monumental work, *Through the Valley of the Kwai*, published in 1962. He describes one occasion when, at the end of a workday, the tools were being counted before the prisoners returned to their quarters. A guard declared that a shovel was missing. He began to rant and rave, demanding to know which prisoner had stolen it.

Working himself into a paranoid fury, he ordered whoever was guilty to step forward and take his punishment.

No one did.

“All die!” the guard shrieked. “All die!” He cocked his rifle and aimed it at the prisoners.

At that moment, one man stepped forward. Standing at attention he calmly declared, “I did it.”

The Japanese guard at once clubbed the prisoner to death. As his friends carried away his lifeless body, the shovels in the tool shed were recounted only to reveal there was no missing shovel.

Imagine, if you can, the effect upon his fellow prisoners of this man’s substitutionary sacrifice for them. It’s a profound and moving story of sacrifice and heroism. Yet it falls short of being an adequate illustration of the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus Christ- because there is no adequate illustration.

Unlike the situation of those prisoners staring into the cocked and loaded gun of a deranged guard, you and I do not face death from a fellow sinner. What we face is the righteous threat of furious wrath from a holy God. That is the threat faced by all who have gone astray, by each one who has turned to his own way. In our case, the shovel is missing; there is in fact a great deal more that’s missing. We are indeed guilty of sin and deserving punishment.

But the innocent One, the holy One- God the Son- stepped forward to die for the rest of us. On that cross the Servant suffered for sinners like you and me, because of sinners like you and me- and as the substitute for sinners like you and me.

He takes the punishment that you and I richly deserve, yet in Isaiah’s words we read, “We esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.” That was the word on the street- that’s how the local media covered the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth: They said he was being justly judged by God for the sin of blasphemy.

Well, those who have been granted new eyes perceive that He was indeed smitten by God and afflicted- not for His sin, but for ours.

Discuss:

1. What are some similarities between the prisoner’s sacrifice and Christ’s sacrifice? What are some differences?

Part 2: The Dilemma

Adapted from "The Cross Centered Life" by CJ Mahaney

Part two, The Dilemma, discusses God's righteous wrath, our sin nature and why Jesus could be the only possible mediator for us. Use this if someone thinks they "aren't THAT bad of a person" or if they don't understand why only Jesus could bridge the gap between God and man.

Paul conveys a dilemma in the opening chapters of his first letter to Timothy. God is "the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God," Paul says. As King of ages, He's the absolute Sovereign One who transcends time. In His immortality, He's immune to decay, to destruction, and to death. And He's invisible- living in unapproachable light, so that sinful beings cannot see Him and live. Furthermore, He's the only God, with no rivals.

In utter contrast to this is the portrait of humanity Paul paints for Timothy: "Lawless and disobedient...ungodly and sinners...unholy and profane...those who strike their fathers and mothers...murderers, the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine."

That's the biblical perspective on mankind, and all of us fit somewhere in that description.

Paul puts himself there as well, confessing that he'd been "a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent" of God. Paul even identifies himself as "the foremost" of sinners, the worst sinner, the chief of sinners.

For God, the divine dilemma comes about because He isn't indifferent to any of this sinfulness on mankind's part. He is, in fact, righteously and furiously opposed to every bit of it. He cannot simply overlook or excuse it. In light of His holiness and justice, He has no alternative but to punish sin and punish the sinner. In our court systems, a judge who simply overlooked people's offenses and "just forgave" them would quickly be kicked off the bench. God is righteous, and must do what is right in punishing sin.

And yet, as Paul informs us, God "desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."

God's desire is to save- but how can He rescue anyone? He's righteously opposed to sin, yet sin lurks in every corner of every human heart. As we've seen, we're all "lawless and disobedient"; we're all "ungodly and sinners," as Paul says. Each of us to some degree can label ourselves the same way Paul did; an "insolent opponent" of God.

What an impossible predicament! A holy God can respond only in furious wrath to sin; how much more so when the sin is persistent, intrinsic evil! How could He ever forgive, pardon, save, and be reconciled with those who are entrenched and enslaved in such blatant hostility toward Him?

How?

Part 3: There That Day

Adapted from "The Cross Centered Life" by CJ Mahaney

Part three, There That Day, starts with reading through John's account of the crucifixion story together. Then, the article helps them identify themselves with the angry mob who mocked Jesus on the cross. This article helps convict them of their sin so that they can understand how amazing this grace is. Again, this might be a good article for someone who doesn't recognize their innate hostility and separation from God.

Read John 18-20

Let me ask you: With whom do you most identify in the events of this dark day? Of the many onlookers and participants in these scenes, whose actions are most like your own, if somehow you were also there?

For some it might be Peter, weeping bitterly in the predawn hours as the weight of his denial of the Lord bore down upon him.

For others it might in some way be the passerby Simon of Cyrene, who was forced to carry Jesus' cross for Him. Others would identify with the women who were followers of Jesus and who "stood at a distance watching these things."

Some would perhaps choose Mary, His mother, who was "standing by the cross of Jesus," enduring such unimaginable pain. Or the disciple John, who also was "standing nearby" and whom Jesus spoke to from the cross. Or the penitent thief, who from his own cross cried out to the Savior in faith, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Or the centurion who, after watching how Jesus died, was moved to say, "Truly this man was the Son of God!"

But let me tell you who I identify with.

I identify most with the angry mob screaming, "Crucify Him!"

Apart from God's grace, this is where we would all be standing and we're only flattering ourselves to think otherwise. Unless you see yourself standing there with the shrieking crowd, full of hostility and hatred for the holy and innocent Lamb of God, you don't really understand the nature and depth of your sin or the necessity of the cross.

When we begin to grasp that we joined that mockery- that we are to blame for the Savior's death- we start to understand the seriousness of our sin.

But convicting you of sin is not my ultimate purpose here; rather, I want to convince you of grace. For when you're deeply aware of your sin, and of what an affront it is to God's holiness, and of how impossible it is for Him to respond to this sin with anything other than furious wrath- you can only be overwhelmed with how amazing grace is.

Part 4: Persuaded of His Love

Adapted from "The Cross Centered Life" by CJ Mahaney

Part four, Persuaded of His Love, is a super short article that discusses God's deep love for each person- proven with the Cross. If someone doesn't understand how God really loves them, read this with them.

The motivation of God the Father in sacrificing His Son as our substitute is uniquely revealed- shockingly and startlingly exposed- in verse 10 of Isaiah 53: "It was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief." The death of the Servant was not the fruit of human initiative and design; it was God's plan, God's purpose, God's will.

Who killed Jesus?

God did. God the Father was ultimately responsible for the death of His Son. God is telling us, "I purposefully determined to crush My Son with My wrath- for your sins, as your substitute."

Why?

"Because I love you."

When you're tempted to doubt God's love for you, stand before the cross and look at the wounded, dying, disfigured Savior, and realize why He is there. I believe His Father would whisper to us, "Isn't that sufficient? I haven't spared My own Son; I deformed and disfigured and crushed Him- for you. What more could I do to persuade you that I love you?"

That's how far God's love goes.

And that is what it all means.

Listen to Sinclair Ferguson's words on the staggering implications of the crucifixion:

"When we think of Christ's dying on the cross we are shown the lengths to which God's love goes in order to win us back to Himself. We would almost think that God loved us more than He loves His son. We cannot measure His love by any other standard. He is saying to us, 'I love you this much.'"

The cross is the heart of the gospel; it makes the gospel good news. Christ died for us; He has stood in our place before God's judgment seat; He has borne our sins. God has done something on the cross which we could never do for ourselves. But God does something to us as well as for us through the cross. He persuades us that He loves us.

Are you persuaded?

If not... what more could God possibly do to persuade you?

Discuss:

1. Is it hard for you to believe that God deeply loves you, individually? Why or why not?
2. Why is it sometimes easy to doubt God's love for you?
3. How is God's love different than the love from another person?
4. If you really realized this deep love of God for you, how would that affect your life?