

Mortal Combat: Jesus vs. Sin

Isaiah 52:13-53:12 (NIV)

¹³ See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. ¹⁴ Just as there were many who were appalled at him— his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being and his form marred beyond human likeness— ¹⁵ so he will sprinkle many nations, and kings will shut their mouths because of him. For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand. ¹ Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? ² He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. ³ He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. ⁴ Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. ⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. ⁷ He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. ⁸ By oppression and judgment he was taken away. Yet who of his generation protested? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was punished. ⁹ He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth. ¹⁰ Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand. ¹¹ After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. ¹² Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

Let's state the obvious as to why we are here tonight: We've gathered because Jesus died.

But, pastor, haven't you been saying for the last 6 weeks that Jesus wins? Even just two Sundays again, you told us that Jesus beat death. How can he die and win? How can we call this Friday "good" if Jesus died? Doesn't that mean that he lost? How can we make sense of today?

Jesus made a life out of not dying. Herod the Great tried to kill Jesus as a baby. A crowd in Nazareth tried to push Jesus off a cliff to his death. At least once - and maybe more times - Jews had picked up rocks to stone Jesus to death for blasphemy, but not a single stone was thrown. Jesus often traveled in such a way during his ministry so as to avoid those who plotted to arrest and kill him. The chief priest and religious leaders kept plotting Jesus' death, but, until today, they had never made good on their schemes.

And Jesus made it clear that he wasn't lucky in avoiding death. When the mob with swords and clubs came to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus asked them who they wanted. They said, "Jesus of Nazareth." When Jesus answered and said, "I am he," the whole group drew back and fell to the ground - just at Jesus acknowledging who he was. (John 18:5) When Peter drew his sword and cut off Malchus' ear, Jesus rebuked him, told him to put his sword away, and said, "Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?" (Matthew 26:53) Jesus was protected. He could have continued to make a life of not dying.

The chief priests and the religious leaders saw and acknowledged this truth and then mocked Jesus for his supposed power while he hung on the cross. As we will hear during our service tonight, they taunted Jesus saying, "He saved others, but he can't save himself! He's the king of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God.'" (Matthew 27:42-43)

Seeing Jesus dying on the cross doesn't make sense. He has the power. Avoiding death for him should be super easy, barely an inconvenience. Yet, we know what happens today. It's why we gathered. Jesus, God made mortal flesh, died. It looks like he lost.

Now, I'm an 80s / 90s kid, and kind of a nerd. Thanks to the animated series cartoon, I got into the X-Men. One of my most favorite video games back in the day was *X-Men* for the Sega Genesis. But there was one level I could never beat. I thought I had beaten the boss, but then I just stayed on the level. Time would always run out, and then I would have to try again, but to the same result. Since this was pre-internet-in-the-home days, I had no walkthroughs, no tips or tricks. The only way for me to progress was to use this

cheat code device called a *Game Genie* to skip that level. I thought that the game was broken or that I missed a step or a clue from earlier on. Something was wrong. This didn't make sense, and I couldn't win.

Years later, as an adult, I finally learned how to beat that level. Get this: you had to hit the reset button on the console. That doesn't make any sense. You hit the reset button when you get a game over screen or when the game freezes. You don't hit reset when you're at the end of a level and just defeated the boss. This was totally counter-intuitive, and yet it was designed that way on purpose. Nothing was broken or corrupted, but the only way to win was to do something that didn't make sense.

I told you all back on March 26 with Jesus vs. Death, Round One with Lazarus, that you already know the outcome. Jesus would and does still win, but then why did he die? Why doesn't this battle end with him coming down from the cross alive? That's because this particular battle on Friday was not against death. I realized in writing this sermon that this mortal combat is not Jesus vs. Death, Round Two. No, God in flesh used death in a counter-intuitive, designed way to defeat a different enemy: the enemy called sin. Tonight's battle is actually Jesus vs. sin.

As soon as sin entered the arena of the world, God laid out the plan as to how he would defeat it. More and more details were given over the years, particularly by the prophet Isaiah some 700 years before Jesus came in flesh and blood into our world and went to the cross, went to his death. Blow by blow, tonight we see Jesus' fight against sin take place exactly as foretold. No beauty or majesty to attract us to him – check. No deceit found in his mouth – check. He was despised and rejected by men – check. He was silent like a sheep before its shearers – check. By oppression and judgment he was taken away – check. He was cut off from the land of the living – check. He was assigned a grave with the wicked and the rich – check.

In this prophecy, Isaiah event tells us how Jesus wins this mortal combat against sin. "He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed." (verse 5) This doesn't make sense. I should have to pay for my debts, my sins. I should have to be punished if I do something wrong, not someone else. I mean, I know that I'm not perfect. I know that I think bad things, say bad things, do bad things, but I have to be the one to take care of them. And, aside from that, you don't heal someone by wounding someone else. This is totally counter-intuitive.

Yet this is exactly how the Creator of the universe, of all life, of you and me, designed the defeat of sin, the defeat of our sin. "Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand. After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities." (verses 10-11) Jesus, God made flesh, used death in his fight to become our sin offering. He took on our sin upon himself, all of our sin. He became our sin. As our sin, he used death to suffer the penalty for our sin, to defeat our enemy, to kill our sin. He was pierced. He was wounded. He bled. He died for us, to heal us, to forgive us, to do away with our sin forever, a debt paid in full, a debt never to be paid by anyone else ever at any time.

Jesus using death to defeat our sin is what atonement is. He used death, bent it to his will, to make it the thing that removes all our sins, all the bad things we do, and then makes us right with God. His blood shed in death covers over God's law, over all the times that we have broken his law. It's as if you wrote on a piece of paper all your sins, all the things that make you feel that you would never measure up to God, and then covered it, drenched it, in blood. You would look at it and realize that you can't read any of those sins, any of those law breaker moments anymore. This is what Christ's blood shed on the cross has done for you and for me. It makes our sins go away, as if they never happened. God can't see them because of his blood shed for us. God died to consume the debt of our sin. Only God made mortal flesh and blood could die in a way that his blood shed would cover over all our sins, over all the atrocities committed in this world, even the most heinous sins ever committed in history.

Jesus won this mortal combat against our sin by using death. It's counter-intuitive to us, but by design he died to kill sin. He used death to gain the victory.

So, yes, we've come together today because Jesus died, but tonight's not a battle against death. So, tonight is not a loss. Jesus chose to die, chose to give up his life in place of ours, chose to take our sins upon himself so that when he died, our sins would be defeated, killed, dead as a doornail. Jesus chose to fight this battle against sin in this specific way so that we would walk away today healing, having the victory of all our sins forgiven, covered with the blood of Christ. In Jesus vs. sin, we win because by his wounds, by his death, we are healed. Amen.