

Editorial: Reading Luke's Passion Narrative in Light of the Whole Story

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Every year *SBJT* has the privilege of devoting one of its four issues to Lifeway's January Bible Study portion of Scripture. In some small way, our goal is to help our churches become better Bible readers and teachers of God's word. We take seriously the admonition of the apostle Paul to the Colossian church: "We proclaim Him, warning and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ" (Col 1:28, HCSB).

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In addition to his role on the faculty, Dr. Wellum serves as editor of *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*. He received the Ph.D. from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and he is the author of numerous essays and articles, as well as the co-author of *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Crossway, 2012).

This year's focus is on that incredibly important and rich portion of Scripture, namely Luke's portrayal of the passion week of Christ (Luke 19-24). Obviously, given our space limitations, our contributors cannot expound the fullness of these chapters; they can only begin to scratch the surface as various aspects of this wonderful portion of Scripture is reflected upon. Yet, what most of the articles demon-

strate is how central to Luke's Gospel is the narrative flow which culminates in the cross work of our Lord. In other words, it is the death and resurrection of Christ which unites all the diverse elements of the Gospels and as such, contrary to some current scholarly opinion, each Gospel presents our Lord's cross work as central to the very purpose of his incarnation and entire mission.

Another way of stating this point is to acknowledge that each Gospel, including Luke's, is made up of many sub-genres, e.g., parables, miracle stories, genealogies, apocalyptic elements; each Gospel includes the teaching of our Lord and describes his ministry and mission; yet each Gospel ultimately culminates in the cross and resurrection. Thus, if one is to grasp the message of the Gospels aright one must first understand who Jesus is and what he has come to do by viewing all of the diverse elements of the Gospels in light of their overall storyline culminating in the cross. What this entails, for example, is that it is illegitimate to interpret individual passages without always asking how they contribute to this overall storyline of

the Gospels. This is why the Gospels are not simply books about Jesus as a great teacher or miracle worker. Instead, they are books about Jesus as our great Lord, Redeemer, and Savior who has become one with us in order to pay for our sin, to reverse the effects of sin and death, and to win for us a new creation by acting as our new covenant head, our great high priest in his death and resurrection on our behalf. In this way, the “little” narratives and parts of each Gospel contribute to the overall storyline, and to fail to read each part in light of the whole is fundamentally to misunderstand the purpose and intent of the Gospel writers.

One reason I stress this point is due to the fact that in some academic discussions regarding the Gospels today, some contend that Luke, for example, was not interested in developing an atonement theology. As the argument goes, in the Gospels we do not find anything like what we see in Romans 3:21-26, Colossians 2:13-15, Hebrews 2:5-18, or the extensive development of an atonement theology in Hebrews 5-10. As we are told, atonement theology was simply not a primary concern for Luke or the other Gospel writers. Instead their concerns centered more on issues related to a larger kingdom theology, discipleship, or some other point of Jesus’ life and ministry.

The problem, however, with such a viewpoint is that it fails to place the parts of each Gospel in light of their overall storyline. In fact, it fails to explain what Jesus himself sought to explain to his two downcast disciples on the way to Emmaus: “How unwise and slow you are to believe in your hearts all that the prophets have spoken! Didn’t the Messiah have to suffer these things and enter into His glory?’ Then beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He interpreted for them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures” (Luke 24:25-27, HCSB). For example, it is for this reason that it is illegitimate to appeal to the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) in order to downplay atonement theology in Luke’s Gospel—like Joel Green and Mark Baker do in *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-

Varsity Press, 2000), 148. In their treatment of the parable, they quote Robin Collins, who interprets the parable independent of any notion of substitutionary atonement. Collins attempts to show that to insert atonement theology into the parable is to lose the point of it. In fact, nowhere does the father say to his prodigal son that he cannot forgive him unless there is a payment of sin. Instead, the father gladly, willingly, and lovingly embraces his wayward son and receives him back without worrying that justice has been met and that the penalty of his sin has been utterly paid.

However, the problem with such an interpretation of the parable in Luke’s Gospel is minimally twofold. First, it fails to grasp the entire storyline of the Bible which demonstrates repeatedly that God in his holiness, justice, and righteousness cannot overlook sin; sin must be dealt and ultimately it must be resolved by God himself. In other words, the full satisfaction and payment of our sin before God is not a secondary matter; it is utterly essential if forgiveness of sin is going to be a reality. Second, it also fails to place the parable in the overall storyline of Luke’s Gospel. From the announcement of Messiah’s birth in fulfillment of OT expectations of the dawning of the new covenant age (which at its heart deals with the forgiveness of our sin as Jer 31:34 makes clear), from the singular intent of our Lord to go to Jerusalem to die as the Messianic King in order to fulfill the Scriptures in his death (Luke 9:21-22; cf. 9:31, 44-45; 17:25; 18:31-34, etc.), to the passion narratives themselves which understand Jesus’ death in terms of the eternal plan of God to save people from their sins, one must interpret the “parts” in terms of the “whole” otherwise we will distort and misunderstand the point of the text.

In light of this observation, it is my prayer that this issue of *SBJT* will not only enable us to understand better this important section of Luke’s Gospel but also it will enable us to read these texts in light of the “big story” of God’s redemptive plan centered in Jesus Christ our Lord. If that goal is achieved this issue of *SBJT* will indeed be considered a success.