

The Death of the God-man, Jesus Christ: Understanding the Most Important Event in Human History

•Written by •

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The issue of how a God-man dies is one of the most complex questions in Christian theology.

Here are a few items to help understand the issue better.

First, the biblical Jesus Christ is true God, true man, one Person, and the divine and human natures remain distinct. The second Person of the Trinity, the Son, never ceased being God, but assumed a full human nature, body and soul-spirit, in the incarnation. This is orthodox Christology, affirmed at the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451) and in the Scriptures. To understand what is happening at the cross, with the God-man, we need some clear definitions and explanations.

Regarding divine wrath, Christ suffers the wrath of God *intensively*, but not *extensively* by means of His human nature. This is the classic way to explain how Christ suffered God's *eternal*

wrath. Moreover, since Christ is unique as a God-man and sinless, He can suffer the *essence*,

that is, necessary properties, of God's wrath and eternal death, but not its *accidents*

, that is, non-necessary properties. For example, while He may suffer from a lack of fellowship with God through His human nature and human mode of consciousness as a sinless Person, which is the essence of spiritual death, He did not suffer the accidental and secondary qualities of hopelessness and despair because He was innocent and knew that God had not abandoned Him forever.

When Christ cries out on the cross, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mk 15:34), this may be regarded as "desertion" by the Trinity, that is, Father, Logos, and Holy Spirit, because of the unity of essence in the Trinity. This is true to the degree that one is emphasizing the unity of essence in the Godhead. The doctrine of mutual indwelling or *perichoresis* of the Members of the Godhead would be included in this analysis as well.

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This seems to mean that the Trinity “deserted” the human nature and mode of consciousness of Jesus on the cross in the sense that They did not support and comfort Christ’s human soul and human body during the time that the human nature and mode of consciousness bore the wrath of God. This is a break or cessation in the activity of fellowship between the human and divine natures in Christ or a break in the fellowship between the Trinity and the human mode of consciousness in Jesus. However, it is not a dissolution of the personal or *hypostatic* union of the two natures. There are psychological models that help explain how Christ sublimates His divine consciousness to His human mode of consciousness in order for this spiritual death to occur.

Next, it is essential to remember that the Logos suffered through His human nature, not the divine nature. By analogy, I, as a human, may be physically suffering, without mentally suffering. For example, if I have a sore elbow, I am not necessarily suffering in my spirit as well. Each substance of human nature possesses properties or powers specific to it. Moreover, the Logos was aware He was suffering through His human nature, body and soul-spirit, acquired in the incarnation since it is the Logos’s human nature, that is, the divine Person acquired a second nature, human, through which He may experience all of the activities of human nature, except sin.

Next, regarding spiritual death, Christ possesses a single sense of self consciousness, that is, self-awareness, but two modes of consciousness, divine and human, that correspond with His two natures. Thus, the incarnate Christ possesses two natures, but three substances: Infinite Divine, limited human physical, and a limited human rational non-physical soul-spirit. As a mere human person, each individual human is self-aware and, yet, has modes and layers of consciousness, grounded in the fact that they have two substances, a spiritual and physical substance. Christ, as a God-man, possesses an additional type of consciousness because He is fully human and divine.

The example of a human simultaneously tasting and enjoying food is instructive here. The physical substance of the body provides the ground for the awareness of physical things, such as taste. As such, I can be aware or conscious that I am eating and I can physically taste it. Eating is a function of the body. Angels, as angels in their normative state, cannot be aware they are eating or aware they feel physical pain. They are spirits. Likewise, I can enjoy what I am eating. Enjoyment is not a function of the body, but of the soul-spirit. The non-physical, rational substance of soul-spirit provides for awareness that I am enjoying what I am eating. Since I have two substances, physical and non-physical, each with its own distinct properties, I can have two modes of awareness simultaneously. Likewise, I can eat and think simultaneously, with two modes of awareness, but I am only one person.

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Christ had two complete natures, divine and human. Thus, three substances constitute the Person of Christ: Infinite Divine Spirit, limited human physical, and limited human non-physical soul-spirit. Since Christ had two rational natures, divine and human (three substances) in one Person, He could simultaneously have two rational modes of awareness or consciousness, one unlimited and one limited, and, in addition, the ability to have a physical mode of consciousness.

Christ, with His two rational modes of consciousness and single sense of self-awareness, walked perfectly with God the Father. The internal Trinitarian relation did and must remain constant and unbroken, but the limited activity and relationship with the Father grounded in His human mode of consciousness, which is not part of the intra-Trinitarian relationship, could cease and experience spiritual death. This is what occurred with Christ on the cross. His human mode of consciousness ceased to be aware of active fellowship with the Father, which is spiritual death.

Since the human soul-spirit has a limited faculty of intellect, the Logos had a limited mode of relationship with God the Father through this human faculty. Simultaneously, He is a Mode of Subsistence of the Eternal Godhead, and as a Divine Person, eternally relates to the Father and the Spirit within the divine substance.

Now one may ask how one mode of consciousness can cease to function while the others function? Here are some examples that may help. When a human sleeps, he may have dreams, but his awareness of his physical sensations is diminished. Yet, no one would argue that he ceased to have a body because he was temporarily unaware of its sensations. Thus, at times, with humans, one mode of consciousness may dominate while the other is sublimated for a time.

Christ's status is unique. There is no exact analogy that would completely explain the functioning of the two rational natures of Christ as there is no other like Him.

Yet, with the examples and analogies from substance dualism in human nature, it is reasonable to argue that Christ simultaneously had distinct modes of consciousness proper to each of His two natures with three substances. And at times, the relations to each, such as body to soul, soul to divine nature, or rational soul in relation to God the Father, could be sublimated or cease. Yet each always belongs to the Logos.

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The physical death of Christ required the separation of His human soul-spirit from His human body. In that situation, there was a cessation of relation and causal power between the two. The body was inactive, His soul-spirit remained as all other human soul-spirits—active, and His divine nature remained omnipresent, omniscient, etc. The properties of each substance were unchanged.

So as long as one begins with the distinct capacities of each substance of the two natures of Christ and analogizes to the distinct modes of awareness in humans, we can begin to understand how the spiritual and physical deaths of Christ occurred.

Regarding the intermediate state, the Logos and His human soul-spirit remained personally or *hypostatically* united, arguably with the same types and levels of consciousness He had during physical life. He had dual modes of awareness during the intermediate state just as He had them during His physical life. Here, a study of the types of presence of each substance is in order. I encourage all to read the concepts of local, illocal, and repletive presence to help understand the issue of “where” Christ was between death and resurrection. (See www.theolaw.org)

And, finally, since He continues to be the mediator between God and man, and there is no indication these offices will ever end, He will continue to have two natures—and that His two natures entails—for all eternity.

Soli Deo Gloria -KAL

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