

Why did Jesus Die? Study Two

How many of you have friends or relatives that wear a model of a guillotine around their necks? Or maybe even an electric chair? Sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? But how often in the Western world, do we come across people who have a cross around their neck? We are so used to seeing the cross around people's necks that we don't think about it, but the cross was just as much a form of execution as a guillotine or an electric chair. Why do people wear a cross? The cross was one of the cruelest forms of execution that has ever been invented. Even the Romans, not known for their human rights, abolished crucifixion in AD 337 considering it too inhumane. Yet the cross has always been regarded as the symbol of the Christian faith. A high proportion of the Gospels are about the death of Jesus. Much of the rest of the New Testament is concerned with explaining what happened at the cross.

When the apostle Paul went to Corinth, he said, "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2). When we think of Winston Churchill, Ronald Reagan, Mahatma Gandhi or Martin Luther King, we think of what they did in their lives, how they influenced society by what they did. Yet when we read the New Testament, we read more about Jesus' death than His life. Jesus, who more than any other person changed the face of world history, is remembered not so much for His life but for His death. Why is there such concentration on the death of Jesus? What is the difference between His death and the death of Princess Diana, or one of the martyrs, or war heroes? Why did He die? What did it achieve? What does the Bible mean when the New Testament says that Jesus died for our sins? These are some of the questions we want to answer in our session today.

The Problem

When I was younger I used to do a lot of talking to individuals on a personal basis asking them as to their relationship with God, hoping for the opportunity to tell them about what Jesus has done for them. Often they would tell me that they had no need of Christ, that their lives were full, complete and happy. "I try to live a good life" they say, "and have reason to think that when I die I'll probably be okay because I have lived a good life." What they are really saying is that they have no need of a Savior because they don't perceive that they have anything to be saved from. There is no appreciation and love for the Savior because they have never been convinced of their personal guilt and rebellion before a holy God. Yet all of us have a problem:

²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23).

I don't know about you but I find it so hard to say, "I was wrong. Please accept my apologies." I am so quick to blame others and so slow to accept that I am wrong. My wife knows that I have a keen sense of direction having been at sea for many years when I was younger. You learn to navigate by the direction of the sun. But every now and again I mess up and find that I am going north when I thought I was going west. But it is so hard for me to admit that I got it wrong. Anyone else find it difficult to say that you were wrong?

If we are honest, we all have to admit that we do things that we know are wrong. Many people just can't accept the fact that they might be to blame, or even partially to blame. This unusual phenomenon is brought acutely to our attention when people fill out their car crash accident claim forms. It is the perfect example of people being unable to accept even the slightest degree of responsibility. As the following show, some drivers insist on blaming others for what are, more than likely, their own mistakes. Here are some more examples from no win, no fee claims:

- "I consider neither vehicle to blame, but if either was to blame it was the other one."
- "The telegraph pole was approaching fast. I was attempting to swerve out of its path when it struck my front end."
- "The guy was all over the road. I had to swerve a number of times before I hit him."
- "An invisible car came out of nowhere, struck my vehicle and vanished."
- "I collided with a stationary truck coming the other way."
- "Coming home I drove into the wrong house and collided with a tree I haven't got."
- "I had been driving for 40 years when I fell asleep at the wheel and had an accident."

As for whoever made the following statement on their accident form, it's debatable whether a toilet, a mechanic or an English teacher would be the best solution. I'll let you decide:

- "I was on the way to the doctor with rear end trouble when my universal joint gave way causing me to have an accident."

In order for people to understand their need of a Savior, we have to go back and look at the greatest problem, which confronts every person reading this study. The problem is that we have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God. One person told me that he would be alright when he came to the end of his life, for he had helped two people get out of a plane crash before it exploded, and he had saved their lives. When I asked him what he was going to do about his sin, he told me that he had never sinned. He was deceived into thinking that his moral standing was better than most, and because his life was better than most, he would be okay in the Day of Judgment, when God will bring all men to account for what they had done.

Most people judge themselves by looking at the lives of others. Let me try to explain what I mean: Imagine I was in the room where you are reading these notes and pointed to the nearest wall to you, what if I were to say to you that one of the walls near you represents a scale of all the people who have ever lived? Imagine that the very worst person is at the bottom and the top of the wall represents the very best and most righteous of people. Who would you put at the bottom? Many would say Adolf Hitler, Josef Stalin, or maybe Saddam Hussein, or even their boss! Ha! Who would you put at the top? Perhaps you would say, "Mother Theresa, Princess Diana, Martin Luther King, or Billy Graham perhaps. I think you would agree that all of us would be somewhere on the wall—Keith Thomas would be down there and maybe you would be higher up. Well, what do you think the standard is that we must attain to? Many of us would probably reply that the ceiling would be the standard, seeing as the best of humanity is up there. But that is not what the Bible says that the standard is. The passage in the Bible that we just looked at says that the standard is the glory of God, which is Jesus Christ—God's glorious ideal for living. The standard is not the ceiling of this room but the sky. None of us have met the

standard of God’s righteousness—Christ Jesus. We have all fallen short of the target, which is what sin means—falling short. The Greek word that is translated into the English word “sin,” is the word *Harmatia*, a word borrowed from archery. If you couldn’t hit the bullseye of the target with your arrow, you would fall short (*harmatia*) of perfection. I think everyone of us have fallen short of the target. None of us are good enough—we have all fallen short! If we compare ourselves to armed robbers or child molesters or even our neighbors, we may think we come off quite well, but when we compare ourselves to Jesus Christ, we see how short we fall.

Somerset Maugham once said, “If I wrote down every thought I have ever thought and every deed I have ever done, men would call me a monster of depravity.” The essence of sin is a rebellion against God (Genesis 3) and its result is that we are cut off from Him. Like the Prodigal Son (Luke 15), we find ourselves far from the Father’s home with our lives in a mess. Some would say, “If we are all in the same boat, does it really matter?” The answer is that, yes, it does matter because of the consequences of the sin in our lives, which can be summarized under four headings, the pollution of sin, the power of sin, the penalty of sin, and the partition of sin.

1) The Pollution of Sin.

²⁰ He went on: “What comes out of a man is what makes him ‘unclean.’ ²¹ For from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, ²² greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. ²³ All these evils come from inside and make a man ‘unclean’” (Mark 7:20-23).

You may say, “I do not do most of these things.” But one of them alone is enough to mess up our lives. We may wish the Ten Commandments were like an examination paper in which we only have to “attempt any three” of them. But the New Testament says that if we break *any* part of the Law we are guilty of breaking *all* of it (James 2:10). One sin is enough to pollute your life and disbar you from the perfection of heaven. It is not possible, for example, to have a “reasonably clean” driving record. Either it is clean or it is not. One driving offense stops it from being a clean record. Or when a policeman stops you for speeding, you don’t tell him that you haven’t broken any of the other laws of the land, and expect to get off. One traffic infringement means you have broken the law. So it is with us. One offense makes our lives unclean. For instance, how many murders do you have to be to be a murderer? Only one, of course; how many lies does a person commit before he becomes a liar? One. How many sins does a person commit before he becomes a sinner? Again, the only answer is one. One offense makes our lives unclean.

2) The Power of Sin.

³⁴ Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin (John 8:34).

The things we do wrong have an addictive power. When I was on drugs, many times I would be so aware of how they were destroying my life, but they had a hold on me. I tried two or three times to throw them away, but always went back and bought more. People will tell you that marijuana does not have an addictive power, but I did not find it so, I could not get free until I gave my life to Christ. It is also possible to be an alcoholic, or addicted to bad temper, envy,

arrogance, pride, selfishness, slander or sexual immorality. We can become addicted to patterns of thought or behavior, which, on our own, we cannot break. This is the slavery that Jesus talks about. The things we do, the sins we involve ourselves with, have a power over us that makes us slaves to them.

Bishop J.C. Ryle, a former bishop of Liverpool, once wrote:

Each and all (sins) have crowds of unhappy prisoners bound hand and foot in their chains...The wretched prisoners...boast sometimes that they are eminently free...There is no slavery like this. Sin is indeed the hardest of all taskmasters. Misery and disappointment on the way, despair and hell in the end—these are the only wages that sin pays to its servants.

3) *The Penalty for Sin.* (Turn to page 1716)

“The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23)

One of the things that often move me to prayer is the news. When I hear of a mother that kills or abuses her children deliberately, I want justice. When I am in a traffic jam, and cars are flying by on the side of the road where only the police and emergency vehicles are supposed to go, I get angry and long for those cheating the system to be caught. But when I am late for work and I am speeding trying to get to the staff meeting on time, then it is a different matter, I don't want justice, I want mercy and grace. I want the policeman to let me off. I guess I am a hypocrite! We are right to feel that sins should be punished. The laws are there to guide us to live our lives correctly, people that sin should be punished for their sin. Sin will earn a wage just as our work week by week deserves a wage. Our employer will pay us what we deserve by what we have done—our wage. In the same way, God, in His justice, must give us the wage that we have deserved with our lives of sin—separation from God for eternity, a state that the Bible calls hell. The wages of sin is death—which is separation from God for eternity.

4) *The Partition of Sin*

“Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear” (Isaiah 59:1).

When Paul says that the wages of sin is death, the death he speaks of is not only physical. The prophet Isaiah says that sin separates us from God. It is a spiritual death, which results in eternal isolation from God. This cutting off from God is something that we experience in this life, each of us have felt distant from God as a result of our sin, but this will also be a reality when we cross from death into the real life which is beyond this world. The things we do wrong cause this barrier.

THE SOLUTION

We are all in need of a Savior to deliver us from the consequences of the sin of our lives. The Lord Chancellor in England, Lord Mackay of Clashfern, wrote:

“The central theme of our faith is the sacrifice of Himself by our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross for our sins...The deeper our appreciation of our own need the greater will be our love for the Lord Jesus and, therefore, the more fervent our desire to serve Him.”

The good news of Christianity is that God has seen the predicament that every one of us is in, and has taken steps to resolve the problem. His solution was to be the substitute for all of us. God Himself came down in the person of Jesus, the Christ, to take our place, something that John Stott, author of many books, calls the “self-substitution” of God. The apostle Peter describes it thus:

²⁴He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed (1 Peter 2:24).

1) The Self-Substitution of God

What does self-substitution mean? In his book, *Miracle on the River Kwai*, Ernest Gordon tells the true story of a group of Prisoners of War working on the Burma Railway during World War Two. At the end of each day the tools were collected from the work party. On one occasion a Japanese guard shouted that a shovel was missing and demanded to know which man had taken it. He began to rant and rave, working himself up into a paranoid fury and ordered whoever was guilty to step forward. No one moved. “All die! All die!” he shrieked, cocking and aiming his rifle at the prisoners. At that moment one man stepped forward and the guard clubbed him to death with his rifle while he stood silently to attention. When they returned to the camp, the tools were counted again and no shovel was missing. That one man had gone forward as a substitute to save the others. In the same way Jesus went forward and satisfied justice by dying in place of us.

2) The Agony of the Cross

Jesus was our substitute. He endured crucifixion for us. Cicero described crucifixion as “the most cruel and hideous of tortures.” Jesus was stripped and tied to a whipping post. He was flogged with four or five thongs of leather interwoven with sharp jagged bone and lead. Eusebius, the third century church historian, described Roman flogging in these terms: “the sufferer’s veins were laid bare, and...the very muscles, sinews and bowels of the victim were open to exposure.” He was then taken to the Praetorium, the Roman courtyard inside the fortification, where a crown of thorns was thrust onto His head. He was mocked by a battalion of 600 men and hit about the face and head. He was then forced to carry a heavy cross bar on His bleeding shoulders until he collapsed, and Simon of Cyrene was press-ganged into carrying it for Him.

When they reached the site of crucifixion, He was again stripped naked. He was laid on the cross, and six-inch nails were driven into His forearms, just above the wrist. His knees were twisted sideways so that the ankles could be nailed between the tibia and the Achilles’ tendon. He was lifted up on the cross, which was then dropped into a socket in the ground. There He was left to hang in intense heat and unbearable thirst, exposed to the ridicule of the crowd. He hung there in unthinkable pain for six hours while His life slowly drained away. Yet the worst part was not the physical trauma, nor even the emotional pain of being rejected by the world and deserted

by His friends, but the spiritual agony of being separated from the Father for us—as He carried our sins.

Because of the finished work of Jesus on the cross, in full payment for what your sins deserved, God is now able to grant those who will receive it, a full pardon. The Lord shows us that He is not aloof from suffering. He Himself has taken all and more than many of us deserved upon Himself. He died in place of us and for us. On the cross God revealed His love for us.

¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16).

THE RESULT

The scriptures give us four images to describe what Jesus has done for us on the cross:

²¹ But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ²⁵ God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— ²⁶ he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus (Romans 3:21-26).

1) The First Image is from the Temple:

“God presented Him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in His blood” (verse 25).

In the Old Testament, very careful laws were laid down as to how sins should be dealt with. There was a whole system of sacrifices, which demonstrated the seriousness of sin and the need for cleansing from it. In a typical case the sinner would take an animal. The animal was to be as near perfect as possible. The sinner would lay his hands on the animal and confess his sins over it. Thus the sins were seen to pass from the sinner to the animal, which would then be killed. This was only a picture to us all that sin meant death, and the only way out was the death of a substitute. This is why John the Baptist, when he saw Jesus coming cried out, “Behold, the lamb of God, which takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

2) The Second Image is from the Marketplace

²⁴ and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus (Verse 24)

Debt is not a problem confined to the present day; it was a problem in the ancient world as well. If someone had serious debts, their only recourse was either to sell themselves or those that they were in debt to force them to be sold to pay their debts. Suppose a friend happened into the market just as he was being sold and asked the price. Suppose that friend then paid his debt and

let him go free, he would be redeeming him. In a similar way Jesus paid the “redemption fee” to buy us out of Satan’s slave market of sin.

3) The Third Image is from the Law Court.

We are, “justified freely by His grace” (Verse 24).

Paul uses the words “justified freely.” Justification is a legal term. If you went to court and were acquitted, you were justified.

Two people went through school and university together and developed a close friendship. Life went on and they both went their different ways and lost contact. One went on to become a judge, while the other one ended up a criminal. One day the criminal appeared before the judge. He had committed a crime to which he pleaded guilty. The judge recognized his old friend, and faced a dilemma. He was a judge so he had to be just; he couldn’t let the man off. On the other hand, he didn’t want to punish the man, because he loved him. So he told his friend that he would fine him the correct penalty for the offence. That is justice. Then he came down from his position as judge and wrote a check for the amount of the fine. He gave it to his friend, saying that he would pay the penalty for him. That is love.

This is an illustration of what God has done for us. In His justice, He judges us because we are guilty, but then, in His love, He came down in the person of His Son, the Lord Jesus, and paid the penalty for us. In this way He is both ‘just’ (in that He does not allow the guilty to go unpunished) and the one who justifies—Romans 3:26 (in that by taking the penalty Himself, in the person of His Son, He enables us to go free).

The illustration used is not an exact one for three reasons. First, our plight is much worse. The penalty that we are facing is not just a fine, but death, not just physical death, but separation from the author of life—spiritual death—eternity apart from God. Secondly, the relationship is closer. This is not just two friends: it is our Father in heaven who loves us more than any earthly parent loves his own child. Thirdly, the cost was greater: it cost God not money, but His one and only Son—who paid the penalty of sin. It is not an innocent third party but God Himself who saves us.

4) The Fourth Image is from the Home

¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them (2 Corinthians 5:19)

What happened to the Prodigal Son can happen to us. God has reconciled us to Himself and put our sins away from us, if we will receive His gift of love and grace. He has taken your place so that He can freely forgive you. Will you receive His free pardon?

In the year 1829, a Philadelphia man named George Wilson robbed the U.S. Mail Service, killing someone in the process. Wilson was arrested, brought to trial, found guilty, and sentenced to be hanged. Some friends intervened on his behalf and were

finally able to obtain a pardon for him from President Andrew Jackson. But, when he was informed of this, George Wilson refused to accept the pardon! The sheriff was unwilling to enact the sentence—for how could he hang a pardoned man? An appeal was sent to President Jackson. The perplexed President turned to the United States Supreme Court to decide the case. Chief Justice Marshall ruled that a pardon is a piece of paper, the value of which depends on its acceptance by the person implicated. It is hardly to be supposed that a person under the sentence of death would refuse to accept a pardon, but if it is refused, it is then not a pardon. George Wilson must be hanged. So, George Wilson was executed, although his pardon lay on the sheriff's desk. What will you do with the full pardon offered to you by the Chief Justice—the God of the Universe?¹

John Wimber, an American pastor and church leader, described how the Cross became a personal reality to him:

After I had studied the Bible...for about three months I could have passed an elementary exam on the cross. I understood there is one God who could be known in three Persons. I understood Jesus is fully God and fully man and he died on the cross for the sins of the world. But I didn't understand that I was a sinner. I thought I was a good guy. I knew I messed up here and there but I didn't realize how serious my condition was.

But one evening around this time, Carol (his wife), said, "I think it's time to do something about all that we've been learning." Then, as I looked on in utter amazement, she knelt down on the floor and started praying to what seemed to me to be the ceiling plaster. "Oh God," she said, "I am sorry for my sin."

I couldn't believe it. Carol was a better person than I, yet she thought she was a sinner. I could feel her pain and the depth of her prayers. Soon she was weeping and repeating, "I am sorry for my sin." There were six or seven people in the room, all with their eyes closed. I looked at them and then it hit me; they've all prayed this prayer too! I started sweating bullets. I thought I was going to die. The perspiration ran down my face and I thought, "I'm not going to do this. This is dumb. I'm a good guy." Then it struck me. Carol wasn't praying to the plaster; she was praying to a person, to a God who could hear her. In comparison to him she knew she was a sinner in need of forgiveness.

In a flash the cross of Christ made personal sense to me. Suddenly I knew something that I had never known before; I had hurt God's feelings. He loved me and in His love for me He sent Jesus. But I had turned away from that love; I had shunned it all of my life. I was a sinner, desperately in need of the forgiveness of what Christ had accomplished at the cross.

Then I too was kneeling on the floor, sobbing, nose running, and eyes watering, every square inch of my flesh perspiring profusely. I had this overwhelming sense that I was talking with someone who had been with me all of my life, but whom I failed to recognize. Like Carol, I began talking to the living God, telling Him that I was a sinner but the only words I could say aloud were, "Oh God, Oh God."

I knew something revolutionary was going on inside of me. I thought, "I hope this works, because I'm making a complete fool of myself." Then the Lord brought to mind a man I had seen in Pershing Square in Los Angeles a number of years before. He was wearing a sign

¹ 1500 Illustrations for Biblical Preaching. Edited by Michael Green. Published by Baker Books. Page 317.

that said, “I’m a fool for Christ. Whose fool are you?” I thought at the time, “That’s the most stupid thing I’ve ever seen. But as I kneeled on the floor I realized the truth of the odd sign: the cross is foolishness “to those who are perishing” (1 Corinthians 1:18). That night I knelt at the cross and believed in Jesus. I’ve been a fool for Christ ever since.

What about you, dear reader, isn’t it time for you to pray to the God who loves you and has made a way for you to be forgiven of your sin. Maybe you would like to sincerely pray this prayer:

Prayer: Heavenly Father, I am sorry for the things I have done wrong on my life. (Take a few moments to ask His forgiveness for anything particular that is on your conscience.) Please forgive me. I now turn from everything that I know is wrong. Thank you that You sent Your Son, Jesus, to die on the cross for me so that I could be forgiven and set free. From now on I will follow and obey His as my Lord. Thank you that You now offer me this gift of forgiveness and the gift of Your Spirit. I now receive that gift. Please come into my life, I want to be with you forever. I ask these things in the name and authority of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Many of the thoughts of this study are from the Alpha Course by Nicky Gumbel. I would recommend his book, Questions of Life, printed by Kingsway Publishers.

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