

## Why did Jesus Die?

Most people today would say they're fans of Jesus. They especially love that he partied with sinners and included people that society marginalized. We love his teachings—his greatest hits like. “Don't judge, lest you be judged.” They're a little unsure about “love your enemies” “and turn the other cheek,” but they admire the idealism.

Jesus' teachings are popular, but the elephant in the room is that Christians believe that Jesus' death was in some way significant. He didn't die in a hospital bed with his loved ones around him. He died one of the most horrific deaths imaginable—being convicted as a common criminal and nailed to a Roman cross.

The writer, Philip Yancey notes that most biographies devote little time to the death of their subjects—even people like MLK Jr. and Ghandi, who died politically significant deaths. But Jesus' life is different. Only two of the Gospels record Jesus' birth account all of them speed through the first 30 years of his life. Then, when they get to his last week, they slow to a crawl. Almost a third of the Gospel's are devoted to the last week of Jesus' life leading up to his death.

Christians have always elevated Jesus' death as a significant part of our worship. We sing songs with lyrics like, “I will cherish the old rugged cross,” “Jesus keep me near

the cross,” or “Lead me to the cross where your loved poured out.” As far as I can tell, seeing so much significance in someone’s death is unique in history.

And it seems a little gruesome to us. I once sat across the table from a Christian who was losing his faith. And one of the things he couldn’t wrap his mind around was that we teach children about Jesus dying. But I suspect that critique is a recent development in history and probably only in our society where we have so insulated ourselves from the reality of death that we feel the need to hide it from children. Fact is, death is something all of us have to come to terms with, even children.

But Christians don’t treat the death of Christ like other deaths. Jesus’ death was unique because we believe that when Jesus died, the cosmic order changed forever.

Jesus believed his death was a necessary aspect of his ministry. In Matthew, chapter 16, after he was sure his disciples knew he was the Messiah, it says, **“<sup>21</sup>From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.”**

In John 3, Jesus compared his death on the cross to an event from the Old Testament where the people of Israel were being bitten by poisonous vipers. When they cried out to Moses, God told him to put a snake up on a pole and anyone who looked at the snake would be healed. Here’s how Jesus compares, **“<sup>14</sup>Just as Moses lifted up the**

snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.” So, Jesus clearly saw purpose in his death.

And we also see that his death wasn't an accident. In Peter's sermon in Acts, he preached, **“This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.”** (Acts 2:23) But if this was God's plan, what exactly did Jesus death do?

Before we get into that, let me address one thing. It's become popular lately to characterize the death of Jesus as divine child abuse. God in heaven was mad at us because of our sin, so he took it out on his son. But this is a gross misrepresentation. First, Jesus died willingly. Second, it ignores the core doctrine of the Trinity. You see, when Jesus was hanging on the cross, *God himself* was hanging on the cross. So, God wasn't taking out his anger on someone else, it was God's self-sacrifice.

But that doesn't answer why it was necessary in the first place, so, let's talk about it—why did Jesus die? There much more we could say, but let's talk about three reasons.

First, Jesus died *to prove his love for us*. Now, everyone put on your theology cap for just a moment because we have to do a little theological work to understand this one.

When we ask the question, “Why did Jesus die?” we're talking about the *atonement*. You might have heard this word. The word atone means to *deal with a problem*—to make right what was wrong. In Christian belief, that problem is something

called *sin*. Sin damages our relationship with God, with other people and the world. So, atonement has to do with restoring relationships.

Now, since humans are finite creatures who live in the physical realm, our spiritual understanding is limited. So, when the Bible talks about atonement, it uses metaphors—things we *do* understand—to explain what we *can't*. Now, get into a bunch of atonement metaphors except to say that atonement metaphors are broken down into subjective and objective metaphors.

An *objective* metaphor stresses that the death of Jesus achieved something in itself—like if you add a base to an acid, a chemical reaction that takes place and reality changes. An objective theory tries to explain how what changed on the cross.

A subjective metaphor on the other hand doesn't describe a change in reality, but it produces a change in our heart or mind. So, which is right? Well, both. If you're true to the Bible, you have to say there was something that happened on the cross that changed reality. But it's also perfectly legitimate to talk about how the cross impacts how we live.

So, saying Jesus died to prove his love for us would be a subjective reason because God's love for us didn't *change* on the cross. He always loved us fully. The cross was the just the clearest picture of how great his love is for us. Romans 5 says, **"<sup>6</sup>At just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. <sup>7</sup>Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly**

**dare to die. <sup>8</sup>But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”**

The kind of the love the Bible describes isn't sentimental, emotionalism we see in movies. It's a gritty, "prove-it" kind of love that risks personal hurt for the sake of the other. Like Jesus said to his disciples, **“Greater love has no one than this, that he lays down his life for his friend.” (John 15:13)**

Now, this isn't hard for the average American to believe. Most of us *assumes* God loves them like this—not because they've given a lot of thought to it or have dug into Scripture. But because we tend to have high self-esteem. Most people assume God loves them because they're a good person—they've never robbed a bank and they're nice to their neighbor, so why *wouldn't* God love them?

Of course, that's a pretty big assumption, but what about someone *knows* they're not good enough to assume God loves them—the woman ashamed about her affair, the man addicted to alcohol, the woman estranged from her children because of her abuse, or the ex-felon who society has given up on.

What about people like this who struggle with the idea that God could ever love them? It's one thing to say to them, “God loves you.” It's easy for *you* to say, but if you've ever been in that position, words like this can seem like an empty platitude to brush aside your guilt. “You're just saying that to try to make me feel better!”

But the cross puts God's *love* center stage. It's because of the cross that we can say, *whatever you've done in the past, God still loves you, and he gave his own life for you to prove it.* That message isn't just a convenient statement to make you feel better. It's the core of the message of Jesus. If it's not true, the Christianity is not true. *Jesus died to prove his love for us. //*

Second, Jesus died *for our sins*. We'll get into what this means, but whatever it means, it's all over the pages of Scripture. In 1 Corinthians 15, the Apostle Paul writes, **"What I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures..."** In Matthew 26, at the last supper, Jesus said, **"This is the blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."** Some people ask the question like this, "Why does God require Jesus to die to forgive us? Why can't God just forgive?"

Well, first let me say that Jesus didn't die to appease a bloodthirsty God! God is not like the pagan deities who demanded blood. The cross does not reveal God's anger, but his love. It was not God who killed Jesus, but God who offered himself and allowed himself to suffer the consequences of *our* sin. That's why Peter, in his first sermon to the Jews about the Gospel said, **"Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah."** It's not just Israel, it's all of us.

But why did Jesus have to die. Why couldn't God just forgive without all the blood? Well, the answer is justice. You see, God could probably "just forgive" if sin only impacted him or the sinner. But the consequences of sin aren't just for us, but for others. Sin has victims and it creates injustice that harms others. There's always a cost to sin.

Justice is a relationship word. It's about restoring and maintaining right relationships. It's about treating people with dignity as image-bearers of God and making the playing field as level as possible. The word *justice* is closely linked to the word Shalom—which means everything is as it should be—society living in harmony.

But the fact is that some damage, in fact a lot of damage, has already been done. People have wronged each other. Whenever a wrong is done, someone bears the cost. Let's say, for instance, a man steals money from the church. Imagine, he's a real shady character. Let's give him a random name, something like, Scott Hanson.

Now, let's say we file a police report and the police catch him. We could press charges and make him pay restitution. He might have to pay a fine or do some jail time. But, when he paid the money back and served his time, we would say that justice has been done. He's paid his debt to the church and society.

But, we're a forgiving bunch around here and we believe that when someone slaps you on one cheek, you turn the other cheek. So, we decide not to press charges. Plus, we feel bad for him. He has a bunch of kids to feed and he's kind of strange and draws weird

cartoons on whiteboards around the church. Now, when we forgive the offense, does the cost go away? Not at all. When we forgive, we bear the cost ourselves.

But there are instances that can't be solved simply with money. Let's say someone does something to you that costs you something greater than just a sum of money—your reputation, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity or the loss of a loved one. When someone gets away with something like that, we have an innate sense that the perpetrator owes some kind of debt, even if it's hard to quantify. "Sorry" is not enough.

When someone hurts you, there are a number of ways you can respond. You could dream up ways to make them suffer for what they did. You could sue. You could try to cause them physical harm. You could tarnish their reputation. And to be honest, doing that would give you a certain amount of short-term satisfaction.

But there are big problems with these options. First, revenge never *resolves* the situation. Even if payback feels good in the moment, that feeling doesn't last. We never feel like we're even. And it might open you up to retaliation from the person or their family. Then it wouldn't be the end of it, it would only continue a cycle of *sin*. It doesn't bring you closer to Shalom. The world isn't better off because of your retaliation.

But not only is the *world* not better off, you're not better off. Vengeance doesn't resolve the issues in your heart. It only makes your hatred and resentment grow. You



become self-focused and hyper-vigilant. You become bitter—not just toward that person, but toward anyone like them. If you choose this route, the price only gets higher.

The other option is to forgive. But if forgiveness was easy, everyone would do it. Forgiveness is costly. If you've ever been seriously wronged, but instead of retaliating, you chose to forgive, you know how painful it is. It costs you a sense of satisfaction. You might not get to defend your reputation or restore the lost opportunity. The debt doesn't just go away. Someone always pays. When you forgive, you absorb the debt—paying the price yourself. That's what Jesus did on the cross—he absorbed our sin.

Now, listen to what the Apostle Peter writes. **"[Jesus] did not retaliate when he was insulted, nor threaten revenge when he suffered. He left his case in the hands of God, who always judges fairly. He personally carried our sins in his body on the cross so that we can be dead to sin and live for what is right. By his wounds you are healed."** (1 Peter 2:21-24) The healing he brings releases us from the cycle of retaliation and doesn't just heal us personally, but if we really understood it would bring healing to society.

Why is the central act of our faith so violent and ugly? Because sin, rebellion and injustice are ugly. Christianity doesn't sweep it under the rug or pretend it's no big deal. But Christianity doesn't do something so silly as to say there's nothing wrong in the world. It *is* a big deal and God has dealt with it on the cross. //

Finally, *Jesus died that we would no longer live for ourselves, but for Jesus*. Listen to what the Apostle Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5, “<sup>14</sup>**For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died.** <sup>15</sup>**And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again...**” The cross demands a response.

Fear can be a real demotivator. That’s why overly strict parenting is almost never a good thing. Some people think that fear of punishment is the best way to motivate people. Of course, fear can get people to comply, but the compliance is usually only on the outside. And it doesn’t accomplish what we really want.

Let’s say you play an instrument—like a violin. Now, there’s a technical aspect to playing music—you have to play the right notes or the song won’t sound good. It’s especially important if you’re playing in an orchestra where every part is carefully crafted to work together. So, you have to be familiar with the song and know where the next note is going. This is way people will never play a song best when they’re sight-reading it.

But music is more than playing notes on a page. Music is meant to move us, so there’s an expressiveness and freedom that great musicians play with that takes a song beyond mechanical notes on a page to an inspirational work of art.

To play like that, there has to be a certain level of comfort, so there can’t be a fear of messing up. That’s why a piano student can play a song at a recital when they’re really

nervous, and if it's a familiar song, you'll be able to recognize it, but it won't sound the same as when the teacher plays it. The same is true for athletes; you never play your best when you're afraid of the consequences of messing up. It's why some people play better in practice than in games. It's why some musicians are incredible at rehearsal—they play freely. But when the lights come on and there's pressure there, they freeze.

Think about the cross like this. If the cross takes away sins consequences, *fear* can be a thing of the past. Then, rather than fear, we're motivated by the love of God. 1 John 4:18 says, **“There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.”** We still want to please God, but we don't do it out of fear, we do it out of love. And it changes the way we try to please God.

Fear makes us self-focused. Love makes us God and other-focused. People who are afraid for their standing with God tend to be focused on doing everything right—studying all the laws and making sure they're not missing any technicalities. When they do that—even though they might say they're focused on God—they're really focused on themselves. They're making sure they are doing everything by the letter of the law so God won't reject them.

But there are some who will object, “Yeah, but if you tell people God took care of the consequences of their sin, they'll take advantage of it!” And that might be true of

some people, but only people who don't get it. If you really understand the Gospel, and if you really understand the price God paid to deal with our sin, that gratitude won't lead you to take his grace for granted—it won't lead you into more sin—it'll lead you into freedom to not have to be obsessed with whether you're doing everything by the letter of the law. Like the Apostle Paul says, you become free to not live for yourself, but for him who died for you.

As Paul writes in Romans 2, **“It's God's kindness that leads to repentance.”** (2:4)

And in 1 Corinthians 1, **“The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those of us who are being saved, it is the power of God.”** It makes little sense until we receive it. But when we do, it changes everything!

The cross shows us God's love

Saves us from sin

And frees us to live new lives where we don't live for ourselves, but for God and our neighbor.