

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 7

Why did Jesus have to die?

Jesus had an amazingly productive ministry, teaching and healing thousands. He attracted large crowds and had potential for much more. He could have healed thousands more by traveling to the Jews and Gentiles who lived in other areas.

But Jesus allowed this work to come to a sudden end. He could have avoided arrest, but he chose to die instead of expanding his ministry. Although his teachings were important, he had come not just to teach, but also to die.

The Old Testament tells us that God appeared as a human being on several occasions. If Jesus wanted only to heal and teach, he could have simply appeared. But he did more: he became a human. Why? So he could die. To understand Jesus, we need to understand his death. His death is part of the gospel message and something all Christians should know about.



Death was an important part of Jesus' ministry. This is the way we remember him, through the cross as a symbol of Christianity or through the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. Our Savior is a Savior who died.

Born to die

Jesus said, "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28). He came to give his life, to die, and his death would result in salvation for others. This was the reason he came to earth. His blood was poured out for others (Matthew 26:28).

Jesus warned his disciples that he would suffer and die, but they did not seem to believe it.

Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" (Matthew 16:21-22)

Jesus knew that he must die, because the Scriptures said so. "Why then is it written that the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected?" (Mark 9:12; 9:31; 10:33-34).

Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.... "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day." (Luke 24:26-27, 46)

It all happened according to God's plan: Herod and Pilate did only what God "had decided beforehand should happen" (Acts 4:28). In the Garden of Gethsemane, as Jesus knew that he would soon be

crucified, Jesus asked his Father if there might be some other way, but there was none (Luke 22:42). His death was necessary for our salvation.

The suffering servant

It was written in the Old Testament, Jesus had said. Where was it written? Isaiah 53 is one of the prophecies. Jesus quoted Isaiah 53:12 when he said: “It is written: ‘And he was numbered with the transgressors’; and I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me. Yes, what is written about me is reaching its fulfillment” (Luke 22:37). Jesus, although without sin, was to be counted among sinners. Notice what else is written in Isaiah 53:

Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

For the transgression of my people he was stricken.... Though he had done no violence ... it was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer ... the Lord makes his life a guilt offering.... He will bear their iniquities.... He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors. (verses 4-12)

Isaiah describes someone who suffers not for his own sins, but for the sins of others. And though this man would be “cut off from the land of the living” (verse 8), that would not be the end of the story. “He will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many.... He will see his offspring and prolong his days” (verses 11, 10).

What Isaiah wrote, Jesus fulfilled. He laid down his life for his sheep (John 10:15). In his death, he carried our sins and suffered for our transgressions; he was punished so that we might have peace with God. Through his suffering and death, our spiritual illness is healed; we are justified, accepted by God.

These truths are developed in more detail in the New Testament.

Dying an accursed death

“Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God’s curse,” says Deuteronomy 21:23. Because of this verse, Jews considered any crucified person to be condemned by God. As Isaiah wrote, people would consider him “stricken by God.”

The Jewish leaders probably thought that Jesus’ disciples would give up after their leader was killed. And it happened just as they hoped — the crucifixion shattered the disciples’ hopes. They were dejected and said, “We had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel” (Luke 24:21). But their hopes were dramatically restored when Jesus appeared to them after his resurrection, and at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit filled them with new conviction to proclaim salvation in Jesus Christ. They had unshakable faith in the least likely hero: a crucified Messiah.

Peter told the Jewish leaders, “The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead—whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree” (Acts 5:30). By using the word tree, Peter reminded the leaders about the curse involved in crucifixion. But the shame was not on Jesus, he said—it was on the people who crucified him. God had blessed Jesus because he did not deserve the curse he suffered. God had reversed the stigma.

Paul referred to the same curse in Galatians 3:13: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.’” Jesus became a curse on our behalf so we could escape the curse of the law, which is death. He became something he was not, so that we could become something we were not. “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

He became sin for us, so that we might be declared righteous through him. Because he suffered what we deserved, he redeemed us from the curse of the law. “The punishment that brought us peace was upon him.” Because he suffered death, we can enjoy peace with God.

Message of the cross

The disciples never forgot the shameful way that Jesus died. Indeed, sometimes that was the focus of the message: “We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Corinthians 1:23). Paul even called the gospel “the

message of the cross” (verse 18). Paul reminded the Galatians that “before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified” (Galatians 3:1). That was how he summarized the way that he preached the gospel.

Why is the cross good news? Because the cross is the means by which Jesus rescued us from death. Paul focused on the cross because it is the key to Jesus being good news for us. We will not be raised into glory unless in Christ we are made “the righteousness of God.” Only then can we join Jesus in his glory. The crucifixion is part of the process by which we are transformed from the old creation to the new.

Paul says that Jesus died “for us” (Romans 5:6-8; 2 Corinthians 5:14; 1 Thessalonians 5:10); he also says that he died “for our sins” (1 Corinthians 15:3; Gal. 1:4). “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree” (1 Peter 2:24; 3:18). Paul also says that we died with Christ (Romans 6:3-8). Though our union with him in faith, we participate in his death.

It is as if we were on the cross, receiving the curse that our sins deserved. But he did it for us, and because he did it, we can be justified, or proclaimed as righteous. He takes our sin and death; he gives us righteousness and life. The prince became a pauper, so that we paupers might become princes.

Although Jesus used the word *ransom* to describe our rescue, the ransom wasn’t paid to anyone in particular—this is a figure of speech to indicate that it cost Jesus an enormous amount to set us free. In the same way, Paul talks about Jesus redeeming us, buying our freedom, but he didn’t pay anyone.

God loves people—but he hates sin, because sin hurts people. God wants everyone to change (2 Peter 3:9), but those who don’t will suffer the result of their own sins.

In the death of Jesus, our sins are set aside. But this does not mean that a loving Jesus appeased or “paid off” an angry God. The Father is just as merciful as Jesus is, and Jesus is just as angry about sin as the Father is. He is angry at sin because sin hurts the people he loves. Jesus is the Judge who condemns (Matthew 25:31-46), as well as the Judge who loves sinners so much that he dies for them.

When God forgives us, he does not simply wipe away sin and pretend it never existed. Sins have serious consequences—consequences we can see in the cross of Christ. Humanity’s tendency to sin cost Jesus pain and shame and death.

The gospel reveals that God acts righteously in forgiving us (Romans 1:17); his mercy is part of his righteous character. He does not ignore our sins, but takes care of them in Jesus Christ. Metaphorically, God presented Jesus as a sacrifice for our forgiveness. Sin has consequences, and Jesus volunteered to suffer the consequences on our behalf. The cross demonstrates God’s love as well as his justice (Romans 5:8).

As Isaiah says, we have peace with God because of what Christ did. We were once enemies of God, but through Christ we have been brought near (Ephesians 2:13). In other words, we have been reconciled to God through the cross (verse 16). It is a basic Christian belief that our relationship with God depends on Jesus Christ, including his death.

Christianity is not a list of things to do—it is accepting that Christ has done everything we need to be right with God—and he did it on the cross. “When we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son” (Romans 5:10). God reconciled the universe through Christ, “making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” (Colossians 1:20). He did this before we believed it, before we were even born. And since we are reconciled through him, all our sins are forgiven (verse 22)—reconciliation, forgiveness and justification all mean the same thing: peace with God.

Victory!

Paul uses an interesting image of salvation when he writes that Jesus “disarmed the powers and authorities” by making “a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (Colossians 2:15). He uses the word for a military parade: the winning general brings captured enemy soldiers in a victory parade at home. They are disarmed, humiliated, and put on display. Paul’s point here is that on the cross, Jesus did this to our enemies.

What looked like a shameful death for Jesus was actually a glorious triumph for God’s plan, because it is through the cross that Jesus won victory over enemy powers, including Satan, sin and death. Their claim on us has been fully satisfied in the death of the innocent victim. They cannot demand any more than what he has already paid. They have nothing further to threaten us with.

“By his death,” we are told, Jesus was able to “destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil” (Hebrews 2:14). “The reason the Son of

God appeared was to destroy the devil's work" (1 John 3:8). Victory was won on the cross.

Sacrifice

Jesus' death is also described as a sacrifice. The idea of sacrifice draws on the rich imagery of Old Testament sacrifices. Isaiah 53:10 calls our Savior a "guilt offering." John the Baptist calls him the Lamb "who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Paul calls him a "sacrifice of atonement," a "sin offering," a "Passover lamb," a "fragrant offering" (Romans 3:25; 8:3; 1 Corinthians 5:7; Ephesians 5:2). Hebrews 10:12 calls him a "sacrifice for sins." John calls him "the atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 2:2; 4:10).

Several terms are used to describe what Jesus accomplished on the cross. Different New Testament authors use different words or images to convey the idea. The exact terminology or mechanism is not essential. What is important is simply that we are saved through the death of Jesus. "By his wounds we are healed." He died to set us free, to remove our sins, to suffer our punishment, to purchase our salvation. The conclusion is simple: "Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (1 John 4:11).

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Seven images of salvation

The New Testament uses a wide range of images to express the richness of the work of Christ. We may describe these images as analogies, models or metaphors. Each gives part of the picture:

Ransom: a price paid to achieve someone's freedom. The emphasis falls on the idea of being freed, not the nature of the price.

Redemption: the basic idea is "buying back," or for a slave, buying freedom.

Justification: being put right with God, as if declared by a court to be in the right.

Salvation: the basic idea is deliverance or rescue from a dangerous situation. The word can also suggest restoration to wholeness, a healing.

Reconciliation: the repair of a broken relationship. God reconciles us to him. He acts to restore a friendship, and we respond to his initiative.

Adoption: making us legal children of God. Faith brings about a change in our status, from outsider to family member.

Forgiveness: This can be seen in two ways. In legal or financial terms, forgiveness is like the cancellation of a debt. In terms of personal relationship, forgiveness means the setting aside of personal hurt or injury.

(Adapted from Alister McGrath, *Understanding Jesus*, pages 124-135).