

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Why did Jesus have to die?

In a biography of Winston Churchill's life there are only 3 pages out of 300 that are devoted to his death. That is only 1% of the book devoted to this great man's death. This should not surprise us because virtually all biographies concentrate on the events during the life of the subject of the book. However, when we look at the New Testament we see that approximately 33% of each gospel is devoted to the death and resurrection of Jesus. The reason for this is that his death and resurrection are absolutely vital to the gospel message. Indeed, the main reason why Jesus came to earth was not just to give us a good example of how to live, or provide us with moral teaching, but to die and rise again!

The reason for the Cross of Christ

The cross of Christ is therefore central to the Christian message. It is an event which has changed the eternal destiny of millions of people. What we are about to look at is the most important doctrine (teaching) in the whole Bible, that of salvation – how a person can be truly free for ever!

The cross lies at the heart of Christianity, if we do not understand the cross, we will never understand Christianity. Let us consider first of all Jesus' death on the cross.

The death of Jesus was all part of God's plan going right!

Some think that Jesus' death was a big mistake; it was a tragic accident that was never meant to happen. Wrong. It is all part of God's rescue plan for mankind. Indeed, Jesus' death was planned even before the foundations of the world were laid. That is why John described Jesus as 'the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world' (Revelation 13:8 (NIV)).

When the Apostle Peter stood up to preach his first ever sermon he said:

Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and

you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. (Acts 2:22-24) (NIV)

So we can see that the death of Jesus was no accident; God planned it.

What was crucifixion?

The crucifixion was invented by the Phoenicians and later used by the Romans as a means of execution. It is perhaps the cruellest and most agonising method of execution ever invented by human beings in order to inflict maximum pain whilst denying the victim the relief of death.

The victim would sometimes be scourged with a whip made of leather thongs, which often contained pieces of metal or bone in order to rip the flesh. Jesus' back would have looked like a ploughed field (again a fulfilment of prophecy – see Psalm 129:3). It had been known for people to die from such beatings alone.

Having been stripped of all his clothing, the victim was then impaled to the cross by means of iron nails driven through the wrists and feet, or above the heels. Ropes bound the shoulders to the wooden frame so that the victim was held, immovable, exposed to the full heat of the day and cold of the night.

Victims would be unable to wipe away annoying insects, or sweat from their eyes. In addition, the victim would suffer severe muscle cramps. Death came slowly – often after many days. Death was often caused by asphyxiation because the unnatural position of the body required the victim to pull or push himself up on nail-pierced feet in order to draw each breath. This is why the Roman soldiers used to break criminal's legs in order to speed up death.

The crucifixion was held in a public place in order to deter any future would-be offenders.

Some have estimated that in 1st Century Palestine over 39,000 people were crucified. So why is Jesus' death any different from all these thousands of others? The answer lies in what was happening behind the scenes – the unseen aspect of the crucifixion. At first appearance it was a crucifixion much like any other, but, unseen to most eyes, events of huge and far-reaching spiritual consequence were taking place.

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What was really happening when Jesus died?

The physical sufferings of Jesus are the only part of his death that is even barely conceivable to us. It is shocking, and rightly so, for it was an awful death to die. Yet what you and I can never even begin to comprehend is that in addition to Jesus' physical agony he was also undergoing an incomprehensible spiritual agony. For as he hung there on the cross he was taking upon himself the sin of the world and the punishment from God that those sins rightly deserved.

Why was the cross necessary?

People often say, 'Why couldn't God just forgive us without Jesus having to die?' To think in such a way is to fail to understand the holiness and justice of God. God never compromises on his holiness. His holiness must shun sin and his justice must punish it. However, the other side of God's character is that he is a God of love and of mercy too. At the cross, we see all of these attributes of God being demonstrated to their full extent.

- His holiness rejects sin – hence Jesus' cry, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' as he took upon himself the sins of the world.
- His justice passes judgement on that sin, which requires shed blood as payment. For God couldn't just ignore our sin as though it never happened.
- In his immense love God sends his only Son to pay the penalty for *our* sin.
- In mercy God offers a free pardon and a restored relationship with him for those who accept Jesus as their Saviour. So at the cross we see God's 'wrath and mercy meet' as one hymn-writer put it.

If Jesus had not died on the cross then we would all be lost in our sin eternally, without hope. For we cannot put ourselves right with God by our own means any more than a bankrupt criminal can pay his own fine. We are utterly helpless and the cross is our only means of rescue.

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We are out of relationship with God and cannot save ourselves

Out of his love for us, God sent Jesus to our rescue

He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. (1 Peter 2:22) (NIV)

Jesus (because he was God in flesh) could pay the penalty for our faithlessness and rejection of God because he was the only person who was morally and spiritually 'in credit' and therefore was the only person who could 'bail us out'.

He 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) (NIV)

For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. (1 Peter 3:18) (NIV)

The meaning of the Cross

There were many things that were happening in the heavenly realms in connection with Jesus' death. There are four main themes relating to this that the New Testament writers continually pick up on they are:

- **Justification** – a picture from the law courts
- **Redemption** – a picture from the slave market
- **Substitution** – a picture from the temple worship
- **Reconciliation** – a picture from the battlefield

Let us examine each in more detail.

Justification – to be declared 'just' (or not guilty)
The story is told of a man who was taken to court to pay a \$1,000 fine for a crime that he had committed. The man had no money to clear his debt and pleaded for mercy from the judge. The judge could not just let the man go free or else justice would not have been done. So he ordered that the fine of \$1,000 must be paid.

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Then, in an act of self-sacrificing love, the judge stepped down from his chair, went to the clerk of the court, and wrote a cheque to pay the fine in full. The judge then said that because the penalty had been paid the man was free to leave the court and return home. The judge had ordered that the penalty be paid, but had then paid it himself.

This illustrates both the justice and the love that God offers to each of us, by sending Jesus to pay the price and the penalty that our wrongdoing deserves. This is why the Apostle Paul says:

God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8) (NIV)

In other words, whilst we were still morally bankrupt, Christ died for us to pay our debt. Imagine that! The God whom we have offended is the one who comes to our rescue!

God made him (Jesus) who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:21) (NIV)

Just think of it! We can be declared right before God, by God himself!

A way to remember the spiritual implications of the word justified is to break the word up like this: To be JUSTIFIED means that because of faith in Christ, God looks upon me JUST-IF-IDE never done any wrong! Poor English admittedly, but a tremendous truth nonetheless!

Redemption – to be bought out of slavery
Redemption is a concept that people in Biblical times would have understood very well because in the Roman world there were some six million slaves. It was used in connection with a slave being bought into new ownership, or even freedom. To redeem means to 'buy back'. The New Testament writers use it to illustrate that we were slaves to sin and death, but now we have been *bought back* at a very high price – through Christ's death – into freedom and eternal life. A Christian is someone who is no longer under the slavery of sin or death. They are redeemed from going to hell. Indeed they have been 'bought back' to their rightful owner – God himself!

In the same way that a ransom had to be paid to buy back a hostage or a slave, so too God, in Christ, was

buying us back to purchase our freedom. Our redemption is secure, but one day the fullness of that redemption will finally be revealed when we are raised to life in Christ and are totally set free and made perfect and incorruptible.

The Apostle Paul writes:

In him (Jesus) we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace. (Ephesians 1:7) (NIV)

Substitution – to have someone take our place
Any follower of football will understand the concept of a substitute. It is when someone takes another's place on the field. In a similar way, in the Old Testament sacrificial system in the temple, an innocent lamb without spot or blemish would die 'in the place of the sinner. The lamb was the substitute for the sinner, bearing the punishment of the sinner. In the same way Jesus was dying the death that was rightfully ours. He was taking our place. He was, if you like, saying 'God punish me and spare them'. This is why John the Baptist cried out when he saw Jesus, 'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!' (John 1:29) (NIV)

For God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8) (NIV)

Jesus was willing to be our substitute to bear our punishment so that we could be spared.
Reconciliation – the healing of a broken relationship

Contrary to what many people think, we were not born into this world on 'best buddy' terms with God. We were born sinners – enemies of God because of our sinful nature and under his wrath. That might sound a bit harsh, but it's true. God's abhorrence of sin meant that there was a conflict between our rebellious hearts and God's holiness right from the start of our lives, which prevented us ever having a relationship with him.

But on the cross Jesus restored that broken relationship by removing God's wrath and anger from the sinner and taking it upon himself. With the barrier of sin removed, we could have peace with God. Peace means the absence of conflict and fear and in its place we can have an intimate friendship.

That is exactly what the cross achieved for the relationship between man and God; the removal of conflict and fear and the restoration of a personal and

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loving relationship, such as that which exists between a father and his child. Indeed, that is what a person becomes when they come to faith in Christ; they are adopted into God's family. As the apostle John wrote: Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. (John 1:12) (NIV)

All of the above results in this:

- **We know God's forgiveness** – God chooses to forgive and forget all our sin
- **We have access to God** – God opens a way for us to draw near to him (remember the curtain in the temple being torn from top to bottom see Mark 15:38)
- **We have peace with God** – we are no longer enemies of God but friends
- **We are adopted into God's family** – God adopts us into his family and loves us as his children
- **We have eternal life** – if the penalty for our sin has been paid for in full then we can enjoy eternal life with God when we die

Consider these verses that the Apostle Paul wrote which stress many of the words mentioned above:

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.

... You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. (Romans 5:1-2, 6-11) (NIV)

The Atonement

The Atonement is, in a nutshell, what the Bible says the cross of Christ achieved (this is a term taken from

the Old Testament sacrificial system). What does it mean? It can be broken down in this way: ATONEMENT means AT – ONE – MENT. We are put in a right standing before God in a restored relationship. We are at one with God.

The Resurrection - the triumph of the Cross of Christ

How do we know that Jesus succeeded in what he set out to do on the cross?

The proof is to be found in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. This session has emphasised the death of Christ, but his death and resurrection go hand in hand.

If Jesus did not rise from the dead on the third day after being buried in the tomb, then his death would have been like that of any other man. It would not have achieved anything and there would be no guarantee that the price for sin had been paid on the cross by him. But the very fact that he did rise shows that his mission was completed and his death on the cross was a success. If the wages of sin is death, and Jesus is raised from the dead, then it proves several things:

- That he paid the wages of sin in full, for death no longer had a hold on us
- That he really was who he claimed to be – God in flesh – the author of life
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If the resurrection did not happen then our faith is futile, there is no hope and we remain lost in sin! As the apostle Paul wrote:

If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. (1 Corinthians 15:14) (NIV)
And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. (1 Corinthians 15:17) (NIV)

The resurrection actually happened! All the evidence points to this, as the Apostle Paul wrote:

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living. (1 Corinthians 15:3-6) (NIV)

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Paul stresses that there were many first hand eye-witnesses who saw Jesus alive, before he was taken up to heaven forty days later. These people were utterly convinced that Jesus was alive. This is what transformed them from cowards, fearing for their lives because of the authorities, to bold preachers of the gospel who risked (and in many cases lost) their lives trying to tell the world of this good news.

In Summary

People often ask, 'Was there any other way for God to save us, other than Christ having to die?' The answer to that is simply 'No'. For if there had been another way, God would surely have taken it. Only the horror of the cross could ever shock us into realising four vital things:

- Sin is so serious and abhorrent to a Holy God that it required death as the penalty
- God is so immensely loving that he should go to such agonising lengths to rescue the likes of us who have rebelled against him
- Hell must be so awful that God would go to such incredible lengths to save us from it
- The human heart can be so hard that it could turn down a salvation that is offered so freely and graciously by God!

Someone once said, 'When we look at the cross we see that God is so much more angry with us than we had ever dared fear, and yet so much more loving than we had ever dared hope.' How true!

Finally

Many people wrongly think that if Jesus died for the sins of the world then we are all going to heaven! But that is not the case. Jesus himself said that many people would reject him and the consequences of their rejection was that they would remain under God's judgement and be lost in their sin for all eternity in Hell. The truth of the matter is that although Christ's death was sufficient to save us, it still has to be applied to our lives before it is made effective.

It is not enough just to know that Jesus died on the cross for sin. Each person must see their need to be in relationship with God, and invite Him to come into their lives.

A step of faith and trust in Christ has to be made. It is not a blind leap in the dark, but rather a reasonable step, based upon significant evidence.

Paul wrote:

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. (Romans 5:1) (NIV)

Christ's death is made effective when we respond in faith and believe in our hearts that he was dying in our place for our sin. In other words, we have to accept Christ for ourselves. There is no such thing as a hand-me-down faith from our parents or grandparents, husband or wife. Saving faith must be a first-hand experience. We must each decide what we will do with Christ's immense sacrifice for us. We either accept it or reject it.

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Recommended Books

- Josh McDowell, Evidence that demand a verdict (Alpha 1998)
- Josh McDowell, More than a carpenter (Kingsway 1995)
- Bill Bright, A man without equal (Scripture Union 1988)
- Michael Green, The day death died (IVP 1988)
- Stephen Gaukroger, It makes sense (Scripture Union 1988)

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