

# “QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS”

## Session 3 – Why did Jesus have to die?

I was pulled over for speeding. I was angry, because many people had been going faster than me. I said so to the policeman. So he asked me, “Did you know what the speed limit was? And you were speeding nonetheless?”

“Yes, I was,” I said, “but others were speeding more.”

“Were there people going slower than you?” he asked. “Yes,” I admitted.

“So there were people who were going faster, some who were going slower, and that means you weren’t breaking the law?”

“No, I admit I was exceeding the limit, just that others who were breaking it more.”

“So according to you, only the people who are worse offenders than you should be considered to be in violation of the law, and everyone else should be let off? You’re the point at which innocence starts?”

He had me there. “Is there an answer I can give which gets me out of this ticket?”

“Would that be fair to the last few people who got a ticket?”

“What would be fair is if those who were going faster than me got a ticket before I did.”

“What would be fair would be you getting a ticket every time you broke the law,” he said, writing the ticket. “Lucky you, you’re only getting this one.”

*“There is no one who is righteous, no one who is wise or who worships God. All have turned away from God; they have all gone wrong; no one does what is right, not even one. They have not known the path of peace, nor have they learned reverence for God.” Now we know that everything in the Law applies to those who live under the Law, in order to stop all human excuses and bring the whole world under God's judgment. For no one is put right in God's sight by doing what the Law requires; what the Law does is to make us know that we have sinned. (Romans 3:10-20)*

The relationship between humanity and God had been irreparably damaged. Human sin and selfishness had brought untold misery upon the world; human pride and rebellion against God (illustrated by the story of the Garden of Eden) had estranged us from God. All were guilty; none could stand before God and claim innocence. Yes, some were worse than others; but all were in rebellion, placing themselves in God’s place. But God had a plan for restoring the relationship

*But now God's way of putting people right with himself has been revealed. It has nothing to do with law, even though the Law of Moses and the prophets gave their witness to it. God puts people right through their faith in Jesus Christ. God does this to all who believe in Christ, because there is no difference at all: everyone has sinned and is far away from God's saving presence. But by the free gift of God's grace all are put right with him through Christ Jesus, who sets them free. God offered him, so that by his blood he should become the means by which people's sins are forgiven through their faith in him. (Romans 3:21-26):*

Christians believe the death of Jesus was part of a divine plan to save humanity. But how?

## **Atonement and reconciliation**

The events leading up to the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus are well-told by the Gospel writers. In the end the Roman authorities and the Jewish council wanted Jesus dead. He was, in their view, a political and social trouble-maker. But thousands of people had been crucified in the past, even many in Israel – including 800 Pharisees, 100 years before Jesus. What made the death of Jesus more significant than the countless other crucifixions carried out by the Romans and witnessed outside the city walls by the people of Jerusalem? But why did Jesus have to die?

Christians believe that Jesus was far more than a political radical. For them the death of Jesus was part of a divine plan to save humanity. The death and resurrection of this one man is at the very heart of the Christian faith. For Christians it is through Jesus's death that people's broken relationship with God is restored. This is known as “**The Atonement.**”

## **What is the atonement?**

The word “atonement” is used in Christian theology to describe what is achieved by the death of Jesus. William Tyndale introduced the word in 1526, when he was working on his popular translation of the Bible, to translate the Latin word *reconciliatio*. In the Revised Standard Version the word “reconciliation” replaces the word atonement. Atonement (at-one-ment) is the reconciliation of men and women to God through the death of Jesus.

But why was reconciliation needed? The Bible, through the first chapters of The Book of Genesis, teaches that although God's creation was perfect, through humanity's rebellion against God and the desire to be themselves gods (“we decide what's right and what's wrong!), sin was brought into the world:

*“You will not certainly die,” the serpent said to the woman. “For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”*

*When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. Genesis 3:4-6)*

The human condition was tainted (or characterized) by this sin - everybody carries this “original sin” with them which separates them from God, just as, in Genesis, Adam and Eve were separated from God when they were cast out of the Garden of Eden.

So it is a basic idea in Christian theology that God and mankind need to be reconciled – to be “made one.” However, how does the death of Jesus achieve this reconciliation? What makes this question more difficult is, there is no single doctrine of the atonement in the New Testament.

## **New Testament images**

The New Testament uses a range of images to describe how God achieved reconciliation to the world through the death of Jesus. The most common is the image of sacrifice. For example, John the Baptist describes Jesus as *“the lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world”*. (John 1:29) Other images are also used to describe the atonement:

- a judge and prisoner in a law court
- a payment of ransom for a slave's freedom
- a king establishing his power
- a military victory

There are many verses which describe what is happening through the death of Jesus:

- 'For the Son of Man himself did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many'.- Words attributed to Jesus in Mark 10:45
- 'Drink all of you from this', he said. 'For this is my blood, the blood of the covenant, which is to be poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.' - Matthew 26:28
- In the first place, I taught you what I had been taught myself, namely that Christ died for our sins, in accordance with the scriptures... Written by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:3

In his book “Christian Theology: An Introduction”, Alister McGrath groups his discussion into four central themes: The cross as sacrifice; The cross as a victory; The cross and forgiveness; The cross as a moral example.

### **The cross as sacrifice**

The image of Jesus' death as a sacrifice is the most common image in the New Testament. The New Testament uses the Old Testament image of the Suffering Servant and applies it to Christ. While the Messiah was expected to come in power and overwhelming victory, Isaiah, 700 years before Jesus, also painted the picture of a Messiah who comes and suffers on behalf of his people:

*He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted.*

*But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.*

*We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

*He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away; he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was punished. He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth.*

*Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand. After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors.*

*For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors. (Isaiah 53)*

### **The cross as a victory**

The New Testament frequently describes Jesus's death and resurrection as a victory over evil, sin and death. Christ fights against and triumphs over the evil powers of the world, the 'tyrants' under which mankind is in bondage and suffering, and in Him God reconciles the world to Himself. The worst injustice and evil the world could manage – the unjust accusation, judgement, torture and

death of a completely innocent man, who had only ever done immeasurable good – was defeated by the power of the Resurrection. The powers of evil, in the end, lost. The victory was extended to all the followers of the Victorious Christ.

On the Cross Christ wins through losing, triumphs through defeat, achieves power through weakness and service, comes to wealth via giving all away. Jesus Christ turns the values of the world upside down.

As theologian N. T. Wright says: *“The real enemy, after all, was not Rome but the powers of evil that stood behind human arrogance and violence ... [On the cross] the kingdom of God triumphed over the kingdoms of this world by refusing to join into their spiral of violence. [On the cross, Jesus] would love his enemies, turn the other cheek, go the second mile. This upside-down pattern so contradicts the thinking and notice of the world that it creates an “alternate kingdom,” an alternate reality, a counterculture among those who have been transformed by it. In this peaceable kingdom there is a reversal of values of the world with regard to power, recognition, status, and wealth.”*

### **The cross and forgiveness**

Anselm of Canterbury writing in the eleventh century presented the satisfaction theory of the atonement. In this theory Jesus pays the penalty for each individual's sin in order to right the relationship between God and humanity, a relationship damaged by sin. Jesus's death is the penalty or "satisfaction" for sin. For justice to truly be done, the penalty owed by all – the penalty of death, the inevitable result of separation from God – had to be paid.

Satisfaction was an idea used in the early church to describe the public actions (such as pilgrimage or charity) that a Christian would undertake to show that he was grateful for forgiveness. Only Jesus can make satisfaction because he is without sin. He is sinless because in the Incarnation God became man.

Did Jesus take the punishment for humanity's sins when he died on the cross? That idea is called penal substitution and is summed up in this way: “When God punished he showed his justice by punishing sin but he showed his love by taking that punishment himself.”

### **The cross as a moral example**

Moral influence theories emphasise God's love expressed through the life and death of Jesus. Christ accepted a difficult and undeserved death. This demonstration of love in turn moves us to repent and re-unites us with God. Peter Abelard (1079-1142) wrote: *The Son of God took our nature, and in it took upon himself to teach us by both word and example even to the point of death, thus binding us to himself through love. ...Our redemption through the suffering of Christ is that deeper love within us which not only frees us from slavery to sin, but also secures for us the true liberty of the children of God, in order that we might do all things out of love rather than out of fear - love for him that has shown us such grace that no greater can be found.*

### **A Vengeful God?**

Sometimes well-intentioned preachers give the false impression that in dying for us Jesus persuaded a reluctant and vengeful Father to show mercy. The charge of cosmic child abuse has even been leveled against such mis-preaching. The truth is that it was out of love that God sent his Son and the Son lays down his life of his own accord. Two texts from Romans make this clear:

*“God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us”* (Romans 5:8). The death of Christ puts beyond all doubt the fact that God loves us. It assures us that no matter what life throws up, we can trust that *“he who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all ... will graciously give us all things”* (Rom 8:32).

Yet Jesus also died to prove the justice of God: *“God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement ... to demonstrate his justice”* (Romans 3:25-26). God does not forgive us by turning a blind eye to our sin or by somehow overlooking it. Forgiveness is costly to the one against whom the wrong has been done. And at the cross we see not only God’s love, but the seriousness with which he takes our sin.

### **Couldn’t God have “let us off with a warning” and extended forgiveness without sacrifice?**

Tim Keller discusses this question in his book *“The Reason for God.”* First: Forgiveness always requires sacrifice. When we forgive we bear the consequence, the suffering, ourselves rather than demanding retribution. No one “just forgives” any grievous wrong. How much more then for God? God did not, then, inflict pain on someone else, but rather on the Cross absorbed the pain, violence, and evil of the world into himself. This was not just an example, but an ultimate act of forgiveness: *“This is a God who becomes human and offers his own lifeblood in order to honor moral justice and merciful love so that someday he can destroy all evil without destroying us.”*

Second: Real love involves a personal exchange. More than this, genuine life-changing love requires substitutional sacrifice, benefiting the other at the expense (large or small) of ourselves. When the needs of the other are large the sacrificial cost, the expense, is also large. *“How can God be a God of love if he does not become personally involved in suffering the same violence, oppression, grief, weakness, and pain that we experience?”* The answer is that God can’t – and the Christian story is that the God of love does become personally involved. *“God, in the place of ultimate power, reverses places with the marginalized, the poor, and the oppressed.”* (p. 196)

According to Keller the story of the cross involves forgiveness, sacrifice, substitution, justice, mercy, reversal, and identification: God for us. The act – the historical event - is the turning point in human history.

So Keller sees both costly forgiveness and reversal at play in the Cross: *“To understand why Jesus had to die it is important to remember both the result of the Cross (costly forgiveness of sins) and the pattern of the Cross (reversal of world’s values). On the cross neither justice nor mercy loses out – both are fulfilled at once. Jesus’s death was necessary if God was going to take justice seriously and still love us. (p. 197)”*

### **Why did Jesus have to die? A Summary from “Living Faith”**

We confess that we are sinners. We do not care for the world as we should. We do not fulfill our calling to serve God. Our lives do not reflect the Creator's love. Our failure is sin, a rebellion against God, an insistence that we be god in our own lives.

God has given us the law to show us how to live. Yet we are unable to keep the Ten Commandments, and we do not love God without reserve nor our neighbour as ourselves. Above all, our sin is exposed by the perfect life of Christ.

Sin alienates us from God. It offends the holiness of God, separates us from our Lord, and leads to spiritual death. It mars the divine image in us and infects our relationship with others and with ourselves. Sin is a power present in every human life, even at birth. It issues in such sins as pride asserting itself against God, indifference towards God and neighbour, untruthfulness, greed, lust, laziness, gluttony, envy, and selfish anger.

We cannot escape our sin, nor the sin of the world. Because we are sinful the societies we live in are sinful. There are no exceptions: every system is flawed. We are part of the evil of the world, of its violence, neglect, injustice. All people fall short of God's standards and need salvation.

To the world in its rebellion and alienation God promised blessing and restoration. The Lord chose Abraham and his descendants and through a covenant with them destined them to be bearers of that promise to all people. The Old Testament records God's message and mighty acts. It speaks of God's grace and judgment. It declares God's promise and points to the One to come. From Israel came the Messiah; in Jesus of Nazareth God kept the promise of salvation.

Jesus is Saviour through whom God has come to us and through whom we come to God. Christ died for our sins. The innocent one bore our condemnation on the cross. He suffered and was put to death for the sin of the world.

God's reconciling act in Jesus Christ is a mystery which the Scriptures describe as the sacrifice of a lamb, a shepherd's life given for his sheep, atonement by a priest. It is also the innocent dying for the guilty, the ransom of a slave, payment of a debt, and victory over the powers of evil. Such expressions interpret the love of God revealing the gravity, cost, and sure achievement of our Lord's work. Yet that love we cannot fully explain. God's grace, received by faith alone, pardons and justifies, redeems and reconciles us.

Jesus suffered, died, and was buried, but God raised him from the dead. Risen and ascended, he is alive now, the living Lord. His resurrection means that our faith is not empty, that final victory is assured over all evil powers which destroy and deform life, and that death, the last enemy, is conquered. The forces of the evil one still wage war against us. The destructive powers are still present. But their end is not in doubt. We await the full revelation of our Lord's triumph.

Salvation comes from God's grace alone received through faith in Christ. From all eternity, and through no merit on our part, God calls us to life in Christ. Here is the good news of the Gospel! Through the death and resurrection of Christ our sins are forgiven. Salvation means life, forgiveness, healing, wholeness. It comes from God's grace received through faith in Christ alone.

Thanks be to God!

**Next Week: "How can I have faith?"**