

Why Did Jesus Die?

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In the preceding devotional, "How Good Must You Be?" we saw that God requires *absolute perfection* of us if we are to gain His approval. To bring home this point, imagine that you are standing by the roadside, about to take a sip from a large tumbler of pure, clean water, when suddenly a car races by and splashes through a nearby mud puddle. A single slimy drop of germ-infested mud lands 'plop' into your tumbler of water. Would you go ahead and take the sip of water now?

No, you would probably dump out the whole tumbler in disgust. It's similar between us and God. The very first time you ever sinned in your life, that one sin polluted your spirit and made you unfit for a relationship to the Holy One.

And as we also saw in the last devotional, this is a problem that all of us face, for in reality *none of us* meets God's standard of perfection (Romans 3:23). When we talk about God's standard of perfection, we are talking about God's *Law*. The idea of Law is simple (Romans 2:6-12): If you are consistently righteous, you will be rewarded with eternal life. If you sin, you will be punished with eternal death (where "death" here means the death of the spirit -- a complete breaking of your relationship to God).

Keep in mind that spiritual death has always been the punishment for any and all sin. Remember what God warned Adam and Eve would happen if they ate the fruit He had forbidden: ". . . in the day that you eat from it you will surely *die*" (Genesis 2:17). Did they? Well, no, their bodies didn't die that day (they lived for many years afterwards), but their spirits immediately died the very moment they ate of the fruit. At that moment their relationship to God was severed. This is what always happens when someone breaks God's holy Law.

So, though God would gladly reward a consistently righteous person with eternal life, what we in fact find is that no one ever lives without breaking God's Law, so every person stands condemned to spiritual death.

But there is another way. Even in the Old Testament, God provided a balance to the Law. That balance was the system of *sacrifices*.

Think of a sacrifice as involving a substitute death. Each Jew in the Old Testament who presented himself before God at the Temple had sinned just like you and I have sinned. God commanded that he bring to the temple an animal that could be killed as his *substitute*, in his place.

Leviticus 1

'When any man of you brings an offering to the Lord, you shall bring your offering of animals from the herd or the flock. 3 'If his offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he shall offer it, a male without defect; he shall offer it at the doorway of the tent of meeting, that he may be accepted before the Lord. 4 'And he shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, that it may be accepted for him to make atonement on his behalf.'

Substitute death. The man's sins were placed on the animal (or assigned to it), and the animal died instead, so that the man wouldn't have to.

This was God's idea, and the concept was a great one. There was only one problem. By itself, the system of animal sacrifices couldn't make anyone acceptable to God. God realized this all along, of course, and He even said so in Hebrews 10:4.

"For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins."

Why is it impossible? There are several reasons the death of an animal could not really substitute for the death of a man:

1. An animal's life is not worth the same as a human life. Humans are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27); animals are not.
2. The required punishment for sin is not merely physical death, but *spiritual* death. Yet, an animal has no spirit or relationship to God, so it cannot experience spiritual death.

The most that animal sacrifices could do was to be a *symbol*, a pointer to the kind of sacrifice that would be required to substitute for the punishment that we humans deserve for our sin. The Bible tells us what this suitable sacrifice is:

Hebrews 10

10 . . . we are made holy through the sacrifice Christ made in his body once and for all time.

11 Every day the priests stand and do their religious service, often offering the same sacrifices. Those sacrifices can never take away sins. 12 But after Christ offered one sacrifice for sins, forever, he sat down at the right side of God. . . . 14 With one sacrifice he made perfect forever those who are being made holy.

Christ's sacrifice was the once-for-all perfect sacrifice. Here's why:

1. As a *human*, he could suffer *spiritual* death, because He had a human spirit just like you and me. When Jesus died on the cross, not only did His body die, His spirit died as well. His relationship to God the Father was temporarily broken off (i.e., spiritual death).
2. As a *perfect* man who never sinned, his death could be a substitute for *our* sins. If Jesus had Himself been a sinner, then His death could only have been a punishment for His own sins. But

because Jesus was the sinless Son of God, His spiritual death could be a substitution for the spiritual death that we deserve.

3. As the *God-man*, his death could substitute for *all sins of all people of all time*. If Jesus had been only a normal man, then He could have at most substituted for just one other person (i.e., one life for one other life). But because Jesus was God as well as man, His life had infinite value. The value of just one moment of spiritual death for Jesus on the cross was more than equal to the weight of an eternity of spiritual death for all people who have ever lived.

Because Jesus died as the once-for-all sacrifice, then, God has a basis on which He can justly forgive sins. And if God considers your sins to have been punished in Jesus's death, He can then declare you to be perfectly righteous in His sight, with nothing offensive remaining on your moral record. Your relationship to God can be completely restored; your spirit can be healed.

Yet God requires a response from you before He will apply the benefits of Christ's death to you personally and declare you to be righteous in His sight. That response is *faith in Christ*:

Romans 3:22-26

22 God makes people right with himself through their faith in Jesus Christ. This is true for all who believe in Christ, because all people are the same: 23 All have sinned and are not good enough for God's glory, 24 and all need to be made right with God by his grace, which is a free gift. They need to be made free from sin through Jesus Christ. 25 God gave him as a way to forgive sin through faith in the blood of Jesus' death. . . . 26 . . . God did this so he could judge rightly and so he could make right any person who has faith in Jesus.

What does "faith in Jesus Christ" mean? There are many verses in the Bible that talk about this, including the following: Matthew 16:24-26; John 6:28-29; John 8:23-29; John 20:30-31; Acts 20:21; Romans 10:9-10; Galatians 2:16; Galatians 5:1-6; Ephesians 2:8-10; and 1 John 5:9-13. From these and other verses, we can summarize what faith in Christ means:

To have faith in Christ you must commit yourself to trust in Jesus as the one and only God-man whose death on the cross can alone bring you to God. Such a loyal faith involves an ongoing commitment to turn away from the sin in your life that displeases God, and a willing desire for God to make you more and more like the Jesus Himself, who is your Lord and Master.

This is clearly not a simple decision of the moment that can be made and then forgotten. It is an ongoing commitment to trust in and follow the Lord Jesus. But you must begin sometime. If you haven't yet begun this journey with Christ, are you willing to do so now?

One word of warning: You cannot have a genuine faith in Jesus until you have first abandoned all hope of gaining God's acceptance by way of your own goodness. As we talked about earlier, you can never be good enough to gain God's acceptance on your own, because *any* amount of sin in your life (including the past sins you've already committed) stains your moral record and makes you unfit for a relationship with the holy God. It is absolutely essential to understand this, for the Bible makes it clear that you must completely give up the old way of expecting to *earn*

God's acceptance (the way of Law); instead, God's acceptance can only come to you as a *free gift* (see Romans 3:24 above). If you still think that you can earn God's acceptance, you will remain cut off from Christ:

Galatians 5:4

If you try to be made right with God through the Law, your life with Christ is over--you have left God's grace.

You cannot hold onto Jesus in one hand, while in the other hand continue to cling to confidence in your own goodness. God will not accept such an offer.

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