

QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

15 Why Did Christ Die?

Scripture: I Corinthians 15:1-3

“Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; By which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain. For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.”

Most Christians could answer the question before us right off the top of their heads without any hesitation. Christ died for us. It all seems simple enough, that is until someone comes along and asks what we mean when we say that Christ died for us. Did Jesus really have to go and get Himself crucified on a cross for us? Could there be Christianity without a cross? It was at this point that even the disciples made at least three mistakes in their understanding of the faith they had come to embrace. First, they did not realize that Christ **would have to die**. The sixteenth chapter of Matthew's gospel is important because there for the first time in the New Testament, I believe, the church, the cross and the coming again of Christ are mentioned. Peter responds to the Lord's mention of dying with the words, *“This shall never happen to You.”* This error on Peter's part was because of his misunderstanding about the Lord's real mission when He came to this earth the first time. Inasmuch as we are nearing the Easter season I will mention in passing that the other two mistakes these early followers of Christ made were that they did not know Jesus **would have to rise** from the dead. When Jesus was actually put to death they found it very hard to believe that He came back from the dead. Their attitude is expressed in Mark 16:11, *“and they, when they heard that he was alive, and had been seen, believed not.”* Lastly, they did not understand that Christ **would have to ascend**. The first thing they had on their minds when they knew Christ was alive was the kingdom they wanted Him to establish. This is seen in the question which is recorded in Acts 1:6, *“Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?”* The purpose of the Lord's coming was to redeem, not to reign. The disciples did not have this awareness.

Absolutely speaking, some theologians feel there could have been Christianity without a cross. They reason. God could have done anything He wanted to do and in His infinite wisdom could have devised another type of doctrine. He could have not demanded expiation for sin. But that is all in the realm of possibility, and as the facts are understood by us, Christianity cannot surrender the cross. We can only understand that God has willed to balance the scales of justice in the punishment of sin by having one man die for all men.

There appears to be two kinds of Christianity which operate side by side in this world. There is a Christianity of social improvement and civic mindedness. In this segment of professing Christendom, Christ is spoken of as a great humanitarian and a wonderful martyr. In addition to these things Jesus was a great teacher who contributed to the wellbeing of society. The death of Jesus was an unfortunate incident which took place in a world where there is no justice anyway. There is yet another kind of Christianity which makes its appeal to the hearts and minds of people. It is a Christianity of atonement. Here is more than a system of ethics. Here we find a holy God moved by the tragic results of sin. In mercy and love God became flesh and dwelt among men only to eventually bear man's sin in His own body upon a tree. (I Peter 2:21-24) If you remove the truth of the cross from the first kind of Christianity, nothing is changed. Take away the cross from the second kind of Christianity and there is nothing left. Which kind of Christianity do we find in the New Testament? It is the kind where there is a cross. It is the kind where a man by the name of Jesus died at age thirty three and who suffered death solely because of others. Before we look to see how the Bible sets forth the death of Christ I think that we can be much helped in understanding His death by first examining the fundamental truth of just who this man Jesus is. Once we have come to a decision about that it is not difficult to appreciate more of what really did happen on that Good Friday so long ago.

I. THE TRUE IDENTITY OF JESUS: *Hebrews 1:1-13*

Verse two in this passage reveals a most important thing about God. The God with whom we have to do is a God who communicated Himself to us. He has expressed Himself to mankind. "...has spoken to us in His Son," is the way the Bible reads. This God is not discovered in the normal processes of logic, philosophy, and reason. Nor is He discovered by the scientist in a controlled framework of experiment. Rather, this God has spoken through the prophets, but in these last days through a Son. God's supreme message to this world is not to be found in a creed or a doctrine, essentially, it is to be known through a person.

In this person time and eternity converged. In this person the invisible God could be seen before the very eyes of men. In the flesh this person was the image of God. (Colossians 1:16; Hebrews 1:3) It was J. B. Phillips who spoke of ours as being a visited planet. All things are said to be derived from Him and are upheld by Him. (Colossians 1:16-17) This includes this planet in the remote corner of this immense universe, the mountains, the oceans, and all life. In fact, all things were created for Him (Colossians 1:16) It is a sober thought to realize that you and I were made for Jesus Christ. This Jesus claimed to be God. (Luke 5:20; John 8:58-59) He claimed to be the judge of men (John 5:16-18), to control human destiny (John 5:24), to have universal appeal (John 12:32), to be the way to heaven (John 14:6), to be the Savior of the world (Mark 14:61-62), and to be the truth (John 14:6). It is God's plan that Christ should be preeminent in all things. The realms of His preeminence include the church, and all human beings, for all shall one day bow to Him, many not joyfully, but all will bow. (Philippians 2:9-11) When we read passages such as those mentioned we begin to get a little different picture of Jesus than the one which is so often presented by Sunday School art, the Jesus who is surrounded with little children and lambs of the flock. This is the Jesus who died on the cross. He was a very special person and therefore His death was a very special death. We don't ordinarily think of people's death as being special. People don't accomplish much by dying. Everything a person does is done before the moment of death. The death of Jesus is different. It was His death that accomplished a great deal.

II. JESUS WAS GOD AND HE DIED: *Philippians 2:5-8*

The question will come, did God die? This is paradoxical because God, by definition, cannot die. Skeptics who do not believe that Jesus was divine claim that His death is proof enough of this. Nevertheless, when Jesus died death was so taken into the nature of God that He experienced our understanding of it. When Christ's body died, God did not die in the sense that He went out of existence. We know from other Scriptures that the Spirit of Christ was very active during the three days His body was in the tomb. (I Peter 3:18-19; Ephesians 4:9) We believe that it was only the body of Jesus which died on the cross and that after three days His spirit returned to empower that body to be triumphant over death and the restrictions imposed upon it by time and space. The most important part of Jesus death was not physical, but spiritual, and was accomplished when He gave up the ghost. (Matthew 27:50) The holiness of God in motion against sin came upon Him and He was utterly forsaken by His Father

with whom He had always known perfect communion. (Matthew 27:46; Matthew 26:39) If this is what the essence of Hell is, separation from God, Jesus suffered it for those three terrible hours. Just before He dismissed His spirit from His mangled body, He cried the great victory word which called our salvation complete, *"It is finished."* (Luke 23:46; John 19:30)

III. THE DEATH OF ONE FOR THE MANY: *Hebrews 2:9*

The reason why we took the time to carefully identify this Jesus now appears. It is to be seen in the fact that *"God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself."* (II Corinthians 5:19) The divine, human nature of Christ, will always remain a mystery to us. Theologians call it the "hypo-static" union. As a man He suffered *"more than any man"*. (Isaiah 52:14) As God He could endure infinite and eternal punishment in a specific place and at a specific time. In this way He satisfied the demands of a righteous God. . On the human level this would have been impossible, but here we have some thing which is outside the human equation of one for one. In fact, the value of the divine life which was surrendered on the cross exceeds the need on the part of humanity. The innumerable sins of the ages have been adequately covered by the blood of Christ whose suffering has infinite worth. Christianity is not .a "do-it-yourself" system. It has all been done in the one way it could be done. Salvation comes to us as a gift or it does not come to us at all. We are saveable, but only because of what someone has done for us. That is the reason why Christ was born. *"The Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost."*

IV. THE SCRIPTURAL DEFINITION OF CHRIST'S DEATH:

1. Christ Died as a Ransom: *Galatians 3:13*

The meaning of a ransom is set forth in Leviticus 25:47-49. It is to deliver a thing or person by paying a price. It means to purchase back a person or item by paying the price for which it is being held. The Bible portrays sin as a slave market in which people are under the sentence of death. We are. A people in bondage. Into the agora, the market, comes the man with the seamless robe. His name is Jesus. He comes to purchase. His price is not silver or gold the value of which fluctuates. It is His own blood which is of eternal value. The word used in Galatians 3:13 is *"ekagorazo"* And it means to. *"Acquire out of the forum."* .

In the early days a slave would be purchased only to outlive his usefulness and be sold again. He would be returned to the market place and placed on

the block again. The point here is that when Christ purchases a person and redeems him, he will never return to the slave market again. He is no longer up for grabs. Christ will not give up His ownership to another. Verses which speak of this wonderful redemption are Revelation 5:9; I Peter 1:18-19.

2. Christ Died as a Propitiation: *Romans 3:25*

The meaning of propitiation is mercy-seat or covering. It is that God covers, overlooks, casts away the believing person's sins because of Christ's death. The death of Christ is set forth as the grounds upon which God is able to do this without compromising His holy and just nature. The Book of Hebrews teaches that Christ "*propitiates*" the sins of people. (Hebrews 2:17) John declares that Christ is the "*propitiation*" for our sins. (I John 2:2; 4:10) This thought is part of the publican's prayer in Luke 18:13, "*God be propitiated to me the sinner.*" It is the thought of appeasement. The punishment due to the sinner is not inflicted. This release we have come to enjoy as forgiveness.

3. Christ Died as a Reconciler: *Romans 5:10*

The meaning of reconciliation is the removing of enmity between two or more discordant parties. It is a change in attitude on the part of God toward man which was a barrier to fellowship. The thought is that originally God and man faced each other. In sinning, Adam turned away from God. Then God turned away from Adam. The death of Christ has satisfied the demands of God so that God now has turned toward man. It remains for man now to turn to God. Man is now urged to be reconciled to God.
(II Corinthians 5:18-20)

4. Christ Died as a Substitute: *I Peter 2:24*

This simply means one life given in the place of another. We have already spoken of the ability of Jesus to do such a thing for all men. The important thing about Jesus is who He is. As important as His teachings are, Jesus did not move that much beyond the Hebrew prophets in His teaching. It was His person that counted. If Jesus is not alive today Christianity will fall in shambles. He substituted for us before the bar of justice when sin was being tried. (II Corinthians 5:21)

5. Christ Died as an Example: *Philippians 2:5-8*

In the second century there was an enemy of the church whose name was Celsus. He even wrote a book and entitled it "The True Word." He said that

the whole thought of God coming to this world was absurd. Even if such a thing was true, God would never have come to be born as he was where he was. He would have come to Rome and to the great palace where he would be sure to be recognized. Celsus seems very reasonable at this point. However, God's ways are not man's ways. God came as a servant. He was obedient. That is why believers are urged to take up a cross. The cross-death of Christ is an incentive to service. We now assume voluntarily a self-sacrifice lifestyle for the servant is not greater than His master. (Matthew 16:24; II Corinthians 5:15; Galatians 6:14) Jesus changed the symbol of the cross to one of heroism.

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