

Why Did Jesus Die? How God Saves Us

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With the end of the first century of the Christian Era and the death of John-the last intimate eyewitness of Christ's ministry-questions previously taken for granted began to surface: Who was Jesus? Why did He come? Why did He die?

Responses to such queries came through a host of metaphors found in the Scriptures: the sacrificial Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world; the conquering King of kings; the Light of the world. Jesus was seen as the Son of God-a cosmic deliverer, an emissary from heaven. But also as the Son of man, identifying with us.

One of the most telling pictures lies in the idea of ransom. Jesus says, "The Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28).* And echoing Him, Peter says, "You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot" (1 Peter 1:18, 19).

The idea of ransom was common in the ancient world. The word indicated something of value used to reclaim something from a pawnshop. It also referred to the purchase of freedom by a slave. Of course, the ancients also knew all too well about the practice of paying ransom for release of a captured hostage or prisoner of war. Hence Paul's comment, "You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men" (1 Cor. 7:23).

The Ransom Price

However, restless imaginations soon went to work, and raised the question, If ransomed, who collected the ransom price?

Interestingly, the Bible never says. Over the centuries a dramatic scenario took shape-part fact, part fiction. According to the tale, a deal was struck between the Father and Satan. Adam had sold his rights-indeed, his soul-to the devil. Knowing the Father's earnest desire to have Adam returned, Satan, with a fiendish cackle, demanded the ultimate price: the life of the Son of God, the final object of Lucifer's hatred.

So Jesus came-so goes the scenario-and lived under the duress of Satan's torment, and finally forfeited His life. But according to the story, Lucifer himself was fooled, for the Father raised His Son from the grave, leaving Lucifer shorn of his prize, possessor of nothing but an empty tomb. He lost the prize he had extorted from the Father.

The Important Truth

Despite the fantasy window dressing, we discover here a nugget of truth. Christ did indeed give His life a ransom for us sinners. But the worthwhile question has little to do with who received payment. There is a far more important truth-namely, that in Christ's atonement a monumental price was paid, not in crass commercial terms, but to accomplish reconciliation between us as fallen sinners and our righteous God, to set us right with God. "For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life" (Rom. 5:10).

Before a watching universe God demonstrated once for all how far He would go to make possible redemption of lost sinners. In this extension of His love is revealed the manner in which His sacrifice partakes of ransom qualities.

We must never forget that it was our God who initiated our rescue, who reached out to us. "All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself" (2 Cor. 5:18). And He continues to reach out to us today. When we accept His merciful invitation, we walk in the certainty of salvation guaranteed by His death and resurrection.

In one brief sentence Paul probes the depths of what it means for God to love. "But God

shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).

Three truths leap out at us. First, God demonstrates His kind of love. Second, we grasp our helpless, ever-ignorant condition as sinners. And third, we watch Him initiate the whole plan.

In God's plan Christ fulfills the everlasting covenant, meeting a commitment crafted before the world was. He would volunteer to lay down His life for us. As Adventists understand especially well, He was fulfilling concurrently a purpose of cosmic proportions.

But what about His love?

Unfortunately, love has become an almost shapeless word. Often it is tied to sentiment, and even confused with a religious feeling. But as used in the Bible, love is a power word, not a soft fuzzy. Love is aggressive: God at work tracking us down to help us. Love is a principle, Ellen White says. How can that be? The answer is that God's love is an unshakable commitment, inviolable, a predisposition in our favor that cannot be discouraged. Divine love—there is no way to shake it or deter it. It is a relentless pursuit by a God eager to help, one who never gives up. In this sense God is love.

More Than Example

In the high Middle Ages a French monk, Peter Abelard, constructed what he felt described what love really means. It has come to be called the moral influence theory. Reacting against the coarse ransom idea of his time, he argued that in no sense was Jesus a ransom, but someone elevated. If only we could grasp the nobility of God's character, he reasoned, our self-ridden hearts would melt and be moved to repentance, and sin would be abandoned.

For Abelard, Christ's death really was the ultimate demonstration of God's love, hence a description of His character. So Jesus suffered with us to set the example. He identified fully

and tasted all of life. He suffered *with* the sinner rather than directly *for* the sinner. This theory reinterpreted the meaning of those texts that tell us Christ died for us.

Despite its core truth, Abelard's doctrine fell far short of the full biblical picture. It presents Christ as subject to the law of love rather than being its Creator. Its soft view of sin suggests that difficulty arises not so much from the sinner's violation of God's perfect character as from his failure to understand God's affection for him. It leaves to wander the biblical teaching that Christ came not only to demonstrate God's love but to manifest His justice as well. With the atonement described principally in terms of enlightening us about His purpose, Christ's work as a sacrifice dying for guilty sinners is muted. The focus falls especially on inward moral enlightenment, not so much on a plain and open outward death that resolved the major conflict sin had introduced in God's universe. So Abelard brought us a partial truth-Jesus as the demonstration beyond all question of God's unfailing concern for us.

But salvation means more than good feeling between us and God. It means a grueling confrontation between righteousness and human revolt that entangles us all. It means a love that carried Jesus to the ultimate sacrifice to obtain for us reconciliation with our Creator. The ghastly physical scene at Golgotha spoke only dimly to humans of a kind of love that, in fact, means taking up the guilt of every sin and bearing its consequence: total alienation from God. Only here surfaces the depths of God's self-sacrificing, persistent love.

So, as Paul says, "we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (verse 1). We have the joy of certain salvation as we accept Him, knowing ourselves fully accepted in His love. God is love, and the magnitude of that love will continue to unfold before us as we stride through the gates into eternity.

Tucked away in a familiar New Testament text is a truth usually obscured by translators. "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3). Literally the text says Christ became our place of sacrifice (Greek, *hilasterion*), an unclouded reference to the ancient Hebrew sacrificial system. Both on the surface and at bedrock, the principle is

substitution.

Typical of pagan religions, the ancient Greeks worked to appease their gods, quieting the gods' anger and seeking favor with gifts and a regimen of specified deeds. Unfortunately, this concept persists among some Christians today, at times surfacing in arguments over faith and works. But appeasement on any grounds is a pagan idea worthy of rejection.

The Father's Favor

In Christ's death is no hint of the Saviour's effort to win the favor of the Father. With that favor already in hand, His confidence carried Him to Calvary, despite a shuddering of His human frame. Only on the cross, confronted by withdrawal of His Father's presence in revulsion against sin, did the stark break become clear. As the veil of our guilt fell over Him, there was expressed from His lips an agonizing cry, "Why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46).

With this He slipped into the pit of the second death carrying the burden of rejection for rebellion against God. At that point He is in our place. His is the despair of lost sinners staring into a black hole of oblivion, devoid of hope. Standing in our place, "The Saviour could not see through the portals of the tomb. (*The Desire of Ages*, p. 753). Death overtook Him as the abandoned sinner, alone, in the place where each of us really belongs.

Some suggest that Christ came primarily to show His concern for us in our common human fate, to share our sorrows, to assure us God understands and cares. While all this has merit, it carries the subtle suggestion that, after all, sin is not really that serious and we should take final comfort in the knowledge that God never ceases caring. We are encouraged to look on the sunny side. But what sunlight ever falls on the precipice overlooking doom? Beyond question, Jesus demonstrates how God loves, but much more was at stake. He came to bear the inevitable punishment for revolt against the infinitely righteous character of God.

Jesus came, not to appease, but to cancel guilt and cleanse sinners. In no sense is this

bribery of God or adroit footwork to meet some sort of personal demand. Instead, it was a calculated divine plan of which Paul said, "This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:25, 26). *In other words, rather than responding to God's demand, it was done at God's initiative.*

Along the way Jesus paid our ransom and freed us, the captives of sin. Along the way He showed how God loves. But there is much more. Real understanding comes when we come to grips with the desperate nature of our sin problem and how God must deal with rebellion running loose in His universe.

At question is God's righteousness, His justice. Here is a dramatic departure from pagan ideas of appeasement. God undertakes to bridge the gulf. He substitutes Himself to demonstrate the changeless nature of His law, and performs all that's needed. Christ becomes the divine sacrifice, His cross an altar (see 1 Cor. 5:7). In amazement we stand aside, watching as He takes it up in our behalf. He "gave himself up for us" (Eph. 5:2) and "offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins" (Heb. 10:12). God "sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10).

In Christ our sin was judged and condemned. God's righteous nature remains intact and its violation dispatched. While we stood like wide-eyed children, He reconciled us, now to shower the benefits upon us who accept Him in faith. With the universe as witness to it all, what more could He do?