

What's So Important About the Death of Jesus?

On Palm Sunday, Christian people all over the world are thinking about that last Sunday in the earthly life of Jesus when He came into Jerusalem amid an explosion of joyous enthusiasm. Palm Sunday is the beginning of the last week in the public life of Jesus leading up to His crucifixion on Good Friday and then the resurrection on Easter Sunday. Palm Sunday is like the opening of a curtain on the central events of the Christian faith.

Matthew 21: 9 captures the heart of the Palm Sunday event: "The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, 'Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!' The word "hosanna" meant "Save us now, we pray!" Their hosannas echoed the words of the Psalms. They were praising Jesus, calling Him king, and calling on Him for salvation.

In spite of all the excitement on Palm Sunday, it is clear that what Jesus had come to do was to die. He had said so repeatedly. In the gospel of Matthew, Palm Sunday takes place in Matthew 21 as Jesus enters the city. Matthew 20 tells about the journey there, and in that chapter Jesus twice predicts His death.

But He doesn't just predict that this will happen. Jesus tells us that this is what He came to do. In Matthew 20:28 He says, "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." That itself sets Him apart from the founders of every other major religion. Others came to teach. Jesus says He came to die. That raises an important question: *What is so important about the death of Jesus?*

Today we begin a series called "The Struggle to Believe: Today's Questions About Christian Faith." This series comes out of my interaction with non-Christians and has also been influenced by, and owes a lot to, Tim Keller, a former teacher of mine and a pastor in New York City. Dr. Keller has had a heart for communicating the Christian faith to thoughtful non-Christians influenced by contemporary culture and its questions.

One question that many people ask today is, "What's so important about the death of Jesus?" When the movie *The Passion of the Christ* came out, a man on a panel discussion basically said, "I don't get all this emphasis on the bloody death of Jesus. After all, isn't it His teaching that is most important?"

What comes through when you read the Bible, however, is that the teaching of Jesus *is* important but it is not *most* important. Let's look again at what He said. "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28). Look especially at that last phrase. Jesus said dying was the reason for His coming.

What's so important about the death of Jesus?

The Death of Jesus Is Important Because He Was Giving Himself as a Ransom for Many

For many people, saying this just raises new issues, but before we consider those issues let's clearly understand what Jesus is saying. He is saying that in giving Himself to die, He is substituting His life *for* others. Notice that He describes giving His life as the paying of a ransom. The little word "for" in Greek is *anti*, meaning "in the place of." The word "ransom" is the Greek *lutron*, which means to buy the freedom of a slave or a prisoner. When someone was a prisoner, you would have to pay a ransom that would be given in exchange *for* or in place *of* the prisoner, who would then be given his freedom.

The Bible Pictures People as Walking About Seemingly Free, but Living Under God's Coming Judgment

I saw a man walking down International Speedway Boulevard last week wearing a GPS ankle bracelet locked on his leg. I knew what it was because I had recently read about the use of this new technology to release prisoners on parole and track their activities. In a sense that pictures our situation. We are all guilty of breaking the law of God, but we are allowed to be at loose in the world. However, all of our activities are being tracked. God knows where we are and what we do at all times. We are waiting for a final court date, so to speak, but our judgment is certain because we are all guilty.

Jesus Says He Came to Die in Order to Take Our Place and Bear the Punishment for Our Sin

The prophet Isaiah wrote hundreds of years before Christ. In Isaiah 53:6 he says, "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

The Bible Says You Do Not and Cannot Earn Salvation by Doing Good Works

We receive salvation only by turning to Christ as Lord and trusting Him as our Savior. Why? Because on the cross Jesus did for us what we could not do for ourselves. He took the wrath and judgment of God and absorbed it. He gave His life as a ransom for many.

Now, many people hear the Bible's teaching and say, "Wait a minute. I don't get it. That makes no sense at all. If God is such a God of love, why does Jesus have to give His life to set people free from His judgment? If God is a loving God, why doesn't He just forgive us? What's the matter with Him? How can you really believe in all this?" You may or may not believe this idea of Jesus dying on the cross as a sacrifice to pay for *your* sins is nonsense and offensive, but you are certainly surrounded by people who feel the idea is nonsense or offensive.

The answer to that objection is to consider the Bible's teaching.

It Is *Only* Through the Death of Jesus That God Could Save Us and Remain True to His Own Character and Laws of Life

Jesus repeatedly said that His death on the cross was not just a certainty but also a necessity. "From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life" (Matthew 16:21). He tells us why when he says, "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28). When you think about it, what Jesus said is pretty strong stuff. What He was saying is that without His coming to ransom us through His death on the cross, we *cannot* be right with God.

Many Things Cannot Be Made Right Simply by Saying, "I'm Sorry"

Suppose a person commits a crime and goes to prison. When he comes out, it's said that person has "paid his debt to society." The idea behind the statement is that there are human laws so that we can live at peace with each other. What happens when we trample on other human beings and their rights and dignity, hurt them, or take what belongs to them? A price has to be paid so that we can be reconciled to the community and live at peace with that society.

Suppose a slick con artist scams a community of elderly people out of their life savings. He is caught. Can he just say, "So I hurt you, made you feel foolish, reduced you to poverty, and left your future uncertain, but let's just let bygones be bygones." No, he has to pay a debt to society. Justice demands that he suffer the consequences of his actions. There may be a fine or imprisonment. Even if he can pay back the people financially, society demands that a certain debt to society itself be paid for the person to ever be in a reconciled relationship to that community and allowed to live in peace. You cannot just get up the next day and start fresh without somehow being reconciled. And reconciliation isn't always cheap and easy.

Suppose the father of this con artist is the attorney general of the state in which the crime was committed. Does that get him off? Would it be right for the father to say, "Well, he's my little boy, bless his heart, so I'm not going to prosecute him at all." Let's hope not. The attorney general is the head of the Department of Justice. His job is to uphold the laws of the state for the good of society. He may love the boy, but he must uphold the law, or else what's right and what's wrong is trivialized and compromised. That's how it is with God.

If One Can Owe a Debt to Society, Does It Not Make Sense We Can Sin Against God and Incur a Spiritual Debt?

Doesn't it make sense that if there is a spiritual reality beyond human society, we can become indebted to that spiritual reality, that spiritual society and community? Doesn't it make sense that we can incur a spiritual debt to God that cannot just be shrugged off? Scripture tells us there is a spiritual world that interpenetrates our world. There is a real spiritual world ruled by a perfect God, who has given us perfect laws of life that we have repeatedly broken. There is a fabric to that spiritual society that is woven of perfect love, justice, truth, and goodness. When we tear that fabric, it must be mended. Something has to happen.

God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. "Let there be stars in the sky," and there were stars in the sky. "Let there be waters teeming with fish and sea creatures," and it was so. But God could not just say, "Let there be forgiveness." When God determined to redeem fallen humanity, it took an incredible plan that unfolded over several millenniums and culminated in the cross and the resurrection of Christ. You don't have to fully understand all the reasons, but at some level you must accept the fact of the necessity of the cross or else you turn the story of Jesus into nonsense and Jesus into a fool.

Let me use an extreme illustration. Let's say I take a couple of guys from church and we hire a little plane to give us an aerial tour of all that good fishing country in the backwaters of Mosquito Lagoon. While we're flying, I turn to my buddies and say, "I love you guys so much. I want to show you how much." Then I say, "I love you this much," and throw myself out the door of the plane.

What would you say? Would you say, "Wow, there's a man who really loved us"? No, you would say, "Was he crazy or just stupid?" Why? Because my giving my life under those circumstances doesn't show you the depth and reality of my love, because it's senseless. Now if for some strange reason the plane started having trouble and the pilot shouted, "This is an emergency! We need to lose 170 pounds fast, or we're going down. We don't have anything to jettison so one of you has to go!" Then it would mean something if I gave myself to save others.

If the death of Jesus wasn't the absolutely necessary price for your redemption, then His death is senseless and He is neither a great leader nor a wonderful teacher. He's just crazy. If you think your sin isn't serious or that God should just shrug it off, the whole story of Jesus is senseless, because He came to give His life for us.

The Death of Jesus Is Important Because Through His Death He Reveals God's Love

In Matthew 20:28 Jesus says He would give His life as a ransom for many. Jesus was not blindsided by the cross. He willingly offered up His life. His sacrifice reveals His love and God's love. That's why it is such an empowering force for a life of love. In Ephesians 5:1-2 the apostle Paul writes, "Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

Some object to the message of the Bible, thinking what we have in the Bible is just an example of one of the many ancient religions with their bloodthirsty gods on which their bloodthirsty societies were based.

You read about it in all the ancient classics. In *The Iliad*, King Agamemnon wants to sail to Troy to do battle but can't get the gods to bring him favorable winds. So he sacrifices his daughter Iphigenia to appease the goddess Artemis so that she will give him fair winds for sailing off to war. People compare the Bible to that and say, "All those ancient societies were built on bloodthirsty religions and unloving gods who demanded bloody sacrifices to satisfy their wrath. What you have in the Bible is just the same old thing."

If that is your objection, would you consider that perhaps that is an inaccurate comparison based on a superficial evaluation?

People have been thrown into jail because someone from another culture or race didn't look very carefully at who it was who committed the robbery or the rape. Then when DNA evidence proves that the man in prison is innocent, the witness who had confidently pointed to the wrong man in the lineup tries to escape blame by saying, "They all looked alike to me." People outside a culture are notorious for seeing superficial similarities and overlooking serious distinctions.

The problem with comparing the sacrifice of Jesus with the sacrifices of primitive and bloodthirsty religions is that it makes a superficial comparison and fails to see the huge differences. The gods of ancient mythology were often petty, impulsive, and immoral in their judgments and in the sacrifices they demanded. They required sacrifices to satisfy their own wounded pride. In the story of Agamemnon, Artemis is piqued because Agamemnon boasted he equaled her at hunting. Therefore he had to sacrifice his daughter to appease her. But the God of the Bible is not like that. His laws are part of the spiritual fabric of true righteousness, which must be mended when torn. The ancients knew about angry gods, but they had no idea of a God of love who would come into the world and give His life a ransom for many.

The God of the Bible Doesn't Just Require a Sacrifice; He *Is* the Sacrifice

The God of Scripture is so just and holy that He cannot merely shrug off our sinfulness. At the same time, He is so loving and gracious that He would gladly come into our world and become one of us to give Himself as a ransom for our sins. Jesus was God Himself come to earth. The sacrifice of Jesus is not at all like the bloody sacrifices demanded by unjust gods in primitive cultures. His sacrifice is an act of love offered by a holy God who gives Himself to deliver us from the judgment we deserve.

When you turn to Christ as your Lord and trust in Him as your Savior, God considers your sins to be paid for by Jesus' suffering and death. Christ's perfect life

"What's So Important About The Death Of Jesus?" - Page # 5

record is transferred to your account, and God accepts you. Now you are righteous in His eyes because of what Jesus did for you.

Bono, the Irish rock star, anti-poverty champion, and philanthropist, was awarded an honorary British knighthood last week. Bono had this to say about Christ and the love of God: "The thing that keeps me on my knees is the difference between grace and karma." Saying that the idea of karma is central to all religions, Bono explained:

What you put out comes back to you: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. . . . And yet, along comes this idea called grace to upend all that. Grace defies reason and logic. Love interrupts, if you like, the consequences of your actions, which in my case is very good news indeed, because I've done a lot of stupid stuff. It doesn't excuse my mistakes, but I'm holding out for grace. I'm holding out that Jesus took my sins onto the cross, because I know who I am (Michka Assayas, *Bono: In Conversation with Michka Assayas*, Riverhead Books, 2005).

When we understand the meaning of the death of Christ, we see how very important it is. Through His incarnation, death, and resurrection, God in Jesus Christ triumphed over evil. He gave us an example of sacrificial love that is moving and powerful. And at the heart of it all, He gave His own life as a sacrifice that brings salvation if we trust in Him.

What do we have to do? We must repent and believe. To repent means facing the fact that we've been living as our own master and worshiping the wrong things. We turn from that to give God His rightful place in our life. And we transfer our trust from ourselves to Christ. We rely on what He did when He died on the cross to make us right with God.

The truth is life changing. The more you think about it, believe it, and take it to heart, the more powerfully it works in you and changes you.

A pastor told about a woman who worked for a major network broadcast company and came to his church. She was trying out church, she said, because of an experience she had. She had made a mistake that should have cost her her job, but her boss took the blame for her.

Because the boss was incredibly well thought of, he had the capital to handle that. He lost face, but it wasn't fatal. But if she had been blamed, it would have cost her her job. So she went to him and said, "Look, I've had bosses take the credit for work I did, but I've never had a boss take the blame for a mistake I made. I want you to know how much this means to me."

He said, "Don't even think about it. She said, "I've never had anyone do anything like this for me." He said, "It's OK. Don't worry about it." She said, "Why would you do that? Why did you do that?" He said, "Don't worry about it."

She kept pushing, so he said, "OK, let me tell you this--I'm a Christian, and that means Jesus took the blame for me. That's really the theme of my whole life. So it seemed to me that in this case I could take the blame for you. In just a small way, I thought I could take the blame for you."

If the meaning and message of the sacrifice of Christ for you isn't changing your life, maybe you don't really understand it or you are not believing it.

What Christ suffered on the cross shows how deep and powerful the love of God in Christ really is. The same Christ who gave Himself as a payment for sin rose again from the dead. He offers Himself to you today as a living Lord and Savior, whose eternal love is more gracious, powerful, and effective than your wildest dreams. Believe in Him, and let the power of the cross of Christ change your heart and life.