

## WHY DID JESUS DIE?

The cross has often been a fashionable item on jewellery items like bracelets, necklaces, earrings etc. We are so used to seeing it that we are not shocked by it. Imagine someone wearing a gallows or an electric chair on a chain! Yet the cross was a form of execution - and a very cruel one. The Romans abolished it in AD315 because it was considered too inhumane.

The cross has always been regarded as the symbol of Christian faith. A high proportion of the Gospels is about the death of Jesus. Much of the New Testament is concerned with explaining what happened on the cross. An important service of the church is 'Communion' when the body of the Lord Jesus and his shed blood are considered. Many churches have a cross on them because Jesus' death (as much as his life) has impacted the face of human history.

Why is there a concentration on the death of Jesus? Why is his death different from any martyr or war hero and what did it achieve? What does it mean when the New Testament says "He died for our sins?"

These are the questions we will now try to answer.

## WHAT IS MAN`S GREATEST NEED?

Ever heard people say, "I have no need for Christianity?" Sometimes they consider their lives to be happy and full and they 'try to lead a good life' and be 'nice to others'.

In order to understand why Jesus died we have to go back and look at the greatest problem which confronts every person. If we are honest, we would all have to admit that we do things which we know are wrong. We may be better than lots of other people we can think of, yet we are still guilty of wrong doing ourselves.

The Apostle Paul wrote: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). In other words, relative to God's standards we fall a long way short, no matter how good in comparison to someone else you may be.

Imagine this. A swimming race from any West Coast beach of New Zealand was to be held with the destination being Australia. On a certain day the swimmers all line up and plunge into the surf. Some make it through large breakers and then find themselves exhausted. Others are still swimming strongly several kilometres out. A few may get a considerable number of kilometres off shore but the point is *nobody will make it to the destination! All will come short.*

It is our sin that causes us to come short of God's standards and has broken the relationship with God that He planned for us to have. Like the Prodigal Son (Luke 15) we find ourselves far from our Fathers' home with our lives in a mess. Someone might suggest, "If we are all in the same boat, does it really matter?" It matters greatly because of the **consequences** of sin in our lives.

## ***1. The Pollution of Sin***

Jesus said, "What comes out of a man is what makes him unclean. For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thought, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man unclean." (Mark 7: 20-23). These things pollute our lives.

You may say "I don't do most of those things!" But one of them is enough to mess our lives up. The Ten Commandments are not an exam paper in which we only have to attempt 'any three' of them. The New Testament says that if we break *any* part of the Law we are guilty of breaking *all* of it (James 2:10). It is not possible to have for instance, a 'reasonably clean' driving licence. Either it is clean or it is not. One offence stops it from being a clean licence.

## ***2. The Power of Sin***

The things we do wrong have an addictive power. Jesus said, 'Everyone who sins is a slave to sin' (John 8:34). It is easier to see this in some areas of our wrong-doing than with others.

For example taking a hard drug like heroin, very quickly becomes an addiction, but it is possible also to be 'addicted' to temper, lying, pride, sexual immorality and many other things we cannot break. This is the 'slavery' which Jesus spoke of. Sin really is a hard task-master and after holding people prisoner pays wages of misery, despair and disappointment and hell in the end.

## ***3. The Penalty for Sin***

There is something within human nature which cries out for justice. When we see children molested, people battered or abused, something in us recognises that the perpetrations of such acts need to be apprehended and punished. Our motives may be mixed, (there may be an element of revenge) but there is such a thing as justifiable anger. We are right to feel that sins should be punished; that people who do such things should not get away with it.

It is not just other people's sins that deserve punishment. It is our own as well. One day we will all be subject to the judgment of God. Paul tells us the "wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23).

## ***4. The Partition of Sin?***

The death Paul speaks of is not only physical. It is 'spiritual' too in that it results in isolation from God - not just in time, but also for eternity.

An old Testament prophet call Isaiah declared: "Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your Lord, your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear." (Isaiah 59:1-2)

The things we do wrong cause this barrier.

## **WHAT HAS GOD DONE?**

We all need to deal with the problem of sin in our own lives. The more we recognise our need, the more we will appreciate what God has done. The good news of Christianity is that God loves us and did not leave us in the mess that we make of our own lives. He came to earth in the person of his Son, Jesus to die instead of us. Jesus took our place paying the penalty for sin that we justly deserved, (see Corinthians 5:21 and 1 Peter 2:24). Jesus was our *substitute*.

Many years ago in Russia, a highly respected leader who had bought great military advances to his people introduced some tough laws to curb the crime and disregard for authority. These laws were for everyone's protection. For stealing a loaf of bread, the guilty party would be tied to a whipping post and flogged to within inches of their life -many would not survive.

One day the leader's lieutenants bought the news to him that a person had committed the crime of stealing bread. Testing his reaction, they asked, "Does the crime still incur the penalty stated, regardless of who committed the act?" His answer, to be just, had to be "yes". They then bought his own elderly mother before him. Stunned, he realised the punishment had to be paid. His dilemma was he loved his mother and longed to pardon her but how could he show love and uphold justice at the same time? Stripping off to the waist he said "I will pay the price - tie me to the whipping post"

Jesus died taking our place - he was our substitute. Justice has been satisfied and yet God's love and mercy have been demonstrated and made available to mankind at the same time. Crucifixion was a cruel and hideous torture. Hanging there, naked, nailed by six inch nails into his forearms, just above the wrist and into his feet, Jesus' life slowly ebbed away as a mocking crowd ridiculed him. Yet the worst part of his suffering was not the physical trauma or torture, or even the emotional pain of being rejected by the world and deserted by his friends, but the spiritual agony of being cut off from his Father for us - as he carried our sins.

The amazing thing about God's love for mankind is that even when we were rebellious, disbelieving and living our own lives, he still loved us.

"Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrated his love for us in this; while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:7,8)

You do hear stories where someone sacrifices their life for their buddies but never for people who hate them and are strangers and aliens. Yet Jesus did precisely that.

## **WHAT ARE THE RESULTS?**

Like a beautiful diamond the cross has many facets. On the cross, the powers of evil were disarmed (Colossians 2:15). Death and demonic powers were defeated. On the cross, God revealed his love for us. Having entered our world and experienced suffering and the ultimate pain and rejection of the cross, Jesus has fully identified with the human condition.

Four images the New Testament uses to describe Jesus' work on the cross.

### ***1. We have been "Justified" (Romans 5:1)***

Justification is a legal term. If you went to court to answer charges and were acquitted, you were justified. Even though every person would be judged guilty in God's courtroom, Jesus in his love pays the penalty and we can go free. He is both our Judge and our Saviour. It is not an innocent third party but God himself who saves us. In effect, he gives us a cheque and says we have a choice: do we accept his payment on our behalf or are we going to face the judgment of God for our own wrongdoing?

### ***2. Our 'Debt' has been Paid***

Debt is not just contemporary with our day. It was a problem also in the ancient world. If someone's debt is serious enough, he might be forced to sell himself as a slave in order to pay them off. Suppose a man was standing in the market-place offering himself as a slave. Someone might have pity on him and ask, "How much do you owe?" The debtor might say "\$50,000". Suppose the customer offers to pay the \$50,000 and then lets him go free. In doing so he would be 'redeeming' him by paying a 'ransom' price.

In a similar way for us 'redemption ...came by Jesus Christ' (Romans 3:24). Jesus by his death on the cross paid the ransom price (Mark 10:45). In this way we are set free from the power of sin. This is true freedom. Jesus said, 'If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed' (John 8:36). It is not that we never sin again but that sin's hold over us is broken.

### ***3. We are made 'Clean'***

In the Old Testament there were careful laws laid down as to how sins should be dealt with. There was a whole system of sacrifices which demonstrated the seriousness of sin and the need for cleansing from it.

In a typical case a sinner would lay his hands on the animal confessing his sins. Thus the sins were seen to pass from the sinner to the animal which was then killed.

The writer of Hebrews points out that it is 'impossible for the blood of bulls and goats' to take away sins (Hebrews 10:4). It was only a picture or a 'shadow' (Hebrews 10:1). The reality came with the sacrifice of Jesus. Only his blood as our substitute can take away our sin, because he alone was the perfect sacrifice since he alone lived a perfect life. His blood purifies us from all sin (1John 1:7) and removes the pollution of sin.

Cleansing from sin and forgiveness is a wonderful thing. Because of what Jesus has done our sins can be blotted out - God remits our sin - sees it as cancelled out.

### ***4. We can be 'Reconciled' to God***

This simply means the broken relationship can now be restored. The partition of sin has been removed. Jesus has 'atoned' for our sins and bought about 'at-one ment!' (atonement) and just like the Prodigal son we can come back to the Father and experience his love and blessing. Our relationship is not only for this life it is eternal.

Nothing we could EVER do would be enough to actually ever 'earn' this new relationship with God. Many people try to live good lives and do good deeds to gain sufficient "merit points" to commend themselves to God. But there is only one way for us to be bought into relationship with God and that is by believing and receiving the free gift of forgiveness made possible by Jesus. All our efforts and good works are irrelevant in trying to win God's approval. However they are very relevant as evidence of our faith, *once we have* believed. Once we see the cross in personal terms and receive what Jesus has done for you and for me (not just the sins of the world) our lives will be transformed.

This is how John Wimber - who was an American church leader who came out of a background as a professional musician, discovered the cross as a personal reality to him: "After I had studied the Bible... for about three months I could have passed an elementary exam on the cross. I understood there is one God who could known in three Persons. I understood Jesus is fully God and fully man and died on the cross for the sins of the world. But I didn't understand that I was sinner. I thought I was a good guy. I knew I messed up here and there but didn't realise how serious my condition was.

But one evening around this time Carol (his wife) said, "I think it's time to do something about all that we've been learning". Then, as I looked on in utter amazement, she knelt down on the floor and started praying to what seemed to me to be the ceiling plaster. "Oh God", she said, "I am sorry for my sin".

I couldn't believe it. Carol was a better person than I, yet she thought she was a sinner. I could feel her pain and the depth of her prayers. Soon she was weeping and repeating, "I am sorry for my sin". There were six or seven people in the room, all with their eyes closed. I looked at them and then it hit me: They've all prayed this prayer too! I started sweating bullets. I thought I was going to die. The perspiration ran down my face and I thought, "I'm not going to do this. This is dumb. I'm a good guy" Then it struck me. Carol wasn't praying to the plaster; She was praying to a person, to a God who could hear her. In comparison to him she knew she was a sinner in need of forgiveness. In a flash the cross made personal sense to me. Suddenly I knew something that I had never known before; I had hurt God's feelings. He loved me and in his love for me he sent Jesus. But I had turned away from that love; I had shunned it all of my life. I was a sinner, desperately in need of the cross. Then I too was kneeling on the floor, sobbing, nose running, eyes watering, every square inch of my flesh perspiring profusely. I had this overwhelming sense that I was talking with someone who had been with me all of my life, but whom I failed to recognise. Like Carol, I began talking to the living God, telling him that I was a sinner but the only words I could say aloud were, "Oh God, Oh God..."

I knew something revolutionary was going on inside of me. I thought, "I hope this works, because I'm making a complete fool of myself. Then the Lord brought to mind a man I had seen in Pershing Square in Los Angeles a number of years before. He was wearing a sign that said, 'I'm a fool for Christ. Whose fool are you?' I thought at the time, "That's the most stupid thing I've ever seen". But as I knelt on the floor I realised the truth of the odd sign: the cross is foolishness 'to those who are perishing' (1 Corinthians 1:8). That night I knelt at the cross and believed in Jesus. I've been a fool for Christ ever since..."

If you are unsure about whether you have ever really believed in Jesus, here is a prayer which you can pray as a way of starting the Christian life and receiving all the benefits which Jesus died to make possible.

“God, I am sorry for the things I have done wrong in my life. (Take a few moments to ask his forgiveness for anything in particular that is on your conscience). Please forgive me. I now turn from everything which I know is wrong.

Thank-you for sending Jesus, your Son to die on the cross for me so that I could be forgiven and set free. From now on I will follow and obey him as my Lord. I now receive the gift of your forgiveness and your Spirit in my life to help me and be with me forever. Amen.”