**Why Did Jesus Die?**

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**W**e are walking with Jesus towards Jerusalem – through the events of the last week of his life. A few days ago – on Palm Sunday – we discovered that Jesus wanted everyone to know that events are not careening out of control.He is in charge. He’s not a pawn. He is sovereign. *And he is determined to save – whatever it takes.*

Long ago the church discovered that same sense of purposefulness and intentionality in the Old Testament, in one of the Suffering Servant passages in Isaiah, chapter 53: “He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities…upon him was the punishment that made us whole…by his bruises we are healed…because he poured himself out to death.”

What is quite shocking in Isaiah 53 is that the Suffering Servant is not merely a victim of human abuse and hatred, but in some sense God *demands* his death. Isaiah 53 says he was struck down by God…it was **the will of the Lord** to crush him with pain…through him **the will of the Lord will prosper**.”

*And we wonder how could God do this?*

Is the suffering of Jesus necessary?

Did Jesus really have to die?

**Andrea’s question**

Maybe you remember a number of years ago, just before Easter, when Christians were packing out movie theaters across America to see Mel Gibson’s move, “The Passion of the Christ.”

I was struck by something my sister Andrea said to me shortly after she saw “The Passion.” After we talked for quite awhile about how the film had impacted her, as the conversation was drawing to a close, I’ll never forget how Andrea paused, and then a bit sheepishly she said, “Now, I know I’m supposed to know this . . . *but why did Jesus die?”* How honest is that?

If you’ve seen the film, you know that’s one question it doesn’t really answer. ***How*** did Jesus die? Well, yes, there’s lots of that – maybe too much – especially if you compare the film to our Gospel texts. The Bible is very short on details of Jesus’ suffering. But ***why***did Jesus die? Sorry, but Gibson pretty much leaves us in the dark.

So, “I know I’m supposed to know this, but why did Jesus die?”

As I talked with my sister that day, I almost went on autopilot. I almost took the easy way out. I almost said, “Well, Jesus died for our sins.” Or, “Jesus died to save us,” which is true, but what does *that* mean?

So I came clean. I said to my sister, “Look, I’ve been a Christian for over thirty years and I still struggle to explain it!” And I don’t think I’m alone. We all know we’re supposed to know this…but why did Jesus die?

I mean, why wasn’t Jesus just transported directly from earth to heaven? (Hey, it happened before in the Bible, it could happen again!) Why didn’t Jesus just die of old age, or in his sleep? Does the salvation Jesus brings have to include suffering and death on a cross?

**Relational imagery**

Of course, the New Testament writers develop a variety of images for why Jesus died (financial, military, legal and sacrificial). But in answer to the question why did Jesus die the Scottish theologian and preacher Donald Baillie draws out a different kind of imagery…relational imagery.

This is how Baillie puts it: Suppose you hurt somebody, somebody you love. (I know this is a stretch but stay with me here!) And so you say to that person, “I am so sorry I hurt you; I feel really bad about it.” And then that person says, “Well, it’s OK. It’s no big deal. Why don’t we just forget it.” *But is that really forgiveness?*

What is that person really saying? Might that person actually be saying something closer to, “I don’t really care enough about you to be bothered by anything you say or do? You’re not that important to me.” So what happens is you end up sitting there nursing the pain of your guilt, when in fact what you really need is that person to help you deal with it, to help you clean the slate, so you can start fresh, so you can move on.

In other words, Baillie says, “Good natured indulgence and casual acceptance are not forgiveness and love, but [in reality they are] an expression of indifference and sometimes [even] hostility. **[Because] Real love and forgiveness mean caring enough to be hurt, caring enough to put ourselves in [an]other’s shoes and sharing their guilt as if it were our own.** Real love and forgiveness are ***costly*** – not just in the sense that the guilty party must squeeze them out of the injured party but in the sense that the injured party genuinely sympathizes with the guilty and shares [their] pain.” *And this is what God does in Jesus Christ!*

So, why did Jesus suffer and die?

Because God cares for us too much to say, “Oh, it doesn’t really matter, let’s just forget it.” God does not flippantly dismiss our sin and guilt – because it *does* matter.

Jesus died because words alone don’t cut it; because actions speak louder than words. In Jesus’ death God acts to demonstrate that God’s love and forgiveness are genuine.

Jesus died because when we thumb our noses at God, when we tell God and others in our lives to “get lost”– resulting in separation, and loneliness, and alienation – God deliberately stands *with* us. God *won’t* “get lost.”

Here’s Donald Baillie again: “In the cross God says to us, ‘Yes, it is true. You *have* hurt and offended me. But I still love you.’” In fact, God says, I love you so much *“*I will make your guilt and its consequences my own.*”* I love you so much “I will suffer with you – [and] *for* you – to make things right between us again.”

What this means is that it is God’s *love* that motivates Christ death, not God’s *anger*.

Maybe you’ve heard someone say that the Son of God dies on the cross to appease the Father’s anger? Of course, these folks still try to maintain that God is loving. (Someone pointed out that “feels a little like having the owner of a dog who is barking, growling and straining at its leash say, ‘Don’t worry, he doesn’t bite.’” Yeah, right!

Sometimes people make it sound like what Jesus came to save us from is…*God!*

But on the cross it’s *all* of God against *sin*; it’s *all* of God *for* humanity. God is not the problem; *sin* is the problem. *Those are the arms of God stretched wide in a loving embrace from the cross.*

*That’s why Jesus died!* That’s how the will of the Lord prospers!

That’s why Good Friday is good. And today we are are reminded that our job is not only to *proclaim* the cross, but also *to live it* – to *demonstrate* love, forgiveness and hope; to put ourselves in another’s shoes; to suffer with others*.* We are called to express God’s love as Jesus did – by ministering in weakness, vulnerability, and suffering love; by caring enough to be hurt; by letting our hearts be broken.

Because this too is why Jesus died…not merely to provide us with a ticket to heaven someday, but to be the key to a new kind of existence now, an existence that proclaims the gospel of salvation with our very lives. Jesus did not come just to prepare us to die. He came to teach us and empower us to live – to live lives marked by redemptive suffering.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Listen: for followers of Jesus, *life is* ***cruciform****.* *That’s* how grace triumphs! *That’s* how love wins! May it be so. By the power of God who is at work within us. Thanks be to God! Amen.

1. Donald Baillie, *God Was In Christ*, pp. 171ff., quoted by Shirley Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine, Revised Edition* (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), p. 260. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)