

The Greatest Why

Two weeks from today is Easter Sunday and we will join with Christians around the world in celebrating the resurrection of the Lord. In preparation for Easter, so we understand the reason for celebrating his resurrection, I want us to focus today on his death. Specifically, I want us to ask and answer the question of why. Why did Jesus have to die? Why is his death so important? I often say at memorial services that we have gathered not because someone died, but because this person lived. But with Jesus, we are very much here because he died! Much of the world wants to focus on his ethical life, his teaching, the miracles he performed, but the truth is, everything, and I mean everything, depends on his death and resurrection.

That's why the Christian world celebrates his death and resurrection at Easter. The deaths of other spiritual leaders of the world's religions are lamented by their followers. Their death marked the end of their teaching, but there was no significance to their death. What mattered was their life, their teaching, their example. Whether we are talking about Muhammad, the Buddha, Confucius, or even modern moral leaders like Ghandi or Martin Luther King – it was their life and example that mattered.

But not so with Jesus. His teaching and his example are certainly unparalleled in history, but from the beginning of his life and ministry an emphasis was laid upon his death and resurrection. He spoke of it often and saw it as central to his mission. The Scripture says, **“He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.” Mark 8:31.** He told them again in Mark 9:31 and again in Mark 10:32-34. **“Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. ‘We are going up to Jerusalem,’ he said, ‘and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise.’ Mark 10:32-34.**

Jesus saw his mission, his reason for coming as being completed by his death. Speaking of the crucifixion Jesus said, **“Now my heart is troubled and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour?’ No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!” John 12:27-28.** Jesus saw his mission culminating in his death on the cross.

During the Passover meal with his disciples, Jesus made provision for his own memorial service. They were to take and eat of the bread and drink of the cup in memory of his sacrifice. Jesus told us how he wished to be remembered and notice – it wasn't for his teaching, his good works, his caring for the poor, his healing ministry – he was to be remembered for his death!

When the gospels were written, Matthew and Mark devoted about one third of their gospels to the last week of Jesus' life. Luke devoted about a quarter of his gospel to that final week and John devoted almost half of his gospel. Too much emphasis on his death?

The apostle Paul saw his death as being the central theme. **“I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” 1 Corinthians 2:2**

The cross was central, but why? Why did he have to die? Some would say he made political enemies. Some would tell you his ideas were so revolutionary, so subversive to his culture that the rulers in power had to kill him. It was inevitable. But what is the real reason? Keep in mind Jesus himself said **“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep....no one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.” John 10:11, 18.** Why did he lay down his life for us? Why did he willingly go to the cross? There are many reasons I could talk about this morning, but let me share three reasons Jesus died on the cross. First of all,

Christ died to atone for our sins. We all believe that don't we? The cross of Christ, his sacrifice, is the only basis upon which God can and will forgive our sins. But why is that? Why doesn't God just forgive us without the sacrifice of his Son upon the cross?

A Presbyterian pastor of another century wrote, **“Forgiveness is to man the plainest of duties; to God it is the profoundest of problems.” ...Patrick Carnegie Simpson** Why would forgiveness be described as a problem for God? It has to do with his nature. God is love the bible tells us, but the bible also tells us God is holy and just and right. Suddenly we have a dilemma. Since God is just, he must punish sin and the sinner. He cannot allow sin to go unpunished. But since God is love, how does he punish the sinner? Send us all to hell without hope? He loves us so he wants to pardon us and forgive us. But how could he pardon the sin without compromising his justice? How could God, being holy, excuse our sin and unholiness?

This is the dilemma that God resolved on the cross. **On the cross, when Jesus died, God was in Christ bearing the judgment we deserved so he could extend to us the love and forgiveness we did not deserve.** The full and complete penalty for our sins was borne, not by

us, but by Christ on the cross. God in Christ, bore the penalty for us. Justice was satisfied, sin was punished, love was shown. In John Stott's words, "On the cross divine love and justice were reconciled."

How sweet the words we hear repeated often in Scripture, "Christ died for our sins." Sin and death are constantly spoken of. They are woven together. The wages of sin is death. Sin separates us from God and the soul that sins must die. We sin and we die. That is the law. But Christ comes as the atoning sacrifice and changes everything. Now when we speak of sin and death, the sin of which we speak is ours, but the death – the penalty for sin, is his. He died for our sins. He took our place, he bore the penalty and judgment for our sins, he experienced separation from God so we could be reconciled to God. **"...God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them...God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."** 2 Corinthians 5:19, 21. Why did Jesus die on the cross? He died to atone for our sins! He died so you could be forgiven and have eternal life. But that's not all.

Christ died to reveal the character of God. We disclose something of our character through our actions don't we? You can tell if I'm honest, kind, loving, or if I'm a liar, vain, conceited, by my actions. In the same way, God has revealed his character to us through his actions. He has revealed his nature to us, most incredibly, by giving his Son to die for us. **"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him would not perish but have everlasting life."** John 3:16. There is no other love like this! The song writer said "Amazing love how can it be, that thou my God should die for me!"

"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Romans 5:8. Look at the depth of this love. (John Stott says,)

God gave his Son for us. God didn't send an angel, some other created being, some other mediator, God sent his Son and in sending his own son he was giving himself. Stott wrote, "The value of a love gift is assessed both by what it costs the giver and by the degree to which the recipient may be held to deserve it. A young man in love will give his beloved expensive presents because he considers that she deserves them. But God, in giving his Son, gave himself to die for his enemies. He gave everything for those who deserved nothing from him. And that is God's own proof of his love for us."

God gave his Son to die for us. It would have still been amazing and totally wonderful if God had sent his Son just to live on this planet with us. Think of how awesome that is. The incarnation, God became man and lived with us, identified with us in our humanity, showed us how to live. That was wonderful but it wasn't enough. We were still lost and dying in our sins, separated from God and headed to hell. But God gave his Son to die on the cross. Paul said Jesus **“made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself [that would have been incredible, amazing, wonderful – but he went beyond that] and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!”** **Philippians 2:7-8.**

Imagine, leaving the glory of heaven to come to this earth and then, on top of that, to be subject to the horror of crucifixion and bearing all our sins in his flesh and feeling he had been forsaken by God himself. That is what it means for God to demonstrate his love for us. That's what Christ's Passion is all about.

Finally, **God gave his Son to die for us** – that is for people the bible describes as sinners, enemies of God and powerless to save ourselves. That's us isn't it? While we were still sinners, ungodly, enemies of God and in rebellion against him, God demonstrated his love for us and sent his Son to die for us, to redeem us and atone for our sins. God gave his Son to die for us!

The sacrifice of Christ on the cross doesn't necessarily settle the questions about injustice and the problem of pain in the universe, but it does forever assure us of the love of God for us. That he loved me in such a fashion assures me that he will somehow, someday, right all of the wrongs on this earth. Christ died to atone for our sins, to reveal the character of God and finally,

Christ died to conquer the powers of evil and death. When some think of the cross, they think of defeat. What a pathetic sight, this poor itinerant preacher, brutalized, beaten and crucified. There he is forgiving his executioners, showing us how to love and forgive. Those are powerful lessons to be sure. But that's not all that was happening and because we know what was really happening on the cross and why he died, the response of the New Testament to his death is not one of sorrow and defeat. It is not a pathetic sight, instead it's the basis for shouts of victory and triumph. **“Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”** **1 Corinthians 15:57.** And Paul writes again, **“But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ...”** **2 Corinthians 2:14.**

The cross is not a symbol of defeat but of victory, triumph, conquest, overcoming. Listen again this morning to John Stott. "...any contemporary observer who saw Christ die would have listened with astonished incredulity to the claim that the Crucified was a Conqueror. Had he not been rejected by his own nation, betrayed, denied and deserted by his own disciples, and executed by authority of the Roman procurator? Look at him there, spread-eagled and skewered on his cross, robbed of all freedom of movement, strung up with nails or ropes or both, pinned there and powerless. It appears to be total defeat. If there is victory, it is the victory of pride, prejudice, jealousy, hatred, cowardice and brutality.

"Yet the Christian claim is that the reality is the opposite of the appearance. What looked like (and in one sense was) the defeat of goodness by evil, is also, and more certainly, the defeat of evil by goodness. Overcome there, he was himself overcoming. Crushed by the ruthless power of Rome, he was himself crushing the serpent's head (as was predicted in Genesis 3:15). The victim was the victor, and the cross is still the throne from which he rules the world."...John Stott

The apostle Paul describes in Colossians how the powers of Hell came against Jesus in all of their fury on that day of crucifixion, but Paul declares **Jesus "disarmed the powers and authorities" and "made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross."** **Colossians 2:15.**

The devil thought he had finally won, but at the cross, Jesus triumphed over him and made a public spectacle of him. The devil thought he could get Jesus to avoid the cross, but instead, Jesus became obedient, even to death on the cross. The devil thought Jesus would strike back, but instead, Jesus overcame evil with good. He refused to call ten thousand angels to set himself free. He refused to disobey God, refused to hate his enemies or his executioners and refused to misuse his power to save himself. The devil couldn't gain a stronghold and Jesus triumphed over him and won the victory for all of us! The cross was our victory and the resurrection endorsed, proclaimed and demonstrated the power of that victory. Jesus conquered the powers of evil and secured victory for all of us.

Through his death on the cross, the devil was defeated and death was robbed of its frightening hold on mankind. The writer of Hebrews declares **"...so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is the devil – and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death."** **Hebrews 2:14-15.** Jesus died so we could

be set free from the control of the devil. He died so we no longer have to be afraid of death because death no longer suggests torment, instead, Jesus is preparing a place for us so we can be together forever. Death is the doorway that leads us into his eternal presence. Because Jesus died for us, now if we believe in him, Jesus said even if we die, we shall live. Death is not darkness for us, someone said it is extinguishing the light because the dawn has come. Jesus died to conquer death so we can live forever. The greatest why?

Why did he die? He died to atone for my sins and your sins. He died to reveal the character of God to us. He died to overcome the powers of the devil and death and provide victory for you and me. If you have not realized that Christ died for you, to atone for your sins, this is a great day for you. He died to save you, so you don't have to die in your sins and be forever separated from God in a place that was prepared for the devil and his demons.

If you will admit today that you're a sinner and need a savior. If you will believe in your heart that Jesus died for you and you'll repent and turn to Christ, you can be saved and given a brand new life in Christ. This is why Jesus died on the cross. **You are the answer to the greatest "why?" You are why he died.**

Listen one final time to John Stott. "In the course of my travels I have entered a number of Buddhist temples in different Asian countries. I have stood respectfully before a statue of the Buddha, his legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing around his mouth, serene and silent, a remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of the world. But each time, after a while, I have had to turn away. And in my imagination I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in Godforsaken darkness.

"The crucified one is the God for me! He laid aside his immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death. He suffered for us, dying in our place in order that we might be forgiven."

Why did he die? He died so you and I could be saved. So we could be forgiven. So we could walk in fellowship with him once again. So we could spend eternity in heaven with Jesus. He died for you. Are you living for him? He gave his life for you. Have you given your life to him?

Oh how he loves you and me.

