

"Why Did Jesus Have to Die?"

A Bible Study On the Meaning of Christ's Sacrifice

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INTRODUCTION:

Why Did Jesus Have to Die?

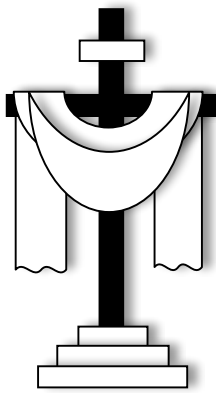
Jesus said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. (Luke 24:25-27)

Christ talks about his death on the cross as something "necessary" — something that **had** to happen. As Christians, if we are to trust and believe in Jesus and what he has done for us, we must at some point consider the important question: "Why did Jesus have to die?"

This Bible Study explores the most profound event of salvation history — the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. In theological terms, this is referred to as the biblical doctrine of the Atonement. At its heart, this doctrine is about how Christ addressed the rift between God and humanity, caused by human sin.

Approaching the topic like a multifaceted jewel, this Bible Study series will look at the meaning of the cross from different angles, exploring the many scriptural images and themes that are used to explain what Christ accomplished for us. Students of historical theology may be able to identify in the sessions certain "theories of the atonement" often associated with particular theologians from history. This study was not meant to measure which view is best, but to let the Word of God speak for itself. Each biblical description of the meaning of the cross reveals something about the nature of God's salvation, and why it was necessary for Jesus to die.

In the end, the goal of this study is more than just intellectual understanding. As with all of Scripture, it is written *"so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."* (John 20:31)



The message of the cross is more than just words *about* God; it is the Word through which God himself lays hold of our hearts. In the stark contrast between human violence and the love of God, the cross becomes the mighty means by which God saves us from sin and death. As the Apostle Paul wrote:

"The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." (1 Corinthians 1:18)

Viewed through the cross of Christ, the light of God's promise shines most brightly. Like a precious gem, all the facets together reveal the full majesty of our Savior. It is our hope that this study might inspire a deeper trust and faith in him, so that we all may join in confessing in the great hymn, "In the Cross of Christ I Glory":

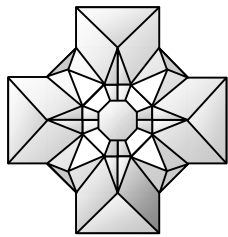
"In the cross of Christ I glory, towering o'er the wrecks of time. All the light of sacred story, gathers round its head sublime."

Using this Study

This study was designed to be led by a pastor or lay facilitator in a small-group question and discussion format. Each Scripture passage includes a number of questions that are meant to help participants understand the verses and what they mean for our present lives of faith.

Many of the questions are open-ended, asking what participants think about what the Bible is saying. This is not to suggest that there are no right and wrong answers. Real biblical study is more than just a conversation amongst ourselves; it is an opportunity to hear God himself speak to us through his Word.

Participants should listen for how God may be using the text to encourage or challenge them in their own life of faith. They should also be open to how other biblical texts or stories from Scripture might inform the discussion.



"Lamb of God"

THE CROSS AS ATONEMENT

Prayer

Gracious Lord, our Father, you gave your Son Jesus Christ to be our life and salvation. We thank you for the promise of what only he could have accomplished. By the power of your Spirit, help us to trust in Christ and him alone, and lead us all to serve you in his name; through Jesus Christ, your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

Introduction

When John the Baptist first pointed Jesus out to the crowds that were gathered to be baptized, John announced Jesus to be "the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." (John 1:28-29)

For his Jewish audience, this reference would have immediately called to mind the familiar image of worship in the Temple of Jerusalem, where lambs were regularly sacrificed to atone for the sins of the people. To call Jesus the *Lamb of God* points to one of the ways that Scripture speaks about Jesus' death on the cross: as an expiation or "atoning sacrifice" to take away the penalty of our sins.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah: "He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all." (Isaiah 53:5-6)

This session will explore the nature of sacrifice in the Scriptures, and what it means to call Jesus' death a sacrifice of atonement.

Definition: Atone (v.)

*"to make up for" or "to make reparation"
(derived from the sense of being "at-one")*

Paying a Fine for Sin

✠ Read: *Leviticus 4:27-31*

This lesson describes the offerings that were required of the Israelites in order to make up for breaking the Law of Moses. This was commonly referred to in Scripture as a "sin offering" or a "sacrifice of atonement." To modern people, the idea of blood sacrifice may seem abhorrent, but to the Israelites it was a sensible and down-to-earth means of paying a fine for sin.

1) Why is there a penalty attached to breaking the law? What purpose does such a penalty serve? What good does it do?

2) Have you ever received a parking ticket? In what sense is paying the fine on a ticket similar to the sacrifices the Israelites made?

3) When you pay a fine, what do you pay it with? Where do you send your payment?

4) Since ancient people rarely used currency, what would you expect them to pay with? How do you imagine such a payment could be sent "up" to God?

Thinking Like Scripture

Consider these additional Bible Verses in the context of our current theme:

✠ *Read: Psalm 49:7-9*

5) What would happen if you owed a fine that was more than you could pay? Where do you go when all earthly resources fail you?

6) Read some of the verses before and after this passage. What general theme is the writer speaking about? In what way is our lot as human beings the same for all of us?

✠ *Read: Romans 3:19-24*

7) Scripture says that no one will be justified ('made right') with God through the law. That includes the Old Testament sacrifices. Why then did God give us the law? (see v. 20)

8) If Jesus' death on the cross was "a sacrifice of atonement by his blood" — what did he accomplish for us? What was his goal? When do we become "at one" with Christ?

✠ *Read: 1 John 4:7-12*

9) According to these verses, what was Jesus' motive for his sacrifice? How does all this impact the way we, in turn, live our lives and treat our neighbors?

Christ has freed me from sin, death, and the power of the devil — not with silver or gold, but with his holy and precious blood, and his innocent suffering and death. ... All this he has done that I may be his own, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.
(Luther's Small Catechism)

Building Your Theological Vocabulary:

The idea that Jesus' death could atone for our sin is referred to doctrinally as *vicarious satisfaction*. The word *vicarious* means "experienced through another." The word *satisfaction* means "to fulfill the demands of." We experience the benefit of Christ having fulfilled the demands of the law, by his paying the fine of sin for us.

Once For All

✠ *Read: Hebrews 9:11-28*

In the end, there is no sacrifice that we could pay to make up for all our sins. That is why something more than the Old Testament sacrifices was needed. In this lesson, Scripture speaks of Christ as the final sacrifice "*once for all at the end of the age to remove sin.*" His sacrifice both fulfills and supercedes the sacrifices that came before it.

10) How is the sacrifice that Christ paid similar to the sacrifices of the Old Testament? How is it different? Whose blood is offered?

11) The word "covenant" means: contract, deal or agreement. How is the new covenant of the Gospel different from the old covenant of Law? On what does each depend?

12) Hebrews 9:16 uses the image of someone writing out a "Last Will & Testament." What motivates a person to write out a will? What event puts the will into effect?

13) Why is it important to know that Jesus' sacrifice was "once and for all"? (v.26) What does that mean?

14) Using the theme of the cross as atonement, how would you explain in your own words what is meant in verse 26, that Jesus "came to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself"?