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Why did Jesus have to Die?

So why did Jesus have to die?

We could look at this from a number of perspectives, such as from the Jewish leaders or the Roman authorities.

The current BBC mini-series on the Passion portrays the tensions in Jerusalem between the Romans, Jewish leaders, and Jewish extremists very well, showing that from the perspective of those in power in Jerusalem, Jesus had to die to prevent the possibility of riots and the ensuing violent crack-down from Rome.

But of course we know that he died “for our sins” and “as a ransom for many” – any elementary search through the New Testament will turn up those answers. So let's cut the talk short and move on to Communion.

Well, I suppose we could; but before we do, it might be interesting to think a little more deeply about these phrases that actually mean, and whether they cover the entirety of the reasons for his death.

Over the centuries, many different ideas have been put forward and even come to be considered orthodox by the Church, some of which are more recognisable to us today than others. It's easy to take our own orthodox view for granted, since that is what we know and are comfortable with; but instead I would like to look at some other views which have been and to an extent still are around, to challenge our thinking and hopefully deepen both our understanding and appreciation of our Saviour's death.

St Augustine – defeating Death in Hades

An early explanation of what was happening when Jesus died is quite thought-provoking, and was promoted by St Augustine back in the early 5th Century. According to him, God's plan was for Jesus to enter Hades to free humanity from Satan's grasp, but of course the last thing Satan would want to do would be to have the Son of God in his own inner sanctum. But Satan was unaware of Jesus true identity, seeing him as just a particularly virtuous human, and as such a prize worth seizing. St. Augustine likened the devil to a mouse, the Cross to a mousetrap and Christ to the bait. In dying and descending to Hades, Christ was able to defeat Satan's power over mankind forever.

We don't often think of the consequences of the very Author of Life being held in the land of the dead; the idea here is quite sensible, that the two could not co-exist and so there was going to be only one victor, Life!

Anselm – substitutionary atonement

We often speak of Christ's death as paying our debt, but rarely consider who the debt is owed to. For a long time, the prevailing view was that it was in fact Satan who was owed the debt, as he is the lord of world since the Fall, and in that sense has a legitimate claim to human souls. Christ's death paid him off, allowing us to return to God.

It was an 11th-Century Archbishop of Canterbury named Anselm who proposed the alternative that we recognise today, that humanity owed God the Father a ransom of "satisfaction" (to use his feudal terminology) for the insult of sin. The problem was that the debt was unpayable: not only did we lack the means, since everything we had of value was God's to begin with, but also we lacked the standing, like a lowly serf helpless to erase an injury to a great lord. So Christ, who was both innocent of sin and also God's social equal, suffered and died on the cross to make amends to the Father for what we had done. This concept is known as "substitutionary atonement", and has been the prevailing view for the past millennium.

Abelard – exemplary atonement

A problem with this is that it makes God the Father out to be very fierce and hard – some have gone as far as to call him a cosmic child abuser! The idea that he would want to punish his son in order to forgive us is a difficult one to bear. So it wasn't long before another theologian, Peter Abelard, came up with another view: exemplary atonement.

His atonement took place less as a compact between God the Father and God the Son and more in the hearts of believers adhering to the message of Jesus' life - and the love most dramatically expressed in his willingness to die rather than renounce his calling. "Love answers love's appeal," Abelard wrote. With Jesus' example before it, humanity could now gain salvation and reconciliation with God.

Rather than the problem between God and Man being one of debt, it is one of ignorance. Christ's death did not so much pay the debt of our sin, as show us how we could overcome sin in our own lives. Abelard's theory, which allowed mankind to play a role in our own salvation, fitted much better with the 18th Century Enlightenment spirit, and so exemplary atonement became popular once more. The basic idea is still popular today with many people, most famously perhaps Steve Chalke, who believe that the "substitutionary atonement" view implies that God is vengeful and vindictive.

Lewis – to enable us to repent

Even C. S. Lewis has weighed into the debate on why Jesus died; aficionados will have to excuse this out-of-context quote that may appear to suggest he was off-beam in theology.

In Mere Christianity, he writes:

“Repentance ... means undergoing a kind of death. Only a bad person needs to repent: only a good person can repent perfectly.

Can we do it if God helps us? Yes, but what do we mean when we talk of God helping us? We mean God putting into us a bit of Himself, so to speak. When you teach a child writing, you hold its hand while it forms the letters: that is, it forms the letters because you are forming them. But we now need God's help in order to do something which God, in His own nature, never does at all - to surrender, to suffer, to submit, to die.

But supposing God became a man - suppose our human nature which can suffer and die was amalgamated with God's nature in one person - then that person could help us. He could surrender His will, and suffer and die, because He was man; and He could do it perfectly because He was God. ... we cannot share God's dying unless God dies; and he cannot die except by being a man. That is the sense in which He pays our debt, and suffers for us what He Himself need not suffer at all.”

In other words, Christ had to die so that God could help us to repent, otherwise we could never be saved.

“Proof” texts

All of these, in their different ways, still fit within the umbrella phrase of Christ dying for our sins. And you can see the logic in each of them. But therein lies the problem. We are trying to use our human logic to work out the most profound metaphysical puzzle of them all: Why the Son of the Living God should die.

I wouldn't discourage you at all from thinking about these things, but when all is said and done we need more than our own thoughts: we need God's. So to evaluate any ideas about Jesus death, we need to weigh them up to what the breadth of Scripture teaches us. You'll be glad to know that I'm not going to attempt to do that to all these ideas we have looked at; but I will read out a few verses which shed light on this question:

Many of you will already be turning up, at least in your minds, some of the classic “proof texts” of atonement, such as Romans 3:25. We'll get there soon enough, but first it's worth looking at some other references which show that there is more going on on the cross than *purely* a sacrifice of atonement.

In Hebrews 2:14 we read:

¹⁴Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—¹⁵ and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

And in 2 Timothy 1:10:

¹⁰but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

St Augustine had a point, by dying Jesus did indeed destroy death and the power of the devil over mankind.

In Colossians, which of course you will all have been reading avidly, Paul says in 2:20-3:3:

²⁰Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules... ³For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

And in 2 Corinthians 5:

¹⁴For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. ¹⁵And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

Clearly there is something *exemplary* about Christ's death, as it shows how we too should die to the world in order to be alive to God.

Then there is Romans 10:

¹⁰The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.

¹¹In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Perhaps here we see some support for Lewis's notion. Christ died to sin – even though of course he was sinless so had not, as such, lived in sin – and for that reason can help us to do the same.

All of these ideas add something to the picture, but the main event, I think, is still the transaction only Jesus could make to pay for our sins. Not only is this the whole background to the Jewish sacrificial system, where the people's sins were symbolically transferred to the sacrificial lamb, and where the Passover lamb died so that they would not; but we have numerous explicit verses in both Old and New testaments which show how, unpleasant though it may sound, God the Father was punishing God the Son on our behalf.

Isaiah 53:

⁵But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.

¹⁰Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer

And of course we get to Romans 3:25:

God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement (*as the one who would turn aside his wrath, taking away sin*) through faith in his blood.

So why did Jesus have to die?

Because that was the only way that we could be saved, and God – for all his fierce judgement on sin - loves us so much that he deemed it a price worth paying.