

Why Jesus Had to Die for Our Sins

Psalm 51:1-5

Psalm 51 is King David's great prayer for forgiveness. He knows that his sins are against God, and God would be justified if He ignored his pleas for mercy and punished him for his sin instead. He prays,

"Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge." (Psalm 51:4)

David prays anyway, because he knows God is a God of unfailing love.

"Have mercy on me, O God according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions." (Psalm 51:1)

All of us have David's sinful heart, regardless of how well we keep it under wraps. But, many of us have arrived at a place of easy believism in God and His forgiveness. We are sure God will forgive us, because that is what we have been told He wants to do.

1) If we have any questions about any of this it is usually along this line: **"If God is so merciful and loving** (as Christians say), and He wants to be merciful to us – **why did Jesus have to suffer and die on the cross?** Why couldn't God just forgive us? Doesn't God make the rules? Couldn't He have found a different way if He wanted to forgive us?"

This is a pretty important question to answer, because the cross is so ugly and yet so central to what it means to be a Christian. The cross isn't a thing of beauty. It's an instrument of torture. It's about as glamorous as a firing squad, but it is at the center of our faith. For some, the idea of Christ being sacrificed on the cross for our sins sounds like a primitive superstition which should have been discarded long ago. Why was it necessary for that terrible moment to occur?

2) **For the explanation** of Christ's sacrificial death, I'm going to take you to a book most of you probably have not read, and if you tried to read it, you probably didn't like it or understand it. It's the handbook of worship that the Jews used for centuries – the book of Leviticus.

This book has rules for everything – what to eat, what two people do in a bed, and how handle the pots and pans in the kitchen. You read that, shake your head, and say, "What's this all about?" But this God

goes everywhere. There is no place in our lives that we can say, "This is private. God not allowed." We dare not ignore this book, because in it, God is revealing Himself. He says in chapter 11,

"I am the Lord your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy." (Leviticus 11:44)

3) The book of Leviticus **takes us back to a day of animal sacrifice** not familiar to us. In Leviticus chapter four, there are instructions for bringing an animal for a "sin offering." Four stages occur when someone came to offer a sacrifice before God. Once we see this, Christ's sacrifice will become much clearer.

a. In ancient days, when a sinner found himself or herself in sin, broken in fellowship with God, it was essential that there be an animal sacrifice. In the first stage the sinner brings an animal without defect to the altar.

"Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 'Speak to the sons of Israel, saying, If a person sins. . . let him offer to the Lord a bull without defect as a sin offering for the sin he has committed.'" (Leviticus 4:1-3)

The plan was designed to be uncomplicated. As soon as one realized sin had come into his life, intentional or unintentional, that individual knew that the sin had caused a separation from fellowship with God. To clear that up, an animal had to be brought to an altar. The animal would become a "sin offering."

b. In the second stage the sinner lays his hand on the animal.

"And he shall bring the bull to the doorway of the tent of meeting before the Lord, and he shall lay his hand on the head of the bull. . ." (Leviticus 11:4a)

The act symbolized the transfer of guilt from himself to the animal.

c. In the third stage, the animal is to be killed.

". . .He shall bring them to the priest, who shall. . . nip its head at the front of its neck, but he shall not sever it. He shall also sprinkle some of the blood of the sin offering on the side of the altar, while the rest of the blood shall be drained out at the base of the altar: it is a sin offering."
(Leviticus 4:8-9)

In all honesty, have you ever read anything like that? Just nip the neck so there is a sprinkling of blood. Every detail was so clearly defined.

- Why the emphasis on blood? Let me show you the key verse in the book of Leviticus.
"For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement." (Leviticus 17:11)
- Notice the word "atonement." It is mentioned twice in this single verse. God devised this plan: By the shedding of blood, two will be brought together as one. The blood of the animal will bring atonement between humanity and God. Any church or theology which minimizes the Cross and the Atonement is at best sub-Christian and at worst un-Christian.

d. Now back to Leviticus chapter 4. The animal is slain at the altar. In the fourth stage the blood is poured or sprinkled as God required.

"Then the anointed priest is to take some of the blood of the bull and bring it to the tent of meeting, and the priest shall dip his finger in the blood, and sprinkle some of the blood seven times before the Lord, in front of the veil of the sanctuary. The priest shall put some of the blood on the horns of the altar of fragrant incense which is before the Lord, in the tent of meeting; and all the blood of the bull he shall pour out at the base of the tent of meeting."
(Leviticus 4:5-7)

4) Since the earliest days, **the Jews connected atonement with their Lord with blood and sacrifices.** Sheep were slain at Passover by the thousands. The blood literally ran out of the city of Jerusalem. Priests were ceaselessly dealing with blood sacrifices. Day in and day out, God required it.

a. Think how monotonous this task was to the ancient priest. Those of us who try to minister today sometimes think some of our work can be monotonous. But nothing like that! Just try to imagine killing the animals and pouring out the blood, killing more animals and pouring out more blood. Day after wearisome day. . .year after year.

b. And now consider this: none of these sacrifices permanently took away sins? Never! The people found momentary relief from their guilt. They found temporary forgiveness. They went on their way rejoicing, which lasted for a while. . .but they'd soon be back with another animal. And the focus? Sin. Sin. SIN.

5) **Those Old Testament sacrifices never took away sins permanently.** But when Christ died on that cross and once for all poured out His blood, He cried out, **"It is finished."**

The sacrifice of the Lamb of God was once for all. We will never have to offer another sacrifice. It's not needed. His death on the cross finished the task.

a. This isn't my idea, it is what Hebrews, chapter 10, tells us.
"For the Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, can never by the same sacrifices year by year, which they offer continually, make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins?"
(Hebrews 10:1-2)

b. Had the ancient priests' sacrifices been permanently effective, they would have walked away smiling and saying, "I'm through with all the animals, through with the altar, through with all the blood sacrifices." But that never could be said.
"But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins year by year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins." (Hebrews 10:3-4)

c. The writer continues the thought:
"By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. And every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God." (Hebrews 10:10-12)

6) **Some of you are probably saying to yourself,**

- "This is the weirdest sermon I have ever heard."
- Perhaps others of you are questioning if this is really about God, or just some folk's idea of God.
- Maybe others are saying, "I don't like this God."

You need to remember something today – the Bible has a consistent warning for us. It warns against remaking God according to our liking.
"You shall have no other gods before Me." (Exodus 20:3)

a. Honestly, some folk do not like the God that the Bible reveals. The God of the Bible, they say, is too harsh or too demanding or too bloody. So, they create a god in their own mind that they prefer. That's idolatry. We are not free to dispose the God of the Bible and to create a god we prefer.

b. It is an historical fact that Jesus Christ suffered. But the idea that His suffering was necessary has often been the subject of scorn from those who have criticized and ridiculed Christianity.

- Muslims, for example, show respect for the person of Christ, but see the cross of Christ as a stumbling block and regard the atonement as foolishness.
- Oxford scholar Alfred Meir called Christianity "the worst of all because it rests on the idea of a suffering Savior and a substitutionary atonement which is intellectually contemptible and morally outrageous."

Beware of this. Not everything is sacred, but God is. And if we approach God incorrectly, not much else matters.

7) Those who express the view that God could simply forgive us are **lacking a balanced view** of the **gravity of sin** on the one hand and the **majesty and nature of God** on the other. God is completely loving, compassionate, and merciful. He is also completely just, holy, and righteous.

a. Jesus death was necessary to bridge two seemingly opposite, yet fundamental aspects of God's nature: His love and His holiness. We talk endlessly about God's love, but not so much about His holiness. Perhaps if we spoke less about God's love and more about His holiness, we might say more with more meaning when we did speak of His love. A holy and just God cannot simply ignore sin any more than a righteous judge can ignore crimes against the innocent.

b. The story is told about a judge whose daughter was brought into the courtroom for breaking the law. Because the judge was both just and loved his daughter, he faced a dilemma: If he simply forgave his daughter, the judge would compromise his justice. But if he passed judgment on his daughter, he would compromise his love for her.

What did he do? First, he declared that his daughter was guilty and ordered that a fine be paid. Then he took off his robes, stepped down from the bench, and paid the fine himself.

c. The God of the Bible is not like the primitive deities who demanded our blood for their wrath to be appeased. Rather, this is a God who becomes human and offers His own lifeblood in order to honor moral justice and merciful love so that He can destroy evil without destroying us.

d. Jesus' death was something absolutely necessary to rescue us. It is **more than an example**. The Atonement properly distinguishes the nature of God. Why did Jesus have to die in order to forgive us?

- There was a debt to be paid – God Himself paid it.
- There was a penalty to be born – God Himself bore it.