

Chapter 7: Why Did Jesus Go to the Cross?

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Romans 5:8 (NKJV)

We would be amiss in a discussion of the gospel without attempting to understand the reason for the cross, the defining moment in Jesus' ministry and life. Christ's work on the cross—completing the covenant of the law—brought the possibility of the end of our separation from God and the end of the reign of sin and condemnation. His loving act on the cross is the foundational core of the gospel, and when His sacrifice is emulated, the cross transforms human interaction. It was an act of love so great it completely redefined what love is and how we are to show love for one another.

Even more importantly, the cross was the bridge to a loving relationship with God, and it made possible the rebirth of our spirit to live with the Holy Spirit's presence in us. It is because of the cross that we have forgiveness of sins and are declared righteous, which enables us to be in the presence of God. Understanding the meaning and purpose of the cross and how intensely it demonstrates that God wants a relationship with us is foundational to the gospel.

The cross is the exact opposite of what humanity would expect from a savior. Our savior should be a knight in shining armor riding in on a white horse to conquer our enemies. Our savior should be strong and fix all our problems. Our savior should answer all our questions and give us solutions to the things that trouble us. Our savior should build a kingdom in the mold we

see fit. The cross did not make sense. To the Jews, it was a “stumbling block, and to Gentiles, foolishness.”¹ Why would a savior have to die?

To understand the cross, it will be helpful to try to understand the shedding of blood to cover our sins. Throughout history, God asked humans to do things that may seem strange to facilitate a relationship with Him. One of those things odd to our modern minds, yet central to the Jewish religion, is the sacrifice of animals to cover their sins and to demonstrate their faith in God.

In today’s world, a requirement to kill animals doesn’t seem logically sensible for the benefit of a relationship. Contrary to that sentiment, in Christian and Jewish doctrines, the blood of an animal represents a covenant between two parties. An example is the covenant God made with Abram in Genesis fifteen, where animals were slaughtered to establish the agreement. In much the same way, Jesus referred to His blood as the new covenant between Himself and His followers.² His blood served as a symbol of the binding agreement Christians are asked to enter.

Animal sacrifice can also represent a harsh but poignant picture of the damage we cause when we break a relationship through our evil behavior. It can be understood as a substitutionary death for the death we deserve for our sins.³ We are told the blood covers our sins and washes us clean so we can approach God.⁴

Another way to look at animal sacrifice is that the killing of animals in the Old Testament times is that it demonstrated their faith and trust in the supernatural. In Christianity today, we also sacrifice our time, treasure, and our heart for the benefit of others. Although it is seen as a foolish act for those who do not believe, sacrifice by a follower appears to show faith and love

¹ First Corinthians 1:23.

² Matthew 26:28.

³ Isaiah 53:6, Matthew 26:28.

⁴ Hebrews 9:12–14.

for the Lord. Consider also the strange practice of baptism to represent our belief in Jesus. It is meaningless in the eyes of the non-believer, yet deeply significant in the lives of God's children and to God. Baptism is similar to the sacrifice of an animal in this way, that, somehow, submission to the significance of something that does not come naturally shows one's faith in, trust in, and love for the supernatural.

Although blood sacrifice was necessary for a covenant, to demonstrate our faith, and for the remission of sins,⁵ was the sacrifice of Jesus the only way to achieve these requirements and provide for our salvation? In trying to fully comprehend the cross, we may contemplate that the loving, sacrificial death of God's Son is the most seemingly senseless loving act ever conceived. It does not make sense that an eternal, all-powerful God loves us so deeply and intimately that He would become a man and voluntarily suffer and die to restore a relationship with us. It might be that only what seems the most foolish act of love ever conceived could communicate the undeserved and unearned love and forgiveness we need for salvation.⁶ The other option for Jesus would have been to take power and restore order, but then how would we know such great love? How would we know the greatest act we can do is to sacrifice ourselves for others?

This brings up the question: how can the God of the New Testament—who loves us this much in the person of Jesus—be the same God in the Old Testament who demonstrates His wrath? The picture of a vengeful yet loving God who makes a law of death for eating a fruit is not a correct one.⁷ A better way to look at it is that God is the source of life; without Him, we will die. Death is more of a truth about what happens without God's sustaining presence than a punishment.

⁵ Hebrews 9:22.

⁶ First Corinthians 1:18–31.

⁷ Genesis 2:17.

The Bible is not a story of God's wrath but a love story of God seeking to save humanity from its self-imposed destruction and to restore the relationship humans were made to have with Him. In the Old Testament, to save humans from themselves, God allowed them to experience the consequences of their actions and continually led them back to Himself. What appears as God's wrath is His turning humans over to the deserved consequences of their actions instead of continuing to pardon them. Even humans know that, on specific occasions, allowing people to suffer the consequences is the most loving thing to do. The story throughout the Bible is the true story of God's great love, as He faithfully worked with rebellious humans.

To understand the story of God's great love, we must go back to Adam and Eve. They had a healthy, free, and loving relationship with God. In the "cool of the day," God walked and talked with Adam and Eve in one of those just-right, loving friendships we all crave (Genesis 3:8, NASB). In love, God gave Adam and Eve all things, except He instituted one boundary for their own protection: "You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Genesis 2:17, NET). This presented an opportunity for a decision, Adam needed to either trust and rely on God to teach and provide for him, or he could seek the knowledge of right and wrong on his own. God knew Adam and Eve were far from ready to experience total autonomy, living apart from His direction. God knew it would destroy humanity if Adam chose against Him because people would not yet know how to handle themselves without His guidance. He knew unfettered knowledge of good and evil would lead to great wickedness and consistently evil thoughts.⁸ Knowing God's love, we are right to assume that God did not want Adam to make the wrong choice.

⁸ Genesis 6:5.

To prevent Adam and Eve from making this destructive choice, God used the idea of death as a communication tool to demonstrate the destruction they would bring to their lives personally and to future humanity with their sin. God did not say death was the punishment; instead, He warned they would die if they turned against Him.⁹ When they disobeyed, they immediately felt guilt and shame. They began a life controlled by the knowledge of good and evil and instant separation from God. This was the outcome of their decision to learn on their own and go it alone without Him.¹⁰

Allowing them to live in their rebellion, God showed grace towards Adam and Eve by slaughtering a lamb to cover their guilt which separated them from Him.¹¹ This was the beginning of the practice of blood sacrifice as a substitutionary death to atone for sin so humans could approach God. Still, the fact that they could no longer remain in the garden did not change.¹² Outside of paradise, they were given the curse of struggle in their attempt to provide for themselves and likely curtail their sin and pride.¹³ Humans appear to need difficulties to teach us what is important. In times without struggle, we quickly forget to acknowledge God, and in success, we may also begin to imagine our greatness over others around us. Cain, the first child, and his children quickly began displaying these traits.¹⁴ Eventually, God did allow Adam and Eve's death after an exceedingly long life. Death is sadly not what God intended for humans, and that is why it feels inherently wrong after our relatively short lives. We were meant to live forever in a garden, experiencing a relationship with God.

⁹ Genesis 2:16–17.

¹⁰ Genesis 3:4–7.

¹¹ Genesis 3:21.

¹² Genesis 3:22–24.

¹³ Genesis 3:16–19.

¹⁴ Genesis 4:17–24.

In the next chapter of Genesis, Adam's first son, Cain, murdered his younger brother Abel. With brother now killing brother, this was evidence that the broken relationship between God and humanity was severely affecting human relationships.¹⁵ The murder illustrated the severity of the destroyed trust. Humans would now build their own kingdoms by any means necessary. They continued to distrust God and take matters into their own hands, leading to more brokenness and pain in the world. A relationship cannot exist without trust, and humans were now born with an inherent bent to disbelieve God and His goodness. Fellowship with God became more and more distant because of rebellion and sin.

The flood now became the great fulfillment of God's prophecy of death. He brought death on all of mankind and on all breathing creatures. Humans had decided to embrace their sin and do whatever was right in their own eyes. Some even think fallen angels physically joined in this revelry. Far from the intimate companionship of a person-to-person relationship we were meant for, it was a great corruption of God's intended purpose of creation, and especially a perversion of His desire for humans. The abomination humanity had eroded to was incurable.

Fortunately, Noah pleased God, and He started over with him and his family. This time God instituted a covenant with mankind, instructing us not to kill one another and not to kill animals except for food and recognition of God's mercy. Through a story about nakedness, the writer of Genesis also illustrated the sacredness of the marriage bond and the wickedness of sexual waywardness. From this point on, God promised not to destroy the earth again with a flood. He did not make this promise because He thought humans would now be righteous but because God had the plan of the cross to restore them to their true purpose, despite their failures. He intended to redeem His children and show humans His love for them.¹⁶

¹⁵ Genesis 4:8; First John 3:11–12.

¹⁶ Genesis 12:1–3.

The Bible then jumps forward to Abraham. God promised to use him to fulfill His plan of redemption by giving him numerous offspring, and through one of his descendants, the entire world would be blessed.¹⁷ It was a strange thing to promise to a ninety-year-old man who had no children. When Abraham finally had his miracle child, Isaac, the Lord asked Abraham to take the life of his only son. Abraham loved and trusted God so deeply that he faithfully took his son Isaac to Mount Moriah. He fully intended to sacrifice Isaac, believing God would raise him from the dead.¹⁸ An angel of the Lord stopped Abraham from killing Isaac, and he was blessed for his faith and willingness to be the one to restore humanity's relationship with God.

Isaac's death would not have been sufficient to restore humanity's lost relationship with God because he was not a willing, nor a sinless, sacrifice. Sinlessness is a requirement because someone already deserving of punishment has no ability to pay another's penalty. Only the death of the sinless Son of the heavenly Father, God Himself, could mend the break of the relationship for humans to reach God. Only the death of a sinless, earthly Son could mend the relationship with God toward humans. God gave His heavenly Son, Jesus, to repair man's rebellion against Him, and humans unknowingly gave God their earthly Son, Jesus, to mend their guilt and shame. This reconciliation could only have been accomplished in one man, Jesus Christ, the sinless sacrifice. He was both the "Son of Man" who paid the price for humanity's sin and the "Son of God" who gave Himself up to restore a loving relationship between God and man.¹⁹

The Father did not kill Jesus, and humanity did not kill Jesus.²⁰ It may seem that the Father forced Jesus to die, but Jesus was a willing participant at every moment of His death.

¹⁷ Genesis 12:1–3.

¹⁸ Genesis 8:22–14; Hebrews 11:17–19.

¹⁹ Matthew 18:11; John 1:49.

²⁰ John 10:17–18.

Motivated by His great love for us and His desire to have a relationship with us, He chose His death, a horrific death, to once and for all restore the loving relationship lost in the garden.

We can hardly imagine the immense love Jesus demonstrated as He submitted Himself to the whipping and the brutal death on the cross. At each blow, His love endured as He restrained His power to obliterate the perpetrator. Isaiah, the ancient Jewish prophet, wrote: “By His stripes we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5, NKJV). His gruesome torture and death were for an important reason. He took on the violence we deserve for our sins. In His love, Jesus literally paid the penalty and endured the destruction our sin caused so we could be healed, freed from our enslavement to destruction, and invited to enter a relationship with Him.

His death was the perfect payment to appease justice, provide mercy, and pave the way for this new relationship. It is a mutually loving relationship extending from God toward people and from people toward God. The cross ended the need for the law and punishment. His sacrificial death demonstrated transformation through love, resulting in a new and greater life, free from judgment and violence of the law.

It is important to know Jesus did not go to the cross because of God’s need to exercise His wrath; that is the opposite of what He was doing. God was demonstrating His love and giving us a pathway to Himself. Knowing this love requires us to make a choice to trust a God who deeply desires a relationship with us, one in which He can participate in our lives as a mother, father, brother, sister, friend, king, and savior.

When Jesus came to restore eternal life and repair humanity’s relationship with Him, no conditions were put on our behavior before He would exercise His love for us. Jesus told Nicodemus, long before He was crucified, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John

3:16, NKJV). All anyone must do to receive their restoration to God’s love is to believe in and accept Jesus as Lord.²¹ His love does not come with any stipulations to fulfill or any hoops to jump through prior to Him loving us. Jesus died for us “while we were still sinners” (Romans 5:8, NET).

In His great love, God forgave the sins of the whole world through Jesus on the cross. The apostle John wrote: “He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world” (First John 2:2, HCSB). Jesus was so completely driven by His love for us that He took upon Himself all the sins of each and every human. John the Baptist exclaimed upon seeing Jesus: “Here is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29, HCSB). The cross was an act of sacrificial love which provided forgiveness and atonement for all human sins—to restore for every human the possibility of a relationship with God.²² Our reconciliation was predicated on His love for all humanity shown on the cross.²³

Paul goes to great ends to communicate how immense and permanent the love of God is for us when we choose to follow Him:

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He did not even spare His own Son but offered Him up for us all; how will He not also with Him grant us everything? ...Who can separate us from the love of Christ? Can affliction or anguish or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ...No, in all these things we are more than victorious through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that not even death or life, angels or rulers, things present or things to come, hostile powers, height or depth, or any other created thing will have the power to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord!

Romans 8:31–32, 35, 37–39 (HCSB)

²¹ Romans 10:9–10.

²² Romans 5:18.

²³ John 3:16.

The story of God's great love and sacrifice on the cross, so we might know His love and be restored to a relationship with Him, is the amazingly good news that should be proclaimed by all believers. It should be spoken of to those who do not know God's real love, and it needs to be proclaimed as the desperately needed answer to what has killed our souls.

Our trust in the loving, brutal act of the cross as the means of forgiveness for our sins is the seemingly foolish act of faith we must commit to change our hearts from the inside out. Jesus' humble sacrifice freed us from a life of sin and death. When He died for our sins, He made it possible for the Spirit to live inside us, guiding us in His love. We can be forever transformed and deeply moved by knowing of and believing in this strange act of sacrifice. On the cross, Jesus demonstrated love was greater than any achievement in the world's eyes, and He profoundly demonstrated that His love was even more important than life itself. If a person can comprehend such an amazing act of love, how could they not respond positively to this love which turns our lives *love-side-up*?

If only everyone knew that God wants to bring all His children home and to love them. When a person responds to His call, they receive this love and are adopted into His family. There is nothing that can take God's love away. The following simple statement informs us and reminds us of God's great unconditional love:

There is nothing we can do to make God love us more, and there is nothing we can do to make God love us less.

With that kind of love behind us, in us, and before us, we seem to be left with no better option than to walk in His great love shown on the cross and to let Him be king of our lives. It is the beginning of a life lived on *the way of the cross*.

