

## Why Did Jesus Have to Die

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Text: Luke 22:1-20

Subtext: Luke 22:16: "For I tell you, I will not eat it [the Passover] again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God."

Theme: Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross simultaneously satisfied a holy God's demand that sin be punished and a loving God's desire to forgive our guilt.

Introduction:

"Why did Jesus have to die?" is our question of the morning. You might ask, *"Isn't that the Good Friday question, but this is Palm Sunday?"* This is the day when joyful children carry palm branches and the populace in Jerusalem shouted their "Hosannas" to the coming king. This is a day of jubilation and cheer. How did we get ahead of ourselves by focusing in on the death of Jesus?

As a preacher, I have always experienced Palm Sunday with an undercurrent of sadness and grief. It is a day of mixed emotion. Sure the expectant king rides triumphant into Jerusalem. But it is a day that it is bittersweet. For this king comes to fulfill his appointment with destiny.

Jesus had a consciousness that the purpose of his life was to be found in his death. The turning point of the gospel accounts occur when Jesus unveils his identity to his apostles. He had just asked them the pointed question, *"Who do you say that I am?" (Matt. 16:15)* Peter in a moment of uncharacteristic insight said, *"You are the Christ."* Then Jesus went on to redefine the meaning of Messiah. It was at this point that he set his face toward Jerusalem and told his followers what awaited him there. *"From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he **must** go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he **must** be killed and on the third day be raised to life" (Matt. 16:21).* Note the word **must**. He was under a divine compulsion, a prior arrangement awaited him in Jerusalem. So even as Jesus enters into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, it is the beginning of the end and Jesus knows why he has come there.

If you have listened to any of the radio or TV talk show critiques of the film *The Passion of the Christ*, which I seem obsessed to do, you know that one of the criticisms is Gibson's decision to focus solely on the last 12 hours of Jesus' life. Why all this obsession with masochistic reveling in the blood and gore of the flogging and crucifixion of Jesus? Couldn't Gibson's creative talents be better spent focusing on the genius of Jesus' teaching and the moral legacy of his life than this flailing of this man?

Of course, the criticism itself reveals a lack of understanding of the meaning of Jesus' death. Though the manner in which Jesus lived, and the moral

insight of his teaching are all integral to our faith, it is the meaning of his death that is the key to why he came. We have the gospel accounts of the three years of Jesus' public ministry. Yet fully one third of these accounts focus on the last week of His life. Why? Because this is the culmination toward which everything pointed.

**Why Did Jesus Have To Die?** What is the meaning of it all? Why don't we let Jesus Himself interpret the meaning of his death for us? As we read our text from Luke 22:1-20 together this morning, note the emphasis here on the Feast of Unleavened Bread also known as the Passover. Jesus' words that we associate with communion at the end of the text are the familiar words we hear when we take the Lord's Supper or Communion. Yet these words are set in the context of the Passover meal, which will serve as the interpretive frame for us to understand *why Jesus had to die*.

### **Read Responsively Luke 22:1-20**

For those of you who have seen *The Passion of the Christ* you will never be able to take communion again without the vivid images coming to mind of the price paid by the physical and spiritual suffering that Christ endured. Gibson relieved the unrelenting cruelty directed at Jesus with flashbacks to scenes of Jesus with his disciples in the Upper Room. Jesus gave his followers a foreshadowing of what was to come when he took the matzah, the unleavened bread, and said, *"This is my body given for you"*. He took the cup of the Seder meal and said, *"This cup is the new covenant in my blood"*, and Matthew adds, *"which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt. 26:28)*.

We are told the purpose of Jesus' death is to provide the means of our forgiveness. But here is the rub, why did Jesus have to die for us to be forgiven? Couldn't God just find it in his heart to forgive us? Isn't this a little much? What is the need for such drastic measures?

One French cynic questioning the need for the cross said in a cavalier fashion, *"God forgives that is his job."* As if to say, *"I sin, God forgives"*, isn't the world wonderfully arranged. The critics from the Muslim faith question the necessity of the death of Christ as an atoning sacrifice for our guilt. Allah, the merciful and compassionate, just forgives. As much as the Muslim faith has a regard for Jesus as prophet and a messenger of God, they totally deny the centrality of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. The Muslims teach that God did not allow Jesus to be crucified, for God rescued him and raised him up to Himself never having known death. In other words, the death of Christ is not necessary to get us right with God.

Forgiveness is not a simple matter to God. It is not just a matter of saying, *"They messed up, but I am good guy so I will forgive them."* As C. S.

Lewis has written, *"We want not so much a Father in Heaven as a grandfather in heaven—a senile benevolence who as they say, 'liked to see young people enjoying themselves', and whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of each day, 'a good time was had by all.'*"

From a human perspective, forgiveness poses a problem for God. How does God hold in balance his justice and his love, his holiness and his mercy? In his justice and holiness, sin must be punished. **"Boys will be boys"** cannot be the reaction of a holy God. Yet at the same time, God is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, ready to forgive the guilt of our sin. Rebecca Pippert states our dilemma like this, *"How can God forgive without comprising his holiness and yet judge evil without frustrating his love?"*

If we think forgiveness by God is a simple matter, we have underestimated both the gravity of our sin problem and the majesty of our God.

## **The Gravity of Sin**

What is the core problem in humans? I know of no better place to look for the insight into what has gone wrong with the human heart than to go back to the story of the temptation that was presented by the serpent in the garden of Eden to Eve of which Adam became equally complicit.

First, the serpent causes the woman to question whether God has her best interest at heart. Is God really good and trustworthy? God had said to Adam all this lush garden is yours to enjoy, *"You are free to eat from any tree in the garden, but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Gen. 2:16, 17)*. You are free to eat of any tree! What does the serpent do? He turns the generosity of God on its head and says to the woman, *"Did God really say, you must not eat of any tree in the garden?" (Gen. 3:1)* The woman shows that she is starting to doubt whether God has her best interest at heart, because her response understates God's generosity and overstates his restriction. *"The woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden' (Gen. 3:2)* [Note she does not say "we are free to eat of any tree"]. Then she goes on to overstate the restriction; *"but God did say, 'you must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it [God didn't say anything about not touching], or you will die.'"*

Now the serpent, seeing that he has the woman on the ropes having sown the seed of doubt about God having her best interest at heart, moves in for the kill. *"You will not surely die", the serpent said to the woman, "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:4,5)* What is the knowledge of the tree of good and evil? It is our desire to like God. The serpent is saying, God is just jealously

guarding his position. He just doesn't want any rivals. But you too can be God. The woman bit, she aspired to be what she was not designed to be—god herself. The man quickly followed.

Every human heart is in tug of war with God, rebelling against his authority. We want to declare our own sovereignty—to live as if there is no higher authority than ourselves. A couple of decades ago you might recall the movie, *Hoosiers*, which is about Indiana high school basketball. In Indiana I understand that basketball is a god. Gene Hackman played the coach of the high school team who was on the verge of the championship. When he was confronted with his total obsession with winning-it-all, he replied, *"Don't you understand that people will kill for the opportunity to be considered gods for a brief moment?"*

And people will kill for the ability to maintain their position of god. One of the reasons why Christ died in such a hideous way was to unmask the gravity of sin in the human heart—to put on public display what we are all capable of doing. R. C. Sproul in his book *The Holiness of God* could not say it better, *"If God were to expose his life to our hands, He would not be safe for a second. We would not ignore Him; we would destroy Him. This charge may seem extravagant and irresponsible until we examine once more the record of what happened when God did appear in Christ. Christ was not simply killed. He was murdered by the hands of malicious men. The crowds howled for his blood. It was not enough merely to do away with Him, but it had to be accompanied by scorn and humiliation."* If God had put his divinity at risk, then the cross would have finished the rebellion that started in the Garden. The coup of the universe would have been accomplished. We would declare ourselves God and the overthrow would be complete.

G. K. Chesterton once said that the doctrine of original sin is the only philosophy empirically validated by centuries of recorded history. Yehiel Dinur is an unlikely witness to the capacity of all of humans to put Jesus on the cross. Yehiel Dinur was a witness at the trial of Adolf Eichmann following the atrocities to the Jews during WWII. To protect Eichmann in the courtroom he was placed behind bullet proof glass. The courtroom became hushed as Dinur entered and stood before the one who had presided over the death of millions of Jews. Then suddenly Dinur began to sob and collapsed to the floor. Everyone thought he was reliving the atrocities of the death camps. Later he explained what he was feeling, *"I was afraid about myself"*, he said, *"I saw that I am capable to do this...exactly like he."* That is why we don't blame the Jewish leaders who were instrumental in Jesus' death. We see that we are exactly like them. Given the affront to our autonomy we will do anything to preserve our liberty.

**The Majesty of God**

This is the problem that a just and loving God faces. His creation is in full riot against him. What can he do? In his justice and holiness he just can't wink at this attempted coup. A just payment must be made. There must be a reckoning for this attempted overthrow. Yet that is not all there is to God—in his compassion and love he desires to reconcile us to himself, because we were made for a relationship with him. God is not satisfied to simply condemn.

Yet, every fibre of God's being in his holiness and justice is opposed to our sinful nature. We don't appreciate God's dilemma to forgive because we have never run into holy purity. There may be human experiences that give a little window into what it means to be exposed to God's majestic holiness. It was about a generation ago that the book *The Peter Principle* was released. The Peter Principle, you recall, is our tendency to rise to our level of incompetence. I have finally managed to reach such a level myself. What we may not remember is that there were two exceptions to the Peter Principle. The super-incompetent and the super-competent. Why it is that the super-competent don't rise to the level of incompetence? Because the super-competent are a massive threat to those above them. To those who hold seats of honor and power the super-competent are a clear and present danger. God in His holiness is a threat to us.

Or think about your time in the classroom. Have you ever taken a test when you had done so poorly that you wonder if you had ever been to class? The questions on the test seemed to have no correlation to the class content. In fact, your only hope was that the teacher graded on a curve. Since everyone was making 20's and 30's out of a 100, it was evident that the test was unfair, you thought. Yet there was inevitable brain, the "goody two-shoes" who made a 100. Do you ever remember a standing ovation for the curve-breaker?

Jesus was the curve-breaker. He embodied holiness. By His very presence he exposed the unholiness of those around him, especially those in power. The prophet Isaiah one day went into the temple of the Lord and had a vision of the Lord seated on the throne, high and lifted up. Six winged creatures, named Seraphs were flying overhead extolling the majesty of God, *"Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory" (Is. 6:3)* The foundations of the temple shook as if an earthquake was moving the ground and Isaiah knew he was being exposed to and by majestic purity. The veil between himself and God had been momentarily lifted and his was in the presence of the Holy. Did he feel comforted? No, he was terrified. Every part of his being screamed in pain, *"Woe to me" Oy Vey ist Meir. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips and my eyes have seen the King the Lord Almighty." (Isaiah 6:5)*

It does not give God pleasure for us to writhe in pain before his holiness. He is not some sadistic being in his justice who simply wants to see us squirm. As with Isaiah, he quickly moves to forgive our sin.

But this brings us back to our dilemma. How does God satisfy his holy demand that sin be punished, while at the same time granting forgiveness to the sinner? How can God forgive without compromising his holiness and yet judge evil without frustrating his love?

## The Passover

The Cross. God solved his problem, by putting forth Himself as a substitute for the guilt of our sin. This leads us to Jesus' interpretation of the meaning of his death and why he had to die. It was not an historical accident that led to Christ to be crucified on Passover. This was part of God's orchestration of historical events. Jesus chooses to come to Jerusalem at the time when the Passover celebration was occurring. Even as you read Luke 22 you get the sense of God, the Director, is moving all the players on the stage to take their places. The passage begins with, *"Now the Feast of Unleavened Bread, called the Passover, was approaching" (Luke 22:1)* The teachers of the law were ready to make their move to get rid of Jesus. Satan enters into Judas to take up his position as the betrayer. The disciples are instructed to prepare the Passover meal. Jesus, it is clear, has already made prior arrangements. *"Then came the day of Unleavened Bread on which the Passover lamb was to be sacrificed" (Luke 22:7)*. Here is the clearest hint that Jesus saw himself as the lamb to be sacrificed, the fulfillment of the Passover.

What is the meaning of the Passover? This was the day more than any other that defined the identity of Israel. What the Declaration of Independence is to our country, so the Passover is the Israel. It was the day that their freedom from captivity in Egypt was to be commemorated. The Passover is the deliverance of the Hebrew people from the tenth of the ten plagues God used to release Israel from slavery. *"So Moses said, 'This is what the Lord says, 'About midnight I will go throughout Egypt. Every firstborn son in Egypt will die...there will be loud wailing throughout Egypt-worse than has ever been or will be again" (Exodus 11:4-6)*.

But God would act as the redeemer of the Hebrew people and pass-over their households if they followed His instruction. On the 10<sup>th</sup> day of the first month, they were to choose an unblemished one year old lamb, and then on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the first month, sacrifice the lamb and have the blood gather in the basin at the foot of the door. Then they were to take a hyssop branch, dip it in the blood, and daub it on the doorposts and the cross beam of the house. On this night the covering of the blood of another, sacrificed on their behalf would

provide protection as the angel of death passed through Egypt. The word Passover or *Pesach* in Hebrew, literally means that the Lord himself will spread his wings like a mother bird to protect his children from the angel of death.

Jesus is the fulfillment of the Passover. Jesus says as much, *"I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it [the Passover] finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God."* (Luke 22:15,16) He is it fulfillment. Jesus is the Passover lamb. John the Baptist said of Jesus when he came on the scene at the beginning of his ministry, *"Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world"* (John 1:29). The apostle Paul makes this clear association, *"For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed"* (1 Cor. 5:7)

Then Jesus leaves no doubt that He sees himself as the lamb who is slain. For in the midst of the Passover Seder celebration, he takes the unleavened bread, we often refer to as matzah, *"And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you..."* (Luke 22:19) Foreshadowing his body broken on the cross. *"In the same way after the supper, he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you"..."* (Luke 22:20) and Matthew adds, *"for the forgiveness of your sins."* The Old Covenant is now complete. A new way is to be opened for all that was foreshadowed in the sacrifice of an unblemished lamb is now fulfilled in the sacrifice of the unblemished God-man.

How can God forgive without compromising his holiness and yet judge evil without frustrating his love? The self-substitution of God. **The way God satisfied his justice and his love is that in his love he moved to offer himself in our place and bear the penalty of sin, so that we would be free to experience the Passover, the protection, the forgiveness purchased by His blood.**

I can't say it any better than the quote on the front of your bulletin, *"The concept of substitution may be said, then, to lie at the heart of both sin and salvation. For the essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man. Man asserts himself against God and puts himself where only God deserves to be; God sacrifices himself for man and puts himself where only man deserves to be. Man claims prerogatives which belong to God alone; God accepts penalties which belong to man alone."*

Let me conclude with a story that both wonderfully brings home the power of the cross to cover the guilt of our separation from God. Rebecca Manley Pippert in her book *Hope Has Its Reasons* tells a true story of the power of the cross to bring forgiveness when we are at our worst. A woman hung

around the platform after one of her speaking engagements, desiring to have a word with her. They moved to private space so she could share her tortured story.

This woman told Becky how she had made an excruciating decision to have an abortion. At the time she had been engaged to a youth pastor, became pregnant and decided to end the pregnancy. If they had gone through with having the baby, their future in ministry would be over, she reasoned. *"My wedding day",* she said, *"was the worst day of my life."* She said that all she could think about was, *"You're a murderer. You were so proud that you couldn't bear the shame and humiliation of being exposed for what you are. But I know what you are and so does God",* screamed her conscience. She continued, *"I just can't believe that I could do something so horrible."* She loved her husband she said, and had 4 beautiful children now. But she concluded, *"The thought that haunts me the most is, how could I murder an innocent life?"*

Becky Pippert took a deep breath before she responded and then said what had come to her mind. She said, *"I don't know why you are so surprised. This isn't the first time your sin has led to death, it is the second."* The young woman looked in amazement at what she was hearing. *"My friend, when you look at the cross, all of us show up as crucifiers—all of us are responsible for the death of the only truly innocent person who ever lived. Do you think there are any sins of yours that Jesus didn't die for? The very sin of pride that caused you to destroy your child is what killed Christ as well. It doesn't matter that you weren't there two thousand years ago. We all sent him there. So if you have done it before, then why couldn't you do it again?"*

The young woman stopped crying and looked Becky straight into her eyes and said, *"You are absolutely right. Do you realize the significance of what you are telling me, Becky? I came to you saying I had done the worst thing imaginable and you tell I have done something even worse than that."* Then as if light of grace was penetrating as if never before she went on, *"But Becky, if the cross shows me that I am far worse than I had ever imagined, it also shows me that my evil has been absorbed and forgiven. If the worst thing any human can do is kill God's son, and that can be forgiven, then how can anything else—even my abortion—not be forgiven?"* Then she leaned back in awe and quietly accepted her cleansing, saying, *"Talk about amazing grace."*

Simultaneously the cross tells us that we are much more guilty than we ever imagined and that we are much more loved than we can ever fathom. For it is on the cross that the justice and love of God come together. The cross is the public display of the darkness of the human heart and the extravagance of God's accepting grace. That is why Jesus had to die.

