

## WHY DID JESUS HAVE TO DIE?

### Romans 3:25

Good morning! So far, in this ongoing series on “Power to Change” which is all about the Book of Romans, we’re going through the entire book verse-by-verse, we finished Section 1 – “Sin”, the first three chapters. Then, we started section 2 – “Salvation”. It begins at Romans 3:21. Today, we’re continuing in the Salvation section but will focus on one verse which is the heart of the gospel. Romans 3:25. We’re going to look at specifically at the first part of this verse.

Let’s read it together: “God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood.” This morning I’ve entitled this message, “Why Did Jesus Have to Die?”

This is a question that many can’t seem to grasp or understand. It has become a stumbling block for them. Phil Donahue, for example, listed the various reasons why he had become disillusioned with Christianity. Among them was this: “How could an all-knowing, all-loving God allow his Son to be murdered on a cross to redeem my sins?” My nephew asked me why is there a need for Jesus to sacrifice his life. And Muslims, they even deny that Jesus died on the cross. They claim that according to the Koran God made it appear to people that it was Jesus who died when, in fact, another person was crucified on the cross. Maybe it was Judas, maybe it was Simon the Cyrene, or some bystander. They couldn’t accept that the Messiah would be defeated by death. In fact, they teach that Jesus was taken into heaven like Enosh and Elijah.

It is historical fact, however, that Jesus died on the cross. Aside from the testimony of the gospel writers and the early church fathers, the crucified Christ is mentioned in the writings of ancient writers like Lucian of Samosata and

historians like Josephus. The question to answer then is, “Why did Jesus have to die?”

Last week, I talked about nine wonderful facts of salvation that are covered in verses 21-26 of Romans 3: It's designed by God, it's unearned, it's unhidden, it's through faith, it's available to all who believe, it's free, it's undeserved, it's through the person of Christ, and it's very expensive.

This morning, I want us to look at the meaning of the atonement. If you remember, this is the third key concept of Salvation, first is **Justification, then redemption, then atonement.** This is very, very important, because is the heart of the Gospel. It answers the question of why Jesus had to die. It's the heart of Christianity. If you don't understand why Jesus Christ died for you, you don't understand Christianity.

Why did Jesus have to die? We discover **three answers to that question** in Romans 3:25 plus the verse before and after it. Let's look at these verses then:

**“And all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.”**

These verses tell us that Jesus died

### **1. To Turn Away God's Wrath**

Again, part of verse 25 says, **“God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood.”** The phrase “sacrifice of atonement” translates a Greek word that means “propitiation.” Few people have ever heard the word propitiation,

and fewer still understand what it means. Here's a simple definition: *Appeasing the wrath of an offended person*. In this context it means that the death of Christ turns away God's wrath.

I realize that God's wrath is not a popular topic these days. Many pastors fear to preach on God's wrath lest they incur the wrath of the congregation. Much modern gospel preaching is anemic precisely because we preach less than the whole truth to guilty sinners. If all we say to the lost is "God loves you," we are in danger of making them think that their continued rebellion doesn't matter to God. Instead, we must warn them to flee from the wrath to come as Luke 3:7 tells us.

In pagan religions, the worshipers offer animal sacrifices to appease their gods. As you may know, Haiti is the land of voodoo. At least 90% of the people practice voodoo to one degree or another. Sometimes the Haitians will slaughter a chicken and place the blood (with the entrails) on a dish by the front door, hoping to ward off evil spirits. It is their way of appeasing the god who stands behind voodoo. That is the pagan idea of propitiation.

And many husbands actually practice propitiation even though they haven't heard the word. When he realizes he has offended his wife, he stops on the way home and buys flowers and candy and a card. Before she can say a word, he gives her the gifts, hoping to turn away her wrath and restore a good relationship. Propitiation for husbands, like the Day of Atonement for Jews, is a regular thing.

But the best illustration of propitiation comes from the Old Testament Day of Atonement when the high priest would enter the Holy of Holies with the blood of a goat. *Leviticus 16 describes the ritual in exacting detail*. It must be the high priest and him alone, and it must happen on the Day of Atonement or Yom Kippur, and on no other day. On the Day of Atonement, the high priest would take off his

regular clothes and put on a sacred linen tunic. He would sprinkle the goat blood on the lid of the Ark of the Covenant. That lid (made of gold) was called the “Mercy Seat.” Inside the Ark was a copy of the Ten Commandments, representing the Law of God. By the sprinkling of the blood, the sins of the people were “covered.” That covering by means of blood was called the “atonement.” *The sacrifice of blood turned away the wrath of God.* Why is this important? Because God’s justice demands death as the ultimate punishment for sin.

Now, what does the symbolism of the Day of Atonement represent? During the other days of the year when God looked down from heaven, he saw the Ten Commandments inside the Ark. The Ten Commandments stood as a testimony against the sins of the nation of Israel. But on the Day of Atonement God saw the blood of the sacrifice that covered the sin of the people of Israel.

Here's the thing. The sacrificial system had one major problem. It *provided only temporary forgiveness because it was based on the blood of animals.* We know that it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin as Hebrews 10:4 says. That is why every year, year after year, the high priest would go in and do it all over again. And when he died, another high priest would take his place and do the same thing each year on the Day of Atonement. The Old Testament system provided no permanent forgiveness for sin (Hebrews 7:23-28).

*When Jesus died on the cross, the blood that he shed was like the blood on the Mercy Seat.* It turned away the wrath of God and covered the sin of the entire human race. How could that be? In the Old Testament it is the blood of bulls and goats, in the New Testament it is the eternal blood of Jesus Christ which has eternal value in the eyes of God. When Jesus hung on the cross, he cried out, **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”** (Mark 15:34). In that moment all

the wrath of God was poured out on Jesus. He became sin for us, and all of your sin and all of mine and the sins of the whole world were poured out on Jesus. In that moment God turned his face away from his own Son. *To call the death of Christ a “propitiation” means that God’s wrath is now satisfied with the death of his Son.* When a sinner trusts Christ, God accepts him on the basis of the bloody sacrifice Christ made when he died on the cross.

Why did God do it this way? Because he is an infinite God of infinite holiness, and all sins committed against him are infinite in magnitude. *Only a gift of infinite value could turn away the infinite wrath of God.* And only God himself (in the Person of his Son) could make such an infinite gift. That’s why our measly efforts to turn aside God’s wrath are doomed to failure. We think that going to church or being baptized or going to Mass or saying our prayers or being good or stopping a bad habit or “trying hard to be better” will somehow turn away the infinite wrath of God. The wonder of propitiation is that the offended party (God), who has every right to be angry at sinners himself, offers the gift (the death of Christ) to turn away his own wrath, thus making it possible for guilty sinners to be forgiven.

Folks, listen to this: *The cross is the place where grace and wrath meet.* Let me repeat that. *The cross is the place where grace and wrath meet.* When we come to God through Christ, we come to a loving Father and not to an angry God.

Why did Jesus die? To turn away God’s wrath. Also,

## **2. To Demonstrate God’s Justice**

In verses 25-26, Paul says that God set forth Christ as a propitiation for sin so that he might be “just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus” (verse 26).

Some people argue this way: No one has to die. Since God is both all-powerful and infinitely gracious, why didn't he simply offer forgiveness to anyone who says, "I'm sorry"?

The answer goes like this. If you think about it, it seems that God was facing a dilemma. Because God is holy, he cannot allow sin to go unpunished. His justice demands that every sin be punished-no matter how small it may seem to us. But if he were to forgive sin without proper punishment, he would cease to be holy and just. God would no longer be God because he would have denied his own character. That could not happen. All offenses against God must be punished. That's why sinners can't simply say, "I'm sorry" and instantly be forgiven. Someone has to pay the price. In short, the dilemma is this: God is loving and he wants to forgive sin. However, God is also just, and he must punish sin.

We follow this same principle in our criminal justice system. Suppose a man is found guilty of embezzling six million dollars from his employer. Let us further suppose that just before sentencing, he stands before the judge, confesses his crime, begs for mercy, and promises never to embezzle money again. How would you react if the judge accepted his apology and released him with no punishment? Suppose the man had been convicted of rape and then was set free with no punishment simply because he apologized. How would you react to that kind of judgment? For sure, you will cry for justice.

So, even in this life a price must be paid for breaking the law. You see, *When lawbreakers are set free with no punishment, respect for the law disappears.* The same principle applies to raising children. When parents refuse to discipline with tough love, they end up raising criminals instead of responsible adults. The same is true in the spiritual realm. When sin is not punished, it doesn't seem very

sinful. God's "dilemma" was to devise a plan of salvation whereby he would remain holy and just, and still provide a way of forgiveness for guilty sinners. Somewhere, somehow, there had to be a place where grace and wrath could meet. That place is the cross of Christ.

Back to Phil Donahue for a moment. He asked a second question that deserves an answer: "If God the Father is so 'all-loving,' why didn't He come down and go to Calvary?" The answer is, he did! God came down to this earth in the Person of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and died for our sins. (The Phil Donahue quotes come from Erwin Lutzer, *Why the Cross Can Do What Politics Can't*, p. 111).

The paradox of salvation is this: God is a God of love ... and therefore wants to forgive sinners. But he is also a God of justice ... who must not and cannot overlook sin. How could God love sinners and yet not overlook their sin? No one would ever have dreamed of his answer. His answer is: God sent his own Son Jesus to die for sinners. In that way, the just punishment for sin was fully met in the death of Christ, and sinners who trust in Christ could be freely forgiven. *Only God could have done something like that.* Thus, Paul says, God is both just (in punishing sin) and the justifier of those who believe in Jesus.

Think of it. In the death of this One Man, all the sins of the human race are fully paid for: past, present and future. *As a result, those who believe in Jesus find that their sins are gone forever.* This is the heart of the gospel: God's justice demands that sin be punished. God's grace provides the sacrifice. *What God demands, he supplies.* Thus salvation is a work of God from first to last. It is conceived by God, provided by God, and applied by God.

Why did Jesus have to die? To turn away from God's wrath. To demonstrate justice. And

### **3. To Justify Us Freely.**

Romans 3:24 tells us that we are "justified freely by his grace." The word "freely" literally means "without a cause." Salvation comes "without a cause" in us. That is, God saves us despite the fact that he can't find a reason within us to save us. Salvation is a "free gift" to the human race. There is nothing in us that causes God to want to save us. No good works, no inner beauty, no great moral attainment, no intellectual merit of any kind. When God saves us, he does it despite the fact that we don't deserve it.

Let me go a step further. *When God saves people, he doesn't do it because of any potential he sees in them.* I think most of us secretly feel (though we would never say it) that there must have been something in us worth saving. Human pride dies hard. But it's not as if God saw a musician and said, "We need a good piano player in the church. I think I'll save him." Or "She's got a lot of money and we could use some extra cash for world missions." Or "Those twins would make excellent ushers. I want them on my team." No, no, a thousand times no. God doesn't save on the basis of your potential. Apart from the grace of God, the only potential you have is the potential for eternal damnation.

Some 220 years ago there was a man in England by the name of William Cowper who often struggled with bouts of severe depression. At one point he became extremely distraught, fearing that he was under the wrath of God. Here is his own testimony:

"I flung myself into a chair by the window and there saw the Bible on the table by the chair. I opened it up and my eyes fell on Romans 3:25, which says of

Christ, 'Whom God has made a propitiation through faith in his blood.' Then and there, I realized what Christ's blood had accomplished and I realized the effects of his atonement for me. I realized God was willing to justify me, and then and there, I trusted Jesus Christ and a great burden was lifted from my soul."

Looking back on that day, William Cowper wrote a hymn entitled "There is a fountain filled with blood".

Friends, those are the answers to the question "Why did Jesus have to die?" To turn away God's wrath, to demonstrate his justice, and to save us freely by his grace.

What should be our response to this? Once we understand why Jesus died what should be our response? There are 3 responses.

### **1. We ought to hate sin.**

*1 Peter 1:15 " But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do."*

God wants us to live pure lives, holy lives. Living as best we can in the power of the Spirit without sinning. Why should we hate sin? Look what it did to Jesus. If you want to know how bad sin is, look at the cross.

Society teaches us to laugh at sin. The way society tries to get something to be acceptable is to get us to laugh about it. I don't think it was any accident that a number of years ago, adultery started creeping into sitcoms before they were in dramas. You start laughing at it. Homosexuality first appeared on TV in sitcoms before they started having movies with themes on homosexuality. Even Disney, which used to uphold conservative values, has joined the bandwagon. Then, in schools, you've got drag queens reading to children and strutting their stuff, making fun and enjoying it. If you laugh at something, your resistance is lowered, you begin to enjoy it. Sin is not a laughing matter. Look what it did to Jesus Christ.

## 2. We ought to love Christ.

When we look at what Jesus has done for us, it ought to break our hearts. We ought to say, "Jesus Christ, You deserve our entire devotion." 1 John 4:19 talks about *"We love because He first loved us."* He gave Himself for us. And because He loves us we love Him in return. If He loved us enough to leave heaven, come to earth, die on the cross then we surely owe him our devotion. God has never met a person He didn't love.

Romans 8:32 *"He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?"* Jesus solved your biggest problem when He died for your sin. Any other problem you have is minor in comparison. If He loved you enough to take care of your sin, He loves you enough to take care of your needs.

Now, since Christ took care of our needs, we ought to take care of the needs of others in the same way. We ought to love them just as Christ loved us. This means sharing with them what God has given us. We go to the Philippines to reach out to the less fortunate. That's good. God is pleased with this ministry. But if you're not able to go, do you know that there are also poor and hungry people close to you? Let me call Andrew to give his testimony.

[Last night, I was scheduled to pick up the bread at the Panera Bread Bakery in Merrifield and so I went. It was about 9 PM. On my way out with two boxes of bread, I noticed this homeless guy who was standing by the elevator. I walked toward him and offered him some bread. He was surprised. He told me that he was so hungry and had been praying for bread. With a wide smile, he gladly reached out for the bag of bread I gave him and thanked me. I was at the right place at the right time. I know it was God who put me there. God cares for that hungry individual. We must show that we care, too.]

Paul says in Acts 20:35, "In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

We ought to hate sin and love Christ and share this love with others.

### **3. We ought to share the good news.**

In 2 Cor. 5:14a, Paul says, "*For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all.*" He's saying this in context of being an ambassador for Christ. He's saying he witnesses to others because of the love of Jesus. Can you imagine an event as important as the cross yet it was kept a secret? If I had the cure for cancer don't you think I'd be obligated to share it with others?

This is the bottom line. This is why we do what we do. Everybody deserves to hear what we're talking about today. That Jesus Christ died for every single person here. We are commanded to share. The love of Christ compels us -- that's the motive. If that person lives and dies without knowing Christ, then for that person the death on the cross was a waste. Because it never got to him.

When we talk about church growth, we're not talking about bringing in a bunch of other Christians who are already believers, from other churches. That's not church growth at all. We're talking about winning people to Christ who have never heard this. There are thousands of people in the Metro DC area, different kinds of people, that Jesus Christ died for and they deserve to hear every single word that we talked about. It is the ultimate selfishness to say, "We don't want to grow as a church." That's saying, "We're saved!" But what about everybody else? They need it just as much as we do. Those people, if we don't reach them, who will? If nobody reaches them, they'll go to hell. That's the bottom line.

That's why the love of Christ compels us. That's the motive. The Bible says, "*The Lord is not willing that any should perish.*"

What is our response to the fact that Jesus Christ died on the cross for us? We hate sin because we see what it did to Jesus, we see what it does to people. We love Christ. We share that message. Outreach is the top priority of the church. Evangelism is the number one priority. That's what God says.

In Luke 15:3, we read *“Then Jesus told them this parable: “Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”* God is happier when one person becomes a believer than seeing 99 persons in fellowship.

Outreach is so important that the Bible says a shepherd leaves 99 safe sheep to go look for one lost one. That's how important it is. Even if we've got 99% of the Metro DC area saved, if there is one lost sheep you've got to reach them! This church can never stop growing as long as there is one person who doesn't know Christ. We've got to care because God cares. Love leaves no choice at all.