

# Why Did Jesus Have To Die?

This is a portion of a chapter entitled “The (True) Story of the Cross” in Tim Keller’s book, *The Reason for God*.

“I could accept Jesus as a martyr, and embodiment of sacrifice, and a divine teacher. His death on the cross was a great example to the world, but that there was anything like a mysterious or miraculous virtue in it, my heart could not accept.”

-Gandhi, *An Autobiography*

“I would catch a glimpse of the cross--and suddenly my heart would stand still. In an instinctive, intuitive way I understand that something more important, more tumultuous, more passionate, was at issue than our good causes, however noble they might be...I should have worn it...It should have been my uniform, my language, my life. I shall have no excuse; I can’t say I didn’t know. I knew from the beginning, and turned away.”

-Malcolm Muggeridge, *Jesus Rediscovered*

“The primary symbol of Christianity has always been the cross. The death of Jesus for our sins is at the heart of the gospel, the good news. Increasingly, however, what the Christian church has considered good news is considered by the rest of our culture to be bad news.

In the Christian account, Jesus dies so that God can forgive sins. For many, that seems ludicrous or even sinister. ‘Why would Jesus *have* to die?’ is a question that I have heard from people in New York more often than ‘Does God exist?’ ‘Why couldn’t God just forgive us?’ they ask. ‘The Christian God sounds like the vengeful gods of primitive times who needed to be appeased by human sacrifice.’ Why can’t God just accept everyone or at least those who are sorry for their wrongdoing? While the Christian doctrine of the cross confuses some people, it alarms others. Some liberal Protestant theologians reject the doctrine of the cross altogether because it looks to them like ‘divine child abuse.’

Why, then don’t we just leave the Cross out? Why not focus on the life of Jesus and his teachings rather than on his death? Why did Jesus have to die?

## The First Reason: Real Forgiveness is Costly Suffering

Let’s begin with a purely economic example. Imagine that someone borrows your car, and as he backs out of the driveway he strikes a gate, knocking it down along with part of a wall. Your property insurance doesn’t cover the gate and garden wall. What can you do? There are essentially two options. The first is to demand that he pay for the damages. The second is to refuse to let him pay anything. There may also be middle-of-the-road solutions in which you both share the payment. Notice that in every option the cost of the damage must be borne by *someone*. Either you or he absorbs the cost for

the deed, but the debt does not somehow vanish into thin air. Forgiveness, in this illustration, means bearing the cost for his misdeed yourself.

Most of the wrongs done to us cannot be assessed in purely economic terms. Someone may have robbed you of some happiness, reputation, opportunity, or certain aspects of your freedom. No price tag can be put on such things, yet we still have a sense of violated justice that does not go away when the other person says, 'I'm really sorry.' When we are seriously wronged we have the indelible sense that the perpetrators have incurred a debt that must be dealt with. Once you have been wronged and you realize there is a just debt that can't simply be dismissed--there are only two things to do.

The first option is to seek ways to make the perpetrators suffer for what they have done. You can withhold relationship and actively initiate or passively wish for some kind of pain in their lives commensurate to what you experienced. There are many ways to do this. You can viciously confront them, saying things that hurt. You can go around to others to tarnish their reputation. If the perpetrators suffer, you may begin to feel a certain satisfaction, feeling that they are now paying off their debt.

There are some serious problems with this option, however. You may become harder or colder, more self-pitying, and therefore more self-absorbed. If the wrongdoer was a person of wealth or authority you may instinctively dislike and resist that sort of person for the rest of your life. If it was a person of the opposite sex or another race you might become permanently cynical and prejudiced against the whole class of people. In addition, the perpetrator and his friends and family often feel they have the right to respond to your payback in kind. Cycles of reaction and retaliation can go on for years. Evil has been done to you--yes. But when you try to get payment through revenge the evil does not disappear. Instead it spreads, and it spreads most tragically of all into you and your own character.

There is another option, however. You can forgive. Forgiveness means refusing to make them pay for what they did. However, to refrain from lashing out at someone when you want to do so with all your being is *agony*. It is a form of suffering. You not only suffer the original loss of happiness, reputation, and opportunity, but now you forgo the consolation of inflicting the same on them. You are absorbing the debt, taking the cost of it completely on yourself instead of taking it out of the other person. It hurts terribly. Many people would say it feels like a kind of death.

Yes, but it is a death that leads to resurrection instead of lifelong living death of bitterness and cynicism. As a pastor I have counseled many people about forgiveness, and I have found that if they do this--if they simply refuse to take vengeance on the wrongdoer in action and even in their inner fantasies--the anger slowly begins to subside. You are not giving it any fuel and so the resentment burns lower and lower. C.S. Lewis wrote in one of his *Letters to Malcolm* that 'last week, while at prayer, I suddenly discovered--or felt as if I did--that I had really forgiven someone I had been trying to forgive for over thirty years. Trying, and praying that I might.' I remember once counseling a sixteen-year-old about the anger she felt toward her father. We weren't getting anywhere until I said to her, 'Your father has defeated you, as long as you hate

him. You will stay trapped in your anger unless you forgive him thoroughly from the heart and begin to love him.' Something thawed in her when she realized that. She went through the suffering of costly forgiveness, which at first always feels far worse than bitterness, into eventual freedom. Forgiveness must be granted before it can be felt, but it does come eventually. It leads to a new peace, a resurrection. It is the only way to stop the spread of evil.

When I counsel forgiveness to people who have been burned, they often ask about the wrongdoers, 'Shouldn't they be held accountable?' I usually respond, 'Yes, but only if you forgive them.' There are many good reasons that we should want to confront wrongdoers. Wrongdoers have inflicted damage and, as in the example of the gate I presented earlier, it costs something to fix the damage. We should confront wrongdoers--to wake them up to their real character, to move them to repair their relationships, or to at least constrain them and protect others from being harmed by them in the future. Notice, however, that all those reasons for confrontation are reasons of love. The best way to love them and the other potential victims around them is to confront them in the hope that they will repent, change, and make things right.

The desire for vengeance, however, is motivated not by goodwill but by ill will. You might say, 'I just want to hold them accountable,' but your real motivation may be simply to see them hurt. If you are not confronting them for their sake or for society's sake but for your own sake, just for payback, the chance the wrongdoer ever coming to repentance is virtually nil. In such a case you, the confronter, will overreach, seeking not justice but revenge, not their change but their pain. Your demands will be excessive and your attitude abusive. He or she will rightly see the confrontation as intended simply to cause hurt. A cycle of retaliation will begin.

Only if you first seek inner forgiveness will your confrontation be temperate, wise, and gracious. Only when you have lost the need to see the other person hurt will you have any chance of actually bringing about change, reconciliation, and healing. You have to submit to the costly suffering and death of forgiveness if there is going to be any resurrection.

No one embodied the costliness of forgiveness any better than Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose story I recounted in Chapter 4. After Bonhoeffer returned to Germany to resist Hitler, he wrote in *The Cost of Discipleship* (1937) that true forgiveness is always a form of suffering.

*My brother's burden which I must bear is not only his outward lot, his natural characteristics and gifts, but quite literally his sin. And the only way to bear that sin is by forgiving it in the power of the cross of Christ in which I now share...Forgiveness is the Christlike suffering which it is the Christian's duty to bear."*

In April 1943 Bonhoeffer was arrested and imprisoned. He was eventually moved to Flossenburg concentration camp and executed just before the end of World War II.

How did Bonhoeffer live out his own words? His forgiveness was costly suffering, because it actually confronted the hurt and evil before him. His forgiveness was not

what he called 'cheap grace.' He did not ignore or excuse sin. He resisted it head on, even though it cost him everything. His forgiveness was also costly because he refused to hate. He passed through the agonizing process required to love your enemies, so his resistance to their evildoing was measured and courageous, not venomous and cruel. The startling evidence for this is found in the letters and papers that Bonhoeffer wrote while in prison. The lack of bitterness was remarkable.

*Please don't ever get anxious or worried about me, but don't forget to pray for me--I'm sure you don't. I am so sure of God's guiding hand that I hope I shall always be kept in that certainty. You must never doubt that I'm traveling with gratitude and cheerfulness along the road where I'm being led. My past life is brim-full of God's goodness and my sins are covered by the forgiving love of Christ crucified....*

Here we see Bonhoeffer simply living out what Jesus had done for him. Jesus bore his sins, bearing the cost of them. Now Bonhoeffer is free to do the same for others. Bonhoeffer uses divine forgiveness to help him understand human forgiveness. But let's now use Bonhoeffer's marvelous example of human forgiveness to understand the divine.

## **The Forgiveness of God**

'Why did Jesus have to die? Couldn't God just forgive us?' This is what many ask, but now we can see that no one 'just' forgives, if the evil is serious. Forgiveness means bearing the cost instead of making the wrongdoer do it, so you can reach out in love to seek your enemy's renewal change. Forgiveness means absorbing the debt of sin yourself. Everyone who forgives great evil goes through a death into resurrection, and experiences nails, blood, sweat, and tears.

Should it surprise us, then, that when God determined to forgive us rather than punish us for all the ways we have wronged him and one another, that he went to the Cross in the person of Jesus Christ and died there? As Bonhoeffer says, everyone who forgives someone bears the other's sins. On the Cross we see God doing visibly and cosmically what every human being must do to forgive someone, through on an infinitely greater scale. I would argue, of course, that human forgiveness works this way because we avoidably reflect the image of our creator. That is why we should not be surprised that if we sense that the only way to triumph over evil is to go through the suffering of forgiveness, that this would be far more true of God, whose just passion to defeat evil and loving desire to forgive others are both infinitely greater than ours.

It is crucial at this point to remember that the Christian faith has always understood that Jesus Christ is God. God did not, then, inflict pain on someone else, but rather on the Cross absorbed the pain violence, and evil of the world into himself. Therefore 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 someday he can destroy all evil without destroying us.

Therefore the Cross is not simply a loving example of sacrificial love. Throwing your life away needlessly is not admirable--it is wrong. Jesus' death was only a good example if it was more than an example, if it was something absolutely necessary to rescue us. And it was. 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. Forgiveness is always a form of costly suffering.

Questions:

1. When was a time that you felt the pain of forgiveness rather than the cheap joy of retaliation?
2. How does Keller's ideas clarify your understanding of the necessity of Christ's death?
3. What characteristic of God stands out to you most in this excerpt? (love, mercy, humility, courage, grace, etc)