

# Why Did Jesus Have to Die?

By Eric V. Snow

Why did Jesus have to die? Why couldn't God the Father just look down at us humans, and say (for example), "You're forgiven if you repent"? Importantly, Jesus had to die, which is the foundation for the theory of atonement. Let's briefly explain below the theory of atonement, which explains why Jesus had to die so people could be forgiven for their sins.

Unlike the case for the Old Testament's animal sacrifices, Jesus' sacrifice was once for all time, and didn't need to be kept being repeated, as is the case for animals. When a bull, sheep, goat, or dove was sacrificed for the sin or offense of a man or woman, that sacrifice would need to be repeated if the sin or offense was repeated. But in the case of Christ's sacrifice, it covered all human sins for all time for any reason. Interestingly enough, Hebrews 9-10 explains this distinction in detail. For example, it notes that unlike the Jewish high priest, Jesus' sacrifice doesn't need to be repeated (Hebrews 9:25-26): "Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the Holy Place yearly with blood not his own; for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself." Likewise, Hebrews 10:12, 14 says: "But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God . . . For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified." The blood of God in the flesh is worth far more than the blood of the animals He created: He could create any number of them, but He was uncreated and thus of a totally different, and superior, class. But then, one could ask, Why did the Creator decide to die for His creatures? We're return to this puzzle further below.

Now it's useful to go through some historical background from the Old Testament about its animal sacrifices. They had a meaning in forgiving sins that foreshadowed in predictive type what Jesus would do later. According to Lev. 17:11, blood symbolized the life force of the creature sacrificed for a man's trespasses: "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 the reason of the life that makes atonement." The sin offering which sacrificed a goat (Lev. 17:24-26) had the animal die physically in order that the man may live spiritually:

And he shall lay his hand on the head of the male goat, and slay it in the place where they slay the burnt offering before the Lord; it is a sin offering. Then the priest is to take some of the blood of the sin offering with his finger, and put it on the horns of the altar of burnt offering; and the rest of the blood he shall pour out at the base of the altar of burnt offering. . . . Thus the priest shall make atonement for him in regard to his sin, and he shall be forgiven.

But then, why did God use this symbolism? Why did he want animals to die in the place of people symbolically for their sins? And why did God want sin, violations of His law (Romans 7:8; 4:15; 5:13), to cause death (Romans 6:23)?

These questions overall relate to the profound issue of the theory of atonement, about why Jesus had to die. After all, one theoretically could ask: "Why couldn't have God the Father looked down from heaven, and say these are the conditions for atonement, 'If you confess your sins and repent, you are all forgiven'"? Why did God Himself, meaning, the Son, have to die for humanity's sins? Now here we have a truly deep mystery. The mystery here concerns God's motives for wanting a blood sacrifice as a condition for forgiveness of violations of His law. And Scripture by no means fully reveals God's mind on this subject. Theologians have long argued about the theory of atonement, which concerns the reasons why God (meaning, Jesus) sacrificed Himself on the cross for the sins of humanity (see Rev. 13:8). Why was God so insistent on the principle of a blood sacrifice as a condition for forgiveness for violations of His law that He was even willing to sacrifice Himself (meaning Jesus, not the Father) on the cross?

Let's explain why the human race is in spiritual debt to God to begin with and the reasons why this is the case. For example, in Romans 5:1, Paul notes the consequences of Jesus' sacrifice after Christians have accepted it by faith: "Therefore, having been justified by faith,

we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Verse 10 sounds a similar note: "For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life." So Jesus' sacrifice served to reconcile humanity to God the Father. Because of sin, humans are in debt to God, since violating God's law causes an automatic death penalty to be assessed against us (Romans 3:23): "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." So Jesus' sacrifice paid the penalty of the human race's sins to God the Father. Since God is the Creator, He owns us intrinsically and has the right to tell us what to God based on His law, which expresses His law.

The theological school of Calvinism proposes one theory of atonement to answer these kinds of questions. But here let's explain one version of the Arminian solution, a rival theological school to Calvinism, because its explanation is better. Now because God's government over the whole universe is subject to His law, the atonement was necessary. This law is for the good of all. But since humans have an evil nature, they naturally wish to sin and violate the laws of God's government, God's kingdom. God has to punish sin for two basic reasons, instead of arbitrarily letting men and women off. First, in order to deter the future violations of God's own law for later acts of sin, God's government has to inflict a formal penalty upon all who violate His law. By punishing sin, God discourages others in the future from sinning. To this extent, the theory of morality that's at the basis of the atonement is a consequentialist or utilitarian one. That is, it believes punishment is good at least to the extent it deters future violations of God's law. But that's only half the picture.

Second, God also has to inflict a penalty to uphold justice. Consequently, under God's law, to punish a murderer by the death penalty is perfectly just, even when it doesn't deter a single future murder or criminal act. Here a deontological, or duty-oriented, theory of morality also undergirds the atonement. Fortunately, God's sense of justice doesn't require the inflicting of an exact punishment for each act of sin by every individual human. Otherwise, Jesus would have to have suffered and had transferred upon Him exactly the penalties for sin as mankind should have (or did) suffer because of its sins (cf. I Pet. 2:24; II Cor. 5:21; Gal. 3:13). (This is part of the basis

for the Calvinistic doctrine of the limited atonement, which says Jesus died only for saved Christians, not the whole world).

Instead, what's required is a sufficiently great, perfect, and high sacrifice that shows that God's law (which is an expression of His moral character and nature) is so important to Him that it can't be casually ignored. A penalty for its violation must be inflicted. By having the Creator and the Lawgiver die for all men and women, this bears witness to all the intelligences in the universe (human and angelic) that God's moral government over all the universe isn't a mere paper tiger, but has full substance behind it. As the theologian John Miley comments, while defending the Arminian governmental theory of the atonement against the Calvinistic theory of satisfaction:

"Nothing could be more fallacious than the objection that the governmental theory is in any sense acceptilational, or implicitly indifferent to the character of the substitute [i.e., Jesus, in this case-EVS] in atonement. In the inevitable logic of its deepest and most determining principles it excludes all inferior substitution and requires a divine sacrifice as the only sufficient atonement. Only such a substitution can give adequate expression to the great truths which may fulfill the rectoral office of penalty."

So although the Arminian theory of atonement maintains that God requires a high sacrifice as the ground of atonement, He doesn't require an exact act of retribution that would have to be inflicted against each individual for his or her sins to be charged against the One providing the basis for atonement.

The story of Zaleucus, a lawgiver and ruler over an ancient colony of Greeks in southern Italy, helps illustrate how God's law could require a high but not necessarily fully exact penalty for its violation. Zaleucus's own son had violated the law, which required as a penalty the son being made blind. As this case came before Zaleucus himself, he suffered terrible inner torment since his roles as father and lawgiver collided. Although even the citizens of the colony were willing to ask for his son's pardon, he knew as a statesman that eventually the reaction against letting his son arbitrarily off was that they would accuse him of partiality and injustice; consequently, in the future his laws would be broken more. Yet, as a father, he yearned to

lessen or eliminate the punishment for his son. His solution? He gave up one of his own eyes so that his son would only lose one of his own! Notice that had he paid a sum of money, or had found someone else to take the penalty for this punishment, his authority as a statesman and lawgiver would have still been subverted, since the law and the penalties for its violation weren't then being taken seriously enough. By giving up one of his own eyes, a crucial piece of his own body, Zaleucus showed his own high regard for the law and the moral sense standing behind it.

A theory of atonement that imposes no death penalty for violations of God's law, such as by imposing only repentance and acts of charity as the exclusive basis for the forgiveness of sins, undermines our desire to obey God's law. Such a theory of atonement subverts the moral justice of God's government by making an arbitrary, non-costly act of God's will be the basis for forgiving the sins of humanity. Consequently, the penalty for violating God's law ultimately becomes trivial. Only by making a great sacrifice, such as Zaleucus's for his son, did God demonstrate to all the universe's intelligences that any violations of His moral government's law, which expresses His intrinsic moral character, would not be taken lightly or arbitrarily ignored as He expresses His great love for humanity.

The theory of atonement relates closely to another deeply mysterious issue: Why does a good, almighty God allow evil to exist in His creation? I believe that a major reason for God's sacrifice of Himself was God's desire to impress upon all created intelligences, human and angelic, His love for His creation. Therefore, by dying for created beings, He shows His love for us, which means we shouldn't doubt his love despite all the pain and misery that occurs to so many in the world. God didn't want us to doubt His love while giving us free will that would result in pain and misery for many as we exercised it. For God is in the process of making beings like Himself who have 100% free will yet also will choose to be righteous and obedient to His law 100% of the time. The latter takes time to develop, for its a matter of settled character that God wants to develop in us and see over time if we'll manifest it. Jesus' sacrifice also rescued us all from the death grip of Satan (Heb. 2:14-15): "Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death,

that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage." Much more could be said on this issue, but it is very important and relates to the question about why Jesus' blood was worth more than that of animals.

If the atonement has no ontological foundation (i.e., based on an absolute moral law), but was a mere arbitrary cancellation of the penalty of God's law for sin, how can men and women know that God is just in His actions? How could one know whether or not He will punish sins when they should be punished? Ultimately, the source of redemption has to be the Lawgiver Himself, since God's moral laws are intrinsic to His eternal character and divine nature. Having been the Lawgiver to Israel through Moses, Jesus was the originator of the Law for humanity. Having been the reason for its existence, He also could take in His own Person the penalty resulting from that law, and stand in humanity's place for it. The one who put the moral law in motion has to be the Creator, and thus be God. The violation of the moral law demanded human death as the penalty for its violation. Consequently, Jesus had to become human to save us by becoming just like us. He also had to become human in order to die, and to give up His life temporarily so Christians may live eternally themselves. Although Jesus was our Creator physically, and thus His life was worth more than all of humanity's combined, He also had to be the Lawgiver in order to be able to receive the penalty of sin in His own Person in humanity's place.

I admit that some of what I've written here is somewhat speculative, for I can't prove it directly by quoting this or that text from Scripture. Instead, I'm merely following in the footsteps of theologians who have pondered this question and proposed answers based in part on their sense of what God's system of morality is based on and why He takes violations of it so very seriously.

In conclusion, Jesus had to die in order to provide a solid foundation for restoring our relationship with God after we broke it by violating His law by sinning. Only God, as the origin of the moral law, could release us from the penalty of that law. Furthermore, since God's sufferings on the cross were so mysteriously great, it also reminds us to avoid thinking God doesn't understand the pains and trials in our own lives. Jesus didn't just die for our sins, but He suffered greatly

while dying for us. Let us always be thankful that God loved us so much as to pay such a high price to redeem us, as Paul felt so deeply emotionally: “O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7:24-25).