

OpenTheo

The Cause of His Death - Part 1

September 12, 2021



The Bible for Today with John Stott - Premier

John Stott explains why God cannot simply forgive our misdemeanours, as we would forgive one another, and why it was necessary for Jesus to die for us on the cross.

Transcript

Why doesn't God simply forgive us without the necessity of the death of His Son? Why shouldn't God forgive me? Ask the cynic some years ago, sesomit here. That's His speciality. That's His job.

After all people go on, if we sin against one another, we are required to forgive one another. So why shouldn't God be equally generous?

[Music] Welcome to the Bible for today with John Stott. There are few evangelicals who have ever influenced the global church in the 20th century as much as John Stott.

Always remaining faithful to the Word of God and unswayed by current trends, the person of Christ blazed from every sermon He preached. His home church was always all souls, laying in place in the heart of London's West End. And it's from 600 sermons He preached there that we're marking His centenary with some of His most powerful messages.

[Music] As Christians we know that Christ died to forgive our sins. But if God is all powerful and can do anything, surely He could just forgive us. Why was it necessary for all the pain and all the suffering that Jesus had to endure? Today John Stott explores why both the Bible and Jesus Himself speak so much about His death.

Anybody investigating Christianity, and that's what we're doing these Sunday evenings investigating particularly Jesus Christ, is struck by the extraordinary concentration of Christians on His death. In the case of all other great spiritual leaders who have ever lived in the whole history of the world, their death is lamented because it terminated their career. But it is of very importance in itself.

What matters is their life, their teaching, the inspiration of their example and so on. With Jesus, however, it is the other way round. To be sure His teaching and His example were incomparable.

And yet Christians have always emphasized His death more than His life. For wanting Jesus always or kept predicting Himself that He was going to die and refer to His death as the hour for which He'd come into the world. Gospel writers devote a disproportionate amount of space to His death rather than to His life and teaching and ministry.

And the apostle Paul could write, "I decided that I would know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified." And the church has recognized this. If we've been baptized in the Church of England, it has signed us with the sign of a cross on our forehead. When we're dead, as likely as not they're erect across over our grave.

Many great cathedrals are built on a cruciform ground plan, and many Christians wear a cross on their lapel or on a necklace and so on. So there is no doubt of the centrality of the death of Jesus in the thinking of the Church and of Christian men and women. But why? Why all this emphasis on His death and why in any case did He die? Well, there are many people who have no difficulty in giving their answer to this question.

He died, they said, because He was a preacher of dangerous and even revolutionary doctrines. He was such a revolutionary thinker that He disturbed the prejudices of His contemporaries. He was arrested, He was put on trial, He was condemned to death, and He was crucified.

It's very simple, they say. He died as the victim of small minds. He died as a martyr to His own greatness.

I've heard people argue like this, and as a matter of fact, it's quite true as far as it goes. The martyr theory about the death of Jesus, He was the victim of the pride and prejudice of human beings. But that explanation of the death of Jesus doesn't go far enough.

It ignores the fact which the narratives may abundantly plain that Jesus went to the cross of His own free will. He said, "Nobody takes my life from me. I lay it down by myself.

I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again." He said, "Jesus claimed that it didn't die as a martyr. He died deliberately laying down His life." So again we come to the question, "Why?" Well, again, a number of answers are given, and the cross is too big an event for us to find just one reason for His death. I mean, He died as an example of self-sacrifice and of patience and love.

He died as a revelation of the incredible love of God. He died in order to conquer the powers of evil. But it is on none of these that the New Testament writers later emphasis.

Listen to what some of them say. He died for our sins according to the Scriptures. That's

Paul.

Well, here is Peter. Christ once suffered four sins, the just for the unjust, the innocent for the guilty in order that He might bring us to God. He has the letter to the Hebrews.

He was once offered to bear the sins of many. So there is no doubt that in the opinion of the writers of the New Testament, there was an unbreakable link between our sins and His death. But again you say, "But why? Why should our forgiveness depend on Christ's death?" Why doesn't God simply forgive us without the necessity of the death of His Son? Why shouldn't God forgive me? Ask the cynic some years ago, "Sessomitier." That's His speciality.

That's His job. After all people go on, if we sin against one another, we are required to forgive one another. So why shouldn't God be equally generous? Why was it necessary for God's Son to lay down His life as a sacrifice for sin before God could forgive us? Even that a very crude idea with sophisticated people like us have long ago discarded.

Well, no, it isn't. And there are two reasons. First we say with Anselm, a great 12th century Archbishop of Canterbury, you've not yet considered the seriousness of sin.

You see, the analogy between our forgiving one another and God's forgiving us is a very superficial analogy. And first we say, "We forgive one another. Why shouldn't God forgive us?" The trace shallowness of thought and not sophistication for the simple reason that we are not God.

And again, we are private individuals. Our misdemeanors, when we sin against one another, are only personal injuries. But God is not a private individual.

He is the maker of the laws we break. Sin is not a personal injury. It is a rebellion against God.

You've not yet considered the seriousness of sin as a self-centered rebellion against our Creator. And the second reason is not you've not yet considered the character of God. Because although God is love, His love is not sentimental love, but holy love.

It is love that yearns after our sinners and longs to forgive us, but refuses to condone our sin or compromise with evil. And when you begin to see that, you know, the real question we should ask is not why God finds it difficult to forgive sins, but how He finds it possible at all. Forgiveness, as one writer has put it, which to us is the plainest of duties, to God is the profoundest of problems.

How can God express His holy love? How can He express His love in forgiving sinners without compromising His holiness? How can He express His holiness in judging sinners without frustrating His love? How can God confronted by human evil be true to Himself in the majesty of His holy love? How can God be simultaneously a righteous God and a

Savior? It is this question to which the cross supplies an answer. This is the divine dilemma which was resolved at the cross. At the cross, when Jesus died, God in His holy love paid the full penalty of our disobedience Himself in our place.

God Himself in and through Jesus Christ bore the judgment we deserve in order to bring us the forgiveness which we don't deserve. And on the cross, divine mercy and divine justice were perfectly reconciled. But I think I hear some impatient objector saying again, "You make it all sounds so terribly complicated." Surely the death of Jesus was much simpler than that.

He just sacrificed Himself out of love for us. And the New Testament authors confused everything with the incomprehensible theologizing. Well, no, actually that's not the case.

The apostles did theologize. It's true, but they didn't invent their theology. What the writers of the New Testament did was simply elaborate the thinking and the teaching of Jesus Himself.

And that's what we're going to do for the rest of our time tonight. I want us to try and penetrate into the mind of Christ during His last hours on earth. We're going to try to project our minds back to the night before He died, where the son had set for the last time.

At least Jesus saw it for the last time. And within 15 hours, His limbs would be stretched out on the cross. And within 24 hours, He would be dead and buried.

And He knew it. And the extraordinary thing is this, have you ever noticed this? The extraordinary thing is that He, within a few hours of His death, He thought of His mission as still future and not past. He was still talking about what is going to happen and not what had happened in the past.

We need to remember that Jesus was still a comparatively young man. Well, most certainly, He was between 30 and 35 years of age, and He had barely lived out one half of our human allotted time span. Three score years and ten.

He was still at the height of His powers. And at that age, most men and women have their best years ahead of them. The hamlet lived till he was 60.

Socrates till he was 70. Plato and the Buddha till they were 80. And if death threatens to cut a human being's life short, a sense of frustration often plunges them into gloom.

But not Jesus, for this very simple reason. Jesus did not regard the death that He was about to die as bringing His mission to an untimely end. But it's actually necessary to accomplish it.

It was only seconds before He died only then that He was able to shout, "It has been

finished." So then on His last evening, or though only a few hours before He died, He was not looking back on a mission accomplished, or on a mission that had been a failure. He was still looking forward to a mission that He was about to fulfill. The mission of a lifetime of 30 to 35 years was about to be accomplished in the last hours of His life.

So what I want to do, if I may, for the rest of our time is to remind you of three of the scenes through which He passed in these remaining hours of His life. Because they throw floods of light on His own understanding of His death and the causes of His death. And why? It was necessary for Him to die.

First, come with me, if you will, in imagination into the upper room in Jerusalem. Jesus is spending that last night with the Twelve. They are gathered round a low table in the middle of the room.

They are reclining probably on cushions on the floor, leaning on their left elbow with their right arm free with which to feed themselves for what we call the last supper. Jesus has already washed their feet, taught them to love one another, warned them of His impending departure, promised them that the Holy Spirit would come, and now they watch and thrall. As He takes a loaf of bread, gives thanks to God for it, breaks it, gives it to them to eat, and says, "Take, eat, this is my body which is given for you." And after supper, He takes a cup of wine and says, "As He gives it to them, having given thanks, this is my blood of the new covenant which is going to be shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of your sins.

Do this in remembrance of me." Well, these are tremendously significant deeds and words. And it is really a great picture that so many of us are so familiar with us because they illumine the meaning of the death of Jesus. They give us His own authoritative explanation as to why His body was to be given and His blood was to be shed in death.

Because by what He did with the bread and wine, and what He said about the bread and wine, He was visibly dramatizing His death before it took place and giving His own definitive explanation of its meaning and purpose. To begin with, He emphasized the centrality of His death. It was His last evening.

He wanted them to remember Him. He said, "Do this in remembrance of me." He gave instructions for His own memorial service. And for what did He want them to remember Him? What was it that spoke from the bread and wine? He said, "This is my body given for you." "This is my blood shed for you." "Do this in remembrance of me." In other words, He wanted to be remembered for His death.

He did not ask them to remember His birth or life or ministry or miracles, even His resurrection. It was death that spoke through both the elements, the bread and the wine, and that is what He wanted them to remember. Surely that is conclusive, is it not, that the death of Jesus was central in His own mind as the most important thing that He had

come to do.

Then here is another thing. He tells us, again in the upper room, through the bread and the wine, the purpose of His death. He spoke of His blood of the new covenant shed for men if they are the remission of sins.

Well, our minds have to go back to the day, 600 years before Christ. When God said to Jeremiah, "The day is coming when I will make a new covenant with my people." And as part of the promise of the covenant, I will forgive their iniquities and their sins. I will remember no more.

You see, a new covenant in which the forgiveness of sins is promised. 600 more years passed, and a young Jew named Jesus, carpenter by trade, preacher by vacation, had the effrontery to say that this new covenant that God promised 600 years ago is about to be established, that the forgiveness of sins that is the promise of the covenant is about to be available, and the sacrifice to ratify the covenant is the shedding of my blood in death. It could be hard to imagine a more audacious claim than that, that the reason He was going to die on the cross was to establish a new agreement between God and man and make the forgiveness of sins possible.

That's his understanding of his death. One other thing before we leave the upper room, and that is, notice the form that the drama took. He didn't just break bread, he didn't just pour out wine, it wasn't just the drama in which he was the actor, and they were the spectators watching the breaking of the bread and watching the outpouring of the wine.

No having broken the bread, he gave it to them. He said, "Take it, eat it." Having poured out the wine he gave them, the copy said, "Drink it." In other words, they were not to be spectators only. They were participants in the drama.

Just as it was not enough for the bread to be broken, it had to be eaten, and for the wine to be poured out, it had to be drunk, so it is not enough that Christ died on the cross. We have to receive him. In that dramatic imagery of Jesus, we have to eat his flesh and drink his blood.

That is to say, we have to appropriate personally for ourselves the benefits for which he died. We have to receive him as we eat the bread and drink the wine. We can receive Christ into our hearts and make him our own as our personal Savior.

How amazing that Jesus should have taught all that in the upper room through bread and wine. Now let's leave the upper room. Come with me to the second scene.

It's moonlight now. It's nighttime. They leave the upper room in Jerusalem.

They walk through the deserted streets of the city. They cross the brook, Kidron. They begin to climb the Mount of Olives on the east side of Jerusalem.

Then they turn off into Gethsemane, which seems to have been an Olives or church. There something happened which simply cries out for an explanation. Jesus leaves the apostles and goes on by himself into the depths of the garden where he frustrates himself in prayer and cries, "Oh my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me.

Nevertheless, not what I will, but what you will." "And again, oh my Father, if this cup may not pass from me unless I drink it, your will be done." Then Luke tells us after he'd said it a third time, he was in great agony of mind and spirit and his sweat poured from him like drops of blood. What is the meaning of that sorrow, that agony, that blood is sweat? There is anxious cries that if possible, a certain cup that was being offered to him to drink might be taken away from him. What is that cup? Is it the mocking, the spitting, the flogging that he was going to have to endure? Is it the desertion of his friends, the abuse of his enemies, the physical torture of death by crucifixion? Is that what he's shrinking from? You never make me believe that it was any of those things or all of them put together.

To me, it's ludicrous to suppose that Jesus, whose moral and physical courage has never for one moment wavered, is now afraid of pain and insult and death, I tell you it is absurd. If Jesus wasn't afraid of any of those things, then next week John Stott will explain what Jesus was referring to when we conclude this message. John Stott was a writer as well as a preacher, and each week we recommend one of his books.

Today, it's simply entitled "The Gospel" and you can find out more at our website. John Stott found several well-known organisations during his lifetime, and you can find more information and links to their websites when you visit premierchristianradio.com/JohnStott. The legacy of John Stott lives on and is growing, touching every level of society across the world. Today, Christian leaders throughout the majority world are being equipped to provide pastor training and resources in their own countries thanks to the vision of John Stott, who donated all his book royalties to support this ministry through Langham Partnership.

To find out about this and other ministries, John Stott founded, go to premier.org.uk/JohnStott. Join us at the same time next week for more from The Bible for Today with John Stott.

[Music]

(dramatic music)