

The Meaning of His Death



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 27:45, 46; Luke 2:25–35; 1 Cor. 15:3; 2 Cor. 5:18–21; Gal. 6:14; Heb. 2:17.*

Memory Text: “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (*Mark 10:45, NIV*).

A cover article in a major magazine reported on a discussion in a men's Bible-study group. The topic? The reason for Jesus' death. Among the questions asked in the discussion were such things as, What if God's plan were merely for Jesus to come and give us good teachings, such as loving our enemies? Or did He have to suffer and die, as well? If so, why? Why wouldn't the teachings be enough? And even if He did die, what has that to do with us, today, many centuries later?

Almost two thousand years after His death, the meaning of the Cross is still a subject that challenges Christians. In fact, even before His death, the prophets constantly tried “to find out the time and circumstances” to which the Holy Spirit was calling their attention, “when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow” (*1 Pet. 1:10, 11, NIV*).

So, this week we will seek to try to answer the important question of why Jesus died, what purpose was accomplished by His death, and what it means for us many centuries after the fact. Did Christ, as some assert, die merely to show us God's love, and thus to change our feelings about God; or did Christ's death, in fact, do something that changed how God relates to us? These are all topics worthy of our deepest interest.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, June 7.*

Born to Die

Read Luke 2:25–35. What is the meaning of this passage? What is the message to Mary? What is its message about Jesus?

This story, told only by Luke, is powerful in its simplicity and profound in its implications. The devout Simeon, meeting at last the Messiah for whom he had been waiting, reveals the Infant's future to His parents with cryptic terseness: " 'This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel. . . . And a sword will pierce your own soul too' " (*Luke 2:34, 35, NIV*). The word for "sword" in the Greek signifies a huge, Goliath-type instrument, destined to pierce the heart of Mary, a prediction of the agony she would experience at the Cross. "These mysterious words of Simeon must have passed over Mary's consciousness like a chilling and ominous portent of things to come."—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 704.

What do the following passages tell us about the death of Jesus? Was it something that had to happen? (*Matt. 16:21; 26:52–54; Mark 10:45; Luke 18:31–33; John 3:14; Heb. 9:25–28*).

The consistent note here is that Jesus was born to die; His death was not an accident. It *had* to happen. Why did it have to? Well, that is not a matter that can be explained fully by rational processes, not because it is irrational, but because it is *suprational*, above human reason. It falls in the realm of Divine revelation, part of that "mystery . . . kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints" (*Col. 1:26, NIV*). The Bible does not go into any long attempt to justify it or to explain it, maybe because it is not something subject to human logic. We do not have other instances elsewhere by which to judge or compare it. Biblical atonement represents a solo occurrence in the history of the universe. And our task is to seek to understand what the Bible says about it and to apply what it means to our own lives.

The fact that Jesus had to die in order to atone for our sin should tell us something about how serious sin really is. How seriously do you take the sin in your own life? What efforts are you making to overcome?

How It Happened *(Matt. 27:45, 46)*

The Gospels devote an immense amount of space to the final week of Jesus' life. In Matthew, it occupies one-third of the book. In Mark, more than one-third. And one-quarter of Luke and one-half of John are devoted to it. Clearly, the central focus is on Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection. The Gospels are not biographies; they should be seen, rather, as theological summaries of the significance of Jesus' death.

Relive the awful events of the Passion by reviewing the following passages: *Matt. 27:27–31, 45–54; Mark 15:21–32; John 19:28–30*. **How do they make you feel? What is your overwhelming emotion, and why?**

None of us ever can claim to understand the full meaning of Jesus' death or the circumstances surrounding it. What seems clear, however, is that the role played by those physically present and active (whether at His trial or at the cross) was theologically incidental, so far as the participants' racial or national identities were concerned. To malign Jews today, or modern Italians for that matter, for the involvement of some of their ancestors in the death of Jesus is theological stupidity, an attitude contrary to the very essence of biblical religion. The individual guilt of those involved in His death will be a matter between them and God. Instead of pointing fingers, maybe we should ask ourselves, What might we have done were we, ourselves, there? In one sense, actually, we were!

Read Matthew 26:38. What was it that hung so heavy on the Savior during this crushing agony? How did He manage to survive the ordeal? (See Luke 22:43.) “Having made the [final] decision,” wrote Ellen G. White, “He fell dying to the ground [there in the garden]” (The Desire of Ages, p. 693). This means that although He later was killed by Roman hands, the fatal blow had come much earlier, delivered by one giant, collective hand, ours. How does it make you feel, knowing that your own guilt caused the death of Jesus? More important, how should you respond to those feelings?

What It Accomplished: Part 1

What is the central focus of these following passages? (1 Cor. 2:2, 15:3, Gal. 6:14).

The writers of the New Testament used a variety of metaphors, images, and pictures in their attempts to express the saving work of God in Christ. In this lesson (and in Wednesday's) we sample a few:

1. *The Concept of Sacrifice, Offering, Substitute*—Ephesians 5:2: Christ “gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering [*prophoran*] and sacrifice [*thusian*] to God” (NIV). Hebrews 9:26: He came “to do away with sin by the sacrifice [*thusias*] of himself” (NIV). Hebrews 10:14: By means of “one sacrifice [*prophora*] he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy” (NIV).

The idea in all these passages is that of vicarious death, death in our place, death as our Substitute. Vicarious suffering is suffering endured by one person in the stead of another. In 1 Corinthians 15:3, Paul says that “Christ died for our sins” (NIV); Romans 5:8 says that “while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (NIV); and 1 Peter 2:24 says that Christ “bore our sins in his body on the tree” (NIV).

2. *The Concept of Ransom*: The word *ransom* derives from the Greek term *lutron*; the basic idea conveyed is that of a payment for something delivered. In classical Greek the term often was used in connection with the redemption of slaves and war prisoners. The sacred writers borrowed the concept and pressed it into the service of a grander theme (*Matthew 20:28; compare Mark 10:45*): Jesus came “to give his life as a ransom [*lutron*] for many” (NIV). (Here “many,” incidentally, means “all.”)

The family of words from which *lutron* comes puts the finger on the substitutionary nature of Christ's sacrifice. He gave His life *for us*, the tense of the verb *gave* in the original Greek pointing to a specific event in time, to Jesus' death on the cross. The basic concept here is that we were slaves to sin, condemned to eternal death, and unable to free ourselves; but Jesus came as our ransom, our *lutron*.

Think about the things that you have done wrong, things you knew were wrong but did them anyway. What does it mean to you to know that Someone Else, Jesus, Someone innocent, received in Himself the punishment that would, otherwise, be yours for those things (and others) you did?

What It Accomplished: Part 2

Yesterday, we discussed two of the many metaphors employed by the writers of the New Testament to express the accomplishments of Christ's death. Here are two more:

1. *The Concept of Propitiation (or Expiation) (hilasterion)*: In regard to the mission of Christ, the word is found in Hebrews 2:17, where it speaks of Christ making "propitiation for the sins of the people" (*NKJV*). "Propitiation" has the sense of pacifying someone. The belief was that when a god was angry, the people should make a gesture of appeasement (*hilasterion*) in order to render the god *hilaros* (happy, joyous) once more. What students of the New Testament repeatedly have noted, however, is that its authors, though borrowing vocabulary from classical Greek and elsewhere, nevertheless fill that vocabulary with brand-new content and meaning.

Accordingly, many Bible scholars agree that a better English translation of the word is "expiation." So understood, the idea is that by means of Jesus' death, God "expiates," "covers," "erases" our sin. Any idea of human appeasement of God would be utterly foreign to the New Testament writers. Instead, they wanted to emphasize that the entire human race, threatened by the righteous wrath of God on account of sin, was rescued by Jesus' death. Jesus became our *hilasterion*, covering us from the wrath of God (*see Heb. 9:5*).

2. *The Concept of Reconciliation (katallage)*:

Read the following passages. What important emphasis do they share in common? (*Rom. 5:10, 11; 2 Cor. 5:18–21; Eph. 2:16; Col. 1:20–22*).

Sin is departure from God and God's will. It puts us into a condition of estrangement from God, a state whose end result is death.

Reconciliation speaks of the restoration of harmony between us and God, the recovery of wholeness. And here is a critical point to note: It was God who took the initiative (*Rom. 5:8–11*). "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself" (*2 Cor. 5:19*). Because of sin, the whole world stood condemned before a righteous God; because of the Cross, our standing before God changed, and thus all who come to Jesus by faith have the assurance of eternal life.

Because of the Cross, you have the opportunity by faith to stand perfect, holy, and accepted by God. In what ways, on a daily basis, should your life reflect this new standing that we can have through Jesus?

The Security of the Universe

The cross has become the central symbol of Christianity. And in the theology of the New Testament, it says several things about the human condition, pointing beyond itself to its ultimate accomplishment.

Examine the following passages. What do they say about the human condition and about the need for Jesus' death? (*Rom. 3:10, 23; 1 Cor. 2:2; 15:3; Gal. 6:14*).

The Greeks and others in the ancient world thought of humanity as basically in good moral health. Given the right opportunity, our natural, innate goodness will blossom and flourish, they believed. The attitude represented a significant challenge for Christianity, with its concept of universal human depravity and our desperate need for outside intervention. That is why Paul could say that “the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (*1 Cor. 1:18, NIV*). That quiet power, he said, will eventually conquer, and “every knee [in the universe] should bow, . . . confess[ing] that Jesus Christ is Lord” (*Phil. 2:10, 11, NIV*).

Yet, however central to our salvation, the Cross has an importance that goes beyond us.

“The significance of the death of Christ will be seen by saints and angels. Fallen men could not have a home in the paradise of God without the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. . . . The angels ascribe honor and glory to Christ, for even they are not secure except by looking to the sufferings of the Son of God. It is through the efficacy of the cross that the angels of heaven are guarded from apostasy. Without the cross they would be no more secure against evil than were the angels before the fall of Satan. Angelic perfection failed in heaven. Human perfection failed in Eden, the paradise of bliss. All who wish for security in earth or heaven must look to the Lamb of God. The plan of salvation, making manifest the justice and love of God, provides an eternal safeguard against defection in unfallen worlds, as well as among those who shall be redeemed by the blood of the Lamb.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 1132.

Even the angels in heaven are guarded from apostasy because of the Cross! What an incredible thought! If the Cross means so much to unfallen beings, those whose lives were not even redeemed by it, how much more so should the Cross be the central focus for us, we who have been redeemed through it?

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “Calvary,” pp. 744–757; “It Is Finished,” pp. 758–764, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“Well, then, might the angels rejoice as they looked upon the Saviour’s cross; for though they did not then understand all, they knew that the destruction of sin and Satan was forever made certain, that the redemption of man was assured, and that the universe was made eternally secure. Christ Himself fully comprehended the results of the sacrifice made upon Calvary. To all these He looked forward when upon the cross He cried out, ‘It is finished.’ ”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 764.

“The death of Christ upon the cross made sure the destruction of him who has the power of death, who was the originator of sin. When Satan is destroyed, there will be none to tempt to evil; the atonement will never need to be repeated; and there will be no danger of another rebellion in the universe of God.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 1132.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Some limit the Cross to a mere demonstration of God’s love, devoid of any legal or atoning efficacy. That is, Christ died merely to show us the Father’s love; there was no change in our legal standing before the Father. Hence, the only purpose of the Cross was to bring a change in us and in our attitude toward God. Why is such a position a radically weak and ultimately unsatisfactory view of Jesus’ death? How does such a view, of necessity, lead to a salvation-by-works theology?
- ❷ Dwell more on this idea of the universe being made secure by the Cross. What does this tell us about the Cross and about the grand issues that it dealt with? How does our understanding of the great controversy help us better appreciate what happened at the Cross?
- ❸ The life and death of Jesus present us with mystery from start to finish. Though there are aspects that we can understand, other things remain a mystery. How can you learn to trust the Lord regarding the things you do not understand? What is the key to keeping your faith strong?

Kobamo's Urgent Message

Kobamo is the eldest son of a poor cattle herder in southern Ethiopia. His parents wanted a better life for him, so they sent him to school. There Kobamo met some Adventist children. Kobamo knew almost nothing about God, but he listened as his classmates shared their faith with him. Over time he realized that God loves even him, a poor farm boy.

He could not attend the Adventist church with them, for he had many chores to do on Saturday. However, sometimes he attended special afternoon programs when his work was done. In time Kobamo accepted Jesus as his Savior.

Kobamo's grandfather was a witch doctor, an important and feared man. One day Kobamo felt an urge to visit his grandfather, who lived an hour's walk away. In Kobamo's culture children do not associate with their elders, even their grandparents. So Kobamo's parents were surprised when he asked to visit his grandfather. Nevertheless, they allowed him to go.

Kobamo finished his chores and set out for his grandparents' home. The sun was low in the sky when Kobamo reached their home. His grandparents were surprised to see Kobamo, and they invited him to come in and sit down. But Kobamo stood up saying, "I will not sit down until I have told you what I have come to say. God sent me to tell you to believe in Him."

Kobamo did not have a Bible, and he did not know many Bible texts to quote to his grandfather. He just knew that his grandfather needed to believe in God. So Kobamo, in his childish way, simply urged his grandparents to believe in God.

Kobamo's grandparents were surprised that this young boy would talk to them in this way. For four hours Kobamo told his grandparents what he knew about God and asked them to believe.

Finally Kobamo's grandfather told the boy that he believed that God had sent Kobamo to share this message. The couple knew nothing about God except what Kobamo had told them, but because their young grandson spoke so bravely to them, this influential couple accepted Jesus as their Savior and faithfully attended church until their deaths.

Kobamo's parents joined another Protestant church, but Kobamo insisted on attending the Adventist Church. He obeyed his parents in everything, but he refused to work on God's holy day. His parents allowed Kobamo to follow his faith, for they had seen God working in his life.

Our mission offerings help spread the gospel in Ethiopia, where half the population follows non-Christian religions. Thank you for sharing Christ through your mission offerings.

KOBAMO continues to share his faith in southern Ethiopia.