

# WHY DID JESUS DIE ON A ROMAN CROSS?

*SERIES: JESUS, SAVIOR OF THE LOST*

by Ron Ritchie

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On our trip to Germany in May, we enjoyed the hospitality of a Christian retreat center called the Castle Reichelsheim. One day the director, Horst-Klaus Hofmann, showed me a small chapel designed for prayer and meditation. It was round, and there was a circular bench that went about three-quarters of the way around the room. The bench faced floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked a beautiful garden. An open Bible rested on a small table in front of the windows.

Mounted above the table and between two windows was a three-foot bronze figure of Christ hanging on an invisible cross. I glanced at the figure briefly and then went over to the window to look out on the garden. Mr. Hofmann asked me to look at the figure again, and when I looked more closely, I was struck by the artist's conception. The figure's head, face, shoulders, side, hands, and feet showed the horrible results of the beatings and scourging our Lord took upon himself on our behalf. Mr. Hofmann told me that a church had commissioned an artist to do a bronze Christ on the cross for them. When the artist presented this figure to the church members, they were horrified and within the year gave it back to him because it was too ugly. Mr. Hofmann, who had suffered in a Russian prison camp during World War II, asked the artist if he could purchase the figure, for it reminded him of the unjust suffering our innocent Lord was willing to undergo for our sins. He thinks that the bronze Christ is beautiful.

But why did Jesus die on a Roman cross?

## **Jesus died for us sinners**

**And when they led Him away, they laid hold of one Simon of Cyrene, coming in from the country, and placed on him the cross to carry behind Jesus.**

**And there were following Him a great multitude of the people, and of women who were mourning and lamenting Him. But Jesus turning to them said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, stop weeping for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For behold, the days are coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.' Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us.' For if they do these things in the green tree, what will happen in the dry?" (Luke 23:26-31)**

John R.W. Stott writes in his wonderful work *The Cross*:

*Jesus had predicted that he would be 'betrayed into the hands of men' or handed over to be crucified. And the evangelists tell their story in such a way as to show how his prediction came true. First, Judas 'handed him over' to the priests (out of greed). Next, the priests 'handed him over' to Pilate (out of envy). Then Pilate 'handed him over' to the soldiers (out of cowardice), and they crucified him.*

Stott shows us the human reason for the crucifixion, but earlier in our Lord's life he showed us the divine reason when as the good Shepherd he said, "For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father" (John 10:17-18). Later the apostle Paul would add to this statement when he wrote, "For while we were still helpless, at the right

time Christ died for the ungodly...God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:6-8). The issue between God and man is sin: Paul told the Roman Christians that all mankind since Adam had been under sin, and then he quoted the words of God out of the Psalms and the prophets:

**"There is none righteous, not even one;  
There is none who understands,  
There is none who seeks for God;  
All have turned aside, together they have become useless;  
There is none who does good.  
There is not even one...."**

"...For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:10-12, 23). Sin is hostility toward God (see Romans 8:7) expressed in active rebellion against him. It is wanting to have our own way. "It is seeking to 'get rid of the Lord God' in order to put ourselves in his place in a haughty spirit of 'God-almightiness.' Sin is defiance, arrogance, the desire to be equal with God, the assertion of human independence over and against God" (Emil Brunner).

It is because of this sinful nature within our humanity that we find that the Lord Jesus "went out, bearing His own cross" (John 19:17) through the streets of Jerusalem (the route now called Via Dolorosa, which means the sorrowful way) in order to be crucified outside the city walls (see Leviticus 24:14; John 19:20). But at some point in that journey, because of the lack of sleep, food, and water for the previous twenty-four hours; the horrible beatings on his face and head; the loss of blood from the Roman scourging; and the crown of thorns; Jesus found himself physically unable to carry the cross (or perhaps the cross-beam) and fell under its weight. So as was the Roman custom, they pressed a bystander named Simon, a Cyrenian, into service to carry the cross.

Among the great multitude who were following Jesus to the place of crucifixion outside the city walls was a group of women who were mourning and lamenting him. They were not his disciples, but as mothers they found their hearts filled with sorrow over the horribly beaten figure that passed by them on the way to Calvary. When our Lord heard the weeping of the "daughters of Jerusalem" he told them, with the knowledge that his life was secure in the hands of his loving Father, that they were weeping for the wrong person. He said, "Weep for yourselves and for your children [for you are still part of an unbelieving Jewish nation]...For if they do these things in the green tree, what will happen in the dry?"

David Gooding wrote in *According to Luke*:

*If citizens, living in a reasonably civilized society under a fairly stable and reasonably just government, can overrule the government and insist on the execution of an innocent man, not to mention the fact that he was God's Son and their Messiah; if priests in a nationally recognized religion which stands for divine law, morality and ethical behavior, can use lies to pressurize the civil powers to commit judicial murder; what kind of behavior will prevail in a society that has lost all respect for justice, law, morality, religion and God?"*

Jesus then reminded these "daughters of Jerusalem" that the days were coming when the Romans would surround the city, and their personal suffering would be so great that it would dull all normal desires and human values. The love and desire for children would be overshadowed by the desire for death instead of life.

Why did Jesus die on a Roman cross? Paul wrote to the Galatians, "...the Lord Jesus Christ...gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us out of this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forevermore" (Galatians 1:3-5).

**To save us from the wrath of God**

**And two others also, who were criminals, were being led away to be put to death with Him.**

**And when they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left. But Jesus was saying, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots, dividing up His garments among themselves. And the people stood by, looking on. And even the rulers were sneering at Him, saying, "He saved others; let Him save Himself if this is the Christ of God, His Chosen One." And the soldiers also mocked Him, coming up to Him, offering Him sour wine, and saying, "If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself!" Now there was also an inscription above Him, "THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS." (Luke 23:32-38)**

The one and only righteous God by his nature has to deal with the sin of a rebellious humanity. Divine justice must be served; there must be judgment against sin; and that judgment is death--spiritual, emotional, and finally physical. Paul would write to the Christians in Rome, "For the wages of sin is death.." (Romans 6:23). However, God's purpose was to save sinners and to save them righteously. Jesus would become the sin-bearer and experience death on their behalf. "...having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him" (Romans 5:9). The wrath of God is his allowing humanity to suffer the full consequences of trying to live out life without him.

Isaiah prophesied about our suffering Savior in 700 BC:

**"...[He] was numbered with the transgressors;  
Yet He Himself bore the sin of many,  
And interceded for the transgressors." (Isaiah 53:12)**

William Barclay wrote in his *Gospel of Luke*:

*When a criminal reached the place of crucifixion, his cross was laid flat upon the ground...it was quite low, so that the criminal's feet were only two or three feet above the ground...the victim's arms were stretched out upon the cross bar, and nails were driven through his hands (and feet)...halfway up the cross there was a projecting piece of wood, called the saddle, which took the weight of the criminal, for otherwise the nails would have torn through his hands. Then the cross was lifted and set upright into the socket. The terror of crucifixion was this--the pain of that process was terrible but it was not enough to kill, and the victim was left to die of hunger and thirst [and suffocation]....*

The gospel writers say very little about Jesus' physical suffering, but the Scriptures are full of his spiritual suffering. As the innocent dying for the guilty he had to endure the full wrath of God on our behalf. Isaiah prophesied concerning the promised Messiah:

**"But He was pierced through for our transgressions,  
He was crushed for our iniquities;  
The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him,  
And by His scourging we are healed.  
All of us like sheep have gone astray,  
Each of us has turned to his own way;  
But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all  
To fall on Him." (Isaiah 53:5-6)**

They crucified him and the criminals together, one on his right and the other on his left. At his feet stood the mockers, the Roman soldiers, the scribes, the Pharisees, and the chief priests. Psalm 22:16-17 says:

**"For dogs have surrounded me;  
A band of evildoers has encompassed me;  
They pierced my hands and my feet.**

**I can count all my bones.  
They look, they stare at me...."**

Then Jesus uttered the first of seven things he said on the cross in the midst of his physical, emotional, and spiritual agony: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." We can hear the heart of Jesus in the words that Paul wrote some years later to the Ephesians: "And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you" (Ephesians 4:32).

They cast lots to divide his garments among themselves. It was 9:00 am Friday morning, and Psalm 22:18 was being fulfilled to the letter:

**"They divided My [outer] garments among them,  
And for My clothing they cast lots."**

The Romans would assign a centurion to pick four soldiers per criminal with the understanding that the soldiers could have the criminal's material possessions. Part of our Lord's clothing was "the tunic [which] was seamless, woven in one piece" (John 19:23).

John 19:19, 22 tells us that Pilate, in spite of a great protest from the chief priests, had ordered a sign to be placed above Jesus' head in Latin, Hebrew, and Greek which read "JESUS THE NAZARENE, THE KING OF THE JEWS." The presence of this sign had three results: (1) According to Matthew 27:39-40 some people who were passing by wagged their heads and insulted him: "You who are going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross." (2) Then the chief priests along with the scribes and elders said, "He saved others; let Him save Himself if this is the Christ of God, His Chosen One." It was at this time, according to Matthew 27:42-43, that they said, "He is the King of Israel: let Him now come down from the cross, and we shall believe in Him." Then they quoted from Psalm 22:8, referring to Messiah: "He trusts in God; let Him deliver Him now if He takes pleasure in Him; for He said, 'I am the Son of God.'" (3) The soldiers joined in by saying, "If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself!"

Our Lord's spiritual suffering can be seen in Psalm 22:6-8 as the Lord God speaks through a suffering David:

**"But I a worm, and not a man,  
A reproach of men, and despised by the people.  
All who see me sneer at me;  
They separate with the lip, they wag the head, saying,  
'Commit yourself to the Lord; let Him deliver him;  
Let Him rescue him, because He delights in him.'"**

Thank God that Jesus did not come down from the cross to save himself; otherwise we would have had no hope of a savior; no forgiveness of our sins; no freedom from guilt and shame; no wholeness, peace, or joy; no gift of the Holy Spirit to empower us to live; and no hope of eternal life with God now or in the future. We would have fully experienced the wrath of God ourselves.

Why did Jesus die on a Roman cross? Once again, "...God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, have now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him" (Romans 5:8-9).

### **So we could have peace with God**

**And one of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, "Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!" But the other answered, and rebuking him said, "Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." And he was saying, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!" And He**

said to him, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise." (Luke 23:39-43)

Matthew 27:44 and Mark 15:32 both tell us that each of the thieves who were crucified with Jesus were casting the same insult at him. But one thief repented and rebuked the other thief. Then, having heard Jesus say, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing," he turned to Jesus and said, "Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom." If we read between the lines, he was saying, "Jesus, I deserve to be on this cross, but from all I know about you, you are innocent of all charges against you. And not only that, I really believe that you are the Son of God and the King of the Jews, the long-promised Messiah. So once you die and then are raised from the dead and come into your spiritual kingdom, would you do me a favor? Would you remember me and the fact that in spite of all my sins and wasted life, I do believe in you as Messiah?" Now, based on that simple faith alone apart from works, money, power, or position--for the thief's state was one of total physical, emotional, and spiritual bankruptcy--our Lord fulfilled the promise he had made to his disciples and the crowds at the beginning of his ministry: "Blessed are the poor in spirit [those who are spiritually bankrupt], for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3). He said, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise."

Charles R. Erdman wrote the following insight in the *Believer's Bible Commentary*:

*This story reveals the truth to us that salvation is conditioned upon repentance and faith. However, it contains other important messages also. It declares that salvation is independent of sacraments. The thief had never been baptized, nor had he partaken of the Lord's supper...He did in fact boldly profess his faith in the presence of a hostile crowd and amid the taunts and jeers of rulers and soldiers, yet he was saved without any formal rites. It is further evident that salvation is independent of good works....Again it is evident that there is no "purgatory." Out of a life of sin and shame, the penitent robber passed immediately into a state of blessedness. Again it may be remarked that salvation is not universal. There were two robbers; one was saved. Last of all it may be noted that the very essence of the joy which lies beyond death consists in personal communion with Christ. The heart of the promise to the dying thief was this: "Thou shalt be with me." This is our blessed assurance, that to depart is "to be with Christ" which is "far better."*

The death I'll never forget was my father's in 1953. I saw him squeeze the hand of a pastor from inside an oxygen tent to indicate at the moment of his last breath on earth that he had invited Jesus Christ into his life. Then he died...and woke up in paradise! And the father that I had been estranged from most of my life is now my brother. That's the love of God, the mercy of God, the hope of God! It isn't over with your parents or your friends or your children until they breathe their last breath; and even if they can't speak, God sees the squeeze of a hand and accepts it as faith.

Why did Jesus die on a Roman cross? He died for the sins of ungodly mankind, to save us from the wrath of God, and to make peace between us and God. "Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ..." (Romans 5:1).

### **To offer us eternal life**

**And it was now about the sixth hour, and darkness fell over the whole land until the ninth hour, the sun being obscured; and the veil of the temple was torn in two. And Jesus, crying out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into Thy hands I commit My spirit." And having said this, He breathed His last. Now when the centurion saw what had happened, he began praising God, saying, "Certainly this man was innocent." And all the multitudes who came together for this spectacle, when they observed what had happened, began to return, beating their breasts. And all His acquaintances and the women who accompanied Him from Galilee, were standing at a distance, seeing these things. (Luke 23:44-49)**

Three things occurred in the last three hours on the cross: First, the sky was darkened for those three hours. The light of the world was being put out right in front of them. The apostle John would tell us that Jesus told the Pharisees, "I am the light of the world; he who follows Me shall not walk in the darkness, but shall have the light

of life" (John 8:12). And he also wrote, "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it" (John 1:4-5). The darkness that was coming over the land was a physical symbol of the darkness that had flooded the spiritual life of the people of Israel.

Second, the curtain in the temple between the holy place and the Holy of Holies was torn in two (Matthew 27:51-53). That curtain was some sixty feet long, thirty feet wide, and the thickness of the length of a man's palm. It was so heavy that it took some three hundred priests to carry it when it needed to be moved. That curtain symbolized the remoteness of God from his people, but now the death of Jesus was going to open up the way into the very presence of God for every man, woman, and child who wanted to have a relationship with him. The death of Jesus was the fulfillment of the sacrificial system that looked forward to the final Passover Lamb. The writer to the Hebrews said, "Since therefore, brethren, we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience..." (Hebrews 10:19-22).

Third, an earthquake shook the land; rocks split; and the tombs of the recently buried saints (that is, people who loved Jesus) opened, and they were raised from the dead; and after our Lord's resurrection they entered Jerusalem and became a sign to demonstrate the hope of our final bodily resurrection for all who believed in Jesus as the Messiah (see Matthew 27:51-53). These saints, like Lazarus, would have to physically die again in order to acquire their new eternal bodies (1 Corinthians 15).

"About the ninth hour [3:00 PM] Jesus cried out [quoting Psalm 22:1] with a loud voice, saying, 'Eli, Eli, Lama sabachthani?' that is 'My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?'" (Matthew 27:46). Jesus was also experiencing the spiritual darkness as he became our substitute Passover Lamb. He was being separated from his Father for the first time. "In the days of His flesh, He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His piety. Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation" (Hebrews 5:7-10).

In the final minutes, according to John 19:26-27 our Lord entrusted his mother's care to the apostle John, and then, "After this, Jesus, knowing that all things had already been accomplished, in order that the Scripture might be fulfilled, said, 'I am thirsty'" (John 19:28). This verse brings to mind some of the great fulfillments of Scripture that we see in the accomplishments of Jesus. First, Isaiah some seven hundred years earlier recorded of this One:

**"For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us;  
And the government will rest on His shoulders;  
And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Eternal Father, Prince of Peace." (Isaiah 9:6)**

Jesus would be fallen humanity's only Savior and Messiah; at his birth the angels told the shepherds, "...today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11).

Further, Jesus would be the final Passover Lamb; he would die for the sin of the world (see Exodus 12; Isaiah 53; and John 1:29). "For the Son of Man [came] to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10).

Finally, Jesus glorified his Father on earth. In the garden of Gethsemane Jesus prayed, "I glorified Thee on the earth, having accomplished the work which Thou hast given Me to do" (John 17:4). At this moment the Scriptures were fulfilled. In the words of Paul, "So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous" (Romans 5:18-19).

Then Jesus said, "It is finished" (John 19:30). "And crying out with a loud voice [quoting from Psalm 31:5], He said, 'Father, into Thy hands I commit My spirit'" (Luke 23:46). John 19:30 concludes, "And He bowed His head

and gave up His spirit."

Luke 23:46-49 tell us the people's final reactions: (1) The centurion began to praise God, saying certainly this man was innocent. (2) The crowd, after the trial, beatings, and mocking were all over, found their hearts filled with remorse rather than joy and began beating their breasts: *What had they done?* (3) His acquaintances and the women from Galilee stood in silence.

The bronze Christ that Mr. Hofmann purchased for the prayer chapel reminded him of the price our Lord was willing to pay for our sins because it showed his terrible wounds, bruises, and scars. We should all be reminded that if Christ had not died for our sins, the figure could have been molded in the likeness of each one of us!

Why did Jesus die on a Roman cross? Ever since Adam and Eve rebelled against God, all their children have been born with the same rebellious nature. This sin of rebellion not only separates us from the one and only just God but also places all of us under his wrath. "But God so loved the world" that he sent his son Jesus, who was willing not only to die for our sins, but during that time on the cross to experience as an innocent lamb the full wrath of God on our behalf. As a result of Jesus' death on the cross, all who place their faith in him as their Savior and Lord have made peace with God. And he in turn has declared them righteous in his sight, has filled their hearts with his peace, and has given them the gift of eternal life now and in the age to come. That is why Jesus, the Son of Man and the Son of God, died on that cruel Roman cross. He wanted to offer the wonderful gift of salvation to each and every one of us.

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