

Jesus' Death—What Does It Mean to Us?



SABBATH—MAY 31

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Matthew 27:45, 46; Luke 2:25–35; 1 Corinthians 15:3; 2 Corinthians 5:18–21; Galatians 6:14; Hebrews 2:17.

MEMORY VERSE: “ ‘Even the Son of Man did not come to be served. Instead, he came to serve others. He came to give his life as the price for setting many people free’ ” (Mark 10:45, NlrV).

A COVER ARTICLE IN AN IMPORTANT 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 for Jesus to come and give us good teachings, such as loving our enemies? Or did He have to suffer and die? If so, why? Why would the teachings not be enough? And even if He did die, what has His death to do with us, today, many hundreds of years later?

Almost two thousand years have passed after His death. But the meaning of the Cross is still a subject that challenges Christians. Even before His death, the prophets (special messengers) tried “to find out about that salvation.¹ They spoke about the grace² that was going to come to you. They wanted to find out when that salvation would come. The Spirit of Christ in them was telling them about the sufferings of Christ that were to come. He was also telling them about the glory that would follow” (1 Peter 1:10, 11, NlrV).

So, this week we will try to answer several important questions. Why did Jesus die? What was the purpose of His death? And what does it mean for us many hundreds of years after the fact? Did Christ die just to show us God's love? In so doing, did He change our feelings about God? Or did Christ's death do something that changed how God connects Himself to us? These are all topics worthy of our deepest interest.

1. salvation—God's plan for saving sinners from eternal (without end) death; the gift of eternal life; being saved.

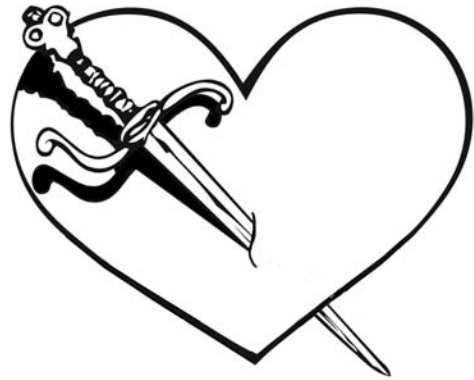
2. grace—God's gift of forgiveness and mercy that He freely gives us to take away our sins.

SUNDAY—JUNE 1**BORN TO DIE (Luke 2:25–35)**

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

Luke's story is powerful and simple but deep in its message. God told the faithful Simeon that Simeon would see the Messiah before Simeon's death. And upon seeing the Baby Jesus in the temple, Simeon makes a very short prophecy³ to the parents about the baby's future: " 'This child is going to cause many people in Israel to fall and to rise. . . . A sword will wound [hurt] your own soul too' " (Luke 2:34, 35, NIV). The word for sword in the Greek shows a huge, Goliath-type⁴ weapon that would strike the heart of Mary. This is a prophecy of the suffering that Mary later experienced at the cross. "These mysterious words of Simeon must have crossed Mary's mind like a chilling and gloomy prophecy of things to come."—Adapted from *The SDA Bible Commentary*, volume 5, page 704.

What do Matthew 16:21; Matthew 26:52–54; Mark 10:45; Luke 18:31–33; John 3:14; Hebrews 9:25–28 tell us about the death of Jesus? Was it something that had to happen?



The pain Mary felt as she watched her Son die on the cross felt like a sword piercing her heart.

The Bible says 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 human⁵ reasoning. This is because it was of God's doing. It falls in the realm of divine revelation,⁶ part of that "mystery that has been hidden for many ages [years]. But now it has been made known to God's people" (Colossians 1:26, NIV). The Bible does not try to explain it. Maybe this is because it is not something subject to human reasoning. We do not have other examples elsewhere by which to judge or understand it. Jesus' sacrifice (death on the cross) for our sins represents a love event in the history of the universe. And our job is to try to understand what the Bible says about it and to make use of what it means in our own lives.

3. prophecy—a special message from God, often an explanation of what will happen in the future.

4. Goliath-type—very large, huge. Goliath was the Philistine warrior whom David killed when he (David) was a youth (young man).

5. human—of, or concerning, men, women, or children.

6. revelation—the act of making known what was hidden or secret.

The fact that Jesus had to die for our sins 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 it?

MONDAY—JUNE 2

HOW IT HAPPENED (Matthew 27:45, 46)

The Gospels⁷ give a large amount of space to the final week of Jesus' life. In Matthew, it holds one-third of the book. In Mark, more than one-third. And one-quarter of Luke and one-half of John describe it. Clearly, the focus is on Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection (return to life from death). The Gospels are not just biographies (life stories). They should be seen as religious discussions on the deep meaning of Jesus' death.

Relive the awful events of Jesus' suffering and sacrifice by reviewing the following verses: Matthew 27:27–31, 45–54; Mark 15:21–32; John 19:28–30. How do they make you feel? What is your strong emotion, and why?

None of us can ever claim to understand the full meaning of Jesus' death. Neither can we understand the situations around it. What seems clear is that the racial or national backgrounds of those who were there (whether at His trial or at the cross)

did not matter. To criticize the Jews or modern Italians (Romans) today is wrong and pointless. To do so opposes the very teaching of biblical religion. The individual guilt of those involved in His death will be something between themselves and God. Instead of pointing fingers, maybe we should ask ourselves: What might we have done if we, ourselves, were there? In a way we were!

Read Matthew 26:38. What was it in Matthew 26:38 that made the Savior (Jesus) so sad during this great suffering? How did He manage to survive this sadness? (Read Luke 22:43.) Ellen G. White wrote, "Jesus made the final decision. Then He fell dying to the ground [there in the garden]."—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, page 693. It is true that Jesus was later killed by Roman soldiers. But the fatal blow really had come much earlier. It was done by one giant group of hands that was ours. How does it make you feel, when you know that your own guilt caused the death of Jesus? More important, how should you act toward those feelings?



The hands that nailed Jesus to the cross were ours.

7. Gospels—the four books of the New Testament that tell the story of Jesus' life and His teachings. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are called the Gospels.

TUESDAY—JUNE 3**WHAT JESUS' DEATH DID—PART 1
(1 Corinthians 2:2)****What is the central focus of 1 Corinthians 2:2; 1 Corinthians 15:3; and Galatians 6:14?**

The writers of the New Testament used different symbols (word-pictures), images, and pictures when they tried to explain the saving work of God in Christ. In today's study (and in Wednesday's) we give a few examples:

1. The Concept (Idea) of Sacrifice, Offering, Substitute:⁸ Ephesians 5:2: Christ "gave himself up for us as a fragrant [sweet smelling] offering [*prosporan*] 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 [*prospora*] he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy" (NIV).

The idea in all these verses is that of sacrificial death, death in our place, death as our Substitute. Sacrificial suffering is suffering done by one person in another person's place. 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 [carried] our sins in his body on the tree" (NIV).

2. The Concept of Ransom: The word *ransom* comes from the Greek word *lutron*. The basic meaning is payment for something done. In the old Greek language the word often was used in connection with the freeing of slaves and war prisoners. The Bible writers borrowed this idea and used it for a greater theme: Matthew 20:28 (read also Mark 10:45). Jesus came "to give his life as a ransom [*lutron*] for many" (NIV). (Here "many" means all.)

The family of words from which *lutron* comes puts the finger on the sacrifice of Christ as our Substitute. He gave His life *for* us. The tense of the verb gave in the original Greek pointed to a certain event in time, which is Jesus' death on the cross. The basic idea is that we were slaves to sin and sentenced to eternal (forever) death. We were unable to free ourselves; but Jesus came as our ransom, our *lutron*.

Think about the things that you have done wrong. They probably were the things you knew were wrong but did them anyway. What does it mean to you to know that someone else (Jesus) received in Himself the punishment for you (and others)?

8. substitute—someone or something that takes the place of another person or thing. Jesus is our Substitute because He died for our sins.



We are slaves to sin, sentenced to death, and only Jesus can free us.

WEDNESDAY—JUNE 4

WHAT JESUS' DEATH DID—PART 2 (2 Corinthians 5:18–21)

Yesterday we discussed two of the many symbols used by the writers of the New Testament to explain the accomplishments of Christ's death. Here are two more:

1. The Concept (Idea) of Propitiation⁹ (or Expiation)¹⁰ (*hilasterion*): In describing the mission of Christ, the word *propitiation* is found in Hebrews 2:17. It speaks of Christ making "propitiation [payment] for the sins of the people" (NKJV). "Propitiation" has the sense of pacifying (giving peace to) someone. The belief was that when a god was angry, the people should make appeasement¹¹ (*hilasterion*) to

him in order to keep the god *hilaros* (happy, joyous) once more. New Testament authors have borrowed vocabulary from classical (very old) Greek and elsewhere and given that vocabulary new meaning.



By way of Jesus' death, God "erases" our sin.

Many Bible scholars agree that a better English translation of the word is "expiation." By way of Jesus' death, God "expiates [takes away]," "covers," "erases" our sin. Any idea of human appeasement of God would be very strange to the New Testament writers. Instead, the writers wanted to point out that the entire human race was rescued by Jesus' death from the righteous (holy) anger of God because of sin. Jesus became our *hilasterion*, covering (protecting) us from the anger of God (read Hebrews 9:5).

9. propitiation—payment for our sins; sin-payment.

10. expiation—when someone makes up for doing something wrong or bad.

11. appeasement—the act of doing something to soften a person's (or God's) anger.

2. The Concept (Idea) of Reconciliation¹² (*katallage*):

What important point do Romans 5:10, 11; 2 Corinthians 5:18–21; Ephesians 2:16; and Colossians 1:20–22 share in common?

Sin separates us from God and God's will. It puts us into a condition (a state of being) of separation from God, which leads to death.

Reconciliation means the re-making of peace between us and God. And here is a very important point to remember: It was God who took the first action (Romans 5:8–11). "God was bringing the world back to himself through Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:19, NIV). Because of sin, the whole world became separated from a righteous God. But because of the Cross, our standing before God changed. And all who come to Jesus, by faith, have the assurance (promise) of eternal life.

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

THURSDAY—JUNE 5

THE SECURITY (SAFETY) OF THE UNIVERSE¹³ (Romans 3:10, 23)

The cross has become the central symbol of Christianity. And the New Testament says several things about the human condition, encouraging us to become perfect in Christ.

What do Romans 3:10, 23; 1 Corinthians 2:2; 1 Corinthians 15:3; and Galatians 6:14 say about the human condition, and about the need for Jesus' death?

The Greeks and others who lived a long time ago thought that all people were in good moral health in the beginning. Given the right opportunity, our natural goodness would blossom and grow, they believed. The attitude¹⁴ showed a great challenge for Christianity, which believes in human sinfulness and our great need for God's action to save us. That is why Paul could say that "the message of the cross seems foolish to those who are lost and dying. But it is God's power to us that are being saved" (1 Corinthians 1:18, NIV). That quiet power, Paul said, will eventually conquer, and "Every knee in heaven and on earth will bow" and "say that Jesus Christ is Lord" (Philippians 2:10, 11, NIV).

12. reconciliation—the act of making peace with God again. Restoring or bringing us back to God's favor.

13. universe—all the matter (things), light, and energy (forces in nature that do work) that have been discovered (found) or that we know of.

14. attitude—a way of thinking, acting, or feeling.

The Cross is central to our salvation. But it has an importance that goes beyond us.

“The true meaning of the death of Christ will be seen by saints and angels. Fallen men could not have a home in the paradise [heaven] of God without the Lamb slain [killed] from the foundation [beginning] of the world. . . . The angels give honor and glory to Christ, for even they are not made safe except by looking to the sufferings of the Son of God. It is through the sacrifice of the cross that the angels of heaven are protected from backsliding. Without the cross they would be no safer against evil than the angels before the fall of Satan were. Perfection among angels failed in heaven. Perfection among humans failed in Eden. All who wish for security [peace and safety] in earth or heaven must look to the Lamb of God. The plan of salvation makes clear the justice and love of God and gives an eternal safeguard against backsliding in unfallen worlds. The plan of salvation also protects those who shall be saved by the blood of the Lamb.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, volume 5, page 1132.

Even the angels in heaven are guarded from backsliding because of the Cross! What an unbelievable thought! If the Cross means so much to unfallen heavenly beings,

then how much more important should the Cross be for us, we who have been saved through it?

FRIDAY—JUNE 6

ADDITIONAL STUDY: Read Ellen G. White, “Calvary,”¹⁵ pages 744–757; “‘It Is Finished,’” pages 758–764, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“Well, then, might the angels rejoice as they looked upon the Saviour’s cross! They did not then understand all. But they knew that sin and Satan were forever destroyed. They knew that the salvation of man was made sure. They also knew that the universe was made eternally safe. Christ Himself fully understood the results of the sacrifice made upon the cross. To all these Jesus looked forward when upon the cross He cried out, ‘It is finished.’ ”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, page 764.

“The death of Christ upon the cross made sure that Satan is to be destroyed. Satan has the power of death and was the originator¹⁶ of sin. When Satan is destroyed, there will be no one to tempt us to do evil. Christ’s sacrifice will never need to be done again. And there will be no danger of another rebellion [war] in the universe of God.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, volume 5, page 1132.

15. Calvary—the name of the hill where Jesus was crucified (put to death).

16. originator—someone who is the first to do something or to bring something into being.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

❶ Some limit the Cross to just a showing of God's love, without the cleansing sacrifice. That would mean Christ died just to show us the Father's love. There would be no change in our legal standing before the Father. So, the only purpose of the Cross would be to bring a change in us and in our attitude (feeling) toward God. Why would this position be a weak and unsatisfactory view of Jesus' death? How would this view lead to a salvation-by-works kind of religion?

❷ Think deeply about this idea of the

universe being made secure (safe) by the Cross. What does this tell us about the Cross and its deeper issues? How does our understanding of the great controversy (war between Christ and Satan) help us better understand what happened at the cross?

❸ The life and death of Jesus presents us with mystery from start to finish. There are parts that we can understand. But other things remain a mystery. How can you learn to trust the Lord about the things you do not understand? What is the key to keeping your faith strong?