

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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What difference does it make: Why did Jesus have to die such a death?

Good Morning, and a happy Easter to you. It hardly seems like a year since we were enjoying a lovely sunny Easter 2010 - how time flies! Talking of time flying brings another question to mind. I guess if I was to ask the question, "What single day has been the most significant in living memory to you?" I would get some interesting answers. Some might immediately say 9/11, and yet, dramatic though that was, I'm not convinced that all that much really changed for me that day. I think I would have to say 13/08/1988 - the day I got married. How very different my life would have been apart from that day. No wife to keep me straight, no children to ... well no children anyway! Might I have taken more risks or followed a different path? I shall never know.

This morning, though, we celebrate a day that truly changed everything for everyone. Remarkable then, isn't it, that for such an important day, we do not even know what day, or year it actually was! That is because the significance of that day lies not in the date but in the events of that day and their eternal significance. Compared to these, the point in the calendar on which they occurred loses all importance! Last week we began our series of four talks on the theme "What difference does it make?" We looked at the question, "Why did Jesus come into the world?" Today, we will look at the question, "Why did Jesus have to die such a death?"

On that first Easter day, as we consider that question we are faced with four fundamental questions.

1. As regards the Father, would He compromise as regards sin?
2. As regards the Son, is obedience best?
3. As regards the world, what sort of God is He?
4. As regards myself, what does it matter?

1. As regards the Father, would He compromise as regards sin?

Would the Father compromise on His attitude towards sin at the cross? If we were to trace the history of God's attitude towards sin, it would not take us long to realise that His righteousness demands an implacable hatred of all that is not of faith. God truly loves the sinner - for God so loved the world - but He unremittently hates the sin with a fury that is terrifying! As we go back to the very beginning in the garden of Eden, we would hear Him say to Adam, "but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Genesis 2:17). God could not overlook that first sin, and the whole of creation has suffered as a result, ever since. The words of the prophet Ezekiel could not be more clear: "the soul who sins shall die" (Ezekiel 18:4). God had left Himself no wriggle room in terms of His opposition to sin and its consequences. But in His infinite mercy towards His creation, from the very beginning He had also made plain that He had a plan to deal with the consequences of sin that involved sacrifice. Adam and Eve were made coats of skins (Genesis 3:21). To Abraham, in Genesis 22, the wonderful promise was made "God will provide Himself a lamb for a burnt offering". To Moses, as provision was made for the Passover, God had said in Exodus 12, "when I see the blood I will pass over you". And again, to the nation of Israel, as provision was made for their feasts, in Leviticus 16, the scapegoat was to have the sins of all the people laid upon it ceremonially, and then led out into the wilderness "there to perish". There could be no doubting that God had Himself determined to pay the debt our sins had generated, through sacrifice.

It is all very well conceiving a plan, on paper. So often, however, when that plan becomes a living reality, it becomes unworkable or the cost becomes prohibitive. Before the world was created, God had settled upon the sacrifice of His Son as the means by which He could forgive sin and yet remain righteous in His opposition to it. But as that first "Good Friday" dawned, as He saw His only begotten Son bearing that rough wooden cross, as He heard those words of desperate enquiry "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" would He compromise? Oh no! There was never a moment when He lowered the standards of His holiness. He in no way went soft on sin, just because it was His Son on the cross.

Sometimes we fail to discipline our children just because they are our children. Our love for them blunts our common sense and they get away with things we would condemn in others. In no sense can this be said of God. His condemnation of sin was immovable, even when it was His own Son. Paul wrote to the believers at Corinth and told

them that "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21). God knew the cost of dealing with sin but He was prepared to pay it in full.

2. As regards the Son, is obedience best?

Now we turn to the choice the Son made in dying such a death, that of obedience being best. This is not only a question that had the profoundest impact upon His life, but as our example, ought to have a very real impact upon our lives also. We do not have to look very hard to see how obedience characterised all that the Lord Jesus did whilst here on earth.

- "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work" (John 4:34).
- "My Father has been working until now, and I have been working ... the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner ... I can of Myself do nothing. As I hear, I judge; and My judgement is righteous, because I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me" (John 5:17, 19, 30).
- "For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me" (John 6:38).

In all His lifetime, Jesus fully obeyed His Father in all things. There can be no doubt as to the blessedness of that pathway. But then we come to the cross, and yes, it is the cross to which this pathway inevitably led. During the three hours of darkness, God blotted out all light so that none could see the awful horror of the wrath of a righteous God falling like a nuclear explosion upon this one Man who had always obeyed in all things. God took the sinfulness of all mankind and made Him, who knew no sin, responsible for each and every one. What an unimaginably large burden of sin that was! In His righteousness God could not even stand side by side with His Son and so Jesus experienced an aloneness that we will never know. Utterly forsaken, as angels looked on in mute wonder at that barbaric scene. The contemplation of Calvary had caused the serene soul of the sinless Son of God to be troubled, prompting Him to pray more earnestly, as if any of His prayers could have been anything but fully meant. Now the suffering of death by crucifixion would mar His image beyond human recognition.

Is obedience really best if this awful scene is what it led to? Oh! A thousand times yes, for we would be utterly without hope had it not been for the cross. The writer to the Hebrews put it like this: "But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honour, that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for every one. For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings ... For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted" (Hebrews 2:9, 10, 18). What are we to say when God declares what is fitting for His well beloved Son? But we can see that without such obedience we would be eternally lost, alienated forever from the presence of God. And it is through His death that many sons will be brought to glory. The only true basis for the forgiveness of God for all mankind lies in the events of Calvary. And it is those hours of aloneness that add real power to His promise, "I will never leave you, nor forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5). He has experienced what it is like to be truly alone, with no one to turn to, not even God. Without the cross, God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - would have dwelt in splendid isolation, surrounded by myriads of angelic hosts. But the whole of His earthly creation would have been forever cut off from His glory. It is through the obedience of the cross that the dividing wall of sin has been removed and we have been restored to full relationship with Him.

Do we sometimes feel that we have a hard path to take in life? Perhaps we make sacrifices and they seem wasted, like chaff in the wind. We may find ourselves caught up in a job where too much is expected of us, and yet we feel there is no way out. Unreasonable demands may be placed on our time by friends and family or by commitments already made. Pressed upon every side, we may begin to feel that it is all too much and that the path of obedience is too hard a journey to make, that God has, in some way, led us into some cul-de-sac from which there is no escape. It is just at such a time that we need to find ourselves at the cross and see there, in unmistakeable terms, that His will is best, despite the outward appearance to the contrary. The great God in whom we believe does not make mistakes and is able to sustain us through, and in, the very darkest of circumstances; in bereavement He is there, in illness He is there, in redundancy and poverty, He is there, in monotony He is there. David experienced something of this as he cried out, "Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there Your hand shall lead me, and Your right hand shall hold me. If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall fall on me,' even the night shall be light about me" (Psalm 139:7-11). Later, the prophet Isaiah, speaking of God's perfect Servant, could say, "A bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench" (Isaiah 42:3). This morning, as we look at the cross, we may doubt our ability to cope with our circumstances, we may not understand why they are what they are, but let us never doubt that obedience is best, that God has perfect control over our circumstances and that He is able to sustain us in them. Time and again, I have felt that I have had enough and can't go on. At just such times, He has shown me that He is still there, often in the smallest of circumstances. The cross still stands as incontrovertible proof that God knows what is best for each of us, as He knew for His Son.

3. As regards the world, what sort of God is He?

But the cross leaves this world with a choice also. How many people if questioned about their attitude towards God would view Him as some loving Being, a little old fashioned perhaps, a little distant, useful for extremities in life, but of no real relevance to the every day. The cross cuts away all this nonsense and leaves the world with the starkest of choices. For either God is a monster, or God is exactly who He says He is and we need to get right with Him. There is no middle ground. God cannot just be nice! The cross, the death of His Son, removes this woolly middle ground entirely. Let us use an example to show what we mean by this. I have a son whom I love very much. Now imagine I was having a party and I really wanted you to come. Of course I would send an invite, but that might not really impress you as to how much I really wanted you to come. So I decide to butcher my son and send you a photo saying that this is the length I will go to, to show you how much I want you to come. What would you think of me? You would rightly think I was some kind of deranged psychopath, and you definitely would not want to come to my party. I could have come in person, or sent you £1,000,000 to prove how much I wanted you there. You see there would be lots of ways, and the death of my son was a meaningless cruelty. Are we to view the cross in this light, some bizarre and misguided proof of the so called love of God?

Now let us imagine another scenario. Imagine we were at an event together, when suddenly terrorists burst into the room. Seeing me and my son together they make this bargain. Either the two of us go free but everyone else in the room is killed, or they shoot my son, but then everyone else in the room goes free. Now what would you think of me, if after much anguish, I sacrificed my son, so that you could go free? In both scenarios I had been responsible for the death of my son, and in both it was my love for you that caused me to do what I did. The thing that makes all the difference is the alternative. In the former scenario there were alternatives, in the latter there was none. So at the cross, we see that God was either a monster for allowing His Son to die, so that we could be forgiven and enjoy a relationship with Him, if there was some other way in which this could be achieved. Or, and this is clearly what the Bible teaches, though we so desperately try to avoid the conclusion, for it makes us utterly unworthy, the death of Jesus upon the cross was the only way for a righteous God to deal with the sins of an unrighteous person, and yet remain righteous.

A Midlane's hymn expresses it well:

*"The perfect righteousness of God
Is witnessed in the Saviour's blood;
'Tis in the cross of Christ we trace
His righteousness, yet wondrous grace.*

*God could not pass the sinner by,
Justice demands that he should die;
But in the cross of Christ we see
How God can save, yet righteous be.*

*The judgement fell on Jesus' head,
'Twas in His blood sin's debt was paid;
Stern Justice can demand no more,
And Mercy can dispense her store.*

*The sinner who believes is free,
Can say, 'The Saviour died for me.'
Can point to the atoning blood,
And say, 'This made my peace with God.'"*

Or in Cecil Alexander's traditional Easter hymn:

*"There was no other good enough
To pay the price of sin.
He only could unlock the gate
Of heaven and let us in."*

Having no alternative, God sent His only begotten Son to die upon the cross to become the Saviour of the whole world.

4. As regards myself, what does it matter?

Having considered these three questions, each one of us is left with a choice to make. Did Jesus die on the cross for you?

It has struck me recently that, if I was to ask people what they thought of politics or politicians in general, then I would probably be told that they were a pretty corrupt bunch, only in it for themselves. However, if I asked people what they thought about this or that individual MP, many would say they were a really good constituency MP. So how can a bunch of good local MPs become such a generally disliked group of people? Sometimes people have a similar problem with the church. They see what so called Christians are and have become collectively and they are rightly turned off by it all. However, that is not the choice to be made this morning. We are not here, this morning, asking you to vote for your favourite Christian, for they could do nothing to deal with the problem of individual sin. The only question we need to answer this morning is, "Do you accept that as Jesus died on the cross, He did so in your place?" Christianity is an individual relationship with God, based upon the completed work of Jesus at the cross. The apostle Paul, whose life we would describe as colourful, at least, knew the truth of this, when in Galatians 2:20 he could say, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me."

As we draw to a close this morning in considering 'Why did He have to die such a death?' I am reminded of a philosophy class I attended many years ago. The only answer to why is because! That might have made for a very short broadcast, but as we have thought about this morning, the answer lies in the fact that there was no alternative. The answer lies in the fact that God had so much to show us through such a death. The cross shows us that God cannot, nor will not, compromise on His absolute perfection. His hatred of sin and His mandatory judgement of sin allowed no wriggle room for us as sinners. The cross shows us that the path of obedience, though it may lead through the most difficult of circumstances, is always the best. The cross cuts away all the religious mumbo jumbo that so appeals to the natural part of us. It shows God for who He truly is in all His holiness and all His love, but it also shows us for what we truly are. And finally it leaves us with the most important choice we shall have to make. It is a choice with eternal consequences, one we dare not get wrong, for it is based on a day that truly changed the world.

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