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Why Did Jesus Have to Die on the Cross? Richard Cunningham

Girls and women – just imagine you are with the bloke of your dreams: handsome, charming, strong, considerate (I did say in your dreams). He's hired a box at the theatre and during the interval he presents you with an ornate jewellery box. You open it and pull out a long, delicate gold chain – on the end of which you notice is a replica electric chair.

You'd think he was a sicko – someone from a Stephen King novel.

But romantic men have been buying their girlfriends little gold crosses forever – so why? The cross is a symbol of the most ghastly form of public execution ever devised.

Misconception 1: The Cross is something sentimental

You'll realise just how unsentimental the crucifixion of Christ is if you watch Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). It's not really material for a romantic date. I remember once taking Ruth (my wife) to see a romantic film on our wedding anniversary – but we, unwittingly, found ourselves watching RoboCop – don't go there!

The cross is a means of torture and bloody execution

If you watch Mel Gibson's film you'll be struck at how realistic and accurate a portrayal (for the most part) it is of the final 16 hours of Jesus life. But the overwhelming question you are left with is "Why?"

Why did Jesus so deliberately co-operate with a series of events that took him to a place of torture and bloody execution? It seems gratuitous and unnecessary.

So why did Jesus die? Even after dispensing with sentimentalism people are still prone to a number of other misconceptions about the death of Christ.

Misconception 2: Jesus chose the cross as a deliberate attempt to start a religion

A second common misconception is to think that getting crucified was Jesus' deliberate attempt to start a religion.

You will sometime hear people say that the origin of all religions is the same: that some person, of great moral, spiritual and intellectual standing, gains a new insight of truth about our human nature, and dedicates his life to teaching that truth. Also they will build a culture around it, which outlasts the leader personally.

Jesus died as a lonely figure on a cross

And, as far as Judaism, Buddhism, and Islam are concerned – there is some credibility in that analysis. Because these religions did begin in that way.

For Moses, the Buddha and Muhammad died at a ripe old age – after a lifetime of teaching and having won vast popular acclaim – the future of their respective religions was guaranteed.

But you cannot explain Christianity that way, can you?

For Jesus died at the age of 33 with a teaching ministry of, at the very most, three years. He had been outcast by society, betrayed and denied by his own supporters, mocked by his enemies and, at the very end, forsaken by all except his mum and a few of her friends.

He suffered one of the most brutal forms of execution ever devised by the imagination of men.

The founder of Christianity did *not* die at a ripe old age – after years of public teaching and acclaim. He did *not* have the future of his movement guaranteed – *No*. The founder of Christianity died prematurely, tragically. A lonely figure on a cross. And yet more people follow him today than anyone else – alive or dead.

Misconception 3: The teaching of Jesus is more important than his death

But why did Jesus die? Why does the Old Testament look forward to his death and the New Testament look back on it as the greatest event in world history?

People have criticised Mel Gibson for concentrating on the last 16 hours of Jesus life – rather than focussing on his life.

Surely we should concentrate on the teaching of Jesus – like the Sermon on the Mount.

Well that's misconception number 3, to see the teaching of Jesus as some kind of separate entity from his death. People say: *"Oh I love his teaching – apart from the stuff on sin and Hell. What offends my sensibilities is all this evangelical stuff about Jesus dying for me. Surely it's just fundamentalist claptrap."*

For anyone who has studied the Gospels you'll soon realise that the Gospel writers are in a hurry to get you to the last week of Jesus life. They get their haste from Jesus himself – who wants people to understand who he is and once the penny has dropped – Jesus wants to tell them what he has come to do.

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In the Gospel of John, Jesus speaks of *"his hour"* – the hour in which he will be glorified ([John 12:23](#)). He will not be distracted from this hour. Note that we are just half way into the Gospel of John and yet we are into the last week of his life. Half the gospel on one week of Jesus life. Again in [John 17:1](#), at the Last Supper, Jesus speaks again of *"his hour"*, this time saying that *"Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son"*.

But why this emphasis on Jesus' death? It still doesn't seem to make any sense does it? Why is the most significant person in world

history deliberately moving events towards his own brutal execution? Surely it's not going to help anyone – except his enemies?

Here is the greatest figure in the world, no, the universe (the God-man – the Logos – the creator of the world) dying so horribly... and deliberately, at the hands of his own creation.

Hardened soldiers blindfold him and punch him in the face and say – “*Hey prophecy – which one of us punched you?*” ([Luke 22:63-5](#)).

Having been beaten up and had his back flogged “*until it looked like a ploughed field*”, he is stripped naked by rough, cruel men, has a crown of sharp long thorns forced onto his head – thrown down onto a cross and tied and nailed to it. After that the cross is *dropped* into a deep socket – it lands with a judder, dislocating both of his arms.

And so he begins to suffocate in his own blood and spittle. Howls of mockery rise up. It's obscene isn't it? And yet it was avoidable.

Jesus didn't need to keep Judas Iscariot in his company. He'd detected his treachery much earlier. *He didn't have to walk into his enemies trap*. Yet he did and made no attempt to give Pilate an excuse to release him.

The armies of heaven were waiting for an excuse to rescue their king and master – Jesus only had to raise an eyebrow and he would have been plucked from the cross and his enemies consumed.

Yet Jesus insisted that the crucifixion was his hour of glory. That's where the Gospels locate the glory of Jesus – at the crucifixion rather than the resurrection.

God loved the world so much that he gave Jesus to die.

Well, if Jesus was so full of love then why did he allow evil to win the day? Why did he cause his widowed mother so much pain? Would she be impressed by this avoidable act of sacrifice?

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If a husband and wife walk along the banks of the Seine and the husband pronounces his undying love for his wife, adding that he will show here how much he loves her – and then jumps into the water... Would she see how the dying and loving were connected? No – she would think: “*If he loved me, he would have lived for me and not killed himself so gratuitously and selfishly.*”

Just so with the cross of Jesus. We don't see how the loving and the dying are related, do we?

And so we think that the cross is an extravagant, self-indulgent mistake. The disciples certainly did at the time – they fled!

But within a few weeks these confused and terrified followers were preaching publicly and boldly that the death of Jesus was the greatest event in world history. The early church revelled in it. They decorated buildings with crosses and composed hymns about the cross. “*We preach Christ crucified*”, said Paul the Apostle ([1 Corinthians 1:23](#)).

It was a total turn off to the Jews and the Greeks. The Jews thought that crucifixion was so morally repugnant and such a shameful death that it destroyed any celebrity Jesus may have enjoyed during his life. For them it would have been like us finding Billy Graham dead in a brothel surrounded by drugs and booze.

And sure enough, the early church was persecuted for worshipping a God on a cross, accused of cannibalism for celebrating communion.

You would have to rise from the dead to begin to salvage this appalling mess – nothing but the resurrection can explain the birth of Christianity.

Yet even after his resurrection, the followers of Christ chose the symbol of the cross as the primary symbol of their faith, rather than the empty tomb. It is in the cross and not the resurrection that John locates Jesus' great victory – his moment of glory.

And it didn't take long for the disciples to realise that what they thought was the most humiliating defeat was the greatest victory of all time.

After the battle of Waterloo English troops received a message: "*Wellington Defeated*".

They were utterly dejected. They were prepared to flee back to England when someone cried: "*We haven't got the full message*" they looked again. And read "*Wellington defeated Napoleon*"!

The disciples read the message "*Jesus defeated*" – so they fled the scene of his execution.

But they were soon preaching "*Jesus defeated ... sin and death and hell.*"

What a staggering victory – over sin, death and hell. Sin and death are the two greatest enemies of all time, aren't they?

These things have defeated every political King and warrior of history and will certainly defeat you. Do you have a solution to death and your sin, which will take you lower than the grave?

Misconception 4: Our sin doesn't present any danger to us

The fourth misconception is to underestimate the significance of our sin and the danger we are in. That's why the death of Jesus looks like gratuitous violence.

The Bible is crystal clear on our predicament: ever since humans rebelled against God, we forfeited the right to eternal life. God cannot permit sinful, proud, selfish humans to live forever – we would only ruin the new paradise he has created.

It's as if God was saying: "*I made you. I made a world for you to live in and yet you live without any reference to me. You are self-centred, proud, aloof and ungrateful – yet you have little to be proud of since everything you have is a gift from me.*"

It's not very flattering but you have to wake up to the fact (as I had to some years ago) that your rebellion and cold-heartedness constitute a great offence to God.

That's why the suffering of Christ was so terrible – it was commensurate with the seriousness of our sin. That sin will disqualify us from the presence of God's love and care and beauty and goodness forever. *And that is an appalling prospect.*

No. God MUST punish wrongdoing in his universe. Sin can NEVER be overlooked. God cannot just dispense forgiveness like a sovereign handing out gongs.

Catherine the Great famously said, "*God will forgive – that's his business.*" Do you think like that? If so, that is a terrible misconception. No, God's business is to be true to his character and

You would have to rise from the dead to begin to salvage this appalling mess

uphold law within his universe. The hardest thing for a Holy God to do is to forgive sin. His rule would become unsustainable if he excused sin.

The whole of the Old Testament points out that sin is so serious that it always involves death. Sin can never be merely forgiven – it must be punished.

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The death of Jesus is the only way of God's wrath being appeased. There is nothing we can do or say that will appease God and make him propitious. And if you have a problem with that then you've got a bigger problem with the alternative. For if God were not angry with sin, then he would not be good.

I mean could you observe a gang rape and remain serene – or remain neutral about the torture of young children? Such people (often powerful tyrants) who get to that state have become dehumanised, we would suggest – they have obliterated the image of God in themselves rather than reflected it.

Well let me tell you, our thoughts and motives are so foul and rebellious, our selfishness and bitterness is so obscene to God. He is angry. And if he weren't then he wouldn't be good.

We don't understand the cross – the sheer brutality of the cross, because we don't understand our own danger.

Jesus on the cross was offering himself to satisfy God's demands for sin to be punished. He was dying to save us from God's wrath – from hell. He was taking our place – our punishment. He was our ransom.

Consider our husband and wife again, walking along the banks of the Seine when the wife falls in. Her husband jumps in and after a struggle manages to push her to the bank with his last piece of energy, before falling back under the water. Would she then see how the dying and loving were connected? Of course.

Jesus on the cross plunged into the icy river of death in the place of sinful humanity. Sin is so serious that God's own Son had to die.

Misconception 5: There must be another way to be forgiven apart from the Cross

Maybe you are thinking *"I can sort this out another way – I'm pretty good – I believe in God."* Well, that is misconception number 5 and all I can say is "Forget it". Jesus asked his Father the same question in the Garden of Gethsemane – Jesus is exploring all other possibilities. He prays: *"If there be any other way..."* Jesus contemplated not so much the brutality of men – but the wrath of God – being separated from the Father and being punished by him.

The only answer that came was – a deafening silence.

Now we could go on all night giving parallels – but I know that some of you are saying: *"Wonderful imagery – but can this notion really be taken seriously? Is God really just and fair in attributing our sin to the righteous Jesus and acquitting us? Isn't it like pagan Gods being offered innocent children?"*

When people raise this objection, they are missing a fundamental detail. What they think is happening is that here is God, here is you, and here is Jesus, an innocent third party and God loads our sin onto him and lets us go.

The Bible says that there is no third party. Because the Father and Son were so close in this matter that they were one. God was in Christ dealing with the sin himself.

To illustrate that God is taking the punishment himself, think of God as a wife who has been cheated on. How should the wife feel about her husband leaving her to live with another woman? Serene and passive? No – more like hurt and angry.

But there's a twist. The husband turns up one day genuinely repentant and says, *"Forgive me – I want to come back."*

What would his wife say? *"Yeah sure, I didn't notice you were gone"*? That would surely be amoral and indifferent.

there is no third party

Should she remain angry and take him to the cleaners in a divorce? The law would be on her side.

But that would not be a healing would it? More like an amputation.

The thing is – as hurt and angry as she is – she still loves him.

But there is another way – but it's very costly. It's the way of love and mercy. It's not easy and it's not sentimental.

You see, true love has the power not to ignore hurt, but to absorb it – rather than allow the relationship to be destroyed by the offence.

The wife might say to her husband "I still love you and will have you back".

But you say: *"That's a bit cheap! What's the price tag?"*

That man would know! He would know that that the price of his acceptance would be the pain and anguish that his wife had absorbed – pain that she would feel every day of her life.

That's what Jesus did on the cross!

He chose the way of love. He was angry at our sin and had the right to be. Our sin has hurt him and all that he had made. Yet there on the cross we see him absorbing the pain of our sin and digesting it. Christ plumbed the depths of his own divine heart for those inner resources which alone can quench God's righteous anger.

It was there God came to terms with our sin. All our appalling selfishness and pride and jealousy and envy and bitterness. Christ absorbed it into his own divine self on the cross.

That was the real agony of the cross. Jesus who had never sinned – this Jesus who hated sin absorbed the filth and degradation of your sin into his own divine self. He took your hell.

That's why Jesus died.

Do you realise how you have angered and offended his holy love for you?
How you broke his heart on the cross?

Yet such is his love for you. He's willing to have you back.

Jesus who had never sinned took your hell

Willing to make himself vulnerable to your rejection.

Tonight he offers you forgiveness, love and acceptance – he's willing to start over.

To commit himself to you tonight and for eternity.

Nearing death on the cross, Jesus shouted in [John 19:30](#):

“It is finished.”

Not *“I am finished.”*

No, this was a shout of triumph.

The word Jesus used translates as *“completed”*.

It’s the word you would use when making the last payment on your mortgage, or the builder would use when laying his last brick or the student having finished their last exam.

IT IS FINISHED.

NOTHING MORE TO PAY.

NOTHING MORE TO DO.

NOTHING MORE TO PROVE.

The cross is a great triumph over sin and death and hell.

Sin has been punished, Death has been conquered, and Hell has been plundered.

And it’s such a wonderful rescue that we *should* rejoice in it.

Five years ago we visited friends in Devon. They live in a rambling old house with castle turrets and a 10-acre garden. A paradise for children. Without any thought we let Ashley and Jack (aged 3) run off into the garden to play, while Ruth and I took afternoon tea in the kitchen.

We didn’t know that there was a large pond in the garden – so it was a shock when 40 minutes later our friend’s eldest child came running in to inform us that Jack had run down the hill and fallen headlong into the pond – which was so green that he hadn’t noticed it.

Ruth and I rushed into the garden, not even knowing where the pond was. And do you know what we heard? The most beautiful sound in the world, I shall never forget it. It was Jack howling his head off. His lungs were gloriously full of air as opposed to water. Ashley, aged 8, on impulse – had pulled a long ladder from the tree-house, spanned the pond with it – crawled across it to where Jack was and then held him above the water until further help arrived.

I’m not sure who we hugged more at bedtime that night – Jack or Ashley. But we all celebrated in gratitude for this rescue.

Misconception 6: I’m not bad enough to need the Cross

We are caught up in the mud and weed of our sinful rebellion against God, which will take us lower than the grave. It will take us to hell.

And yet Jesus is effectively bridging that awful swamp and offering you his hand.

Will you take it? Or are you still living under the biggest delusion and misconception of them all – that you are good enough?

This is the sixth and last and most prevalent misconception of the lot. That you will happily face God on your own terms. That you don’t need all this evangelical talk about forgiveness.

Can I appeal to you tonight not to be so proud and foolish?

Are you willing to acknowledge that you can contribute nothing to your own forgiveness – nothing but your sin?

Can you imagine what God might say to you if you died tonight and walked into his presence unforgiven and self-righteous?

“How dare you come into my presence unforgiven? How could you think you were good enough? When I gave my only, much loved Son to rescue you – poured out my anger for sin on him and you dare to tell me you think you are good enough? I have provided the means of forgiveness – but I can’t force you to take it. Depart from me – I never knew you.”

The Good News of the Cross

But the good news proclaimed by the death and resurrection of Christ is that everyone here can tonight walk out of this building – right with God, ready for life and ready for eternity. But you must kneel at the foot of the cross in repentance and gratitude.

What astonishing love – some might die for a good person – but Christ died for you, a sinner and a rebel.

And the risen Jesus by his Spirit is here tonight – right here – and he’s looking for followers. Jesus is looking for followers tonight.

Has he won your love and loyalty?

Are you willing to turn to him and repent, to turn away from your sin and the coldness of your heart?

Are you willing to acknowledge that you can contribute nothing to your own forgiveness – nothing but your sin?

I do hope so. For if you are not moved by what you have heard tonight, then I suspect nothing else will move you.

Further reading

Richard Cunningham's bethinking booklet [Crucifixion: con trick to start a religion?](#) expands on the talk given here. Buy the book [from IVPbooks](#).