

THE MOST COSTLY AND CONVINCING EVIDENCE

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Another look at the cross in the larger setting of the Great Controversy over God's character and government, answering the question:
Why Did Jesus Have to Die?

Sin as Distrust

The Bible describes sin as more than mere breaking of the rules. Sin involves a breakdown of trust and trustworthiness, a stubborn and suspicious unwillingness to listen. Left untreated, sin makes peace impossible. To set and keep things right, trust must somehow be restored. God sent his Son "to deal with sin." Why was it not enough for Jesus simply to tell us the truth about his Father and to demonstrate by his own gracious treatment of the worst of sinners that God is not the kind of person his enemies have made him out to be? Why did Jesus also have to die? Why was there no other way?

The way Jesus suffered and died is the greatest revelation of the truth about God the universe will ever see or ever need. Correctly understood it means defeat for the accuser of our Heavenly Father. No wonder Satan has sought to obscure, even pervert, the meaning of the cross - to his own evil advantage and to our great loss! But why did Jesus have to die?

Christ's Cross God's Answer

Now we have called the cross the most costly and convincing evidence because we believe that the unique and awful way in which Jesus suffered and died reveals something about our God and about his government that absolutely had to be clarified before trust and peace could be restored again. For there has been a crisis of distrust in God's universal family—even to the point of war up in heaven as described in Revelation 12.

God has been accused of being unworthy of the trust of his created beings—of being arbitrary, vengeful, and severe. Particularly has he been accused of lying to his children—lying about death being the result of sin. Now it does no good simply to deny such charges. God does not tempt us to accept mere claims. Even the Devil can make mere claims. Only by the demonstration of trustworthiness over a long period of time and under a great variety of circumstances—particularly difficult ones, can trust be re-established and confirmed.

So the Bible records that God sent his Son to deal with this breakdown of trust and trustworthiness in his family. In other words, he sent his Son to deal with sin. As the Bible describes it, sin is much more than a mere breaking of the rules. Sin is a breakdown of trust or trustworthiness. Sin means a stubborn and suspicious unwillingness to listen-not to mention all the damaging consequences of our being unwilling to listen to our heavenly Father. Jesus came to set right everything that had gone wrong, and to set it right in such a way that it would stay right for the rest of eternity.

What went wrong?

So first of all, let us consider again what has gone wrong because I believe the way we understand what went wrong helps us to understand the methods God has used to set things right. It particularly helps us to understand why Jesus had to die. Our God has been accused, specifically, of being arbitrary, and exacting, vengeful, unforgiving and severe. God sent his Son to reveal the truth about these matters. Why was it not enough for Jesus to come and live among us as he did and tell us the truth about his Father and then demonstrate by his gracious treatment of the worst of sinners that God, indeed, is not the kind of person his enemies have made him out to be? Of course the way he lived and the way he treated people is vital evidence.

But remember that the most serious charge leveled against our God is that God has lied to us—he lied to us when he said that sin results in death. Worse than that, Satan has turned God’s gracious warning to our first parents in the Garden of Eden into a terrifying threat. He pictures God as saying to Adam and Eve, “Either you obey me, or I’ll kill you!” Think of the baleful effect that perversion of the truth has had on the human race. Think how it has poisoned people’s attitude toward God and their practice of religion. Think of picturing our gracious God as saying, “You either love and obey me, or I’ll torture and execute you in my righteous wrath.” How could this satanic view of God win such wide acceptance as it has? Why is it still so widely believed?

Appeasing God?

For thousands of years men have sacrificed—even their own children—to win the favor of their offended gods. Even in the Christian world it is suggested and even believed, that if it were not for Christ’s appeasement (sometimes called propitiation) of his Father’s wrath, we would long before now have been destroyed. And were it not for Christ’s constant pleading with the Father, God could not find it in his own heart to forgive and heal his children. Who could have thought up such a perversion? But from reading the 66 books of the Bible, does anything need to be done to persuade God to love his children? The testimony of all 66 books is that God has always loved even his most wayward child. That is what is summed up in John 3:16: “God so loved the world ...” (not just his good children, but all his children—both good and bad).

Sin results in death

Those serious words to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden were no threat. They were a gracious warning, because sin actually results in death. Sin so changes the sinner that the natural consequence is death. Cut off by his own rebellious choice from the source of life the sinner will die. Now out of harmony with God by his own rebellious rejection, the sinner is so changed that even the life-giving glory of our God becomes to him a consuming fire. How can this best be clarified? Not by claims, but by evidence and demonstration.

One choice that God had was to allow Adam and Eve to die. And he could have said to the universe, “Who is telling the truth? I said sinners would die. It is the Devil who has lied to you”.

Or going back even further, God could have left Satan and his followers to reap the natural results of their sin and they would have perished. Surely then there would have been no question about the truthfulness of God's warning. Why didn't God take those apparently easy choices? He could have saved all the painful history since that time. Of course, had the universe watched Satan and his followers die, having never seen death before, there was the hazard that they would assume that God had executed his children who had displeased him. Then there would be the danger that the angels would serve God from fear. The obedience that springs from fear produces the character of a rebel. And rebelliousness is the essence of sin.

Fear-induced obedience

But God did not take that easy way out. He did not want the obedience and love that spring from fear. That would be totally unacceptable to so gracious a God as we know him to be. Instead, God sent his Son in human form and he died the death that is the natural result of sin. The universe watched and saw how God was involved in the death of the wicked.

Of all the 66 books in the Bible, perhaps Paul in Romans gives the clearest explanation of why Jesus died. First of all he recognizes the truth of God's warning in the Garden of Eden. Look at Rom. 6:23 (Phillips) where Paul agrees with the record in Genesis: "Sin pays its servants: the wage is death." But we also recall Satan's denial and his charge that God had lied in Genesis 3:4, 5 (RSV): "But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God.'" Notice that Satan subtly adds the additional charge that God is selfishly withholding something that would be for their best good.

Claims or evidence?

Now who is telling us the truth? God, or the great former lightbearer, Lucifer? How do you determine who is telling the truth? Did God gather his family together and say, "I am telling the truth, the Devil is lying!" Which would only encourage the Devil to say, "No, I am telling the truth and God is lying." Matters like this cannot be settled by claims or denials. God's way was to take his case into court. Look at the marvellous words of Romans 3:4 (Goodspeed): "As the scripture says, 'That you may be shown to be right in what you say, and win your case when you go into court.'" The Bible often speaks of such meetings of the heavenly family. Look, for example, in the first two chapters of Job. And if you want to know how many attend, look in the book of Daniel (7:9, 10) where it says a hundred million beings watch as the court meets. Note how God resolves questions particularly of the charges of Satan that are leveled against him and against his friends before the heavenly court. In the book of Job, Satan accused God and he accused Job of being unworthy of God's trust. Did God say, "That's a lie Satan; this man is perfect?" God said, "You've raised a serious question. The only way to answer it is to show you."

Now look at the rest of the book of Job. Did Job show himself to be a trustworthy friend of God? Did he trust God because he was being richly rewarded or did he seem to be utterly abandoned and yet he still trusted God? The book ends with God saying, "Thank you, Job, you've said of Me what is right." Job was God's friend all the way through and God could then

turn to the heavenly court and say, “Do you need any more evidence about the falsity of Satan’s charges and the trustworthiness of my friend Job?”

This is God’s way. God himself has been accused. He does not merely deny the accusation. He says, “Let me show you. My children, let me show you the falsity of these accusations and the truth about myself and then you decide.” Imagine the humility of the Infinite One submitting his character and government to the scrutiny and investigation of his mere creatures! But that’s God’s way, and it is the only way to really establish love and trust in the fullest sense of freedom.

Jesus’ death shows God’s righteousness

So we are told that in the fullness of time “God showed his Son publicly dying as a means of reconciliation [an answer to questions] to be taken advantage of by faith. This [death] was to demonstrate God’s own righteousness. For in his divine forbearance he had apparently overlooked men’s former sins. This death was to show that God himself is righteous and therefore can set right those who have faith in his Son.” I am sure you recognize Romans 3:25, 26—though perhaps not the words that I used. The KJV reads:

Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.

Propitiation?

Now there is a difficult word in there—“propitiation”. Propitiation means appeasement—this is a most regrettable translation. Propitiation is what you husbands may offer your wives when you promised, on your anniversary, to be home at 6 p.m. to take your wife out to dinner and now it’s 11 p.m., and you’ve just remembered. So on the way home you find an all night florist shop and you buy some chocolates and whatever else you can lay your hands on. As you approach the front door with some trepidation, you open it and hand the flowers and the chocolates in, trying to propitiate the righteous wrath of your deeply disappointed wife. That’s propitiation, or appeasement.

It is essential to really analyze that verse. The word translated “propitiation” here is pronounced “*hilasterion*”. That is the word used in the Greek Septuagint for the mercy seat, although the Bible does not mention mercy seat in the Old Testament. Luther made it up. When Luther looked at this word which is used for the cover of the ark—the ark of the covenant—he found that the Hebrew word just means a “covering”. But that covering was so important that he translated it “Mercy Seat”.

Tyndale was a friend of Luther (who first translated it this way in 1524) and in 1525 Tyndale brought it over into English and several versions followed him. That’s where “mercy seat” came from. The cover of the ark was never called mercy seat until the early sixteenth century AD. But

think of the meaning of what happened before the mercy seat—it was not a bad choice. It's just a pity that the *King James Version* uses mercy seat in Exodus and mercy seat in Hebrews 9:5, but does not use mercy seat in Romans 3:25, 26. It uses propitiation. I think mercy seat would have been much closer. For this Greek word means literally “a place or means of reconciliation”—a place where atonement or unity and at-one-ment take place.

So I ventured my own translation of Rom. 3:25, 26. “For God showed him publicly dying as a means of reconciliation to be taken advantage of by faith. This was to demonstrate God's own righteousness, for in his divine forbearance he had apparently overlooked men's former sins. [They hadn't died as he had warned, you see]. It was to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time to show that he himself is righteous and that he sets right everyone who trusts in Jesus.” In other words, Jesus died to answer the questions about his Father and to prove that God was not the kind of person his enemies have made him out to be. He had not lied about sin leading to death. He sent his Son to answer the questions.

Watching Jesus die

So in imagination let's go to the cross and watch Jesus die. Did he really die? The soldiers were surprised to find he was already dead. Crucifixion was a slow way of dying. Evidently something else had happened. Is it true that Jesus was dying the death of a sinner—to show us how the sinner really dies? Look at 2 Corinthians 5:21 (RSV): “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin.” He did die the death of a sinner. What caused Jesus to die? As you watch him dying on the cross, is God killing his Son? Is he torturing his Son to death? Is God pouring out his wrath on his Son- something the Bible so often pictures God doing toward sinners for whom there is no further hope?

God's Wrath

Well, it all depends on the meaning of wrath. What is God's wrath? One of the clearest explanations in the whole Bible is in Romans 1. The whole chapter is important, but look at these few verses—Romans 1:18, 24, 26, 28 (RSV): “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth ... [and it is the truth about God in that whole section.] Therefore, God gave them up ... For this reason God gave them up ... And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up.” Three times it states in Romans 1 that God's wrath is simply his turning away in loving disappointment from those who do not want him anyway, thus leaving them to the inevitable and awful consequence of their own rebellious choice.

Was Jesus given up? Look at Romans 4:25 (RSV) – “Jesus our Lord, who was put to death ...” my favourite version says. There is nothing in the Greek that says he was put to death. It says: “Jesus our Lord, who was given up for our trespasses ...” and it uses exactly the same word as in Romans 1:24, 26 & 28. Versions ought to leave them the same to show the point that Jesus died under the wrath of his Father.

But look at the real meaning of God's wrath. This was not new with Paul. It's all through the Old Testament. It is most dramatic in Hosea 11:7, 8 (Phillips): "My people are bent on turning away from me ... [but] How, oh how can I give you up, Ephraim! How, oh how, can I hand you over Israel!"

Did Jesus understand that this is the experience he was passing through? Did Jesus know he was being given up as Hosea describes it? (And Paul later in Romans 1 and 4) What did Jesus cry just before he died? "My God, my God, why are you beating me up? Why are you torturing me? Why are you killing me?" No! "Why have you given me up?" (Matt.27:46) He knew.

Did the Father kill the Son?

We should have come earlier, though—to Gethsemane. For there he began this awesome experience of demonstrating the truth about God's gracious but awful warning—that the wages of sin is death. There Jesus fell to the ground dying. The angels were watching. Was God killing his Son in the Garden of Gethsemane or did Jesus feel his unity with his Father breaking up? He began to feel the awesome loneliness of being given up. Had Jesus been left in the Garden of Gethsemane to die there, could you say that the Father killed the Son? Now had he been a mere creature you wouldn't know; but the angels knew who Jesus was. They knew that he was God. And they knew the meaning of his words in John 10:18 (RSV) where Jesus said, "No one takes it [my life] from me. [No one can. I lay it down of myself.] I have the power to lay it down and I have the power to take it again".

The angels knew that was the truth. If Jesus died it was not because his Father had killed him. The Father was giving him up and both of them suffered and the Father was crying, "How can I give you up?" The Son who had assumed humanity was the One who died. So two questions were answered in Gethsemane. Is death the result of sin? Indeed it is. Is it because God kills his wayward children? He did not lay a hand on his Son.

Not knowing God

But there was a third question that needed to be answered. Why is it so important that we understand that God does not execute his sinful children? This had to be answered, too. So an angel came to strengthen Jesus to go out to Calvary. There, once again, he answered the first two questions. But he was also this time tortured and crucified. By whom? By the Father? Or by the most devout group of Sabbath-keeping, tithe-paying, health-reforming, Bible-quoting Adventists the world has ever known? They even said he had a devil before they tortured him to death. You see, they obeyed God from fear. Because as the prophet had said so many times before, they did not really know God.

Look at John 19:31 (GNB): "Then the Jewish authorities asked Pilate to allow them to break the legs of the men who had been crucified, and to take the bodies down from the crosses. They requested this because it was Friday, and they did not want the bodies to stay on the crosses on the Sabbath, since the coming Sabbath was especially holy." You see, they nailed their Saviour to the cross and then rushed home to keep that Sabbath especially holy—to prove they were

God's true people. That's the awful result of serving God from fear because you do not know the truth about God.

The three questions were answered:

1. Does sin result in death? Indeed, it does!
2. But is it torture and execution at the hands of our gracious God? Indeed, it is not!
3. But what's so dangerous about misunderstanding this and serving God from fear? The service of fear produces the character of a rebel. It can even turn people who are dedicated to obedience into harsh rebels, and God's worst enemies!

Reconciling God to us?

Obviously Jesus did not die to win his Father. How clear Paul is on this. 2 Corinthians 5:19 (RSV) "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself." Nowhere ever does the Bible suggest that God had to be reconciled to us. Never once! But God paid the price to reconcile us to himself! Nor did Jesus die to pay some mere legal penalty. He died to reveal the truth about God and the falsity of Satan's charges. Even the angels had to learn this. Look at Colossians 1:20 (RSV): "... and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace, [not war, but] making peace by the blood of his cross."

As Jesus said in John 12:32 (GNB): "When I am lifted up from the earth I will draw everyone to me." Not all men—everyone in the whole family of the universe. You see viewed in the larger setting of the Great Controversy, the way in which Jesus suffered and died is the greatest revelation of the truth about God and his government that the universe will ever see or ever need. Correctly understood, the message of the cross is final defeat for the adversary. No wonder Satan has worked so hard to obscure and misrepresent and even pervert the meaning of the cross.

God's good news

But to some of us the cross is great good news. Yes it is true that sinners will die but we have no need to be afraid of God and he died to prove it. This message has great power to win to repentance and to trust. Paul was so proud of this good news. Look at his understanding of it in the last verses. 1 Corinthians 1:17, 18 (RSV): "For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, [What is the Gospel—the good news—about?] and not with eloquent wisdom lest the cross of Christ, [that's the Gospel] be emptied of its power. [This good news has great power]. For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

Now compare with that Romans 1:16 (RSV) that very famous righteousness by faith verse: "For I am not ashamed of the Gospel: [this good news] it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith ... [Wherein lies the power?] for in it [something is revealed] the righteousness of God is revealed." The good news is that God is not the unrighteous kind of person his enemies have made him out to be.

Confidence in God has been confirmed by the way Jesus suffered and died. Among God's friends whether angels or men this meaning of the cross will have power to hold God's great family together in loyalty and in peace forever.