

Why Did Jesus Have to Die?

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Interviewer: Jonathan Gallagher

Interviewer: Why did Jesus have to die? That's the basic question. First of all, is that the right question to ask?

I've asked that of my students for forty-five years. Bright ones will often respond by questioning the question—which I encourage them to do. Always challenge the question before you start answering it. It may not be a worthy question at all. Did He *have* to die?

Interviewer: That is exactly the emphasis I'd like to put there: Did Jesus have to die?

I'm thinking of it in terms of the fact that there simply was no other way.

Interviewer: Why not?

Can you think any other way to accomplish what had to be done? No doubt God would have used some other method if there could have been some other way. But I think until we discuss what's gone wrong—and needs to be righted—only then can one evaluate what He did, and whether it succeeded in righting what went wrong. You see, with so many, what's gone wrong is that we have broken the rules and we're in legal trouble. We have made a fatal mistake, and we are doomed—not just to die; we are doomed not just to be executed; we are doomed to be punished and then executed.

Now if that's the case, what I'm looking for is what I must do to escape such a penalty. And the Lord says, "Just believe, only believe." Believe what? "I have arranged for that penalty to be paid for," and you get into the whole idea of legal substitution.

Interviewer: But doesn't Ellen White use the phrase quite often, when she's speaking of the atonement, that Christ came to demonstrate the immutability of the Law?

Oh yes. I agree with that one hundred per cent. His death did indeed demonstrate the immutability of the Law. But then you have to go back and ask what the Law requires. The most helpful thing, I find, is to consider what went wrong. Since the Reformation (and before, of course) we have been largely preoccupied with the thought that what went wrong is that I am in legal trouble—and you too—and God has graciously made provision to take care of this. In my opinion, such preoccupation with one's legal standing is the essence of legalism. It is self-centred and even rather childish—but

understandable in a little child, who tends not to think about the people next door. He wonders first about himself—like the little song the children sing that has “Me, me, me” in it.

Paul discussed this problem in Hebrews where he says that though by now you ought to be teachers, you still need milk. You’re still preoccupied with yourselves. And in Ephesians 4 it says we should no longer act like little children but grow up. And as we grow up, one of the marks of maturing is that we become more and more aware of other people and of a larger Universe in which we live.

Now we know there is a whole vast Universe of intelligent beings, all involved in what went wrong, sinless angels included. The book of Revelation was given to help us see that larger view. And what went wrong in the Universe went wrong before we humans ever came into existence, and God proposed to set it right. We know that He created this world to provide the setting within which He would set things right. So we are a spectacle to the whole Universe, as here on this world God did the things that set the Universe right again—whether we humans are saved or not.

Interviewer: So Christ’s death was for our benefit certainly, but also for the benefit of the angels and the unfallen worlds?

Yes—and this of course is where our evangelical friends like Walter Martin would say, “You’re getting it all from Ellen White.” So I love to show these overlooked passages like Colossians 1, Ephesians 1 and 3, where it’s explained that Jesus died to bring peace in heavenly places. And some say, “That’s ridiculous, that’s where peace is.” No. According to Revelation 12, that’s where the war began. “What’s this about a war? Maybe some ancient fathers fancied there once was a war up in heaven”—as Luther once observed.

Some of our evangelical friends have used the book of Revelation to sensationalize the message about the closing up of human history. I think, regrettably, we’ve sometimes done the same thing. As we’ve often discussed before, the center of that book is the war that began in heaven. And it began with Lucifer, who’s described in Ezekiel and Isaiah as standing in the very presence of God. He stood in the “everlasting burnings,” as Isaiah says. He was a blessed and righteous person who could live in “the devouring fire,” the unveiled glory of God. In the presence of God, in the Most Holy Place, he conceived those potentially destructive ideas that finally blossomed into the war that began up in heaven. The war began in the heavenly sanctuary. And we suppose heaven is preoccupied with whether or not I’ve got my legal standing adjusted. Heaven is preoccupied with avoiding another war ever arising again. There or anywhere else. And I believe that just as the war began in the sanctuary, so the war ends in the sanctuary, when everyone agrees that everything, right to the very heart of the Universe, is all right. “Holy and righteous are your ways” they cry in the book of Revelation.

But it [the legal view] is a very narrow view. Those who prefer it sometimes speak of the Great Controversy view as being humanistic. I don't know what they mean by that. It's a much larger view preoccupied with God and the great issues that affect the security of the Universe. We humans are just a drop in the bucket. I think we really need to eat a great deal of humble pie, in order to give a larger message. As Micah says, we need to learn to walk more humbly before our God.

Interviewer: So the death of Christ did do something for us, and it did do something for the angels, and it did do something for all the other beings of the onlooking Universe. Did the death of Christ do something for God?

Well, you start with the war—if you can grant the war. Now if you can't grant the war, you can't grant the Great Controversy, so you have to find some other way to do this. Or if one needs a text for every step, start with Colossians. The death of Christ—it mentions “the shedding of His blood”—brought peace to the Universe. Why would the Universe need peace? Or, looking at Ephesians, why would unity and harmony need to be restored to the Universe? And then inevitably you turn to the war and casting of a third of the angels out of heaven. This is real. This is very, very serious.

What was the war about?? We have no description of the debates that went on among the angels. But we know that in the Adversary's first conversation with the human race, the subject of God was brought up. And God was presented to Adam and Eve as an untrustworthy liar. “God has lied to you. And the subject about which God has lied to you is death: You will not die.” Right there almost on page one in the Bible. So it's no surprise that God's answer is a death. The cross is the answer to the question: Has God lied?

But as you go through the Bible book by book (which is the best way I know to get this perspective) you come to many deaths in the Old Testament. You come to the first death—the killing of a lamb. And Adam and Eve might have said, “Now is that what you mean, that if you sin you'll die? Does this mean you'll kill us just as we have killed this lamb?” I wonder how much they understood that it was representative of a certain death to come.

Soon you come to the Flood, where God drowned all but eight. That would seem to be a pretty clear demonstration, and to loyal angels that was the thing to do. Amens (though surely, solemn ones) rang through heaven when He drowned that bunch. “That's the way to do it!” Except afterwards they found it hadn't won a soul. Instead, necessary as it was, it turned the human race against God more than ever, and they built a tower to escape Him. “Not by might, nor by power” the angels learned as one thing from the Flood. Though they were at the moment rather satisfied, it appears, and waited for God to do it again.

Then came Sodom and Gomorrah. He used fire instead of flood this time, and the angels were amen-ing. They really deserved it, but it didn't win anybody. Even the few God saved from the fire, look how they behaved incestuously right afterwards, and produced some of Israel's longstanding enemies. No, God says, "I'll tell you when the time comes that you're seeing the death that is the final result of sin." And as we all know, it's Gethsemane and it's Calvary. That's the one—and it's not till then that Jesus could say, "It's finished, I've answered that question."

Well, is that the only question that they had? No, you can tell that there were a couple of others intrinsic in what we've been saying. If death is the result of sin, what causes the death? The Devil has been trying to put God in a very bad light—"arbitrary, exacting, vengeful, unforgiving, and severe." I think we can tell what the accusations are by looking at the answers. The Bible is full of demonstrations that God is just the opposite: He's not arbitrary, He's not exacting, He's not vengeful, He is forgiving, He is not severe. Which suggests these were the problems. Is God the cause of the death? And the Devil combined his lie—that the soul is immortal—with his perversion that God has said, "You do what I say or I'll destroy you," and produced the doctrine of eternal Hell. That had to be answered. Does God say "Love me or I'll kill you," or "Love or you'll die, and someday you'll find out why that would be"? The angels didn't understand that death.

Ellen White is so eloquent on that. You remember that in many places—in *Patriarchs and Prophets* and *Desire of Ages*—she describes that had God left Satan and his followers to reap the natural results of their rebellion, they would have perished; but the angels looking on, never having seen death, would have misunderstood and so served God from fear. Which produces the character of a rebel. History has demonstrated that those who serve God from fear become rebels.

So it seems to me that the first two questions could have been answered very early in human history. That is, the Son could have come earlier, and He could have died. Then why not come sooner? Why didn't He come in the days of the Flood? People were wicked enough. He could have come then, and been rejected, and gone out to the equivalent of Gethsemane and Calvary in those days.

But there is a third question that has to be answered: what's so serious about serving Him from fear? "God, you are infinitely superior; wouldn't a little holy fear be good for the Universe?—it would keep peace, you know!" And God replies, "That kind of peace turns my children into my enemies." The loyal angels couldn't believe it. "We love you and we're willing to do whatever you say. In fact we think you ought to go down there and wipe out the opposition. Amen!" They couldn't see it. I think that's the subtlest thing of all, something that even brilliant angels couldn't see.

Interviewer: It takes time to understand the character of God...

Yes. So God works and works through the children of Abraham to produce a certain group of people—He doesn't want to produce legalists, He doesn't want to produce enemies—and as He works along He's giving them every opportunity to be His friends, and He produces a few wonderful friends along the way, but in His foreknowledge He knows that by and by He'll have this group. So He works with them, He works with them. And finally He lets the ten tribes go and He works on the last two. You know that chequered history: up and down, up and down, and finally He sends them to Babylonian captivity, and they come back as bad as they were before, but under Ezra and especially under Nehemiah—who pulled hair from heads and beards, and who locked the gates of the city of Jerusalem and threatened to lay hands on them if they broke the Sabbath—finally the Jews, the descendants of Abraham, began obeying to the last detail. And the angels must have thought, well God, now you're succeeding.

Interviewer: But obeying for the wrong reason, surely?

You know what happened. We know they had a fearsome God, because in the name of that fearsome God they tortured His Son to death. So the third great question that had to be answered—because if it's misunderstood you have the seeds of rebellion in the Universe for eternity—required that God have the opportunity to demonstrate to the onlooking Universe the dire consequences of serving Him for the wrong reason, as I believe forensic people do.

Interviewer: So in thinking of what the cross of Christ accomplishes, does the death of the Son do anything to or for the Father?

It gives a basis for viewing Him as He is. It was a demonstration of the truth. But truth is never coercive. I can say no to the truth, I can say no to God's face. I can say no to God's face in the Holy Place as Lucifer did.

Interviewer: But is Jesus trying to change God the Father in any way? If you answer the question "Did Jesus have to die?" from the Father's perspective, it seems to be the answer is "No." The cross was not necessary for God.

If Jesus is God. . .

Interviewer: Can God die to change anything in God?

Doesn't need to change...

Interviewer: It doesn't make any sense...

It doesn't make any sense at all. Now the pagans thought that God *could* be—but this is basically a very pagan idea.

Interviewer: So what of phrases like “pleading the blood” etc? And Ellen White does use the idea that the Father loved the Son more because of His death.

Sure—she talks that way often. How it was a struggle for the Father to let the Son go. I think that’s to help us sense the reality of the thing. I believe that though God has unlimited foreknowledge, as each moment arises He is also infinitely capable of sensing the significance of the moment and the sorrow of the moment, and it is very, very real. I think when God at the end—and He knows it’s coming—cries over even Lucifer: “My son, my son, how can I let you go?” it will be very real anguish. So she tries to put it in terms we can understand—which is utterly Biblical.

Interviewer: So Christ is not “atoning”—to use the modern meaning?

Yes, now the modern meaning. That needs to be cleared up. This idea of atonement as payment of penalty is a modern perversion of the original idea, and I’m interested that so many forensic folk will say that this is a lot of nonsense, this business of “at-one-ment.” But they should look in the Oxford English Dictionary and read about the history of this word. There was a verb to “at one”, something, which was pronounced *atone*.

Interviewer: As for example alone (all one) and only (one-ly)?

Perfectly right. The Biblical conception of atonement is “reconciliation.” What has misled folk, again, is the thought that the word “atonement” is so rare in the New Testament. “Reconciliation” is not rare; “atonement” is used only once. (KJB) That’s the decision of the translators. That is a disservice of the *King James*—but I wouldn’t blame the *King James*. We’re the fools in limiting ourselves to only one translation.

Interviewer: What of those who would say that certainly atonement equals at-one-ment, reconciliation, the restoring of harmony and so on, but the Hebrew from which that was translated, “kaphar,” is to “cover up,” which is linked far more with a legal covering up, eliminating guilt and so on?

Well it would depend what they read into the sacrificial system in Old Testament times. And then why God would use an audio-visual system which is so prone to misunderstanding. There we’re back to Minneapolis: “Why then the law?” It has been misunderstood, and we have been paying the penalty ever since. There are grave hazards even to using the Decalogue, which commands our love—and it cannot be commanded. We need to realize that. The Decalogue was not prescribed for heaven, because parts of it would make no sense to the angels. But the principles of love and trust and peace and freedom are eternal, absolutely eternal.

Interviewer: So what about the blood in the making of the atonement which is so often spoken of in that audio-visual system, as you describe it? What role does the “blood of Christ” play in this atoning?

The emphasis on blood itself—if only we could rediscover what it meant to them in the beginning...Now we know what it became in due course of time...I saw an advertisement for a book this week—I was tempted to get it—it's a whole history of blood atonement in paganism, and other religions as well as Christianity. Blood has been used all through history, "in many and various ways." The Bible refers to the blood; I just want the truth about it. What is the meaning of His shedding of his blood? It really means He died. He died. So we want to talk about His death. It's interesting that if we talk and talk and talk about the significance of His death and don't use the word "blood," some say you don't believe in a "blood atonement." That's extraordinary to me. It's as if there really was "power in the blood," which is hematolatriy.

Interviewer: Which is what the pagan ideas were: to do something to God.

Yes. That's right!

Interviewer: So that is why seeing the sacrifice of Jesus as doing something to God is the big mistake?

Well, it implies several very serious theological mistakes on the part of those who take that view. Do we really believe that Jesus was God? Mighty God, Everlasting Father—do we believe that? By implication: "No!" We make Him lesser. And that's why some of those who opposed "the truth" at Minneapolis were Arians, like Uriah Smith. Arianism fits beautifully. But if the One who came really was co-equal and co-eternal with the Father, we have God on His knees washing His betrayer's feet with no one in between. And He hoped they'd get the message. Now He couldn't tell this at Sinai. Why couldn't He? Well, how do you address a group of people who would dance drunk around a golden calf? That's what He was dealing with. In the later books in the Old Testament, when they multiplied the rules and regulations, if you read what they were doing...!

Today I was reading Rabbi Hertz' comments on verses in Hosea—he a Jew himself, Chief Rabbi of the British Empire—he said that the things that some of the Jews were doing in those days, in harmony with the Canaanites around them, were absolutely bestial. What they were doing in sacrificing their children, and so on. It is incredible that God's own people were doing this. Now how do you deal with them? The Sermon on the Mount? No—He leaned on them, because it was necessary. "Why then the law? It was added because of transgression."

Interviewer: What else would you see as being dangerous in this idea of trying to "change" God through the death of Jesus?

Well, no one suggests anything had to be done to change Christ. They've split the Trinity. And I think to drive wedges between the members of the Trinity is a most fundamental (to use terms that are used by others) heresy. That's heresy, now. That's

unchristian. That's unbiblical. I believe Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are coequal, co-eternal, equally knowledgeable, equally loving, equally approachable...

Interviewer: So how would you explain to people the whole idea that "without the shedding of blood there is no remission" in terms of the nature of the Father?

Well in Hebrews, where it's stated, if one reads the whole section, one notices the considerable use of Jeremiah. As the law required, there were all the sacrifices, for "without the shedding of blood there was no remission of sin"—but they never stopped to think of the meaning. But what God really wants is not sacrifice at all. Remember there in Jeremiah—it's marvelous—that what He wants is you, and He wants to write His law of love on your minds and on your hearts, so He really can be your God and you can be His people. That's what He wants! And so He sent His Son, who said, "I've come to obey the Law, I've come to be an example of what it means to keep the Law."

I think that should send us back from Hebrews to Jeremiah: what is it that led the apostle to say this? God in Jeremiah says, "At first when I brought you out of Egypt I didn't give you all those things. I just said let me be your God, and you be my people. But you were so stubborn I had to use these other measures. I had you build the Tabernacle, and I had you build the sacred box, but someday when you have pastors who will give you the truth (Jeremiah 3), you won't remember the box, you'll never make another one, it'll never come to mind, because you'll really know me then, and I'll have written my Law in your hearts and in your minds, and I'll be your God and you'll be my people. And if you're worried about forgiveness—of course I've forgiven you." That Jeremiah 31 is marvelous, and forgiveness is tacked on to the end. The least problem for God is to forgive. But to get his Law in our minds and hearts has been a terribly difficult problem.

Interviewer: So the shedding of blood is not a precondition for God in terms of His forgiveness?

No. Then it had to be clarified and demonstrated that to obey God for the wrong reason can turn us into His enemies. That had to be shown—and God's way is not to *say* it will be that way but to *show* it will be that way. The death of Christ made that plain—shockingly plain to the onlooking Universe. And so the seeds of distrust and rebelliousness were eliminated from the Universe. Of course, there was no distrust, no rebelliousness, among the loyal ones. He was *confirming* their trust.

Interviewer: Because they still had questions in their minds?

That's right—that could have led to rebellion. But when it comes to us down here, the same truth that confirms the trust of the Universe—and will keep it secure for eternity—is exactly the same truth that we need to come back to trust Him, to stop rebelling, and become willing to listen. It's the same truth, it's the same gospel—the

angels need the gospel just as we do. Except we need it more, because we have distrusted, we have rebelled. So God dealt with sin: He sent His son to do away with sin. The forensic says He sent His son to forgive sin; He sent His son to pay the price of sin. No, He sent His Son...the Greek is simply “concerning” sin, and there are many translations of course. I love the translation “He sent His Son to do away with sin.” Forgiving it, paying for it, remitting it, does not do away with it.

Interviewer: What would you say to people who say God is the one who defines His law—that’s an expression of His character—and part of His law is that sinners have to die?

That it’s arbitrary? He just made it that way? One could handle that trivially, but I think it’s serious. One does have to go back and consider the subject of freedom, that apparently God values nothing higher than freedom, and He has opted for freedom—He could have run the Universe another way. He has evidently opted for freedom, regardless of the price. Now you cannot have freedom without order, and we all know that from experience. Nor also, I would say, without self-discipline. Trust, trustworthiness—you can’t have freedom without that, it’s been confirmed. Now it also follows that if we choose to be disorderly, and untrustworthy, and unloving, there will be destructive consequences both in this life, and terribly to come. But not at the hands of our gracious God—all He has to do is to leave us to reap the consequences of our disorderliness. And we’ve seen that from experience too. We know that.

God has determined to run a free Universe. He has refused to budge on that. Now the interesting thing is that if we all lived as described in the Decalogue, there would be perfect security, perfect freedom. Everybody can be trusted; nobody cheats, steals or tells a lie; nobody even wants to sin; everybody loves everybody else, and love is patient, kind, and all those other good things. And that’s why if God changes that law at all, freedom will be diminished. The guarantee of eternal freedom is that God will forever run His Universe as described in the Ten Commandments.

Interviewer: Prescriptive rather than proscriptive, then?

That’s right. Though He had to phrase it that way because of transgression. He was simply saying, “Look, this Universe has to remain orderly, you have to be trustworthy, loving people. We all must be, or we cannot have freedom. And if you choose to go some other way...I’ll work on you!” God makes it as hard as possible to be lost.

I do believe that God made—if you want, you can call it an arbitrary decision—a sovereign decision: it was a decision for freedom. Now that’s the only paradox I’m willing to recognize. He is dogmatic about freedom. But that’s the only thing you can safely be dogmatic about—because you won’t hurt anybody.

Interviewer: Is there any way in which God could have made it so that everybody could have had free choice, free to go their own way, and free to disobey him and go on living?

Yes.

Interviewer: What would have happened?

The Universe would have eventually become a vast penitentiary, with everybody in solitary confinement so as not to bother anybody else, and God and the angels would have become prison wardens. So I see God appealing to the Universe: "Look, I could keep you all alive forever. I kept the Devil alive all these years: I could, I could. But I refuse to be a prison warden, and I refuse to ask all of you to become prison guards." And we say, that's all right. We agree that the only alternative is to let these people reap the consequences—and you know what's going to happen. You say, how do we know? Go to Gethsemane, go to the cross: that's what's going to happen. They will die.

Would we want Him to change that? That's the question. I don't want Him to change freedom.

Interviewer: You obviously would not want to exist in that situation once you realized where it took you...

No. So when people say you don't have a sovereign God, I say absolutely sovereign, and He can run His Universe any way He wants. But He chooses to run it with freedom, which requires mutual trust. There is no other way.

Interviewer: There are some who say "Yes, I understand all that, but I get many benefits from seeing the death of Christ in other ways. I would rather not just have one theory of the atonement; I would like to be true to all the Scriptural pictures, and the legal view is one of them. We know that in our experience when you bring up children you need to correct them, punish and chastise them at times. Surely isn't this a demonstration of God?"

This is very Biblical: whom the Lord loves He disciplines. That runs all through Scripture. Some maybe hear only a small part of this. That's why I prefer, rather than giving a "systematic theology," to say, "Let's go through the Bible book by book." We're going to run into discipline right away, sometimes even as severe as death. But it's always the first-sleep death. The second death is not discipline, for discipline is for instruction, and the second death is not for that. Unless you want to say that the punishment of the wicked in the fire at the end (which would require a miracle to preserve them in the flames) is going to discipline the onlooking Universe, and make sure that sin does not arise again. If God then can accomplish peace and unity by terrifying people, He might just as well have done it in the beginning and Jesus did not need to die.

The interesting thing is that those who hold to that view do not need the death of Christ. If God can accomplish the control of His children by might and power, He could have done it in the beginning when Satan rebelled. He could simply have exercised His sovereign power right then.

You say, "But it might have been misunderstood." And those same people will say, "You have no business seeking to understand—the Sovereign Will can do whatever He wishes." That's another Universe, and that's another God.

Interviewer: In connection with Anselm's penal satisfaction theory of the atonement, one commentator has written: "Many people today would regard it as a weakness in St. Anselm's argument that he cannot easily explain why it was necessary for our Lord to die." Which is what we're talking about here and now. You can't explain why Jesus had to die in that context.

In the trust-healing model, there was no other way. It exalts the cross.

Interviewer: As a lesson, as a demonstration in providing answers?

Yes. Now those who call it Moral Influence Theory have no Great Controversy, or at best a limited one. So all they see in what we've been saying is "How very loving of God to do this, and it wins us to love Him." That's really trivializing this way of understanding things, but that is usually said by someone who stresses Reformation theology, has been especially influenced by Luther, and who de-emphasizes the issues in the Great Controversy—so all he sees is the demonstration of God's love: Abelard. But we're talking about three other things that were never mentioned by Abelard: the questions that divided the Universe. These are of enormous consequence, these are of vast significance. If these questions are not answered, there is no peace and security in the Universe, and Paul says so. Why is Colossians 1—and Ephesians 1 and 3—why are they not included at the heart of the argument? "He shed His blood to bring peace in heavenly places."

Interviewer: Very often the criticism against Moral Influence Theory is that it reduces Christ's death to that of a mere innocent man. How do you react to that?

Well it certainly isn't true of the trust, healing, Great Controversy model of the plan of salvation. When Jesus fell dying to the ground in Gethsemane, it had to be someone God could not be misunderstood as killing. If it had been Gabriel, the legalist would say, "He was not good enough." No: if a mere creature were to die, even a sinless angel, the Universe would still not know but that God had killed him. It was no less than God dying in Gethsemane and on the cross, or we don't have the answers to all the questions.

Interviewer: This idea of extrinsic salvation—that God could have died on the other side of the Universe and the results would have been the same...

Then He—God—needed it.

Interviewer: The forensic view then is really saying that God needed—whatever terms you're going to use—to be placated, appeased, propitiated by the sacrifice of the Son, that in some way the death of Christ changed something in the Father. What of this?

Well then I like to ask them, “Do you think God needed it?” To which they may answer, “No, no. Justice required it.”

Interviewer: What is justice?

Now what do you mean, “Justice required it?” “Well, if God had not done it, He would not be just.” Why is it important that God be seen to be just? “Well, that’s the basis of our trust.” Now you’re back to the other way of looking at things—that God did this to demonstrate that He can be trusted. And it’s interesting that Romans 3:25,26 says that the death of Christ was to show that God Himself is righteous—and therefore can set us right. The idea that He’s demonstrating the truth about His character is not palatable to forensic people, but there it is in Romans 3...Incidentally, the same Greek word is sometimes translated justice, sometimes righteousness. No difference!

But there are many other questions one can raise: what if I look at God killing an innocent party so that He can save me? That doesn’t obviously look just and righteous, does it?

Interviewer: How do you get around that?

They will say, “You are not capable of making that judgment. God says it is just and righteous.” I’ll say, “Well then, He didn’t need to convince me of His righteousness, He didn’t need to show me anything. All He had to say was “I am a righteous God, and what I do is righteous because I am doing it, and I say it’s just.” Then you don’t need the cross. All God has to do is do what He wants to do and tell me that it’s just. And now we’re back to servant-talk. The friend will say, “This idea of killing an innocent party so you can forgive me doesn’t look just and ethical.” And God replies, “I sense you ask that in all reverence. You are my friend like Abraham and Moses. Let me tell you why Jesus had to die.” The servant says, “I wouldn’t presume to ask. You don’t need to tell me anything.”

How can we dare, how can we be so ungrateful, how can we be so foolish, to reject or ignore God’s incredibly gracious and costly explanation? In order to understand why Jesus died, I must accept God’s invitation to go right to the cross, in my imagination, and watch Jesus die, and hear His cry, and see how the Father is involved. Then I must fit that back into what I read in all the Bible.

Interviewer: Did Jesus die a “substitutionary death”?

In a way, yes. Either He had to die, or we would die. But even if all sinners were to die, it would only answer the first of our three questions—does sin lead to death? But that would leave the Universe without any answers to questions two and three. The death of Christ answered all the questions. His death was of infinitely more significance than the death of all sinners put together.

Interviewer: Which gives us such an insight into the mind of God Himself. Thanks for sharing your understanding of “Why did Jesus have to die?”