



Why Did Jesus Die?

by Don Everts

My name is Don, and I am a Christian. One of the things you will learn about me in this booklet is that I am fascinated by the cross. Now this may not come as much of a surprise to you: Christians everywhere seem to be into the cross.

I've seen the cross on coffee mugs, diamond-encrusted watches, and even silk ties! I myself own a few crosses: some of them are even kind of special to me. I have one cross that is made of bark from a tree in Russia woven together into the shape of a cross. A friend gave that cross to me, and it is one of my most precious possessions.

The fact is the cross (two simple lines, one vertical, one horizontal) can be recognized the world over. The cross is everywhere. It's on many church buildings, and has been throughout history. It's also found on people's necks, and has been throughout the centuries. When you stop and think about it, this is an odd sort of fame for an instrument of capital punishment! And yet the cross has obviously caught on.

But why? Why has the church adopted the cross as its central symbol? Why did Jesus' death by cross become such a focal point for Christians? Why do some Christians like me describe the cross as "precious"? What exactly does the cross stand for?

In the end, all these queries lead to a single, simple question: Why did Jesus die?

The Basics of the Cross

There is not much to be said about the mechanics of the cross; there's no need to rehearse the torturous qualities of the cross. The cross as a political and judicial instrument came about in an historical setting: more than 2,000 years ago the Romans had control of an expansive empire—it covered all the lands surrounding and extending from the Mediterranean. They had need to enforce their rule. (If you lose control, you lose ... well, taxes, among other things.) And so control was kept through Roman might and displays of that Roman might.

And so a public display was made of those that broke Roman law. You had no blogs or newspapers or ubiquitous, unending text crawls on the bottom of the TV screen ... so how do you make an example of someone—really get your message out there? Well, apparently you kill them: publicly, painfully, slowly. And you do this at the cross-roads, where many people pass by every day. You put your Roman control on display.

The cross was an elegant solution, really. No need for pulleys or sharp blades or electricity or leather straps. Two hefty boards, one vertical, one horizontal. You nail the hands and feet to the boards in such a way that the condemned will definitely die (of suffocation actually), but only after a lengthy display of torturous hanging. Again, there's not much that needs to be said about the mechanics of the cross.

Jesus' Death on the Cross

The real question that needs to be asked is: "Why?" Why did Jesus suffocate to death on a cross? And why is that important enough that two thin lines representing these hefty boards can now be recognized the world over? Why is it important enough that people willingly wear models of this tool of Roman oppression around their dainty necks?

Interestingly, from the very beginning, the cross was central to the message about Jesus. The apostle Paul, one of the earliest Christian pastors and missionaries, a man who took great pains to carry his message as extensively as he could despite opposition and persecution, summarized his message this way: “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2). “To crucify” is a Greek verb that simply means to kill by cross. So Paul’s entire message is Jesus and the fact that Jesus had been killed on a cross.

But why was the cross part of the story so upfront and central for Paul? It would seem Jesus’ death by cross might be a source of embarrassment—especially when you consider that in the Jewish Scriptures it was declared that being killed by hanging from a tree meant you were cursed by God. It would seem that if your leader had been killed hanging on a cross you might want to hide that detail.

Instead, Paul put it on the very surface. Was Paul merely leveraging Jesus’ death to gain adherents to the church? Is the cross simply about martyrdom? Or is there another reason that the church, from the beginning, celebrated and broadcasted the fact that Jesus died by suffocation on a cross?

The Messiah Must Suffer

I’d like to take you back to a significant encounter between Jesus and his followers that I think will help us begin to peer into the question of the cross. In Mark chapter 8, we have the record of Jesus and his disciples discussing how the crowds are answering that ever important question: Who is Jesus? And after hearing what conclusions the crowds are coming to, Jesus asks, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Christ” (Mark 8:29).

Now the Christ, or *Messiah* in Hebrew, was a title that the Hebrew prophets used to describe “the coming one.” You see, God had promised again and again through the prophets that he was going to send someone to the Israelites to save the day—this was the coming one.

The word Messiah meant “anointed,” and was the word the prophets used when they were emphasizing that the coming one would be victorious in saving the day—because he was anointed by God! So Peter, by saying “you are the Christ” is saying: you are the one we’ve been waiting for, you’re the coming one—the victorious Messiah!

And this is the surprising thing that Jesus said then to Peter, “And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him. And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he said this plainly” (Mark 8:30-32a).

He said this plainly. You see right when Peter gets it right (perhaps with stars in his eyes, visions of a glorious path of unending victory before the Messiah) Jesus in essence says, “Yes, but remember everything the prophets said about the coming one.” And then Jesus uses this other title, “the Son of Man,” which the prophets used when emphasizing that the coming one would take the people’s suffering onto himself.

The path to victory is sure, but it leads through the land of suffering. “It is right to call me Messiah,” Jesus seems to be saying. “It is also right to call me the Son of Man. And the Son of Man must suffer.” Jesus indicated this plainly. Jesus’ suffering, his death by cross was not an option; it was not an accident ... it was necessary. The cross was the plan for victory.

Peter was shocked at Jesus’ words. Suffer?! Peter actually pushed back at Jesus: *You are going to be victorious, not suffer!* But it turns out this had been prophesied all along. As the prophet Isaiah had foretold about the coming one,

“Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed” (Isaiah 53:4-5).

According to the prophet Isaiah, the coming Messiah’s suffering would bring two things: peace and healing. But how can one man’s “chastisement” bring someone else peace? And how can one man’s “stripes” (marks of suffering) heal other people? Even if Jesus really was the coming one ... how could his own suffering and death on a cross actually bring peace or healing to others? Such a sacrifice might be well intentioned, but ... what difference could it really make?

The Problem of Sin

It was foretold for hundreds of years that the coming one would suffer, and the result would be peace and healing. Now, the need for peace implies that there is currently some sort of conflict. And the need for healing implies there's currently some sort of sickness. If God was sending the coming one to save the people, what was the conflict and the sickness that they needed to be saved from? In short, the people needed to be saved from sin.

The Bible teaches that in the beginning there was no sin—or ensuing conflict and sickness. The world was once elegant: people lived in careful harmony with the earth. They got along with each other; there was creative work for their minds and good strong labor for their hands, and they were at peace with God, their Creator. There was no conflict and no sickness in the beginning.

But then something happened. Something ... absurd and awkward. Something that shifted the course of history on this planet and introduced intense conflict and insidious sickness. In a word: sin. The original word “sin” simply meant “to miss the mark.” And the “mark” that God had set for humans was enjoying his creation, living in harmony with each other, walking peacefully with God, heeding his wise, loving, fatherly counsel. That was the mark.

So, sin came into the world when humans first doubted God's counsel, eyeing the shiny, though death-inducing, forbidden fruit, and took a bite. In this way they missed the mark. They had sinned. Sin was, and is, absurd, rebellious ... and death-inducing.

Yes, death-inducing. Sin is that significant. You see, the Bible teaches that human sin has unfortunate natural consequences—everyday ones, and eternal ones.

The Everyday Consequences of Sin

Christians refer to the moment in history when sin entered the human equation as “the fall.” An ominous sounding phrase, but in the end, quite apt. When Adam and Eve first sinned, it was as if history was cracked, and every day since that day has been different. How humans feel, how they relate with each other, how they relate with God, how they interact with creation itself—all of this changed. It was as if creation itself cracked, and everyday life began to spoil immediately.

Consider that Adam and Eve started bickering immediately after eating the fruit (there wasn't harmony anymore). They felt guilty and ashamed, so instead of spending their day laboring creatively upon the earth, they frantically busied themselves trying to hide from God (whose fatherly presence they felt too ashamed, too naked, too self-conscious to be in). In this way, sin had natural consequences on everyday life.

If you've ever seen a bird trapped in an oil spill, you have a decent (though sobering) image of the everyday effects of sin. Birds are incredible things: they are graceful and light. Their intricate feathers are an engineering marvel—just the right balance of weight and strength make it so that birds can take flight. And what a sight it is! To see a bird (or flock of birds) in the air is awe-inspiring. When you see a bird in flight, you are seeing them do what they were created to do!

But a bird that has gotten trapped in an oil spill? Their intricate feathers are gummed up and weighted down. A bird in oil can't fly at all, and it struggles to even walk around on its two legs: its weight is off, its balance is off. Its ecosystem is awry, making it harder to find fish or insects to eat. Nothing about it seems right.

That's a decent image of the human situation described in the Bible after the fall. There truly were natural consequences of sin entering the world: sin gums up the whole of creation, spoiling humans and their relationships with each other and with their Creator. Sin is like a sickness that spread like a curse across all of creation. Once sin entered the world, humans just weren't living as they were created to live.

This sickness doesn't feel right, of course (we intuitively sense we're meant for something better), and so we are tempted to try and clean ourselves off. But it can be hard for a bird covered in oil to clean itself off. In fact, this is where the imagery breaks down because, as Jesus saw it, the sickness of sin was actually *inside* all humans, not outside of them.

This is why Jesus paid so little attention to the careful ritual cleansing practices of his day. And the people around Jesus noticed, especially the religious leaders who were very careful about washing their bodies on a regular basis and ritually

washing their hands before eating. As Jesus saw it, the sickness of sin was inside of each human. When pressed on why he didn't pay more careful attention to ritual cleansing before a meal, Jesus stated it plainly, "There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him" (Mark 7:15).

When pressed, Jesus got a little graphic. "Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?" (Mark 7:18b-19a). This is why Jesus wasn't concerned about ritual washing, but was very concerned about the sickness within people. "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person" (Mark 7:20b-23).

That's an interesting list of words: there is no question in us when we read them that that's sort of our default as humans, and there is no question in us that we weren't designed to live that way. The awkward human actions in this list are not unlike the unnatural, awkward movements of a bird trying to move while covered in oil. This sickness of sin causes humans to live life in a way they were not really created for.

I have felt these everyday effects of sin myself. Even early in life, even before finishing high school, I became keenly aware of how the fall and the sickness of sin was affecting my life. I felt like a bird stuck in oil. I was a mess. I had a deep, secret self-hatred growing inside of me, which tainted how I perceived God and related with him.

Looking back, I realize how this growing self-hatred began to affect how I related with others. I actually spent almost my entire freshman year in isolation. I would go through whole days without uttering a single word to anyone. Lunch time was the worst: I would usually take my food outside to eat where I wouldn't be surrounded by tables of laughing people. This was Oregon, so that means I often ate my lunch in the rain. A pretty sad picture, I know.

By the end of freshman year, my involvement in tennis and the speech team planted some seeds of relationships ... one of which began to bloom into a desperate, unhealthy dating relationship. By the end of my sophomore year, I was a mess. I was a lot more like a bird covered in oil than a bird in graceful flight. I experienced first-hand that sin has everyday consequences. And as if that weren't bad enough, it turns out sin also has eternal consequences.

The Eternal Consequences of Sin

Not only does sin have a way of ruining your day, it also ruins your eternity. You see the Bible teaches that there are reverberating spiritual consequences for sin that echo out into eternity. As it describes this natural consequence in one place, "For the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23a). Sin has a "wage." It earns something, results in something: death. You see, the Bible teaches that one day everyone will stand in the Father's presence once again, and he will judge our sin. He will respond to it. He must. Sin has a natural consequence, a wage.

I know it's not popular to think of this, and it can seem so dated and so puritan to speak of sin and judgment and eternal consequences ... but there are perhaps moments of clarity when we catch a glimpse of our own guilt, when we have a sense of the rightness of the wrath that we have earned. I remember such a time in high school. I had a sense then, a muted, though palpable sense, of what was due to me, of the wages I had earned in my life.

I got an unforgettable glimpse of this one hot summer afternoon when I was swimming in the pool of our apartment complex. I was swimming underwater with my eyes opened and my older sister, Vicky, swam across the pool in front of me. Seeing her swimming, I had a sense of how thin and frail and precious she was. She only weighed 85 pounds. It just struck me in that glimpse how dignified and precious she was.

And in that moment, I had a sense of my own guilt. You see, earlier that week we were all hanging out in the living room watching TV. I don't remember what we were watching, but I remember that my sister said something and, mis-hearing her, I thought she had said something bad about me. I was incensed! I jumped up and started kicking her until I could make sense of what she was saying, while she fended off my kicks. I had misheard her. She hadn't said anything about me at all. At the time, I had just stopped kicking her and sat back down.

But here in the pool, seeing her, being struck by how delicate and dignified she was, I knew my guilt. I knew I deserved to be judged for what I had done. On the outside, people saw me as a quiet but successful student, a pleasant teenager. On the inside, I knew my sins had earned me something. And I knew that judgment was, in the end, earned. And right.

The Bible tells us that at its core every sin does damage to one of God's precious children. We aren't really understanding sin clearly until we see that every sin earns a wage, piles up wrath. And the Bible tells us, simply and clearly, that a day is coming when there will be a reckoning. And that day of reckoning is right. As the Bible teaches, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done" (2 Corinthians 5:10a).

The Bible teaches that we *all* have earned judgment. We're all guilty at some level—none of us is getting a good grade. As it says in Romans, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). This is what the Bible teaches explicitly and what each human soul, I believe, knows implicitly. Our every sin places us in deeper and deeper conflict with God. The early Christians talked about this spiritual conflict: "But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed" (Romans 2:5).

As if that weren't sobering enough to consider, we might as well face the full picture: the Bible also goes on to clarify that there's nothing we can do to reduce that conflict. There's nothing we can do to get rid of or lessen this wrath that is rightly building up, nothing we can do to erase our guilt. Our sins are what they are; there's no negotiating, no spinning, no pretending. Our sins have nonnegotiable consequences. In this way, our predicament reminds me of static electricity.

When I was a kid, I thought static electricity was hilarious. My brother and sister and I used to drag our feet around and shock each other. Static build-up is funny, right? Well, then I moved to Colorado. Now, Colorado is at a very high altitude and the air is very dry. Which means that all your surroundings are already super charged, even before you ever scuff your feet on the ground. Which means, I found out, that just a little bit of scuffling on your part leads to very surprising, painful shocks. I hadn't lived in Colorado for more than a week before I learned to dread getting in my car. If you've ever lived in Colorado, you know what I'm referring to!

I'm going to my car one day and go to open the door and WHACK! It was like lightning came from the handle into my soul. And every time I went to get in my car, this happened. And I would try to lose the charge, I would wipe my hands on my jeans, try to get rid of the charge, but here's the thing: you can't negotiate with physics. There's no talking your way out of a static charge. It is there, building up, until you touch metal (something that conducts electricity).

It's a little like that with sin. You and I have been born into a world that is already supercharged, and our sins (our own scuffling about on the carpet of this world) have very real consequences. We've all sinned and missed the mark. We're all guilty. And there's no negotiating with the spiritual physics; try as we might, we cannot lose the charge (through good deeds, through whatever): we can't get rid of the natural consequence of our sins.

This is the clear-eyed narrative of history that the Bible gives us. Sin is our root problem, and it has everyday as well as eternal consequences.

Victoriously Saving the Day, Through Suffering

Enter the cross of Jesus into the story. Jesus suffered on the cross to save people from the consequences of sin. The Bible tells us that on the cross the natural judgment for our bad choices came down on Jesus as he hung on the cross. As Peter would later write, with a nod to the Isaiah prophecy: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree" (1 Peter 2:24a). The cross was the ultimate conductor of this charge of judgment. This is why Jesus said he "must suffer."

Jesus paid the wage our sins had earned and he cleaned our slates. In this way, the cross made peace between humans and God possible again. All who come to Jesus and embrace him get "grounded," as it were, through Jesus. Paul described what happened as God taking our personal debt and due consequences and "This he set aside, nailing it to the cross" (Colossians 2:14b). Remember that prophecy from Isaiah about the Son of Man, "upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace"? Jesus died on the cross to absorb all the wrath that we had built up. He paid our debt.

Something real, and really important, happened on the cross. In that moment, history was shifted again—only this time in a good way. From that moment on, it became possible for people to become reconciled to God. No more conflict. No more judgment. No more guilt. As the early church celebrated this reality: "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him" (John 3:36). It is faith in Jesus, trusting in him, that makes this peace possible.

Jesus died so that all those who trust in him can be justified, forever forgiven. He died so we could experience peace. As the earliest Christians put it, God made “peace by the blood of his cross” (Colossians 1:20b). Sins were atoned for by Jesus’ sacrifice.

But that’s not the whole story. Remember Isaiah said that the coming one would suffer so that people could have peace *and healing*. “With his stripes we are healed.” When the huge backpack of guilt is taken off your shoulders, it is possible to start healing. There’s something about being reunited with God, entering into relationship with God, that has a healing effect over time.

It turns out it is possible to start washing the icky oil off of us awkward birds. And being freed from guilt, being embraced by God—that’s what starts the healing process. When I began to trust Jesus in high school, not only did I experience the freedom that comes from having all your guilt taken away (high school is hard enough without a huge backpack of guilt and wrath!), but I began to slowly experience the healing that comes from living in God’s embrace. That self-hatred started to be replaced by love. My new relationship with God started to change how I related with others.

This healing takes time, but is marvelous to experience. There’s no easy or quick way to remove the icky foreign substance of oil from a bird’s delicate feathers. It takes time and gentleness to massage the oil from the feathers. Jesus’ death on the cross really does make peace and healing possible.

The Crux of History ... and Me

Why did Jesus die? You see, in the whole sweep of history, Jesus dying on the cross is what changed everything. It is the “crux” of the story of all history: the central point, the pivot of the narrative.

I find it interesting that “crux” comes from the Latin word for cross. It is through those two hefty planks that a corner is turned. No wonder the cross was so central and not hidden for the early Christians; no wonder it’s caught on like it has! As James S. Stewart (a Scottish preacher) once put it, “in the fact of Christ God has bridged the gulf between two worlds, has shattered the massive tyranny of the powers of darkness, has changed radically and forever the human prospect and the total aspect of the world, and brought life and immortality to light” (James S. Stewart, *Heralds of God*, 67).

Of course, these are such large, universal, and historical claims. But for the individual Christian the cross becomes an immensely personal, imminent reality. Really, the cross is all about love. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:16-17).

The cross for many Christians, including me, is not just a reminder of an ancient event that took place outside of Jerusalem. It is a reminder of God’s love for me. It is a sign of how I am now forgiven and not guilty. It is the marker of my new relationship with God. It is the source of the slow healing I am experiencing over time. In this way, the cross is the marking of an event, a turned corner in my own life.

That’s why I collect crosses; that’s why they are precious to me. They not only point to the crux of the story of all of history ... they also point to the crux of the story of my life.

Why did Jesus die? To shatter the massive tyranny of darkness, creating a corner in history. And for me—because I needed peace and healing.

It was trusting Jesus that brought the cross out of history and into my own everyday life. Trust is at the core of the biblical concept of “believing,” and that is the key. As we read in John’s Gospel, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him” (John 3:36). That’s a strong enough claim to make you wonder what it means to believe. In another booklet we will ask, “What is faith?”

But for now, from the violence of Roman oppression to the subtleties of Hebrew prophecy to oil-stricken birds to static electricity and the story of an insecure 16-year-old ... I think we have plenty of background to spend time contemplating this historic, personal question: “Why did Jesus die?”

Don Everts is an award-winning author of more than a dozen books about Jesus of Nazareth and the adventure of being one of his disciples. As a college minister, ordained pastor, and friendly neighbor, Don has been getting into conversations about Jesus for over 25 years.



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