

**WHY JESUS HAD TO DIE****ROMANS 1:18-32**

Imagine this scene with me. It's a beautiful summer day and you're enjoying the sunshine and fresh air while you fish from the end of a pier. Suddenly, an absolute stranger comes up behind you and then jumps over you into the water. He begins to flail around and yell, "I'm drowning because I love you! I'm drowning because I love you!" You think he's kidding or has had too much to drink. So, you ignore him and continue to fish. But, lo and behold, if he doesn't drown after all! After his lifeless body gets pulled out of the water, the friends of this man gather around his corpse. They, too, claim that he died in order to show you his love. Now, I guess you'd be scratching your head and saying something like, "This is just too weird. Here I was minding my own business, and this idiot willingly jumps into the water and starts yelling, 'I'm drowning because I love you!' How is that an act of love? How is that showing me love?"

I wonder if some people have the same kind of reaction when we try to explain to them that Jesus died on a cross for them. People might well ask, "Why was it necessary for Jesus to die for me? Sure, He was a good man and a great teacher. He got on the bad side of some bad people. No doubt it was a crime Jesus was ever executed, but how does His death on the cross have anything to do with me? What do I have to do with it?" Perhaps you've heard someone say, "Well, it's because we're all sinners and Jesus died on the cross to show us that He loves us." Chances are that kind of answer raises even more questions. "Why can't God just forgive people their sins and mistakes? If someone asks my forgiveness for something he or she did to me, I just say, 'OK, I forgive you.' I don't have to die in order to forgive them. Why does God's forgiveness of me depend on Jesus' death on the cross? And how is Jesus' death on the cross an act of love?" Those are pretty valid questions.

"The Cross: More Than A Piece Of Wood." That's the title of a message series I'm offering during Lent – this 40 day period of time leading up to Holy Week during which followers of Jesus all over the world reflect again on the meaning of Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection. We all know that the cross is symbolic of all that the Christian faith is about. We know Jesus died on the cross. But today I want to try and answer this question, "Why did Jesus have to die?" There's at least two good answers to that good question. The first answer has to do with understanding more fully God's attitude toward sin – my sin, your sin, all sin. The other answer has to do with the greatness and goodness of God Himself. Now, the great Christian leader, Paul, helps us understand more about all of this in a letter he wrote to followers of Jesus living in the city of Rome. Why did Jesus have to die? First of all...

**TO SAVE ME FROM MYSELF.**

When you see sin the way God sees sin, you'll understand why Jesus had to die. Most of us tend to see sin only as the big, bad stuff: murder, robbery, adultery, rape, or taking advantage of poor people. Of course, those are all sins. But God's definition of sin is far broader and deeper. What we just read in Romans is a good example. Paul describes there what happens when you leave God out of your life, but he's not trying to

be comprehensive, by any means. Contrary to what a growing number of people in our culture choose to believe, the Bible teaches here that the practice of homosexual sex is a sin. True enough. But did you know that the Bible also teaches elsewhere that any kind of sex outside of marriage is just as sinful in God's eyes? Murder is mentioned in what we read, but so also is being envious, deceitful, greedy, arrogant, and even being disobedient to one's parents. And gossiping is a sin, too? That's what God says in His Word. Jesus said that even the attitudes of your mind can be as displeasing to God as actual acts of sin. For example, to hate someone is just as much a sin as killing someone. To develop and dwell in a lustful fantasy about someone other than your spouse is as much a sin as the actual act of sex outside of marriage. And then there are those things that we should have done but we just didn't do them. Sometimes they're called "sins of omission." We didn't show love when we should have. We didn't speak up to defend someone when we should have. We didn't show compassion or kindness when we could have. Sin is simply the breaking of any moral law of God in a thought, a deed, an attitude, a word, or an action.

When you begin to see how broad and deep is God's definition of sin, then it makes a lot of sense when the Bible says, "For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard." (Rom 3:23 NLT) All of us and each of us are sinful human beings many, many times over! Sin is a universal human condition. So, what's God's perspective on your sin and mine? Any sin and every sin is an expression of rebellion against God. If you do something wrong to another person, you sin against God because that person is made in God's image. If you do something to hurt yourself, you sin against God because you're made in His image. Whenever you commit any kind of a sin – a thought, an attitude, or an action – something beautiful is made ugly, something wonderful is made sordid, something pure is made dirty, something loving is made hateful, and something true is made false.

We just don't see sin the way God does. For instance, we tend to minimize our sin. We say or think, "Come on, now, a little sin here, a little sin there. What's the big deal? Everybody does it! Why take it so seriously?" Well, for the simple reason that God takes any and all sin very seriously and it's His universe. Bill Hybels, a well-known pastor and author, was preaching on sin at his church one Sunday much like I'm doing today. After the service, a salesman came forward to tell Hybels that he didn't see himself as sinner. Hybels asked him if he'd been absolutely faithful to his wife. The man hedged a bit, "Well, I travel a lot, you know..." Then Hybels asked him about his expense account. "Oh, everybody stretches the truth a bit," the man said defensively. Finally, Hybels asked him if he ever overstated or exaggerated the benefits of what he was selling. "That's standard practice in the industry," the man told him. Hybels said, "Well, let's see. You've told me you're an adulterer, a cheater, and a liar. The man was appalled by Hybel's insensitivity. "How dare you call me those awful things!" Your sin is never something small to God. It all depends on your perspective. How many of you have ever jumped off a high dive? I jumped... once. I read about a young man who was all excited about diving of what was said to be the tallest high diving board in the world. It didn't look too bad until he climbed all the way up there, walked out on the board, and looked down. One look made him humbly climb back down! No, sin doesn't

look all that serious at our level, but God sees it from His perspective and He hates it with all of His being.

We don't see sin the way God does. We try to escape personal responsibility for them. Karl Menninger, a psychiatrist, wrote a well-known book entitled "Whatever Became of Sin?" He pointed out that many things society used to refer to as "sins" have now become "crimes." The responsibility of dealing with them passed from the Church to the state. Other things society used to call "sins" have now been redefined as sicknesses or diseases that need treatment. Is being drunk a sin or a disease? Is being an habitual user of pornography a sin or a sickness? If by calling an addiction of any kind an illness we try to escape personal responsibility for ceasing that behavior, we aren't being honest with ourselves or God. We don't see sin the way God does. We want to transfer the responsibility for our "issues" to other people or even society as a whole. "I'm the way I am because of how my parents treated me. I did this because I grew up poor. I did this because I was spoiled. I act this way because of how others have mistreated me. I'm just genetically predisposed to be the way I am. I can't help it." Friends, I'm not trying to oversimplify why we sin. Sure, there are many reasons and factors to be considered. Nevertheless, the Bible makes it clear that – at the end of the day - each of us stand before God fully and personally responsible for how our own rebellion against Him has manifested itself.

Why does God hate sin so much? Because of what it does to you, me, and every part of His creation. First of all, sin enslaves. Did you notice something Paul said three times in the passage we read? "Therefore, God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts.... Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts.... He gave them over to a depraved mind...." (Rom 1:24, 26, 28 NIV) What does that mean? It simply means that if we're intent on living life our own way, God will allow us to taste fully the bitter consequences of that decision. He'll allow sin to enslave you. The more you commit a particular sin, the easier it is to keep on committing it and the harder it is to stop it. Addictions to alcohol or drugs is a prime example of that principle, but it applies to just about any kind of sin issue. Start to gossip and it will get easier to gossip. Soon you won't be able to stop gossiping. Allow yourself to lie, and you will evolve from telling white lies to very serious lies. Pretty soon you'll lie even if telling the truth would benefit you! Begin to hate people of other races and the end result is that you'll become a slave to the terrible sin of racism. Feed on pornography and soon pornography will control you. Tell yourself there's nothing wrong about focusing on money and the things money can buy. In the end you'll be a slave to money and things.

Why does God hate so sin so much? Secondly, sin destroys. It's probably easy to see how sin can destroy your mind and your inner spirit. When we ignore God or deny His rightful claim on our lives, Paul says here we become fools. We ignore the blatantly obvious and pay for it in a multitude of ways. Sin can even have a devastating effect on your physical body. Sometimes people make the ignorant assumption that earlier times in human history were more moral or puritanical than our own. The Church of Jesus Christ was launched in an incredibly decadent period of human history. It's no accident that sexual sin and its consequences figure so prominently in this passage. Fourteen of

the first fifteen Roman emperors practiced homosexual sex. Agrippina, the wife of the Emperor Claudius (who reigned during Paul's lifetime), would regularly leave the palace in order to serve in a local brothel just for the heck of it. Sin destroys even this beautiful, incredible physical body God created for you. Sexual sin leads to all kinds of venereal diseases. The abuse of food leads to obesity, on the one hand, and eating disorders like anorexia or bulimia, on the other hand. Chronic anxiety and stress appear to enable cancer, heart problems and other physical problems. Now, please, I'm not suggesting that all disease or illness is the result of your personal sins! But the fact remains that sin does indeed have a destructive effect even on your body.

Why does God hate sin so much? Third, sin kills. It kills your mind, your spirit, your relationships with others, and even your body in the end. God says, "For the wages of sin is death..." (Rom 6:23 NLT) In the end, the point is pretty simple and straightforward. If you break the laws of agriculture, your crops will fail. If you break the laws of construction, your building will fall down. If you break the laws of health, your body will suffer. If you break the laws of God, you will die. And each of us and all of us here have done exactly that. We've all broken some of the laws of God – small ones, big ones, just yesterday, or decades ago. As a result, we're all sinners.

David McCasland, the author, remembers as a ten year old boy, being a part of a camping group as it was hiking on a scorching Oklahoma afternoon. The boys all had canteens, but the water was going fast. At last, they spied a place with an outside water fountain. David headed for the fountain behind the other boys, pouring the last of his warm canteen water on the ground as he ran. But the water fountain sputtered and quit. There was no more water, and David had just thrown his last drop away. The heat and lack of water made him sick and he had to go home early from camp. It was a foolish, boyhood mistake. But since that day, David has never poured out a canteen in anticipation of some, unseen, unknown source of water. Sin is like that. It deceives us with the promise of something better, but after we've thrown the real water away we discover the promises of sin were empty and bitter.

From God's perspective – and His perspective is the only one that matters because it's His universe we live in – sin both results in and deserves to be punished by the death of the one who sinned. For God to save you and me, He had to do something about the end result of sin which is death. He had to save you from yourself. He had to save me from myself. Nobody can save himself or herself from sin. It's just too late. We're already sinners. And nobody can save himself or herself from sin's final result: death. So God stepped into this seemingly unsolvable problem in the person of His Son, Jesus. And it's right here where we find another answer to the question, "Why did Jesus have to die?" It's also a deeper answer to that question. Jesus died...

### **TO SAVE ME FROM HIMSELF.**

So we've got very fuzzy vision when it comes to this thing – this spiritual reality we like to ignore or dismiss – called sin. Yes, we usually fail to see sin for who truly bad it is. But we also fail to see God for how truly good and holy He is. The Bible says we're

made in God's image. Ironically, we like to think God is made in our image – impatient with sin in other people, but remarkably tolerant and accommodating of our own sin. The more you read the entire Bible, the more you see a God who's very different than the popular myths. Of course, God is loving, kind, and good. But, He's also terrifying. When people encountered God in the Bible, they fell to the ground in terror. They were over-whelmed and devastated just by being in His presence. Instantaneously, they recognized how far short they fell of God's absolute holiness, absolute majesty, and absolute goodness. God will not tolerate sin or evil – not even in you or in me. God can't digest and stomach sin like we do. In the Bible, He's sometimes depicted as vomiting out sinful people who refuse to repent. Sin nauseates God.

Does such talk make you feel uneasy somehow? I suggest that if you've never felt really uneasy about God, you've never understood God, or Jesus, or the cross. I'm reminded of the quote from C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, where Mr. Beaver describes the might and majesty of Aslan, the lion, who is a figure or type of Jesus. When he finishes, Lucy asks, "Is--is he safe?" Mr. Beaver replies, "Safe? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King I tell you." This is what the real God is like: hardly safe but thoroughly good. In the passage we read earlier today, Paul talks about the wrath of God. What is that? It's a way of referring to God's uncompromising hatred of and burning anger toward any and every sin – your sin, my sin, everyone's sin. Some folk think an angry God contradicts the truth of a loving God. One woman was discussing with her friend God's destruction of every living creature in Sodom and Gomorrah – two incredibly evil cities in the Old Testament. She said, "Well, if that's the way God really is, then I'm not going to believe in Him!" As if God is prepared to change His eternal character because we find some aspect of it offensive. If you're a parent, you know it's possible to love your kid and be intensely angry with him or her all at the same time. In fact, your deep love for your child is often why you become so angry with him or her! Likewise, God loves you intensely while hating your sins just as intensely.

Now, right here is where we come to the crux of the matter. On one occasion, Jesus said, "Don't be afraid of those who want to kill your body; they cannot touch your soul. Fear only God, who can destroy both soul and body in hell." (Matt 10:28 NLT) The Bible also says, "He (Jesus) will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might." (2 Th 1:8-9 NIV) In yet another place, the Bible says, "It is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God." (Heb 10:31 NLT) What's the point? God's great and eternal holiness and majesty is so eternally offended by your sin, my sin, everyone's sin that there can only be one response: death to all who sin. Final and eternal separation from God. He will not compromise or negotiate with sin or those who commit sin.

And that's why the cross of Jesus is absolutely necessary. And that's also why Jesus had to die there. God came into this world, in His Son, Jesus, not just to save you from yourself, or from the devil, or from Hell. God came into this world to save you from Himself. God desired to rescue you from His own awful, final and eternal anger against

any and all sin and against any and all rebellion against Him. Jesus died in your place and mine. He literally took the penalty for our sin – death – upon Himself. If Jesus had never died on the cross, then God’s holiness would demand the only other available option: you would die for your own sin and I would die for my sin. God isn’t just another sinful human being who we forgive or from whom we seek forgiveness. He is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. And He is also the moral Judge of the universe who must uphold all that is good, right, and just. This is His universe and we live or die by His rules. That’s the deal.

The fact is that you and I deserve death, Hell, and eternal separation from God. But God stepped in and did everything that He could have done to make a relationship with Him possible. He provided a perfect substitute: Himself in the person of His Son, Jesus. God saved us from His own anger by enduring that anger on the cross. On the cross, God unleashed His righteousness upon Himself. He suffered the judgment we deserve in order to make possible the forgiveness we don’t deserve. At the cross, we see everything we can comprehend about both God’s anger against our sin and God’s love for you and me. At the cross, God saved you from yourself and He saved you from Himself. That’s why Jesus had to die.

During our nation’s Civil War, a farmer was drafted to be a soldier. He was very concerned about being drafted, not because he was a coward, but because his wife had died several years earlier. If he went to war, his children would have no one to look after them. The day before he was to report, a young neighbor by the name of Charles Dunham, came to this man’s house. “Farmer Blake,” Dunham said, “I will go instead of you.” In those days, this kind of substitution was allowed. It seemed too good to be true, but Mr. Blake grasped the hand of young Mr. Dunham and praised God for his good fortune. The entire town turned out to bid Charles Dunham a fond farewell. Tragically, in the very first battle he was involved in, Charles Dunham was shot and killed. When Mr. Blake saw the name of Charles Dunham on the list of those who were missing, he saddled his horse, went off to the battlefield, and eventually found the body of his young friend. He brought the body of Charles Dunham back home where it was buried in the graveyard next to the town’s church. Blake himself cut out a small, plain marble tablet in which he carved an inscription with his own hand. It was roughly done, but with every blow of that chisel and hammer, there fell a tear. When the people of that town stooped down to look and see what had been inscribed, many of them wept as well. It said simply: “Charles Dunham. He died for me.”

Did Jesus really die for you? Yes, He did. And you can receive everything God wants you to have – forgiveness of your sins, His peace and grace, an incredible purpose for your life, the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, eternal life both now and in Heaven - when you put your faith in what Jesus did for you on the cross. It was Jesus Himself who made this statement, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on them.” (Jo 3:36 NIV) The cross is most certainly more than a piece of wood. It’s the place where God saved you from yourself and where He saved you from Himself.