

WHY...
DID JESUS DIE?

CHAPTER 2

Why: Finding answers to 5 of life's big questions

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Why? Finding answers to 5 of life's big questions.
Revised Edition
Chapter 2, Why Did Jesus Die?

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WHY ... DID JESUS DIE?

This booklet contains chapter 2 of
“Why? Finding answers to 5 of life’s big questions”

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Chapter 2

Why did Jesus die?

A terrible tragedy has unfolded in Europe; a mentally ill commercial airline pilot appears to have managed to conceal his condition from his employer and has deliberately crashed his aircraft into the Alps. All 150 on board have lost their lives.

As I write though, the news headlines are reporting threats of violence against the family of this pilot and against those who taught him to fly as a teenager. There is no doubt that the world is reeling from this disaster, and increasingly so, as more and more details come to light.

For many, evil has been personified.

It has a face.

A name.

However, as we look at Mark's historical account of the life of Jesus, we learn that the problem of sin and evil is not limited to a few particularly nasty individuals. This is a condition from which we all suffer, regardless of how good we are as a person, how many good deeds we do, or how highly others think of us. We've all thrown off God's pattern for life, and chosen to live our lives our own way, instead of thinking about how God would have us live. That's why some people

call sin “the universal human condition” – there’s no one who has escaped its destructive influence.

Listen to what Jesus says about sin’s universal reach:

As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector’s booth. “Follow me,” Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Levi’s house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” On hearing this, Jesus said to them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.

Mark 2:14 – 17

In this episode Jesus was a guest at the home of a tax collector. While many of us today might grumble at how much tax we pay and we probably open any letter from the taxation office with a mixture of suspicion and trepidation, in the first century AD, tax collectors were about as low on the social scale as you could get. They were nearly always greedy and often corrupt. The Roman politician and philosopher Cicero

considered the occupation undesirable and vulgar.¹ Emperor Vespasian's father had been a tax collector, and according to the Roman historian Suetonius, was honoured with statues inscribed "to an honest tax collector"² apparently the only one ever known! In the Jewish population, the disdain was even more pronounced - tax collectors were considered to be traitors because they worked for the occupying Roman government. And here Jesus is having a meal with a whole group of tax collectors and people just like them! The religious elite seem to be peering in through the windows, asking, "Why is Jesus sitting down to a meal with these kinds of people?"

The implication of their question is either that *they* were more deserving of Jesus' company than the tax collectors, or that if Jesus was the sort of person who actually wanted to associate with the outcasts of civilised society, then he couldn't be much of a respectable person himself.

But listen to how Jesus replies to that suggestion.

"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Mark 2:14 – 17

¹ Cicero, *de Officiis*, Book 1. 42, § 150

² Suetonius, *Life of Vespasian*, 1. 3

Jesus' own understanding of his life's mission has something to do with people who have a problem, people who need help. More specifically the problem he comes to deal with is sin. We saw in chapter 1 that Jesus is God himself. If we want to know what God thinks is important, what God thinks we need, what God's perspective on life is, we just need to listen to Jesus. His words are God's words.

Jesus says there's a problem called sin and that he's come to help people who are stuck in it.

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What's evident in this story though, is that some of the people who are stuck in sin don't realise it! They're not aware that they have a problem. They know there's this thing called sin, but they think it's someone else's problem, not theirs! These are the "healthy" people in the story.

The religious elite.

The experts in religious law.

They don't understand that they need Jesus to deal with their problem just as much as those not-very-desirable people do. The religious leaders think that they are healthy, to use Jesus' analogy. They're good by their own standards. When they look at themselves, they think that God can't help but be pleased with them. They don't think there's any problem between them and God. They don't think Jesus offers them anything they can't get themselves. It never seems to have

occurred to them that in their hearts there's a problem that has to be dealt with. Yet their rebellion against God and their disregard for him, finds its ultimate demonstration later on in Mark's historical account. In chapter 15, it's some of these very same people who call for Jesus, God's special messenger, God himself, to be executed.

Do you see the danger? No matter how "healthy" we think we are, Jesus says, none of us are good enough by God's standard – the standard of perfection. Even if as you're reading this, you're thinking, "I'm basically a good person.

I'm not as bad as that other person who I know.

I do good things and I help other people.

I keep most of the rules, the important ones anyway!"

Jesus says, "*I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.*"

Jesus' ministry is to people who know they don't measure up, to people who know they fail, to people who know they treat others badly, to people who know they've left God out of their lives. These people are the "sinners." The irony is that people Jesus calls "healthy" and "righteous," only *think* they're healthy and righteous. They have fallen just as far short of God's standard as everybody else. The difference is that some people are willing to accept the help that Jesus offers, and some people are still in denial that the problem even exists.

So whatever it is that Jesus has come to do (and we'll see plenty more about this shortly), it's not for people who think

they are perfect. It's not for people who feel that they measure up to any standard that could ever be applied to them. It's not for people who believe that they're good enough to be in a right relationship with God. It's for people who realise that when it comes to a relationship with God, when it comes to asking, "Have I met the standard that God would want from me?" they know there's a problem and they need someone else to deal with it. Those are the people for whom Jesus has come, and those people are the ones who will benefit from what Jesus offers.

As we saw in chapter 1, when we were thinking about forgiveness, when humanity is out of step with God our lives, decisions, choices and judgments put us out of step with other people as well. Wars, crime, hate, and terrorism, they all come from this same problem – this problem of sin. Some of the other 1st century pastors and historians whose words are recorded in the Bible make it perfectly clear that it's because of sin that Jesus died – not his sin, but ours! So, if we're going to understand Jesus and what he offers us, we need to have some understanding of his death.

I think it's fair to say that the cross is universally recognized as the symbol of Christianity. The simple shape of the cross is so closely identified with Christianity that in some parts of the world its display is prohibited for fear of offending people of other religions.

And yet, if you were looking for a symbol to represent a movement, a set of beliefs, or some cause that you were involved in, I'm quite sure you wouldn't pick an electric chair, or a hangman's noose, or a syringe for a lethal injection. But those terrible devices are the modern parallels of the cross. That universal symbol of Christianity was the method of

What is so significant about the death of Jesus on a cross, that this symbol has become forever associated with his followers?

torture and execution by which Jesus died. The shape so frequently worn as jewellery, printed on clothes and displayed prominently on old buildings around our cities, is an ancient instrument of execution so horrific that the

Roman Empire, who copied crucifixion from the Persians and the Greeks, officially prohibited its use against their own citizens.

It is worth asking ourselves then, what is so significant about the death of Jesus on a cross, that this symbol has become forever associated with his followers? Well, here's the answer; it's on the cross that the problem that plagues our world gets dealt with. It's on the cross that our world gets a second chance. That is, through Jesus' death, our rejection of God and rebellion against him can be undone. The problem gets solved, once and for all. That's not a bad reason for its enduring popularity! So, let's have a look at Jesus' death

together and as we do so, we'll notice two lessons that I think we can learn from this event, two reasons why Jesus died.

Firstly, Jesus died because sin must be punished.

As I've already mentioned, crucifixion was a horrible business. The condemned person was usually tied or nailed to the cross beam which was then hoisted onto the main stake. Whipping and beating frequently preceded the crucifixion. Death tended to be slow and agonising. The actual cause of death was often suffocation as breathing became too painful and difficult. Historians report that bodies were sometimes left to rot on the cross.³ Crucifixion served as a method of torture, execution, and public warning ('see what happens to those who break the rules'), all at the same time.

*It was nine in the morning when they crucified him.
At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three
in the afternoon.*

Mark 15:25, 33

Mark tells us that Jesus was crucified at 9 AM, or the third hour by Jewish reckoning. The next mention of time is midday, what the Jews called the sixth hour. Jesus has been hanging on the cross for three hours. After these three hours of what

³ Samuelsson, G. *Crucifixion in Antiquity*. Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, 2013. p 290.

could only be described as the most excruciating physical agony a person could endure, Mark records that *darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon*. When the sun should have been at its brightest, it was dark.

For three hours the whole land was in darkness. From midday to 3 PM the sun didn't shine. This was no eclipse. Have you ever just seen night suddenly fall at lunch time? No? I haven't either.

This is certainly not your every-day sort of occurrence.

Something out of the ordinary is going on.

Something supernatural is happening.

The usual laws of the natural world have been superseded.

In many different ways throughout the Bible, light is used to symbolise God's presence and blessing. Conversely, darkness is used by the authors as a sign of God's anger and judgment. So, as Jesus dies and darkness covers the land, we know right away that Mark is telling us this for a reason.

He wants us to know that God is angry.

God's judgement is at hand.

For some people, the idea of a God who gets angry or who judges people and behaviour can be pretty scary, even offensive. If God is like that, what's to stop him lashing out and getting angry at me or the people I care about? And so some people have tried to "soften" God a bit, tried to make him somewhat more palatable, by suggesting that God couldn't

really get angry, that he wouldn't judge anyone or punish wrong behaviour. On the surface, this can sound like a great idea; it removes any fear of God and means we'd never be called to account for our behaviour. The problem is though (and this may sound very presumptive), you don't want that! Can I really say that?

Can I really tell you what you want and what you don't want, especially when it comes to the nature of God? Isn't that the height of arrogance for me to tell you that you don't want a God like I've just described?

Let me explain why I'm so certain you don't want a God who never gets angry and who would let any and all behaviour go unpunished.

I'm sure you're familiar with the song, *What a Wonderful World*, performed perhaps most famously by Louis Armstrong. Since it was released in 1967, it has become almost an anthem to the simple pleasures provided by the world around us. The words, by George Weiss and Bob Thiele are optimistic, sentimental and paint a wonderful picture of the world we inhabit.

The only problem is those words don't reflect the reality of the world we live in do they? That wonderful world Armstrong sang about doesn't seem to be the world we know. His experience of the world is not our experience! It can be hard

to share his optimism when we take a look at the world around us.

I remember singing that song as part of a combined schools children's choir in 1990.

That same year 210 people were killed in a train collision in Sindh Province, Pakistan.

340 people were arrested in London's West End as protests over poll tax turned violent.

A courier was robbed of 292 million pounds worth of bonds in the world's largest ever mugging.

157 people died when the Scandinavian Star ferry caught fire on its way from Norway to Denmark.

More than 400 people were killed by food poisoning at a party in India.

And those are just a few of the terrible events that occurred in the first four months of that year. While we might enjoy listening to that song, it's hard not to think that there's something wrong with our world. We don't have to look too far to see things that distress us, that offend us, that make us hurt, or that make us cry. Never far from our observation or experience is something that causes us to think, "Surely life wasn't supposed to be like this."

Can you recall a time when you looked around you and thought, "Yes, the world's all as it's supposed to be?" Probably not! But if you're anything like the people I meet every day, you can probably remember asking the question, "Why is life like this?" or "What's wrong with our world and society?"

Some of those events and the many more like them that fill our television screens and newsfeed are directly attributable to human choices and behaviour. The terrible tragedy in the Alps I mentioned earlier certainly seems attributable, at least at this stage in the investigation, to the deliberate activity of an individual.

However, not all the hurt in our world is so easily traceable to a particular source. But all of these troubling events and experiences reflect the fact that because we're out of step with God, our world too is lurching along, far from the Maker's intention.

But consider for a moment the tragedies that unfold due to decisions that people make, the events that are brought about by the way people choose to act. No doubt you were horrified by the deliberate downing of Germanwings Flight 4U 9525. And we're all too familiar with mass shootings; the 2013 Westgate shopping mall attack in Kenya and the 2017 Las Vegas shooting are two of the deadliest to have made the headlines in recent years. I'm sure that like me, you think these events are sad and unfair. And I'm sure that you get angry when you witness evil being perpetrated closer to home. We care about injustice, don't we? We know that it's not right when people are murdered, when children starve, when terrorists take lives. Those events offend us. We know

those responsible have crossed the boundary of what can be considered “right” or “just.”

We’re angered when we witness those tragedies unfolding and so we could hardly think that God would care less than we do.

You and I are upset when evil is committed.

God is too.

You and I get angry when those we love are hurt.

God does too.

You and I believe that there must be justice for those who suffer.

God does too.

How could we think that God cares less about evil and suffering than we do? It makes sense then, that when God punishes sin, his anger is displayed. Here is the root of all the problems in the world and God is dealing with it.

God punishes evil.

God deals with the reason there is hurt in the world.

God brings justice.

God requires the due penalty be paid for sin.

A God who didn’t get angry or punish evil would be no God at all! Such a God would be even less than we are! Do you want a God who lets the guilty go unpunished, who lets the most violent criminals escape judgment, who turns a blind eye to those calling out for justice and relief from their suffering? I’m sure you don’t want a God like that. That’s why we need a

God who's capable of getting angry at evil and who brings the perpetrators to account for their actions.

In Jesus' death on the cross, God punishes sin. To think about it another way, God settles the account. The price for sin is paid. There's no longer any outstanding payment that has to be made for our sin.

But it looks like God's anger is directed at Jesus.

It looks like Jesus is the one paying for sin.

It looks like Jesus is being punished.

Jesus had never done anything wrong - not even his fiercest critics could find any fault in him, no matter how hard they tried, and many of them were experts in the law! But we know from what we read in chapter 1 of Mark's gospel that Jesus knows the biggest problem we face is sin. That's why he thought forgiving the paralysed man who we met in Mark 2 was more important even than healing him.

Jesus knows that because we reject God, we don't live as he would want us to live.

He knows we're out of step with our creator.

He knows we're not living according to the manufacturer's instructions.

We've got fractured relationships with each other.

We certainly don't manage the world the way God intended.

Jesus knows we're sick and we need a doctor.

But Jesus also knows that sin must be punished. Jesus knows what the penalty for sin is. We've seen that God can't just ignore people's sinfulness. That would be completely unacceptable, even to us! The penalty for sin and evil must be paid. When Jesus says to the paralysed man, "your sins are forgiven," he does so knowing that someone must pay the penalty for rejecting God's rule - death and separation from God. But Jesus also knows that he is the one who will pay that penalty and therefore make real forgiveness possible.

One of Jesus' followers who became a leader among the very first Christians was a man named Peter. About thirty years after Jesus' death, Peter wrote a letter to a group of Christians who lived in what is now Turkey and he included these words about Jesus:

He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.

1 Peter 2:24

This is what Jesus knows has to happen. The penalty for our sin needs to be paid. He knows the only solution to the problem we face is for him to pay the price. He didn't have a price to pay for himself. He didn't have his own account that

had to be settled, which is why he could take my penalty and your penalty.

Mark goes on to explain for us the exact nature of the punishment that Jesus accepted:

... at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" (which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?").

Mark 15:34

You may have seen the film, *The Passion of the Christ* which was directed by Mel Gibson. When it was released in 2004, as a pastor I was invited to an early screening which I attended with some of the other staff from our church. At the end of the two hour long movie, my colleague and I came out of the theatre together, yet we could hardly speak of what we had just seen. It was so graphic and violent that it took us quite some time to process everything we had just witnessed, even though we knew the details of those events very well! The movie captures horrifically (but I think probably accurately) the extreme physical agony that Jesus endured in his crucifixion.

What Mark draws our attention to in his account of Jesus' death however, is not so much the *physical* agony of the cross, but the *spiritual* agony, reflected in that harrowing cry, "My

God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" When we've already concluded from Mark's testimony that Jesus himself is God, how can we understand this particular exclamation?

Is Jesus speaking to himself?

Are there a multitude of gods of whom Jesus is but one?

Has Jesus given up his deity, his 'god-ness'?

None of these suggestions are consistent with the historical evidence, so there must be some other explanation.

These harrowing words are the Son's cry to his Father. The Bible speaks of 3 "persons" of God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Before the Son entered human history as a man, even before the creation of the world, the Father, Son and Spirit had enjoyed a perfect relationship. Imagine the blessing of being in such a wonderful relationship! There was never any barrier or disagreement between them. Yet when Jesus, the Son of God, *bore our sins in his body*, that perfect relationship suffers a terrible fracture. As Jesus takes the punishment we deserve for ignoring and rejecting God his relationship with God his Father is ruptured as it never has been before.

We know how much a broken relationship can hurt, even though our relationships at their very best are still flawed and unpredictable. Imagine the agony of a perfect relationship being torn apart! The just and right punishment for sin is death – spiritual death and separation from God. That's what you and I deserve for our rebellion, for ignoring God, for acting as if he neither exists, matters, nor cares. Jesus was

without sin, yet he took our sin and its penalty. He accepted the death and separation from his Father that you and I deserve.

Of course, it's important to remember that Jesus didn't stop being God on the cross. The Trinity doesn't cease to exist, or anything like that, but the terrible weight of our sin thrust Jesus outside the realm of blessing he had enjoyed forever. He felt the full force of his

Jesus was without sin, yet he took our sin and its penalty. He accepted the death and separation from his Father that you and I deserve.

Father's anger at sin and evil, an anger, let me point out, that Jesus himself also shared. But Jesus' great hatred of sin leads him to offer himself in our place. The stranglehold that sin and evil held over people is broken.

The price was paid.

Justice was served.

There is no longer any barrier between us and God.

Let me ask you what may seem like a very personal question. Are there some aspects of your life that you'd rather people didn't know about? Perhaps you've done things that you hope nobody ever discovers. Maybe you've spoken harshly behind someone else's back. Probably all of us have entertained thoughts about others which we would be horrified if anyone ever found out. But God knows. There's a

stark warning to that effect in the New Testament book of Hebrews.

*Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight.
Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes
of him to whom we must give account.*

Hebrews 4:13

The way we've treated others.

The way we've treated God.

The way we've treated his creation which he entrusted to our care.

Imagine if every one of those thoughts, words, and actions was filmed, recorded on DVD as an episode from your life, for others to watch! I read recently that police in Malaysia cracked a movie pirating ring and seized over half a million illegal discs. I think the collection of those episodes from my life which I hope never see the light of day would be a similarly sized pile!

Now imagine that each of us has to physically carry around with us this inglorious collection of our sins and offences, all 500,000 DVDs. A simple experiment with our kitchen scales and some quick multiplication indicates I'd be struggling under 75 tonnes of DVDs! If I was in the middle of a pile that size I'd be lost, buried, cut off from the world!

How could I have a relationship with someone from underneath 75 tonnes of DVDs? Of course, the answer is, I couldn't! If I tried to carry that kind of weight around, I'd be dead! It's the sheer physical weight of the video library that would separate me from other people, but it's the content of those episodes that would separate me from God.

Each of those selfish and thoughtless moments in my life represents the sin that prevents me having access to God and a relationship with him. God is so pure and so holy that even one second of the movie of my life would be enough to separate me from him forever. Merely a preview would put me outside the realm of his blessing forever. Between me and God stands this unfavourable record of my debts.

Jesus on the other hand, had no such pile of DVDs weighing him down during his life. He was, the historians record, completely without sin. Between Jesus and his Father there was no insurmountable barrier, just a perfect relationship, but while he's there on the cross, Jesus collects up all my miserable record and takes it upon himself and I'm left with nothing.

That's why Jesus was forsaken on the cross, because of my unfavourable record and yours. Our sin separated him from

his Father. Jesus took our place, took the punishment that we deserve and as a result, our burden is gone! There's no longer anything separating me from God. Jesus suffered and died; he was cut off from his Father's presence and blessing, so I could enter into his Father's presence and blessing; so I could enjoy a relationship with God.

Jesus suffered and died; he was cut off from his Father's presence and blessing so I could enter into his Father's presence and blessing; so I could enjoy a relationship with God.

And that introduces us to the second reason why Jesus died. Jesus died to give us access to God.

Take a look at the exact moment of Jesus' death as Mark records it:

With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

Mark 15:37&38

Jesus dies outside Jerusalem, on a hill beyond the city walls that probably also served as the town's rubbish dump. But Mark draws our attention to something that happens inside

the city at exactly the same moment; an incident that is an immediate and direct consequence of Jesus' death.

In Jerusalem stood the temple of God. It was the centre of worship for the Jewish people. The first temple had been built by King Solomon close to 1000 years before the time of Jesus and had been destroyed and rebuilt to similar designs on that same spot during the intervening years. The temple had concentric courtyards around the inner-most room. That central room was called the "Holy of Holies" and it was there where God's presence dwelled in a unique way.

Separating the parts of the temple where people could come and gather and that part where God's presence dwelt was an enormous curtain, nine metres high and as thick as two phone books. The curtain had one purpose - it was a great big nine-metre-high "Do Not Enter" sign. It was a reminder that it's impossible for sinful people like you and I to walk into the presence of God. The Bible uses the word "holy" to describe God's utter difference and his 'separateness' to us. We are imperfect, and stained by sin in every part, so we can't simply stroll into the presence of a holy God!

But as Jesus dies, taking our punishment, paying the penalty for sin, and dealing with our rebellion once and for all, God tears the curtain in two from top to bottom. The symbol of separation due to sin is torn apart and God demonstrates in no

uncertain terms, 'I have made the way open for you to approach me and for you to know me.'

God demonstrates in no uncertain terms, 'I have made the way open for you to approach me and for you to know me.'

It's important here to remember what we've been learning about Jesus so far in our journey through Mark's gospel. God didn't deal with the hurt of our world and deal with our sin, by picking on an innocent third party and turning his anger on them. That's not the explanation for what happened on the cross. Jesus is God.

That was what we saw in Mark 2.

Jesus acts on earth with God's authority as only God can. Which means God makes peace with us by willingly sacrificing himself.

God gives of himself.

We can now know God.

We now have access to God.

We can have a relationship with him.

The problem that plagues us and plagues our world has been dealt with.

Yes, sin has a terrible price, but Jesus paid the price. He stood in our place, so there is now nothing standing in the way between us and God.

Jesus died, so we can have access to God. It's good news for us. Although it looks at this moment in the story like bad news for Jesus. He's been crucified; condemned, tortured, and executed, by an alliance of the Roman and Jewish authorities. That's not the end of the story though.

There's an intriguing anecdote in the 1824 supplement to the Encyclopedia Britannica, tucked away in the article on telegraphy – visible signalling communication in the days before radio. The story recounts that a British Admiral named Robert Calder, wanted to inform London that the Duke of Wellington had defeated the French forces in Spain.

The signalling was started: "Wellington defeated ..." but then a fog rapidly descended and the rest of the message was lost. The article records that those in Parliament were in utter despair until much later in the day when the fog lifted and the rest of the message could be transmitted, "Wellington defeated ... the French."

The story of Jesus doesn't end with this apparent defeat. Turn the page and let's move toward an answer to our next question.

Why: Finding answers to 5 of life's big questions

CHAPTER 2

WHY... DID JESUS DIE?

In this series

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