

## Why Did Christ Have to Die?

*Sunday Morning Message delivered at Faith Bible Fellowship, Oak Ridge, Tennessee  
preached in preparation for congregational observance of the Lord's Table*

*March 6, 2005*

*First in a Series of Four Messages*

Last year at this time it seemed like the whole world was abuzz with controversy about Mel Gibson's film, *"The Passion of the Christ."* In fact, our mission team to Croatia last March found that the ripples of controversy had reached even there.

Some who saw *The Passion* could see nothing more than an infomercial for anti-Semitism. It was sure to incite broadspread violence and bigotry against Jewish people. Paula Fredriksen, a professor at Boston University, wrote in her review. *"When violence breaks out, Mel Gibson will have a much higher authority than professors and bishops to answer to . . ."* Her dismissal of film as *"anti-historical, anti-intellectual, & anti-Semitic"* was not unique. If Gibson appealed to the New Testament as his source material, then the NT was anti-historical, anti-intellectual, and anti-Semitic too.

Others were put off by the sheer level of violence in the film. One reviewer wrote about a year ago, *"Unfortunately, it was worse than I had imagined. Certainly the bloodiest, goriest, most violent movie I had ever seen. Just when it can get no crueller, it does. Instead of being moved, I felt abused. This would border on sado-masochistic pornography if Jesus were not involved. And I have to admit that I find it puzzling that conservative Catholics and evangelicals who have always opposed violence in film, now find it fine if Jesus is involved in one."*

And it was true! What a world! Who would have ever thought you'd have churches promoting an "R" rated movie, and arranging for Sunday School classes and youth groups and sometimes whole congregations (buying out the whole theatre) to see it! Now there's something you don't see every day!

The evangelist Billy Graham, certainly someone who speaks for many evangelicals said that he was *"moved to tears"* by the film. He said, *"I doubt if there has been a more graphic and moving presentation of Jesus' death and resurrection, which Christians believe are the most important events in human history."* Perhaps more to the point, Graham said, *"The film is faithful to the Bible's teaching that we are all responsible for Jesus' death, because we all have sinned. It is our sins that caused his death, not any particular group."*

In fact, it all seemed to turn on the connection between the crucifixion and the sins of man. The viewer who saw his own sins on cross was humbled. The one who didn't was horrified. The one who saw his own sins saw God's love for man intermingled with His wrath against sin. Others could see only man's cruelty to man. Those who saw their own sin saw something beautiful within the ugliness of the cross. Others saw something that bordered on pornography – in some cases, the only kind of pornography that had ever offended them.

The whole controversy – indeed, the offense of the cross itself– turns on the Christian notion of sin. The Christian notion of sin is not a simple one. It is multifaceted.

The Bible teaches that a man is body soul and spirit. He is more than flesh and blood; there is also an immaterial part, a soulish identity within who thinks and feels and loves and is loved. And then there is a part of man that is even deeper than that; a spiritual essence that is the kernel and core of his soul.

And the Bible also teaches that sin has touched us on each of these levels, and as we grow in our understanding of the effects of sin, it causes us to grow in our understanding of the real meaning of the cross.

The sins of the body are the easiest to understand. A child can understand when he/she *has done* something wrong. This is our first understanding of sin. We did something we shouldn't have. We told a

lie. We cheated. We stole – we took something that wasn't ours. These are sins of ACTION. We might think of them as sins of the body; they are committed with the body (by means of the body). Murder is a sin. Stealing is a sin. Adultery is a sin. Drunkenness is a sin. Taking the Lord's name in vain is a sin. Sin is something that we *DO*.

But besides these sins of COMMISSION there are also sins of OMISSION. These are understood with a little more difficulty, but most people can grasp the validity of this kind of sin. Sins of omission are things we ought to have done, but didn't.

Years ago in a major American city, a woman was robbed on the street. She called for help but nobody answered, even though many in nearby apartments heard her cries. She was injured, and still she cried out for help. Again people heard, but did nothing. Soon the cries stopped, and the woman died. Police investigators spoke to many who heard it all go down, but to a person every single one said that they didn't want to get involved.

But from a moral standpoint, they already were involved – because they heard, because they were presented with a need, and they did nothing to help. They did not rob the woman, they weren't the ones who killed her – but they became morally culpable that night for their FAILURE to act. The great downward spiral of sin in Romans 1-3 begins with a sin of omission,

*“For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks;”*

The withholding of honor due God is a sin. The failure to give thanks is a sin.

I doubt there is a single adult in this sanctuary who does not know from personal experience the pain and burden and sense of guilt from a sin of omission. When people speak of their “regrets” sometimes they talk about something they have done, but more often they talk about something they wish they had done, but didn't. People say things like, “I wish I had ‘been there’ for him for her, “I should have helped,” or “I should have helped more/done more.” “I wish I had spoken up,” “I should have said something”

All of that is bad enough, but sin is not done with us yet. There are also sins of the soul. There is a level of sin that has no necessary relation whatsoever to ACTIONS; to DEEDS. This is sin that manifests itself on the level of our *thought-life*. These are sins that take place in the arena of our *attitudes, emotions, desires, imagination*. Sins on this level render us morally culpable before God *whether we act on them or not*.

And sin at this level is a little harder to grasp, and we may be a little less willing to grasp it! Jesus famously urges us to recognize that sin goes deeper than deeds in the Sermon on the Mount:

*“You have heard that the ancients were told, ‘You shall not commit murder’  
and ‘Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.’*

*But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court;  
and whoever shall say to his brother, ‘Raca,’ shall be guilty before the supreme court;  
and whoever shall say, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell”* (Matthew 5:22-23).

Again, Jesus said, *“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery; but I say to you, that everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart”* (Matthew 5:27-28).

Now the devil is going to whisper in your ear, *“Hey – you already looked, you already imagined, you already lusted – you're already guilty – you may as well go ahead and sin in body as well as in soul.”* Or, *“You know you hate him – may as well kill him as far as God is concerned.”* You follow that evil advice and you will find out soon enough and very painfully that it would have been better if the sin of the soul had not born fruit in the body.

Jesus is not telling us that we should go ahead and act on every evil impulse, but He *is* showing us that we have not escaped the pervasive effects of sin just because our evil impulses have been restrained. We

*know* what drives the murderer, because we are made of the same stuff. We *know* what it is to be filled with animosity & hostility toward fellow human being. We *know* how the murderer thinks, because we've been there ourselves. We *know* what adulterers are made of, because we are made of the same stuff. Thank God if sin has been restrained, but if we're honest with ourselves, we know that it *needed* to be restrained.

And we should recognize that Jesus did not INVENT this category of sin that takes place entirely within the realm of the soul (the emotions, the desires). If you're talking about sin, you can't get any more basic than the Ten Commandments. The tenth commandment says, "*You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor.*"

If you *act* on your covetous attitude toward your neighbor's house or ox or donkey and steal it, that's another sin, the sin of stealing, prohibited by the eighth commandment. If you *act* on your covetous attitude toward your neighbor's wife, that's the sin of adultery prohibited by the seventh commandment.

But "coveting" is a sin all by itself. Call it envy. Call it lust. But it is a sin that takes place in the privacy of our own soul. It is a sin of misguided affections, of wrongful emotions, of the soul.

So to say that man is a sinner is to say *not only* that he has done things contrary to the law of God, and *not only* that he has left things undone that he ought to have done, but also that he sins against God by the very thoughts of his mind. His affections are misplaced. His desires are corrupt. His imaginations are twisted. His *thinker* and his *feeler* are morally broken.

And yet, the Bible teaches that sin goes even deeper than that. There is a *sinfulness of spirit* that runs deeper even than the *soul-life* of a man. It is what is true of him even before he *begins* to think, before the first thought runs through head. It is true of him even when he is not conscious. It is what Christian theologians historically have called "original sin."

When people hear the term "original sin" they tend to think of Adam & Eve – that was the "original" sin, right? But what is meant by "original sin" is the sin that we each inherited from Adam. Romans 5:12 says, "*Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned –*"

The biblical teaching is *not* that each of us has sinned after manner of Adam, but that we (as sons & daughters of Adam) *ACTUALLY BECAME* sinners when Adam sinned. That's where the spiritual DNA went bad. It's "original" in the sense that we came with it. With each of us, sin was a part of the original package. It was part of our pre-installed software. Before we ever booted up the first time, we were hard-wired for sin. Before we ever committed our first sin, before we had ever had any kind of impure thought, sin was a defining part of our being. It is the natural impulse of every son & daughter of Adam to rebel against the law of God.

That is the Bible's teaching about sin, and that is the part of the biblical teaching about sin that people have the most trouble accepting. Modern psychologists, educational experts, social theorists, and commentators of all kinds seem to be in agreement that the Christian doctrine of original sin is a kind of cultural neurosis; a sick pessimism about the human race; a self-fulfilling prophecy that we would do well to "get over" as soon as possible. It is our ugly heritage of neurotic guilt and self-loathing inherited from those sourpuss, kill-joy Puritans.

Wouldn't it be healthier to build up the human race?, they ask. Wouldn't it be healthier to inspire one another to human goodness, rather than lower expectations so? Wouldn't it be a better idea to instill love and kindness and tolerance, rather than to prejudge each and every person as inherently wicked from the get-go!?

But let's just say, for the sake of argument, that the Christian doctrine is true. If it were true, if we were as a race (the human race) prewired to turn away from God, to rebel, to break His laws; if our spiritual & moral DNA had been marred in some terrible, tragic way, what would we expect to find? We would expect wars; we would expect genocide; we would expect massacres; we would expect torture; we would expect organized crime. We would expect to pick up the newspaper every day, and see the most egregious, loudest, most violent episodes and outbreaks of sin. We would expect human evil to have to be suppressed by a system of laws and punishments. And in the absence or failure of those outside and temporary supports, we would expect lawlessness to reassert itself almost immediately. We would expect society to operate on principles of selfishness and advantage and greed. We would expect to see men and women love things that were bad for them, and we would expect people to become addicted to the means of their own destruction. We would expect to see the good gifts of God given for the benefit and happiness of man turned to unholy purposes so that they hurt man and made him unhappy. We would expect to always struggle with the dark side of human nature; we would expect righteousness and good to always be an uphill struggle, and we would expect the path of least resistance to always lead us downward. We would expect moral good to require nurturing and care like crops. And we would expect moral evil to flourish in the absence of nurture & care, like weeds. We would expect to see those who had set themselves on some sort of program of moral self-improvement to struggle with lapses back into envy, hatred, arrogance, conceit, selfishness, uncharitableness, destructiveness, into all kinds of things they *say* they hate. We would expect even those precious little so-called innocent babies to be inherently selfish, to take their place as the center of their universe as if it were their birthright, and to live as though all others existed to serve and please them. And we would expect *resistance* as they were taught to care for others; to be mindful of others; to respect others; to serve others. In other words, if man were hardwired for sin as a result of Adam's sin, we would expect to see exactly what we do see – everywhere, and every day.

Isn't it ironic that of all the points of Christian doctrine, the doctrine of original sin is most doubted, considered the most backward, the most medieval, the most objectionable to the modern mind – and yet of all the points of Christian doctrine, it is only the doctrine of original sin that can be confirmed by anyone's experience anywhere in the world on any day of the week?

*“There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who seeks for God;  
All have turned aside, together they have become useless;  
There is none who does good, There is not even one.”* (Romans 3:10-12).

Which brings us full circle to the cross of Christ, and today, to the Lord's Table that points back in symbol to the very real cross of Christ in time and space and history. If we observe Lord's Table as a religious exercise to convince others or ourselves how good and religious we are – it is hard to imagine how we could have missed the meaning of the Lord's Table any more dramatically.

If we come to the Lord's Table with the insight that we have committed acts against the moral law of God, or that we have broken God's moral laws by leaving good undone, then we have begun to come closer to the truth.

We may have come to the understanding that we have not only committed outward sins, but that sin has attached itself to our thoughts and attitudes and affections and emotions, so that I love that which I should not love, hate that which I should not hate; so that I harbor ungodly prejudices and resentments and jealousies and envy – then the need for the cross comes into sharper focus, and the deliverance by means of the cross becomes a thing more precious.

And if we realize further that we were born with sin as a part of our spiritual DNA; that we were by our very nature children of wrath, that we were born into a state of rebellion against God, and that ignoring the God of Creation came naturally and felt good . . . and then to know that God sent His own Son to bear the just penalty for *our* rebellion, for our sin (for mine, and for yours), and then to hear Him

say, “*Come let us reason together, though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow.*” (Isaiah 1:18) . . . to know that salvation now, and access to God now, and a meaningful life now, and heaven to come is ours only by the grace and love of God in Jesus Christ, - *that* is to know the true value, and the true meaning of the cross. *That* is to be able to see the love of God meet the wrath of God in the cross of Christ. *That* is to be able to see justice and mercy meet in the wonderful cross. *That* is to be able to see the power in the blood that did for me what I could have never done for myself, even if I would have wanted to.

Thank you, God, for your Son – Thank you, Lord Jesus, for your cross.

*Father in Heaven, thank you, thank you, for Jesus. Thank you for sending the Just to die for the unjust, for we are the unjust, Lord. Thank you for shielding us from realizing the depth of our sin (we couldn't bear it), but thank you for showing us enough to drive us to the cross of Christ. Thank you for opening our eyes to our need, no matter what our level of insight is, Lord, thank you that it was enough. We ask that we would never lose our sense of worship and awe as we consider the greatness of Your love for creatures who did everything they could to render themselves unlovable. May our worship in the Lord's Table be honest, may it tell the truth about our own sense of spiritual need, may it be a worshipful recognition of our complete dependence on the broken body and shed blood of Christ for our salvation – now and forevermore. Help the one who may be at a turning point this morning. Help the one who is inwardly coming to grips with his/her own sin. Give them grace to accept the free gift of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ, and let their taking of the bread and cup today be a bold statement of their trust in the broken body and shed blood of Jesus Christ for their sins. We pray in Jesus' name, amen.*