

# WHY DID JESUS DIE?

*Gill Newton*

## *SHEFFIELD DISTRICT CHAIR, THE REVD GILL NEWTON, HELPS US TO GRAPPLE WITH A QUESTION THAT LIES AT THE HEART OF OUR FAITH.*

Throughout my pastoral ministry, I have often been asked the question, 'Why did X die?' It's a question frequently posed by those who have lost someone at a young age or who feel that medical science has let them down. Of course, there are no easy answers and any response usually feels wholly inadequate.

Faced with the question, 'Why did Jesus die?' we perhaps experience something of the same sense of inadequacy! How can we fully understand the mind and purpose of God? And is there just one answer to the question anyway? Down through the generations many scholars have addressed this question and a range of responses have emerged, each of them supported by scripture and expressed in our hymnody. But does any one of them provide us with an entirely satisfactory answer to this important question? Or are they all just partial as we engage with the mystery of God?

Some theologians have suggested that scripture offers as many as ten different images to help us understand why Jesus died and what happened on the cross. However, these can perhaps be arranged into three major themes, each of which suggests that the death of

Jesus addresses a different fundamental problem that hinders our relationship with God.

### TO FREE THE HUMAN RACE

Firstly, there is the classic or dramatic theme. The images here focus on the battle that Christ has with the evil powers and the victory that his death on the cross wins in order to release the human race from the clutches of Satan. During the early days of the church this theory was prominent. It became known as the 'ransom' theory and was supported by such people as Irenaeus, Origen and Gregory the Great. Here, the death of Jesus was seen as the price which God paid in order to set the human race free - 'The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Matthew 20:28).

### TO HELP US AVOID PUNISHMENT

Secondly, there is the objective or 'satisfaction' theme. This focuses on God and views the work of Christ on the cross as in some way fulfilling the demands of God. The theologian Anselm was a leading proponent of this theory. He suggests that sin is dishonouring to God and that the human race has a responsibility to restore what we have damaged with our behaviour. However, humans can't achieve this on their own, so God can either punish the human race as they deserve or accept satisfaction made on their behalf by Jesus. A scripture that supports this image is 'Christ was without sin, but for our sake God made him

share our sin in order that in union with him we might share the righteousness of God' (2 Corinthians 5:21). During the Reformation this theory was developed further and became known as the 'substitution' theory, suggesting that Jesus died as a sacrifice to satisfy God's need for justice.

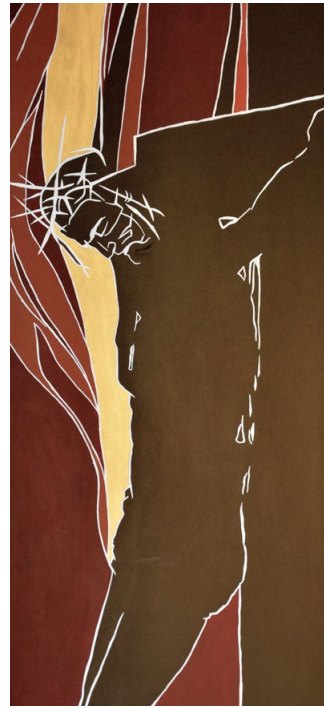
(For further reading on Anselm: Alister E McGrath, 'Christian Theology: An Introduction,' Blackwell Publishers, 1994, 349-51).

### TO DEMONSTRATE THE DEPTH OF GOD'S LOVE

Then thirdly we have the subjective theme where images focus more especially on the human race and see the death of Jesus as something that brings about a change in us. The theologian Abelard developed the thinking that the death of Jesus on the cross was a demonstration of the depth of God's love for humanity - 'But God has shown us how much he loves us - it was while we were sinners that Christ died for us' (Romans 5:8).

He believed that when we look at the cross, we see the greatness of God's love which delivers us from fear and sparks a response of love for God in us. This view is borne out by Isaac Watts in his well-known hymn:

*When I survey the wondrous cross, on  
which the Prince of Glory died,  
My richest gain I count but loss, and  
pour contempt on all my pride.*



(For further reading on Abelard: Alister E McGrath, 'Christian Theology: An Introduction,' Blackwell Publishers, 1994, 355-6.)

### A MANY SPLENDURED THING!

Whilst serving as the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams said 'It's important to be aware of all these images and try to see why they are used; equally important, though, not to treat them as if they were theories that explain why Jesus died. The single central thing is the conviction that for us to be at peace, Jesus's life had to be given up.'

So, rather than pitting the theories against one another, we probably do well to embrace them together, because by focusing on one aspect of what scripture says, we may disregard something else of importance and fail to recognise that the death of Christ is 'a many splendoured thing!' We may never understand it entirely, but it reminds us that our own lives as Christ's followers will involve many sacrifices and crosses along the way. We may never fully answer the question, 'Why did Jesus die?' but we can know the benefit of that momentous event. Whichever image makes most sense to us, the death and resurrection of Jesus destroys the power of death, makes all things new, sets us free, renews our relationship with God, enables us to know forgiveness and opens heaven to us.


And was there then no other way for God to take? I cannot say;

*I only bless him, day by day, who saved me through my Saviour.  
That he should leave his place on high and come for sinners once to die,  
You count it strange? So do not I, since I have known my Saviour.  
Dora Greenwell (1821-82), Hymns and Psalms 221*

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*Note from the Editor: Many thanks to Marion Le Bec for permission to use photos of her Stations of the Cross, which are painted on medium density fibreboard hydrofuge wood, due to the humidity in Saint Louis Church, Brest. For more information about Marion's work: [www.marionlebec.fr](http://www.marionlebec.fr)*



## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION / GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What words, images or feelings come into your mind as you think about Jesus dying on the cross?
2. What does the death of Jesus say to you about the nature of God?
3. Which of these theories do you find most attractive and which do you find most difficult? Why?
4. What impact does your understanding of why Jesus died have on the way you relate to God and other people?
5. What meaning could the death of Jesus have without the resurrection?
6. Which song best sums up your understanding of the death of Jesus?