

# Why Jesus Died!

by Dr. J. Vernon McGee



Published and distributed by  
***Thru the Bible Radio Network***  
P.O. Box 7100  
Pasadena, California 91109-7100  
(800) 65-BIBLE  
[www.ttb.org](http://www.ttb.org)

Scripture references are from the *New Scofield Reference Bible*.

The subject before us, why Jesus died, is not an explanation but it is a declaration. I could only wish that I had the pungent genius of a Paul or the lofty inspiration of a John or the pregnant imagination of a Chrysostom or the scintillating brilliance of an Augustine to present this subject, Why Jesus Died. I am very conscious of the real danger in treating this topic with flavorless and colorless mediocrity. I think it's well acknowledged today and accepted that liberal theology has long since departed from the biblical basis of the death of Christ. But, my friends, all too often biblical Christianity babbles about the death of Christ without the foggiest notion of the true scriptural meaning of His death. There is a danger of treating as commonplace and ordinary the greatest event and the most profound fact in the history of the world: the death of the Lord Jesus Christ upon the cross!

It is said that Hudson Taylor could not preach on the death of Christ without weeping.

I can.

It is said that Hudson Taylor could not listen to a message on the death of Christ without weeping.

You can.

May I say to you today, we who call ourselves Bible believers need to again face up to this greatest of all facts in the history of the world and let it thrill our hearts and be more meaningful to us in these days in which we are living.

It was John Knox, the great Scottish reformer, who said that people can do three things with the crucifixion of Christ and only three. We can deny that it happened, because if acknowledged it would make nonsense of life. Or we can acknowledge it and then decide in consequence that life is meaningless. Or third, we can find in it a clue to a deeper meaning in life than otherwise appears. May the Spirit of God today help us to find the clue to the deeper meaning of life in the death of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now in order to bring into spiritual focus the scriptural meaning of the death of Christ, let's look first at two theories of the atonement which have plagued the church for centuries. Both of these theories are heresies. But unfortunately, like most heresies, there is an element of truth in them. And the thing which commends a heresy to folks is that little element of truth that might be in it.

### **The Martyr Theory**

The first one we want to look at is the theory known as the example or martyr theory.

It is the explanation that appeared very popular in the sixteenth century under the guidance of Lelio and Fausto Socinus, two of the biggest heretics the church has ever had. Here is what it teaches: Christ died as a martyr and that's all. He was a martyr to truth – He was faithful to truth, and on that basis He died. As a martyr to truth, He set us an example.

Those who adhere to this heresy say that because He died for truth, you and I today have a duty to perform. We should be challenged to live and to die for truth because Jesus lived and died for truth. These folk have a text – all heresies can go to the Bible and pick out a text – they chose 1 Peter 2:21, “For even hereunto were ye called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps.” And they say, “Here it is in black and white that He set us an example in dying. Therefore we should be encouraged and challenged to do the same thing.”

May I say that the main objection to this theory and this heresy is that it's not true. It is not true to the facts, nor is it true to the evidence. You see, the only documentary evidence we have is restricted to the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) and the Epistles (Romans

to Jude) in the New Testament. That's all that we have concerning the death of Christ, and anything that you get outside is extra-biblical and has no foundation in fact. Here are the documents and the only recognized documents.

Now let's look for just a moment at the record we have here and see if Jesus died as a martyr. First of all, a martyr is one who dies for a cause because he cannot or will not deliver himself. Either he has a belief in some great truth, or he might believe in something that's not truth, but he is willing to die for it. He believes it's the truth and finds himself helpless, unable to deliver himself and extricate himself from the powers that be. But they give him a choice, either to live or to die. He can deny his belief and live, or he can die for that which he believes is the truth.

May I say that if you read the Gospel accounts of the death of the Lord Jesus Christ and that's what you see, you have not read them aright because there is one thing that is obvious, the Lord Jesus never did die as a martyr. That is farthest from the thought of the Gospel writers – He never died as a martyr. Six months before He went to Jerusalem, way up yonder in Caesarea Philippi, north of Israel proper, He finally told His disciples for the first time what lay ahead. Now you must understand that two and a half years before that, He had revealed His approaching cross to Nicodemus, a religious ruler, but during that interval He never revealed it to His disciples. But when you come to Caesarea Philippi six months before He went to Jerusalem to die, this is what He said, "The Son of man is going to Jerusalem. He is to be delivered into the hands of the Gentiles. They will kill Him and He will rise again the third day." He made that clear-cut statement. He was rebuked by Simon Peter, and then our Lord in turn told Peter that he was speaking as Satan would have him speak. At that very moment our Lord, knowing what was in the future, could have stepped over the border out yonder into that vast oriental East, the mysterious East, and could have been lost among its teeming millions. Neither the Roman government nor the religious authorities could ever have touched Him. Jesus was not a martyr – He deliberately went to Jerusalem. Luke says He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem to die. A martyr is helpless. But, my friend, when Jesus was arrested, He was not helpless. At that very time Simon Peter, wanting to protect his Lord, drew his sword, and our Lord immediately rebuked Simon Peter again. John tells us in John 18:11, "Then said Jesus unto Peter, Put up thy sword into the sheath; the cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?" He's saying to this man, "Peter, I don't need your protection, I am not going to die as a martyr." Then Matthew gives us this added detail in Matthew 26:53, "Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels?" Any man who can pray to the Father and have twelve legions of angels there to protect Him will not be dying as a martyr. He didn't have to die. So He said to Simon Peter, "Put up your sword, I don't need your little protection. If I really wanted protection, there are twelve legions of angels waiting out yonder at the battlement of heaven to step over and deliver Me immediately." When He came into the city of Jerusalem and met with His own that night, He said to them, "Ye know that after two days is the feast of the passover, and the Son of man is betrayed to be crucified" (Matthew 26:2). He said to His own when He got into Jerusalem for the beginning of the Passover feast, "I've been telling you for six months that I've come to Jerusalem to die, and I will die on the Passover Day."

At that very moment, over on the other side of the city of Jerusalem, the Sanhedrin had come together. They were the ones who would arrest Him and turn Him over to the Roman authorities to be crucified. Here's what they plotted, "We won't take Him on the feast day lest there be an uproar among the people." They met together and decided, "Not on the feast day. This city is filled with people and He's popular among the crowd. We dare not crucify Him on

Passover. We'll wait until the crowd starts leaving Jerusalem, and then we'll put our hands on Him." There's a noticeable difference of opinion, isn't there? Jesus said, "I'm going to die on the feast day," while the very ones who were to put Him to death said, "Not on the feast day." When did He die? He died on the feast day because He had full charge of His own death. My friend, He will not be dying as a martyr on the cross.

Let's come back to the text used by these who preach and teach – even today – that Jesus died as only a martyr, and He did so merely to set us an example.

***For even hereunto were ye called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps. (1 Peter 2:21)***

Notice that there is an orderly sequence of events that is chronological here. And there is one thing you have to admit about Simon Peter – he is logical. Peter says that Christ suffered first for us. And since He suffered first for us, then you and I come and accept Him as our Savior who died for our sins. Then He becomes an example to us, but only after we have accepted and received Him. Somebody says, "Can you be sure of that?" Yes, first I know it because Simon Peter himself says so – and that's the danger of lifting out a verse from its context. First Peter 2:21 doesn't stand by itself. You have to put 1 Peter 2:24 with it,

***Who his own self bore our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness; by whose stripes ye were healed.***

This is not an example that is set for us. You and I cannot suffer to wash away our own sins, much less suffer for the sins of the world. Peter is talking here about redemption. "That we, being dead to sins" – that was our condition.

"By whose stripes ye were healed." Healed of what? I notice that when so-called faith healers use the words, "by whose stripes ye were healed," they refer to Isaiah 53:5 rather than to this verse in 1 Peter, because Peter makes it evident that the healing is of sins. I certainly agree that the Lord Jesus came to be the Great Healer – but the Great Healer heals of sins. No human physician can handle that problem. And Peter's use of these words from Isaiah 53:5 reveals that the prophet Isaiah was not speaking primarily of physical healing but of that which is more important and more profound, healing from sin. Now you can glorify God in your body. Again Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7:23, "Ye are bought with a price; be not ye the servants of men." There's nothing that contributes more to the dignity of man than to recognize that he's a weak, lost sinner and to bow before Jesus Christ the Savior. My beloved, when you bow to Him, then you don't have to bow to any other man. Christ makes you free. You have been bought with a price that He might set you free. What a picture we have!

It was Thomas Chalmers, the great Scottish preacher of the past, who said that at the beginning of his ministry he preached reformation – that men needed to be reformed – and he went on to make this very definite statement, "I have never heard of any such reformations being effective. No one has ever changed by my preaching on reformation." Then Thomas Chalmers changed his message. He said, "I began to preach that men are alienated from God by sin, that men are lost sinners, that they need God's forgiveness, and that God will forgive them as lost sinners." He said, "After that I saw men being reformed."

May I say to you, my friend, Jesus did not die a martyr to try to draw out of you a resolve that you are going to do better! He died for your sins. He paid the penalty for your sins because,

down deep underneath, you and I stand guilty before a holy God and the penalty for sin must be paid.

A deeply convicted sinner came forward in a meeting years ago, and unfortunately he fell into the hands of a wrong type of personal worker who was attempting to be sort of a salesman, selling salvation, and saying to this distressed man, “God can cleanse your heart and make you anew.” With great anguish of heart and equally great disgust, he answered, “That’s not what I want. I’m a sinner! I have a debt to pay to a holy God.” May I say to you, Jesus died on the cross to pay that debt. When Nicodemus came to our Lord by night, he said, “We Pharisees know that you are a teacher come from God.” That was a sincere and genuine compliment. Our Lord brushed it aside and said to him, “You must be born again.” And as He talked with this man about being born again, He said, “Really, Nicodemus, I didn’t come as a teacher, nor did I come as a thaumaturgist – that is, a wonder worker or a miracle worker. I came to this earth to die for the sins of the world. But because you must be born again, the Son of man must be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him might not perish but have everlasting life.” My friends, He did not die as a martyr. He died a penal death for the sins of the world, for your sins and mine.

### **Moral Influence Theory**

There is a second widely held theory which is a heresy. It is known as the moral influence theory. It is one of the oldest, going back to Origen (most heresy dates back to Origen). It comes down through Abelard, the Catholic monk who had, by the way, a lovely romance that has made history – not like the dirty kind of thing we are exposed to today. But Abelard went off on this heresy. Later it came to America, was preached in New England by Horace Bushnell, that great preacher, and it swept all of New England into Unitarianism.

Now this is the teaching of the moral influence theory: God entered into humanity to show His love for mankind and that He sympathizes with us and He just came down here to suffer with us. The martyr theory is still being preached in a surprising number of the churches of Southern California, and probably an equal number are preaching this second heresy!

This moral influence theory is the popular position known as Liberalism today. This is the one that the natural man will listen to: Jesus came down to this earth just to suffer with man and sympathize with man; and He died on a cross, yes, but that was just the natural consequence of His suffering with man. This is the theory that magnifies the fact that God is love. Now don’t misunderstand me. Certainly God is love, but love is not God. God is more than love. Also God is holy and God is righteous and God is good and God is just. But this view only sees God as love alone, and it slops over on every side.

This moral influence theory teaches the universal Fatherhood of God and the universal brotherhood of man and that the death of Christ was just self-sacrifice on His part. It was not substitutionary. He was not dying for anyone, but rather His death was to let sinners know that He was big-hearted and died merely to correct man. This heresy teaches that mankind is, after all, not really alienated from God, is not a rebel, is not a lost sinner, nor totally depraved. He just got off the track a little – not much – and there’s some spark of good in everyone, and all it needs is to be fanned into a flame. You’ll find that these folk – oh, they are big-hearted themselves! In fact, they are so big-hearted that, as I heard one of them say, he would forgive God! And that was pretty big on his part, he would want you to know, and God must feel mighty good that this man is willing to forgive Him for even letting Jesus die!

Now this heresy is a nice, refined theory for the noble rich, the filthy rich, and for those who are comfortably retired, those whose minds have also retired and they are no longer

thinking. It's good for those who live in an ivory tower, removed from the maddening crowd today. It's a nice theory for the little old ladies who belong to a sewing circle in a modernistic church. It's a nice theory for idle-minded matrons of a literary club in a community church. It's a nice theory for busy men who have no time for religion and would like one turned out by an IBM machine. This is a very nice theory for intellectual theologians who walk the cloistered halls of an endowed seminary and know nothing about life on the sidewalks of Los Angeles or New York.

However, I happen to stand at the crossroads of the world today, and I rub shoulders with lost, desperate, confused humanity. I meet men and women who are beaten and battered and baffled, standing at the forge of life not knowing what to do. I see folk who are up against the raw and rough reality of living. I see the seamy side of life, and I say to you that this theory is not adequate. Men today, lost men, honest men, who know their own hearts and will face up to reality, realize that they need forgiveness of sin. They know that only by the shed blood of Christ can a holy God forgive us our sins – they cannot use a tepid rosewater religion. Suffering with the sinner is not suffering in the stead of the sinner and for the sinner. Oh, the conceit of modern man!

This theory leaves out the Old Testament saints altogether – forgets them – and it ignores the heathen today. It has no message for the jungles of Africa or the teeming masses of India. This moral influence theory ministers only to the conceit of modern man who thinks he has arrived because he can run a machine! It makes of modern man the epitome and acme of the race. He is the pet of evolution.

I saw a cartoon the other day, a good one. It was the picture of some monkeys in a cage looking out through the bars at some people who had come to look at them. The human beings were on one end of the cage, and the monkeys were on the other end. One of the older monkeys turned to another monkey and said, "I wonder if we really are descended from them?" And there were looks of distress on the faces of all the monkeys! I don't blame them, my beloved.

May I say to you that man who thinks he has it all together may also think this moral influence theory is a religion that will save him. But do you realize that God saved the Old Testament saints by the death of Christ long before He came to Bethlehem? Somebody says, "But they didn't know anything about it." Yes, they did. They knew something. You recognize that the law of gravitation was in operation long before an apple fell on Newton's head. God had made it work long before man found out it was even in existence. And did you know, my beloved, that God was saving man in the Old Testament by the death of Christ? Oh, maybe they did not know as much as you know, but they knew enough. Abel knew enough to bring a little lamb for a bloody sacrifice. Noah knew enough to bring a sacrifice. Abraham knew enough to get a ram out of a thicket. Samuel and David and Elijah brought sacrifices to God, and they understood that the blood of those little animals was not taking away their sin but was pointing to the One who in the future would die and pay the penalty for their sins.

In the New Testament when John opens his account of the Gospel, he goes back farther in the past than any other, and he says, speaking of the Lord Jesus, that He is the light of the world and the light shines in darkness and the darkness did not apprehend it, comprehend it, nor was it able to take it down. You see, there are x-rays beyond the visible spectrum which we cannot see. And back in the Old Testament Christ was the light, and those men may not have seen much, but they saw enough to bring a sacrifice that pointed to Christ, and they recognized that they were sinners who needed to have the penalty paid before they could come into God's presence.

My beloved, the Scripture does not teach different theories of the atonement. The Bible teaches that Christ died a penal, vicarious, substitutionary death, that it was absolutely essential for Him to die or there would have been no salvation. Peter said to the religious rulers,

***...there is no other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.*** (Acts 4:12)

Our Lord Jesus said,

***The Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be slain, and be raised the third day.*** (Luke 9:22)

And Peter said,

***Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver and gold, from your vain manner of life received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.*** (1 Peter 1:18, 19)

Paul, when writing to the Romans, said, “Who was delivered for our offenses, and was raised again for our justification” (Romans 4:25). Writing to the Corinthians he said,

***For he hath made him, who knew no sin, to be sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.*** (2 Corinthians 5:21)

And to the Galatians he wrote,

***Who gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us from this present evil age, according to the will of God and our Father.*** (Galatians 1:4)

And again he said to the Galatians,

***Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us; for it is written, Cursed is everyone that hangeth on a tree.*** (Galatians 3:13)

My friends, when Jesus Christ went to the cross, He did not die as a martyr. Oh, there is bravado in the death of a martyr! Every martyr dies like a hero. Christ did not die like a hero. Stephen, when he died, said, “I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God” (Acts 7:56) – and he died with the light of heaven upon him!

### **The True Reason**

When Jesus died on the cross He cried out, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” and into darkness He was plunged. He was a poor wretch, I tell you. He did not die to sympathize with our suffering. He died your death and my death. He was paying the penalty for your sin and my sin, my beloved, and nothing short of that was acceptable. He died a sacrificial death, and if you want to see the love of God, look further than John 3:16 which is merely the declaration of His love. The explanation is found in Romans 5:6, “For when we were yet without

strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly.” He died for the ungodly because that is the only kind of people there are in God’s sight – ungodly.

***For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man some would even dare to die.*** (Romans 5:7)

Do you know anybody today who would die for you? Do you? Could you number them all on the fingers of one hand? I’ll tell you One who did die for you, and He died for you because He loved you, and He died for you because nothing short of His death could save you. You were a lost sinner.

***But God commendeth his love toward us in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*** (Romans 5:8)

Although he did not tell us so, standing yonder at that cross when Christ died was Saul of Tarsus. I am convinced that Saul of Tarsus, that zealous young Pharisee who hated Jesus, was present at His crucifixion. Even after our Lord died, Saul of Tarsus continued the cruel persecution of His church. When the older Pharisees were rid of the Lord Jesus and He was no longer a threat in Jerusalem, they sat down and said, “This is enough for us,” but young Saul of Tarsus said, “Not for me. I’ll not let up until I terminate this crowd.” He hated Jesus. Paul was in Jerusalem in the School of Gamaliel. When Jesus was crucified, this brilliant young Pharisee would not be staying at home. The other Pharisees went, and I cannot conceive of him staying home and saying, “I have some studying to do, I’ll just have to miss this crucifixion.” No, I am sure he was there. We read that the Pharisees shot out their lip at Him, ridiculed Him, blasphemed Him and did the lowest thing that any man on earth has ever done: They sat down and watched Him die. Why didn’t they go home? They sat down and watched Him, and Saul of Tarsus sat there ridiculing Him and hating Him.

But one day he met the Lord Jesus on the Damascus Road, and that changed his life. “Oh,” he said, “when I met that Man, what was gain to me became loss and what was loss became gain. I was turned outside in and right side up. When I came to Him I found out He loved me and He gave Himself for me! While I stood there ridiculing Him, hating Him, He was dying for the ungodly – and I happened to be one of the most ungodly! He died in my place, in my stead.”

### **Are You Saved?**

Oh, how I want to make this clear today! Many people need this made so clear to them. Until you see in the death of Christ the following three things, let’s be very frank, you are not saved.

### ***The Magnitude of the Guilt of Sin***

Paul went yonder to Corinth where he could have argued philosophy, where he could have talked learnedly of many things, but he said, “I determined not to know any thing among you, except Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2). You must see, first of all, the magnitude of the guilt of sin, that it was sin which nailed our Lord to the cross – nothing else. He is not a helpless man, He is not dying to show you anything, my friend, to help you live your life



a little better. He died to pay the penalty for your sin. Oh, the magnitude of the guilt of sin that required His death!

### *Self-condemnation*

Second, our own self-condemnation. Until you have come to Him as a lost sinner, that's all you are, a lost sinner. We have so many people today, sometimes called "Jesus boys," filled with pride, talking about their talents, wanting to do something, but never have they come as guilty lost sinners to Jesus Christ. Until you and I see our lost condition, we are not saved, my beloved.

### *Adequate Remedy*

Until you see that His death is the adequate remedy for your sins, you are not saved. That's what it requires, and it does not require anything else. You see, the cross is the objective ground, an historical fact that is the basis for your forgiveness. And on the basis that Jesus Christ died some two thousand years ago, God can forgive you at this moment. That's the way He forgives. MacLaren has well said, "Christianity without a dying Christ is a dying Christianity."

Many years ago in England a sea captain took his 14-year-old boy to sea against the pleading of the mother. The sea captain said, "I want to make a sailor out of him," and he made him just a common sailor on board. When they were out at sea they saw a storm coming up, so the captain gave the orders to send all the men aloft into the rigging. His own son went up the mast and out on the yardarm, and while he was out there, the first breeze of the storm hit and it swept the yardarm out, and the young fellow found himself holding onto the yardarm with the deck beneath him. If he fell, it would mean instant death. When the father saw the boy's predicament, a look of consternation crossed his face – what could he do? At that moment the ship heaved a little to the side, and when it did, it moved that yardarm out over the ocean. The father saw the one opportunity and shouted to the boy, "John, jump into the ocean, it's your only chance!" The boy looked down, unable to muster the courage to jump. The father slowly reached back, pulled out his gun and pointed it at the boy. He said, "Son, if you don't jump, I'll shoot!" The boy knew his dad, knew he meant business, so the boy with great fear just turned loose and fell into the sea. When he did, immediately underneath him were the loving arms, the strong arms of his father who pulled him out of the water.

My friend, at this moment you and I in ourselves are helpless and hopeless in this world, and the Law (10 Commandments) by which some people are trying to measure up, is like a gun pointed right at us. It will slay us – it cannot save us! It is an administration of condemnation. You cannot save yourself, and the Law condemns you. God says to leap into the ocean of His grace. And if you by faith leap, the loving arms of a crucified Savior will lift you up and save you. He died for your sin.

I've attempted to make the plan of salvation clear. I do not believe there is a person reading this message who could ever go into the presence of God and say he had never heard the plan of salvation.

My duty is concluded, but you have a tremendous responsibility. What are you going to do with a Savior who died for you? Have you really, truly understood what it means to trust Him? It is not just to come to Him in order to get a little help or a little salve rubbed on some little wound. It means to come as a lost sinner to the Savior and to trust Him. Just leap by faith into the ocean of His love and grace. He is there to save you. But you will have to take the leap – you will have to come to Him by faith.