

Why did Jesus have to die?

And other questions about the cross
of Christ and its meaning for us today



Marcus Nodder

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Introduction

W*here can I find more joy? What's the cure for a troubled conscience and feelings of guilt? How can I get to know God better? How can I get out of the spiritual rut I'm in? Does God really love me? How can I grow more spiritually? Is God really going to accept me when I die? Where can I find the power to change? How can I become more Christ-like?*

These are just some of the many questions I've wrestled with over the past forty plus years of being a Christian. I'm not the quickest at figuring things out, but what I've begun to realise in recent years is that the answer to all these questions that have troubled me as a follower of Jesus has been right under my nose all along.

What I need is not the latest technique or fad. I need the cross. I need my eyes to be opened more to the wonder of the cross; my heart to be captured more by the

beauty of the cross; my life to be shaped more by the power of the cross; my faith to be rooted more in the reality of the cross.

Just a symbol?

If you did a street survey asking people what the cross means to them, unless they've just stepped off a passing spaceship, most would still get the link with Christianity. But beyond that it's anybody's guess. For some, the cross is just the Christian equivalent of the Golden Arches on a McDonald's restaurant—an easily recognisable logo stuck on buildings to tell you where to find a church, if you're that way inclined.

For others, it's a cool design to have tattooed somewhere on your body, alongside a yin-yang or your star sign. Or a lucky charm to hang round your neck, bringing good fortune and warding off any vampires who happen to be in the neighbourhood. Or just a relic of a bygone age, marking the tragic end to the promising career of a great teacher.

If you did the same survey with churchgoers, however, the responses would be equally varied. For some the cross is just an example of self-sacrifice to inspire us to live better lives. For others, it is the place where God deals with what's wrong in the world, but any idea of it involving a sacrifice for sin to save us from the judgment we deserve is dismissed as primitive and immoral.

Or the cross is acknowledged as part of the story, but the real action is seen as being elsewhere—at the incarnation (Jesus being born as a human), or the resurrection, or Pentecost and the outpouring of the Spirit.

Are the answers to those questions of mine really to be found in the cross?

A curious logo

Nowadays, when sports clubs have an animal as part of their logo, they tend to choose ones which are impressive and intimidating to the opposition: bears, bulls, tigers, lions—although in the case of Stockport County, the local soccer club in the town where I grew up, the rampaging lions on the badge haven't helped much (the team languishes in the sixth division).

The same sort of thing was going on back in the first century when Christianity was spreading across the ancient world. Each legion in the Roman army proudly carried the symbol of the eagle. Imagine if instead they'd gone into battle holding aloft a bunny rabbit, or a mouse, or a lamb! And yet for the early Christians a lamb it was.

A lamb isn't remotely impressive. It's weak and vulnerable. And for the Jews, who would celebrate Passover by sacrificing a lamb, it was something you killed. So when those first followers of Jesus found out that he was to be known as "the Lamb of God", questions would have been asked in the marketing department. "Can't we have a lion on the banner instead?"

But a lamb it had to be, because it is the death of Jesus that is central to the Christian message—the gospel. His death *on a cross* no less, with all its associations of criminality, public shame and divine curse.

When John the Baptist saw Jesus coming towards him, he said: "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away

the sin of the world!" (John 1 v 29). And in the last book of the Bible, Revelation, Jesus is referred to once as a lion, but no fewer than 27 times as the Lamb of God. On the throne of the universe, for all eternity, there will be God and the Lamb (Revelation 22 v 1). The angels sing: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain" (Revelation 5 v 12). It is as the Lamb of God that Jesus will be known in the new creation, because it is his sacrificial death which is the key to God's eternal purposes.

And that is why the cross is also the key to so many of the issues with which we struggle.

The aim of this short book is that we would understand the cross more deeply, and treasure it more dearly. And that, as a result, we would live increasingly cross-centred and cross-shaped lives, and love and worship more the one who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all.

But before we dive into the questions, it is worthwhile reading one of the narratives of what actually happened on that first Good Friday 2,000 years ago...

The crucifixion of Jesus

²⁶As the soldiers led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus. ²⁷A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. ²⁸Jesus turned and said to them, 'Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹For the time will come when you will say, "Blessed are the childless women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!" ³⁰Then

*"they will say to the mountains, 'Fall on us!'
and to the hills, 'Cover us!' "*

³¹For if people do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?

³²Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. ³³When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals – one on his right, the other on his left. ³⁴Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.' And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

³⁵The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, the Chosen One.'

³⁶The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar ³⁷and said, 'If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.'

³⁸There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

³⁹One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: 'Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!'

⁴⁰But the other criminal rebuked him. 'Don't you fear God,' he said, 'since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.'

⁴²Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.'

⁴³Jesus answered him, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.'

The death of Jesus

⁴⁴It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, ⁴⁵for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶Jesus called out with a loud voice, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.' When he had said this, he breathed his last.

⁴⁷The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, 'Surely this was a righteous man.' ⁴⁸When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and went away. ⁴⁹But all those who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

Luke 23 v 26-49