

Why Did Jesus Need to Die?  
Luke 22:14-20  
(GCF – April 25, 2010)

## I. Introduction

*Then at the proper time Jesus and the twelve apostles sat down together at the table. 15 Jesus said, "I have looked forward to this hour with deep longing, anxious to eat this Passover meal with you before my suffering begins. 16 For I tell you now that I won't eat it again until it comes to fulfillment in the Kingdom of God." 17 Then he took a cup of wine, and when he had given thanks for it, he said, "Take this and share it among yourselves. 18 For I will not drink wine again until the Kingdom of God has come." 19 Then he took a loaf of bread; and when he had thanked God for it, he broke it in pieces and gave it to the disciples, saying, "This is my body, given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." 20 After supper he took another cup of wine and said, "This wine is the token of God's new covenant to save you — an agreement sealed with the blood I will pour out for you. (Luke 22:14-20, NLT)*

Why did Jesus have to die?

For the last 150 years, the dominant thinking in the Western church has been a legal or forensic view of Christ's death.

In other words, the punishment for my sin is death. As a result, the only way the justice of God could be satisfied is by death.

The *emphasis* in this model is to view God as a judge sitting in His courtroom and ourselves as criminals worthy of the death penalty.

The Good News in this model is that Jesus has paid the penalty, and if I believe in the atoning work of Jesus Christ as expressed in His death, I am let off the hook and can now go to heaven.

While I am not here today to deny the legal or forensic aspects of the death of Christ, I do believe there is another powerful understanding of Christ's sacrifice that has strong biblical support and is rooted firmly in the Jewish understanding of what it meant to be in covenant relationship with God.

The view I would like to emphasize here today is a covenantal view of the atoning work of Jesus Christ.

What does Jesus Himself say concerning His impending death? *After supper he took another cup of wine and said, "This wine is the token of God's **new covenant** to save you — an agreement sealed with the blood I will pour out for you."*

## II. Potential Weaknesses of *Emphasizing* a Legal View of Christ's Death

Before I speak about a covenant view of atonement, allow me to point out what I believe are two major weaknesses of *emphasizing* a legal view of the atonement.

A. A legal view *potentially* provides little motivation for you to cultivate a dynamic **relationship** with God.

Relationship is hard work! If Jesus is simply my meal ticket to heaven – a sort of legal document stating my pardon, why do I need to do anything more?

If salvation is simply going to heaven, then once I have received my pardon why do anything more?

It is like me receiving all the “benefits” of marriage without doing one thing to cultivate the marriage.

The problem with this is that even if Sara felt legally bound to give herself to me, cook my food, and do my laundry, at the core our lives and marriage would be an empty shell and deeply unsatisfying.

But, marriage is not simply a legal document between two people; it is a covenant that indicates our commitment to intimacy and (through the vows) how we will maintain that relationship.

I think many of us are stuck in this legal place. We see God as *primarily* a judge and believe that Jesus has turned His wrath away from us, but this view does not lend itself to drawing near to the Father.

B. A legal view *potentially* provides little motivation for the you to live a **holy** life.

A legal view of our relationship to God puts an *emphasis* on the law.

If the law is the emphasis, then we are painfully aware that we can never do all the law.

Consequently, if the legal requirements of the law are met in Jesus Christ, why should I do any of the law?

Why should I live any differently, if, when God looks at me, He does not see me, but He only sees Jesus?

You see, if Jesus is only viewed as some form of legal protection from the wrath of God and I have put Jesus between myself and the Father, what motivates me to live my life any differently than before?

Returning again to the image of marriage (one of God's favorite views of how He sees Himself in relationship to us His children), if I view my relationship to Sara as simply a legal contract, I am not too motivated to alter my behavior for the benefit of the relationship.

However, my behavior is deeply affected when I desire to live in covenant relationship with her and cultivate intimacy.

In the same way, I would advocate that God does not simply approach us legally. In fact, I would argue that while there may be "legal" elements to the atoning work of Christ, in the words of Jesus Himself, the atonement has more to do with covenant than a legal contract.

### III. Atonement and Covenant Renewal

#### A. Meaning of Atonement

##### Old Testament – *kipper*

Simply put, the Old Testament understanding of atonement had to do with a **cleansing** of sin and the sense of being **reconciled** to God.

Leviticus 16 speaks of the annual Day of Atonement that was to be celebrated by all Israel. On this day sacrifices were made that represented the cleansing of their sins and reminded them of their covenant relationship with God.

##### New Testament - *hilasmos*

The understanding of this is "the means by which sins are **forgiven**."

You see, your sins are not just hidden behind the blood of Christ – they are actually forgiven – opening the door to a relationship with God that was formerly closed because of our sin.

In both the Old and New Testament, this covenant understanding of atonement was sealed with a sacrifice, which was the cultural way of sealing a business deal or establishing a relationship.

#### B. Meaning of Covenant

Where a legal contract does not require any meaningful relationship, a covenant emphasizes the interpersonal nature of the relationships involved.

In the context of establishing the covenant with Israel, God says, "...and I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people." (Leviticus 26:12, NRSV)

##### 1. Covenant and **Sacrifice**

Jesus was "put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood." (Romans 3:25, NRSV)

What does this mean?

I would propose that a sacrifice is a **saving** event, not a penalty.

If the penalty for sin is death, how can the death (sacrifice) of an animal, or in the case of extreme poverty, a simple grain offering adequately pay the penalty?

And yet God says in Leviticus 4:31, *“In this way, the priest will make atonement for them, **and they will be forgiven.**”* (NLT)

The reality is that God was in covenant relationship with His people. The sacrifices were a continual reminder of the nature of God’s covenant love for His people and the expectations He had for the maintenance of that covenant.

For the people to maintain the covenant they offered the sacrifices, but for the sacrifices to be effective the ritual needed to be accompanied by faith and worship.

This is where Israel faltered. They lost sight of the covenant relationship that was to be maintained by faith and obedience and believed that by adhering to the rituals of the law they were in right relationship with God.

Sacrifice is a tangible sign of faith and covenant obedience. In fact, in remembrance of the New Covenant given to us by Jesus, we are still to offer sacrifices!

Do you know what they are?

Romans 12:1 - *I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.* (NRSV)

This is how we walk in covenant obedience to God and as a result receive His covenant blessings.

Not just a ticket to heaven, but the joy of being in relationship with our Creator now.

*Then you will know what God wants you to do, and you will know how good and pleasing and perfect his will really is.* (Romans 12:2, NLT)

## 2. Covenant and **Jesus Christ**

Hebrews 7:23-28 says, *“But Jesus remains a priest forever; his priesthood will never end. 25 Therefore he is able, once and forever, to save everyone who comes to God through him. He lives forever to plead with God on their behalf. 26 He is the kind of high priest we need because he is holy and blameless, unstained by sin. He has now been set apart from sinners, and he has been given the highest place of honor in heaven. 27 He does not need to offer sacrifices every*

*day like the other high priests. They did this for their own sins first and then for the sins of the people. But Jesus did this once for all when he sacrificed himself on the cross.” (NLT)*

Jesus Christ allows us to enter into a new better covenant with God by presenting a perfect sacrifice.

He presented himself, shedding His own blood to seal the covenant.

His sacrifice, unlike the old covenant, cleanses perfectly from sin.

While both covenants needed to be embraced by faith, the sacrifice of Christ re-establishes the covenant of God with humanity once and for all.

#### IV. Conclusion

One message is hardly adequate to deal with this issue. Perhaps I have raised more questions than I have answers, but let me try to conclude.

First, I am proposing that Jesus’ death is primarily **covenantal** in nature: *This wine is the token of God’s new covenant to save you — an agreement sealed with the blood I will pour out for you.* (Luke 22:20)

Second, the nature of covenant is **relational** more than it is legal: *I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people.* (Leviticus 26:12)

Third, Jesus’ sacrifice **seals** (establishes) the covenant, providing a renewed opportunity for meaningful relationship between God and all who identify with Christ’s incarnational work: *The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.* (Hebrews 8:8, NRSV)

Finally, similar to the Old Covenant, this relationship is a gift and is entered into and *maintained* by **faith**: *Therefore, since we have been made right in God’s sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us. 2 Because of our faith, Christ has brought us into this place of highest privilege where we now stand, and we confidently and joyfully look forward to sharing God’s glory.* (Romans 5:1-2, NLT)

In response to all of this I conclude by inviting you into a relationship with God that is defined by covenant, not by law, and in response to that loving relationship *present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.*