

On the Passion of the Christ: Why Did Jesus Have to Die?

An Orthodox Christian Perspective

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I. Introduction

What is it about our Lord's death on the Cross that saves us? Why did He plan and voluntarily endure His Passion and Death? Why was it necessary for Him to die? Certainly it was prophesied that He would suffer and die for us in the Old Testament (e.g. Ps 21, Is 38, etc.). But this doesn't explain the "why." It only demonstrates that the Christ's death was indeed according to God's plan. Why wasn't the Incarnation alone enough to save us or heal us of our infirmities and enslavement to Death? St. Gregory the Theologian and other early Church Fathers taught that whatever was not assumed by Christ when He took our human nature, was not healed. Therefore Orthodox Christians believe that our Lord assumed our full human nature, while in its broken and fallen state in order to heal it. Then why did He have to still do more? His life and teaching were also effective for our salvation because He made known and taught us the Divine Truth. This eternal message of Redemption has been preserved and passed down to us by His Church for all to believe. So why did He still have to die? Certainly it is not because God the Father is a blood-thirsty deity who's divine justice demands the bloody execution of His Only-Begotten Son in order to make satisfaction for his lust for blood and suffering. Some, in their explanation of our Lord's Crucifixion, come close to blasphemy by speaking in such terms.

It is important to note that the Orthodox explanation of Salvation is multi-faceted. As Bishop Kallistos Ware points out in his lecture "*Salvation: The Orthodox Perspective*," within the New Testament there are numerous models or ways of speaking of our Lord's work of Redemption. These models of salvation include:

- **The Didactic:** Christ teaches us the way to salvation (St. Mt. chaps. 5-7)
- **The Illuminative:** Christ gives us the light which frees us from darkness (St. Jn. 8:12 & 1 St. Jn. 1:1-2:11)
- **The Sacrificial:** Christ's was sacrificed for us (Heb. 9:1-10:23)
- **The Ransom:** Christ paid our debt to ransom us from Death (1 St. Pt. 1:18-21)
- **The Substitution:** Christ took our place by dying for us (Rom. chap. 5)

- **The Cosmic Battle and Victory over Death:** Christ has conquered Death for us (1 Cor. 15:12-58)

- **The Sharing, Participation and Reciprocity:** Christ took our human nature so that we could partake of His Divine Nature (2 St. Pet. 1:4)

Eastern Christians do not hold to only one model of salvation to the exclusion of all others because, as Bishop Kallistos put it, when it comes to the Orthodox teaching on salvation we believe that “there is strength in numbers.” While the following explanation will focus primarily on the “participation” model, it does not by this imply a denial or exclusion of the other New Testament salvific models of Christ’s work of redemption.

II. Corpus

By our first parent’s disobedience, mankind tasted of the fruit of death. When contemplating the Biblical narrative in the book of Genesis, we must realize that the story does not teach that God murdered our first parents. It would be more correct to state that they, by their very choice in rejecting Him, *committed an act of suicide*. In other words, the act of rejecting God directly results in spiritual death, just as surely as jumping off a tall building results in physical death. To refuse God is like refusing to breath. After all, He is the origin and giver of life. To reject Him is to reject *Life* itself.

Our first parents, allowing themselves to be deceived by the Liar, ignored God’s warning and did the very thing He so lovingly instructed them not to do. By their disobedience, they partook of the fruit of death. The clear meaning behind the symbolic imagery of the “forbidden fruit” is that man ingested death as the consequence of his rejection of God. As St. Paul states, because of this, “Death passed upon all men” (Romans 5:12). “Thorns and thistles grew therein,” as the Armenian *Book of Hours* alludes to the Biblical account of the effects of the Fall upon all of creation. Our first parents then passed-on their broken, death-bound humanity to us, their posterity. All of mankind thus inherited the self-induced sentence of condemnation to death.

Mankind was stung by death, and as a result “the sting of death is sin” (1 Corinthians 15:56). Many people today think only the opposite of this Scriptural text. They think only that “the sting of sin is death.” For our first parents this was certainly true. Their sin brought death upon them and all mankind. But for us now, as St. Paul states, the opposite becomes true. Now, because of our inherited mortality, we ***through the fear of death***, are led into sin. As St. Paul explains, after the Fall, man through this fear of death was subjected to a lifelong bondage of sin (cf. Hebrews 2:15). How does the fear of death lead us to sin? Anthony Dragani, an Eastern Catholic writer, explained the historic Orthodox view stating,

“Because of the certainty of physical death, we try to evade the inevitable. This leads us to try and cheat death, which results in sin. We store more food than we need (gluttony), we hoard wealth and resources (avarice), we use our reproductive potential wantonly (lechery), etc. In the quest to cheat death we distort natural God-given gifts. Thus, death causes us to sin.”

Man was thus “caught” by death and unable to deliver himself. He needed a deliverer; a Savior. Our Lord Jesus Christ, the *Logos* or *Word of God*, through His Incarnation (“the Word became flesh...” St. Jn 1:14), assumed our fallen, broken human nature in order to heal it. From the sanctified womb of the virgin, St. Mary, our Lord’s entire life was a process of the *divinization of human nature*. In so doing He both healed and transfigured our fallen, mortal nature. As St. Paul teaches:

“For it was fitting that He, for Whom and by Whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the originator of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified have all one origin. That is why He is not ashamed to call them brethren, saying, ‘I will proclaim Thy name to my brethren, in the midst of the church I will praise Thee’ and again, ‘I will put my trust in Him.’ And again, ‘Here am I, and the children God has given me.’ Since therefore the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death He might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage. For surely He taketh not hold of the nature of the angels, but He taketh hold of the seed of Abraham. Therefore He had to be made like his brethren in every respect, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, in order to be made an expiation for the sins of the people. For because He Himself has suffered and been tempted, He is able to help those who are tempted.” (Hebrews 2:10-18).

“Although He was a Son, He learned obedience through what He suffered; and being made perfect He became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey Him.” (Hebrews 5:8-9)

In the garden of Gethsemane, Christ came face to face with the reality of what He would have to endure -not just physically- but more importantly spiritually, for our redemption. Paradise was lost in a garden, and with Christ’s Words, “Not my will but Thine be done,” access to Paradise began to be regained in a garden. The knot binding us to death due to our disobedience was now being loosed by Christ’s obedience and acceptance of the Cross. His entire earthly life had set in motion the process of our redemption, beginning with His Incarnation and ministry. Yet there still remained the self-induced sentence of death upon mankind which needed to be abolished.

It is crucial to understand that our Lord was not murdered against His will. His passion and crucifixion were *voluntary*. His death was a *sacrifice* for us. Jesus said,

“I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again; this charge I have received from my Father” (St. Jn 10:14-18).

As it is stated so beautifully in the Armenian Anaphora of St. Athanasius: “Your Only-Begotten Son [is] both Debtor and Debt, Immolation and Anointed, Lamb and Heavenly Bread, High Priest and Sacrifice.” Jesus was the high priest who sacrificed Himself on the altar of the Cross. Therefore to view the Crucifixion simply as a murder is to woefully misunderstand the meaning of His death. But why did He offer Himself on the Holy Cross?

Man’s self-inflicted sentence of death could only be undone by God. Man could not do it on his own. Mankind was caught by Death and in life-long bondage to it. Because of Death, man was torn asunder and the subconscious fear of it destroyed man’s inner spiritual harmony and communion with God. As it says in the Psalms, man could not ransom himself from this horrible lot:

“Truly no man can ransom himself, or give to God the price of his life, for the ransom of his soul is costly, and can never suffice, that he should continue to live on for ever, and never see Hades” (Psalm 48:7-9 LXX).

Only God could ransom us:

“But God will ransom my soul from the power of Death, for He will receive me” (Psalm 48:15 LXX).

Christ, being the Only-Begotten Son of God, was of the same Divine nature as God the Father. As St. Paul states, “For in Him the whole fullness of Divinity dwells bodily” (Colossians 2:9). Through His Incarnation Christ left His heavenly majesty to be born as a humble, defenseless babe. St. Paul writes that Christ,

Who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:6-8).

Christ experienced our suffering and death, in order to heal our humanity. As the Orthodox Paschal liturgies triumphantly proclaim:

“Christ has trampled down Death by death...
and upon those in the tombs, He has bestowed Life!”

Christ, by truly becoming man, was able to endure the sentence of death and condemnation on behalf of all mankind. By so doing, He abolished Death’s power. Through His Resurrection He opened the way, in our humanity, for our own resurrection. He was “put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Romans 4:25). In His Divine-Human nature He endured the effects and consequences of the sins of the world in order heal our nature. As St. Peter wrote, “He Himself bore our sins in His body

on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By His wounds you have been healed. (1 Peter 2:24) But how did Christ's death destroy Death's power?

As already mentioned, man could not break the power of death on his own. Even the righteous Old Testament saints like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were caught by Death and held captive by Hades, no matter how holy these men were. Even those considered sinless like Jeremias, St. John the Forerunner and St. Mary the Bearer of God, were caught by Death and unable to deliver themselves. Death, in a sense, had mankind in a "strangle-hold," a "death-grip" so tight, we could not break free. Only the Son of God, when He partook of death in our human nature, could break free from the clutches of Death and, through His Divine power, rise again. Death could not hold Him because He joined our death-bound humanity to His omnipotent Divinity. By His death and Resurrection, He crushed Death and its power over man. Christ "tasted death for everyone" (Hebrews 2:9) and as St. Paul adds, "through death He... destroyed him who has the power of death, that is, the devil" (Hebrews 2:14).

As St. John Chrysostom said in his famous Paschal Homily:

"Let no one fear Death, for the Savior's death has set us free. He that was taken by Death has annihilated it! He descended into Hades and took Hades captive! He embittered it when it tasted His flesh! And anticipating this Isaias exclaimed, 'Hades was embittered when it encountered Thee in the lower regions.' It was embittered, for it was abolished! It was embittered, for it was mocked! It was embittered, for it was purged! It was embittered, for it was despoiled! It was embittered, for it was bound in chains! It took a body and, face to face, met God! It took earth and encountered heaven! It took what it saw but crumbled before what it had not seen!"

St. Peter writes regarding Christ's Sacrifice,

"Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the Spirit; in which He went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. There is also an antitype which now saves us: Baptism (not a putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the examination of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, Who went to heaven and is at the right of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to Him" (1 St. Peter 3:18-22).

This mention of the "spirits in prison" to which Christ descended to preach is a reference to what is commonly known as our Lord's "Harrowing of Hell." There he accomplished the deliverance of the righteous Old Testament saints held captive by Death. As St. Paul states,

“Therefore He says: ‘When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men.’ Now this, ‘He ascended’ what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth?” (Ephesians 4:8-9).

Christ descended into the lower regions, into Hades, in order take captivity (those held in bondage by Death) captive and lead them into Paradise. The Icon of the Harrowing of Hell profoundly depicts this spiritual reality and truth.

Thus Christ endured sin and death for us and overcame them. As a result we portray the Greek letters, “IC XC NIKA” which means “Jesus Christ Conquers.” He has conquered death, trampling it down by His death and has bestowed life to those in the tombs. Once we become part of His Body the Church, through our faith and Holy Baptism (cf. Mark 16:16), He imparts to us His Divine energy and grace to overcome the power of Death in our lives. We no longer have to fear death or its power because Christ is risen and has conquered death for us. He has become “the source of eternal salvation to all who obey Him” (Hebrews 5:8-9).

III. Conclusion

This brief explanation or reflection on the purpose of Christ’s Sacrifice is meant to help us to understand why Christ had to die to save us from the power of death. To conclude this reflection on our Lord’s passion and death and His redemption of mankind, consider these sacred words from the Anaphora of St. Athanasius which are offered every Lord’s Day in the Armenian Divine Liturgy:

Holy, Holy, Holy are You truly and All-Holy; and who is he that will presume to contain in words the outpouring of Your infinite loving kindness to us? From the very beginning You did care for him who had fallen into sin and did comfort him in diverse manners by the prophets, by the giving of the law, by the priesthood and by the prefigurative offering of animals.

And at the end of these days, tearing up the sentence of condemnation for all our debts, You gave us your Only-Begotten Son, both Debtor and Debt, Immolation and Anointed, Lamb and Heavenly Bread, High Priest and Sacrifice; for He is distributor and He himself is distributed always in our midst without ever being [fully] consumed.

For having become man truly and without illusion, and having become incarnate through union without confusion, through the Mother of God, the holy virgin Mary, He journeyed through all the passions of our human life without sin and came willingly to the world-saving Cross... the occasion of our redemption.