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New Living Translation: 1 Pe 3:18

¹⁸ Christ suffered for our sins once for all time. He never sinned, but he died for sinners to bring you safely home to God. He suffered physical death, but he was raised to life in the Spirit.

Why did Jesus *have to die*?

We've been told many times in our lives that Jesus died for us. Our Bible quote today says that Jesus died for us – for all time, meaning that he died for future sins, committed by people who were not yet born at the time this was written. This includes us.

Who wrote this? This New Testament book is called First Peter and the author clearly states that he is Peter, the apostle of Jesus Christ. The letter was written to people who were undergoing persecution for being Christians. In particular, the author was writing to people in Asia Minor, which is more or less modern Turkey. There is some problem, though, with the authorship of this letter. It's written in sophisticated Greek, but Peter was an uneducated

fisherman. It's also true that persecution against Christians in this area didn't begin until after Peter died. So, there are many scholars who believe that this letter was written in Peter's name, but by someone else, perhaps a more educated person who was a follower of the real Peter.

But this doesn't affect our quote. It states something that we take as a simple fact.

What's interesting, though, is that this statement doesn't answer the question as to why Jesus *had to* die, why he couldn't have forgiven all our sins, and then lived to be a hundred and two, and finally died from heart failure.

Over the centuries, Christian thinkers have written a lot about this question and it has been at the heart of many theological discussions. When we use that word theological, we are referring to a body of thought that tries to put order on the beliefs of some faith, in this case, Christianity. Christian Theologians want to take what we have been taught as Christians and somehow make an integrated, logical system out of it.

There was a guy named Anselm of Canterbury who lived from about 1033 to 1109. He was a Benedictine monk and a theologian. He is famous for his work on ontological arguments about the existence of God. This refers to an attempt

to prove with some sort of logical, almost mathematical, argument that God must indeed exist. He is also famous for his theory called the “satisfaction theory of atonement”. It has to do with this issue of why Jesus had to be crucified and die. Anselm argued that Christ died in order to pay a debt owed by humanity because of our unfaithfulness to God. It was too vast a debt for any mere human to pay, so in order to clear our slate and give us a clean start, God had to come to earth in the being of Jesus and actually pay with his human life - and because of the extreme level of our guilt, his death had to happen in an excruciating way. Only then has Jesus truly paid our debt.

Another major theologian was Martin Luther. He argued in something he wrote called *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* that Jesus died in order to put the final seal on God’s promise to remain faithful to us. God’s promise was thus turned into a sort of last will and testament. Now, when the person who writes a will dies, it can no longer be changed. So, God had his son die to ensure that there was no turning back, that the will and testament could never be changed. His promise to us was therefore something we could count on for all generations.

Another theory that has been proposed is that the reason Jesus had to die and couldn’t save us by any other means was that it was a test of his

commitment. There are those who have argued that in order for Jesus to save us, he would have to be in a situation where he needed to be saved – and then not save himself. He had to be willing to hand over his very life to prove that he could live up to his own teaching – and that teaching said that he was there for us, without any hesitation or limitation. Once Jesus' own commitment had been tested, we would no longer question his faith in us or the truth of his ways.

So, what does this philosophizing mean to us today?

I'd like to diverge and talk about my father. He lived to be sixty-six. He died of brain cancer, a very aggressive, usually lethal form of brain cancer called a glioma. A glioma originates in cells called glial cells that surround the neurons in the brain. I'm not a medical person, but when my father was dying I was told that gliomas finger out into the brain with tentacle-shaped growths, and that this makes them extremely difficult to remove. I was also told that large gliomas are scaled at a size 3 to 4, and that when they discovered it, my father's glioma was 3.85.

It's important to note that in any regard, my father's brain was certainly badly damaged by the time he died. And as he lay on his death bed in a hospital very near where I went to high school, he had visions. He saw Jesus Christ being

crucified right in front of him. Now my father was a tough man. He grew up with no father. He lived in a dangerous neighborhood. He joined the Marines and served in World War II as a sergeant. He was a sniper. For the rest of his life after he left the Marines he got up at 5:30 in the morning. He worked six days a week, long hours, to provide for his wife and three kids. He never complained about anything. He was as stoic as they come.

But as he was slowly dying, he laid on his bed and screamed out loud, pointing to the air at the foot of his bed, describing in gory detail how Jesus was being hammered to the cross right then and there. It was happening live. He described the blood, the agony, the fear, the calling out of a desperate Jesus asking his father why this had to happen to him.

Why did he have this vision? Because his brain was damaged?

I remember sitting there next to him, hardly able to recognize him. He somehow didn't look like my father, this man who was paralyzed by terror as he watched the terror of a man who was God. My father looked like a man who had been broken by unimaginable suffering.

I stood at the foot of his bed, in front of the scene that was unfolding in front of him. *I'm coming to be with you*, my father yelled out at one point, his finger leveled at the wall behind me. *I'm coming after you, Jesus*, he yelled.

Maybe that's it. Maybe the reason Jesus had to die is that he came here to fetch us, to bring us back to God, to lead us home. To lead us toward our everlasting life with God, which isn't going to be here, on this earth. Maybe Jesus had to die because if he came here to fetch us, to bring us with him, he couldn't stay here. This isn't our ultimate destination. He had to leave so that we could follow, so that we could someday leave as well.

Or maybe Jesus had to die so that we could experience true sacrifice by watching the example of Jesus. That's what my father did. He witnessed it happening as if he had been there in person two thousand years ago. Maybe he was transported back in time or to some other form of reality where he literally saw Jesus beaten, nailed to a cross, and die. By the way, we don't really know that Jesus was nailed to a cross. The Romans often tied prisoners to crosses.

They died from suffocation, by the way, when they no longer had the strength to use their legs to lift their bodies up. By pushing upward with their legs, they could fill their lungs with air. That's why the Roman guards were going

to break his legs, to make sure he couldn't breathe and would then quickly die.

But they saw that Jesus was already gone by this time.

At any extent, there is a truly vast body of written material concerning the nature of our faith as Christians. But the truth is that as everyday Christians, we don't sit around and philosophize about our faith. We just know that Jesus died for us – and that's good enough for us. So, maybe there's no benefit from us having this discussion right now.

But here's something that I noticed after my father had finally died. I went down to the viewing room in the morgue, in the basement of the hospital, and I visited him one last time. He didn't look terrified anymore. The intense strain on his face was gone. He looked relaxed. He looked like himself. It was a great comfort to me.

I knew at that moment that my father had indeed followed Jesus.

You know, it's not clear what Jesus' last words were. In the Gospels of Mark and Mathew, Jesus is quoted as saying "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" Matthew says that he shouted out one more time before dying, but it doesn't say what words he might have shouted. The Gospel of Mark simply says that Jesus uttered a cry and then he died. The Gospel of Luke says that Jesus

said, "Father, I entrust my spirit into your hands," just before he died. The Gospel of John says that Jesus said, "It is finished," and then he died. These are all translations, of course. The New Testament was written in Greek, but Jesus spoke Aramaic, which is related to Hebrew. So, we're reading an English translation of a Greek translation of what Jesus said in Aramaic.

Now, the truth is that I have my own interpretation of all of this. Here's why Jesus died - why he had to die - in my opinion.

But first, let me tell you a brief story about my father, long before he got brain cancer and died a slow, agonizing death. My father sold car tires and worked on cars for a living. We went to church every Sunday. One Sunday, as we were leaving church, a storm broke out. We dashed to the car and barely made it into our '67 Chrysler Fury III before a huge downpour happened. We were all dressed in our best clothes, of course, with my father wearing the only suit he owned.

As my father started the car, my mother was sitting next to him, and I was in the back seat, between my older brother and my older sister. Just as he put the car in reverse, a teenaged girl started backing out of a space next to us. I knew her, even though she was a bit older than me. I was fourteen. She was

sixteen and had just gotten her driver's license. I'm sure she couldn't see in the heavy rainfall. She slowly backed up – into the right rear fender of our car.

I felt the bump and my brother opened the window. She rolled hers down. She started crying that she didn't mean it, she was sorry. She was extremely upset. She sobbed.

My father got out of the car – in an extremely heavy rainfall – walked around the back of our car and up to her window. I listened as he stood there calming her down, telling her that everything would be okay, that it was just an accident. He said he would call her father and explain that she wasn't being reckless. Then he told her that he worked on cars and he had a buddy who ran a body shop. My father said that he fixed his friend's cars and got tires for him, and in return, his buddy did body work for him. So, he was sure that his buddy would fix both cars. And it was so little damage, anyway. It would all be okay. The girl calmed down. My father told her to drive safely. She left. My father watched as she pulled onto the road and drove away.

My father got back into our car soaking wet. We drove away. He didn't say anything to any of us. We went home. He walked into the house like nothing had happened. He changed his clothes and went back out to the garage to dry the

driver's seat with towels. My older brother helped him. That week, my mother had his suit dry cleaned.

You know, Jesus often taught by example. He didn't need to be baptized, but he had John the Baptist baptize him, so that we would know it was important to do this. He spent time with children, so we would know to cherish them. He fed the hungry and cured the lowest of the low, so that we would learn to respect all human life.

Maybe there are many reasons why Jesus had to die. But I believe that one reason Jesus had to die was so that people like my father could, in death, follow the same person they had followed in life. But more importantly, Jesus died so that people like my father could see someone teaching by example in the most powerful way possible – by giving one's life for others. Indeed, my father taught by example the same way that Jesus taught by example. He did this over and over while I was growing up – and I witnessed all of it.

I don't know what Jesus' last words were. But I do know what my father's last words were. He said "Jesus, I'm coming."