

How Can One Person's Death Pay For Another's Sin? You Asked For It

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On Feb 18, 2015, a man seeking online legal advice sent this message: "My wife made an ill-informed decision on her taxes, and we fear jail time might be a possibility. I can't let her go to jail. If jail time is sentenced, can I serve in her place?"

In 2011, someone wrote: "A dear friend of mine just got sentenced to 90 days in jail and has a special needs daughter at home. Can I serve the sentence for my friend?"

It surprised me to learn that this is a question frequently asked of legal experts: "Someone I love is set to be punished, can I serve their sentence?"

While this isn't allowed in our legal system, in other countries it's actually quite common. In fact, in China, there's even a name for it. It's translated in English as "*substitute criminal* – when an innocent person voluntarily takes the place of someone who's guilty."

If you're visiting with us at Shelby Street, online, or here in person at Franklin Road, we're so glad you're here. We're in this series called *You Asked For It*, and we're tackling some pretty heavy topics. Today we get to dig into this question: "How can one person's death pay for another person's sin?" And I love that we're talking about this today, on what's traditionally known as "Palm Sunday." The day Jesus arrived in Jerusalem with a massive crowd of people laying palm branches on the ground before him, believing he was coming to rule as their king. But just a few days after this arrival, Jesus would have nails driven into his hands and feet, and be hung on a wooden cross to die a brutal death – a punishment, reserved in that day, for the worst of criminals.

And even if you believe that Jesus died, just like scripture says – on the cross, dead for 3 days, and rose from the grave – even if you believe that, how does Jesus's death mean something for my life, and for your life, and for everyone, everywhere?

It's estimated that 107 billion people have lived on earth (including those currently alive). Now, I don't understand how that number is calculated, but population experts believe it's a safe guess. So, if Jesus died, just like the bible said, what does that mean for 107 BILLION people?

To answer that, we need to understand why Jesus needed to die in the first place. You see, *we each owe a debt we can never repay.*

As I was writing this message, I was trying to come up with the best way to illustrate this, and I need you to use your imagination for a bit. Imagine that I have no car insurance, and after church, I get in my car and go tearing out of the parking lot, and I crash into, and total, your car. Now, I have legal obligation to make that right – to restore the imbalance created by my actions. And as a follower of Jesus, I also have a moral and ethical obligation to make things right. Now imagine that the court orders me to pay you back, over time, the full cost of replacing your car. So, over the next several months, maybe even years, I work hard, I make sacrifices, and I set aside regular money until, finally, I repay the debt I owe.

Now, let's change the scenario just a bit. I still have no insurance, and I get in my car, I go tearing out of the parking lot, and instead of hitting your car, I hit and total *this*. This is a Bugatti Super Sport 300. It's suggested retail price is *3.9 million dollars*. Now, the same rules apply. I still have a legal, moral, and ethical obligation to make things right, and the court orders me to pay back the full amount of replacing this car.

Well now I'm in real trouble! Unless I win the lottery, no amount of time, no amount of effort, no amount of good deeds, will get me to 3.9 million dollars. I'm stuck with a debt I can never repay.

Friends, this is the very situation we find ourselves in with God!

We read in Romans 3:23: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Now, chances are you've heard that word "sin" before, but what exactly is it? Well, a simple web search tells us: sin is rebellion against God. It isn't something that happens by accident. It's often a conscious choice that we make.

That's how James, the half-brother of Jesus, described it: "If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them" (James 4:17). So, when you know you shouldn't cheat, but you do it anyway; when you know you should be truthful, but you decide to tell even that small lie; when you know you should honor your parents, honor God with your body, or stop after one drink, but you choose not to, that's when it's sin. When you know the good you should do, and you don't do it. Listen to this definition of sin, by pastor and theologian, John Piper: "Sin is what you do when your heart is not satisfied with God."

Now, a few weeks ago, we tackled the question "why is there so much suffering?" It's because of sin in the world! In Genesis, Adam and Eve had every reason to be fully satisfied with God; there were no worries, no sin, no shame. But their hearts wanted more, and their rebellion against God – their sin – brought about suffering in the world.

Think about it: while there's suffering from natural disasters, most of our suffering comes from either our own choices, or is collateral damage from someone else's choice. And Romans 3 tells us we're all guilty! *All of us* have, at some point, been dissatisfied with God, we've known the good we should do, and we've chosen to rebel!

Then later, in Romans 6, we read this: "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). The cost of sin, the payment due because of sin, is death, and it's debt we can't repay.

And this is where it gets a little tricky, because many of us were taught to believe we *can* pay off this debt. In fact, this is the foundation of most religions in the world – just say this specific prayer, confess your sins to this person, donate money, pay a penance and you're good! Essentially, we're taught that if we do the right things, we can correct the imbalance caused by our sin, so that we can pay off our own debt.

Friends, if I had to pick one false teaching most responsible for leading sincere people of faith astray, this is it: that we could do enough good to outweigh the consequences of our sin. That somehow, we could wipe away our own debt and get right with God.

The reason this can't work is because sin also *causes a relational divide* between us and God. The prophet Isaiah was trying to explain to the nation of Israel the results of their rebellion when he wrote: "It's your sins that have cut you off from God. Because of your sins, he has turned away and will not listen anymore" (Isaiah 59:2 NLT). So not only does our rebellion against God carry a debt we can't repay, but it causes a relational divide with God that we can't cross.

Trying to bridge the relational divide sin creates between us and God is like trying to jump across the Grand Canyon. Laura and I went there for the first-time last year, and this was one of my favorite picture spots. This is me standing about 15 feet from the rim. But when Laura zoomed the camera way out, not only does it look like I'm standing right on the edge, but you can see just how vast the canyon is. At some places it's over a mile across! No matter how hard I tried, it would be *impossible* to jump from one side to the other.

And friends, the relational divide between God and humanity is even greater than that! Not ONLY because of the nature and consequences of our sin, but also because of the nature and character of God.

You see, the bible says God is *holy*. He's perfect in goodness and righteousness. Right now, there are angels surrounding the throne of God, and day and night they never stop saying: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come" (Revelation 4:8).

If I'm in a meeting at work and my phone rings, and I see it's Laura or one of my kids, I'll hit the automatic reply "can I call you later?" If I get a second call, then I think, "well, maybe they didn't get last my text." But if I get a third call...then I know it's probably something serious. And that's the emphasis we see here. God's not simply holy. He is HOLY, HOLY, HOLY! He is absolutely perfect in goodness and righteousness.

But God is also *just*. Which means he's morally right and perfectly fair. In Deuteronomy 32, the author says: "Oh, praise the greatness of our God! He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he" (Deuteronomy 32:3-4).

And the apostle Paul tells us how God's justice causes him to respond to sin: "God is just...He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might" (2 Thessalonians 1:6, 8-9).

And that sounds pretty bad! But there's one more, very important, characteristic about God that we need to see. The bible tells us God is *love*.

In 1 John 4 we read, “Dear friends, let us love each other, because love comes from God. Those who love are God’s children and they know God...because God is love” (1 John 4:7-8 NLT).

And in Psalm 136, the writer begins: “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. His love endures forever” (Psalm 136:1). Then that same refrain is repeated 25 more times. His love endures forever, His love endures forever, His loves endures forever!

So let’s summarize what we know: We all sin, sin carries a punishment, and sin separates us from God. BUT God is holy (perfect in all ways), God is just (he must punish sin), AND God is love. God loves us, created us to be in relationship with him, and God wants to find a way to forgive the debt we owe AND restore the relationship.

So what does God do?

Well, early in the bible, God introduced the ritual of animal sacrifices. Which sounds really weird and even cruel, but for the nation of Israel, it was a powerful symbol of God’s justice and love. If the wages of sin is death, then God allowed an animal to serve as Israel’s “substitute criminal,” symbolically dying for their sins.

So once a year, a lamb was killed on behalf of all the people to forgive their sin. The bible calls this “atonement.” That word appears over 100 times in the bible and it means “to cover over or forgive someone’s debt.”

But there’s a second part to this yearly ritual, because remember, sin also causes a relational divide between God and people. So the priest, who killed the lamb, would take the animal’s blood, and sprinkle it throughout the temple, which was the place God designated to meet with his people. This “cleansing” of the temple was a symbol of the cleansing needed in order for people to come back into relationship with God. Through the animal sacrifice, Israel was forgiven AND relationally restored to God.

Now, you’d think that Israel would live differently in response to God’s gift; that they’d see God’s love and be changed for the better as a result. But that’s not what happened! In fact, the people did the exact opposite! They took advantage of God’s love and grace and treated it as their “get out of jail free card” – as an opportunity to live for themselves. They thought, “Hey, we can do whatever we want because the yearly sacrifice will take care of our sin!” And that’s why Isaiah 59:2 says they were “cut off from God.”

But later in Isaiah 59, Isaiah hints about God’s plan to deal with the consequences of sin once and for all. Isaiah said that a king would come! Not to rule, but to be a servant! Then to suffer and die as a substitute criminal for all people. And that King is *Jesus*!

In fact, when Jesus began his ministry, John the Baptist saw Jesus coming and said: “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). And throughout scripture, we see how Jesus’ death was an atoning sacrifice for everyone, permanently

forgiving the debt humanity owed and cleansing us with his shed blood, so that we can be brought back into a relationship with God.

Let me read just a few of the many verses that describe this amazing gift.

“You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ, for he forgave all our sins. He canceled the record of the charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross” (Colossians 2:13-14 NLT).

“God made him (Jesus) who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (1 Corinthians 5:21).

We read the first half of this earlier: “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23).

Jesus took our sentence, paid our debt, purified us so we could be right with God, and gave us the gift of eternity.

Listen, we don't want this series to just be some good information on tough topics. Our prayer is that this is yet another opportunity to come face to face with God, to see His love and grace, and be changed for his glory as a result. And today, I believe the invitation is for us to live in the reality of God's holiness, justice, and love!

For some, that requires an honest assessment of your current standing with God. Just because Jesus paid the debt you owe and provided a way for you to be in a relationship with God, doesn't mean you're living in that reality yet.

If you've never trusted Jesus as Savior and Lord, then your debt and separation remains. Not because God didn't do his part, but because you haven't said yes to that gift yet.

In Jesus, God did away with the ritual of animal sacrifice, but he did establish a couple new rituals – one of them is baptism. Since January, 82 people have made the decision to be baptized here at The Creek! Just as Jesus died for our sins and rose, those 82 people were buried in water and rose to live differently in response to God's love.

Maybe there are some listening that need to take that step – you can visit thecreek.org/nextsteps. There's a baptism class happening today, or you can sign up online for the next one!

But for those who've already made that decision, living in the reality of God's holiness, justice, and love should change our motives. Instead of trying to earn or maintain God's love (which we can't), we get to serve, give, and love *in response to God's love*. It's the power and simplicity of 1 John 4:19 - We love because he first loved us. God made the first move. Our lives get to be a response to His gift.

And so, we've got to ask ourselves: have we been treating God's forgiveness and love like the Israelites did – like a cosmic credit card with no limit, deliberately making choices we know are outside God's will because, "Hey, I'll just ask for forgiveness later?"

Some of us are trying to keep one foot in the world and one foot with God, choosing to go on rebelling against God, knowing we've been forgiven. Scripture says this is a pretty clear indication we really don't know the extent of God's love for us. To the extent we know we're loved by God, that will change our motivation to love God in return!

Living in the reality of God's holiness, justice and love should also change our focus. Instead of constantly thinking about ourselves and wondering where we stand with God, our focus will naturally shift to thinking of those who don't know God yet – "if God's forgiveness and love are available to ANYONE, how can we share that message with EVERYONE?"

I've been amazed, recently, at the people God has brought across my path that need to know his love and grace. But unfortunately, more times than not, I've missed those opportunities because I've been focused on myself, my life, or wondering where I stand with God, and trying to make that right. But as we learn to live in the reality of God's holiness, justice, and love, not only will we be more aware of others, but we can tell them, and show them, the difference God makes!

Here's the last one we have time for: living in reality of God's holiness, justice and love should change our outlook for the future. In a world that feels so broken and seems to be getting worse each day, as believers, we can know that our past is forgiven, that we can live today, free from the consequences of sin and in relationship with God, and we can live in confidence that our eternity in heaven is a promise that our just God will keep.

We can trust that God is in control, not us. That vengeance and justice are ultimately God's, not ours. And we are new creations in Christ, clothed in His righteousness, not because of anything we do, but because of his gifts of forgiveness and love.

Not long after we moved here, my son Josh fell and broke his arm right in front of our house. One look and I knew it was bad. I tried to do everything I could to help him – I grabbed two paint stir sticks and made a makeshift splint. We got him into the car and drove to the emergency room – the whole time he was in such pain. Then there were the x-rays, the news of surgery, pins, and an overnight stay in the hospital. I just remember feeling so helpless. That no matter what I did, I couldn't take the pain away and I couldn't mend what was broken.

Friends, our sin created a debt and distance from God, *but God wasn't helpless to fix it*. In fact, he literally moved heaven and earth to forgive our debt & mend our relationship so that we could live in the reality of his holiness, justice, and love.

Earlier I mentioned new rituals brought about through Jesus. The first one was baptism, and the other is communion. We use bread and juice as symbols of Jesus' body and blood, and we take these symbols weekly to celebrate our freedom from sin and the restored relationship God gave through Jesus. Let's respond now, to all that God is, and all that he's done!