

Did Jesus Have to Suffer and Die?

But we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for every one. ~ Hebrews 2:9

AFTER THE SIN OF ADAM AND EVE and their loss of friendship with God, the Father could have left humanity without forgiveness. But God, love itself, did decide to forgive us. Yet God's justice made it necessary for humanity to make atonement (amends), and his perfect justice required *adequate* atonement. Nothing humans could do as finite creatures, however, was sufficient to redress the offenses against the infinite God. Humanity needed a Redeemer who could take upon himself the full punishment due for the sin of our first parents and all succeeding and future sins of all of us, their children. In God's saving plan, that Redeemer was God himself, the God-man Jesus Christ. The Son of God freely chose to become a man, and appeared on the earth as the Person we know as Jesus Christ, with a divine nature and a human nature to make reparation for us and restore our friendship with his Father.

But did our redemption have to be by Jesus' suffering and death? A single act of Christ's will as the God-man has infinite value, and

might therefore have been sufficient. Why, then, Calvary and all the suffering that preceded it? From the Gospel stories it is evident that *God willed that redemption be realized in the most perfect and fitting manner possible*. It was necessary, therefore, that the Son of God become man to redeem us through his own suffering as our atonement. The God-man Jesus is the only one who could offer to the Father fitting atonement.

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The Descent from the Cross, by James Tissot, 1856-1902

God wanted to clearly demonstrate the horror of sin. St. Paul tells us that sinners were responsible for the sufferings that the Redeemer endured (see Heb 12:3). None of us, those who lived before Christ and those who live today, is fully aware of the gravity of sin. *“In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood”* (Heb 12:4). Christ suffered and died to show us how awful sin is, so that even the shedding of blood alone is not sufficient atonement; our sins required the ghastly suffering and death of the God-man himself to satisfy the justice of God.

Calvary was also necessary to show the immensity of God's love for all of us. No

greater love can one show than that the lover surrender life itself for the beloved (see Jn 12:13). The Gospel story of Jesus' total sacrifice is a divinely heroic love story. Out of love for his Heavenly Father, and for love of all men and women who his Father wanted to save, Jesus accepted, freely, all the suffering from the agony of anticipation at Gethsemane to the climax at Calvary. "[F]or this purpose I have come to this hour" (Jn 12:27), says Jesus. He knew and loved us all when he made this sacrifice of himself (see Gal 2:20; Eph 5:2, 25).

Looking back over Jesus' whole life, it is true to say that his suffering and death for our salvation was the very reason for his Incarnation. Whatever he did do, was done because he wanted to do it. At the age of twelve, he stayed in the Temple because he wanted to. He walked on water because he wanted to. He gave us his flesh to eat because he wanted to. And he went to Jerusalem, knowing what would happen to him, because he wanted to. He suffered and died, not because he had to, but because he wanted to. His Passion was totally voluntary: "No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord" (Jn 10:18). In a sense, he had to suffer and die because he wanted to, and he wanted to because it was his Father's will.

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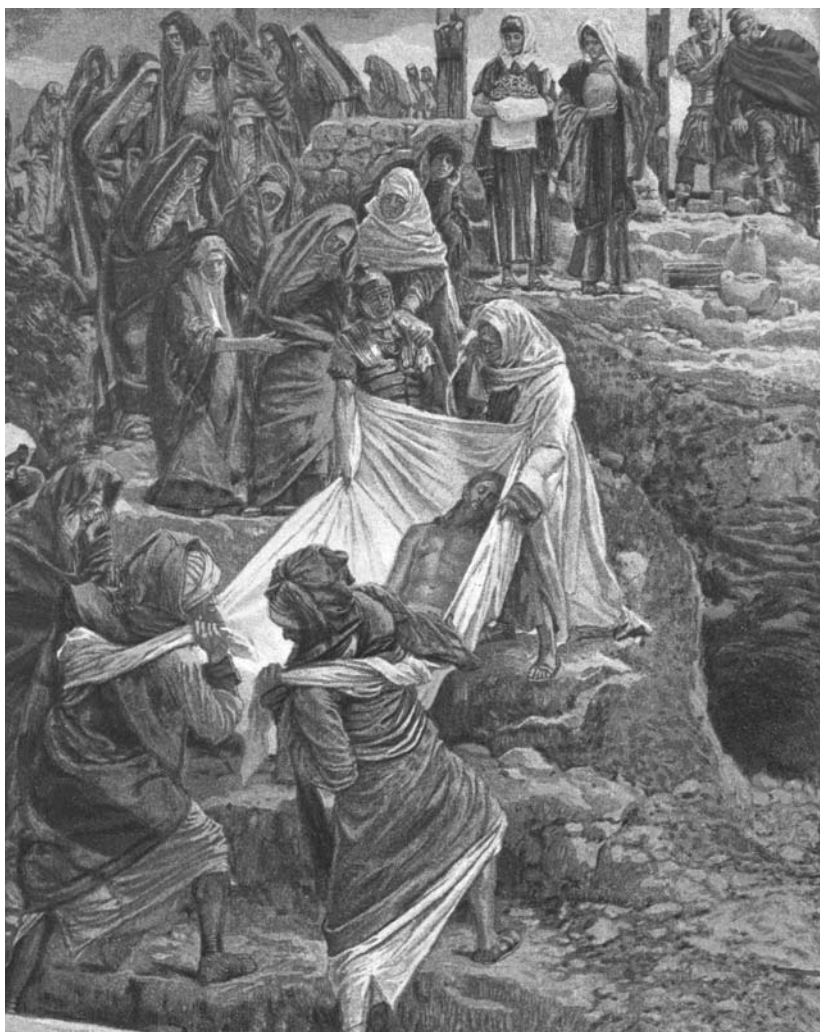
the Passion and death of Jesus became a necessary part of God's will for his Son. Christ had to suffer, for his Father willed that his human nature, the crown and unifying bond of all creation, should receive its glory as a fruit of the cross (see Lk 24:26). Truly, as we acknowledge in the Nicene Creed, "for us men and for our salvation he came down from Heaven" to suffer and die for us (Lk 18:31-33).

Jesus, as the "new Adam," undid the evil of the sin of our first parents. His obedience to the will of his Father reversed Adam's disobedience to God's command. His resistance to temptation reversed Adam's faithlessness. His humiliating death on the cross — that of a common criminal or slave — reversed Adam's pride. And his death was the definitive victory

over the death brought upon all of us by Adam's sin.

When suffering and even death enters our own lives, we have the opportunity to join with Christ in acknowledging the grievousness of sins — our own especially — and sharing in the love our Savior bestows on us by offering our own sufferings lovingly to him as our participation in, and union with, the Passion of our God (see Col 1:24).

(CCC 539, 554-555, 557, 571-573, 598, 606-610, 612-618)



The body of Jesus carried to the stone of anointing, by James Tissot, 1856-1902