

Before reading

1 Peter 3:18

For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit,

Christ died for sins .. or, Christ died for sinners

Which is it?

1 Peter 2:24 He himself bore our *sins* in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed

Rom 5:6 at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly
V8 while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

1 Corinthians 15: 3 that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures...

2 Corinthians 5:14 ... we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for him who died for them and was raised again.

2 Corinthians 5:21 God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

We come today to the heart of Peter's first letter.

All he has been saying about the way we Christians suffer falls into place when we look away from ourselves to Jesus.

Suffering was planned, and God used it to solve the problem that no other human but Jesus could solve: people disobey God. They ignore his laws, challenge his will, and frequently ignore him.

We are in a state of rebellion, and we don't have the means to sort it out. But that is what Jesus came to do:

Reading -1 Peter 17 - 22

17 It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil

18 For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit,

19 through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison

20 who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water,

21 and this water symbolises baptism that now saves you also— not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience towards God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ,

22 who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand— with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

Some things in life are given names, it seems, almost at random

A dog is called 'dog' not 'cat'; we all learn the same word to mean the same animal - unless, of course, you speak French.

It's the same with time

We have chosen to divide the day into 24 hours

And we have chosen to call this, (look at watch) ten past 11 (or whatever). Yesterday at this time, it was 10 past 10.

So long as we all change our clocks together, it works.

With some things, however, a majority opinion does not work.

A five year old girl came home from school one day and told her mother, breathlessly, 'We got a new hamster in the class today, and guess what, it's a girl hamster.'
'That's nice,' her mother replied, and with some trepidation asked, 'How do you know?'
'We took vote ...
... and girls won.'

Take guilt, for instance. The majority have evolved a host of ways to try to write it out of our minds. "Have you told a lie? Taken what wasn't yours? "Never mind," some will say, "just forget it."

At least once a week as I visit hospitals, I rub alcohol gel into my hands to reduce the spread of infection. If anyone passes me, I joke, 'excuse me while I do my Lady Macbeth.'
For Lady Macbeth, it was no joke. Having murdered King Duncan in his sleep, she cannot forget her guilt, even in her sleep. The memory of his blood on her hands moves her to try to wash and wash it off.

One version of 'forget it' is to imagine that guilt passes with time .
Others think confession is all it takes. And, true, sometimes it clears the air. Both these theories fit the story by Jonathan Ross on Friday.
He told it as if it were funny: An American in hospital had been told he was dying. Something had troubled his conscience for 30 years. He called the police to his bedside and confessed to a crime, of murder, no less. Having confessed, he felt better. He thought he was at peace with himself, society and his maker. But he recovered. As he left hospital, the Police arrested him - and charged him with the said murder; if found guilty, the penalty could be - death.

Time does not assuage guilt; confession does not absolve us.

The Persian mathematician and poet, Omar Khayya'm 1,000 years ago, wrote:
'The moving finger writes and having writ moves on;
Nor all thy piety nor wit can lure it back to cancel half a line,
Nor all thy tears wash out a word of it.'

In Ian McEwan's brilliant book, a 13 year old called Briony makes a foolish mistake with disastrous consequences for two other innocent people. In an attempt to make atonement, she throws herself into wartime nursing. She denies herself the pleasure of marriage and family life. She visits the pair in an attempt to apologise for her folly.
59 years after her sin, she can publish a novel, but she cannot re-write history. Atonement can only come from beyond ourselves.

Into a world where everyone has guilt, came Jesus, God the Son.
Everyone has guilt, that is, except him.

He said, and says, to all who are burdened by guilt, 'Come to me... and you will find rest...'
(Cf Matt 11:28)

Is Jesus just another human device to excuse our guilt? To pretend it's gone? The Bible says emphatically, NO! 1 Peter 3:18: Note 4 parts. '(1) Christ died for sins (3) once for all, (2) the righteous for the unrighteous, (4) to bring you to God.'
(1) Humans excuse guilt by calling it 'just a feeling'. But there is an objective fact. We have broken God's laws. We have become rebels against the King. We deserve an objective penalty, the penalty for treason. And we cannot pay.

God is just. That is the point of the cross of Christ. God does not deny the guilt, or its consequence. This guilt has earned the death penalty. But God pays the price himself. Christ died for sins.

(2) When the innocent Son of God died under Roman execution, he took the penalty we sinners deserve. The Greek word here matches the one used for sin-offering in the OT. That is, the OT concept of human sin being reckoned on a spotless animal which was then killed, applies to Jesus. He was the spotless lamb, the righteous one, dying the death the unrighteous deserved.

Christ died.

He did not merely die for *sinners*, (though the Bible elsewhere says he did - Romans 5: vv 6 and 8) but for sins.

Do you see the difference?

God may love the sinners, but he hates the sins. Every act of rebellion is an offence to him. Those sins needed paid for.

God sent his son to die a factual death to pay in fact for those sins.

1 Peter 2:24 He himself bore our *sins* in his body on the tree...

2 Corinthians 5:21 God made him who had no sin to be sin for us...

The other day I heard a meditation that spent pages focusing on the physical suffering of Christ. The bible does not. It was appalling enough. But far worse than the scourging and the nails, the thirst and breathlessness, was the burden of being reckoned as sin by God the Father; the sinless Christ felt for the first time the awesome alienation that sin poses between God and man. It drove him to quote Ps 22: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

(3) Peter says, Christ died, once and for all. This is the Gk word hapax, which is the word scholars use when they refer to a word or phrase that appears only once in the entire Bible. Hapax legomena.

Once, for all time. Once, because effective eternally. We do not repeat this death. We could not. It is unique. Once and for all time. Finished.

We cannot add to it. If our sins are not atoned for by this death, no amount of self-sacrifice by us will improve upon it. Before the Reformation, people were constantly taking communion in the hope it would make them holy; constantly reciting prayers as if that could win them favour with God. They went without food, wore uncomfortable clothes, made arduous pilgrimages, paid money to the church, in the hope of doing enough to earn God's pardon. The monk Martin Luther was one such, fearful of the words 'the righteousness of God' in Romans 1, and struggling to achieve the perfection those words seemed to demand of him. Until suddenly, the Holy Spirit showed him, the righteousness of God was the righteousness God gave to people who trusted solely in the cross of Christ. Rom 1:17

The truth is, this death *does* pay the price, in full. Philip Bliss wrote:

Guilty, vile and helpless we; spotless Lamb of God was he; Full atonement, can it be? Yes ! 'Lifted up was he to die, 'It is finished' was his cry. Now in heaven exalted high; Hallelujah, what a Saviour.

Finished.

(4) Now just as God reckoned our sins as if they had been Jesus' sins, and Jesus died as a consequence, so God is able, justly, to pardon us. He will not demand double payment. God equally reckons Christ's righteousness to our account.

1 Peter 2:24 He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, *so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness*; by his wounds you have been healed
2 Corinthians 5:21 God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Full atonement - can it be?

Oh, the Lady Macbeth method of wringing hands can't achieve it
And the Briony lifetime of self-deprivation and novel-writing cannot.

But Christians have found that the death of the righteous Jesus in place of us, the unrighteous, CAN!

The effect of Christ's sacrifice on the Cross was, to bring Peter's original readers to God. The barrier their sins had created was gone!
And it can bring us to God in the same way;

This is not just Peter's *opinion*: the other disciples agree and confirm:

John: If we confess our sins, God is faithful *and just* and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

Paul: God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21)

How do we benefit by this fabulous transaction?

There is nothing automatic about it; we need to receive it.

Back in 1 Peter 1:18-21

18 For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers,

19 but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.

20 He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake.

21 *Through him you believe in God*, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.

We receive it by faith.