

Why did Jesus die?

The first clue to Jesus dying was given to Joseph after he found out his bride-to-be was pregnant before their wedding. An angel told Joseph in a dream not to worry, go ahead and marry Mary anyway, and by the way, name her baby son *Jesus*, because the reason he'd been conceived by the Holy Spirit was to **“save his people from their sins,”** **Matthew 1:18-21**. The first reason for Jesus being born, then, was to be a Saviour.

But a Saviour of whom? “His people” - his fellow Jews. So the primary reason for Jesus being born was to save **his fellow Jews** from their sins. Jesus himself made that clear in **Matthew 15:24** too, that “I was sent only to the lost sheep of **Israel**.” He also told his disciples in **Matthew 10:5-6**, “Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of **Israel**.”

Saving the whole world, therefore, wasn't the main focus of Jesus being born, or dying. Nor was it the main focus of the one sent to prepare the way for Jesus either, because “Before the coming of Jesus, John (the Baptist) preached repentance and baptism to all the people of **Israel**,” **Acts 13:24**, resulting in many Jews in Israel “confessing their sins,” **Matthew 3:6**. So both Jesus and John were sent to Israel, and for the same purpose, to deal with **Israel's** sins.

But why Israel? Because, according to the pregnant Mary, “God my Saviour,” **Luke 1:47**, “has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to **Abraham and his descendants forever**,” **verses 54-55**. So it all goes back to a promise God made to Abraham, the founding father of Israel, that God would preserve Abraham's descendants forever, no matter what happened.

And how would God do that? Well, that's where Zechariah, husband of Elizabeth, Mary's cousin, comes into the picture, because in **verse 68** he cries out, “Praise be to the Lord God of Israel, because he has come and redeemed his people” by **“raising up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David,”** **verse 69**, to “show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, **the oath he swore to our father Abraham to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,**” **verses 72-74**. Jesus was connected directly, therefore, with God's promise to Abraham.

Simeon made that connection too. In **Luke 2:26**, it had been “revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.” So he lived for that day, “eagerly waiting for the Messiah to **come and rescue Israel**,” **verse 25**. And that day came at last, when “Moved by the Spirit,” **verse 27**, Simeon went to the Temple and there he caught sight of Mary and Joseph who’d come “to present the baby Jesus to the Lord as the law required.” Simeon was ecstatic. He took Jesus in his arms and cried out to God in **verses 30-32**, “I have seen your salvation (in Jesus) which you have prepared for all people. **He is a light to reveal God to the nations**, and he is the glory of your people Israel.”

It tied in exactly with the promise God made to Abraham, or “Abram” as he was back in **Genesis 12:3**, the promise that “**all nations on earth will be blessed through you**.” And now we find out how God did that: it would be through this “horn of salvation in the house of David” (Luke 1:69), the “Lord’s Messiah” (Luke 2:26), **identified by Simeon as Jesus**, who would not only “rescue Israel” (Luke 1:74, 2:25), he’d also “reveal God to the nations” (Luke 2:32) - **all nations**, that is, just as promised to Abram. Or as John the Baptist phrased it in **Luke 3:6**, “**all people will see the salvation sent from God**.”

But on God’s timetable the “salvation sent from God” would **start with Israel**, the Jews of Jesus’ day. That was made clear by Peter on “the day of Pentecost” in **Acts 2:1**, when all of a sudden the disciples were “filled with the Holy Spirit,” **verse 4**, and spoke about “the wonders of God” (verse 11) in all the different languages of those present (verse 6). So up stood Peter who “raised his voice and addressed the crowd” to explain what was happening, **verse 14**. And who was he talking to? His “Fellow Jews” (verse 14) and “**Men of Israel**” (verse 22).

To start with, then, God was revealing, developing and fulfilling his promise to Abraham - of salvation for the whole world - **through the Jews of Israel first**. And the message Peter gave them was straight to the point: “**Men of Israel**, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God **TO YOU** by miracles, wonders and signs.” So, first things first, Peter identifies Jesus as the Messiah that they, like Simeon, were all “eagerly waiting for.” But instead of accepting Jesus as the Messiah sent to rescue them and save their nation, “you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross,” **verse 23**.

“Therefore,” Peter concludes in **verse 36**, “let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ (or Messiah).”

This was terrible news for those Jews, that they’d killed the very one sent to save them. But Peter had also said back in **verse 23**, that “This man (Jesus) was handed over to you **by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge.**” It was all part of God’s predetermined plan and design that Jesus would die, then, and at the hands of his fellow Jews too.

Which is a bit of a twist, because if God sent Jesus as the Messiah to save his people from their sins, why allow his people to kill him? There’s a clue in **John 8** that helps explain why - and again, it goes back to the promise God made to Abraham, which the Jews of Jesus’ day also knew all about, because they were the descendants of Abraham that God was fulfilling his promise through (verse 33).

There was a problem, however, because when Jesus told them that only through his teaching would they be “set free,” **verses 31-32**, they replied in **verse 33**, “But we are Abraham’s descendants and have never been slaves to anyone. How can you say, then, that we shall be set free?”

To which Jesus replied in **verse 34**, but “**everyone who sins is a slave to sin,**” and “a slave to sin has no permanent place in the family,” **verse 35**. The Jews thought that simply being a descendant of Abraham gave them a guaranteed ticket to all the blessings promised to his descendants. To which Jesus replied in **verse 37**, “Yes, I know you’re Abraham’s descendants. Yet you are ready to kill me.” And in **verses 39-40**, “If you are Abraham’s children, then you would do the things Abraham did. As it is, you are determined to kill me.”

Which branded them as “slaves to sin,” and that meant “no permanent place” for them in the family of Abraham, and no guarantee of the blessings either. Just one sin and that was it, game over (verses 34-35). And that was terrible news again, because if it was game over for them, it was game over for the whole world too. Because the purpose of God in choosing Israel, as Simeon quoted from **Isaiah 49:6**, was to make them “a light for the Gentiles, so that you (Israel) may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.” **Through Israel God would save the whole world.**

So if Israel blew it by sinning, which they did by killing the one sent to save them, that was “plan over” for the saving of everyone else too.

But among the descendants of Abraham was this “horn of salvation in the house of David” that Zechariah had mentioned back in **Luke 1:69**. And Matthew made it clear **who that person was** when he wrote down “the record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, **the son of David**, the son of Abraham” in **Matthew 1:1**. Jesus fits the bill on both scores, then - not only as a direct descendant of “the house of David,” but of Abraham too. And John adds to that in **John 7:42**, when he asks, “Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the descendants of David?”

Yes. But was he also **without sin**? That was the key, because how could Jesus be a “horn of salvation” for the Jews if he needed saving from sin too? So, was he without sin? Well, when John the Baptist saw Jesus he cried out, “Look, the **Lamb of God**, who takes away the sin of the world,” **John 1:29**. And the Jews knew the significance of lambs, because it was the sacrifice of lambs that saved their lives from the death of the firstborn in Egypt. And the lambs had to be “**without defect**” too (Exodus 12:5), just like the lambs they brought “as sin offerings” in **Leviticus 4:32**, because nothing less than a **lamb without defect** would do “for sins committed to be forgiven,” **verse 35**.

To call Jesus a Lamb of God, then, brought these pictures to mind, of those spotless lambs they sacrificed at Passover to save their lives, and the spotless lambs they sacrificed for the forgiveness of their sins. If Jesus, then, was being compared to those lambs, then the Jews had their sinless descendant of Abraham, their “horn of salvation” who’d never sinned himself. Which meant it wasn’t “game over,” despite their sins. God’s promise of blessing all nations through Israel could continue.

Ah, but calling Jesus the Lamb of God also brought to mind that their lambs **had to die** to take away their sins. But if dying was Jesus’ destiny too - what was the sense in that? Because if Jesus truly was the Messiah sent to save his people from their sins, and be the sinless descendant of Abraham through whom God could then bless all nations, what was the point of him dying? What good could a dead Messiah do? This was the question that troubled Jesus’ disciples too, because they couldn’t see the sense in Jesus dying either (**Matthew 16:21-22, 17:22-23**).

The big question was, then: “Why would the Messiah need to die?” And what a question that is, because to answer it takes us way back to why God created us in the first place.

God created us to have sovereignty over the Earth. To enable us to do that he made us just a little lower than himself (Psalm 8:4-6), and by creating us as males and females able to bare children we could then fill the whole planet with his beauty, creativity, wisdom and goodness, and all in a lovely, personal relationship with him as one big family too.

It sounds wonderful, but how would we know how wonderful God’s plan was, and relish the fulfilling of it, if we had nothing to compare it to? So God made another creature that would provide a real and obvious contrast - and give us some real competition too. And it soon became apparent how worthy an opponent this creature was, because it toppled our sovereignty over the Earth very quickly, and killed off our purpose for being here before we even got started.

And for one simple reason too: by our opponent telling us that the fruit God said would be the death of us would instead make us “like God” (Genesis 3:5). Which on the surface made sense, because if we know good and evil as well as God does, then we’ve got the ability **within ourselves** to make the planet flourish, right? It had a strong appeal - just as it still does - believing we can rule this Earth on our own ability and wisdom. But being in the image of God it’s not surprising we think that way, because he really did create us with amazing abilities.

But God also warned us that depending on just knowing good and evil, no matter how God-like it is, would be the death of what he’d created us for. But we don’t believe that today, any more than Adam and Eve did. They thought they could rule this Earth on their own “wisdom” without God. But instead of things flourishing, they faced what we’re now facing too - crippling problems beyond our ability to correct, including the very source of the problems, the same easily deceived nature that made us think we could outwit death in the first place. We’ve had to learn, sadly, that no matter how clever we are, or how rich we become, or even how good or bad we are, we all end up in the same place, dead - and the world careens on after we die too, none the wiser either as to what God created us humans for.

And God could have left us in that state in the Garden of Eden, but he had a solution ready to go that would **restore** what he created us for.

But first we had to experience the world of our opponent's creation, in which "man's wickedness had become so great," **Genesis 6:5**, "that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time." "The Earth had become so corrupt and full of violence" (verse 11) that God told Noah - the only "blameless" man of his generation - that he was "going to put an end to all people, and destroy both them and the Earth," **verse 13**. Was this the "death" God had warned Adam about in the Garden of Eden, then?

But God spared Noah, and from Noah's family "nations" of people grew (Genesis 10:32), in one of which Abram, a descendant of Noah's son Shem, was born. And to Abram - whose name God changed to Abraham - was given God's amazing promise that all the Earth's peoples would be blessed through him (Genesis 12:2-3, 22:18). And that really took shape in the promise God made to Jacob, Abraham's grandson - whose name he changed to "Israel" (Genesis 35:10) - that his descendants would become "a nation and a community of nations" (verse 11).

And so the nation of **Israel** was born, but first of all in Egypt, where "the Israelites were fruitful and multiplied greatly and became exceedingly numerous, so the land was filled with them," **Exodus 1:7**. Following their escape from a genocidal tyrant, thanks to God's intervention, God had Moses tell the Israelites in **Exodus 19:5-6**, that "out of all nations you (Israel) will be my treasured possession."

So Israel became the most special nation on the planet, but instead of being "a light to the nations" revealing God and his wonderful plan for humanity, they became slaves to the nations they were supposed to be a light to.

Daniel, himself a Jew in captivity in Babylon, summarized their plight: "All Israel has transgressed your law, refusing to obey you," **Daniel 9:11**. "Therefore the curses and sworn judgments written in the Law of Moses have been poured out on us," **verse 11**. "Our sins and the iniquities of our fathers have made your people an object of scorn to all those around us," **verse 16**.

Our opponent seemed to have won again, because Israel was now a “desolate sanctuary” (verse 17). But Daniel appeals to God for his merciful intervention, to “listen, forgive, hear and act, and not delay, because your city and your people bear your Name,” **verses 18-19**. God’s response is immediate, with a message and a vision for Daniel from the angel Gabriel (verses 20-23), about the coming of the Anointed One (the Messiah) in **verse 25**. So the answer to Israel’s plight and the curses being poured out on them, would be **the arrival of the Messiah**.

But then, rather shockingly in **verse 26**, Gabriel talks of this same Anointed One being “cut off.” But why would the Messiah need to be “cut off”? And for that matter, what did being “cut off” mean? There’s a clue in **Isaiah 53:8**, “For he (whoever ‘he’ is) was cut off from the land of the living.” He was killed, in other words. So, we’ve got the meaning of “cut off,” but does that mean the Messiah would be killed too?

But how could the death of the Messiah restore Israel? Again, **Isaiah 53:8** clues us in, because the ‘he’ it mentions was killed “for the transgression of my people (Israel)” - meaning, **verse 12**, that “he poured out his life unto death,” because **in so doing** “he bore the sins of many and made intercession for the transgressors.” In his death, then, he took on himself the sins of Israel. And we know who the ‘he’ is here, because “he had done no violence nor was any deceit in his mouth,” **verse 9**. This clearly meant the Messiah, the sinless descendant of Abraham and David, sent by God to save Israel from its sins.

And here we see **how** God saved Israel from its sins: it was by “laying on him (Jesus the Messiah) the iniquity of us all,” **verse 6** - the “us” in context here referring to Israel (Isaiah 52:12). Jesus saved Israel, therefore, by “taking upon himself their (Israelite) infirmities, and being pierced and crushed himself for their transgressions and iniquities,” and “the punishment that brought us Israelites peace was upon him,” for “by his wounds we are healed,” **verses 4-6**. And by Jesus doing all this in himself for Israel, “he will justify many,” **verse 11**.

So, **Isaiah 40:1-2**, “Comfort my people,” for “her sin has been paid for,” so that, **verse 5**, “the glory of the Lord will be revealed” through Israel again, starting with John the Baptist (verses 3-4) “preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,” **Luke 3:3**.

And knowing their sins were forgiven was essential, because they knew from **Daniel 9:11** that “the curses and sworn judgments in the Law of Moses had been poured out on them for sinning against God.” And those curses and judgments in Deuteronomy 27 to 29 meant the ruin of Israel, as all 12 tribes of Israel already knew, having been carted off as captives to other countries and everything they held dear back home ruined.

And now the Jews of Jesus’ day were under the thumb of the Romans too, still cursed and pathetically powerless. But Daniel had pleaded for God’s forgiveness, and suddenly up popped John the Baptist saying forgiveness of sins was now possible. And along came Jesus soon after too, saying he had the “authority on earth to forgive sins,” **Matthew 9:6**, which he amply demonstrated by freeing people from all sorts of crippling physical and mental ailments, including casting out demons, and attaching all these healings to their sins being forgiven (Mark 2:9-12).

So in **Acts 2:36**, when Peter told the Jews they’d just killed their Messiah and they were “cut to the heart” (verse 37), wondering where on earth they now stood, Peter was able to tell them in **verse 38**, “Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ so that **your sins may be forgiven.**” All those curses and judgments they’d brought on themselves for their sins could be forgiven because of Jesus’ death.

But Jesus dying was so hard for them to grasp, as we see in the two disciples on their way to Emmaus in **Luke 24:14** “talking with each other about everything that had happened” to Jesus. They thought “he was the one who was going to redeem Israel,” **verse 21**, but he’d been killed instead. Jesus dying didn’t make sense to them either.

Which is when Jesus joins them on their walk, and he asks them in **verse 26**, “Don’t you recall what all the prophets said, that the Messiah would have to suffer?” Well, no, they’d missed that, so “beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, Jesus explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself,” **verse 27**. And that’s when it began to dawn on them that it was only because of the Messiah dying and taking all Israel’s sins and curses into himself that Israel could have their own sins forgiven, which then opened the door to Israel being restored back to what God had called them for in the first place, to bring salvation to the whole world in fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham.

Jesus then had to go over it all again with his disciples in **verse 44**, that “Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms,” which included the Messiah’s suffering,” **verse 46**. But having suffered (taking all Israel’s sins and curses into himself) he “rose from the dead on the third day (as proof he really was the Messiah),” so that from then on, **verse 47**, “repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name **to all nations**, beginning in Jerusalem.”

Which explains why Jesus said in **John 4:22**, that “salvation is from the Jews,” because it was their Jewish Saviour that got things started, and their Jewish repentance and forgiveness that kickstarted the spreading of the message of salvation to the whole world. As Peter said in **Acts 3:26**, “When God raised up his servant Jesus, he sent him **FIRST** to you (Israel, the Jews) to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways.” And in **Acts 5:31**, God raised and “exalted Jesus as Prince and Saviour that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins **TO ISRAEL**.”

So that’s where the salvation of the world began, with Jesus dying for the sins of Israel, and taking all their sins into himself on the cross, which in turn forgave every sin they’d committed, and gave them the chance to repent, start again, and get back to what God had created them as a nation for in the first place, to be “a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the Earth,” **Acts 13:47** (quoting Isaiah 49:6 again).

And what a “light” to the Gentiles they would be, because in their history and what had happened to them the world would come to see just how merciful, patient, forgiving and faithful God is. Even when Israel broke the amazing covenant that God himself made with just them and no one else - in which he promised to make them “out of all nations his treasured possession” and a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation,” and they promised to “do everything he said” (Exodus 19:5-8) - it should have been the death of them forever.

But what happened instead? Jesus died, taking their sins and the death they deserved into himself on the cross, and in so doing he made it possible for a new covenant to be made with them, that would enable the blessing of all nations to continue through them.

It was announced by Jesus himself too, when at his last meal with his disciples he took a cup of wine and said to them, “All of you drink from it, because it’s the blood of a new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins,” **Matthew 26:28**. That through his death, his blood, a new covenant was being made with Israel that would now make forgiveness of sins available to the many.

So this became the message they preached, beautifully summarized by Paul in **Acts 13**, by which time many Gentiles had responded already, so Paul began in **verses 16-17**, “Men of Israel and you Gentiles who worship God, listen to me! The God of the people of Israel chose our fathers...”

So this is where it all began for Paul too - with Israel, because out of Israel came King David (verse 22), and from David’s descendants “God brought to Israel the Saviour Jesus, as he promised,” **verse 23**. And “what he promised our fathers he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus,” **verses 32-33**. “Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you,” **verse 38**. And in saying this, Paul was doing what God had called Israel to do, to be “a light to the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth,” **verse 47**.

The blessing of all nations through Abraham and his descendants was in full sail again, which is why Jesus died.