

SESSION 5

The Saving Significance of Jesus' Death

The *Study Catechism*: Questions 42–52

Question 42. *What do you affirm when you say that he “suffered under Pontius Pilate”?*

First, that our Lord was humiliated, rejected, and abused by the temporal authorities of his day, both religious and political. Christ thus aligned himself with all human beings who are oppressed, tortured, or otherwise shamefully treated by those with worldly power. Second, and even more importantly, that our Lord, though innocent, submitted himself to condemnation by an earthly judge so that through him we ourselves, though guilty, might be acquitted before our heavenly Judge.

Luke 18:32 “For he will be handed over to the Gentiles; and he will be mocked and insulted and spat upon.”

Isa. 53:3 “He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account.”

Ps. 9:9 “The LORD is a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble.”

Luke 1:52 “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.”

2 Cor. 5:21 “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

2 Tim. 4:8 “From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.”

Question 43. What do you affirm when you say that he was “crucified, dead, and buried”?

That when our Lord passed through the door of real human death, he showed us that there is no sorrow he has not known, no grief he has not borne, and no price he was unwilling to pay in order to reconcile us to God.

Matt. 26:38–39 “Then he said to them, ‘I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.’ And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, ‘My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.’”

Isa. 53:5 “But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.”

Gal. 3:13 “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.’”

Heb. 2:9 “But we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.”

2 Cor. 5:19 “In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.”

Question 44. What do you affirm when you say that he “descended into hell”?

That our Lord took upon himself the full consequences of our sinfulness, even the agony of abandonment by God, in order that we might be spared.

Mark 15:34 “At three o’clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?’ which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’”

Heb. 9:26 “He has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself.”

Rom. 4:24–25 “It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.”

Question 45. Why did Jesus have to suffer as he did?

Because grace is more abundant—and sin more serious—than we suppose. However cruelly we may treat one another, all sin is primarily against God. God condemns sin, yet never judges apart from grace. In giving Jesus Christ to die for us, God took the burden of our sin into God’s own self to remove it once and for all. The cross in all its severity reveals an abyss of sin swallowed up by the suffering of divine love.

Rom. 8:1, 3–4 “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us.”

1 Cor. 1:18 “For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

Rom. 5:8 “But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.”

Col. 1:20 “Through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.”

James 2:13 “For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.”

Question 46. What do you affirm when you say that “on the third day he rose again from the dead”?

That our Lord could not be held by the power of death. Having died on the cross, he appeared to his followers, triumphant from the grave, in a new, exalted kind of life. In showing them his hands and his feet, the one who was crucified revealed himself to them as the Lord and Savior of the world.

Acts 2:24 “But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.”

1 Cor. 15:3–4 “For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures.”

Luke 24:36–40 “While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’ They

were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, 'Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.' And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet."

John 20:15-18 "Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her."

1 Cor. 15:5-8 "He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me."

John 20:27 "Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.'"

Question 47. What do you affirm when you say that "he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father"?

First, that Christ has gone to be with the Father, hidden except to the eyes of faith. Second, however, that Christ is not cut off from us in the remote past, or in some place from which he cannot reach us, but is present to us here and now by grace. He reigns with divine authority, protecting us, guiding us, and interceding for us until he returns in glory.

Acts 1:6-11 "So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' He replied, 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and

they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.'"

Col. 3:1 "So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God."

Question 48. How do you understand the words that "he will come again to judge the living and the dead"?

Like everyone else, I too must stand in fear and trembling before the judgment seat of Christ. But the Judge is the one who submitted to judgment for my sake. Nothing will be able to separate me from the love of God in Christ Jesus my Lord. All the sinful failures that cause me shame will perish as through fire, while any good I may have done will be received with gladness by God.

2 Cor. 5:10 "For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil."

Ecl. 12:14 "For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil."

Acts 17:31 "He has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

Rom. 8:38–39 "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

1 John 4:17 "Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world."

1 Cor. 3:12–15 "Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done. If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward. If the work is burned up, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire."

Acts 10:42 "He is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead."

Question 49. Will all human beings be saved?

No one will be lost who can be saved. The limits to salvation, whatever they may be, are known only to God. Three truths above all are certain. God is a holy God who is not to be trifled with. No one will be saved except by grace alone. And no judge could possibly be more gracious than our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Heb 10:31 "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

Rom. 11:32 "For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all."

Matt. 18:12-14 "What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost."

Eph. 2:8 "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God."

1 Tim. 2:3-4 "This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."

John 3:17-18 "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God."

Ezek. 18:32 "For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord GOD. Turn, then, and live."

2 Cor. 5:14-15 "For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them."

Question 50. Is Christianity the only true religion?

Religion is a complex matter. When used as a means to promote self-justification, war-mongering, or prejudice, it is a form

of sin. Too often all religions—and not least Christianity—have been twisted in this way. Nevertheless, by grace, despite all disobedience, Christianity offers the truth of the gospel. Although other religions may enshrine various truths, no other can or does affirm the name of Jesus Christ as the hope of the world.

Matt 7:3 “Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?”

James 1:26 “If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless.”

James 1:27 “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

Acts 4:12 “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.”

John 14:6 “Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’”

Rom. 1:16 “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”

2 Cor. 4:7 “But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.”

Question 51. How will God deal with the followers of other religions?

God has made salvation available to all human beings through Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. How God will deal with those who do not know or follow Christ, but who follow another tradition, we cannot finally say. We can say, however, that God is gracious and merciful, and that God will not deal with people in any other way than we see in Jesus Christ, who came as the Savior of the world.

Rev. 7:9 “And there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.”

Ps. 103:8 “The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.”

John 3:19 "And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil."

Titus 2:11 "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all."

Question 52. How should I treat non-Christians and people of other religions?

As much as I can, I should meet friendship with friendship, hostility with kindness, generosity with gratitude, persecution with forbearance, truth with agreement, and error with truth. I should express my faith with humility and devotion as the occasion requires, whether silently or openly, boldly or meekly, by word or by deed. I should avoid compromising the truth on the one hand and being narrow-minded on the other. In short, I should always welcome and accept these others in a way that honors and reflects the Lord's welcome and acceptance of me.

Rom. 15:7 "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."

Luke 6:37 "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven."

Matt. 5:44 "But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

Eph. 4:25 "So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another."

Acts 13:47 "For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, 'I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, so that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.'"

Rom. 12:21 "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Rom. 13:10 "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law."

Reflections

What difference does the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ make? What does it mean to say Jesus is Lord and Savior? What does it mean to be saved? Who will be saved? What do I have to do to be saved? How will my life be different? All of these are questions at the

heart of Christianity. This section of the catechism deals with these central questions of our faith.

KNOWING WHO JESUS IS

The heart of the gospel is found in the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus. To understand the gospel we need to know the sequence of events that led up to this event. All four Gospels tell the story. Read the events from Palm Sunday through the Resurrection in one of the Gospels: Matthew 21:1–28:20; Mark 11:1–16:20; Luke 19:28–24:53; John 12:12–21:25.

Years before, the prophet Isaiah spoke of a suffering servant who would come and “bear our griefs” (Isa. 53:2–12). When we compare the events of the last week of Jesus’ life with the prophet’s message, we believe Jesus Christ fulfilled the longing for a messiah who was also a suffering servant.

The power of the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus is seen in the witness over the past two thousand years to these events. God sent Jesus into the world for each of us. God loved us so much God was willing to sacrifice God’s Son that we might have a new life. We proclaim this message when we profess our faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The first question asked when you join a Presbyterian Church is “Who is your Lord and Savior?” What does it mean to say Jesus is our Lord and Savior?

JESUS AS LORD AND SAVIOR

When we proclaim Jesus as Lord we share in Peter’s Pentecost affirmation that Jesus was God’s Son: “Let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36). Catechism questions 29–31 dealt specifically with this message.

Because of Jesus’ suffering and death on the cross we respond by proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul proclaims this clearly in the great Christ hymn: “At the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:10–11).

The catechism does not treat the significance of Jesus’ death in isolation from the entire work by which reconciliation between God and humanity is effected. The incarnation of the Son, his earthly ministry, his death and resurrection, and his ascension are together the one act of salvation by which God overcomes the forces of sin and death separating

humanity from God. Perhaps the most important theme woven throughout the entire catechism is the triumph of God's suffering love. God's power is described in terms of God's love, "a love that is ready to suffer for our sakes, yet so strong that nothing will prevail against it" (question 8). The death of Jesus, thus, can be seen as the culmination of God's suffering love, which animates every aspect of his earthly ministry.

Nonetheless, Jesus' death on the cross has been singled out by the church as having special significance in the overall work of reconciliation. Look again at questions 43 and 44, noting the images used to explain the saving significance of Jesus' death.

Question 43. What do you affirm when you say that he was "crucified, dead and buried"?

That when our Lord passed through the door of real human death, he showed us that there is no sorrow he has not known, no grief he has not borne, and no price he was unwilling to pay in order to reconcile us to God.

Question 44. What do you affirm when you say that he "descended into hell"?

That our Lord took upon himself the full consequences of our sinfulness, even the agony of abandonment by God, in order that we might be spared.

The death of Christ on the cross is not the end of the story. With the women on Easter morning at the tomb we can proclaim "that our Lord could not be held by the power of death" (question 46). Christ's resurrection was hard for the disciples to believe. They did not believe the women until Jesus appeared to them. "In showing them his hands and his feet, the one who was crucified revealed himself to them as the Lord and Savior of the world" (question 46). Because Christ was raised from the dead, we know his birth, life, and suffering have importance beyond his own lifetime.

PROCLAIMING JESUS

We have a responsibility to share the good news of Christ with others. We are called to proclaim (Latin: *pro*, before + *clamare*, cry out). Our responsibility is to share with others the story of God's salvation, the events and meaning of the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. It is not our role to "save" others for Christ. God alone provides salvation. It is our responsibility to offer the message of salvation to others.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. (John 3:16–17)

In our pluralistic world this is a challenge. The catechism (questions 50–52) offers helpful guidelines for how to address people of other religions. Scripture very clearly tells us “God has made salvation available to all human beings through Jesus Christ, crucified and risen” (question 51). Salvation is for all. We are called to proclaim the good news of how God is at work in our lives and in the world. We bear witness to God’s love for the world in Jesus Christ. How has claiming Jesus as Lord and Savior changed your life? How is God at work in your life? We offer the message of the gospel, love those who believe differently, and pray that God will work in their lives, knowing that no one will be lost who can be saved.

Keeping a Journal

Reread the catechism questions and answers for this session. Choose one sentence or phrase to reflect on for the week. Here are some ideas:

- Christ aligned himself with all human beings who are oppressed, tortured, or otherwise shamefully treated by those with worldly power.
- There is no sorrow he has not known, no grief he has not borne, and no price he was unwilling to pay in order to reconcile us to God.
- Grace is more abundant—and sin more serious—than we suppose.
- The cross in all its severity reveals an abyss of sin swallowed up by the suffering of divine love.
- All the sinful failures that cause me shame will perish as through fire.
- No one will be lost who can be saved.
- I should always welcome and accept these others in a way that honors and reflects the Lord’s welcome and acceptance of me.

See if you can memorize the sentence or phrase you choose, or at least remember the gist of it. Let this phrase stick with you through the week. Include it in your prayers, think about it while you are in the car,

