

5. Why is the world in a mess? & How come Jesus got executed anyway?

In 1989 the Exxon Valdez oil tanker ran aground in Prince William Sound, off Alaska. Within hours the beautiful snowy-white coastline of this previously unspoiled wilderness was transformed by a coating of thick black sludge as 232,000 barrels of oil spilled out from the hold of the stricken tanker. But there was worse to come. Three-quarters of the salmon population that normally migrated to the area didn't return the following season. Thousands of seabirds and otters died in this ecological disaster. A place that was originally beautiful had been spoiled by a human blunder.

Can you imagine gardens that never grew weeds? Or streets that were always safe? A world where nations were at peace and resources were happily shared? A world without racism, ageism without abuse of any kind? Too good to be true? Well that's how it was meant to be. If you've been following through these pages, you'll have already thought through issues like whether God exists or not; and what He's really like anyway - and also considered the evidence for Jesus, His death and resurrection. I hope you agree that as we look more closely at it, the more reasonable and believable the positive answers become. That there really is a God - a God who's made Himself known in and through Jesus Christ and communicated with us in the Bible. But it's only reasonable to ask: 'If that's the case, then why is this world now in such a mess, and how come Jesus ended up dying like He did anyway?'

What went wrong? The answer is 'we did'. From the beginning of the creation God made (them) male and female (Mark 10:6). Everything in the garden was lovely, until our first parents chose to go their way, not God's. The result was much more than an ecological disaster. The original beautiful world was spoiled. Spoiled by human blunder. The key word the Bible uses in describing this is 'sin'. It tells us that 'through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin' (Rom.5:12). 'Sin' is what caused the mess in the first place and continues to do so. And to sin is to refuse to live the way God intended for us.

Our sinfulness is our habitually choosing to go our own way, not God's way. Let's try to explain that further. We've probably all had the experience at some time or other of doing our supermarket shopping with a shopping trolley that seemed to have a mind of its own. You want to go down the fish aisle; it starts to head off towards the soft drinks. The harder you push your way the more it seems determined to go its own way. Of course, you realise it's doing this because it's got a buckled wheel. Whoops, now it's gone and collided with that display made of tins of baked beans, knocked a few over, and dented them. It just seems to be one bump, one mess, one embarrassment after another. Why? Because, with that buckled wheel, it's in the nature of the thing to go the wrong way. You just can't do anything with it, any more than we can do anything with our own corrupt nature. It's in our nature to go our own way, rather than God's. Time after time, that spoils our lives as we become aware of our self-centredness, our uncharitable attitude, our meanness... or whatever. Remember though it's not really a list of things, it's the state we're in.

Because of this condition of ours, we can never match up to what God requires of us. Remember the last time you went into a shop for a new pair of shoes? Chances are you were still feeling pretty good about the old pair, although you felt it was probably about time you had a new pair - just for best. Yes, these old shoes weren't too bad yet. 'You should see the state of some peoples' shoes', you're busy thinking to yourself. Just then the assistant brings out a shiny brand new pair. All at once you can see how shabby your old pair have become.

Most of the time perhaps we feel pretty good about ourselves. Compared to others, 'we're okay, thank you very much.' But God has a different standard: it's His 'new shoes' standard. It's one to

match who He is and what he's created. It's against that standard of absolute moral goodness, and purity, and perfection that we're measured. We were trying to understand what sin really is. 'Sin' is about not matching up, it's all about missing the grade.

So 'sin' is the state we're in, and it's our failure to match up to God's standards, but, obviously, sin does involve breaking God's rules: doing 'our own thing' instead of doing what God asks us. God's rules are not of the 'Keep of the grass' variety - but they're designed with our own best interests in view. Nowhere are they expressed better than in the Ten Commandments. Most of us know some of them at least: don't steal, don't lie, don't commit adultery. The problem is we tend to treat them as Ten Suggestions by doing things the way we want. Well, that's sin, and when we break God's wise rules we end up damaging ourselves.

Our sinfulness entices us to choose our own way, and when we do our own thing in breaking God's rules we end up spoiling and damaging ourselves. Picture it like the oil-spill from the Exxon Valdez that we began by thinking about. But the worse thing is that sin separates us from God. The Bible puts it like this: 'Yours sins have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you' (Is. 59:1,2). Like oil and water, our sinfulness and God's purity don't mix. As a stinking mess offends our nostrils, our sin is just such an affront to God, to His very nature.

I heard of someone who was very proud of his lawn. A neighbour offered him some surplus 'Weed & Feed', and thinking it could only make a good lawn better, he applied it to the whole of his lawn. He was horrified as large brown patches started appearing all over his precious lawn. You see, unlike him, the 'Weed & Feed' could tell the difference between green grass and green weeds! And one day we're due to stand before our Maker, the Judge who knows the difference between what looks good and what really is good.

But if you picture God as being like some over-eager traffic warden just itching to put the wheel clamps on you, someone who's happiest when making people miserable, then the really good news is you've got it totally wrong! The reason I can be sure you've got it wrong is the death of Jesus. The importance of Jesus' death for each one of us is all bound up with who He was and what He'd come to do. To help you understand what Jesus did for you, let me first tell you the true story of two brothers in San Francisco. The younger brother ran with a street gang. One night during a fight the knife in his hand met the soft flesh of a rival. Death was swift. The young man ran home to swap his blood-stained clothes for clean ones, then he disappeared into the night. The older brother arrived home soon afterwards to find the clothes lying where they'd been abandoned. The sound of police sirens was in the air. By the time the police knocked on the door, he, the older brother, was wearing the stained clothing as though it was his own. He was charged, tried and eventually executed for murder. During all this the younger brother witnessed the love of his older brother - who died in his place and paid his penalty. Finally, it became more than he could bear. Overcome with remorse, he turned himself in and made a full confession. But the police sent him away. There could be no charges because his brother's death had satisfied the demands of the law.

And that's what God has done for us. He's dealt with our sin in a way that's both just and loving, by taking our punishment upon Himself. He came in person as Jesus to do exactly that at the cross - and that's why His death is unique.

It took a lot to clean up the pollution in Prince William Sound, where the Exxon Valdez ran aground and spilled its cargo of oil. The bill for the clean-up operation was two billion dollars. Sin is a far worse pollutant in our world, and the cost of our cleansing was the priceless sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Jesus' death was God's plan to rescue us from the consequences of going our own way. On the basis of that death, God's forgiveness is now freely on offer to all who will turn from sin to Him and respond to God's love in simple, personal faith.