

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,  
on Sunday, June 2, 1996, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

## **GALATIANS 2:20**

“The Son of God loved me, and gave Himself for me!”

### **WHAT DID JESUS DIE OF?**

Whenever we hear of someone’s death, the first question we naturally ask is — What did he die of? It is interesting to recall that the law of our land demands that whenever a person dies, a doctor must issue a death certificate on which the cause of death is clearly stated.

With this in mind as we gather around the Holy Table this morning, let us ask reverently and earnestly — “What did our blessed Lord die of?”

There can be no doubt whatever about the fact of the death of Jesus; and just because we believe in His Perfect Humanity as well as His Perfect Deity, we can therefore legitimately consider some of the things from which ordinary mortals die, and then ask — “Did any of these account for the death of Jesus?”

**1. Was it old age?** According to the Bible, the appointed span of our earthly life is 70 years, or by reason of added strength 80 years; and isn’t it significant how, even with all the skill and resource of modern medical science, some disease or infirmity usually emerges to snatch us away before the four score years are reached?

Jesus might have lived a long and useful life, and then, at the last, have passed into decline, and, like Jacob of old, have been “gathered to His fathers.” Indeed, there are those today who would say that it was nothing short of a tragedy that Jesus died young. George Bernard Shaw once remarked that “it would have been better for Jesus to have lived to a ripe old age and to have died a grandfather.” This, however, Jesus did not do.

Taken the whole world over, the average age to which a human being lives is only 33 years — and Jesus died at 33! You know the old proverb which says, “Those whom the gods love, die young.” Our Savior did not wait till sunset; He died in the glad morning of His day with the dew of the morning still glistening upon His soul.

**2. Was it disease?** As one medical writer has put it — “The story of our human race is just the story of a mighty struggle between microbes and men.” Germs and bacteria possess our bodies, and permeate the atmosphere we breathe, and the romance of modern medical and surgical research is man’s heroic attempt to defeat these evil forces of nature, and give to mankind a healthy body free from disease.

Now in His Perfect Humanity, Jesus was much like other men. We are told that He was hungry, thirsty, tired, so weary that He could sleep in the back of a boat during a storm: In short,

that He shared with us a multitude of our human experiences. But there is one amazing fact about Jesus — never anywhere in the Gospel records are we ever told that He was ill. Sickness, apparently, never overcame Him. This is a truly remarkable fact when we remember that He lived in a warm, sultry, germ-infected climate, and at a time in human history when people had little knowledge of how to combat disease. And furthermore, it is an astonishing fact because day and daily Jesus was mingling with diseased people, hopeless individuals suffering from contagious and loathsome diseases.

But not only did Jesus resist disease Himself; the fact is that disease could not so much as dwell in His Presence. Why, there was healing in the very tassel of His robe, and in the spittle from His mouth. Not only was Christ never ill — wherever He went He brought with Him health and healing.

**3. Was it poverty?** How many tragic deaths must be ascribed to this foul assassin! Living as we do in a land of plenty, it is difficult for us to realize that more than half the people on this planet are, at this very moment, fighting a grim battle against slow but relentless starvation. In countries like Bangladesh today, men and women and little children are falling down by the side of the road, the victims of sheer starvation.

And in Palestine in Christ's day, the people were incredibly poor. They tried to scrape a living from the soil, but the taxes levied by the conquering Romans, together with the offerings demanded by their own religious leaders, kept them continually in abject poverty. You remember how, on one occasion, Jesus said, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has no place to lay His head." (Matt. 8:20) And it was literally true. On another occasion, when the Herodians came with their neat problem concerning the tribute money, Jesus said, "Show Me a penny" (Luke 20:24), the inference being as Robertson Nicoll once pointed out, that Jesus did not possess a penny Himself.

Yes, He was extremely poor, but it was not poverty that caused His death; for so long as there was that hospitable home in Bethany; so long as Simon Peter's fishing skill remained; so long as Joseph of Arimathea's gold retained its purchasing power; so long as those grateful women helped support Him out of their own means — just so long as that, Jesus was in no danger of being utterly destitute. And besides, if He had cared to, He might have turned the very stones into bread, and water into wine. And when He died, He left a Robe that was worth gambling for.

No, He didn't die of poverty.

**4. Was it disappointment?** Disillusionment and despair have stilled many a stout heart and broken many a noble spirit; and some would maintain that it was bitter, agonizing disappointment that drove Him in despair to Jerusalem to give Himself up to martyrdom, just as Socrates, in disillusionment, had drunk his hemlock and died without a tremor. Now we must admit that disappointment hurt Him very deeply. Think of the tragic pathos implicit in the words of John 1:11, "He came to His own people, but His own people didn't welcome Him."

And yet, we could never believe that such bitter disappointment was even a contributing

factor to His death, for the Master braced Himself for the Cross in a spirit of triumph. When Moses and Elijah stood with Him on the Mount of Transfiguration, they spoke, you remember, about His departure which He should accomplish at Jerusalem. Note the word “accomplish.” The Cross was no unfortunate, inevitable accident: It was rather, a glorious accomplishment. It was not something done to Jesus by men: It was something done by Jesus for men. At Calvary, Jesus challenged Satan, sin and hell to do their worst to Him, and they did. But He was the mighty Victor at the last. He did not die of disappointment. He died by God’s appointment.

No, it wasn’t old age, disease, poverty, or disappointment that caused His death. We must probe deeper if we are to find the true answer to our question — What did Jesus die of?

Lovers of his poetry have often wondered what really caused the death of Robert Burns at age 37. Many reasons have been put forth — fever, rheumatism, drunkenness, poverty, disrepute, disappointment. His friends have seen in his death a tragedy of human life; his enemies see in it a stern reminder of the inevitable consequences of immorality. But his fellow Scot, Robert Louis Stevenson, in one of his delightful essays, states his opinion in this way: He says, “Robert Burns died of being Robert Burns”; and surely no one will seriously criticize that verdict.

But what has all this to do with the death of our Lord? Just this, and it is vitally important — “Robert Burns died of being Robert Burns.” But we could never say that “Jesus Christ died of being Jesus Christ” — for death could never have a legitimate claim upon the sinless, holy Son of God.

But if Jesus Christ did not die of being Jesus Christ, then He died of being you and me! And that brings us to the very heart of the Gospel; for this is the core and essence of the faith — that Jesus died of being you and me! He took my place on the Cross that I might take His place at God’s right hand. Jesus associated Himself with me in my sin that I might associate with Him in His righteousness. He endured the agonies of hell that I might enjoy the glories of heaven. His enemies didn’t take His life — He gave it freely for our sakes, as a final and perfect atonement for sin.

And every time we look at the spread Table, it reminds us that it cost God an inestimable price to make it possible for us to have our sins forgiven. But out of His great heart of love He gladly paid the price Himself. That is why we say so often that “salvation is free, but it is not cheap,” for it has been paid for in full at Calvary. The salvation of your soul and mine cost God the Son of His love.

Jesus died of being you and me! Isn’t there sheer wonder in that thought? When this saving truth breaks in upon our soul, we feel we must exclaim with Isaac Watts,

“Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were an offering far too small;  
Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.”

And with the Apostle Paul — The Son of God loved me, and gave Himself for me!

**AMEN.**