

MAKING  
SENSE OF

THE DEATH  
OF JESUS



Chris Price

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"I believe that the world was created and approved by love, that it subsists, coheres and endures by love, and that, insofar as it is redeemable, it can be redeemed only by love. I believe that divine love, incarnate and indwelling in the world, summons the world always toward wholeness, which ultimately is reconciliation and atonement with God."

— WENDELL BERRY



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# INTRODUCTION

We glimpse crosses almost everywhere we look.

On churches, tattooed bodies, jewelry, clothing and coffee cups. The cross is arguably the most recognizable symbol in the world.

The crucifix as religious iconography has been secularized in the truest sense of the word—it has been tamed of its terror, reduced of its horror, made this-worldly by Christians and non-Christians alike. Few things highlight more clearly the chasm between the first century understanding of crucifixion and our modern understanding of it than the successful commercialization of the cross.

There is, of course, an occasional attempt to re-contextualize crucifixion through the use of analogy. For example—in an effort to highlight the oddity of wearing a symbol of execution as jewelry—wearing a cross could be compared to dangling an electric chair around our necks. But even analogies such as this fail to convey the brutality of the cross. After all, as repugnant as some may find the electric chair, there are still attempts to sanitize the process: it's a quick death, mostly private (though



limited viewing is allowed), done without ridicule or other acts intended to denigrate the criminal's humanity.

Crucifixion was different.

It was designed to be excruciating, drawn-out and public. The victim hung naked for days subjected to insults and ridicule, exposed to the elements and at the mercy of pecking birds of prey. It was the height of shame and indignity. We have no modern equivalent in the secular West.

And, yet, despite the horror, the cross remains the central symbol of the Christian faith.

The first Christians wrote about the cross with adoration, sung about the cross with passion and worshiped fervently at the feet of the one who hung on the cross.

A first century symbol of oppression was turned into a symbol of hope.

A first century symbol of Roman power and might was turned into a symbol of God's victory over the forces of evil and darkness that plague humanity.

To stress what a strange turn of events this represents, Episcopal priest and author Fleming Rutledge writes,

Christianity is unique. The world's religions have certain traits in common, but until the gospel of Jesus Christ burst upon the Mediterranean world, no one in the history of human imagination had conceived of such a thing as the worship of a crucified man.... The peculiarity of this beginning for a world-transforming faith is not sufficiently recognized.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2015), 1.

Submerged beneath this odd beginning of a global faith and the religious art, jewelry and iconography it has produced lie deeper questions which remain unresolved in the minds of many.

Simply put: Why did Jesus have to suffer? Why did Jesus have to die? What was the point, the purpose, the meaning of it all? And why do Christians, even when confronted with the seeming absurdity of it all, still choose to celebrate the death of Jesus on the cross as good news? How in the world is Jesus' suffering an act of God's love?

These are not new questions. Lesslie Newbigin, a well-known Christian thinker at the end of the 20th century, wrote these words:

If I'm drowning in a well and another man jumps into the well and rescues me, while he himself is drowned in the effort, then there can be no doubt about that man's love. He has given his life for me. But if I'm attacked by a tiger, I need a different kind of help. My friend may jump into the well and drown himself, but that will not rescue me from the tiger. In that case, even though my friend gave up his life, I cannot say that he loved me or saved me. Christ gave up his life on the cross, but how does that save me? How does it rescue me from my sin? Unless we can show that there is some connection between Christ's death and my sin, I cannot believe that Christ's death is proof of love for me, or that it has saved me from sin. Clearly it is not enough simply to say that the cross is a revelation of God's love, unless we can answer these questions.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Lesslie Newbigin, *Sin and Salvation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956), 72.

Unless Jesus' death on the cross is somehow connected to humanity's deepest and most perennial problems, it cannot be seen as an act of love.

So how is the death of Jesus tied to our deepest needs? And in what ways is the cross a revelation of God's love?

To answer these questions one needs to enter into the world of the New Testament and think deeply about the nature of love, the age-old tension between justice and mercy, the power of evil, the cost of forgiveness and the fact of human suffering.

# THE PROBLEM

Many atheists argue that, if there is no God, then moral values and duties are grounded or anchored in the human species, whether in individual persons or enshrined in cultural norms.<sup>3</sup> To ground morality in humanity, however, relativizes morality to

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<sup>3</sup>Not all atheists believe this, of course, but the list of atheist individuals who do is long and impressive. Friedrich Nietzsche, a famous atheist, pointed out that if God dies so does Christian morality. Objective moral values are vaporized in a universe where God is wiped from the horizon of our lives. Richard Dawkins, with a touch of rhetorical flourish, writes: “The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference” (Richard Dawkins, *River out of Eden* [New York: Basic Books, 1995], 133). No good. No evil. Just indifference. Machiavelli understood this and concluded that might equals right. Hobbes, Nietzsche, and the great French Existentialists (Sartre, Camus, etc.) all understood this as well. Bertrand Russell and the Logical Positivists understood this (after all, given a strict verificationism, moral statements are worse than false—they are meaningless). Michael Foucault believed this and all those postmodernists who still subscribe to truth claims as a masked will to power would agree. The great philosophical atheist J. L. Mackie understood this. The prominent philosopher of science Michael Ruse understands this. The list of influential intellectuals goes on and on. No God, no objective moral values and duties—moral relativism reigns supreme.

individuals, cultures and time-periods. Philip Gorski, a sociologist from Yale, argues that in a materialistic universe everything has a materialistic origin, including morality. He concludes that morality is either the product of evolutionary biology, or constructed by our culture, which is designed to insulate and protect the interests of those who possess the power.<sup>4</sup>

Either way, morality is relative and there are no moral absolutes.

Alex Rosenberg from Duke University says it more bluntly: "What is the purpose of the universe? There is none. What is the meaning of life? Ditto. Is there free will? Not a chance. What is the difference between right and wrong, good and bad? There is no moral difference between them. Anything goes."<sup>5</sup>

Timothy Keller points out the implications when he writes, "In such a worldview, confession and forgiveness are always something of a sham: who is to say what sin is? Why should I feel guilty for something I want to do?"<sup>6</sup>

If there are no moral absolutes, there is probably no coherent concept of sin. If there is no coherent concept of sin, there should be no need for atonement. Period.

Nevertheless, we can't seem to escape the reality of moral absolutes. We live, speak and act like some things are really wrong and some things are really right for all people and all places. In the last ten years, important protests, originating

<sup>4</sup> Phillip Gorski, "Where Do Morals Come From?," *Public Books*, February 15, 2016, [www.publicbook.org/where-do-morals-come-from](http://www.publicbook.org/where-do-morals-come-from).

<sup>5</sup> Alex Rosenberg, *The Atheist's Guide to Reality: Enjoying Life without Illusions* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Timothy Keller, *Forgive: Why Should I and How Can I?* (New York, NY: Viking, 2022), 51.

in the West, have swept across the globe. The *Me Too*, *Black Lives Matter* and *Indigenous Lives Matter* marches were not led by consistent moral relativists. Individuals and groups rallied around the fact that some acts are truly evil, even if the perpetrators of the deeds are powerful, or believed what they were doing was permissible, right or justified.

In other words, whatever people's underlying worldview commitments or religious beliefs may be, there is a strong tendency to subscribe to objective moral values—moral truths about the way people *ought* to behave, independent of their personal opinion on the matter. Of course, there is always a temptation to appeal to moral relativism when we do wrong, or when it provides us license to act on our desires for power or sexual expression, or when writing a university paper in an ethics class, but we tend to become moral absolutists when we, or someone we love, is harmed.

How then do we make sense of our continual appeal to objective moral values and duties that should be binding on all human conduct?

As hinted at above, it seems as though evolutionary biology turns morality into shifting sand. Our current moral beliefs might be left behind like our gills, or our East African origins. Today's good may be tomorrow's evil and there is no objective moral standard found in nature that we are evolving closer and closer to reflecting. In general, science is of little help in this area. The scientific method may tell us what "is" but it cannot, using its appropriate methods of inquiry, tell us what "ought" to be.

Not only that, as ethicists and thinkers like Peter Singer or Yuval Harari have consistently pointed out, in a time and chance universe, where morality evolved like everything else, universal

human rights are a Judeo-Christian myth. Most of us, regardless of our religious persuasion, are unwilling to concede their point; at least when it comes to moral values we care about. This highlights a very real tension: If God doesn't exist, moral absolutes seem inherently implausible; but at the same time, we cannot live well together without assuming their existence.

C. S. Lewis sums up our predicament when he writes, "First... human beings, all over the earth, have this curious idea that they ought to behave a certain way, and cannot really get rid of it."<sup>7</sup>

But he goes on to add one more sobering feature of our experience: "Secondly...they do not in fact behave that way.... These two facts are the foundation of all clear thinking about ourselves and the universe we live in."<sup>8</sup>

In Lewis' volume *Mere Christianity* his initial argument is that there is a moral law pressing down on us, one that goes beyond personal preference or societal norms. This fact of our experience suggests a moral lawgiver who acts as a transcendent anchor point for moral values and duties. This moral lawgiver is most aptly described as God. And, for the Christian, our moral duties are expressed in God's commands found in scripture. God's nature, expressed in His commands, fleshed out in the life of His Son, Jesus, provides an objective standard and anchor for objective moral values and duties. As philosopher William Lane Craig points out:

On a theistic view, objective moral duties are constituted by God's commands. God's moral nature is expressed in relation

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<sup>7</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, Publisher, 1952), 8.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

to us in the form of divine commandments, which constitute our moral duties or obligations.... In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the whole moral duty of man can be summed up in the two great commandments: First, you shall love the Lord your God with all your strength and with all your soul and with all your heart and with all your mind, and, second, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On this foundation we can affirm the objective rightness of love, generosity, self-sacrifice, and equality, and condemn as objectively wrong selfishness, hatred, abuse, discrimination, and oppression.<sup>9</sup>

God's moral law is not oppressive, rather, it sets us free to become the people He created us to be. God's law is designed to promote our human flourishing.

The problem that Lewis highlights is that we don't always follow the moral law.

To prove this is the case is not difficult.

When we hear about God's standards, even in the secular West, we tend to think about the Ten Commandments. The second half of the Ten Commandments outline stipulations for how we ought to treat each other—don't lie, don't steal, don't commit adultery, don't murder, don't covet. Curiously, if we followed these commands many of the world's problems would disappear overnight. The problem is that we don't follow them, do we?

We lie, cheat, covet, steal and murder on a regular basis. Well, maybe not murder in the truest sense of the word, but

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<sup>9</sup>William Lane Craig, *Is the Foundation of Morality Natural or Supernatural? The Craig-Harris Debate* [Debate transcript] (Reasonable Faith, 2011) <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/is-the-foundation-of-morality-natural-or-supernatural-the-craig-harris#ixzz4ZuaAR6bk>



many of us, in a rage, have wished someone dead. We have killed with a glare and murdered with a stare. While not as bad as the former, to undertake these actions is to move in the same direction as the one who actually goes through with the act. After all, a world without contempt is likely a world without murder.

The Ten Commandments are good rules.

We break them.

So, what does that make us?

Bad?

Or flawed, imperfect, broken, possessing a perverse bent to mess things up—however you want to say it!

Here is how scripture says it: “For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:22).

Now, scripture considers sin at a level far deeper than our propensity to break God’s law. Because at the heart of our law-breaking is self-centeredness and pride; a desire to self-rule rather than submit to God’s rule. Written deep into the rebellious heart of humanity is a failure to acknowledge God’s authority over our lives and His right to give us commands.

In our natural state we are very much like a young adult who had a good upbringing with parents who were kind and provided for all of their needs.<sup>10</sup> As a grown-up, they still cash their parent’s cheques, but refuse to return their calls or acknowledge their existence. When challenged about their profound ingratitude, they insist they are a good person because they are kind to strangers, donate blood and occasionally give to nonprofits that serve the poor. Nevertheless, most would insist that this

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<sup>10</sup>This illustration was suggested to me through the speaking ministry of Timothy Keller.

individual's self-proclaimed righteousness is more than a little incomplete.

Along a similar vein, scripture would urge us to recognize the fact that we owe God, as our Creator, absolutely everything—our very existence and our every breath is a borrowed blessing from His hands—whether we believe in Him or not. We might do good things, regardless of our religious beliefs. But if God exists as our maker and sustainer, our divine benefactor who has given us every good and perfect gift, then a failure to live in gratitude to His generosity leaves a gaping hole in our self-proclaimed holiness—highlighting an ingratitude at the heart of our condition. Such ingratitude is part of the residual impact of sin.

Leave God's standards and our ingratitude to one side for a moment.

More than breaking God's commands, we frequently fail to live up to our own standards. Imagine if, on the day of our birth, a tape recorder was placed around our neck that only switched on when we pronounced moral judgements on another person or situation. If that tape recorder was played on the day of our death we would find ourselves falling short of both God's standards, *and* the moral standards we consistently imposed on others. It wouldn't be an alien code of ethics that condemns us in the end, but our own.<sup>11</sup> In other words, we have all had moments of raging hypocrisy; the equivalent of the parental doozy, "Do what I say, not what I do."

This painful reality puts us at odds with our Maker and at odds with our own conscience, which is why guilt and shame continue to plague the human condition.

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<sup>11</sup> This analogy was suggested to me years ago by the work of Francis Schaeffer.

The New Testament expresses our predicament in bleak terms: “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world...” (Eph 2:1–2).

This is our problem.

Forget debates about original sin right now.

It is *unoriginal* sin that is the practical issue. Our familiarity with sin is the really inexcusable bit about us all. Our stubborn rebellion against the one part of Christian theology that can actually be proven might be the most dishonest thing about us. Such an admission is not misanthropy, it is clear-sighted honesty. To quote G. K. Chesterton, “Sin is the only doctrine that’s been empirically validated by 2,000 years of human history.”<sup>12</sup> Rather than bludgeon the reader with accounts of human depravity and the startling normalcy of those who committed evil deeds, I am, instead, asking for soul-searching transparency. As Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote in *The Gulag Archipelago*: “The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart.”<sup>13</sup>

The problem isn’t just on our end, however.

God is a being of complete and utter moral goodness.

C. S. Lewis in his science fiction novel, *Perelandra*, has one of his human characters reflect on the experience of meeting an

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<sup>12</sup> I personally was unable to track down the source of this popular Chesterton quote, but one of our very able editors found it quoted in Timothy Beougher, *Who Will be Saved?* Edited by House, Paul and Thornbury, Gregory. (Downers Grove, ILL: Crossway Publishing, 2000), 100.

<sup>13</sup> Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918–1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation* (New York: Collins Harvill, 1986), 312.

unfallen being of pure, moral goodness. The character decides he doesn't enjoy pure goodness as much as he thought he would.

This is a very terrible experience. As long as what you are afraid of is something evil, you may still hope that the good may come to your rescue. But suppose you struggle through to the good and find that it is also dreadful? What if food itself turns out to be the very thing you can't eat, and home the very place you can't live, and your very comforter the person who makes you uncomfortable? Then, indeed, there is no rescue possible.... I wanted to go away. I wanted every possible distance, gulf, and barrier to be placed between it and me.<sup>14</sup>

God's holiness makes human sinners want to hide.

It was true in the Garden of Eden and remains true to this day. Our sin and God's holy perfection creates a chasm no human can traverse on the basis of our own moral resume.

It is only when we reckon with God's holiness and realize that there is a way we ought to live, and we are failing to do so, that the good news of the cross strikes us as pertinent to our situation.

There are objective moral values and duties rooted in God's commands and human conscience.

We break both God's law *and* violate our own consciences.

Therefore, there is a coherent concept of sin.

But who will provide atonement for our sin?

Again, as soon as we take that question seriously, the crucifixion of Jesus becomes surprisingly relevant.

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<sup>14</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Perelandra* (New York, NY: MacMillan, 1965), 19.

In what follows we will investigate six different meanings of the cross. What is presented below is not intended as an exhaustive list. Precious truths have been omitted for the sake of space. Instead, think about the following as a highlight reel, not a comprehensive exploration:

1. *The Cross is about God's love*
2. *The Cross is about the Self-Substitution of God*
3. *The Cross Resolves the Tension between Justice and Mercy*
4. *The Cross is God's Victory over Satan and Demons*
5. *The Cross is about Forgiveness*
6. *Through the Cross God Identifies with our Suffering*<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> For a more detailed exploration, see Darrell Johnson's *It is Finished*, or John Stott's *The Cross of Christ*.

# THE CROSS IS ABOUT GOD'S LOVE

The God who started the universe and sustains its existence, the God who fine-tuned the universe for life, the God who placed His moral rudder within us—this God sent His son, Jesus as the solution to our sin problem highlighted in the previous section.

To quote one of the most famous passages in all of scripture: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (John 3:16–17).

God doesn't simply *have* love toward us. God *is* love within His own being.

To affirm that God is love (and not only in His deposition toward us) suggests the doctrine of the Trinity.

Love in its most meaningful sense is a relational term. Love implies a subject and an object. Someone to give love and someone to receive and reciprocate love, whether it be a person or a pet. For God to be love suggests a relationship within His own nature; a plurality of persons within His divine essence.

Scripture teaches that there is one God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. One divine essence, three distinct persons, or centres of consciousness. As John Mark Comer writes, “God is a community of self-giving love; each member of the Trinity, as theologians call them, is distinct yet somehow one.”<sup>16</sup>

The Father loves the Son, the Son loves the Father, and the divine, personal love between the Father and Son is the Holy Spirit. Humanity was originally created to participate in the inner love and life of the Trinity.

This is what we are made for; to share in the intimacy that is at the center of all things, to connect to the live-wire of God’s love that jolts us into life that is truly life. “It’s to enter into the flow of love within the inner life of God himself.”<sup>17</sup>

More than that, this is what we are saved for.

And the entire Trinity is involved in our salvation.<sup>18</sup>

God the Father sent the Son in love.

God the Son laid down his life in love.

And God the Holy Spirit pours that love into our hearts and applies the benefits of Jesus’ death to our lives.

Our sin has broken the loving relationship we were made to enjoy. Sin is a collapse into self, an inward-turn and downward slope to selfishness that untethered us from God. Thankfully, in love, God has sought to remedy the breach of our rebellion.

To love another is to long for and act toward their ultimate flourishing.

<sup>16</sup> John Mark Comer, *Practicing The Way: Be with Jesus, Become Like Jesus, Do as he Did* (New York, NY: Waterbrook, 2024), 36.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>18</sup> See Ephesians 1:3–12.

And our ultimate flourishing is found in a loving relationship with our Creator—the relationship we were created to experience.

Because God is love, God's very nature necessitates that he acts in such a way that makes our ultimate flourishing possible, which leads him to the cross. If our sin ruptured the connection between us and the love of God, Jesus is the one to re-establish it; to make a way for sinners to drink deeply of His goodness once again.

God has done this as an act of grace.

Grace is another word for an unearned gift.

Grace has sometimes been defined as us receiving God's riches at Christ's expense.

To say it another way, when we love someone we give them gifts.

And the greatest gift we give to them is the gift of ourselves.

Love gives this gift freely.

As Paul writes, "For it is by grace you have been saved through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God" (Eph 2:8–10).

This salvation is not achieved by us, it is received by us.

It is not about our merits, but God's mercy.

It is not about our goodness, but His grace.

It is not about our loveliness, but His love.

Experience may lie to us about God's presence or absence.

Nature and accidents may tell us the world is capricious and cruel.

But the cross tells us God is for us and God is love, so He gives us the gift of Himself.

Why did Jesus die?



Because He loves us with a love that is meant to be experienced by us through the Holy Spirit—a love that transforms us over time.

Psychologist and spiritual director, David Benner writes:

Meditating on God's love has done more to increase my love than decades of effort to try to be more loving. Allowing myself to deeply experience his love—taking time to soak in it and allow it to infuse me—has begun to effect changes that I had given up hope of ever experiencing. Coming back to God in my failures at love, throwing myself into his arms and asking him to remind me of how much he loves me as I am—here I begin to experience new levels of love to give to others.<sup>19</sup>

May meditating on the cross as an act of love do the same for us.

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<sup>19</sup> David G. Benner, *Surrender to Love: Discovering the Heart of Christian Spirituality* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2003), 92.

# THE CROSS IS ABOUT THE SELF-SUBSTITUTION OF GOD

The apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance that Christ *died for our sins* according to the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3, emphasis mine).

For our present purposes the key word I want to highlight is “*for*.”

Christ died *for* our sins.

Scripture says, “*For* the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 6:23, emphasis mine).

The apostle seems to be describing a harsh reality. It is worth noting, however, that the consequence for sin is death—not because God is harsh, but because sin separates us from the living God and the life that is in Him.

It is cause and effect.

The heart of our rebellion is a stubborn “no” to God.

To say no to God, leads to no God and no life that flows from God.

To turn our back on the God who is life *is* to experience spiritual death. In this way, humanity is similar to a plant. When we remove a plant from sunlight, once it is cut off from its source of life, it withers and dies.<sup>20</sup>

The New Testament teaches that Jesus was tempted in every way that we are and yet he did not sin. A stunning claim, especially when affirmed by those who spent several years traveling with him! “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin” (Heb 4:15,16).

Jesus was tempted and did not sin. The longer you resist a temptation the more intensely you experience it. So, Jesus, in never giving into temptation, experienced its full pressure in a way that you and I seldom will. But even more curiously, if sin leads to death, and Jesus never sinned, why did Jesus die?

The answer is found in the three letter word highlighted above.

Jesus died *for* our sins, in our place.

In love he willingly takes our place and bears our judgment.

Deep love is willing to put itself in the place of another. When I have strong affection for another person, I am even willing to take on the consequences of their wrong-doing or mistakes, *if* possible. To reference one popular illustration: If I were a judge and my child was brought before my courtroom for a traffic

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<sup>20</sup> I heard this illustration from the author Donald Millar at a speaking engagement many years ago.

violation, or a series of traffic violations, I would uphold the law by declaring a guilty verdict. But then I might be compelled to take off the judge's robe and pay the debt for my child as a compassionate father.

To pay the debt of another can be an act of love.

If my wife were to become deeply ill, I would, with all of my heart, willingly take on her illness so that she could be well, *if* it were in my power to do so.

I would substitute myself for her in a heartbeat.

Love is willing to pay the debt of another.

Love is willing to put itself in the place of another.

Love is willing to lay down its life for the beloved.

Jesus is both willing and able to lay his life down for us on the cross, as our substitute.

John Stott, a well-known theologian, once wrote, "The essence of our sin is we human beings substituting ourselves for God, while the essence of our salvation is God substituting himself for us. We...put ourselves where only God deserves to be; God...put himself where we deserve to be."<sup>21</sup>

Or, in the words of the apostle John, "This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (1 John 4:10,11).

One term to describe this reality is *penal substitutionary atonement*.

"Penal," because the penalty for sin is death.

"Substitutionary," because Jesus died *for* us.

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<sup>21</sup> John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 160.

“Atonement,” because the end result of Jesus’ death is that you and I can be at one with God again.

Some critics have construed the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement as being immoral because it is understood to imply that God punished an innocent person. Such a complaint misrepresents what many defenders of penal substitutionary atonement have taught. To quote John Stott, “We must never make Christ the object of God’s punishment.”<sup>22</sup> J. Howard Marshall, in his defense of substitutionary atonement states it even more strongly: “It is not a case of God punishing Christ but God in Christ taking on himself the sin and its penalty.”<sup>23</sup>

Even if penal substitutionary atonement did require God punishing an innocent individual, the question might be posed: *in an extreme ethical situation where one must punish an innocent person or else the world will be totally destroyed (or all of humanity will be eternally condemned), should one punish the person?*

For the consequentialist, or the utilitarian, the answer is obvious. You are morally obligated to punish the person to bring about the greatest good for the greatest amount of people. But even for the individual who rejects consequentialism as a branch of ethics, it is still conceivable that the above act would be morally permissible. The defender of penal substitutionary atonement who insists that God *did* punish the innocent Jesus

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<sup>22</sup> John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 151.

<sup>23</sup> Derek Tidball, David Hilborn, Justin Thacker, *The Atonement Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 63. From the essay, “The Theology of the Atonement.”

on the cross might, therefore, point out that “punishing Christ for our sins, has mercifully saved the world from total destruction and was therefore acting compatible with moral goodness.”<sup>24</sup>

As already stated above, most proponents of penal substitutionary atonement *do not* hold that God punished Jesus on the cross and the whole picture looks entirely different once you grant that Jesus *willingly* endured the consequence of our sin. God the Father did not impose on Jesus a penalty that Jesus was unwilling to accept—such was the depth of the Triune God’s love for us.

For others that are concerned that such an approach to the atonement creates a violent theology with an abusive God, which in turn creates abusive religious environments, we must point out that only a caricature of the cross could ever do such a thing. When penal substitutionary atonement is placed in the context of the Gospel narrative (as it must be) we are still confronted with a God who forgives his enemies on the cross, who speaks a word of grace to the insurrectionist hanging next to him, who doesn’t respond to evil with evil or violence with violence but, instead, overcomes evil with good. The cross ultimately exposes violence in the heart of humanity, not violence in the nature of God. A correct understanding of Jesus substituting himself for us on the cross, bearing our penalty, doesn’t change that fact. As Mez McConnell writes,

At the cross, God acts for the weak, the oppressed, and the abused. To overcome evil. To uphold justice. To free the enslaved. God himself perfectly identifies with all the victims

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<sup>24</sup>William Lane Craig, *Atonement and the Death of Christ* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2020), 181.

of vile manipulation and power plays. The cross is the greatest demonstration that we have ever seen or ever will see.<sup>25</sup>

Other thinkers and theologians have called this view of the cross *vicarious redemption*. Vociferous critics of the faith, like the late Christopher Hitchens, often criticized this idea as immoral because it suggests that our guilt, our sin, our wrong-doing can be thrust onto someone else in such a way that it absolves the wrongdoer of any real responsibility for their actions.

Protests like this may also rest on a bit of a caricature.

In order for any one to benefit from the saving death of Jesus, his atoning sacrifice or substitutionary death, one must take responsibility for their own actions, confess their sin and turn from their wrong doing. The word for that is repentance. It is through turning from our sin, which implies taking responsibility for our actions, that we personally appropriate the saving benefit of Jesus' substitutionary death.

Not only that, once we recognize, to quote a well-known hymn, "it was our sin that held him there," we are moved and highly motivated to renounce our sinful ways and pursue righteousness.

Our reconciliation with God, achieved at great cost to God, compels us to pursue reconciliation with others, even at great cost to ourselves. In other words, the cross acts as a catalyst for pursuing right-relatedness to God and others, not as an opportunity to recuse ourselves from responsible living and the pursuit of justice.

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<sup>25</sup> Mez McConnell, "The Rock-Solid Hope of Penal Substitutionary Atonement (Part 3)" (20schemes Equip, 8 October, 2020) <https://20schemesequip.com/rock-solid-hope-penal-substitutionary-atonement/>

# THE CROSS RESOLVES THE TENSION BETWEEN JUSTICE AND MERCY

In the book of Exodus, God reveals His character to Moses.

“The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished...” (Exod 34:6–7).

This passage is one of the most referenced in all of the Bible by other scripture writers.

It mentions God being slow to anger, a description which causes some of us to struggle.

The thought of an angry God is unpleasant.

But a mad God is *not* a bad God.

A bad God is a never mad God who yawns in the face of evil and injustice.

In her writings, Rebecca Pippert has us imagine our own human experience of anger being birthed out of love: “Think



about how we feel when we see someone we love ravaged by unwise actions or relationships.... Do we respond with benign tolerance?"<sup>26</sup> She continues, "real love stands against the deception, the lie, the sin that destroys. Anger and love are inseparably bound in human experience."<sup>27</sup>

If this is true in human experience, why would it not also be true when it comes to God? To quote Fleming Rutledge, "It makes people queasy nowadays to talk about the wrath of God, but there can be no turning away from this prominent biblical theme. Oppressed peoples around the world have been empowered by the scriptural picture of a God who is angered by injustice and unrighteousness."<sup>28</sup>

To put it another way, a mad God is not a primitive God but, rather, a good God opposing primitive behavior in the people He loves.

The difference is God's anger is never the result of bruised pride, or a thwarted will, or an irrational lashing out; it is not vindictive, over the top or quick to erupt. God's anger is utterly righteous. God's wrath is His settled opposition to sin and evil that arises out of His holy nature.

Not only that, God is slow to anger. He has a long wick and it burns at a snail's pace.

Another intriguing note about the above passages is that, on one hand, this scripture says that God forgives wickedness. At the same time, he also doesn't leave the guilty unpunished. Well,

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<sup>26</sup> Rebecca Manley Pippert, *Hope Has Its Reasons*, rev. Ed. (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Books, 2001), 101.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> As quoted by Timothy Keller, *Forgive: Why should I and how can I?* (New York: Viking, 2022), 95.

which is it? Do you forgive the guilty? Or punish the wicked?

It is both.

But how can it be both?

Doesn't justice negate mercy and mercy negate justice?

How does God resolve this tension?

To say it another way, if God ignores our sin and law breaking, He would appear unjust like a judge who refuses to throw the book at an obviously guilty criminal.

And yet, on the other side, if God doesn't do anything about our predicament as guilty sinners, He would seem unloving—like a father who renounces his children when they get into trouble.

That is the tension: If God forgives sin, He seems unjust. If God doesn't forgive sinners, He seems unloving. This is the age-old dilemma that is always up-to-date. Justice or mercy. Mercy or justice. The tension is real.

The New Testament presents the cross as the solution. At the cross, God's justice and mercy coalesce. His justice is demonstrated in condemning sin and his love is displayed in forgiving sinners. Either we bear the judgment our sins deserve and experience the just wrath of God, or Jesus bears it in our place. Either way, sin is condemned as utterly sinful.

The cross acts as a sort of lightning rod. Lightning rods are put on houses in places where lightning storms are frequent. A lightning rod absorbs the electricity generated by a lightning strike so that the house doesn't catch on fire. Jesus becomes the lightning rod for God's just anger against sin; Jesus absorbs it in our place so that our lives don't burn up in His fiery judgment. This is good news for those who acknowledge a moral law and realize that they have broken it.

The Biblical word for this is propitiation.

As scripture says in 1 John 2:2, Jesus "is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world."

Jesus drinks the cup of God's wrath so that there is not a drop left for you or I to swallow.

To be clear, the cross is not about an angry "Father" and a forgiving "Son" in a tug-a-war for the salvation of sinners, a contest that Jesus wins due to the Father reluctantly conceding.

The Father *is* angered by sin. But so is Jesus.

The Father also has a loving disposition toward sinners. So does Jesus.

How can the Triune God communicate the horror of sin and express just wrath against sin, while also not condemning sinners?

The answer is God bears the cost of sin, Himself, on the cross.

The cross communicates the horror of sin.

The tremendous and exceeding sinfulness of sin.

And the incredible and costly nature of God's mercy.

The above is very close to the Apostle Paul's idea in Romans 3:21-27 where he writes,

There is no difference for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

The cross demonstrated God's justice and mercy. He condemns sin on the cross. The death of His Son is His ultimate "no" to sin and evil. At the same time God says "no" to sin, He says "yes" to sinners. Jesus died so that sin could be condemned and sinners could be forgiven.

Mercy and justice meet at the cross.

# THE CROSS IS GOD'S VICTORY OVER SATAN AND DEMONS

The New Testament expresses a confident belief in dark spiritual forces, supernatural ones, that come to steal, kill and destroy.

Satan is referred to in scripture as a liar, a murderer, a tempter and the accuser of the saints. Though the devil is a creature and, therefore, limited and unable to be everywhere at once, scripture speaks about other fallen angels who are actively working against God's good purposes in cahoots with the ultimate accuser.<sup>29</sup> As the apostle Paul writes in Ephesians

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<sup>29</sup> When it comes to explaining the cause of Satan's fall it is shrouded in mystery. The options are it was either: 1) *uncaused*, 2) *caused by God*, or 3) *self-caused*. An uncaused action doesn't make sense and God doesn't cause evil, so Satan's fall must be *self-caused*. God created angels with free will which is good. Satan took the good gift of freedom and freely chose to rebel against God out of his desire to be like God. Other angels followed suit becoming demons. The idea of a fallen angel is no fairytale. Rather, it gives us insight into the very nature of evil. The devil is a fallen angel. Evil is always a fallen good. Evil does not exist on its own. It is always a corrupted good. For example, it is good to exist, and it is good to have a

6:12, “[Christians] do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” Our battle is a spiritual one and it is against the demonic powers of darkness that afflict our world.

In a small gathering of people a few years ago, a friend interrupted the group conversation and said incredulously, “You’re not serious, are you? You all actually believe in demons!”

His reaction is not uncommon.

The primary reason for this skepticism is an intellectual climate created by the Enlightenment and the general success of the scientific method in exploring and explaining the natural world. The pervasive rhetoric that emerged from the Enlightenment is that science has helped us progress from ignorance to knowledge, from fear of unnamed forces to mastery over nature, from religion to reason, from dogma to scientific discovery. Such an attitude has even impacted New Testament studies and led to an unwillingness to take the Gospels at face value when it comes to healing miracles, or exorcisms. Nevertheless, the reality is that no scientific discovery has made belief in the demonic untenable, or intellectually irresponsible. And there is no single advancement in the sciences that has made belief in a spiritual world incoherent.

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will, or the ability to make decisions—this ability makes possible love and reason and virtue and all the other things that make life so meaningful. Evil happens when I use my existence and my will for a wrong purpose to achieve a wrong end, corrupting the good gifts I was given. This is what happened with Satan and this is the very thing that happens to us. Misery loves company so Satan tempts humanity to join him in rebellion against God. He attempts to replicate his sin in the hearts of humans. Pride. Idolatry. The worship of self. The sin that is pregnant with all other sins. Adam and Eve join the rebellion and the result is the fall of humanity.

Disease is caused by germs, therefore, demons don't exist.

There is a quantum realm, therefore, demons don't exist.

The theory of special relativity is true, therefore, demons don't exist.

The universe is old, therefore, demons don't exist.

Mental illness is real and is often caused by a multiplicity of physiological and sociological factors, therefore, demons don't exist.

The conclusions don't follow logically from the statements—it is just one *non sequitur* after another.

There is simply a climate of skepticism toward the demonic in some circles and it is a climate of skepticism that is very Western, which makes our disbelief in the demonic very ethnocentric, elevating the insights and assumptions of our culture over the wisdom and experience of other cultures.

The words of philosopher David Bentley Hart are on point, even if he is a little *too* pointed:

Certainly we moderns should not be too quick to congratulate ourselves, or to imagine ourselves as having embraced a more rational approach to the world, simply because we are less prone than were ancient persons to believe in miracles, or demons, or other supernatural agencies. We have no rational warrant for deploring the 'credulity' of the peoples of previous centuries toward the common basic assumptions of their times while implicitly celebrating ourselves for our own largely uncritical obedience to the common basic assumptions of our own. Anyway, even in modern Western society a great many of us apparently find it sublimely easy to revert to the perspective of 'primitive' peoples on these matters; and there

are still today entire cultures that—on irreproachably rational grounds—find the prevailing prejudices of Western modernity almost comically absurd. I know three African priests—one Ugandan and two Nigerian—who are immensely educated and sophisticated scholars (linguists, philosophers, and historians all) and who are also unshakably convinced that miracles, magic, and spiritual warfare are manifestly real aspects of daily life, of which they themselves have had direct and incontrovertible experience on a number of occasions.<sup>30</sup>

Christians believe in the demonic for a number of reasons, none more significant than the authority of Jesus. His miracles and (as we show in our booklet, *Making Sense of the Resurrection*) his resurrection from the dead establish his authority. There is no more trustworthy guide to the nature of the spiritual world than Jesus and he believed in a battle with the demonic. We also believe in the demonic based on human experience that stretches across cultures and time periods, the history of the church and the encounters of many friends and ministry partners.

More than that, we believe that the cross was a decisive victory against the enemy of our souls. The most popular view of Jesus' death on the cross in the early centuries of the church was called *Christus Victor*. Jesus died to defeat Satan and demons. As scripture tells us in the book of Colossians, Jesus having "canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by

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<sup>30</sup> David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions* (Yale University Press, 2009), 103.



the cross" (Col 2:14–15). Though rulers and authorities can refer to human governments, again and again in the New Testament this language is used to refer to demonic powers. Through the cross, Jesus has disarmed the powers and authorities.

How so?

Our Colossians passage highlights one very specific way. Through the cross, God canceled the record of debt that our sins have created, which stood against us. In scripture, the devil's great work is that of accusing the people of God. In fact, the very word "satan" means the "accuser." But in Christ, no accusations can be brought against us. "Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies." (Rom 8:33) As John Piper writes, "Neither man nor Satan can make a charge stick. The legal case is closed. Christ is our righteousness. Our accuser is disarmed. If he tries to speak in the court of heaven, shame will cover his face.... There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ."<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps a little illustration will help. Have you ever tried to place a sticky note that has started to lose its adhesive power onto a fridge or a mirror? You confidently press it onto the surface and walk away, only to turn around and see the Post-it lying on the ceramic tiles.

It is mildly frustrating.

Well, once during a time of prayer, I had a picture of Satan trying to attach lies and accusations to followers of Jesus, but because of the cross the notes wouldn't cling to our hearts anymore. We no longer wore his lies as labels that defined our worthiness.

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<sup>31</sup> John Piper, *Fifty Reasons Why Jesus Came to Die* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), kindle edition.

He persisted.

He pressed and pressed his falsehoods into our lives only to have them peel off again and again and flutter to the floor in defeat.

Satan's Post-its have lost their ultimate adhesive power because of the cross.

The New Testament presents Jesus' death as the decisive blow that has been struck against Satan and all his fallen angels. The final victory has not yet been fully realized. We still stand firm and wrestle against dark spiritual forces. We still have a war-time mentality living in a cosmos embroiled in a spiritual conflict. But the tide has turned. God's boot has been put on Satan's throat and he is now "a liar running out of breath."<sup>32</sup> The God of peace will soon crush Satan under our feet, states the Apostle Paul in Romans chapter 16. The devil rages all the more fiercely because he knows his time is running out. Satan is like a pilot that has been shot out of the sky. The plane will crash and the pilot won't survive, but he still attempts to steer the plane towards the enemy. He knows he is finished, but he is trying to do as much damage as he can on his way out.

This perverse bent toward destruction doesn't change the fact that the people of God win. The end of God's book has already been written—nothing can be added to it, or taken away. Victory is assured through the death and resurrection of Jesus and we get the privilege and pain of joining the Holy Spirit in implementing His victory in the here and now.

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<sup>32</sup>This is a lyric from Hillsong UNITED, "Not Today." *Wonder*, Hillsong, 2017.

## JESUS DIED TO FORGIVE US

The apostle Paul writes, “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph 4:32–5:2).

Jesus died to forgive our sins. The cross shows us the costly nature of forgiveness. Many have thought, “Why can’t God just forgive?” “Why did Jesus have to die?”

In response, it has been pointed out that that cross is God bearing the cost of our wrong-doing on himself, and that the very nature of forgiveness involves something similar.

It is a strange idea, at first, but it is worth thinking about together.

Before proceeding, it is important to realize what forgiveness is not. Forgiveness is not neglecting justice, it is not excusing sin, it must never be used to silence victims, and it is not the removal of necessary boundaries that help us breathe and feel

safe and create room to heal.

Forgiveness is also not just a one-time event, but a process. And it is a courageous choice before it is ever a feeling.

Forgiveness *is* a display of grace, or unmerited favor, to the world. Instead of being an echo of hostility, we choose to be a mirror of God's grace. And it does involve "bearing the cost" of the wrongdoer in a very specific way.

Let me explain in more detail.

When we are really wronged there is this strong sense that the person owes us—that there is a debt that should be paid. We understand this economically or transactionally well enough. If you break my lamp I can forgive you, but someone still has to pay for the lamp. I can make you pay or I can release you from the debt and pay myself. Something similar happens when it comes to relationships.

There are two ways we can respond to the debt created by their wrong actions. We can seek to make the person pay. We can slander them, sue them, attack them viciously, give them the cold shoulder—all in an attempt to make them pay for what they did. The problem with this approach, as hinted at above, is that we become an echo of their hostility. We sink to their level as their behavior determines our own.

Evil does not disappear.

It spreads.

And it spreads into our own character.

The other option is to forgive. Instead of trying to make the individual pay, you cancel the debt. You don't make them pay. You release them from your hostility and release yourself from carrying it in your heart. One can do so and still pursue legal recourse for wrongs committed. Forgiveness is never a license

for abuse, a means of silencing victims, or an opportunity for crimes to go unpunished. But, as Timothy Keller writes regarding forgiveness,

To refrain from lashing out at someone when you want to do so with all your being is agony. It is a form of suffering. You not only suffer the original loss of happiness, reputation, and opportunity, but now you forgo the consolation of inflicting the same on them. You are absorbing the debt, taking the cost of it completely on yourself instead of taking it out of the other person. It hurts terribly. Many people would say it feels like a kind of death. **Yes, but it is a death that leads to resurrection instead of the lifelong death of bitterness and cynicism.**<sup>33</sup>

So, why can't God just forgive?

Because of the nature of forgiveness!

Forgiveness involves canceling the other person's debt.

And, in doing so, you are absorbing the cost.

This is what Jesus does on the cross. He pays for the debt that our sin has created. He absorbs it in His own person out of love for us. He doesn't repay evil for evil, he overcomes evil with grace and forgiveness. In the words of an ancient Christian writer, Anselm of Canterbury, "the debt of our sin was so great that, although we alone owed it, only God could pay it."

God does so at the cross.

To quote Keller one last time,

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<sup>33</sup> Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York, NY: River Head Books, 2008), 196.

On the cross we see God doing visibly and cosmically what every human being must do to forgive someone, though on an infinitely greater scale. I would argue, of course, that human forgiveness works this way because we unavoidably reflect the image of our creator.<sup>34</sup>

Jesus died to forgive our sins.

God forgiving our sins paves the way for us to be reconciled to God, adopted as His children and made members of His eternal family.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 199-200.

<sup>35</sup> If God didn't forgive murderers, there would be huge gaps in the scripture. How so? Well, the apostle Paul was responsible for the arrest and murder of Christians. If God had not forgiven him, we wouldn't have 13 epistles in our New Testament. Not only that, if God didn't forgive murderers, there would be no Christians. Again, how so? In one of his more shocking teachings, Jesus actually equates murder with contempt. We have all experienced and expressed contempt toward another human being. Murder and contempt are not equal in their consequences, but they are equal in their origin story—they both flow directly and very naturally from the human heart. And without anger and contempt, there would be no murder. Jesus tends to go after the root of the problem and the root of the problem lives in all of us, which is why Dietrich Bonhoeffer said somewhere, while living in Nazi Germany (!), that "nothing we despise in another person is wholly absent from our own hearts."

The seeds of every evil act live in my own heart and, if watered by the wrong upbringing, environment, or genetic make-up, I could do those evil things I condemn from my couch. To deny this painful reality is to separate myself from much of humanity in a possibly naive way. Humanity is capable of great evil. To say I am not capable of great evil is to separate myself from humanity. Therefore, to make room for the possibility of grace toward the murderer is to make room for my own wickedness and sin to find grace as well.

Not only that, even humans can forgive their own killers and the killers of their children. Think of the Amish publicly forgiving the killer of their children. Think of the family members of the Charleston shooting victims

forgiving the killer through tears publicly. Think of Stephen, or Jesus, in the New Testament forgiving their killers while they are in the process of being killed. Are we more gracious than God? Certainly not. We should, therefore, allow God to forgive as well.

Now, God doesn't forgive all murderers and abusers. There is hell. And hell is an expression of God's love in protecting the abused against their abusers who have not repented. We glibly dismiss the need for hell as a dark and unnecessary doctrine—the leftover of a more unenlightened past. But I once wrote a dialogue where two characters argued about the reality of hell and the defender of the doctrine uttered these words:

*"Allow me to protest to your dismissal of hell in an equally vehement manner. I wonder if your sentiments are not a manifestation of liberal privilege? A cushy existence? A first world education in the humanities? Would you not feel different about hell if you were a woman in the Congo subjected to abuse after abuse by soldiers? If you were caught in the middle of a civil war? You would know hell on earth. Would you not then long for a hell after earth? Wouldn't the judgment and wrath of God be a source of hope and vitality for you? Friend, would you look that victimized woman in the eye and tell her, 'you should feel relief, there is no hell, there is no final judgment. Those soldiers who committed those unspeakable acts, who mutilated and vandalized your humanity and stole your babies with laughter and levity, will be welcomed into heaven just as they are and call you sister and God our Father. All of this without repentance, without remorse, without a deep and painful realization of the horror of their crimes, without a surrendering of their will, without tears and without pleading to God for a mercy so costly that it can only be found through the cross.'*

*Please, as if you could do such a thing, say such a thing, believe such a thing. Step a little bit deeper into the muck and mire of history and you will see the need for a God of judgment and a God of wrath."*

Not all murderers and abusers will be forgiven. This is justice. And because our choices shape character and our character determines our destiny, not all who have made such choices are able to repent. Their hearts are hardened. Their soul has turned away from the living God. And all that results in is spiritual death. The only way to receive forgiveness is genuine repentance and trust in Jesus which, for the abuser, would be such a costly, painful act of very real suffering no one who truly understood it would ever say they got off easy. It would involve prison and restitution and a genuine horror at oneself and one's deeds that would make sleep difficult and living with oneself painful. It is only the radical love and grace of God that could heal such a soul.

# JESUS DIED TO IDENTIFY WITH US

Jesus died to reveal to us a God who suffers with us. The cross shows us the love of God in his willingness to suffer with us and for us.

A question many people have is, "In light of evil, how can we trust God or believe in His goodness?"

In many ways the cross, properly understood, is the answer. And not just Jesus' death, but also his resurrection.

Evil and suffering threatens our trust in the love and power of God.

The death of Jesus shows us that evil is real. That is why Jesus had to die. The death of Jesus also shows us the love of God is real, which is why Jesus was willing to die. The resurrection tells us that God's power is real, stronger even than the grave, which is why death will one day die.

John Stott once wrote that, "I could never myself believe in God if it were not for the cross. In the real world of pain, how



could one worship a God who was immune to it?"<sup>36</sup>

To be honest, this is probably one reason why many of us remain followers of Jesus through the heartbreaks and trials of life.

Atheism is unappealing, in my opinion.

It keeps the pain.

And removes the ultimate hope.

Plus, it seems too reductionistic.

Try as we might, some of us will never have the faith to believe that something (like a whole universe) can come from nothing, that meaningless matter can create meaning, that purposeless matter can create purpose, or that love is just an accidental by-product brought to life by nature only to be put to death by her.

So, come what may, we will always be left with some sort of belief in God.

Nevertheless, the only God many of us can worship and trust in every season of the soul is a suffering God.

Our broken world needs a screaming God, a God in agony, a God hanging on a tree, struggling to breathe, bleeding out on a cruel piece of wood. A forsaken God in what feels to be a God-forsaken world is the paradox at the heart of the Christian tradition. It is the truth standing on its head, legs flailing in the air, begging for prayerful attention. God was, in Christ, reconciling the world to himself. At the point and the place where God seemed most absent, he is present in Christ.

Over the question mark of suffering we stamp the cross of Christ. God doesn't just know about suffering.

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<sup>36</sup> John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 335–36.

God himself suffered. To quote John Stott again:

[God] laid aside his immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death. He suffered for us. Our sufferings become more manageable in the light of his. There is still a question mark against human suffering, but over it we boldly stamp another mark, the cross that symbolizes divine suffering. 'The cross of Christ... is God's only self-justification in such a world' as ours.<sup>37</sup>

This is utterly unique to Christianity.

The Bible claims that God was in Jesus reconciling the world to himself. This means that God, in Jesus, experienced rejection, heartache, physical agony, and betrayal. He tasted the bitterest parts of human experience.

And Jesus did this for one simple reason: He loves us.

Nails didn't keep him on the cross.

The soldiers didn't keep him on the cross.

The mockery of the religious leaders didn't keep him on the cross. Even the mighty Roman Empire didn't keep him on the cross.

Love did.

We can still worship at the foot of the cross, if it is the Son of God hanging there—a God who doesn't try to get himself off the hook for suffering but, instead, puts himself on the hook of

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<sup>37</sup> John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 335–36.

suffering for you and I.<sup>38</sup>

Regardless of how the mechanics of the cross work, there clearly is beauty, power and truth in the story of Jesus' death that changes lives and meets us profoundly in the depths of our sufferings.

Jesus died to reveal a God who suffers with us, for us, because of us, and to one day take all suffering away from us.

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<sup>38</sup> This sentence is a nod in the direction of Philosopher Peter Kreeft's work on Suffering. See his book, *Making Sense of Suffering* for his profound and detailed response to why God allows evil and suffering.

# CONCLUSION

In conclusion, here are three things to keep in mind.

**First**, it is worth pondering if we sometimes wrestle with the meaning of the cross because we ask the opposite question the New Testament writers struggled to answer.

We wonder, "how can God judge anyone?"

Most people in the ancient world and, frankly, around the world today have no problem with the idea of God judging.

In the secular West, however, we do take issue with this idea, which means our objection to God's judgment is pretty ethnocentric and privileges our culture's sentimental streak above the insights and moral sensibilities of most of humanity throughout most of history.

The New Testament is not wrestling with the question, "How can God judge people?" It is asking the question, "How can God forgive anyone, given our sin, without looking unjust or like evil doesn't matter?"

The answer is the cross. Sin and evil are condemned at the cross, and sinners are forgiven.

**Second**, we need to remember that Christians believe that Jesus is God the Son, in human flesh. So God is not inflicting the cross on some helpless victim. God is not like a primitive deity who demands blood from an innocent third party for his wrath to be satiated.

Instead, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, absorbing the pain, violence and evil of the world into His very being, to then overcome it with love and grace. This has been implicit throughout this booklet, especially in the last section, but I thought I would make it crystal clear.

**Third**, no one in the ancient world would have believed that Jesus' death could have somehow atoned for, or forgiven the sins of the world, apart from his resurrection from the dead.

A crucified messiah was, by definition, a failed messiah in first century Judaism.

The fact that Jewish people began to proclaim that Jesus was indeed the messiah and that his death somehow had saving significance (and preached that even to their own deaths!), is really only explicable in light of some kind of miraculous event that radically altered the emotional disposition and religious viewpoint of the first disciples.

The resurrection was like God's stamp of approval on the life, ministry and saving death of Jesus Christ, apart from which we would have no reason to consider Jesus anything but another poor Jewish martyr, teacher, leader and would-be-messiah, put to death by the Romans.

In other words, apart from the resurrection the cross is foolishness and no one should believe any of it—2,000 years ago or today.



