



CWRm

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AXIS OF LOVE

Just How Does “Dying for Our Sins” Work?

When we say, “Jesus died for our sins,” what do we mean? It’s an essential confession of Christian faith, but how does it work? This much I’m sure of, it’s not reducible to just one thing. To reduce the death of Jesus to those tidy explanations known as “atonement theories” is an impoverished approach to the mystery of the cross.

Most of them are inadequate; others are repellent, particularly theories that portray the Father as a pagan deity who can only be placated by the barbarism of child sacrifice.

*The god who is mollified by throwing a virgin into a volcano or by nailing his son to a tree is **not** the Abba of Jesus!*

When we confess that “Christ died for our sins,” we **don’t** mean that God required the vicious murder of his Son in order to forgive. How would that work anyway?

Did God have some scale of torture that once met would “satisfy his wrath?” Was death alone not enough to satisfy this god? Did death by crucifixion have to be part of the equation? Was there a minimum number of lashes required in the scourging or thorns in the crown for this god to call the scales “balanced”?

Are you squirming yet? Do you want to say, “Well, some of the abuse Jesus suffered was gratuitous torture by the hands of cruel men.” But if that’s the case, how does this **division of labor** work? How much was necessary to “satisfy God” and how much was just for the sport of it? No, this approach to the cross clearly won’t work.

So what do we do? Let’s begin here: Before the cross is anything else, it is a catastrophe. It is the unjust lynching of an innocent man. This is how the Apostles preached the crucifixion in Acts.

“This Jesus...you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men”(Acts 2:23, my emphasis).

“**You killed** the author of life, whom God raised from the dead” (Acts 3:15, my emphasis).

The Bible is clear, God did not kill Jesus. Jesus was offered as a sacrifice in that the Father was willing to send his Son into our sinful system in order to expose it as utterly sinful and provide us with another way.

But it was not a sacrifice to appease a wrathful deity or to provide payment for a penultimate god subordinate to Justice.

When we say Jesus died for our sins, we mean this: *We violently sinned our sins into Jesus, and Jesus revealed the heart of God by forgiving us.* When Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them,” he was not asking God to act contrary to his nature. Rather, he was, as always, revealing the very heart of God!

At the cross Jesus absorbed our sins, died because of them, carried them into death, and rose on the third day to speak the first words of the new world: “*Peace be with you.*”

When I say “we” violently sinned our sins into Jesus, I mean that we are all more or less implicated by our explicit or tacit support of the systems of violent power that frame our world. These very political and religious systems executed Jesus.

At the cross we see where Adam and Eve’s penchant for **blame** and Cain’s capacity for **killing** have led us—to the murder of God! At Golgotha human sin is seen as utterly sinful. God did not require the death of Jesus—but *we did!*

So the cross is not about the appeasement of a monster god. It is the revelation of a merciful God. At the cross we discover a God who would rather die than kill his enemies—where God in Christ absorbs sin and recycles it into forgiveness. **The cross is not what God inflicts upon Christ in order to forgive**—it is what God endures in Christ as he forgives. When we look at the cross, we see the lengths to which a God of love will go in forgiving sin.

The cross is both ugly and beautiful. It’s as ugly as human sin and as beautiful as divine love. *But in the end, love and beauty win.* □

—Brian Zahnd