

THE VERDICT

“Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out.” (John 12:31)

Christians are generally accustomed to speaking of the cross as the place and time where God enacted judgment on the world. But what does this actually mean, and what are its implications?

Usually, the cross as the *place* of judgment is understood to mean the physical location where God poured out his wrath upon Jesus. Here, *wrath* is understood as the punishment for our sin which God, in his justice, is obliged to mete out: namely death. And Jesus, the sinless Lamb of God, gamely hangs on the cross in our place and bears the brunt of God’s implacable justice so that we, in spite of our sin, can escape punishment.

And the cross as the *time* of judgment is understood as the point in history when God sovereignly intervened in human affairs to solve humanity’s sin problem as described above.

So there we have it: **time and place come together at the cross** as Jesus bears God’s punishment for our sin. This, then, is the judgment of the cross: a resounding verdict of “Guilty!” pronounced upon the human race by God, accompanied by an unappealable death sentence. The twist is that Christ comes

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IS IN... AND ALL HIS JUDGMENTS ARE MERCY!

in as an innocent victim to serve the sentence in our place.

This is what I believed without a second thought for most of my Christian life. Until I began, through a process of reading and thinking, to see some gaping holes in it:

- **Hole Number 1:** In this view, God is not free to simply forgive sin; he is beholden to a higher principle of justice that must be obeyed. This is a major philosophical and theological problem, because **if God is God, there clearly cannot be any higher principle than himself by which he is bound.**

- **Hole Number 2:** Following on from hole number 1, since God is bound by a higher principle of justice that must be satisfied, the only way he can forgive us is through some kind of transaction. His end of the transaction is that someone has to die, since the wages of sin is death. Jesus agrees to be that someone, so God can now forgive us because his perfect son has died in our place, thus balancing the scales of justice. The problem here is that this is supposedly the same God who elsewhere in scripture instructs us to *freely* forgive others, **even as we have been forgiven.** So God requires a different standard of his children—*free forgiveness*—than he himself is prepared to meet. Hmm.

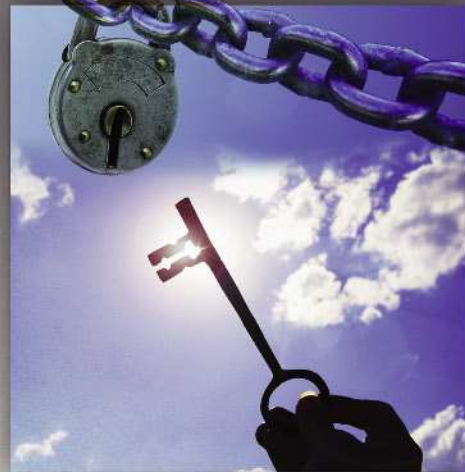
- **Hole Number 3:** This understanding makes God into a God who uses scapegoating to accomplish his purposes. *In this view, Jesus is a God-ordained scapegoat.* The groundbreaking

work of French philosopher and anthropologist René Girard has shown that scapegoating is a uniquely human phenomenon that lies at the very foundation of human society. Scapegoating is an evil practice because it shifts blame for a community's ills onto an innocent victim and then buries that victim so that life can go on as before. The innocent is made to pay the price for the guilty, so that the guilty can carry on unreformed. Do we really think the God who is supposedly the apex of love and compassion would endorse such a practice, let alone deliberately use it as a mechanism of justice?

- **Hole Number 4:** This view treats sin as a legal problem to be settled, an equation to be solved. In doing so, it shifts sin from the concrete to the abstract. Thus, the event of the cross does little or nothing to actually address the here-and-now reality of humanity's sin; it merely promises a clean legal record to anyone who puts their faith in Jesus.

I could go on, but I think those holes are already quite large enough.

In this legal view, then, the outcome of the judgment that takes place at the cross is this: humanity is found deserving of death *because God must actively mete out punishment to all sinners*; and God is not averse to engaging in the evil practice of scapegoating in order to see Lady Justice satisfied. This judgment, I contend, is as much an indictment on God as



it is of humanity. Both humanity and God are found wanting: humanity because of our sin and God because of his willingness—nay, his requirement—to deal out violent death in response.


Understanding the Judgment of the Cross

If not sin as a universal abstraction, what exactly was being judged at the cross?

Let me first make a statement, which I will then try to unpack: **the cross judges the world in that it proves that none of our violence or accusation was ever rooted in God.**

Humanity's number one problem is and always has been violence. Physical violence, verbal violence, mental violence. Violence expressed in war, in oppression, in racial hatred, in intolerance. Violence manifested in mistrust, suspicion, accusation and blame. We don't mind talking about *sin* because it's such an imprecise, abstract term that it's easy to hide from its implications. But as soon as we talk about *violence* in its many and various expressions, we are all implicated.

So what has this to do with the judgment of the cross?



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Well, one of the main ways in which humanity has sought to justify its violence throughout history is by claiming it to be divinely sanctioned, or even divinely ordained. We can see this in various places throughout the Old Testament, and we can still see it in the world today. And if God, the ultimate authority, sanctions human violence, how can the cycle of violence ever be broken?

Answer: It can't, and so the world keeps on spinning ever faster along a trajectory of escalating violence. At the end of that way lies apocalyptic destruction.

What happened, then, at the cross? **Far from revealing God to be the ultimate dispenser of violence, the cross showed that God would rather die than engage in violence of any kind.**

The cross drew a sharp distinction between humanity and God. Humanity gravitates towards violence as the final solution for every problem, and is prepared to engage in scapegoating and lynching to preserve the status quo. God, on the other hand, eschews all forms of violence and, in going to the cross, *exposes* scapegoating as the structural evil that it is.

God is not judged and found wanting at the cross: on the contrary, he is decisively shown to be genuinely, truly, perfectly good and non-violent. What is judged is the world, the *kosmos*, civilization and the wicked systems of violence and injustice that underpin it. And, most importantly, humankind's favorite excuse for its violence—*God told me to!*—is forever obliterated.

One final point: I believe the cross was and is a judgment that has power to transform individual and collective life in the here and now, not simply to leave the status quo undisturbed pending a post-mortem deliverance. And how does it achieve such transformation? By starkly revealing the problem of human violence and showing the only way in which the cycle of violence can be broken: free and unconditional forgiveness, first from God to humankind, and then from human to human. As he hangs on the

cross, Jesus prays, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do." And as he returns from the grave three days later, he announces not vengeance but peace. The cycle is broken.

The cross is a judgment, yes, but it is a judgment of light and life. The question is, are we prepared to see it that way, release our tight grip on violence and enter into the virtuous cycle of forgiveness and peace? □

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"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" You can't exegete your way out of the despair in that universal question. The cross is a metaphor for the mysterious suffering of all humanity. It is where we cry, "It is finished!" but where we hope to hear, "This is enough!"

