

Teaching the Cross to Children

Brad Jersak

What is God like?
Jesus showed us!
What did Jesus show
us about God? That
God is perfect love!
That God loves us!

So begins my children's book, *Jesus Showed Us!* Imagine the mixture of joy and sorrow when I received this response from a 5-year-old child: "I'm not afraid of God anymore."

The abusive backstory to this comment makes the gospel of God's healing love even more potent. Sadly, many otherwise healthy children suffer spiritual damage and grow up afraid of God because of the brand of religion they were raised on. Children are especially vulnerable to this as we try to explain what the Cross means.

Gospel Missteps

Two common missteps come to mind immediately:

1. "Jesus died for your sins." Without a doubt, the Bible teaches us that on the Cross, Christ bore and forgave our sins (e.g. Romans 5:8, 2 Corinthians 5:15, 1 Peter 3:18). How this works is a great mystery and sharing it requires sensitivity. When religion paints Jesus as whipping boy for the wrath of an angry God, what does a child hear? "Jesus died because of you!"

A thoughtless evangelist says, "YES! Your sins did that to him!"

I have heard these words. But they needn't be spoken, because children infer them. Imagine the sensitive psyche of a child who feels personally responsible for the torture of their beloved Jesus.

It's good for behavior control in the short-term but ultimately creates adult atheists.

2. "God was punishing Jesus" [for your sins]. So, Jesus died because of them, and who did this to Jesus? Religion says that God the Father did it. Why? To punish your sins. And what does a child hear? How do they process a God who loves them *and* who did *that* to Jesus for them?

Meditate on that. I did—as a six-year-old. Worse: I accepted it gratefully, because that's what good boys do. I must love this violent God or burn in hell forever.

Does that not seem psychotic? How could I even love this God?

The Cross for Children

How instead should we talk about the Cross and Jesus' death with children?

By showing children that in word and deed, Christ was always revealing that God is perfect love, most especially on the Cross. The New Testament testimony is consistent: on the Cross, Jesus showed us God's love for all people (John 3:16; 1 John 3:16; 4:9-10).

What follows is how I share the meaning of the Cross as God's love to children, which I flesh out fully in my book, *A More Christlike God* (CWR Press).

From the first time a child sees a cross, I say:

What is God like?
Jesus showed us!
Jesus showed us what
God is like in many
ways, didn't he! Jesus
showed us God's love
most on the Cross.

These lines reflect the passages from John's Gospel and first epistle listed above. The Cross revealed God's nature as infinite love. The height, breadth, width and depth of God's love (Ephesians 3) come into clearest focus on the Cross.

Thus, it's absolutely critical that we clear up for children (and adults!) the question of where God is and what God was doing on Good Friday:

God was in Jesus on
the Cross, showing us
God's love!

Where was God in this picture? Turning away from Christ? (NO. Psalm 22:24). Yahweh says through the prophet Zechariah (Zechariah 12:10), "They will look at ME, the One they have pierced." The apostle Paul insists, "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19). Where was God when the skies darkened and the earth quaked? There. On the Cross.

What the Cross Says about God's Love

In *A More Christlike God*, I sum up three key revelations of cruciform love. The Cross shows us that God is self-giving, radically forgiving, co-suffering love. This is what I say to believers and seekers, but also to little children.

1. Self-giving Love

On the Cross, God gave
his best gift to the
whole world!
What gift did God give
us? Yes, God gave us
Jesus—
God's firstborn Son!

Jesus was God's great love gift for all of us!

What was God doing on the Cross? Giving God's best—God's Son—to the world. Giving himself to the world. As NT Wright notes, John 3:16 does not say, "God so hated the world that he killed his only Son." Rather, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" as a love gift to everyone.

2. Radically Forgiving Love

On the Cross, Jesus forgave everyone in the whole world.

God even forgave the people who killed Jesus! Jesus shows us that God can forgive anybody and anything!

Note how I avoid accusing the children of Jesus' murder but I do include them as recipients of God's forgiveness. In Acts 2:23; 5:30; 7:52, we read that "wicked men"... "betrayed and murdered" Jesus Christ—not the little children who love Jesus but sometimes disobey Mommy and Daddy.

Through Jesus's intercession, "Father forgive them," God pardoned the sins of the conspirators. He forgives the Temple leaders, the Roman soldiers, both thieves and even Judas! If God forgave them, he can forgive anyone. So all are included, including children, in God's universal forgiveness.

3. Co-suffering Love

On the Cross Jesus suffered with everyone who suffers

God became a human so he could feel what we feel.

On the Cross, Jesus shows us God understands.

Compassion (literally "co-suffering") emphasizes empathy

through shared experience. God-in-Christ knew suffering and sorrow, just as we do. Children need to know that God understands and that God cares. This is exactly what the author of Hebrews 2:14-18 and Hebrews 4:15 claims.

To summarize, these three facets of God's cruciform love all point to the truth that God's love "never fails," that "God's mercy endures forever," and that "God's lovingkindness is everlasting." Children of the Cross are led to this conclusion:

Jesus showed us God's love even when he was dying. Jesus never stopped loving. Jesus showed us!

Why did Jesus need to die?

Adults—so attuned to retribution—often ask, "If not to appease God's wrath, why did Jesus need to die?"

But children know! The Cross, shows us that God is love!

But he also died to enter the grave and overcome death—to "break the power of him who holds the power of death ... and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death" (Heb. 2:14-15). Jesus' death was how he destroyed death ... and his resurrection proves it! And that means Jesus is alive now—his love is with us and in us forever!

The last word goes to a three-year-old who responded to this good news. He exclaimed joyfully, "Jesus is the winner!" Truly! □



Illustration by Shari-Anne Vis from *Jesus Showed Us!* by Brad Jersak.

Jesus showed Us! is an adaptation of Brad Jersak's award-winning book, *A More Christlike God* (CWR Press), illustrated to teach children how Jesus came to reveal the love of our Heavenly Father, Jesus' own Abba, to the whole world.