

# Being Cross-shaped in a World Bent out of Shape

by Josh Valley

I suffered sexual abuse as a child and depression as a 20-something, followed by self-harm, anxiety attacks, insomnia—the pain of being a human being with a broken body in a broken world. The struggles still come without warning. Marriage breakdown and renewal, chronic sleep disorder, weight gain, minor addictive tendencies; it can be tough to be a human trying to follow Jesus in our world today.

Every person has different and unique weaknesses. But whether it's physical or mental suffering we all share the same reality: we are all human. We are all prone to sin and extremely averse to suffering.

## Prone to Sin

At this point, you might think I am going to launch into a diatribe about how we need to guard ourselves from temptation and “dig deep” to keep ourselves pure in this immoral and godless world. That's not where this is going. It's not that pursuing purity and holiness isn't important, but I think it is secondary to what I'm calling the (capital S) “Sin.”

This Sin isn't new to our generation—God has been warning about it since the time of Moses.

I'm talking about the first commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3). If Jesus is God, the exhaustive Word of God, the concrete image of the invisible God—if God looks and acts like Jesus—we have replaced him with other gods.

## Abandoning Jesus as THE Sin of All Sins

We see other gods reflected in movements like the prosperity gospel, where a genie-god has replaced Jesus—the crucified God

of hope—as the center and focus of our theology and witness in the world.

We see other gods in dispensational rapture theology where Jesus, “the concrete executor of God's love” (Bonhoeffer), is maligned and replaced with a violent End Times Warrior—a wrathful genocidal destroyer—that looks and acts nothing like the New Testament Jesus we have come to know, love and follow.

We see other gods in the fundamentalist movements that have replaced Jesus—the living, superlative and exhaustive Word of God—with a rabid and rigid biblical literalism. This has led millions to believe that God commanded genocide in the conquest narratives and that God can suspend ethics because He is defined by self-determination, not love. Nope. Not Jesus.

We see other gods in the large swaths of politically polarized Christians, of all persuasions, who have replaced cross-shaped discipleship with political partisanship and hate for their enemies.

Finally, we see other gods in how celebrity culture has invaded North American Christendom where pastors are turned into



god-like figures of fame and fortune to be worshiped. This has caused the fabric of Christian community, which is supposed to be held together by Christ-like service towards one another, to be replaced by a culture that praises the exceptional and distinguished rather than serving and honoring the weak and oppressed among us.

The suffering of the Messiah

Jesus has welded his entire being to her at the cross. But there are many attempts to do so—within the world of Christendom. We see it in the movements that have abandoned Jesus-centered Christianity for other gods.

The god of wealth. The god of destruction. The god of celebrityism. The god of literalism. The god of superiorism. The god of religious tribalism. The god of

them rich.

Rather, it's about voluntarily suffering with struggling and weak humanity because we believe God is deeply and daringly merciful in Jesus; it's about offering hope to human beings as disciples who are being formed into the crucified God of resurrection hope.

Christ-followers are identified by and identify with cruciform discipleship and resurrection hope. "Discipleship is a bond with the suffering Christ," says Bonhoeffer. The gospel includes the hope, indeed the Truth, that God is not a force of destruction, but a compassionate Sufferer who offers concrete hope to a suffering world.

Cross-shaped discipleship acknowledges that "God is revealed in the world precisely in those places that the world is most prone to ignore: in suffering, rejection, and scorn," says

David H. Jensen in *Religionless Christianity and Vulnerable Discipleship: The Interfaith Promise of Bonhoeffer's Theology*.

Yes. We are all, to some degree, whether "the world" or the world of Christendom, bent out of shape. Embrace the grace of God, live out your faith as a Christ-follower and allow him to become his cross-shaped handiwork. □

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was God's plan from the start and nothing could get in the way of that. Hear me. It was the *only* way. In accordance with the Law and the Prophets, Jesus said: "The Son of Man **must** suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he **must** be killed and on the third day be raised to life" (Luke 9:22, emphasis mine). It was a **must**. "It was divine necessity that Jesus had to suffer and be rejected," writes Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book *Costly Discipleship*.

It is impossible to tear Christianity away from the crucified God of hope because

political partisanship.

These gods are not the God of the Bible revealed in Jesus as the crucified God of love and hope.

### **Cross-shaped Discipleship**

When we Christians place Jesus at the center of our theology and ethics, we will learn cross-shaped discipleship in a world bent out of shape. Our message as Christ-followers is not centered in celebrity pastors, human privilege and economic power.

Nor is it about warring against "godless" culture, nor is it about peddling a proclamation to sinners that a God is coming either to destroy them or to make