

Why did Jesus die? by Brad Jersak

Question: “If Jesus’ death on the cross was not punishment for our sin, in our place, as our substitute, to appease the wrath of God against sin, then why did Jesus die?”

How many times have I been asked that question since 2003—the year I finally let go of penal substitutionary atonement in my theology? The question almost wants to be rhetorical, as if I should be stumped by this “show-stopper.” As if there could be no other possible reason, meaning or significance for the Cross of Christ on the original Good Friday. Indeed, the question often comes as an accusation, as if abandoning the predominant Christian script is heretical and doing so makes us “enemies of the cross.”

N.T. Wright, in his book *The Day the Revolution Began*, struck a similar nerve with his critique of a “gospel” that implies, “God so hated the world that he killed his only Son.” Of course, laying bare that image of God draws charges of straw-manning—but if Wright is wrong, then I will rejoice when evangelists stop communicating that very impression. The gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is far more beautiful than what Wright identifies as the “paganized” message of wrath-appeasement through divine violence.

But many faithful Christ-followers have been so conditioned with this ethos of the Cross that they must still sincerely ask, “Then why did Jesus die?” If God the Father was not exacting his “pound of flesh,” what exactly was God’s Good Friday mission?

In this article, I will respond to

that question from three cohesive perspectives.

Why did Jesus die? Because we killed him!

The Gospel of John and his first epistle present the Incarnation as a love-gift from heaven. God gives his Son—which is to say, gives himself—to the world as a revelation of divine love and his decisive saving act. More on that shortly. The Light of life and love entered this world, but our darkened hearts neither recognized nor received him (John 1:9-12).

Thus, Jesus died because we rejected God’s love and killed God’s Son. Stephen calls the crucifixion a betrayal and a murder (Acts 7:52)—the homicide and “deicide” (murder

of a deity) of the God-man.

Yet even then, John insists, the darkness could not overcome this Light of love and life (John 1:5). Sure, the religious-political establishment could reject divine love and kill the Christ, but they could not *take his life* (John 10:18).

Rather, Christ lays down his life willingly as a revelation and an act of God’s love, then takes it up again (the resurrection) to distribute that love to the world.

Why did Jesus die? To reveal God as Love

The Cross then, ironically, becomes our primary revelation of the nature of God as eternal and infinite love. Paul describes this love as wider, longer, higher and deeper than we can grasp or





back to creation. Indeed, it flows from all eternity within the community of Triune Love.

“The Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Revelation 13:8) shows us that God’s immutable (eternally constant, ever-flowing, never static) nature is self-giving love.

- **God is radically forgiving love because God in Christ forgave and reconciled the world to himself, not counting our sins against us (2 Corinthians 5:19).**

On the Cross, we hear Christ’s great cry echo across the ages, *“Father, forgive them!”* (Luke 23:34). A 9-year-old boy named Malachi once grilled me on this text. He asked, “When Jesus prayed that prayer, do you think the Father answered?”

I turned the question back on him and he concluded, “Yes, I think he answered with a yes, because the Father loved Jesus and Jesus always prayed in the will of his Father.” Smart kid.

He then asked, “Who did Jesus mean by *them*?”

Again, I deflected to Mal, who felt *them* must include all the conspirators: the temple authorities and Sanhedrin, Pilate and the Roman soldiers, both thieves and even Judas Iscariot. And if the Father did forgive them, even while Christ was being tortured, is there anyone he can’t forgive?

Further, if God forgave and reconciled them—even while they were still his enemies (Romans 5:8-10), what does that mean? If the Father did not charge them with that sin (see Acts 7:60), does any condemnation remain for anyone? If Adam’s sin infected the whole of humanity, how much more would Christ’s life-giving blood cleanse them! (see Romans 5:18).

God’s forgiveness is universal.

imagine (Ephesians 3:17-20). Paul prays that the Holy Spirit would supernaturally fill our vision of God with a greater revelation of love than we now conceive. In other words, if you can imagine God as more loving than you already believe him to be, *you must—because he is!* And how shall we posture ourselves to catch this vision? At the foot of the Cross.

In *A More Christlike God: A More Beautiful Gospel*, I unpack this revelation of a “cruciform” (i.e. cross-shaped) God as self-giving, radically forgiving, co-suffering love. Let’s discuss each of these elements briefly.

- **God is self-giving love because God-in-Christ has poured himself into the world as love.**

Paul says, “... although he existed in the form of God, he did not regard

equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men” (Philippians 2:6-7 NASB).

“Emptied” (*kenosis*) here does not imply that Christ emptied himself of his divinity, as if he were emptying a bucket—quite the opposite. Think more in terms of an eternal spring of infinite mercy, poured out in a constant stream—a never-failing waterfall of God’s loving-kindness. His mercy endures for how long? *Forever!*

Thus, the self-emptying love of God is not only an event in time at the Cross. Rather, the Cross is a window through which we see that God has always been *kenotic* (self-giving love). God’s self-giving love was there at the Cross, in the Incarnation, and all the way

This does not negate the call for a response—indeed, God’s radical forgiveness induces faith far more effectively than terrifying threats of everlasting, fiery torture. Fear might make us obey God (for a time, begrudgingly). But we love God because God first loved us (1 John 4:19)—a love inspired most powerfully by a vision of the Cross (Zechariah 12:10; 1 John 3:16).

As the hymnist wrote, “Amazing love! How can it be that thou my God shouldst die for me!”

• **God is co-suffering love because God in Christ assumed “the likeness of sinful human flesh” (Romans 5:3).**

The divine Word descended into the depths of the human condition, experiencing the full range of our suffering. He co-suffered (literally “com-passion”) in solidarity with us, empathizing with us in our mortality to raise up human nature with himself.

As the author of Hebrews writes, “For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:15-16).

Does God suffer? This is theologically tricky, because God cannot be diminished. But in his suffering, Christ reveals the empathetic love of God. God’s eternal, loving nature includes the capacity to become human, to suffer and die—so the Incarnation is itself both a divine and necessary act for God to be God!

Therefore we say, *in Christ, God suffered in the flesh*. In so doing, he ransomed us from death.

Why did Jesus die? To rescue us

The misuse and overuse of the word “saved” among Christians has made it a problematic cliché. When we read it in the New Testament, the Greek word *sozo* may be rendered save, deliver, heal or make whole. I’ll use the term “rescue.” **Jesus died to rescue us. But NOT from the Father!**

The Father/Son relationship is no good cop/bad cop scenario. Christianity is not

some pagan mythology of casting the pure virgin into a frothing volcano. Jesus is not a codependent son, staying the angry hand of his volatile Dad.

Even Paul’s statement in Romans 5:9 that God saves us from “the wrath” does not mean God saves us from himself, but rather, from ourselves—from “*the wages of sin*” (Romans 6:23)—from destruction and death. These are the enemies that God in Christ rescues us from.

“*Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death*” (Hebrews 2:14-15).

The victory of Christ is no mere atonement theory. It is the gospel itself! At the Cross, Jesus tells us, “*the prince of this world is driven out*” (John 12:31); at the Cross, sin is forgiven; at the Cross, death dies. *Decisively*.

As a three-year-old acquaintance declared, hands raised high, “Jesus is the Winner!” God wins! Life wins! Love wins! This is the cruciform (cross-shaped) victory of God.

To sum up, we ask again: **Why did Jesus die?** Because we killed him. But more than that, in Jesus’ death we see the face of God—the final revelation and decisive act of God as *kenotic* love, cruciform love, victorious love. □

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