

are not robots—God has not rigged the final outcome of our lives. To cite C.S. Lewis,

*God created things which had free will. That means creatures which can go either wrong or right... free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having. A world of... creatures that worked like machines would hardly be worth having.*

*The happiness which God designs for all of his creatures is the happiness of being freely, voluntarily united to him and to each other in an ecstasy of love*

*and delight compared with which the most rapturous love between a man and a woman on this earth is mere milk and water. And for that they must be free.*

When we are truly free in Christ, we individually admit and accept responsibility for the consequences of our actions, we surrender our condemnation of others and we certainly do not blame God as the cause of suffering and misery. □

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# The Sign that Saves the World

*Look to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth!*

—Isaiah 45:22 —

Brian Zahnd

Peri and I are on our way to speak at the Christ at the Checkpoint conference in Bethlehem and we're spending a few days in Florence, Italy exploring the cradle of the Renaissance.

Visiting the museums and art galleries, I've seen hundreds of crucifixion paintings, and I've tried to view each one with a reverent eye. I never look at depictions of Christ crucified with a jaundiced eye. Their religious nature and ubiquitous presence may illicit a yawn from the secular cynic, but not from me—I'm an incorrigible Christian.

I believe the cross is where Christ saves the world. Looking at the cross with the right eye, the reverent eye of

humble faith, is the locus of salvation. The cross is the sign that saves the world.

The crucifixion of Jesus is easily the most depicted event in

human history. How many billions of crucifixes have been formed, fashioned, carved, and painted over the past two millennia? And yet what is it

that is being depicted in these billions of crucifixes? On a purely objective level, it is the torture and murder of an innocent man at the hands of those who run the world by the means of violent power. The crucifixion is the damning indictment of the world as it has been arranged.

The cross tells us that when the Son of God entered our world—the world created by Cain and all the kings who followed in his bloody wake—our systems of violent empire and sacrificial religion nailed him to a tree. This is the moment when the principalities and powers



Coptic cross in the Temple of Isis, Philae, Egypt

who run the world were put to open shame and their claim of being wise and just was shown to be nothing but an empty sham. What they called wisdom and justice was nothing more than a cheap disguise to hide their naked lust for wealth and power. Paul says the rulers and authorities were shamed by the triumphant truth-telling of the cross.

Every crucifix reminds us that our systems of civilization, built around an axis of power enforced by violence, are not to be trusted.

The myths, monuments, anthems, and memorials of every empire are designed to cleverly hide the bodies of the weak who have been trodden down by the mighty in their march to "greatness."

The cross is the unveiling. The cross is the great truth-telling. The cross is the guilty verdict handed down upon empire. The cross is the eternal monument to the Unknown Victim. Yes, the cross is where the world is forgiven, but not before the world is found guilty.

But trite and tidy answers about the meaning of Good

Friday are how we domesticate the cross. This is the bane of atonement theories. Instead of the crucifixion remaining the pivotal event in a compelling story, it's turned into a sterile formula. The cross is diminished to one of the Four Spiritual Laws or a waypoint on the Roman Road. This is how the cross is sanitized and made mechanical.

remain on the cross, but he didn't remain in the manger either, and Protestants don't seem to have an objection to Nativity scenes.

The truth is, Jesus was crucified and this is the epicenter of the gospel. Paul tells the Galatians, "It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified" (Galatians 3:1).

A crucifix replaced with an abstract symbol removes the crucifixion from the story and seems to indicate a move to reduce the cross to a kind of mathematical sign or theological equation. This gives rise to pallid descriptions of the cross like, "God turning our minus into a plus."

Once we do that we can easily lose sight of the scandal of the cross. And the cross is a scandal!

For Christians living at such a far remove from the first century, the depth of this scandal may be hard to grasp, but your hero being crucified would be the last thing a Jew or a Roman living in antiquity would boast about.

Yet the early Christians *did* boast about it. Paul readily admitted that this was foolishness to Romans and offensive to Jews.

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The storyline is lost and the scandal is swept aside.

I'm not sure why Protestants abandoned crucifixes for empty crosses, but I think it was a mistake. I know that Protestants often argue that Jesus didn't

our next breath we mutter, “If You aren’t capable of vengeance, we certainly are. Step aside and we will crucify him.”

The incarnation of God in Jesus, in part, was to accomplish this: God becomes fully what we are in order to, as us, absorb our diabolical thirst for vengeance, our twisted and perverted sense of justice, and by becoming our scapegoat and sacrifice, destroy the power and false promises of death. This is so we might learn to live with resurrection life, so we would never need to kill another human being again.

Prisons ought not be places of retributive vengeance, but places that create boundaries and discipline for the purpose and intention of healing and restoration. Reconciliation and rehabilitation in the best sense. Every judge and lawyer ought always to have in their hearts and actions the desire to bring healing to every person and situation they serve and protect, not simply be enforcers of State or Religious law.

The world says of these men whom I love, “these are beyond redemption”—therefore, they are dead to us. But it takes time to go through the necessary hoops to sanitize our decision and make it palatable, to baptize it in our Religious/State language so that these killings will be sanctioned and acceptable. And again, here is the exposure and why Death Row becomes an expression of back-handed grace; these men love each other, love God and love humanity. God did this miracle of restoration in spite of

human justice. What has happened in their hearts and in the hearts of many of their victims is true justice.

It is firm-handed love that seeks the wholeness of all involved. It requires forgiveness, confession, repentance, the owning of both the wrongs and the self-righteous judgments. In our punitive vengeance, have we also not become perpetrators ourselves? Who among is without sin and has the right to cast the first stone? If Jesus refuses, where does that leave us? Jesus lives in them, and the State with the support of Religion will crucify him again, and again, and again.

For three hours, we told stories, cried, hugged and finally stood in a circle, holding hands. Each of us has a date with death, it’s just a matter of time. The men pray, profound prayers of trust and hope and forgiveness and kind blessing for those who have chosen to be their enemies.

Our hearts break and in response, our eyes leak as Abu, an elderly dignified man who has travelled the road from mental illness, to Islam and to Jesus, lifts up his powerful voice embedded with the resonance of a life of loss and love, and slowly sings our common language:

*Amazing Grace,  
How Sweet the Sound,  
That Saved a Wretch Like Me.  
I Once was Lost  
But now Am Found,  
was Blind But Now I See. □*

*Wm. Paul Young is author of The Shack and Lies We Believe About God.*

## THE SIGN THAT SAVES THE WORLD by BRIAN ZAHND

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But Paul also said it was the power and wisdom of God, contending that “*God’s weakness is stronger than human strength*” (1 Cor. 1:25).

Paul doesn’t mean that when God is weak, God is still stronger than humans. That wouldn’t be scandalous, that would be just a typical boast about conventional power. Rather Paul is saying that ***God’s power is weakness!*** Think about that for a moment and you will realize that such an assertion is still scandalous today.

We are fascinated by conventional power—power to purchase, power to enforce our will, power to kill—and we are put off by any form of powerlessness.

But it is precisely the powerlessness of God enacted by Jesus on the cross that somehow saves the world. Look long and deeply at the cross and you may catch a glimpse of the greatest mystery of all.

Today, about an hour before I saw Fra Angelico’s *Crucifixion*, I saw Michelangelo’s *David*. No doubt Michelangelo’s marble masterpiece is impressive and the crowds who stood around it taking pictures knew it was a monumental artistic achievement—the iconic embodiment of the Renaissance.

But what moved me most today was standing alone before a monk’s fresco painted above a humble door in a medieval monastery.

***David impresses me, but the Crucifixion saves me. □***

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