

DID GOD  
KILL  
JESUS?

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Searching for Love in History's  
Most Famous Execution

TONY JONES



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*To Courtney, who saved me*

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*God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things,  
whether on earth or in heaven, by making  
peace through the blood of his cross.*

—St. Paul the Apostle

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PART ONE



# The Problem with the Cross

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# I

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## “As He Died, He Saw Your Face!”

I SAT IN a mountain lodge one weekend with two hundred junior high students. We’d embarked on three days of wholesome fun and getting jazzed on God.

I was twenty-four. A part-time youth pastor working my way through seminary, I’d taken a job at an evangelical church near campus. I had driven a vanload of students into the Southern California mountains for a winter weekend at the denomination’s retreat center. We met up with busloads of kids converging from several churches in the region, and the air was laden with anticipation, no doubt driven as much by hormones as spiritual curiosity. Such is evangelical youth ministry.

On Friday, the highly touted and charismatic speaker for the weekend gave a talk in the evening chapel service that endeared him to all of the kids. He told funny stories about himself in middle school and how nerdy he was, and he set himself up as a credible authority on spiritual matters.

Then, on Saturday night, he brought the heat.

He told us a long, detailed story about a poor peasant woman in Russia who lived with her toddler daughter in a dismal, Soviet-era apartment. They had a horrible life, he told us, but at least they had each other.

Then, one night as they were sleeping, the shoddy Communist construction gave way during an earthquake, and the building collapsed on top of them. The mother was pinned beneath a huge piece of concrete. Miraculously, the young girl was unharmed, but they were both trapped in the rubble, with no way of escape.

A day passed, but no one came to their rescue. The little girl began to grow weak, and she complained to her mother that she was hungry and thirsty.

Another day passed, and the mother began lapsing in and out of consciousness. She knew that her young child would die of dehydration soon if she didn't do something.

On the third day, the mother realized that she was going to have to make a sacrifice for her daughter. So she reached out for a piece of broken glass, and she slashed open her palm and directed her daughter to drink her blood in order to survive.

The girl did as she was told, and she was rescued. The mother died.<sup>1</sup>

We were on the edge of our seats—what love the mother had to sacrifice herself for her daughter! Who doesn't want to be loved like that?

Now the speaker was worked up into a metaphorical lather, and his voice rose as he addressed the assembled eleven- and twelve-year-olds, turning the rhetorical corner from the Russian mother to Jesus. Jesus is like that Russian mother, he told us, and we are the helpless little girl. Jesus' blood on the cross saves us the same way that the daughter was saved.

Then the speaker explicated at length the ancient practice of execution by crucifixion. He went into excruciating detail about the pain of having spikes pounded through your wrists and ankles, about the enormous amount of blood, about the humiliation of hanging, naked, six feet in the air, and about how death comes slowly and agonizingly, not by blood loss, but by suffocation.

We heard about the extreme agony, even desperation, felt by a victim of crucifixion as he pulled himself up on the spikes in his arms and pushed himself up on the spikes in his legs to catch a breath

until, completely exhausted, he couldn't rise anymore. Unable to inhale—coughing, choking, dying.

Now our speaker was screaming, sweating, spitting.

“That's how much Jesus loves you!” he cried.

“He died for you in the most horrible, gruesome manner that the Romans could imagine! And as he died, *he saw your face!* He whispered your name! Because *you* are a sinner, he had to die in *your* place!

“God *hated* you because of your sin! When he looked at you, all he saw was your sin!

“But Jesus stood between you and God, so now when God looks at you, he only sees Jesus.

“Tonight, you can accept what Jesus did for you and go to heaven instead of hell when you die. You can let Jesus stand between you and the terrifying, holy God.

“Tonight you have the chance to drink the blood from Jesus' hands to save yourself.”

And the next part I remember verbatim. He concluded, “If tonight, for the first time, you've decided to accept what Jesus did for you, angels are celebrating in heaven; stay after chapel to pray with a counselor. If tonight you've decided to recommit your life to Jesus, angels are dancing and cheering; you should also stay after and talk to a counselor.

“And if you aren't ready to do either of those things, you are dismissed. There's popcorn and hot chocolate for you in the dining hall.”

There are, of course, numerous problems with what happened that night, not least of which is using popcorn as a consolation prize for eternal life. The emotional manipulation of that talk—and the thousands of similar talks given to millions of kids over the past several decades of American youth ministry—is inexcusable. If the way that a person gets into heaven has to do with a spontaneous, fear-driven, adolescent decision, then the Christian faith is no more than a desperate sales pitch.

This speaker had the opportunity to woo kids into a life with God. He could have told about how God came to Earth to walk among us, about the amazing miracles that Jesus performed, healing the sick and raising the dead. He could have wowed us with the love of God. Instead he terrified us.

But what *really* troubled me about that night was the guilt. Jesus' blood was on *our* hands. According to this guy, these middle schoolers killed Jesus because they were "born into sin," and God hated them for it.

Let's think about this evangelist's message to those preteens: The God who created you, presumably out of love, now cannot stand so much as to look at you. You disgust God. And the only reason God doesn't explode in rage every time he sees you is because Jesus has stepped in between you two.<sup>2</sup> All God sees is Jesus, not you. We cower in fear behind Jesus, and God fumes with anger on the other side. What happened to the loving Russian mother who loves her daughter so much she sacrifices her own life? How did a story of a loving mom morph into a loving son who saves us from a wrathful heavenly Father?

Believe it or not, this is a fairly common framework for understanding what Jesus did on the cross. But it certainly does not fit cleanly with everything scripture tells us about God, Jesus, or the cross—such as how do we go from "God is love" and God sent his only Son for us because "God so loved the world" to God is so disgusted with us that he has to kill Jesus so that he can pretend to see only Jesus when dealing with us. Surely we have taken a wrong turn, because this story is supposed to be about love.

Not long ago, I was in the same position as that speaker, addressing a room of mostly middle schoolers and their parents. I'd been invited to speak to the confirmation class of a large Lutheran congregation, and the youth pastor said I should talk about the book that I was working on. That happened to be this book. So after some warm-up jokes, I asked the assembled crowd how many of them had ever been told, "Jesus died for your sins." As expected, every single person raised a hand.

“Alright,” I said. “We’re going to take a little test. I’d like each of you confirmands to turn to the adult who brought you and ask, ‘How? How exactly does that work? Please explain to me how it works that the death of one man two thousand years ago takes care of all my sin.’”

The adults in the room groaned.

“One more thing,” I added. “After they’ve answered you, you’re going to give your adult a grade on their answer.”

The groans doubled.

After a couple of minutes of discussion, I called the crowd back to order and asked some of the kids to shout out the grade they’d give their parent’s answer. “C-minus,” shouted one girl. “That’s generous,” her mom said to laughter. And it went on from there. The clear consensus from the adults in the room was that they were ill-equipped to answer the question. They believed that Jesus died for their sins, but they really had no idea why.

These Lutherans are not alone. Across the theological spectrum, Christians struggle to explain how Jesus’ death worked on our behalf. Which, in a way, is surprising. It is surprising because when you ask people what the central event of the Christian faith is, most point to the cross. When Christians are asked how we know that God loves us, they point to Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross. That’s God’s love. When forced to pick one symbol that best represents the entire faith, Christians throughout two thousand years of history have come up with the same answer: the cross. We see it used everywhere to represent Christianity—on steeples, in art, even on our bodies in jewelry and tattoos. So isn’t it a little strange that it’s hard to explain what transpired on the cross with Jesus and how it affects us?

Of course, some are like the earnest evangelist, cocksure that they know exactly why Jesus died and who was responsible.

As it turns out, his version—that God is terribly angry with you and kills his son in your place—is just one of the various answers that have been proffered over the past two thousand years. Although it’s only a thousand years old, this version is the most popular today, but it

also happens to have some major problems. For example, the preacher said that when God looks at us, God is disappointed, disgusted, or even irate about our sin. So I ask, what happens when you look in the mirror? Or when you look at your friend or spouse or child? If God finds us disgusting, and we're to seek after the heart of God, won't we find ourselves and our loved ones disgusting, too? Ah, you say, but aren't we supposed to pretend to see Jesus when looking at ourselves or at our loved ones? Ask yourself, is that how love works in your life? When I look at my children, I see *them* and love them as themselves. I don't have to pretend to see Jesus in them in order to love them.

To be sure, each of us at times struggles with self-loathing. And we sometimes struggle to see the best in our partners and children and friends. But most of us, most of the time, find myriad reasons to *love* those around us, in spite of their shortcomings. Surely this is what we try to do. And if we have a little grace with ourselves, we can even find ways to love the person in the mirror. And how about God? When I look deep within myself, when I examine my own feelings for God, what I find is love. It's love and gratitude and wonder and awe—and mostly love—that I have for God.

But if this popular model of the cross were true, then I am freer with my love than God is with his. And that can't be right.

Even without the Bible, what kind of sense does it make to believe that God would create you and me, only to be disgusted by us and wrathful at our inevitable shortcomings? But add in the Bible, and you can really see how misaligned this interpretation of the crucifixion is. If we look in the Bible for evidence of this overwhelming disgust God has for us, it's hard to come by. Sure, there's the occasional verse that talks of God's anger at particular sins or human behavior that God considers an abomination, but the overarching message of scripture is clear: God created us, God loves us, and God wants the best for us. In fact, the Bible is rife with stories of God going out of his way to set people on the right path—despite our failures, despite our sins. Indeed, the Apostle Paul assures us that God loved us “while we still were sinners.”<sup>3</sup>

Before we study the Bible and even before we formulate and

wrestle with all the doctrines from church history, we intuitively know something fundamental: the message of Jesus, God’s primary emissary, is that *God loves us*. That’s what Jesus came to preach and to enact in his miracles. He referred to God as his “Father” and his “Abba”—intimate terms based in relationship. There was a close and loving connection. Jesus came to open that loving relationship between himself and the Father to all of us. This event, the crucifixion, on which all of cosmic history pivots, forever changed both us and God.

This also means there can be no separation between God and Jesus; we cannot set a wrathful and vengeful God in opposition to a loving and gracious Jesus. Jesus repeatedly taught that he and the Father are one, that the best way to know and understand the Father is by knowing and understanding the Son. And the main message of both Father and Son is that they love us and want to be united with us. Even before we come to understand what happened on the cross, we know that whatever explanation we discover cannot contradict the eternal relationship of love that binds the Father and the Son, that binds God and us.<sup>4</sup>

The retreat evangelist’s version of who God is and his related justification for the necessity of Jesus’ death on the cross is not only inconsistent with the Bible, it’s also dangerous. When embraced, it taints people’s view of God, of others, and even of themselves. After two thousand years of Christian history, we wonder why our world is so flooded with war and violence and ethnic hate. We fret that church attendance is low and dropping. And we worry that many see the Christian faith as irrelevant or even bad for the world. Could viewing God as vengeful and wrathful and bloodthirsty be the source of our problems?

On that evening in 1992, I couldn’t articulate these objections, but in my gut I felt that something was very wrong. Later that night, at the counselor meeting, I was livid. I protested that the entire thing was grotesque. The speaker, as you might guess, was mighty defensive in the face of my anger. He made his living giving this very talk over and over, to a different group of high school or ju-

nior high students every weekend. In fact, he was shocked at my criticism. He'd never had anyone raise similar concerns. He assumed that every true Christian agreed with him about why Jesus died: that God killed Jesus to appease his own wrath. But deep down I knew this model is not a message of God's love, and actually caused spiritual harm—I'd seen it in the faces of the kids in my youth group. They had arrived at that retreat assuming that God loves them, only to be told that God is disgusted by them.

But I did not know what alternative views of Jesus' cross might be, and that started me on a quest. This book is the fruit of that search.

I was not starting from scratch. The consensus among Jesus' earliest followers was clear: Jesus was the *love of God* in the flesh. In Jesus' own words, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love."<sup>3</sup> In that same speech, Jesus comforts his followers by assuring them that he won't leave them as orphans, that he will continue to work with God the Father to give them what they need, and that he'll send the Holy Spirit to be humanity's advocate forever. This promise is claimed still by Christians today, two millennia after it was written.

These words are in the Gospel of John, one of the last books written in our New Testament. Scholars think it was penned around 95 CE, over sixty years after Jesus' death. With this hindsight, the author of the Fourth Gospel gives us an account of Jesus' life that is more theologically evolved and sophisticated than the previous three Gospels. And the message in John is clear: God loves us, and God showed that love for us by sending Jesus, his son, to live and die among us. This is an act of love, of solidarity with humankind—an act, as the Apostle Paul virtually sings in his letter to the Philippians, written four decades before the Gospel of John, of divine humility:

*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,  
who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,*

*but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.  
And being found in human form,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross.<sup>6</sup>*

From the first books of the New Testament to the last ones written, Jesus’ life and death are portrayed as revealing, demonstrating, and modeling for us the meaning of love. Jesus’ death on the cross not only revealed God’s love for us but also exemplifies the love we are to have for one another.

Now here we sit, two millennia later, and survey after survey tells us that Christians are known not for our love, but for our fear: fear of gays, fear of change, fear of the “end-times,” fear of science, fear of the Other—in whatever form the Other takes.

How did we get here? How did the act of following Jesus go from something that was a response to God’s love in the first century to a bloody, fear-based, avoidance-of-hell decision in the twenty-first?

That is the question I will tackle in this book. My deepest wish is for the church to restore the central symbol of the Christian faith—the cross—so that it can once again become the symbol of humble love, pointing both back to the love that saved us and forward toward the love we are to embody. It’s also a personal journey, because I’ve always loved the cross and what the event of the crucifixion means about God’s relationship with the world. I’ve long been in awe of God’s act of humility on the cross, and I’ve doubted that it could have really been about wrath. Yet I’ve lacked a good explanation for this, for the cross being about love. On that winter night at the retreat center, I couldn’t articulate a better version of the meaning of the crucifixion. Now it’s time that I have one, that we all have a better version.

To do that, we need to take an intellectual journey in order to understand not only what the Bible says about the cross but also how

our ancestors in the church have contemplated this very question. Again, understanding what happens on the cross is not an arcane theological discussion. How we understand the cross also colors how we picture God, Jesus, ourselves, and our mission in the world and how we see others. Very much is at stake.

We will begin by looking at the Hebrew Bible, known as the Old Testament to most Christians. Jesus' ministry did not simply fall out of the sky but emerged out of the long history of Israel, the hopes and dreams of Judaism. We cannot understand Jesus' role without recourse to the Bible he used and quoted in his own ministry, and we cannot understand Jesus' first interpreter, Paul, without knowing about the Hebrew system of sacrifice that the Old Testament codified.

Of course, we'll study the New Testament also. Paul was the first writer to try to make sense of Jesus' death, and he wrote out his thoughts in several of his letters. Other letter writers, from those who wrote in the names of Peter and John to the anonymous preacher of Hebrews, also had their perspectives on Jesus' death. Then there are the Gospel writers, who wrote about Jesus' life and death. Clues to the meaning of Jesus' death can be found in each of their narratives.

The church is two thousand years old, and over that time various theologians and preachers have put forward various ideas about the death of Jesus, what it accomplished, and what it means to us today. Each of these can be judged against the biblical accounts and against our own experience and reason—especially the test of love, as we have already seen.

Ultimately, we will judge the crucifixion and its effects against what we know of God. For the death of Jesus cannot be a repudiation of God's love. It cannot pit God against Jesus. Nor can it be anything but good news.

In fact, it might be better news than we've ever imagined.

# 2

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## Why God Matters

I GREW UP in a nice Midwestern suburb at a centrist church that preached a centrist God. Some of my friends were reared in homes and churches that taught that God was so angry he skipped sinners across the lake of fire. But in my church, God wasn't so much angry with me as he was disappointed. I'd really let God down with my adolescent sins of lust and white lies. When God looked at the ledger of my sins, I imagined that he shook his head in sadness and maybe shed a tear about how I'd failed him.

Yes, I felt shame over the fact that I'd stolen a five-dollar bill off my brother's dresser and called a girl names at recess; still, even back then I wondered how these transgressions were worthy of the torture that Jesus endured on the cross. Yet that's what I was taught. Had I not committed those sins, God wouldn't have had to subject his son to death. *I* was the reason for the crucifixion of the son of God, Jesus, the one innocent man in all of history.

Mine was a fairly mild version of God, relatively speaking. In some of my friends' churches, God wasn't just disappointed in human behavior, he was downright furious. *Wrath*. That's the biblical word for it, and in those churches, God's primary characteristic seemed to be that all of our sin had really caught God by surprise, and God was out to even the score. "Turn or burn" goes the phrase. These church websites tout statements of faith that assure the "eternal, conscious

torment of unrepentant sinners.” I have never quite figured out why they call this “good news”—yes, God’s honor is preserved, but most people end up getting tossed into the lake of fire. When asked about the many passages of scripture that speak of God’s love, these Christians counter that this *is* love. God’s love would be worthless, they claim, if God weren’t holy, if God weren’t just, if God weren’t righteous.

From an early age, this troubled me. When I prayed, God didn’t seem angry with me or even disappointed. Instead, it seemed that whether I prayed in joy or prayed in terror, God was there no matter what, listening, accepting, forgiving. When I read the Bible, I found God’s loving-kindness. These characteristics of God were also preached at my church, so I didn’t know quite how to fit all this together. On the one hand, God was terribly disappointed in me; on the other hand, he was always there with open arms, like the father in Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son.

God seemed a bit schizophrenic, but for a long while I learned to accommodate his condition.

A lot of us are on a quest for God. We’re trying to figure out just who God is, how God relates to us, and what God wants from us. This quest matters because, it turns out, how we think about God influences how we think about ourselves, others, and the world we live in. And here’s the rub: many of our churches emphasize that God is disappointed or angry, which encourages us to be disappointed or angry with those who do not measure up, including ourselves. Still, many people’s experiences of God are like mine, that God is loving, gracious, merciful. We hear about a God of wrath, but we experience a God of grace. How can God be both? Does he hate us, or does he love us? Does God love us only if we love him back the right way—and, if we don’t, do we meet the wrathful God?

I’ve made mistakes in life. I’ve got broken relationships in my past, scars that don’t seem to heal. I’ve failed friends, my spouse, my children. I have failed others and God, in “things done and left undone,” as the Book of Common Prayer puts it. I often go to God in prayer over these failings, especially on nights when I can’t sleep.

I lie in bed, staring into the darkness, and rehearse the joys and sorrows of my life. And as I ask God to forgive me my trespasses and help me be better tomorrow, I have a deep and very real sense that God forgives me, that God is *for* me, that God *loves* me, even when I fail. In other words, my deepest spiritual experience is that God loves me as I am. Yes, God longs for me to grow and become like Jesus, and God partners with me in this process of becoming more Christlike. But God also loves the current version of me.

Of course, it's possible that I'm deceiving myself, that in fact God is so disgusted by my sins that he can't even hear my prayers. But I don't think so. Both my experience and my reading of scripture tell me that God created me for good and that God loves me in spite of my flaws. In fact, I think that God created me knowing my flaws, even loving my flaws, because *God is love*.

I have a friend who says, "I think God has to be at least as nice as Jesus." His point is that Jesus was notorious for reaching out to those on the margins, for dining with sinners, and for hanging out with prostitutes and tax collectors. He spoke the truth, sometimes pointedly, but he wasn't an angry person. And, as God's representative and emissary, Jesus reflected God. "I and the Father are one," Jesus taught.<sup>1</sup> We can gauge a lot about God by looking at Jesus. So, my friend reasons, God must be at least as nice as Jesus was.

It's with confidence in this assessment that I confess my shortcomings to God. And I don't worry that God will reject me because of them. Instead, I'm quite sure that God loves me in spite of—or even because of—my failings.

If Jesus tells us anything about God, it's that God is love—not wrath or anger or vengeance, but pure love.

## God: Violence or Peace?

Much violence has been perpetrated in the name of God, and unfortunately that's part of the story, too. Today, famous atheists believe that religion leads to violence, and they're not wrong. Massive

amounts of bloodshed have been justified with religious language and under the imprimatur of religious authorities.

Whenever you're reading this, violence in the name of religious belief is taking place somewhere in the world. One religion is battling another over a patch of land, or one sect is fighting another for control of a government. Some argue that religion is just a cover for tribalism and greed and power, but nevertheless, religion always seems to be at the center of the conflict.

All this leads us to ask, *If God is love, why is religion so violent?* And, more pointedly, *Is Christianity inherently violent?* We would like to think not, but there's a lot of evidence to the contrary. After all, we've got a bloody execution standing right at the center of our faith, memorialized in the crosses around our necks. A lot of us don't necessarily think about that when we look at the cross. We see it as a symbol of redemption and even resurrection. But long before it represented those things, it was a symbol of torture and death.

Jesus' death itself was rooted in a religious conflict. During his three years of itinerant ministry, Jesus preached a particular perspective on the future of Judaism and the nature of God. But his view was at odds with those of other religious and political groups of the day: the Pharisees, the Herodians, and the leaders in the Jerusalem temple. The Roman authorities got caught in between these rivals. The temple leaders had more power than Jesus and his band of Galileans, and the Romans sided with the powerful and sent Jesus to the cross. We tend to look at a crucifix and think of Jesus as a willing victim who died for our sins, but to the eyewitnesses—both Jew and Gentile—it surely must have been seen as an internecine religious disagreement. And in the years since, even more religious violence has been perpetrated as a result of that crucifixion, in the name of the crucifixion, most notably the extraordinarily heinous history of Christian anti-Semitism. The crucifixion, an event that we claim brings peace between God and humans, has also been used to justify pogroms and holocausts.

While we could look at a lot of aspects of Christianity to help us solve the problem of violence that besets our religion, the obvious

place to start is with that bloody execution. What we do with that violence will help us figure out what to do with all of the subsequent violence in Christianity and in the world. And what we finally decide about God will have massive implications for these questions, because if God is wrath, then violence is inevitable.

But if God is love, then violence must be surmountable. And the crucifixion of Jesus, while violent, must be the key to ending violence.

## What the Crucifixion Tells Us About God

The crucifixion of Jesus is the central act in the drama that is the Christian story, and its importance cannot be overstated. Therefore, it simply must tell us something very important about God. That's really what this book is about: God.

It's notoriously difficult to talk confidently about God, the Great and Unknowable. The ditches are many, and they're deep, and we will likely fall into a few of them along this journey. But nevertheless, we must endeavor to search the death of Jesus for clues about who God really is and how we can relate to God. Because how we think about God determines everything else: who we are, what we are to do, what we hope for, and who we hope to be.

Essential to the Christian story is that Jesus of Nazareth was God's unique son and that Jesus of Nazareth died a violent and unwarranted death. Looking back on Jesus' death and resurrection, his disciples and the subsequent apostle, Paul, attempted to make sense of that death. They looked to the Hebrew Bible, and they reminisced about Jesus' own words, looking for clues as to the significance of a crucified Messiah—a very different outcome than they had previously expected. Within a short time after his crucifixion, they'd determined that Jesus' death was the key that unlocked the door to understanding everything: God; the law; Jesus' life, teachings, and miracles; and, maybe most importantly, how Christians are to live.

Like the earliest followers of Jesus, every generation of the church

since has been uniformly committed to the importance of the crucifixion. It's why a cross or crucifix hangs at the front of nearly every church in the world. But who is the God behind that cross? My ministers may have taught me that I'm responsible for Jesus' death, but at least some Christians have asked if it is God who bears the ultimate culpability: Did God kill Jesus?

In fact, we can't help but ask a whole litany of questions as we see Jesus hanging there:

- What kind of God lets his son die?
- What was accomplished when Jesus died?
- Was there another way?
- Was violence necessary to take away our sins?

Jesus dies on the cross, and all the dominoes start to fall. Was it God who pushed over the first one and started the chain reaction? Or did God demand it of his son?

These questions vex me—and maybe you, too. I've set out on a quest to understand the crucifixion so that I can better understand the God behind the crucifixion. Part of that is studying all of the ways that theologians have interpreted the crucifixion in the past. When we really dig into those interpretations, we find a particular version of God behind each of them. And part of it is looking for new explanations and interpretations that jibe both with our sacred text and with our experience that God is breathtakingly loving, not volcanically wrathful.

I suspect that as we journey through the history of thought about Jesus' crucifixion and look at the biblical accounts of that event, we will find a God who is not wrathful or disgusted. We won't find a God who killed his son, nor demanded that his son be executed to pay a penalty. Instead, I suspect that we will find a God of love who goes even to the most extreme lengths to identify with the human experience and to build a bridge between the human and the divine. We'll find a God who wants nothing more than to communicate his love to us.

## It's a Multiple-Choice Question

It turns out that the reason for Jesus' death preached at that middle school retreat—embellished with the story about the blood and the woman trapped under the collapsed building—is not the only way that Christians have understood the death of Jesus. Instead, it's one of about half a dozen theories that preachers and theologians have used over the past two thousand years to explain why Jesus died. This fact wasn't advertised to me when I was growing up. Instead, I was taught that there was one and only one reason that Jesus died: because of my sin and God's anger and disappointment with me. Maybe you were told the same thing. But this sentiment would have been confounding to a second- or third-century Christian. They had entirely different ways of understanding Jesus' death, ways that we will explore in later chapters.

And behind each explanation of the crucifixion is an implied view of God. God is either strong or weak, in control or abdicating control, engaged or absent, gracious or vindictive. In the pages that follow, we will walk through the various views of Jesus' death, and we will look at the God who stands behind the cross in each.

The version that I heard that night at the retreat wasn't the first in history, but it is currently the most popular view in the Western world. It's called *penal substitution*, and at the heart of this view of the crucifixion is a God who is extremely wrathful.

A few years ago, I was lunching with a famous pastor of the Calvinist persuasion. The topic of the crucifixion came up—okay, I brought it up—and he proclaimed that *his* version of this doctrine is the only true and biblical version. His version, he confidently stated, *is* the gospel. I demurred, asking him if he didn't think that it was disingenuous for him to hide from his congregation the fact that Christians through the ages have had an array of beliefs about why Jesus died.

“You should never preach!” he nearly shouted at me across the table.

“People need fixed points of doctrine,” he continued, holding up one index finger and circling it with his other index finger. “And to tell them about this historical relativism that you’re suggesting would only confuse them.”

Well, not only does that pastor have a low view of his congregants’ intellectual abilities, he’s doing a disservice to the Bible and to the doctrine of the atonement. That’s the term that theologians use to talk about the question, Why did Jesus die? *Atonement* means reconciliation, in this case between God and humans. It comes from a Middle English word, *onement*, which means “harmony”—literally, the state of one thing being “at one” with another.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, the main Greek word for atonement, *katallagé*, occurs only four times in the New Testament, and it’s usually translated “reconciliation.”<sup>3</sup> Atonement is a more common concept in the Hebrew Bible, as we will see when we investigate the history of sacrifice. Nevertheless, atonement has become one of the most contested doctrines of our day, as I found out at lunch with the Calvinist pastor.

This is actually in spite of its history. I was speaking at an evangelical college not long ago. I’d been booked by the campus chaplain to speak at a pastors’ conference and at the weekly student chapel, but as word leaked out about my appearance, conservative alumni began to object. A couple of prominent alumni families even threatened to withhold their donations to the school if my invitation wasn’t rescinded. Claiming academic freedom, the college administrators stood their ground, but in order to appease their critics somewhat, they canceled my last talk at the conference and scheduled a debate in its place. So there I sat, with members of the school’s theological faculty on either side of me, and we all fielded questions from the audience.

One of the pastors in the crowd asked me how I could continue to be friends with another Christian author who had referred to the penal substitution version of atonement as “cosmic child abuse.” In his question, he referred to my friend as a heretic. Before I could answer, one of the school’s theology professors spoke up, and he was mad. “The atonement has never been a defining trait of theological

orthodoxy,” he said forcefully. “It was never debated in any church council nor formulated in a creed. Therefore, by definition, you are not able to call someone a heretic based on their view of the atonement.”

Until he said it, that had not occurred to me. While the early church cast out as heretics those who didn’t affirm the Trinity or didn’t believe that Jesus was fully human and fully divine, the atonement never rose to that level. It’s not that the early church fathers didn’t think it was important that Jesus died to save sinners, it’s that they didn’t get hung up on the mechanics by which that happened. They recognized that the event of Jesus’ death on the cross was much deeper and more mysterious than our explanations of it could describe—let alone there be one single explanation. Yes, we talk about it because we want to understand the God who loves us and the Son who saves us, but our accounts can never fully capture the mystery of that event.

That’s not the case today. Today, the atonement is one of the most contentious theological issues in the church, and it’s not hard to see why.<sup>4</sup> Many think that the salvation of every human who’s ever lived hangs on one’s explanation of the nature of the atonement. In one way, they’re right: on the atonement hinges our understanding of human nature and the nature of God: Are we sinful? Lost without God’s help? Do we play a role in our own salvation? Is God happy to offer us salvation? Or was God left with no choice but to allow the execution of his son? Was Jesus crucified to satisfy God’s sense of justice? His wrath? A deeper law that binds even God? Or was Jesus setting an example of the sacrificial way that human beings are meant to live?

The importance of these questions, and what they have to say about the very nature of God and humans, cannot be overstated. That’s why the aforementioned pastor with whom I had lunch said that the atonement *is* the gospel. But there’s something else that the pastor got very wrong, and that’s the belief that there is only one acceptable explanation of Jesus’ death.

I remember exactly when I took my last multiple-choice test; it

was the GRE, and I was applying to a Ph.D. program. Now I'm prepping my own children for the ACT and SAT as they look forward to college admissions. They've got lots of multiple-choice questions in their future. We've been led to believe that the questions that surround Jesus' death have one and only one answer. That's why so many preachers can so confidently state just why Jesus had to die and just why you need to accept that fact to gain access to heaven. But one of the more startling realizations we'll make as we journey into this topic is that it's not a true-false question, it's multiple-choice. And the answer just might be "all of the above."

What I mean is that the Bible and the Christian tradition are not unanimous about the reason that Jesus had to die and what his death accomplished. True, the Hebrew Bible set forth a system of sacrifice that gave a framework to the New Testament authors, but the Hebrew Bible itself is ambivalent about the how and why of blood sacrifice. The New Testament varies widely as well, with the Gospel writers understanding Jesus' death as a Passover sacrifice and the author of Hebrews considering it a Yom Kippur sacrifice. Mixing those two is a bit like putting a Christmas tree up on Easter, which is basically what Paul does in his various letters.

And then we'll get to the last two thousand years, during which different—and even contradictory—interpretations of Jesus' death have been considered the one and only answer to the question. Each of the theories about the crucifixion is historically contingent, reflecting the place and time of its invention and even the personality of its author. Each sets out to solve a particular problem, and in each case the death of Jesus is the solution.

Throughout Christian history, the death of Jesus has been the answer—it's the question that has changed.

This is all great news because it frees us from the pressure of getting the answer just right. It's quite likely that the answer is, in fact, a mixture of several answers—that the death of Jesus on the cross is so powerful because there is enough meaning in that event for all times, all places, and all people. That's not to say that everyone gets to make up their own answer; as we will see, some explana-

tions are better than others. But we are given some agency—maybe more than we thought we had—in making sense of the violence that is memorialized in the crosses around our necks and atop our churches. We get to take part in a conversation that’s been going on for centuries, and we get to contribute to that conversation.

Later in this book, I’ll do just that and offer my own contribution to our understanding of Jesus’ death. It’s one that I think does justice to the magnitude of that event while preserving the eternal love between the Father and the Son. And even better, I think that the crucifixion opened the door so that you and I can enter that love ourselves.

The Bible itself provides multiple answers, as does church history. So it is not an option to proclaim that there is only one answer. And it should certainly raise many red flags when we hear that the one right answer was discovered a thousand years after Jesus died. But before we get to that, we’ve got to survey the territory—the Old and New Testaments and the history of the church. And even before we dive into that, we’ve got some preliminary ground to cover. But all the way through, our goal will be to ground our understanding of the cross in God’s love and measure various theories by the standard we get from both the Bible and from our experience: *How does the crucifixion reveal the God of love that Jesus proclaimed?*