

INTRODUCTION

THE CHRIST, THE CRUCIFIXION, AND THE CONCENTRATION CAMPS



The most important question of the twenty-first century is: Why did Jesus Christ suffer so much? But we will never see this importance if we fail to go beyond human cause. The ultimate answer to the question, Who crucified Jesus? is: God did. It is a staggering thought. Jesus was his Son. And the suffering was unsurpassed. But the whole message of the Bible leads to this conclusion.

GOD MEANT IT FOR GOOD

The Hebrew prophet Isaiah said, “It was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief” (Isaiah 53:10). The Christian New Testament says, “[God] did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all” (Romans 8:32). “God put [Christ] forward . . . by his blood, to be received by faith” (Romans 3:25).

But how does this divine act relate to the horribly sinful actions of the men who killed Jesus? The answer given in the Bible is expressed in an early prayer: “There were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus . . . both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place” (Acts 4:27-28). The depth and scope of this divine sovereignty takes our breath away. But it is also the key to our salvation. God planned

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it, and by the means of wicked men, great good has come to the world. To paraphrase a word of the Jewish Torah: They meant it for evil, but God meant it for good (Genesis 50:20).

And since God meant it for good, we must move beyond the question of human cause to divine purpose. The central issue of Jesus' death is not the cause, but the purpose—the meaning. Man may have his reasons for wanting Jesus out of the way. But only God can design it for the good of the world. In fact, God's purposes for the world in the death of Jesus are unfathomable. I am scraping the surface in this little book as I introduce you to fifty of them. My aim is to let the Bible speak. This is where we hear the word of God. I hope that these pointers will set you on an endless quest to know more and more of God's great design in the death of his Son.

WHAT DOES THE WORD *PASSION* MEAN?

We associate at least four things with the word *passion*: sexual desire, zeal for a task, an oratorio by J. S. Bach, and the sufferings of Jesus Christ. The word comes from a Latin word meaning *suffering*. That is the way I am using it here—the sufferings and death of Jesus Christ. But it relates to all the other passions as well. It deepens sex, inspires music, and carries forward the greatest cause in the world.

HOW WAS THE PASSION OF JESUS UNIQUE?

Why did the suffering and execution of a man who was convicted and condemned as a pretender to the throne of Rome unleash, in the next three centuries, a power to suffer and to love that transformed the Roman Empire, and to this day is shaping the world? The answer is that the passion of Jesus was absolutely unique, and his resurrection from the dead three days later was an act of God to vindicate what his death achieved.

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His passion was unique because he was more than a mere human. Not less. He was, as the ancient Nicene Creed says, “very God of very God.” This is the testimony of those who knew him and were inspired by him to explain who he is. The apostle John referred to Christ as “the Word” and wrote, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:1-3, 14).

Then add to his deity that he was utterly innocent in his suffering. Not just innocent of the charge of blasphemy, but of all sin. One of his closest disciples said, “He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth” (1 Peter 2:22). Then add to this uniqueness that he embraced his own death with absolute authority. One of the most stunning statements Jesus ever made was about his own death and resurrection: “I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father” (John 10:17-18). The controversy about who killed Jesus is marginal. He *chose* to die. His Father ordained it. He embraced it.

HIS PASSION WAS VINDICATED BY THE RESURRECTION

Because of this unparalleled passion, God raised Jesus from the dead. It happened three days later. Early Sunday morning he rose from the dead. He appeared numerous times to his disciples for forty days before his ascension to heaven (Acts 1:3).

The disciples were slow to believe that it really happened. They were not gullible primitives. They were down-to-earth tradesmen. They knew people did not rise from the dead. At one point Jesus

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insisted on eating fish to prove to them that he was not a ghost (Luke 24:39-43). This was not the resuscitation of a corpse. It was the resurrection of the God-Man, into an indestructible new life. The early church acclaimed him Lord of heaven and earth. They said, “After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Hebrews 1:3). Jesus had finished the work God gave him to do, and the resurrection was the proof that God was satisfied. This book is about what Jesus’ passion accomplished for the world.

THE PASSION OF CHRIST AND THE PASSION OF AUSCHWITZ

It is a tragedy that the story of Christ’s passion has produced anti-Semitism against Jews and crusading violence against Muslims. We Christians are ashamed of many of our ancestors who did not act in the spirit of Christ. No doubt there are traces of this plague in our own souls. But true Christianity—which is radically different from Western culture, and may not be found in many Christian churches—renounces the advance of religion by means of violence. “My kingdom is not of this world,” Jesus said. “If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting” (John 18:36). The way of the cross is the way of suffering. Christians are called to die, not kill, in order to show the world how they are loved by Christ.

Today this love humbly and boldly commends Christ, no matter what it costs, to all peoples as the only saving way to God. “Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me’” (John 14:6). But let it be crystal-clear: It is not Christian to humiliate or scorn or despise or persecute with prideful putdowns, or pogroms, or crusades, or concentration camps. These were and are, very simply and horribly, disobedience to Jesus Christ. Unlike many of his fol-

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lowers, he prayed from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).

The passion of Jesus Christ is the most important event in history, and the most explosive political and personal issue of the twenty-first century. The denial that Christ was crucified is like the denial of the Holocaust. For some it’s simply too horrific to affirm. For others it’s an elaborate conspiracy to coerce religious sympathy. But the deniers live in a historical dreamworld. Jesus Christ suffered unspeakably and died. So did Jews.

I am not the first to link Calvary and the concentration camps—the suffering of Jesus Christ and the suffering of Jewish people. In his heart-wrenching, innocence-shattering, mouth-shutting book *Night*, Elie Wiesel tells of his experience as a teenager with his father in the concentration camps of Auschwitz, Buna, and Buchenwald. There was always the threat of “the selection”—the taking away of the weak to be killed and burned in the ovens.

At one point—and only one—Wiesel links Calvary and the camps. He tells of an old rabbi, Akiba Dumer.

Akiba Dumer left us, a victim of the selection. Lately, he had wandered among us, his eyes glazed, telling everyone of his weakness: “I can’t go on . . . It’s all over . . .” It was impossible to raise his morale. He didn’t listen to what we told him. He could only repeat that all was over for him, that he could no longer keep up the struggle, that he had no strength left, nor faith. Suddenly his eyes would become blank, nothing but two open wounds, two pits of terror.¹

Then Wiesel makes this provocative comment: “Poor Akiba Dumer, if he could have gone on believing in God, if he could have seen a proof of God in this Calvary, he would not have been taken by the selection.”² I will not presume to put any words in

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Elie Wiesel's mouth. I am not sure what he meant. But it presses the question: Why the link between Calvary and the concentration camp?

When I ask this question, I am not thinking of cause or blame. I am thinking of meaning and hope. Is there a way that Jewish suffering may find, not its cause, but its final meaning in the suffering of Jesus Christ? Is it possible to think, not of Christ's passion leading to Auschwitz, but of Auschwitz leading to an understanding of Christ's passion? Is the link between Calvary and the camps a link of unfathomable empathy? Perhaps only Jesus in the end can know what happened during the "one long night"³ of Jewish suffering. And perhaps a generation of Jewish people, whose grandparents endured their own noxious crucifixion, will be able, as no others, to grasp what happened to the Son of God at Calvary. I leave it as a question. I do not know.

But this I know: Those ostensible "Christians" who built the camps never knew the love that moved Jesus Christ toward Calvary. They never knew the Christ, who instead of killing to save a culture, died to save the world. But there are some Christians—the true Christians—who have seen the meaning of the passion of Jesus Christ, and have been broken and humbled by his suffering. Could it be that these, perhaps better than many, might be able to see and, at least, begin to fathom the suffering of Jewish people?

What an irony that Christians have been anti-Semitic! Jesus and all his early followers were Jews. People from every group in Palestine were involved in his crucifixion (not just Jews), and people from every group opposed it (including Jews). God himself was the chief Actor in the death of his Son, so that the main question is not, Which humans brought about the death of Jesus? but, What did the death of Jesus bring about for humans—including Jews and Muslims and Buddhists and Hindus and nonreligious secularists—and all people everywhere?

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When all is said and done, the most crucial question is: Why? Why did Christ suffer and die? Not why in the sense of *cause*, but why in the sense of *purpose*. What did Christ achieve by his passion? Why did he have to suffer so much? What great thing was happening on Calvary for the world?

That's what the rest of this book is about. I have gathered from the New Testament fifty reasons why Christ suffered and died. Not fifty causes, but fifty purposes. Infinitely more important than who killed Jesus is the question: *What did God achieve for sinners like us in sending his Son to die?* To that we now turn.

FIFTY REASONS WHY
CHRIST SUFFERED
AND DIED



Christ Suffered and Died . . .

I

TO ABSORB THE WRATH OF GOD



*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a
curse for us—for it is written,
“Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.”*

GALATIANS 3:13

*God put [Christ] forward as a propitiation by his blood,
to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness,
because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.*

ROMANS 3:25

*In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us
and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.*

1 JOHN 4:10

If God were not *just*, there would be no *demand* for his Son to suffer and die. And if God were not *loving*, there would be no *willingness* for his Son to suffer and die. But God is both just and loving. Therefore his love is willing to meet the demands of his justice.

God’s law demanded, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:5). But we have all loved other things more. This is what sin is—dishonoring God by preferring other things over him, and acting on those preferences. Therefore, the Bible says, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). We glorify what we enjoy most. And it isn’t God.

Therefore sin is not small, because it is not against a small Sovereign. The seriousness of an insult rises with the dignity of the one insulted. The Creator of the universe is infinitely worthy of respect and admiration and loyalty. Therefore, failure to love him is not trivial—it is treason. It defames God and destroys human happiness.

Since God is just, he does not sweep these crimes under the rug of the universe. He feels a holy wrath against them. They deserve to be punished, and he has made this clear: “For the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). “The soul who sins shall die” (Ezekiel 18:4).

There is a holy curse hanging over all sin. Not to punish would be unjust. The demeaning of God would be endorsed. A lie would reign at the core of reality. Therefore, God says, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them” (Galatians 3:10; Deuteronomy 27:26).

But the love of God does not rest with the curse that hangs over all sinful humanity. He is not content to show wrath, no matter how holy it is. Therefore God sends his own Son to absorb his wrath and bear the curse for all who trust him. “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (Galatians 3:13).

This is the meaning of the word “propitiation” in the text quoted above (Romans 3:25). It refers to the removal of God’s wrath by providing a substitute. The substitute is provided by God himself. The substitute, Jesus Christ, does not just cancel the wrath; he absorbs it and diverts it from us to himself. God’s wrath is just, and it was spent, not withdrawn.

Let us not trifle with God or trivialize his love. We will never stand in awe of being loved by God until we reckon with the seriousness of our sin and the justice of his wrath against us. But when, by grace, we waken to our unworthiness, then we may look at the suffering and death of Christ and say, “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the [wrath-absorbing] *propitiation* for our sins” (1 John 4:10).