

“I was encouraged as I read each story and strengthened in my confidence that the gospel is truly sufficient for all who seek rest in a weary world. This book is brutally honest about sin and suffering and wonderfully hopeful as they point us to our true Savior.”

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“For anyone who thinks that theology is dry, boring, and disconnected to real life, read this book. Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears not only demonstrate the relevance of theology to life, but also convincingly show how it has the most compelling and satisfying answers to life’s tough issues.”

—CLINTON E. ARNOLD, Professor and Chairman,
Department of New Testament, Talbot School of Theology,
Biola University

“Another incredible book by Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears! I can’t think of anything more important in our world today than protecting the truth about Jesus’ brutal death on the cross. At times this book will be painful for you to read, but it won’t leave you where it finds you. It will leave you more in love with the God who died for you. It will leave you more resolved to devote your one and only life to his cause, and it will leave you loving the people you are called to lead. I highly recommend this book—for students, professors, Christ followers, or those seeking the truth about Jesus. It will challenge the way you think and subsequently change the way you live.”

—JOHN BISHOP, Senior Pastor, Living Hope Church, Vancouver,
Washington; Founder, ONLY GOD network



DEATH BY LOVE

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DEATH
BY LOVE

LETTERS FROM THE CROSS

MARK DRISCOLL & GERRY BRESHEARS

CROSSWAY BOOKS
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

Death by Love: Letters from the Cross

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Published by Crossway Books

a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Illustration by: Christopher Koelle at Portland Studios

Cover Illustration and Design by: Christopher Koelle and Matt Mantooth
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First printing 2008

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PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-0423-5

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-0424-3

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Driscoll, Mark, 1970–

Death by love : letters from the cross / Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears.

p. cm. (Re:Lit)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-4335-0129-6 (hc)

1. Suffering—Religious aspects—Christianity. 2. Jesus Christ—Crucifixion. 3. Theology of the cross. I. Breshears, Gerry, 1947–
II. Title. III. Series.

BV4909.D75 2008

232'.3—dc22

2008008947

LB	18	17	16	15	14	13	12	11	10	09	08			
15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

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Preface

Because no one is born into this world with a theology, each generation must rediscover the truths of Scripture for itself. In doing so it must labor to connect the unchanging answers of God's Word with the ever-changing questions of its culture. Sometimes this project is successfully undertaken, and the result is a glorious resurgence of a faithful and fruitful Christian church. Sometimes this project is unsuccessfully undertaken, and the tragic result is false teaching that renders the church impotent to see the power of the gospel unleashed because she either has a false Jesus or is embarrassed by the real one.

Today, the church finds herself in yet another of these epic opportunities as emerging pastors and churches strive to make up their mind on nearly every belief that has been previously considered Christian. Perhaps chief among them is the doctrine of the atonement or, simply, the accomplishments of Jesus' death on the cross.

Some are emotionally reluctant to embrace the cross because it is a symbol of violence and shame. Others harbor mental resistance to the cross because, throughout the history of the church, various theological explanations have been given to explain what it accomplished, leading to confusion as to whether or not any are in fact true or even helpful. Yet, because it is the crux of both the Christian faith and human history, the implications of the cross cannot be avoided and require thoughtful consideration.

We write this book not with the intention of pleasing all of the scholars who may find here various points about which to quibble. Rather, our hope is to make otherwise complicated truths understandable to regular folks so that their love for and worship of Jesus would increase as they pick up their cross to follow him. Additionally, we write in hopes of serving fellow pastors and other Christian leaders who bear the responsibility of teaching and leading people. We are heartbroken that the cross of Jesus Christ is under attack by some and dismissed by

others. This book is our attempt to respond in a way that helps to ensure that the cross remains at the crux of all that it means to think and live like Jesus.

Before we begin, it is important that we establish four central truths regarding the cross. We will introduce them briefly so that we can focus on the Scriptures throughout the rest of the book without getting sidetracked.

First, the cross is a multi-faceted jewel. Throughout church history much ink has been spilled as various theologians and Christian traditions have debated the effects of Jesus' death. In this book we are essentially arguing for all of the perspectives that are nourished by biblical roots in an effort to teach the totality of what Scripture says without obscuring any faithful view of the cross. One theologian has called the cross the great jewel of the Christian faith, and like every great jewel it has many precious facets that are each worthy of examining for their brilliance and beauty. Therefore, you will be well served to see each side of this jewel shining together for the glory of God in complimentary and not contradictory fashion. Most poor teaching about the cross results from someone's denying one of these facets, ignoring one of these facets, or overemphasizing one of these facets at the expense of the others, often due to an overreaction to someone else's overreaction. Such narrow and reactionary theology has tragically caused the beauty of the cross to become obscured by the various warring teams that have risen up to argue for their systematic theology rather than bowing down in humble worship of the crucified Jesus.

Second, the cross is not a pagan jewel. Tragically, some have argued that the crucifixion of Jesus is little more than the makeover of ancient pagan concepts borrowed from other religions. It is then argued that since the Bible itself adapts pagan thinking, we should do the same and reinterpret the work of Jesus on the cross through such modern-day paganism as goddess worship, atheistic therapy, postmodernism, secular feminism, and Marxism. This in turn leads to a wholesale departure from any understanding of the cross that has previously been accepted as faithfully Christian.

The seed for such theological weeds is simply an evolutionary view of truth that sees the Bible in general, and the Old Testament in particular, as archaic, primitive, and embarrassing to modern people who are

grossed out by all of the talk about blood and too sophisticated for talk about sin and punishment. Both the Old and New Testaments clearly declare that our understanding of the cross is the result of God's revelation to us and not human speculation borrowed from paganism. In the great Old Testament chapter on atonement offerings, Leviticus 17, God says, "I have given it for you . . . to make atonement" in verse 11. Paul, like Moses, is emphatic that the gospel message of Jesus' death for our sins is not something he made up or borrowed from pagan culture but instead is the result of divine revelation from God alone (1 Cor. 15:3-4; Gal. 1:11-12, 15-17). Therefore, the only way to faithfully interpret the New Testament metaphors regarding the atonement is to understand their origination as not coming from pagan culture but rather coming from the revelation of the Old Testament.

The gospel message comes from God to the culture but does not emanate in any way from the culture, though it must be effectively communicated to all cultures. Because of this, the truth of the gospel of Scripture is binding on all peoples, times, and places. Any gospel that emanates from or accommodates pagan culture is a false gospel with demonic inspiration (2 Cor. 11:3-4; Gal. 1:6-9). Echoing Paul on this point, D. A. Carson says, "No truth which human beings may articulate can ever be articulated in a culture-transcending way—but that does not mean that the truth thus articulated does not transcend culture."¹

Third, the jewel doesn't stand alone but is mounted in the setting of Jesus' work in history. Curiously, varying Christian traditions each have particular appreciation for and emphasis on various sides of the great jewel of our faith. Jesus' work began with his incarnation as Immanuel, God with us. The Eastern church helps us see the importance of God's coming to bring divine life, energy, and power back to sinful humanity. Subsequently, the full humanity of Jesus is stressed without denying his divinity. Jesus lived a life that was not just a preparation for the cross but also an example of how we, as Jesus followers, should and can live, which the Anabaptist church helps us see.

Jesus made God's character dramatically real through his faithful obedience, sinless living, and unfailing love. His cross brings divine propitiation and forgiveness and is the basis of our justification, as the Reformed church helps us realize. His resurrection is the power of divine life breaking out in addition to being proof that the Father was

satisfied with his payment on the cross. Jesus' resurrection is the basis of our regeneration and new life, in addition to the guarantee of our future resurrection. The pietistic church emphasizes this. Jesus' exaltation as anointed king culminates his victory over Satan and demons. Although appearing as a humble Galilean peasant while on the earth, Jesus is now the glorious Son of God who will defeat all enemies at his return, as the ancient church believed in the midst of its polytheistic and pagan culture.

Fourth, the cross does not reject the love of God but rather reveals it like nothing else. Some will protest that a loving God could not possibly pour out his wrath on Jesus. Yet this is precisely what Scripture says: "Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief" (Isa. 53:10).

Others will protest that a loving God would never sanction the bloody, unjust murder of Jesus. Scripture plainly states, however, that it is at the cross of Jesus that the love of God for us is most clearly seen. Jesus himself said precisely this: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:12–13).

Other Scriptures echo the words of Jesus—his death on the cross is the place where love is most clearly seen in all creation. If we translated John 3:16 exactly from the Greek, it would say, "For God loved the world in this way: he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish." It tells us how God expressed his great love for the world. Romans 5:8 says, "But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Finally, 1 John 4:9–10 says, "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. 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." Clearly, Jesus' bloody death on the cross is about love. The depth of our sin and the depth of God's love cannot be fully known apart from Jesus' cross.

This book aspires to faithfully and passionately articulate the truth about Jesus' cross. Therefore, as you read this book you may be surprised to discover that we in no way seek to be theologically innovative, because theological innovation is inevitably the road to heresy. Instead, this book is an attempt at faithfulness to the timeless truths of Scripture

that have served the church well since the first promise of Jesus' suffering was pronounced by God to our first parents in the garden. We hope to present the timeless truths of the cross in a timely manner that is biblically faithful, culturally relevant, and personally helpful. Our objective is to think God's thoughts after him as revealed in Scripture, and if at any point we fail in this, we ask God's forgiveness and your kindness.

As you read each chapter, a simple logic should emerge. Each begins with the introduction of someone I have worked with in my role as one of the pastors at Mars Hill Church. I then proceed to write a personal letter to him or her explaining one side of the great jewel of the cross so that the person and work of Jesus are made intensely practical for that person's life (Sources for quotations used in these letters are documented in the "Helpful Information" section at the end of the chapter.) In doing so I am following in the example of many books of our Bible that were essentially letters written from a Christian leader to someone he loved; for example, Luke and Acts were written to Theophilus by Luke; the letters to Timothy and Titus were penned by their mentor Paul; Philemon was written to Philemon, Archipus, and the godly woman Apphia by Paul; 2 and 3 John were written to an elder, a godly woman and her family, and Gaius by John. Personally, this was a very painful book to pen and, although I am not a man who cries often, much of this book was written through my tears.

Our approach is an effort to show that there is no such thing as Christian community or Christian ministry apart from a rigorous theology of the cross that is practically applied to the lives of real people. Subsequently, unlike my public preaching, my tone will be deeply pastoral and more like the private meetings I have with people whom Jesus has entrusted to my pastoral care. By way of warning, this book takes the pain of human sin very seriously and, consequently, it may be brutally harsh to read at some points (perhaps in part because we have been inundated with fluffy Christian books about victorious living).

Each chapter includes a portrait of God, because to remain true all theology must begin and remain God-centered. Each chapter then proceeds to examine a biblical aspect of sin and a correlating effect of Jesus' death as the solution to the sin problem as dictated by God. As you read, we would like you to note that we consider both the death and resur-

rection of Jesus as intimately related truths that are, in fact, a singular event. Thus, when we speak of Jesus' death or cross, do assume that we are including Jesus' resurrection and empty tomb, because apart from his ongoing life the cross is without any power.

In each chapter of this book we have sought to teach the very practical and pastoral implications and applications of the work of Jesus on the cross. We also know there are additional theological questions that many of our readers will have about specific issues raised in each chapter. Therefore, we have sought to answer a variety of such questions to be of further service to those who are kind enough to read this book. Because of his expertise as a seasoned theologian, my friend Gerry Breshears is responsible for these answers, and I trust you will benefit from his humble and biblical insight, as I have.

Lastly, our prayer is that this book will be intensely practical in nature, pastoral in tone, theological in depth, biblical in content, and worshipful in consequence.

Mark Driscoll

Acknowledgments

Resurgence Literature (Re:Lit) is a ministry of Resurgence (www.theresurgence.com). There you will find a growing repository of free theological resources along with information on forthcoming conferences we host. The elders of Mars Hill Church (www.marshillchurch.org) have generously agreed to fund Resurgence along with the Acts 29 Church Planting Network (www.acts29network.org) so that our culture can be filled with a resurgence of timeless Christian truth that is expressed and embodied in timely cultural ways.

Free audio downloads of the roughly sixteen hours of sermons that comprise the basic outline for this book are available at www.marshillchurch.org. While preaching this series, originally called “Christ on the Cross,” in Seattle, which is among the least church-ed cities in America with more dogs than evangelicals, I saw our attendance grow by as many as eight hundred mainly young, single, college-educated, twenty-something hipsters in a single week. I yelled myself hoarse for well over an hour at each of our Sunday church services about the depth of sin, the wrath of God, and the propitiation of Jesus and am happy to report that the gospel of Jesus Christ remains the power of God.

This book is a collaborative project between friends. As a young pastor, I desired to be as competent a Bible preacher as possible. This led to a close friendship with my professor Gerry Breshears, whose biblical insights have been invaluable to my understanding of the person and work of Jesus as revealed in Scripture. In this book you will hear my voice, since I crafted the words onto pages, but many of the concepts were shaped and formed by my good friend who gave me helpful input when I sent the chapters to him. You will also hear Gerry’s voice in the Answers to Common Questions at the end of each chapter, where his professorial insights will help deepen your understanding of the person and work of Jesus. Our hope is that this book will be readable, practical, and biblical so that everyone from seminary professors and pastors

to non-Christians would benefit from our work. We are tremendously grateful to our friends at Crossway Books who have kindly agreed to publish this book as the second in the Re-Lit series and have been nothing short of amazing to work with.

Mark Driscoll

We Killed God: Jesus Is Our Substitutionary Atonement

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on [Jesus] the iniquity of us all.

ISAIAH 53:6

Jesus was born in a small town to a poor, unmarried teen mother roughly two thousand years ago. He was adopted by Joseph, a simple carpenter, and spent the first thirty years of his life in obscurity, swinging a hammer with his dad.

Around the age of thirty, Jesus began a public ministry that included preaching the truth, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, and befriending crooked sinners who were despised by religious types. Jesus' ministry spanned only three short years before he was put to death for declaring himself to be God. He died by shameful crucifixion like tens of thousands of people had before him.

In the pages of Scripture, which exist to reveal him, we discover that while Jesus loved children, fed the hungry, befriended the marginalized, healed the sick, encouraged the downhearted, and rebuked the religiously self-righteous, the light of Scripture shines most clearly on the final week of his life and his work of atonement through the cross and empty tomb. In total, the four Gospels, which faithfully record his life, devote roughly one-third of their content to the climactic final week of Jesus' life leading up to the cross. While only two Gospels mention Jesus' birth, and each speaks sparsely of his resurrection, all four Gospels give great attention to the final week leading up to Jesus'

cross. In fact, John's Gospel devotes roughly half of its content to that week.

Perhaps most peculiar is the fact that the symbol for Jesus, which has become the most famous symbol in all of history, is the cross. While the early church embraced several symbols, including the fish and the loaf, the cross has always symbolized the believer's connection with the death of Jesus. The church father Tertullian (155–230) tells us of the early practice of believers making the sign of the cross over their bodies with their hand and adorning their necks and homes with crosses to celebrate the brutal death of Jesus. In our day, this would be akin to a junkie's needle or a pervert's used condom becoming the world's most beloved symbol and adorning homes, churches, and bodies.

The ancient Jewish historian Josephus called crucifixion “the most wretched of deaths.”¹ The ancient Roman philosopher Cicero asked that decent Roman citizens not even speak of the cross because it was too disgraceful a subject for the ears of decent people.² The Jews also considered crucifixion the most horrific mode of death, as Deuteronomy 21:22–23 says: “If a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God.”

Crucifixion was likely invented by the Persians around 500 BC and continued until it was outlawed by the first Christian Roman emperor Constantine around AD 300. Although crucifixion was created by the Persians, it was perfected by the Romans, who reserved it as the most painful mode of execution for the most despised people, such as slaves, poor people, and Roman citizens guilty of the worst high treason.

Throughout history, crucifixion has remained perhaps the most horrid form of execution. Under the leadership of Adolf Hitler, German soldiers crucified Jews at Dachau by running bayonets and knives through their legs, shoulders, throats, and testicles. Under the leadership of Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge performed crucifixions in Cambodia. Today, crucifixion continues in Sudan and online with the multiplayer video game *Roma Victor*.

The pain of crucifixion is so horrendous that a word was invented to explain it—*excruciating*—which literally means “from the cross.” The pain of crucifixion is due in part to the fact that it is a prolonged

and agonizing death by asphyxiation. Crucified people could hang on the cross for days, passing in and out of consciousness as their lungs struggled to breathe, while laboring under the weight of their body. It was not uncommon for those being crucified to slump on the cross in an effort to empty their lungs of air and thereby hasten their death.

None of this was done in dignified privacy but rather in open, public places. It would be like nailing a bloodied, naked man above the front entrance to your local mall. Crowds would gather around the victims to mock them as they sweated in the sun, bled, and became incontinent from the pain that could last many days. Once dead, the victim was not given a decent burial but rather left on the cross for vultures to pick apart from above while dogs chewed on the bones that fell to the ground, even occasionally taking a hand or foot home as a chew toy, according to ancient reports.³ Whatever remained of the victim would eventually be thrown in the garbage and taken to the dump unless his family buried it.

Not only was crucifixion excruciatingly painful and publicly shameful, it was also commonly practiced. Tens of thousands of people were crucified in the ancient world. For example, when Spartacus died in battle, six thousand of his followers were crucified in one day. They were lined up along a road that stretched for one hundred and twenty miles, not unlike the shoulder of a modern freeway.

As a general rule, it was men who were crucified. Occasionally a man was crucified at eye level so that passersby could look him directly in the eye as he died and cuss him out and spit on him in mockery. In the rare event of a woman's crucifixion, she was made to face the cross. Not even such a barbarous culture was willing to watch the face of a woman in such excruciating agony.

On the day Jesus was crucified, two men were hung with him, one on each side. Some years later, when the leader of Jesus' disciples, Peter, was to be crucified, he reportedly did not consider himself worthy of dying like Jesus and therefore requested that he be hung upside down. His request was granted, and he hung upside down until he closed his eyes in death and opened them to gaze upon his scarred Savior and heard, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Among the scandals of the cross is the fact that Christians call it their *gospel*, or good news, and celebrate it every year on Good Friday. It is the

means by which God has chosen to forgive our sins. Indeed, not everyone considers the cross of Jesus such good news. For example, speaking of Jesus' crucifixion, the Hindu Gandhi said, "His death on the cross was a great example to the world, but that there was anything like a mysterious or miraculous virtue in it, my heart could not accept."

GOOD NEWS

The question begs to be answered, how can Christians celebrate the crucifixion of Jesus as good news, indeed, the best news they have ever heard? To answer this question we must move from the historical fact of Jesus' death to the theological meaning of that fact.

The most succinct summary of the gospel in Scripture provides insight into this theological meaning: "That Christ died *for* our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3b–4). In this packed section of Scripture, Paul appoints the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus as the most important event in all of history and the verification of the truthfulness of all Scripture. He then explains why this is good news with the simple word *for*, showing that Jesus died "for our sins." The word *for* (*hyper* in Greek) can mean either "for the benefit of" or "because of." Think for a moment: Jesus did not die "for the benefit of" our sins. He did not help them at all! Rather, he died "because of" our sins. So it was *our* sins, but *his* death.

From the beginning of sacred Scripture (Gen. 2:17) to the end (Rev. 21:8), the penalty for sin is death. Therefore, if we sin, we should die. But it is Jesus, the sinless one, who dies in our place "for our sins." The good news of the gospel is that Jesus died to take to himself the penalty for our sin. In theological terms, this means that Jesus' death was substitutionary, or vicarious, and in our place solely for our benefit and without benefit for himself. Therefore, we find the cross of Jesus to be the crux of good news, because it was there that Jesus atoned for our sin according to the promises of Scripture.

Among the central events in the Old Testament was the act of atonement, including the annual celebration of the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) according to the regulations of the book of Leviticus.

The Day of Atonement was the most important day of the year. It was intended to deal with the sin problem between humanity and God. Of

the many prophetic elements on this special day, one stands out. On that day, two healthy goats without defect were chosen; they were therefore fit to represent sinless perfection, perhaps in spite of the protests of animal rights activists.

The first goat was a sin offering. The high priest slaughtered this innocent goat, which acted as a substitute for the sinners who rightly deserved a violently bloody death for their many sins. He then sprinkled some of its blood on the mercy seat on top of the Ark of the Covenant inside the Most Holy Place. The goat was no longer innocent when it took the guilt of sin; it was a sin offering for the people (Lev. 16:15). Subsequently, its blood represented life given as payment for sin. The dwelling place of God was thus cleansed of the defilement that resulted from all of the transgressions and sins of the people of Israel, and God's just and holy wrath was satisfied. Theologically, we call this the doctrine of *propitiation*, whereby God's wrath is propitiated, or taken from us, because of Jesus so that we are no longer under God's wrath.

Then the high priest, acting as the representative and mediator between the sinful people and their holy God, would take the second goat and lay his hands on the animal while confessing the sins of the people. This goat, called the scapegoat, would then be sent away to run free into the wilderness away from the sinners, symbolically taking their sins with it. Theologically, we call this the doctrine of *expiation*, whereby our sin is expiated, or taken away, so that we are made clean.

In summary, all of this foreshadowed the coming of Jesus Christ, our High Priest who mediates between unholy people and our holy God, the sinless substitute who died a bloody death in our place for our sins, and the scapegoat who takes our sins away to be remembered by God no more. Subsequently, only by rightly understanding the function of the two goats is the atonement fully appreciated. Although there were two goats, there was only one slaughter. The first goat was slaughtered for the propitiation of sin. The second goat was not slaughtered but rather sent away with sin, showing the cleansing expiation from sin. Both of these great themes, propitiation and expiation, will be further explored in separate chapters in this book.

These great images of the priest, slaughter, and scapegoat are all given by God to help us more fully comprehend Jesus' work for us on the cross. Theologically, this is called *atonement* (at-one-ment); Jesus our

God became a man to restore a relationship between God and humanity. This is also what is meant throughout the English Standard Version of the Bible when the word *atone* and its related variations, such as *atoned* and *atonement*, appear nearly one hundred times.

Theologically, the concept of Jesus' dying in our place to pay our penalty for our sins has been expressed in theological shorthand as *penal substitution*. While the church has always affirmed this aspect of atonement, it was highlighted in the Reformation and in the theologies of John Calvin and Martin Luther.

This aspect of the atonement is under the most vehement attack today by people who do not believe that people are as sinful as they truly are, that God is as holy as he truly is, or that God has chosen an appropriate penalty for sin (death). Curiously, such critics are also commonly known to be the most vocal of hypocrites, simultaneously demanding justice on the earth for the poor, oppressed, and abused, while denying God the same kind of justice that is due him by those people that he created to glorify him with sinless obedience. Nonetheless, Scripture repeatedly and clearly declares that Jesus died as our substitute paying our penalty "for" our sins, as the following examples illustrate:

He was wounded *for* our transgressions; he was crushed *for* our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. (Isa. 53:5)

He poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession *for* the transgressors. (Isa. 53:12)

[He] was delivered up *for* our trespasses. (Rom. 4:25)

But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died *for* us. (Rom. 5:8)

Christ died *for* our sins. (1 Cor. 15:3)

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse *for* us. (Gal. 3:13)

For Christ also suffered once *for* sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God. (1 Pet. 3:18)

He is the propitiation *for* our sins, and not *for* ours only but also *for* the sins of the whole world. (1 John 2:2)

Indeed, the human problem is sin, the divine motivation is holy love, and the death and resurrection of the God-man Jesus is the solution. Consequently, the death of Jesus is the most important event in the history of the world and the crux of how a relationship with God is made possible. Because of this, Christianity is not based upon ideas or philosophies, but rather upon the one man Jesus Christ and the one event of his death by crucifixion. Therefore, we must now examine the final days of Jesus' life leading up to his crucifixion to more fully comprehend that event.

THE SUBSTITUTIONARY DEATH OF JESUS

In the days leading up to his death, Jesus was a young man of perhaps thirty-three. He was in good health due to his job as a carpenter and his constant walking of many miles as an itinerant minister. Jesus began speaking openly of his impending death, including at the Passover meal he ate with his friends as their Last Supper. There, he broke with fifteen centuries of protocol. In so doing, he showed that the Passover meal, which God's people had been eating annually, found its ultimate fulfillment in him. The Passover memorialized the night in Egypt when in faith God's people covered the doorposts of their home with blood so that death would not come to the firstborn son in their home but would rather pass over them (Exodus 6–12). Jesus, the firstborn Son of God, likewise had come to die and cover us with his blood so that God's just wrath would literally pass over us sinners as the essence of the new covenant (Luke 22:19–21).

During the Last Supper, Satan entered one of Jesus' disciples, Judas, who had been stealing money from Jesus' ministry fund for some time and had agreed to hand him over to the authorities to be crucified. After Judas left the meal to lead the soldiers to Jesus, Jesus went to the garden of Gethsemane, where he spent a sleepless night in an agony of prayer. Meanwhile, his disciples failed to intercede for him in prayer and instead kept falling asleep. At this point, Jesus was fully aware of his

impending crucifixion and was so distressed that, as the Bible records, he sweated drops of blood, a physical condition that doctors say is rare because it requires an elevated level of stress that few people ever experience. It is also possible, if not likely, that this refers to sweat pouring from him as blood does from an open wound. Either way, only in the most horrifying experiences of life are such things possible, and this is the central point of the biblical account as Jesus faced the cross.

After Jesus' exhausting, sleepless night of distress, Judas arrived with the soldiers and betrayed Jesus with a kiss. Jesus was then arrested. He was made to walk a few miles to a series of false trials where contradicting false witnesses were brought forward to offer false testimony. Despite the absence of any evidence supporting the false charges, Jesus was sentenced to be murdered. He was eventually blindfolded as a mob of cowardly men beat him mercilessly. He was then stripped naked in great shame, and the Bible just says that they had him scourged.

Scourging itself was such a painful event that many people died from it without even making it to their cross. Jesus' hands would have been chained above his head to expose his back and legs to an executioner's whip called a cat-o'-nine-tails. The whip was a series of long leather straps. At the end of some of the straps were heavy balls of metal intended to tenderize the body of a victim, like a chef tenderizes a steak by beating it. Some of the straps had hooks made of either metal or bone that would have sunk deeply into the shoulders, back, buttocks, and legs of the victim. Once the hooks had sunk deeply into the tenderized flesh, the executioner would rip the skin, muscle, tendons, and even bones off the victim as he shouted in agony, shook violently, and bled heavily. Hundreds of years prior, the prophet Isaiah predicted the results of Jesus' scourging: "Many were astonished at you—his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind" (Isa. 52:14).

Jesus then had a crown of lengthy thorns pressed into his head as onlookers who had previously hailed him with shouts of "Hosanna!" mocked him as the "King of the Jews" (Matt. 27:29). Blood began to flow down Jesus' face from the thorns, causing his hair and beard to be a bloodied and matted mess. Later, if Jesus could have seen clearly through the blood and sweat that burned his eyes, he would have witnessed soldiers rolling dice to see who would win the prize of his robe.

Jesus' bare back and shoulders, though bloodied and traumatized, were then forced to carry his roughly hewn wooden crossbar of perhaps one hundred pounds to his place of crucifixion. The cross was likely already covered in the blood of other men. Timber was so expensive that crosses were recycled; therefore, Jesus' blood mixed with the layers of blood, sweat, and tears of countless other men who had walked that same path before him.

Despite his young age and good health, Jesus was so physically devastated from his sleepless night, miles of walking, severe beating, and scourging that he was unable to carry his cross alone. A man named Simon of Cyrene was appointed to carry Jesus' cross. Upon arriving at his place of crucifixion, they pulled Jesus' beard out—an act of ultimate disrespect in ancient cultures—spat on him, and mocked him in front of his family and friends.

Jesus the carpenter, who had driven many nails into wood with his own hands, then had five- to seven-inch, rough, metal spikes driven into the most sensitive nerve centers on the human body, through his hands and feet. Jesus was nailed to his wooden cross. His body twitched involuntarily as he screamed in sheer agony.

Jesus was then lifted up, and his cross dropped into a prepared hole, causing his body to shake violently on the spikes. In further mockery, a sign was posted above Jesus that said, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews" (John 19:19). A painting later discovered from a second-century Roman graffito further shows the disrespect of Jesus at his crucifixion. The painting depicts the head of a jackass on Jesus' body being crucified, with a man standing alongside of it with his arms raised. The caption reads, "Alexamenos worships his god."

At this point during a crucifixion, the victims labored to breathe as their body went into shock. Naked and embarrassed, the victims would often use their remaining strength to seek revenge on the crowd of mockers who had gathered to jeer them. They would curse at their tormentors while urinating and spitting on them. Some victims would become so overwhelmed with pain that they would become incontinent, and a pool of sweat, blood, urine, and feces would gather at the base of their cross.

Jesus' crucifixion was a hideously grotesque scene. Hundreds of years in advance, the prophet Isaiah saw it this way: "He was despised

and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted” (Isa. 53:3–4).

In addition to the horrifying spectacle of the crucified Jesus, Isaiah also saw his silent response: “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth” (Isa. 53:7).

Rather than reviling his mockers or declaring his innocence, Jesus chose to die with his masculine dignity intact. He spoke seven last words from the cross. These words provide great insight into the final thoughts of Jesus and his purpose for dying.

First, Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). Jesus’ first word is a word of forgiveness for the very people who are murdering him. He knew that in a moment he would die to atone for their sins, including the sins they were presently committing against him. In this we see the utter selflessness of Jesus and his unbroken devotion to saving even the worst of sinners through the cross.

Second, Jesus said to one of the thieves being crucified at his side, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). Jesus’ second word is a word of salvation. Jesus was about to die to atone for that man’s sins and open heaven as a gift for him to enjoy as the pattern for all who would come to trust in Jesus for salvation.

Third, Jesus said to his mother, Mary, and his best friend, John, “Woman, behold, your son! . . . Behold, your mother!” (John 19:26–27). As Jesus looked down from his cross, he saw his loving and godly mother, Mary, who was undoubtedly distressed at the sight of her eldest son. Worried for his mother, Jesus’ third word appoints his closest friend, John, to look after his mom and care for her like a son and a pastor in his place. Again we see the absolute selflessness of Jesus—his first three words are devoted to his murderers, a thief, and his mother, without yet speaking of his own great needs.

Fourth, Jesus said, “I thirst” (John 19:28). Jesus’ fourth word confirms that he humbly suffered as a human being and experienced all of the same physical pain and hardship as anyone in his place would have suffered. Jesus did not do anything to take a divine shortcut or ease

his very real physical anguish. Shockingly, the God who created water desperately needed a cup to quench his own thirst and was denied that simple pleasure.

Fifth, remaining a Bible teacher to the end, Jesus quotes Psalm 22:1, saying, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46). At this moment, Jesus died spiritually; the eternal communion he shared with God the Father and God the Spirit as the one Trinitarian God in three persons was broken as their backs were metaphorically turned on Jesus. It was in this moment that our sin was laid on the sinless Jesus (Isa. 53:6), and three hours of darkness came upon the earth, giving the ominous impression that the dominion of darkness had in fact conquered Jesus.

Speaking of this darkest moment in all of time, 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, “For our sake he [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin.” The great Protestant Reformer Martin Luther rightly declares that at that moment Jesus became the most grotesque, ugly, and hideous thing in the history of all creation. In what Luther calls “the great exchange,” the sinless Jesus so thoroughly took our place that he became the worst of what we are—rapists, thieves, perverts, addicts, liars, gluttons, gossips, murderers, adulterers, fornicators, homosexuals, and idolaters. Importantly, Jesus’ work on the cross was not just a bookkeeping transaction in the divine economy. Jesus actually took to himself our sin with all its horror and shame (Heb. 12:2–3).

Also speaking of what transpired at the moment of Jesus’ fifth word, Galatians 3:13 quotes Deuteronomy 21:23, saying, “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.’” As our sin was laid upon Jesus and he became the most heinous of beings, Jesus Christ was literally cursed by God on the cross. He came under the judgment of God the Father and God the Spirit as nothing less than the ugliness of damnable evil. Again we see the substitutionary reality: it was our sin and our condemnation, but it was Jesus, the sinless one, who took our place and in so doing took our sin and condemnation so that we could live a new life with a new nature by a new power free from sin and condemnation.

Sixth, Jesus said in a loud voice of triumph, “It is finished” (John 19:30). At this moment, the atonement for sin was made, and the holiness, righteousness, justice, and wrath of God were satisfied in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Sadly, some have taught, based on a later

revision in the Apostles' Creed, that Jesus did not fully secure our salvation on the cross but rather suffered in hell for three days prior to his resurrection as further atonement. As we have seen, however, Jesus said he was going to paradise on that day and that his work was finished, which negates three days in hell to conclude his work. The Scriptures merely say that Jesus went to the tomb but never declare that he went to hell (Matt. 27:59–60; Mark 15:46; Luke 23:52–55; John 19:41–42).

Seventh, Jesus said, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” (Luke 23:46). Jesus reserved his final breath from the cross to shout his triumphant victory to the world by confirming that he had been restored to God the Father after atoning for human sin. Though we cannot prove it, we do wonder if he was smiling at the conclusion of his mission while gazing heavenward and longing for his rightful return to glory.

The Bible then simply records that Jesus breathed his last and died. Oddly, Islam officially teaches that Jesus did not die on the cross but merely swooned and passed out. If Jesus had not died, that would in and of itself be a miracle, especially in light of the fact that the soldiers were not yet finished ravaging his body.

Jesus hung on the cross for at least six hours—from the third hour to the ninth hour, when the darkness ended (Mark 15:25, 33). How long thereafter that he breathed his last and died is not clear in Scripture. What is clear is the fact that if a victim remained alive on the cross for too long so that it interfered with another event such as a major holiday, it was customary to break the victim's legs, thereby disabling him from pushing himself up on his cross to fill his lungs with air and thereby prolong his life. However, in accordance with the promise of Scripture, Jesus died quickly enough that his legs were not broken (Ps. 34:20; John 19:36). Furthermore, to ensure Jesus was dead, a professional executioner ran a spear through his side, which punctured his heart sac, and water and blood flowed from his side. Jesus died with both a literal and metaphorical broken heart.

For many years, the most sacred place on earth had been the temple, where the presence of God dwelled behind a thick curtain. Only one person a year, the high priest, was allowed to pass by that curtain and enter the presence of God on one day, the Day of Atonement. At the death of Jesus, however, the temple curtain was torn from top to bot-

tom, signifying that God had opened his presence to the world through the cross of Jesus.

Though it was daytime, darkness came as Jesus was prepared for burial. Because Jesus died in poverty, there was not even a burial site prepared for him. A wealthy man named Joseph of Arimathea generously gave his own tomb as a gift to house the body of Jesus, in fulfillment of the promise Isaiah had made hundreds of years earlier, that Jesus would be laid with the rich in his burial (Isa. 53:9).

Three days after his death, Jesus rose with the sun on Sunday morning, triumphing over Satan, sin, and death, just as he had repeatedly promised (Matt. 12:38–40; Mark 8:31; John 2:18–22). Jesus then escaped from his roughly one hundred pounds of burial wrappings and spices, rolled back the large stone covering the entrance to his tomb, walked past the guards on duty, and walked into town on the feet that still bore the scars of his crucifixion.

Over the following forty days, Jesus appeared to crowds upward of five hundred people, proving that he was God who had come to fulfill the promise given to our first parents, that a boot would stomp on the head of the Serpent and liberate those who were held captive in sin and death (1 Cor. 15:1–11). Among those who witnessed Jesus' resurrection and were convinced of his deity were Thomas the doubter, who needed to touch Jesus' scars before he would believe, and Jesus' own mother and brothers, James and Jude, who began worshiping him as their God. His two brothers became Christian pastors and wrote books of the New Testament bearing their names.

Following Jesus' ascension back into heaven, the early church, numbering only one hundred twenty people, gathered informally for a time of prayer, seeking what God would have them to do and awaiting the empowerment of God the Holy Spirit that Jesus had promised. The first pages of Acts record that on the Jewish holiday of Pentecost, which commemorated God's giving the Law to Moses, God the Holy Spirit came with supernatural power, and three thousand people converted to Jesus in a single day.

The flame of Pentecost has continued to burn brightly ever since; today, a few billion people worship Jesus as their only God because they, like Paul, have realized that Jesus died for them personally (Gal. 2:20). They gather together each Sunday, rather than the traditional Jewish

Sabbath day (Saturday), because Sunday was the day of Jesus' resurrection; they gather as the church that was purchased by Jesus at the cross (Eph. 5:25). In these churches, the faithful preachers of the gospel, like Paul, preach nothing but the cross and the crucifixion of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 2:2). In these churches, the faithful servants of the gospel are not ashamed of the cross (Rom. 1:16) but rather boast in the cross (Gal. 6:14), though they are deemed by many to be nothing but fools for Christ (1 Cor. 3:18). Their greatest fear is that they would live as hypocrites and enemies of the cross (Phil. 3:18). In sum, the Christian church lives as a witness to the work of Jesus on the cross for sinners.

In conclusion, it is tempting to look upon the crucified Jesus with condescending pity and feel sorry for his brutal suffering. Yet, out of respect for Jesus' dignity we must resist that temptation, because Jesus did not die as yet another helpless victim. Rather, with the cross on the horizon of his life, Jesus said that no one would take his life from him in defeat, but rather he would give it and take it up again in victory (John 10:18). Furthermore, Hebrews 12:2 encourages us to "[look] to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God." In dignity and triumph, Jesus endured the cross because of the joy that awaited him on the other side of his resurrection, where the Father is glorified in heaven and sinful people have been atoned for on the earth. Today Jesus sits upon his throne in heaven, smiling as he rules over all creation and prepares for the day of his final coming to establish his eternal throne upon the earth. This triumphantly joyous Jesus is not served by our pity but by our praise.

Having established that the substitutionary atonement made possible by Jesus' death on the cross is the great jewel of our faith, we will turn to examine twelve glorious sides of that jewel that together shine forth the glory of God. In an effort to make these points personally relevant to you, each of the remaining chapters will be written in the form of a letter to individuals who are very dear to me, their pastor. Some have sinned greatly and others have been sinned against greatly. Some are young and some are old. Some are male and some are female. Some are Christians and some are not. What they each need is what every person desperately needs—a proper biblical understanding of and personal faith in what Jesus has accomplished for them on the cross.

Answers to Common Questions about Substitutionary Atonement

What does “substitution” mean?

“Substitution” refers to a person or thing acting or serving in place of another. Biblically, the concept of substitution was first practiced not by God but by human beings. When our first parents chose to disobey God and believe the lies of our Enemy, they chose to substitute themselves for God in an effort to become their own gods. Subsequently, to save sinners God had to reverse that tragic substitution and did so by becoming a human being and dying in our place to atone for our sins.

In his marvelous book, *The Cross of Christ*, John Stott insightfully explains this fact:

The concept of substitution may be said, then, to lie at the heart of both sin and salvation. For the essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man. Man asserts himself against God and puts himself where only God deserves to be; God sacrifices himself for man and puts himself where only man deserves to be. Man claims prerogatives which belong to God alone; God accepts penalties which belong to man alone.⁴

Therefore, the concept of substitution beautifully shows forth the love and mercy of God, who is willing to endure the worst for us and give the best to us—namely, himself as our only God and Savior.

Does not substitutionary atonement portray God as angry and vengeful?

Inevitably, substitution does mean that God is punishing human beings according to their sins. This concept is increasingly unpopular, as it has been overshadowed by accepting people as they are, forgiving what they do, and forgetting the evil they have done and the pain they have caused.

Interesting, however, is the proclivity of people to reverse their position when the proverbial shoe is on the other foot. What I mean

is this: when I sin against someone, I want them to accept me, forgive me, and let me off the hook, because that is what sinners want. As long as we view the cross only from the perspective of sinners, this is all we will see. However, when we or someone we love is sinned against, we cry out for justice because that is what victims want. For example, a father who learned that his young daughter had been sexually abused by his brother told me he “wanted blood.” This, precisely, is the perspective of God, who has never sinned against anyone but is continually sinned against by everyone and is truly the greatest victim in all of history. While he is not to be pitied, such injustice must be acknowledged.

Some will protest that such a desire for blood and justice is primitive. But what is the appropriate response to someone who deliberately sins, shows no remorse or repentance, and maintains ongoing devotion to doing evil? The hard truth is that our sin hurts God and hurts the people that God made and loves. Like anyone who truly loves, God takes it personally when harm is done, precisely because he is loving, not because he is unloving.

Sadly, what to do with sinners has led to a political tug-of-war between the right and left. The right generally prefers retribution, which punishes sinners with such things as prison time and capital punishment but usually bypasses rehabilitation and diminishes community responsibility for correction. The left generally prefers rehabilitation, which seeks to improve sinners with such things as therapy and medication but usually bypasses punishment and diminishes personal responsibility for sin. You can see more of this in C. S. Lewis’s great essay on the humanitarian theory of punishment.⁵

At the cross we see that God deals with sinners through both retribution and rehabilitation. God made us for glory, not sin. Through Jesus’ death on the cross, God honors the dignity of our personhood—we are more than animals incapable of good. By dying for us in our place and suffering our rightful punishment, Jesus also satisfies the retributive justice necessary for God the victim. Through Jesus’ death, God has secured for us who believe in Jesus the benefit of a new nature empowered by the Holy Spirit that is not only capable of being reformed but eternally guaranteed to be sinless, thereby satisfying the rehabilitative needs of us sinners.

In conclusion, sin affects both God and the sinner, and only through the cross are God and sinners simultaneously served.

Does the Bible really speak of substitution, of the Messiah's taking the punishment for my sin in my place?

While this question has already been answered in the chapter, it deserves stressing yet again, because it is vitally important and vehemently opposed.

The Bible says that Jesus died for all, including dying my death for me personally. We've already seen substitution in 1 Corinthians 15:3–4, where “Christ died for our sins” has to mean that he died *because of* our sins. Similarly, we saw that Jesus took our curse in our place in Galatians 3:13. These are not isolated passages.

For example, 2 Corinthians 5:14–15 says, “For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.” Paul's phrase “one has died for all” includes the fact that Jesus died for our benefit. But that does not exhaust the meaning of this text. It also says that Jesus' death is our death, even though we weren't even born yet. The only way Jesus' death can be my death is if he took the penalty of my sin to himself, and in his death he took my place and suffered the death I deserve.

John gives us another clear teaching about substitution. The Jewish leaders were worried that Jesus was going to bring trouble on the people of Israel by claiming to be the Messiah. John 11:48–51 says:

“If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.” But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all. Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.” He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation.

Caiaphas wanted Jesus dead so that the people of Israel would not have

to die. John's point is that this substitution is actually an unwitting prophecy of the substitution of Jesus taking our penalty in our place.

Also consider Hebrews 9:26–10:12, which makes the same point. There, the author says that Christ has appeared once for all to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. He was offered once to bear the sins of many. We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. After Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.

Jesus' death is not a tragedy perpetuated by oppressive Roman soldiers but a self-initiated sacrifice, an offering he came to make. In that offering, he, though sinless, bore or carried our sins. Through his sacrifice, guilty sinners are sanctified or cleansed of sin, defilement, and shame.

God says through his divinely inspired Scriptures that somehow Jesus' death was my death and your death. We were helpless, spiritually dead, and separated from God. Yet, when Jesus died on the cross, his death was somehow ours so that we don't have to be separated from God anymore. We no longer have to be lost in a maze of self-centeredness, living for ourselves. Because Jesus' death was our death, we can live like, with, and for Jesus, spiritually alive and connected to the living God.