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RETHINKING THE MEANING OF JESUS' CRUCIFIXION

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Jesus Punished, Once and for All?

Today's Western debates about the cross take place, for better and for worse, within the ongoing influence of the sixteenth-century Reformation. But, as Swiss theologian Karl Barth pointed out, the sixteenth-century Reformers never sorted out what to say about the ultimate future (for which the technical term is "eschatology"); and, as we saw, whatever we mean by "atonement" is directly related to whatever we think about God's ultimate future, particularly about what happens after death. *How* we are saved is closely linked to the question of what we are saved *for*.

This had a particularly sharp focus at the time of the Reformation. In sixteenth-century Europe, a great many people worried a lot about the doctrine of purgatory, the belief that after death faithful Christians could expect to spend time in a place of punishment and purgation where sins were finally dealt with before they might finally enter heaven. Luther's early protest was fueled by his angry rejection of the corrupt practice whereby people could buy "indulgences" that would allow relatives or friends to get out of purgatory, or at least get through it more quickly. Purgatory gripped the imagination of late medieval Europe to a degree almost impossible to imagine today. The rich, and not least the royal, often left copious sums of money to fund "chantries" in which prayers would be offered for their souls in purgatory.

Behind all this was the great heaven-and-hell scheme of Western eschatology, which we see in literary works like those of Dante and in majestic visual art like Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel frescoes. Bodily resurrection remained the official dogma, but the late medieval period more and more envisaged the ultimate promised future not as a new creation, but as the picture of "heaven" common to this day in Western Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant. Many dictionaries still define "eschatology" using the

terms "death, judgment, heaven, and hell," often known as the "Four Last Things." It is possible to combine this with a belief in ultimate new creation, but most people who have been taught the traditional fourfold scheme don't even realize that this alternate schema is an option, far less that it is the *biblical* option.

The Reformers by and large rejected not only the abuses connected with purgatory (selling indulgences and the like), but the doctrine itself. In part this may have been because they saw this teaching being used as a weapon by the clerical elite to maintain social and dogmatic control. But their objections were set out in robustly theological and biblical terms. They insisted that the Christian soul went immediately to heaven after death. (Some tried to combine this with the New Testament's sense of a time lag before the ultimate new creation, teaching that the soul might in some sense "sleep" in between bodily death and bodily resurrection; but the point, again, was "no purgatory.") These issues remained unresolved and are not relevant to our present discussion, except as the context for the truly important thing. The rejection of purgatory precipitated a fresh emphasis from a new angle on an interpretation of the cross that echoed, but also differed from, that of Anselm.

Catholic apologists for the doctrine of purgatory had insisted that at the point of death the still sinful soul needed two things: further purification and further punishment. (Allowance was made for a small number of saints who would go straight to heaven, but they were assumed to be very much the exception.) The Reformers replied that the purification in question was effected not *after* death, but *by* bodily death itself (as in Rom. 6:7, where death pays all debts) and by the Spirit's present sanctifying work, putting to death the deeds of the body (as in Rom. 8:13). And they insisted, particularly, that postmortem punishment for the still sinful believer was unthinkable, *because the punishment had already been inflicted on Jesus himself in the sinner's place*. "So, therefore, there is no condemnation . . . because . . . right there in the

flesh, [God] condemned sin" (Rom. 8:1-4). That punishment had already been meted out and could not be repeated. Thus the doctrine known as "penal substitution" (Jesus bearing punishment in the place of his people), though in itself a much older, indeed biblical and patristic, conception, received a new boost *and a new spin* from the Reformers' rejection of purgatory. One of the reasons it became such a hallmark of Reformation theology was that it was thus a key part of the polemic against a doctrine that lacked biblical support and had the visible propensity to generate corruption and abuse. (It is noteworthy that leading Roman theologians today, men of the stature of Karl Rahner and Joseph Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI, have radically revised the doctrine, so that it bears almost no relation to what their forebears taught in the early sixteenth century.)

The Reformers did not, however, challenge the first part of the medieval doctrine, the pacification of divine wrath through the death of Jesus. Indeed, they insisted on it. (They were careful to expound it through a trinitarian theology of divine love, in other words, over against any suggestion of a "kind Jesus" pacifying an "angry God"; this too can be seen as a reaction against a tendency in medieval art and presumably theology to have a stern Father and a meek and suffering Jesus.) But they insisted on this view of Jesus's death precisely as part of their undermining of purgatory. Not only had the divine wrath been placated through the Father's own action in sending the Son; the punishment for sin had already been meted out. The more one emphasized Jesus's wrath-bearing death in the sinner's place, the less one could then ask the sinner to bear any subsequent punishment.

Luther's protest of 1517 thus kept the medieval picture of God's wrath, but insisted that this wrath was quenched by God's love through the death of Jesus. Exactly one hundred years earlier, a traveling monk called Poggio Bracchiolini discovered a previously lost manuscript of Lucretius's first-century BC masterpiece, *De Rerum Natura*, which forms an elegant, poetic exposition of

the Epicureanism that would then make such an impact on Europe. Bracchiolini too was reacting against the medieval vision of an angry God. But whereas Luther kept the wrath of God and declared that the wrath had fallen on Jesus, Bracchiolini followed the ancient Epicureans in proposing that God, or the gods, were a long way away and were unconcerned with human affairs and certainly not angry about anything in our world. Both were reacting against the same medieval excess, Bracchiolini by denying it altogether and Luther by interposing Jesus and his death. Both have had a long and continuing influence in Western culture.

The other great Reformation protest was against the medieval Roman Catholic doctrine of the Mass. In particular, the Reformers objected strongly to the idea that the priest at the altar was sacrificing Jesus all over again, thus making the benefit of his atoning death available for all those who witnessed the event. (*Watching Mass* being celebrated was deemed to be as effective as actually receiving Communion, if not more so.) Here again the doctrine of penal substitution provided a strong, sharp answer: Jesus died in our place once for all, *ephapax* (as Paul puts it in Rom. 6:10); as a result, the priest could not be sacrificing Jesus again in the Mass. The Mass was thus vilified as doing blasphemous violence to the unique, one-off self-offering of Jesus by attempting to add to the "finished work of Christ" some extra "works" on the part of the congregation, or at least the celebrant. This question thus became further muddled as the specter of "justification by works" loomed up behind, enabling the Reformers to accuse their Roman opponents of not only adding to the already complete sacrifice of Christ, but also bringing their own "works" into play to supplement what Jesus had already achieved. The question of whether medieval Catholics actually taught all this is beside the point, since the Reformers certainly thought they did. As with purgatory, there is also more than a hint that there are social and cultural forces at work behind the theology as people came to reject the power exercised, through the Mass, by the clergy.

These two polemical targets—purgatory and the Mass—thus ensured that when the Reformers were developing their own ways of explaining what the death of Jesus achieved, they were understandably eager to ward off what they saw as ecclesial abuse. I am not a specialist in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but it does seem to me that in general terms the Reformers and their successors were thus *trying to give biblical answers to medieval questions*. They were wrestling with the question of how the angry God of the late medieval period might be pacified, both here (through the Mass?) and hereafter (in purgatory?). To both questions, they replied: no, God's wrath was already pacified through the death of Jesus. Not only does this not need to be done again; if we were to try to do it again, we would be implying that the death of Jesus was somehow after all inadequate. (Echoes of this controversy can still be seen when exegetes tiptoe around Col. 1:24, in which Paul seems to be saying that his own sufferings are somehow completing something that was "lacking" in the Messiah's own sufferings.) They did not challenge the underlying idea that the gospel was all about pacifying divine wrath. It was simply assumed that this was the problem Paul was addressing in Romans 1:18–32 or indeed 1 Thessalonians 1:10 or 5:9.

If, of course, you are faced with the medieval questions, it is better to give them biblical answers than nonbiblical ones. But the biblical texts themselves might suggest that there were better questions to be asking, which are actually screened out by concentrating on the wrong ones. As I have sometimes remarked in reading the gospels, it is possible to check all the correct boxes, but still end up with the wrong result, like a child doing a connect-the-dots puzzle who doesn't realize the significance of the numbers and ends up with an elephant instead of a donkey; or perhaps, writing from Scotland, I should say a Saltire instead of a Union Jack.

I should also add that these last two or three paragraphs, taken by themselves, could give a very lopsided view of the Reformers.

Luther and his colleagues were energetic biblical expositors, excited about the New Testament message of the grace and love of God, which they had not heard taught in the days of their youth. In particular, they went back again and again to grace, love, faith, hope, freedom, and joy as the ultimate reasons for everything, and certainly the ultimate reasons for their own excitement and energy. That, for them, was what it was all about. However, in their insistence on certain particular ways of understanding the biblical teaching on Jesus's death, the two factors I have highlighted—purgatory and the Mass—remained extremely influential. Even when they were gazing in gratitude on the cross as the effective sign of God's love, these concerns and the need to consolidate a Reformation in which abuses would not return to a half-taught church remained powerful.

In thus giving (as it seems to me) the right answers to the wrong questions, the Reformers failed to challenge the larger heaven-and-hell framework itself (which Eastern theologians challenge to this day) or to think through what new creation and resurrection would actually mean or how they might come about. Of course, the great Reformers had a strong agenda for the reformation of society as well as theology. A good deal of their energies went into the attempts to create new kinds of Christian societies within European cities, like Calvin's Geneva, and even countries, like Cromwell's Britain. But the underlying eschatological framework remained in place.

I have often reflected that if the Reformers had focused on Ephesians rather than Romans or Galatians, the entire history of Western Europe would have been different. In Ephesians 1:10 the divine purpose is to sum up, in the Messiah, all things in heaven and on earth. Romans 8 makes the same point, but the key passage, 8:18–24, has routinely been bracketed out, since it has been assumed that Paul's talk in that chapter about "inheritance" and "glorification" is simply a roundabout way of speaking of "going to heaven." That vision of a nonbodily ultimate "heaven" is a

direct legacy of Plato and of those like the philosopher and biographer Plutarch, a younger contemporary of St. Paul, who interpreted Plato for his own day. It is Plutarch, not the New Testament (despite what one sometimes hears!), who suggested that humans in the present life are “exiled” from their true “home” in “heaven.” That vision of the future—an ultimate glory that has left behind the present world of space, time, and matter—sets the context for what, as we shall see, is a basically paganized vision of how one might attain such a future: a transaction in which God’s wrath was poured out against his son rather than against sinful humans.

In particular, the churches of the Reformation, including my own, have often not known what to do with Easter itself. Conservatives have said that Jesus was bodily raised, while liberals have denied it, but neither group has seen the bodily resurrection as the launching of God’s new creation within the present world order. And with that failure many other things have been lost as well. I have written about this elsewhere, particularly in *Surprised by Hope*. Once we say that the aim of God’s saving plan is the new heaven and new earth, with resurrection bodies for his redeemed people, then the means by which we are brought to that goal, leaving sin and death behind, must be rethought as well. Atonement (how humans are rescued from their plight and restored to their intended place within the loving and creative purposes of God) must dovetail with eschatology (what God ultimately intends for the world and for humans). And if we rethink our eschatology, as I have been trying to do over the last decade or two, we must rethink our view of atonement as well. In fact, the two go together very closely in the New Testament: the cross was the moment when something *happened* as a result of which the world became a different place, inaugurating God’s future plan. The revolution began then and there; Jesus’s resurrection was the first sign that it was indeed under way. That is what the present book is about.

The unresolved theological problems of the sixteenth century were made worse, in my view, by the collusion of the Western churches with the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Many Christians in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries still held to a robust resurrection hope. That, indeed, formed part of the postmillennial “Puritan hope,” reflecting a mood of cultural optimism as well as spiritual hope. But by the nineteenth century the notion of “going home to heaven” had all but taken over. The essential Epicureanism of the Enlightenment insisted on a great gulf between earth and heaven. Many devout Christians accepted that unbiblical cosmology, opting for a detached spirituality (a heavenly-mindedness with a questionable earthly use) and an escapist eschatology (leaving the world and going to heaven). Over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, on both sides of the Atlantic, this has taken us back once more to the medieval heaven-and-hell eschatology, which has radically conditioned both soteriology (“How are we saved for that goal?”) and missiology (“How should the church set forward God’s work of salvation?”).

True, the doctrine of purgatory was not so popular outside Roman circles in the nineteenth century. But “penal substitution,” which had been emphasized partly in order to ward off that idea, then found a new home in the Western piety that focused not on God’s kingdom coming on earth as in heaven, but on *my* sin, *my* heavenly (that is, nonworldly) salvation, and of course *my* Savior. This, indeed, presses a particular question upon us: if many of our contemporary ideas about what was achieved on the cross belong with a nineteenth-century view of “sinners” being “saved” and “going to heaven,” what might the cross mean for the earlier view in which the gospel is transforming the whole world? That is a question for the historians, though since my own view of the cross as the start of a revolution has a lot in common with those earlier beliefs, I will be giving my own answer in due course.

Another problem emerges in the eighteenth century and is still with us powerfully today. I have written about this in *Evil and the Justice of God*. When much European culture in the eighteenth century was embracing Deism and then Epicureanism, a radical split emerged between personal sin, which stopped people going to heaven, and actual evil in the world, including human wrongdoing, violence, war, and so on, but also what has been called “natural evil,” earthquakes, tsunamis, and the rest. “Atonement theologies” then addressed the former (how can our sins be forgiven so we can go to heaven?), while the latter was called the “problem of evil,” to be addressed quite separately from any meaning given to the cross of Jesus by philosophical arguments designed to explain or even justify God’s providence. The two became radically divided from one another, and questions about the meaning of Jesus’s death were related to the former rather than the latter. The revolution that began on Good Friday—whose first fruit was the socially as well as theologically explosive event of the resurrection—seemed to be pushed to one side.

One unexpected result of this, therefore, as I suggested in that earlier book, is that it has been tacitly assumed that the cross has nothing to do with social and political evil. Such “evil” was then to be addressed in (apparently) nontheological ways. After the terrible events of September 11, 2001, Western leaders united in declaring that there was “evil” at large in the world and that they and their allies were going to deal with it—basically by dropping bombs on it. That proposal was not only politically naive and disastrous, not only philosophically shallow; it was also theologically naive or even, one might say, heretical. It was trying to “deal with evil” all by itself, with no reference to any belief that this might be God’s job. (This is an analogy to the Reformers’ protest against what they saw as the Roman tendency to add to the unique sacrifice of Christ, whether in purgatory or in the Mass.)

In Christian theology it is God who deals with evil, and he does this on the cross. Any other “dealing with evil” must be

seen in the light of that. This is of course very difficult to work out on the ground. For that we would need a freshly thought through theological analysis of international politics in the post-modern age of global empire, on the one hand, and terrorism, on the other. There are no easy or glib solutions. But just as we must (I believe) restore the biblical vision of God’s ultimate future and reconceive atonement in relation to that—the task of Part Three of the present book—so we must restore the biblical analysis of evil and see the cross as addressing it all, not just part of it.

Scandalous—For the Wrong Reasons?

If a quick tour of two thousand years of church history leaves us somewhat confused about the meaning of the cross, we will not be surprised that there is plenty of confusion in our own day as well. When, as I mentioned earlier, the National Gallery opened its 2000 exhibition “Seeing Salvation” and the skeptics sneered, the standard Christian response might have been, “Well, he died for our sins.” But that, for many today, just makes it worse. Skeptics come back with more scorn. “Sin” itself is out of date, they say. It’s just a projection of anxieties or childhood phobias. To land our “sins” onto a dead first-century Jew is not just ridiculous; it’s disgusting. To suggest that some god projected our “sins” onto that man is even worse: it’s a sort of cosmic child abuse, a nightmare fantasy that grows out of—or might actually lead to!—real human abuses in today’s world. We can do without that nonsense.

The angry scorn of the skeptics gets extra traction from the fact that some have found the sign of the cross to be a symbol of fear. The horrible dark history of “Christian” persecution of people of other faiths, particularly Jewish people, has left a stain on what should be a symbol of hope and welcome. I remember being shocked, as a young man, to read about Jews who had

escaped from persecution in supposedly “Christian” cultures in eastern Europe and who then, upon arriving in America, saw on street corners the sign of the cross, which they had come to fear and loathe. Those of us who grew up with crosses in our churches and all around us and with no anti-Jewish ideas in our heads have to face the fact that our central symbol has often been horribly abused. It has been used as a sign of a military might or of a dominant culture determined to stamp out all rivals. The emperor Constantine, facing a crucial battle, saw a vision of the cross in the sky and was told, “In this sign you will conquer.” The Ku Klux Klan burns crosses, claiming to bring the light of the Christian gospel into dark places. The fact that such nonsense is a scandalous denial of the early Christian meaning of the cross doesn’t make it any better.

It isn’t just those outside the Christian faith who have found the cross a symbol of fear. Many inside the church too have shrunk back from one particular interpretation that, in some form or other, has dominated much Western Christianity over the last half millennium. One recent hymn puts it like this:

*And on the cross, when Jesus died,
The wrath of God was satisfied—*

(This makes it sound like hunger that is satisfied by a good meal.) The line of thought goes like this, usually based on a particular arrangement of biblical texts:

- a. All humans sinned, causing God to be angry and to want to kill them, to burn them forever in “hell.”
- b. Jesus somehow got in the way and took the punishment instead (it helped, it seems, that he was innocent—oh, and that he was God’s own son too).
- c. We are in the clear after all, heading for “heaven” instead (provided, of course, we believe it).

Many preachers and teachers put it much more subtly than this, but this is still the story people hear. This is the story they *expect* to hear. In some churches, if you don’t tell this story more or less in this way, people will say that you aren’t “preaching the gospel.”

The natural reaction to this from many who have grown up hearing this message and feeling they *had* to believe it (if they didn’t, they would go to hell) is that its picture of God is abhorrent. This God, such people instinctively feel, is a bloodthirsty tyrant. If there is a God, we must hope and pray that he (or she, or it) isn’t like that at all. So they react in one of a number of predictable ways. Some people reject the whole thing as a horrible nonsense. Others, puzzled, go back to their Bibles and to the great teachers of the early church, and there they find all sorts of other things being said about the cross, for instance, that it was the means by which God’s rescuing love won the ultimate victory over all the forces of darkness. Or they find early writers urging Christians to imitate the self-giving love of Jesus, and they seize upon that as the “answer”: the cross, they say, wasn’t about God punishing sin; it was about Jesus giving us the ultimate example of love. Thus many different interpretations have arisen, affecting the ways in which people have been taught the Bible and the Christian faith. This has been a recipe for confusion.

This confusion, as I shall be suggesting, gets in the way of what is arguably the most important thing. The New Testament insists, in book after book, that when Jesus of Nazareth died on the cross, *something happened as a result of which the world is a different place*. And the early Christians insisted that when people are caught up in the meaning of the cross, they become *part* of this difference. You wouldn’t necessarily guess this from many of the debates and reactions that I’ve just sketched or, sadly, from the way many Christians and many churches have sometimes behaved. But it’s what the first Christians thought, said, and taught. Jesus’s crucifixion was the day the revolution began.

In particular, they seem to have interpreted Jesus's crucifixion within a much bigger—and perhaps more dangerous—story than simply the question of whether people go to “heaven” or “hell.” That question, in fact—to the astonishment of many people—is not what the New Testament is about. The New Testament, with the story of Jesus's crucifixion at its center, is about God's kingdom coming *on earth as in heaven*. This is, after all, what Jesus taught his followers to pray. That is a rather obvious piece of evidence, though people regularly ignore it in practice. However, it points us in the direction I shall be following as we try to figure out what exactly happened on the cross and why it launched a revolution that continues to this day.

Confusions about the cross have come in many shapes and forms, but the one most Western Christians are familiar with today has to do with violence. Today's global population is more aware of violence, its scale, and its nature than any previous generation. But now, among the unintended consequences of the technological revolution, the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have offered two remarkable things. First, humans have devised ways of killing one another on an industrial scale. Second, the nastiest details about such horrors are now transmitted instantaneously around the world through social media. Apart from those directly involved either in war or torture, most people in earlier generations never really faced the disgusting actualities of raw violence. We all now know not only *that* it has happened and is happening, but what it looks like and sounds like. And even if we don't watch the relevant news bulletins, the movie industry has made an entire art form, new and dark, out of the graphic depiction of every kind of violence.

This seems to have been a kind of signature tune for the twentieth century, in which truly appalling acts of violence became defining moments for global culture. The mere names “Auschwitz” and “Hiroshima” say it all. It remains to be seen whether September 11, 2001, will become a defining moment of the same

kind for the twenty-first century or whether it will be overtaken by other yet more terrible crimes. But the point is this. The present generation has gazed with justified revulsion upon the whole late modern culture of violence and death; *and it has noticed worrying signs of the same culture in some expressions of Christianity*. Many have pointed out that traditional expressions of belief about Jesus's crucifixion sometimes mirror all too closely language that has been used to justify violence.

Putting it like that is deliberately vague. Things haven't been helped by the tendency in some quarters first to regard the Bible as a book of “moral examples” and then to express shock and alarm when a significant number of the stories, particularly but not exclusively in the Old Testament, display various characters behaving extremely badly. The book of Judges provides several examples (Jephthah and his daughter, for a start), but there are many others. Often it seems to be the women who come off worst: a daughter killed, a concubine raped and murdered, a slave girl treated as a substitute wife and then sent packing with her child. In fact, of course, the Bible was not written as a collection of “moral examples” in the first place. The stories are regularly told in quite a sophisticated way, nudging alert readers into seeing serious and complex underlying patterns and narratives that warn against simplistic readings and that, indeed, encourage them to draw conclusions beyond anything stated on the surface of the text.

But this both does and doesn't help. People naturally ask: Does the Bible justify violence? And, in particular: Is the death of Jesus a supreme example of the God of the Bible using violence—violence, it seems, against his own son!—as a way of achieving his purposes? (I once heard that argument made explicitly in the 1970s by some who wanted to use violence to oppose South African *apartheid*; they were saying, in effect, if God could do it, so can we.) Even supposing those purposes are ultimately loving and aimed at rescuing people, is this an appropriate way for the one true God to behave?

These questions come to a head when some preachers and teachers present the meaning of the cross in relation to punishment. Here we have to be careful. There are many ways of talking about the “punishment of sin” and how that might relate to the event of Jesus’s death. At least one of those ways is clearly taught in the Bible, but it means something significantly different from what many people suppose—many, that is, of those who teach it and many who oppose it. But another way in which the cross has been interpreted in connection with “punishment” has been very popular in some quarters. In this view, God hates sinners so much that he is determined to punish them, but Jesus more or less happens to get in the way and take the death blow on their behalf, so they are somehow spared. It would (I think) be difficult to find a work of serious theology in any tradition that puts the matter as baldly as that. Theologians will almost always say, “But of course this was because of God’s love for us.” But at a popular level, in sermons and talks to young people, enthusiastic preachers will often throw caution to the winds and use illustrations or explanatory stories that fall into this trap.

The day after I wrote that last sentence I received an e-mail that included a link to a short video claiming to sum up the gospel in a way that, I was told, I would find refreshing. It would build up my faith. Intrigued, I watched it. It was well put together, with clever sequences and plenty of hi-tech touches. But at the center of the message was a line that made my blood run cold. The video had described how we all mess up our lives, how we all do things that spoil God’s world, and so on. Then said the narrator, “Someone has to die,” and it turned out, of course, to be Jesus. That sums up the problem. What kind of “good news” is that? What kind of *God* are we talking about once we say that sort of thing? If God wants to forgive us, why can’t he just forgive us? (Voltaire famously suggested God would indeed forgive us, since after all that was his job.) Why does “someone have to

die”? Why *death*? Why would that help? And could it just be “someone,” anyone? Did it have to be God’s own son? How does it all *work*?

The danger with this kind of popular teaching—and examples of it are not hard to come by—is that ultimately we end up rewriting one of the most famous verses in the Bible. I already quoted the King James Version of John 3:16: “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son.” Look at the two verbs: God so *loved* the world that he *gave* his son. The trouble with the popular version I have described is that it can easily be heard as saying, instead, that God so *hated* the world, that he *killed* his only son. And that doesn’t sound like good news at all. If we arrive at that conclusion, we know that we have not just made a trivial mistake that could easily be corrected, but a major blunder. We have portrayed God not as the generous Creator, the loving Father, but as an angry despot. That idea belongs not in the biblical picture of God, but with pagan beliefs.

There are many reasons, most of them good ones, why people want to reject the picture of God—the-angry-despot. (Among the bad reasons for wanting to get rid of it is the lazy idea that God, if such a being exists at all, is like an indulgent elderly relative who doesn’t want to spoil people’s fun and so never gets angry about anything. As has often been pointed out, this is mere sentimentalism. If there is a God, and if he does not hate injustice, child prostitution, genocide, and a lot of other things as well, then he is not a good God.) Page after page of the New Testament insists, as we have already glimpsed, that what happens in the death of Jesus happens because of the *love* of God. But the problem with the “angry despot” picture of God is not solved by simply producing a few texts that say the opposite. Most preachers who *in fact* offer this picture will always say, if challenged, that God did what he did because of “love.” It’s just that it doesn’t *look like that* or *sound like that* to anyone trying to make sense of what’s just been said. It is easy for a preacher to deny the “angry despot” picture in

theory, but to reinforce it in practice. Talk to people who attend those churches. They know.

But the problems don't stop there. Many people have pointed out that the idea of an angry, bullying deity who has to be appeased, to be bought off, to have his wrathful way with someone even if it isn't the right person fits uncomfortably well with the way many human authority figures actually behave: tyrants, rulers, bosses, sometimes tragically also fathers, within families older men in general. Sometimes, of course, clergy. People who have grown up in a family with a violent, perhaps drunken, father or who have been abused one way or another by people in authority hear someone in a pulpit telling the story of the angry God, and they think, "*I know that character, and I hate him.*" It doesn't do any good to tell people in that state of mind that this angry God is really a loving God in disguise. "*If that's love,*" they think, "*then I don't want it.*" They have quite possibly been told by an abuser how much he "loves" them. You cannot rescue someone from the scars of an abusive upbringing by replaying the same narrative on a cosmic scale and mouthing the word "love" as you do so.

Now, as I say, there are many ways of speaking of the death of Jesus in relation to the punishment of sin. At least one of those ways is biblical. We shall come to that, and when we do we will find that the entire setting undermines any suggestion of the angry, bullying God. There is a different story, one that we need to think through in fresh ways. But even as we say that, we must face the other challenge to any such account of the meaning of the cross.

Some will say that a story in which God uses violence to redeem the world might serve as an excuse for those who want to believe, presumably on quite other grounds, that "redemptive violence" is the way the world is rescued from its various ills. I mentioned a moment ago an example of this argument from the 1970s, but it goes on today. Critics have found it easy to point out that some versions of the "punishment" view of Jesus's death seem

to be entrenched in the same communities, in parts of America, where a harsh penal regime, including the death penalty, is not only the norm, but is held up as a fine example of how to deal with crime and social unrest. In some of the same communities one might find the belief that when things go wrong in the wider world, the best thing to do is to use more violence there as well, dropping bombs on faraway towns and villages or sending drones to take out designated targets.

My point here is not that some ways of addressing global terrorism are more morally justified or more effective than others. These are complex issues. Easy "solutions" are bound to be oversimplifications. I want to say simply this: that many have observed an apparent connection between ways in which people have described the meaning of Jesus's death and ways in which others have seen fit to try to "solve" problems in the world. If God needs to punish, then perhaps we do as well. If God solves problems by using violence, maybe he wants us to do so too. However, the shift if not toward pacifism itself, then at least toward a strict limitation on military responses to global problems in certain sectors of public opinion in the Western world as a whole over the last century, has caused some in the churches to suggest views of the death of Jesus in which divine punishment plays no role at all. Some have even suggested that the connection between divine punishment and Jesus's death is a comparatively modern invention, though in truth we can find the same theme stated (in a different context, as I shall show) in the Bible itself. We also find it in the early church fathers, and we should note that many of them were strongly opposed to the death penalty at a time when it was taken for granted in the violent world of the Roman Empire. We should not too quickly assume that theories of atonement are directly reflected in or reflective of social practice.

All this points to the complexity of recent debates about the meaning of Jesus's crucifixion, about the "Why?" that haunts the whole subject. If certain "punishment" models of atonement are

perceived to license abusive or aggressive behavior, whether in families or between nations, does that mean we should rule them out of order, even if they seem to be sanctioned by some passages of scripture? Or—to look at things from the other end of the telescope—if such models of atonement are deemed after all to be central to scripture and to the preaching of the gospel itself, so that to soft-pedal such ideas would be to give up on an element of vital spiritual power, ought we instead to regard the sort of objections I have described as a diabolical trick to distract the church from its core message? Sadly, these questions often get bundled up with other ones, including ones about cultural, political, and social problems. At that point, clear-headed fresh readings of scripture can be seen receding over the horizon.

But if you take the first line—that “punishment” models of atonement are to be ruled out because of their horrible view of God or their equally horrible social consequences—what are the alternatives? Traditionally there have been two, both with strong claims to some kind of biblical basis.

First, as we saw earlier, there is the remarkable and paradoxical idea that on the cross Jesus won a victory—or at least God won a victory through Jesus—over the shadowy “powers” that had usurped his rule over the world. That idea was popular in some quarters during the first few Christian centuries. Many thinkers in the second half of the twentieth century and up to the present day have advocated some version of this, partly as a way of warding off what they see as those dangerous ideas about punishment. But this simply pushes the question around the circle rather than answering it directly. What or who are these “powers”? Why would someone’s death—anyone’s death, the Messiah’s death, the death of the Son of God himself—why would such an event defeat these “powers”? Why would that be a revelation of divine love? And—perhaps the most pressing question of all—if these “powers” have been defeated, why does evil still appear to carry on as before, to reign unchecked? Did anything actually happen

on the cross that made a real difference in the world, and if so what account can we give of it? Has the revolution really begun, or is it all wishful thinking?

Second, there’s another idea that comes through prominently in the Bible that many have advocated as the “real meaning” of Jesus’s death. In this view, on the cross Jesus offered the supreme example of love, the ultimate display of what love will do. He thus transformed the world by offering a uniquely powerful example, a pattern for others to imitate. Now, of course, the New Testament does indeed insist on this line of thought. Jesus’s death is regularly appealed to as the gold standard of “love.” In John’s gospel, Jesus commands his followers to love one another and declares, “No one has a love greater than this, to lay down your life for your friends” (15:13). The First Letter of John insists on the same point, as do Paul and many other early writers.

But this too runs into problems. Unless there was a *reason* for Jesus to die, and perhaps even a reason for him to die that particular and horrible kind of death, it is hard to see how this death could actually be an example of love. If Bill’s dearest friend falls into a fast-flowing river and Bill leaps in to try to save him, risking his own life in the process, that would indeed provide an example of love (as well as heroic courage) for anyone who witnesses the event or hears about it. But if Fred, wishing to show his dearest friend how much he loves him, leaps into a fast-flowing river when the friend is standing safely beside him on the bank, that would demonstrate neither love nor courage, but meaningless folly.

My point is this: unless Jesus’s death *achieved* something—something that urgently needed to be done and that couldn’t be done in any other way—then it cannot serve as a moral example. The “exemplary” meaning must always depend on something prior. As John puts it: “Love consists in this: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son to be *the sacrifice that would atone for our sins*. Beloved, if that’s how God loved us, we

ought to love one another in the same way" (1 John 4:10–11). John does not expect his readers to offer themselves as the sacrifice to atone for one another's sins. That has already been done. They are expected to *copy* the self-sacrificial love through which Jesus did something unique, something that urgently needed doing. So our question presses: What was that "something"?

At this point other questions have come into the contemporary discussion. First, as we have seen, the wars and genocides of the last century have generated a new kind of Christian pacifism in which all violence is to be rejected outright, including the apparent violence of some traditional atonement theories (God using violence against Jesus, and so on). Second, at the same time and perhaps with similar motivation, many have embraced the previously unthinkable idea that the suffering of the cross is the suffering not only of the Son, but also of the Father. Others, again, have reacted by proposing new versions of the old idea that though the "human" Jesus suffered on the cross, the "divine" Jesus did not. Whether that makes any sense is difficult to say. These questions demonstrate rather sharply something that is always going to be true: whatever we say about the cross will sooner or later involve us in discussions of the Trinity and the incarnation in the questions of who God really is and who Jesus really was and is.

Having mentioned earlier the ways in which Western hymnody has struggled to articulate the meaning of the cross, I note that at least one recent writer has expressed this new emphasis memorably:

*And when human hearts are breaking
Under sorrow's iron rod,
Then they find that self-same aching
Deep within the heart of God.²*

² Timothy Rees, "God Is Love, Let Heaven Adore Him."

Perhaps it all depends what you mean by "love" and by the love of God in particular. But to explore this any further we must go back to the primary evidence: the remarkably varied picture of the cross we find in the New Testament itself. What might happen if, instead of an ultimate vision of saved souls going to heaven, we were to start with the eschatology of Ephesians 1:10, with God's plan to sum up all things in heaven and earth in the Messiah? What if, instead of a disembodied "heaven," we were to focus on the biblical vision of "new heavens and new earth," with that renewal and that fusion of the two created spheres taking place in and through Jesus himself? What if, instead of the bare "going to heaven," we were to embrace (along with theologians like John Calvin) the biblical vocation of being the "royal priesthood"? What would happen if we thought through the ongoing cross-shaped implications, writ large as they are in the New Testament, of the once-for-all event of Jesus's death? What difference might that make to our view of salvation—including once more its philosophical and political dimensions? How, in other words, does the cross fit into the larger biblical narrative of new creation? What would happen if, instead of seeing the resurrection (both of Jesus and of ourselves) as a kind of happy addition to an otherwise complete view of salvation, we saw it as part of its very heart?

The problem—to put it bluntly—is that this is not what Romans is all about. I shall come back to this passage in the final chapter in Part Three of this book, but for the moment let me say this. Such a view of the relationship between God and humans is a travesty. It is indeed unbiblical. It insists on taking us to a goal very different from the one held out in scripture. It ignores, in particular, the actual meaning of Israel's scriptures, both in themselves and as they were read by the earliest Christians. And it insists on a diagnosis of the human plight that is, ironically, trivial compared with the real thing. Left to itself, this theory would launch a revolution very different from the one the New Testament has in mind.

What the Bible offers is not a “works contract,” but a covenant of *vocation*. The vocation in question is that of being a genuine human being, with genuinely human tasks to perform as part of the Creator's purpose for his world. The main task of this vocation is “image-bearing,” reflecting the Creator's wise stewardship into the world and reflecting the praises of all creation back to its maker. Those who do so are the “royal priesthood,” the “kingdom of priests,” the people who are called to stand at the dangerous but exhilarating point where heaven and earth meet. In saying this I am echoing what many theologians (including John Calvin, the founder of all “Reformed” theologies) have said before me. This is not surprising, because it is all there in the Bible. But this is not the story that normally comes through in popular preaching and teaching.

Within this narrative, creation itself is understood as a kind of Temple, a heaven-and-earth duality, where humans function as the “image-bearers” in the cosmic Temple, part of earth yet reflecting the life and love of heaven. This is how creation was designed to function and flourish: under the stewardship of the image-bearers. Humans are called not just to keep certain moral standards in the present and to enjoy God's presence here and hereafter, but to celebrate, worship, procreate, and take responsi-

bility within the rich, vivid developing life of creation. According to Genesis, that is what humans were made for.

The diagnosis of the human plight is then not simply that humans have broken God's moral law, offending and insulting the Creator, whose image they bear—though that is true as well. This lawbreaking is a symptom of a much more serious disease. Morality is important, but it isn't the whole story. Called to responsibility and authority within and over the creation, humans have turned their vocation upside down, giving worship and allegiance to forces and powers within creation itself. The name for this is idolatry. The result is slavery and finally death. It isn't just that humans do wrong things and so incur punishment. This is one element of the larger problem, which isn't so much about a punishment that might seem almost arbitrary, perhaps even draconian; it is, rather, about direct consequences. When we worship and serve forces within the creation (the creation for which we were supposed to be responsible!), we hand over our power to other forces only too happy to usurp our position. We humans have thus, by abrogating our own vocation, handed our power and authority to nondivine and nonhuman forces, which have then run rampant, spoiling human lives, ravaging the beautiful creation, and doing their best to turn God's world into a hell (and hence into a place from which people might want to escape). As I indicated earlier, some of these “forces” are familiar (money, sex, power). Some are less familiar in the popular mind, not least the sense of a dark, accusing “power” standing behind all the rest.

Called to the Royal Priesthood

I am suggesting that in the Bible humans are created in order to live as worshipping stewards within God's heaven-and-earth reality, rather than as beings who, by moral perfection, qualify

to leave "earth" and go to "heaven" instead. This vision of the human vocation comes into focus in the book of Revelation:

Glory to the one who loved us, and freed us from our sins by his blood, and *made us a kingdom, priests to his God and father*—glory and power be to him forever and ever. Amen. (1:5–6)

*You are worthy to take the scroll;
You are worthy to open its seals;
For you were slaughtered and with your own blood
You purchased a people for God,
From every tribe and tongue,
From every people and nation,
And made them a kingdom and priests to our God
And they will reign on the earth.* (5:9–10)

Blessed and holy is the one who has a share in the first resurrection! The second death has no power over them. They will be *priests to God and the Messiah, and they will reign with him* for a thousand years. (20:6)

The third passage repeats the vocation ("royal priesthood"), but not the means by which it is achieved (the Messiah's death); but the first two are quite clear. The death of Jesus, "freeing us from our sins" and "purchasing a people for God," was not simply aimed at rescuing humans from "hell," so that they could go to "heaven" instead—which is the picture most Christians have when they think about Jesus's death. The great scene at the end of the book is the joining together of the "new heavens and new earth." Being there in the presence of God and the Lamb will give back to the redeemed the role marked out for them from the beginning in Genesis and reaffirmed as Israel's vocation in the book of Exodus. There God promises his newly rescued people that they will be his "treasured possession," "a priestly kingdom and a holy nation" (19:5–6). The priestly vo-

cation consists of summing up the praises of creation before the Creator; the royal vocation, in turn, means reflecting God's wisdom and justice into the world. This is a direct outworking of Genesis 1:26–28, where humans are created in the divine image. The book of Revelation picks up this theme exactly where Israel's scriptures left off. It says—shockingly, of course—that the ancient vocation had been renewed in a new and revolutionary way through the death of the Messiah. Once we get the goal right (the new creation, not just "heaven") and the human problem properly diagnosed (idolatry and the corruption of vocation, not just "sin"), the larger biblical vision of Jesus's death begins to come into view.

A short aside may be needed at this point. Some readers may feel anxious about both elements of the vocation I am describing, the "royal" bit and the "priestly" bit. Let me say a word about each.

For many people, not least those who got rid of monarchs in the eighteenth century, the very idea of kings or queens seems outdated, antiquated, unnecessary, and quite possibly abusive. People often ask me why I continue to talk about the "kingdom of God" when kingdoms in general have been such a disaster, making a few people rich and proud and a great many people poor and downtrodden. My normal answer is that things were like that in the first century too, if anything worse (think of Herod; think of Caesar!), but that Jesus went on talking about *God* becoming king anyway. Why did he do that?

Answer: Because the perversion of human rule is just that, a perversion. We ought not to let the perversion rob us of the good news; and the good news is not only that God is sorting out the world, but that his rule is a different kind of rule entirely from those that give monarchs a bad name. Prophetic passages such as Isaiah 11 and psalms such as Psalm 72 demonstrate that when God is faced with the corruption of monarchy, he promises not to abolish monarchy, but to send a true king to rule with utter

justice, making the poor and needy his constant priority. The human vocation to share that role, that task, is framed within the true justice and mercy of God himself.

So too with “priesthood.” This word makes many people think of corrupt hierarchies, organizing “religion” for their own purposes and threatening dire, and indeed “divine,” punishments for any who step out of line. Again, the abuse does not invalidate the proper use. The notion of priesthood, admittedly now often exposed as a cloak for selfish wrongdoing, is another vital part of being human. We humans are called to stand at the intersection of heaven and earth, holding together in our hearts, our praises, and our urgent intercessions the loving wisdom of the creator God and the terrible torments of his battered world. The Bible knows perfectly well that this priestly vocation can be corrupted and often has been. But once more it proposes not abolition, but full and complete cleansing. The Coming One “will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to YHWH in righteousness” (Mal. 3:3). This ancient Jewish promise points ahead to the ultimate “priesthood” of Jesus himself.

We should not be surprised, then, that horrible abuses have spoiled our sense of both the royal and the priestly vocations. That is what we should expect. The remarkable thing is that the Creator, having made the world to work in this way—with humans functioning like the “image” in a temple, standing between heaven and earth and acting on behalf of each in relation to the other—has not abandoned the project. Yes, it gets distorted again and again. But it remains the way the world was supposed to work—and the way in which, through the gospel, it will work once more. The powers that have stolen the worshipping hearts of the world and that have in consequence usurped the human rule over the world would like nothing better than for humans to think only of escaping the world rather than taking back their priestly and royal vocations.

Communities of Reconciled Worshippers

Those passages from the book of Revelation are not the only places in the New Testament where the result of Jesus’s death is described as a renewal of vocation. Two famous Pauline passages point the same way. In the first, 2 Corinthians 5:21, the natural reading has been obscured and overlaid by generations who have seen in it the regular “works contract” idea. But the wider context of 2 Corinthians 5–6, in which Paul is explaining the nature of apostolic ministry and locating it within his fresh reading of Isaiah 49 (one of his favorite passages), indicates that his train of thought is the same as that of Revelation: the death of Jesus, reconciling people to God, generates the renewal of their human vocation.

In this carefully constructed passage, Paul says the same thing three times, developing it to a climax. In each case he first says something about Jesus’s death and then something about the “ministry of reconciliation” to which people are called as a result:

God reconciled us to himself through the Messiah, *and he gave us the ministry of reconciliation.* (5:18)

God was reconciling the world to himself in the Messiah, not counting their trespasses against them, *and entrusting us with the message of reconciliation.* (5:19)

The Messiah did not know sin, but God made him to be sin on our behalf, *so that in him we might embody God’s faithfulness to the covenant.* (5:21)

The translation of the last clause is controversial. The word I have translated with the phrase “faithfulness to the covenant” is the word often rendered “righteousness”—the word regularly used within the kind of “works contract” I have described (Christ takes our sins, we take his “righteousness,” in the sense of his

moral achievements). But, as I and others have argued at length elsewhere, this is misleading. What Paul is talking about is the same thing that occupies him from the end of chapter 2 of 2 Corinthians to the end of chapter 7: the nature of his apostolic ministry. V. 21 is an additional statement, exactly in line with the two others immediately above, of the way in which *the Messiah's reconciling death results in a new human vocation*. Here Paul is speaking specifically of his "apostolic" vocation. The point would easily apply too to all those who are "in Christ," but that isn't his principal subject here. He is explaining why he does what he does and why his suffering—of which the Corinthians were ashamed—is a necessary part of the deal.

Paul sees himself standing at the cutting edge of the revolution. The death of Jesus has opened up a whole new world, and he is part of the team leading the way into unexplored territory. He is not only to *announce*, but also to *embody* the faithfulness of the creator God to his covenant and his world. He is thinking of Isaiah's vision of Israel's "servant" vocation and quoting from one of his favorite chapters, Isaiah 49: "I listened to you when the time was right; I came to your aid on the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2, quoting Isa. 49:8). The remainder of that verse in Isaiah goes on, "I have kept you and given you as a covenant to the people." Paul is not summarizing the "works contract" (Jesus takes our sin, and we take his "righteousness"). He is doing what Revelation is doing: celebrating the fact that Jesus's reconciling death sets people free to take up their true vocation. The Messiah's death gives to him, and by extension to all who follow Jesus, the vocation to be part of the ongoing divine plan, the covenant purpose for the whole world.

Something similar is visible in Galatians 3:13. "The Messiah redeemed us from the curse of the law," writes Paul, "by becoming a curse on our behalf." This is not a statement of an abstract works-based atonement theology, though it is often snatched out of context and made to play that role. Many sermons have been

preached about how the "curse of the law" (seen as the threatening moral code) is removed by the death of Jesus. Some have even supposed that Paul was regarding Israel's law itself as a bad thing that had no business pronouncing this "curse" and that Jesus's death had showed this up. But this has nothing to do with Paul's meaning. He does not go on—as such sermons regularly have—to say, "The Messiah became a curse for us *so that we might be freed from sin and go to heaven*," or anything like it. He says in v. 14 that the Messiah bore the curse of the law, "so that the blessing of Abraham could flow through to the nations in King Jesus—and so that we might receive the promise of the spirit, through faith."

Paul is not saying that the Messiah's death rescues people from hell. Nor is he saying that it brings humans back into fellowship with God. These are important, but they are not the point he is making. Galatians 3 as a whole is about how God's promises to Abraham always envisaged a worldwide family and how the gospel events have brought that into reality. The death of Jesus launched the revolution; it got rid of the roadblock between the divine promises and the nations for whom they were intended. And it opened the way for the Spirit to be poured out to equip God's people for their tasks. Once again, the biblical view of what was achieved through Jesus's death has to do with the restoration of the human vocation, of Israel's vocation, of the larger divine purpose for the world.

Something similar is also going on—though the passage is one of Paul's densest—in Romans 5:17. In a grand sweep of biblical story, he is contrasting the effects of Adam's trespass with the effects of the Messiah's work. Here if anywhere, we might suppose, we would be dealing with a "works contract" in which Jesus's performance of the duties that Adam failed to perform would be credited to his people. But no. The "obedience" of Jesus is important in this passage, but not for that reason. What Paul has in mind is, once more, a covenant of *vocation*:

For if, by the trespass of the one, death reigned through that one, how much more will those who receive the abundance of grace, and of the gift of covenant membership, of “being in the right,” reign in life through the one man Jesus the Messiah.

They will *reign in life*! The word “reign” is a royal word, from the Greek root *basileus* (as in “king” or “kingdom”). Traditional readings might have led us to expect the conclusion that through the work of the Messiah those who receive his gift will escape death, will find “salvation.” That is true (provided we understand “salvation” in the way Paul does), but it is not the particular truth he is emphasizing, either here or in chapter 8, where he expands the point. What Paul is saying is that the gospel, through which people receive the divine gift, *reconstitutes them as genuine humans, as those who share the “reign” of the Messiah.*

Once we grasp this, it plays back into our understanding of the earlier part of the verse and, with it, the analysis of the “problem” throughout Romans 5. Here is the point. When humans sinned, they abdicated their vocation to “rule” in the way that they, as image-bearers, were supposed to. They gave away their authority to the powers of the world, which meant ultimately to death itself. Thus, in the climactic conclusion in v. 21, Paul declares that “sin reigned in death.” Sin is *the human failure of vocation*, with all that this entails. When we sin, we abuse our calling, our privileges, and our possibilities. Our thoughts, words, and actions have consequences. They were meant to. That is what being image-bearers is all about. Sin risks replacing good consequences with damaging ones. Turning away from the source of life, we invite death to fill the vacuum. *Both these elements, sin and death, need to be dealt with on the cross.* The whole New Testament and Paul in particular declare that this is what was achieved. That is why the cross launches the revolution.

Most people suppose that when Paul explains what is wrong

with the human race, he focuses on “sin.” This is wrong. What he says about “sin” in Romans 1–2 is secondary to what he says about idolatry. The primary human failure is a failure of *worship*. In Romans 1:18–25, “ungodliness” precedes “injustice”: those who worship that which is not God will inevitably produce distortions in the world. The point of “injustice” is not just that it means “wrong behavior” (for which the perpetrator would be culpable), but that it means *introducing powerful rogue elements into God’s world*. Like a foolish businessman who appoints to the board friends without the company’s best interests at heart, we have handed over control to forces that will destroy us and thwart our original purpose.

Consider how this works out. God is known, Paul explains, through the things that he made. The priestly calling of all humans was then to honor God, to thank and praise him. Instead, however, humans “swapped the glory of the immortal God for the likeness of the image of mortal humans—and of birds, animals, and reptiles” (Rom. 1:23). This results from a still more fundamental “exchange”: “They swapped God’s truth for a lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the creator, who is blessed forever” (1:25). Paul here echoes the ancient Israelite insistence on worshipping the true God rather than idols. That is primary. Sin does indeed have dire consequences: “People who do things like that deserve death” (1:32). But his point is much wider than the fate of the human beings in question, important though that is (as 2:1–16 makes clear). Paul’s concern is that the Creator’s whole plan is put in jeopardy by the failure of humans to *worship him alone*. Only through that worship will they be sustained and fruitful in their vocation to look after his world.

“Idolatry,” of course, covers a lot more than simply the manufacture and adoration of actual physical images. It happens whenever we place anything in the created order above the Creator himself. When humans worship parts of creation or forces within creation, they *give away their power* to those aspects of the created

order, which will then come to rule over them. "Sin," for Paul, is therefore not simply the breaking of moral codes, though it can be recognized in that way. It is, far more deeply, the missing of the mark of genuine humanness through the failure of worship or rather through worshipping idols rather than the true God. That action, to say it again, hands over to lifeless "forces" or "powers" the authority that should have belonged to the humans in the first place. The problem is not just that humans have misbehaved and need punishing. The problem is that their idolatry, coming to expression in sin, has resulted in slavery for themselves and for the whole creation.

The Bible, then, offers an analysis of the human plight different from the one normally imagined. "Sin" is not just bad in itself. It is the telltale symptom of a deeper problem, and the biblical story addresses that deeper problem; it includes the "sin" problem but goes much farther. The problem is that *humans were made for a particular vocation, which they have rejected; that this rejection involves a turning away from the living God to worship idols; that this results in giving to the idols—"forces" within the creation—a power over humans and the world that was rightfully that of genuine humans; and that this leads to a slavery, which is ultimately the rule of death itself, the corruption and destruction of the good world made by the Creator.*

It ought to be clear from all this that the reason "sin" leads to "death" is not at all (as is often supposed) that "death" is an arbitrary and somewhat draconian punishment for miscellaneous moral shortcomings. The link is deeper than that. The distinction I am making is like the distinction between the ticket you will get if you are caught driving too fast and the crash that will happen if you drive too fast around a sharp bend on a wet road. The ticket is arbitrary, an imposition with no organic link to the offense. The crash is intrinsic, the direct consequence of the behavior. In the same way, death is the *intrinsic result* of sin, not simply an arbitrary punishment. When humans fail in their image-bearing vocation,

the problem is not just that they face punishment. The problem is that the "powers" seize control, and the Creator's plan for his creation cannot go ahead as intended.

All this comes into much sharper focus when we see it displayed in the biblical story of Israel. This is the story to which Paul is referring when, quoting the early formula, he reminds the Corinthians that "the Messiah died for our sins in accordance with the Bible." This story is what Luke's Jesus has in mind when (in 24:27) he begins with Moses and the prophets and sets out the way that all the scriptures point forward to the "things about himself" that have just taken place. The great story of Israel's scriptures is more complex and many-sided than any brief summary can indicate, and these complexities matter. The New Testament reaffirms the ancient biblical narrative of vocation—Israel's vocation, the human vocation itself—and insists that this has been fulfilled in Jesus and, through Jesus, in his people. The early Christians are therefore drawing on Israel's scriptures to form their dense, compact statements about the meaning of Jesus's death. We must therefore set out this biblical story at somewhat more length.

Passover People

I HAVE ARGUED in this book that, according to the earliest Christians, *when Jesus died, something happened as a result of which the world was a different place.* By six o'clock on the evening of the first Good Friday, the world had changed. A revolution had begun.

The first sign of the difference came on the third day, when Jesus was raised from the dead. Without that, his followers would have concluded with shame and sorrow that he was just another failed Messiah. But his resurrection was not simply a surprise happy ending to the story. It was, and was bound to be seen as, a glorious *beginning*. It meant that the darkest and strongest power in the world, the power of death itself, had been defeated. If that was true, then a new power, a different *sort* of power from all others, had been unleashed into the world.

How had this happened? As the early Christians looked back with Easter eyes at Jesus's kingdom-launching public career and his bizarrely "royal" death (with "King of the Jews" above his head), they soon reached the conclusion that his death itself had been the ultimate victory. That is what we have been exploring in this book. But that victory seemed to have been won not at the

very end of the "present age," but right in the middle of it, with suffering and wickedness still rampant all around. This could only mean that the victory was coming in two stages.

Jesus's followers themselves were to be given a new kind of task. The Great Jailer had been overpowered; now someone had to go and unlock the prison doors. Forgiveness of sins had been accomplished, robbing the idols of their power; someone had to go and announce the amnesty to "sinners" far and wide. And this had to be done by means of the new sort of power: the cross-resurrection-Spirit kind of power. The power of suffering love. It was quite a struggle for the first Christians to learn what that meant: to work for the kingdom of God in a world that neither wanted nor expected any such thing. It is that work, the work we sometimes call "mission," that we must now consider. If Jesus's death really did launch a revolution, what does it look like, and how do we join in?

Here we run into a problem. I have been arguing in this book against one particular way of looking at the cross of Jesus. Millions of Christians in many parts of the world still think the cross means "Jesus died for my sins so that I can go to heaven." The "mission" of the church, then, becomes a matter of explaining to more and more people that he died for them too and urging them to believe this, so that they too can go to heaven. I have taken part in many events that have had that as their aim, some of which were explicitly called "missions." True, in recent years several thinkers have made a distinction between "mission" (the broadest view of the church's task in the world) and "evangelism" (the more specific task of telling people about Jesus's death and resurrection and what it means for them); but the word "mission" is still used in the narrower sense as well, often referring to specific events such as a weeklong "evangelistic rally."

Part of my aim in this book has been to widen the scope of the "mission" based on what Jesus did on the cross without losing its central and personal focus. I hope it is clear, in fact, that this task

of telling people about Jesus remains vital. But I have also been arguing that the early Christian message is not well summarized by saying that Jesus died so that we can go to heaven. That way of looking at the gospel and mission both shrinks and distorts what the Bible actually teaches. It ignores Jesus's claim to be launching God's kingdom "on earth as in heaven" and to be bringing that work to its climax precisely on the cross. It ignores the New Testament's emphasis on the true human vocation, to be "image-bearers," reflecting God's glory into the world and the praises of creation back to God. Fortunately, a great many Christians live up to all this in practice even though they may only believe the shrunken theory.

But that's not a good place to be. The practice is far more likely to be sustained over time if those engaged in it and the leaders and teachers in their churches understand the biblical and theological basis for what they are doing. Many other Christians, convinced of the "going to heaven" theory, have come to regard any talk of working for God's kingdom in the present world as a dangerous distraction. We ought (so they think) to see ourselves as "citizens of heaven" and therefore have nothing much to do with "earth." Sometimes this view is backed up by the belief that God will actually destroy the present world. Why, then, would we bother with it? Why plant a tree if the garden is going to be dug up tomorrow?

I have argued against this view elsewhere, particularly in *Surprised by Hope* and *Surprised by Scripture*. Indeed, the reason for that double "surprise" is partly that the New Testament view of God's new creation still comes as a shock to many in our world, both Christian and non-Christian. But in the present book I want to go deeper than before into the difference between the "usual" view of "mission" I have mentioned—the idea of "mission" as "saving souls for heaven"—and the "mission" that I believe flows from the extraordinary, indeed revolutionary, vision of the achievement of Jesus in his death.

Christian mission means implementing the victory that Jesus won on the cross. Everything else follows from this.

The point is that this victory—the victory over all the powers, ultimately over death itself—was won *through* the representative and substitutionary death of Jesus, as Israel's Messiah, who died so that sins could be forgiven. To suggest, as many have done, that we have to choose between "victory" and "substitution" is to miss the point, whichever we then choose. The New Testament affirms both *and indicates, as we have tried to map out, the relationship between them.* The "powers" gained their power because idolatrous humans sinned; when God deals with sins on the cross, he takes back from the powers their usurped authority. The question now is: What does it look like when this integrated vision of the death of Jesus is turned into mission? Answering that question—or at least beginning to answer it—is the purpose of this final part of the book.

* * *

For the sake of clarity, I have spoken here of two versions of "mission," though I am naturally aware that things are more complicated than that, in both church history and current practice. It may help, though, to explain very briefly, at the risk of considerable oversimplification, how we got to our present position. The recent "backstory" of these two versions looks like this.

For many protestant Christians in Europe and America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the mood was one of optimism. New things were happening, and the gospel was going forward, changing lives and communities. As Europeans traveled the globe, they had a sense of spreading what they saw as Christian civilization in areas previously unknown. This, they believed, was how the kingdom of God would indeed come on earth as in heaven. This was one outflowing of the solidly this-worldly focus of some Reformation theology. It led to what has been called the "Puritan hope": the vision that the kingdoms of

the world would become the kingdom of God, as it says in Revelation 11:15. When Georg Frideric Handel set scripture passages to music in his oratorio *Messiah*, this text from Revelation was used in his "Hallelujah Chorus," a powerful celebration of the kingdom of God on earth as in heaven.

But my point is not just this chorus itself. What matters even more is where the chorus comes in the work as a whole. The selection and arrangement of texts were not random. The oratorio divides into three parts: first, the hope for the Messiah, and his birth and public career; second, his death and resurrection and the worldwide preaching of the gospel; third, the resurrection of the dead and the joy of the new creation. The "Hallelujah Chorus" celebrates the fact that the true God now reigns over the whole world, so that their kingdoms have become his; and it is placed not at the end of the third and final part, but at the end of the *second* part.

This reflects closely the view of mission held by many in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (the first performance of *Messiah* was in 1742). First would come the worldwide kingdom, achieved through the preaching of the gospel; then, and only then, the final resurrection. The aim of "mission" was therefore then to bring the nations into submission to God the Creator and to his Son, Jesus the Messiah. That is, after all, what Psalm 2 had indicated as the divine purpose. And Psalm 2, speaking of the dramatic divine victory over all enemies, was the text set immediately before the "Hallelujah Chorus." It was quite clear what view of "mission" was being advocated.

By the late eighteenth century, however, a very different mood began to prevail. Many Christians in Europe and America continued to pour energy into social and cultural reform. But many others saw this as a distraction from "preaching the gospel," by which they meant "saving souls for heaven." Had the texts of *Messiah* been selected a hundred years later, in the 1840s, one might imagine that the "Hallelujah Chorus" would have

been placed at the very end, celebrating the worship of heaven—though the text from Revelation about the world's kingdoms now belonging to the one God and his Messiah might then have looked strange, since the new mood insisted that the world's kingdoms were irrelevant. Had not Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world"? (No, actually. What he said in John 18:36 was that his kingdom was not *from* this world, but the text, in its misleading King James Version was quoted endlessly to show the folly of any kind of social, cultural, or political "mission.") New mood, new mission: now the mission would try to snatch souls from the world, not to bring the kingdom of God into the world.

This second mood contributed to the cultural movement that called itself the "Enlightenment." With many Christians bent on escaping the present world, leaving it to its own devices and desires, the world channeled the optimistic energy of the earlier Christian mission into "secularism," the development of the world and society as though God was either remote or nonexistent. Having banished God to a distant "heaven," earth was free to move under its own steam and in its own chosen direction. This split-level world, a modern version of the ancient philosophy called Epicureanism, is still widely assumed as the norm. The Enlightenment was, in effect, trying to get the fruits of the older Christian culture while ignoring the roots.

Most modern Western countries emphasize education, medicine, and the care of the poor; these were all concerns of the church from the earliest times. It is an open question whether such concerns can be sustained in a just and peaceful society in a world from which God has been banished. Of course, part of the Enlightenment rhetoric is to point out that many wars and injustices had been committed by the churches themselves or by people claiming to act in God's name. This cannot be denied. The charge must be faced with penitence and shame. But it remains the case that social concern beyond one's own family, faith,

or nation, more or less unknown in the ancient world, was part of the church's life from its earliest days. The second mood I have been describing has often been as quick to disown that tradition as the secular world has been to dismiss it.

Dividing history into "periods" or "movements" is always tricky, but these two stand out. In part, the second was a reaction against the overoptimism of the first. It too bred a reaction, as new "social gospel" movements arose in the early twentieth century, insisting that the emphasis on "going to heaven" wasn't the point and that following the Jesus of the gospels meant working to help the poor and the sick here and now. Many churches today are shaped through traditions that go back to one or another of these movements, and many debates in church councils, synods, and the like reflect the unresolved issues in question.

Many Christians grew up reading the Bible in the light of this or that version, often without realizing that these traditions of reading scripture were themselves shaped by cultural forces that distorted some elements of biblical teaching and screened out others altogether. None of us can escape that problem. But what I have tried to do in this book is to outline a way of understanding the New Testament's vision of Jesus's death, particularly that in the gospels and Paul, a vision that, by giving attention to various strands often ignored and by sketching a way of combining things that have often been played off against one another, will relaunch something more like the first movement than the second. Such a missional vision will need serious reshaping. There were problems (to put it mildly) with that earlier optimism. But I believe we can and must make the attempt. This is already happening, in fact. Many contemporary mission organizations are well aware of the need to advance a holistic mission without losing the cutting edge of personal evangelism. My hope is that a fresh appraisal of what the cross achieved will undergird this new vision and give it biblical and theological depth and stability.

Rethinking Mission

The case I have been putting forward in this book is not just a thinker's puzzle for theologians to argue over in dusty seminar rooms. It is immediately and urgently practical. The "victory" is achieved *because* Jesus "gave himself for our sins," rescuing and forgiving humans and so breaking the deadly grip of the powers they had been worshipping. A mission based on a supposed "victory" that does not have "forgiveness of sins" at its heart will go seriously wrong in one direction. That was the danger of the first view I outlined: triumphalism without forgiveness at its core. A mission based on "forgiveness of sins" where we see things only in terms of "saving souls for heaven" will go wrong in the other direction. That was the danger of the second view: a message of forgiveness that left the powers to rule the world unchallenged. The New Testament insists on both and in their proper relation. That has been my case. When we get this right, the church's true vocation emerges once more.

Notice what then happens. When we see the victory of Jesus in relation to the biblical Passover tradition, reshaped through the Jewish longing for the "forgiveness of sins" *as a liberating event within history*, we see the early Christian movement not as a "religion" in the modern sense at all, but as a complete new way of being human in the world and for the world. People talk glibly of the "rise of Christianity" or even of Jesus as the "founder of Christianity" without realizing that to give Jesus's movement a name like that (an "-ity" alongside all the "-isms") is at once to diminish it, to make it one example of a category, one species within a genus. That is not how it appeared to Jesus's contemporaries. To think of his revolutionary movement in that way is at once to distort its sense of mission.

Of course, many now hear the word "Christianity" within the echo chamber of a weary and cynical Western modernism, for

which the "church" is simply a large organization full of arcane rituals and bland platitudes, with fingers in other people's pies, acting as a triumphal and imperial force in the world and providing guilt trips and the fear of hell for any who get in its way. A caricature, of course, but church must bear its share of blame for it. That is why a fresh vision of the cross ought to challenge standard views of what Jesus's followers are called to do and be—if *they are to be true to the original revolution*.

According to that original revolution, rescued humans are set free to be what they were made to be. "Forgiveness," achieved through God's Son's "giving himself for our sins," is the key to the liberating victory. Sin matters, and forgiveness of sins matters, but they matter because sin, flowing from idolatry, corrupts, distorts, and disables the image-bearing vocation, which is much more than simply "getting ready for heaven." An overconcentration on "sin" and how God deals with it means that we see things only with regard to "works," even if we confess that we have no "works" of our own and that we have to rely on Jesus to supply them for us. (Equally, an underemphasis on "sin" and how God deals with it is an attempt to claim some kind of victory without seeing the heart of the problem.) The biblical vision of what it means to be human, the "royal priesthood" vocation, is more multidimensional than either of the regular alternatives. To reflect the divine image means standing between heaven and earth, even in the present time, adoring the Creator and bringing his purposes into reality on earth, ahead of the time when God completes the task and makes all things new. The "royal priesthood" is the company of rescued humans who, being part of "earth," worship the God of heaven and are thereby equipped, with the breath of heaven in their renewed lungs, to work for his kingdom on earth. The revolution of the cross sets us free to be in-between people, caught up in the rhythm of worship and mission.

Expressing the missional vocation in this way and basing it like this on the revolutionary victory of the cross help us to avoid

some obvious dangers. Without the sense of the victory being already won, we might easily lurch from arrogance (thinking that we had to win that victory ourselves) to fear (thinking that the world was too powerful and that we should escape it or at least hunker down and wait for Jesus to return and sort everything out himself). The initial victory gives us the platform for work that is both confident and humble. However, without the sense that the victory is won *through* the forgiveness of sins, "mission" could easily detach itself from the calling to be people who themselves have been rescued from the grip of the powers, people who themselves know what it means to live as grateful forgiven sinners.

No doubt there are checks and balances here within the church as a whole and within individual lives. We need one another, and we need pastoral care and direction within the church. Sometimes we need, for our own sake and the sake of the work in which we are engaged, to sense afresh just how dark and deep the power of sin really is and to know afresh what it means to be delivered from it. At other times, focusing on sin all the time might actually become neurotic or even self-indulgent, when we should instead be looking outward, working to bring healing and hope to the world. All Christian pilgrimage is a matter of rhythm and balance. This will vary according to different personalities, different churches, and different social and cultural situations. We need one another's help to attain that rhythm and balance and keep them fresh. But within the Body of Christ as a whole we need to keep our eyes fixed on the larger picture and discern our individual vocations, replete as they will be with healing possibilities for us as well, within that.

What matters is that we are constantly brought back in touch with the center of the faith: that Jesus "gave himself for our sins, to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of God our father" (Gal. 1:4). Each element of that is vital; each informs and undergirds the others. The loving purpose of God, working through the sin-forgiving death of Jesus, frees us from

the power of the "present evil age," so that we may be part of God's new age, his new creation, launched already when Jesus rose from the dead, awaiting its final completion when he returns, *but active now through the work of the rescued rescuers*, the redeemed human beings called to bring redeeming love into the world—the justified justice-bringers, the reconciled reconcilers, the Passover People.

Many Western Christians have discovered that if we try to act on this basis, bringing God into the public square, working as explicit Christians for justice and peace in the world, we run into problems. Partly this is because the non-Christian Western world, shrill in its zealous secularism, would like to see the church shrink, huddle into a corner, and ultimately disappear altogether. Statistics that appear to point in this direction are seized upon eagerly. Likewise, any sign of a renewed mission will meet howls of protest and charges of "triumphalism" or worse. In part this is quite justified. We can all recite the litany of the church's follies and failings: crusades, inquisitions, and so on. The modern world, no less than that of several centuries ago, has seen major mistakes made in the name of the gospel. Very often, when Christian people have set out to "make the world a better place," they have sadly left the world a worse place instead. Their tangled motives and flawed schemes have become simply another variation on the world's normal power games.

This should not put us off. A world full of people who read and pray the Sermon on the Mount, or even a world with only a few such people in it, will always be a better place than a world without such people. Church history reminds us of the radical difference that can be made, that has been made, and that please God will be made. But the point is that once the revolution was launched on Good Friday, the vital work was already done. We do not have to win that essential victory all over again. What we have to do is to respond to the love poured out on the cross with love of our own: love for the one who died, yes, but also love for

those around us, especially those in particular need. And part of the challenge of putting that into practice is that the powers, in whatever form, will be angry. They want to keep the world in their own grip. They will fight back.

The New Testament shows again and again what this means in practice. The book of Acts, in particular, shows the church facing danger at every turn. I once saw a commentary on the book of Acts that was entitled "The Church Marches In." That is a risky way of looking at it, implying an easily won military invasion. The church's mission was from the start neither easy nor military. Nor was it an "invasion," for that matter. The whole point was that the creator of the world was reclaiming his rightful possession from usurping powers. Acts is a book of cheerful (and sometimes not so cheerful) muddle and puzzle, as Jesus's first followers blunder around trying to find out what they are supposed to be doing, nudged this way and pushed that way by the Spirit, facing sharp disagreement and potential division inside the movement and even sharper hostility from outside. Acts has plenty of martyrs, riots, and frustrating failures. The powers are fighting back. And yet Acts ends with Paul in Rome, under Caesar's nose, announcing God as King and Jesus as Lord.

Paul's own interpretation of this strange phenomenon is worth quoting in full, because it opens up the point that must be made at the center of any account of Christian mission: *the victory of the cross will be implemented through the means of the cross*. One of the dangers of saying too easily that "the Messiah died for our sins" is to imagine that thereafter there would be no more dying to do, no more suffering to undergo. The same problem comes when we too eagerly celebrate the one-off victory as though there would be no more follow-up victories to be won. The opposite is the case, as Jesus himself had always warned. The victory was indeed won, the revolution was indeed launched, through the suffering of Jesus; it is now implemented, put into effective operation, by the suffering of his people. This is why Paul could write:

We recommend ourselves as God's servants: with much patience, with suffering, difficulties, hardships, beatings, imprisonments, riots, hard work, sleepless nights, going without food, with purity, knowledge, great-heartedness, kindness, the holy spirit, genuine love, by speaking the truth, by God's power, with weapons for God's faithful work in left and right hand alike, through glory and shame, through slander and praise; as deceivers, and yet true; as unknown, yet very well known; as dying, and look—we are alive; as punished, yet not killed; as said, yet always celebrating; as poor, yet bringing riches to many; as having nothing, yet possessing everything. (2 Cor. 6:4–10)

It was hard for Paul's audience to understand this. They lived, as we do, in a competitive society where everyone was eager to look good, to be successful, to impress the neighbors. The beaten, bedraggled figure of Paul was hardly that of a leader one might to be proud of. Yet Paul rubs their noses in the point that this is the Messiah pattern, the cross pattern. This is how the victory was won. Jesus himself went to the place of shame and degradation. This is how the revolution was launched; this is how it makes its way in the world. And this is why, for every one person today who reads Seneca, Plutarch, or Epictetus (among the greatest philosophers of Paul's day), there are thousands who read Paul and find his message life-giving. This is why too for every theologian who puzzles over abstract definitions of "atonement," there are thousands who will say, with Paul, "The son of God loved me and gave himself for me"—and who will then get on with the job of radiating that same love out into the world.

I suspect that this message about the necessity of suffering has not been fully understood in today's church, especially in the comfortable Western churches to which I and many of my readers belong. We all know in theory that the Christian life

will involve suffering. Yet those who are eager for “bringing the kingdom,” for social and cultural renewal in our day, can easily forget that the revolution that began on the cross only works through the cross. And those who are eager to “save souls for heaven” are likely to regard suffering simply as something through which most of us some of the time and some of us most of the time will have to pass, rather than as something *by means of which* the rescuing love of God is poured out into the world. The latter is closer to the mark. “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” This well-known quotation from the African theologian Tertullian, writing around AD 200, reflects the early Christian perception that suffering or dying for the faith is not simply a necessary evil, the inevitable concomitant of following a way that the world sees as dangerously subversive. Suffering and dying is *the way by which the world is changed*. This is how the revolution continues.

This is etched into the New Testament at point after point. We return once again to Acts, this time to chapter 12. The fact that the victory had already been won when Jesus died did not mean that Herod wouldn’t kill James, but it did mean that Peter was then wonderfully rescued from jail. Acts offers no explicit interpretation of this strange combination of events. Had I been James’s mother or wife, I think I would have chafed at the strange providence that worked its victories in such apparently random fashion, and I would only partly have been comforted by reflecting how Jesus’s own mother had felt at the foot of the cross. Or take Acts 16. The fact that the victory had already been won didn’t mean that Paul and Silas wouldn’t be beaten (illegally, as it happens) by the authorities in Philippi, but it did mean that when they then sang hymns at midnight, the prison doors were shaken open by an earthquake and they found themselves converting the jailer and demanding—and receiving—a public apology from the magistrates. Or go to Acts 27–28. The victory achieved by Jesus didn’t stop Paul from being shipwrecked,

but it did mean that when he got to Rome to announce God as king and Jesus as Lord, he would know that he came with the scent of victory already in his nostrils. The God who defeated death through Jesus and rescued Paul from the depths of the sea would enable him to look worldly emperors in the face without flinching.

At each point we have the sense that these things are not coincidental. Those who follow Jesus are precisely *not* to suppose that there will be no suffering along the way or that, if there is, it means they must have sinned or rebelled to have deserved such a thing. (They may, of course, but that isn’t the point, as Paul emphasizes in 2 Corinthians.) On the contrary. The suffering of Jesus’s followers—of the whole Body of Christ, now in one member, now in another—brings the victory of the cross into fresh reality, so that fresh outflowings of that victory may emerge.

That seems to be what Paul has in mind when he says in Colossians 1:24 that he is celebrating his sufferings, which are for the benefit of the young church. He is completing in his own flesh, he says, “what is presently lacking in the king’s afflictions on behalf of his body, which is the church.” This is a striking claim. It seems to mean that part of Paul’s apostolic vocation is to go ahead of the young churches scattered around the Mediterranean world, like a brave commander on the battlefield drawing the enemy fire away from those more vulnerable, to take upon himself the suffering that might otherwise come their way. There is no sense here of Paul trying to add to the once-for-all achievement of Jesus. He elsewhere emphasizes that, for instance in Romans 6:10. But his claim here goes closely with what he says in more discursive mode in Romans 5:3–5 and then at length in 8:17–25. It is worth looking briefly at both.

In the first of these passages Paul explores the inner dynamic of suffering. This is how it works, so to speak, inside the person concerned:

We also celebrate in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces patience, patience produces a well-formed character, and a character like that produces hope. Hope, in its turn, does not make us ashamed, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the holy spirit who has been given to us. (5:3–5)

But then, in the other passage, he explains that sharing the Messiah's sufferings is the means by which, already in the present and then ultimately in the future, those who belong to him will share his rule in the new creation:

If we're children, we are also heirs: heirs of God, and fellow heirs with the Messiah, as long as we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. This is how I work it out. The sufferings we go through in the present time are not worth putting in the scale alongside the glory that is going to be unveiled for us. Yes: creation itself is on tiptoe with expectation, eagerly awaiting the moment when God's children will be revealed. Creation, you see, was subjected to pointless futility, not of its own volition, but because of the one who placed it in this subjection, in the hope that creation itself would be freed from its slavery to decay, to enjoy the freedom that comes when God's children are glorified.

Let me explain. We know that the entire creation is groaning together, and going through labor pains together, up until the present time. Not only so: we too, we who have the first fruits of the spirit's life within us, are groaning within ourselves, as we eagerly await our adoption, the redemption of our body. We were saved, you see, in hope. But hope isn't hope if you can see it! Who hopes for what they can see? But if we hope for what we don't see, we wait for it eagerly—but also patiently. (8:17–25)

This rich, vivid portrayal of the present time—with creation groaning in expectation like a pregnant woman about to give birth, and with the Messiah's people groaning within themselves as they long for their new resurrection bodies—is perhaps the finest description in the New Testament not only of what it means to share the Messiah's sufferings, but also of why that is necessary. When Paul speaks of the Messiah being glorified and of his rule over the whole creation, he has several psalms in mind, notably Psalm 2, which speaks of the Messiah's worldwide rule, and Psalm 8, which speaks of the “glory and honor” proper to human beings who are called to exercise delegated authority over God's world. What we have here, as a result, is a dynamic fusion of messianic hope and human vocation, reshaped around the suffering of Jesus and refocused on the suffering of his followers. Paul has thus filled out the “inner dynamic” described in chapter 5 with a vision of the wider purpose of this suffering.

This is how it works. The Messiah suffered and won the victory over the powers of evil. The church, the Messiah's people, must suffer in the present, because they share the Messiah's life, his raised-from-the-dead life, and this is the way to implement the Messiah's victory. This is part of what it means to share in his “glory,” his splendid rule over the world, which at present is exercised through the Spirit-led work and suffering of his people.

And through their prayer. Paul joins all these themes together in a unique passage, Romans 8:26–27, that brings the inner personal dynamic of suffering together with the larger world-redeeming purpose. This time he is alluding to Psalm 44, which speaks of God searching the hearts of his people (v. 21) and whose next verse, which Paul quotes a little later, refers to God's people “being like sheep destined for slaughter.” The world-changing task of God's people in the present, rooted in the Messiah's victorious suffering, has its ultimate depth in prayer, particularly the prayer that comes from the indescribable depths of a sorrow-laden heart:

In the same way, too, the spirit comes alongside and helps us in our weakness. We don't know what to pray for as we ought to; but that same spirit pleads on our behalf, with groanings too deep for words. And the Searcher of Hearts knows what the spirit is thinking, because the spirit pleads for God's people according to God's will. (8:26–27)

We should not forget, as we contemplate the depth of pain in this passage, that ten verses later Paul is declaring, in a shout of praise, that the Messiah's people are "completely victorious." As in the Psalms themselves, these things belong together.

As we saw in an earlier chapter, Romans 8:26–27 is the passage that supplies a vital clue to the otherwise shocking question of how Jesus, the living embodiment of Israel's God, could cry out, "My God, my God, why did you abandon me?" Here we have the Holy Spirit, who in Romans 8 is clearly the powerful presence of Israel's God himself, groaning inarticulately from the heart of creation. And the Father—the Searcher of Hearts—is listening. This is the extraordinary "conversation" in which the suffering church is caught up. And because it was always the will of the Creator to work in his world *through* human beings, this human role of intercession—of patient, puzzled, agonized, labor-pain intercession—becomes one of the key focal points in the divine plan, not just to put into effect this or that smaller goal, but to rescue the whole creation from its slavery to corruption, to bring about the new creation at last. Paul has a great deal to say about suffering elsewhere in his writings, but I think this passage goes to the heart of it all. It clarifies for us the way the revolution of the cross is worked out in the present time. Suffering was the means of the victory. Suffering is also the means of its implementation.

A word of caution is required at this point. When I was quite young, I was told by a senior church official responsible for the training of ordination candidates that it was good for us junior

folk to have a tough time in college—to live in a damp apartment, to be constantly pulled away from our young families, and so on. This suffering would toughen us up and prepare us for real life in active ministry. Now, although there is no doubt a grain of truth in that—especially in that in active ministry seniors may sometimes bind heavy burdens on their subordinates while not lifting them themselves!—the church has a poor track record in the way it has approached such things. The idea that "suffering is good for you, therefore you need to put up with the conditions we are laying upon you" is at best callous and patronizing. At worst it is unpardonable and abusive. Jesus himself, warning that suffering was bound to come, pronounced a solemn woe on the person through whom it came (Matt. 18:7). Life will throw quite enough problems at us without the church adding more while telling us sanctimoniously that it's good for us. If we hadn't recognized this problem already, we would have been reminded by the fully justified protests of many in the feminist movements, who have rightly pointed out that the message about necessary suffering has often been preached by men to women, indicating that the women have to put up with whatever life throws at them while the men organize things to their own advantage.

But suffering, nevertheless, is still the means by which the work goes forward. First Peter explains this in considerable detail, perhaps because the audience of that sparkling little letter had somehow imagined that the Messiah had done all the suffering, so that there was no more for them to face. The book of Revelation emphasizes the same point in its own ways. At one level all this continues to be perplexing, especially when we ourselves are facing that suffering (in other words, when the problem ceases to be merely theoretical and becomes urgent and personal). But when we pause for a moment we can, I think, glimpse something of why all this should be necessary. It has to do with Jesus's own sense of vocation and with the redefinition of power itself which he modeled, embodied, and exemplified.

Jesus was not the kind of revolutionary who would call for twelve legions of angels, sweep all his enemies away in a moment, and leave nothing to do thereafter. As we have seen throughout this book, the revolution he accomplished was the victory of a strange new power, the power of covenant love, a covenant love winning its victory not *over* suffering, but *through* suffering. This meant, inevitably, that the victory would have to be implemented in the same way, proceeding by the slow road of love rather than the quick road of sudden conquest. That is part of what the Sermon on the Mount was all about.

Did we really imagine that, while Jesus would win his victory by suffering, self-giving love, we would implement that same victory by arrogant, self-aggrandizing force of arms? (Perhaps we did. After all, James and John, as close to Jesus as anyone, made exactly this mistake in Luke 9:54 and again in Mark 10:35–40. Perhaps even Jesus's mother thought the same way; her great Magnificat, in Luke 1:46–55, sounds quite like a battle hymn.) Once you understand the kind of revolution Jesus was accomplishing, you understand why it would then go on being necessary for it to be implemented step by step, not all at one single sweep, and why those steps have to be, every one of them, steps of the same generous love that took Jesus to the cross. Love will always suffer. If the church tries to win victories either all in a rush or by steps taken in some other spirit, it may appear to succeed for a while. Think of the pomp and "glory" of the late medieval church. But the "victory" will be hollow and will leave all kinds of problems in its wake.

I think many, if not most, Christians understand this instinctively, without needing to see the theological or biblical underpinnings. Such people do not need a book like this to explain it all to them. One might as well give someone a flashlight to go and see if the sun had risen. It is after all generous love, Jesus-shaped love, that draws people into the Christian family in the first place, not the complex crossword puzzles of subtle theolo-

gians. But what a book like this may be able to do is to explain to such people and to confused onlookers how the larger picture fits together, so as to avoid the risk that love itself may be subverted by other influences. In particular, it may explain how the mission of the church is organically and intimately related to the great events at the heart of the faith.

The truth of all this was brought home to many in my generation as we learned about Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was one of the most brilliant young men of his generation and one of the finest theological minds of the century. When World War II broke out, he found himself in the comparative safety of the United States, but he believed firmly that God was calling him to return to his native Germany. Working as a pastor and teacher at a time of terrible ambiguities and uncertainties, with many friends regarding him as "a bit extreme" but with his conscience urging him on, he joined the campaign against Hitler, knowing well where it might lead. His *Letters and Papers from Prison* tells its own story of profound reflection and prayer as he faced the hangman's noose not long before the end of the war. Who can say what wonderful works he might have written, had he survived? But who can tell what impact his faithful life and witness have had precisely through his martyrdom?

This points all the way back to earlier examples of similar victories. In AD 177 a pagan mob in the city of Lyons, in southern France, killed several of the leading Christians in the area. The result was that Irenaeus came to Lyons as the new bishop (the previous bishop was among the martyrs) and was able, from that post, to teach and write vigorously on the subversive, world-changing truths of incarnation and resurrection against those, like the early Gnostics, who wanted to settle for a quieter life with the sharp edges of the gospel smoothed out. The blood of the martyrs was, in this case, the seed of some life-changing and gospel-enhancing theological teaching, which has served the church well ever since.

Come forward from there a century or more. The initial victory of Jesus on the cross did not spare the church at the end of the third century from vicious and violent persecution under the emperor Diocletian. But the victory showed itself in a different way. Far from being stamped out, the church continued to grow at such a rate, not least because of the witness of those who had faced death for their faith, that the Roman Empire was forced to admit defeat. Nobody had known that people could live like that or face death like that. This was something new. They recognized the Jesus followers as a strange new presence in their midst, neither a "religion" nor a "political power," but a whole *new kind of life*, a new way of being human.

That, of course, brought new challenges. Victories always do. That moment when the church was first permitted and then authorized as the official religion of the state was indeed difficult, and brought the church into a potentially compromised situation. Nobody ever suggested the church would face no challenges to its integrity, or that Jesus's followers would never have difficulty working out what following him would mean in new situations. But it did mean that many brave and wise teachers and leaders navigated and negotiated their way through the new challenges, and that what at the time were clearly "Christian values"—an emphasis on education, medicine, and looking after the poor as well as on avoiding idolatry and immorality—ceased to be the strange, unnatural concerns of a minority and became instead the way of life that an increasing number recognized, not just as a new way to be human, but as a far better way.

Sometimes things are not so clear-cut. In our own day the harrowing novel *Silence* by the Japanese writer Shusaku Endo tells of the sustained and vicious persecution of the small Japanese church a few hundred years ago and of the appalling dilemmas faced by those who wanted to stay loyal to their faith. As I write, the novel is being made into a film by the director Martin Scorsese. The Japanese Christian artist Mako Fujimura (with Philip Yancey) has

written about it in a moving book entitled *Silence and Beauty*. As Fujimura brings out, even when God seems silent—as in the novel—there is still a message to be heard. Light is present in the darkness. Sometimes even silence can speak with hidden beauty and truth. These are uncomfortable messages for comfortable Western Christians to hear, and they are all the more important for that.

But we don't have to look to novels or to distant history. While I have been working on this book, Christians have been beheaded in public on a beach in North Africa. Others have been shot, raped, and tortured. On the day I am revising this chapter, a message comes from the struggling Christian community in Ethiopia, which is facing a massive refugee crisis and with it increased tensions between tribal as well as religious groups. Those of us for whom a visit to the dentist is about as much pain as we normally experience in a month and who confidently expect to worship and study scripture without any threats from either the authorities or hostile local groups find it almost impossible to imagine being in such a position. But these are our sisters and brothers. They are, quite literally, "martyrs"; the word means "witnesses." Some of those who were beheaded on that beach shouted out "Jesus!" in their last moments. They knew him, loved him, and were ready to die for him, as he had died for them. We cannot tell what effect their witness will have in the days to come, but history suggests it will be powerful.

For every story that makes the news headlines, there are a million others. Again and again Jesus's followers find that when they are weak, then they are strong; that the monsters that loom so large and that can indeed do serious damage from time to time are hollow inside. The idolatry and sin that gave them their energy and puffed them up with pride has been cut off at the root with the forgiveness of sins. As became apparent with the fall of Eastern European Communism, many societies had been in the grip of what had seemed massive, powerful, invincible forces. But

once their bluff was called, they collapsed like a bunch of pricked balloons. There is, no doubt, a certain pragmatic wisdom in the advice that one should not “poke the dragon.” But in the Bible the dragons have already been conquered, and even though they may lash their tails angrily, they are in fact a defeated, mangy old bunch.

Believing this and living on this basis can be exhilarating as well as dangerous. Part of the skill lies in discernment, in knowing which dragons to challenge, when, and on what grounds. But when there are forces at work in our world dealing in death and destruction, propagating dangerous ideologies without regard for those in the way, or forces that squash the poor to the ground and allow a tiny number to heap up wealth and power, we know we are dealing with Pharaoh once more. Idols are being worshipped, and they are demanding human sacrifices. But we know that on the cross the ultimate Pharaoh was defeated. And so we go to our work, not indeed with some kind of slogan-driven social agenda to keep the chattering classes happy, nor with the arrogance that expects to “build the kingdom” by our own efforts, but in prayer and faith, with the sacramental ministry and prayer of the church around and behind us and with the knowledge that the victory won on the cross will one day have its full effect. We expect to suffer, but we know already that we are victorious.

The sacramental life, in particular, can have a power that is sometimes overlooked by those who, afraid of the wrong use of baptism or the Eucharist, have downplayed them within their central teaching. That wasn't Paul's line. As far as he was concerned, as he explains in Romans 6, someone who had been baptized into the Messiah had already died, been buried, and been raised to new life. That had happened to Jesus, and what was true of him was true of his people. That is why (for instance) Martin Luther, the great German Reformer, could say, *Baptizatus sum*, “I have been baptized!” as his ultimate protection against the power of evil. He had been brought into the protection of Jesus's victory.

That doesn't mean of course that no harm can come to baptized persons or that they can no longer fall into grievous sin. Part of Paul's point in that same chapter, Romans 6, is that those who have come into the Messiah's family must constantly make it real, in thought and deed: “Calculate yourselves as being dead to sin, and alive to God in the Messiah, Jesus,” and “Don't allow sin to rule in your mortal body” (6:11, 12). A similar warning is given in 1 Corinthians 10:12: “Anyone who reckons they are standing upright should watch out in case they fall over”! Like the Israelites leaving Egypt, just because you have escaped the life of total slavery, that doesn't mean you won't have to work hard to translate your newfound freedom into actual life.

This brings us to the other major sacrament, the “breaking of bread,” the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist, or the Mass. (The fact that the church has developed different names for this event is an indication that we all know it's important and are anxious to interpret it appropriately, but that, like everything to do with Jesus's death, it remains contested territory.) Paul seems to be aware of the point we made earlier, that Jesus used his final meal with his followers not only as a way of explaining what his forthcoming death would mean, but as a way of enabling them to share in that death, making it quite literally part of their life through eating the bread and drinking the wine. Paul addresses the situation in Corinth, where, as he says in 1 Corinthians 8:5, there were “many gods and many lords,” all doing their best to lure the young Christians away from Jesus. “Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup,” he says, “you are announcing the Lord's death until he comes” (11:26). He doesn't mean that the ceremony of the Lord's Supper is a good occasion for a sermon on the meaning of Jesus's death, though no doubt that will sometimes be true as well. He means that *doing it declares it*.

Think how this works. The actual event—the breaking of bread, the pouring of wine, and the sharing of both all in Jesus's name, which recall his last meal before his death—effectively

makes a public announcement. This may have seemed odd to the Corinthians, who were used to sharing the bread and the wine in private, not in front of their pagan neighbors or the wider world. But the word Paul uses for "announce" (*katangellō*) is a word regularly used in his culture to describe the announcement of a public decree. If a message came from Rome with a new imperial decree to be read out in the public forum in Corinth with all citizens paying attention, *katangellō* might well be the word you'd use to describe what was going on.

So what does Paul mean here? *Doing it declares it*: breaking the bread and sharing the cup in Jesus's name *declares* his victory to the principalities and powers. It states the new, authorized Fact about the world. It confronts the shadowy forces that usurp control over God's good creation and over human lives with the news of their defeat. It shames the dark powers that stand in the wings, waiting for people to give them even a small bit of worship so that they can use that power, sucking it out of the humans who ought to have been exercising it themselves, to enslave people and render them powerless to resist the temptations that the powers have within their repertoire. The bread-breaking meal, the Jesus feast, announces to the forces of evil like a public decree read out by a herald in the marketplace that Jesus is Lord, that he has faced the powers of sin and death and beaten them, and that he has been raised again to launch the new world in which death itself will have no authority.

I know that for some readers this sort of talk seems dangerous. Am I not encouraging a kind of magic in which robed priests try to manipulate created elements to produce special effects? Isn't that the kind of thing that the Protestant Reformers protested against? Yes, the Reformers did protest against what they saw as a kind of magic, but that didn't stop them developing their own rich and serious sacramental theology. The abuse doesn't take away the proper use. Magic is, in fact, a parody of the truly human vocation. Image-bearing humans, obedient to the Creator, are meant

to exercise delegated authority in the world in order that life can flourish. Magic is the attempt to gain power over the Creator's world without paying the price of self-giving obedience to the Creator himself. But the sacraments are the very opposite of this. They are the celebration that *Jesus* has paid the price and that *he* has all power on earth and in heaven. They are the powerful announcement of his victory. They can and should be used, as part of a wise Christian spirituality, to announce to the threatening powers that on the cross Jesus has already won the victory.

All this talk of "victory" means what it means because, as we have seen, on the cross Jesus died *for our sins*; the blood of the new covenant was shed *for the forgiveness of sins*. Sins, to say it once more, were the chains by which the dark powers had enslaved the humans who had worshipped them. Once sins were forgiven on the cross, the chains were snapped; victory was won. This opens up several vistas on the church's mission. For this we need one last chapter.

The Powers and the Power of Love

WHEN THE RISEN Jesus met the frightened disciples in the upper room in Jerusalem, he commissioned them for a worldwide mission. In John's gospel this comes out with lapidary simplicity: "As the Father has sent me, so I'm sending you" (20:21). This will mean, he says, "If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven," and "If you retain anyone's sins, they are retained" (20:23). For this awesome task they are given the gift of the Holy Spirit. In the next chapter, as this commission is focused for a moment on Peter's rehabilitation, it comes with an explicit warning: this will mean suffering. "When you are old, you'll stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you up and take you where you don't want to go" (21:18)—a reference, it seems, to Peter's own forthcoming crucifixion. Then Jesus says familiar words, but they are now full of new meaning: "Follow me!"

In Luke's gospel things are put slightly differently, but with the same overall effect: