

The background of the cover is a classical painting of Jesus Christ on the cross. Jesus is depicted with a realistic, muscular physique, a beard, and long hair. He is wearing a white loincloth. His arms are outstretched, and his hands are nailed to the horizontal beam of the cross. His head is tilted slightly to the right, and his eyes are closed. The cross is made of dark wood. The overall tone is somber and religious.

ADAM HAMILTON

Author of Creed, The Message of Jesus, and Wrestling with Doubt, Finding Faith

WHY DID JESUS HAVE TO DIE?

THE MEANING OF THE
CRUCIFIXION

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CHAPTER ONE

LIFT HIGH THE CROSS

The Crucifixion as God's Word and Recapitulation

*In the beginning was the Word
and the Word was with God
and the Word was God . . .*

*The Word became flesh
and made his home among us.
(John 1:1, 14)*

*In the same way that everyone dies in Adam, so also everyone
will be given life in Christ. . . .*

*The first human, Adam, became a living person, and the last
Adam became a spirit that gives life.
(1 Corinthians 15:22, 45)*

The Struggle to Understand the Crucifixion

I have often been asked, not only by skeptics but also by devout Christians, “Why did Jesus have to die?” Sometimes these are people new to the faith. But more often, they are devout Christians who have spent a great deal of time thinking about this question. Some ask, “Did God *need* for Jesus to suffer and die in order to forgive our sins?” Or they may ask, “How exactly does the death of Jesus so long ago absolve me of my sins today?” Sometimes they simply say, “I’m embarrassed to admit it, but the atonement just makes no sense to me.” As one man told me, “I believe Jesus died for me. I feel bad that he did. I love him for it. I just don’t fully understand it.” Or as one woman told me, “The atonement is one of those ideas that you can’t think about too long or it just gets confusing!”

If you have ever felt that way, you are in good company. Lutheran theologian Robert Jenson once wrote, “The history of theology has been rich in theories of atonement, and explanations of this reconciliation [of God and humanity that Jesus made possible], none of which has been fully persuasive or has in fact persuaded the church as a whole.”¹ Evangelical theologians James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy note, “Particularly among evangelical theologians today, the question of how best to conceive of the atonement remains an important and contested issue.”²

In his book *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis said it this way,

The central Christian belief is that Christ’s death
has somehow put us right with God and given us a

fresh start. Theories as to how it did this are another matter. A good many different theories have been held as to how it works; what all Christians are agreed on is that it does work.³

The Gospels note that Jesus repeatedly told his disciples that he would be put to death. He described the significance of his impending death in several ways, but he never explained precisely how his death would bring forgiveness, ransom the world from sin, glorify his Father, or draw all people to him. In fact, when he told his disciples that he had to suffer and die at the hands of the religious leaders, they at first did not believe him, and when he persisted, they did not understand it.

In Mark 8, Jesus, just after he affirmed that he was, in fact, the king the Jewish people had been waiting for, said to his disciples, “‘The Human One [Son of Man] must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and the legal experts, and be killed, and then, after three days, rise from the dead.’ He said this plainly” (Mark 8:31-32). But consider Peter’s response to Jesus’ prediction: “Peter took hold of Jesus and, scolding him, began to correct him.” This did not go very well for Peter, as Jesus famously responded, “Get behind me, Satan. You are not thinking God’s thoughts but human thoughts” (Mark 8:32b-33).

In Mark 9:30-31, Jesus again predicted his death to his disciples. And Mark records, “They didn’t understand this kind of talk, and they were afraid to ask him” (Mark 9:32). Again and again, Jesus foretold his death. And again and again, the disciples failed to understand why Jesus had to die to accomplish God’s mission.

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The night of his arrest, while he was praying in Gethsemane, Jesus pleaded with God, saying, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible. Take this cup of suffering away from me. However—not what I want but what you want” (Mark 14:36). At least for a moment, Jesus, too, seemed to wonder if there wasn’t another way forward aside from his impending crucifixion.

On that first Easter, the resurrected Jesus appeared as a stranger to two downcast disciples on the road to Emmaus. They did not believe the report that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Walking in their grief, deeply saddened by Jesus’ death, the “stranger” asked Cleopas and his friend, “‘Wasn’t it necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and then enter into his glory?’ Then he interpreted for them the things written about himself in all the scriptures, starting with Moses and going through all the Prophets” (Luke 24:26-27). After this, as they broke bread together, their eyes were opened and they saw the stranger was Jesus. In reading this story, how I wish Luke had recorded what Jesus said to these disciples about why it was necessary for him to die.

By the way, the idea that the Messiah had to be crucified made no sense to an ambitious young Pharisee named Saul of Tarsus. When he heard Jesus’ followers teaching that their candidate for king had been crucified, he thought it was blasphemous. He responded by pursuing a mission to harass and arrest these followers of Jesus, even giving approval for the stoning death of one of them. Only after an encounter with the risen Christ did he come to believe. After his conversion, he appears to have spent years working out his theology of the Crucifixion⁴—we’ll explore his thoughts in subsequent chapters.

It has been noted that the creeds of the first five hundred years of the Christian faith, including the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, and the Chalcedonian Creed, tell us that Jesus was "crucified, dead and buried,"⁵ that "for our sake he was crucified,"⁶ that "for us and for our salvation" [Jesus] was born,⁷ and that he "suffered for our salvation,"⁸ yet none of them tell us *how* the death of Christ saves us, only that it does. They do not endorse any one "theory of the atonement" while at the same time making it clear that Christ died for us.

As an aside, *atonement* is an English word with an interesting history. It seems to have been created by William Tyndale (1494–1536), though influenced by John Wycliffe (1324–1384) when he translated the New Testament into English from Greek, and the Old Testament into English from Hebrew and Aramaic—it signified what was necessary to be reconciled or made at one with God, hence at-one-ment.

Today there is a variety of theories of the atonement—theories as to how Christ's death makes us at one with God. Various Christians tend to emphasize one or the other of ten theories, sometimes more. Most recognize that no one theory is adequate to completely convey the significance of Jesus' death. Each theory is a puzzle piece that requires other pieces in order to offer a clear picture.

The Crucifixion as God's Word

With this as a backdrop, we're ready to consider the saving significance of Jesus' crucifixion. In each chapter we'll consider different answers to the question of how Jesus' death atones or saves. But I'd like to begin with a foundational theory of the atonement—a way of looking at the Crucifixion that, I believe,

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helps resolve the questions raised by the other theories of the atonement and allows each to speak to us today.

I'd like to propose that we start building our understanding of Christ's atoning work with the majestic Prologue of the Gospel of John, John 1:1-18. John's Gospel begins,

*In the beginning was the Word
and the Word was with God
and the Word was God.
The Word was with God in the beginning.
Everything came into being through the Word,
and without the Word
nothing came into being.
What came into being
through the Word was life,
and the life was the light for all people.
The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness doesn't extinguish the light. . . .
The Word became flesh
and made his home among us.
We have seen his glory,
glory like that of a father's only son,
full of grace and truth.*
(John 1:1-5, 14)

John speaks of Jesus as “the Word” that became flesh. The Greek word for “Word” here is Logos, which means not simply word, but message, speech, logic, reason, and more. I read John's Prologue to say that God's desire to speak to us, to reveal himself and his will for humanity, led to the Incarnation. God's message, speech, word, logic, reason, and will took on flesh and “made his home among us” in and through Jesus.

Everything that Jesus says and does is God's Word to humanity, and that Word reaches its climax in Jesus' death on the cross, with the Resurrection serving as the *dénouement*—the final resolution or afterword. This Word on the cross is written in the suffering and death of God's Son.

If we begin by seeing the Crucifixion and the atonement through the lens of John's prologue, then we can recognize that Jesus' death is not primarily a transaction, mechanism, or formula—it is not a divine *quid pro quo* where one thing automatically results in another (Jesus' death procures our forgiveness, for instance). Instead, the Crucifixion is first and foremost *a Word or message* from God. This Word has the power to save, to deliver, to rescue, to redeem, to forgive, to heal, to inspire, and to love. It is intended to move us, to change us, to open our eyes and our hearts, to transform us, and to heal us and the world. We might call this the Logos theory of the atonement or simply refer to the Crucifixion as God's Word.

When we understand this, our question changes from “How does the Crucifixion *work*?” to “What is God seeking to *say to us* through the Crucifixion?” Paul notes, “The *message of the cross* is foolishness to those who are being destroyed. But it is the power of God for those of us who are being saved” (1 Corinthians 1:18, emphasis added). It is the *message* of the cross—God's Word to us through the cross—that has the power to save. Each of the various metaphors used in the New Testament, and each of the different popular atonement theories in the church, are ways the disciples, and believers ever since, have heard God speaking through the cross. Each captures a different dimension of this Word. The focus is not understanding a mechanism, but rather

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hearing and accepting God's Word of redemption, forgiveness, and love.

In Scripture the "word of God" was never merely a book, a written document, or a story. In Genesis 1, God spoke and the cosmos was created. In Exodus, God spoke and the Israelites were liberated from captivity. The word of God gave direction to God's people, and it was the basis of God's covenant with them. It gave them hope and offered them power. It convicted them and moved them to repentance. We read repeatedly how the "word of God," or the "word of the Lord," came to the prophets, seizing them with a message that was like a fire pent up in their bones (Jeremiah 20:9).

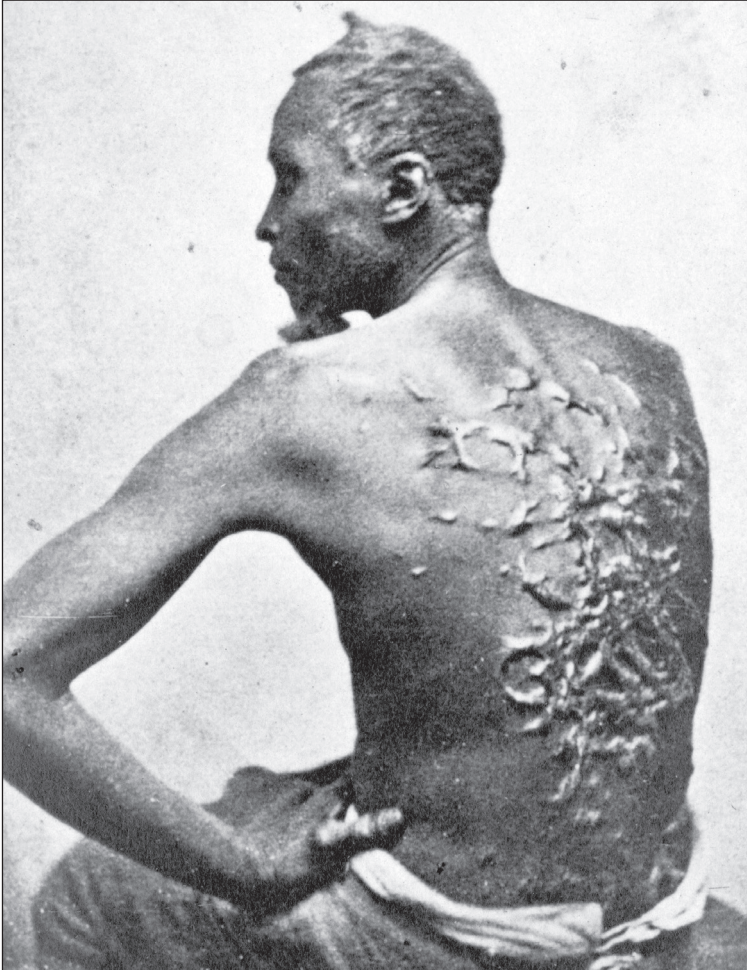
In the Gospels, Jesus both preaches the word of God, and as we've seen, *is* the Word of God. In Acts, the word of God is the good news of Jesus that transforms the lives of those who believe it. For Paul the word gives life, is meant to live in us, is the message of Christ he preaches, and is so powerful he likens it to a sword that comes from the Spirit (Ephesians 6:17). This idea is also picked up by the writer of Hebrews: "God's word is living, active, and sharper than any two-edged sword. It penetrates to the point that it separates the soul from the spirit and the joints from the marrow" (Hebrews 4:12).

Jesus embodies God's Word. His life is the visible Word of God. You've undoubtedly heard that "a picture is worth a thousand words" and that "actions speak louder than words." I think of some of the most influential photographs in history and how a picture can change hearts and even the course of history.

I think of the well-known photo of Peter, a slave who escaped his master's estate in March of 1863. He fled to a

Union camp in Baton Rouge. The record of his story is written on the back of the original photograph taken at the Union encampment:

“Ten days from to-day I left the plantation, run away from massa.” “What made you run away, Peter; was your master ugly—did he whip you?” With a



The mutilated back of the former slave Peter. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.

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peculiar shrug of his shoulders, and raising his eyes toward the ceiling he shouted, “Lor God Almighty Massa! look here”—and suiting the action to the word, he pulled down the pile of dirty rags that half concealed his back, and which was once a shirt, and exhibited his mutilated sable form to the crowd of officers and others present in the office.⁹

The wounds on this man’s body spoke louder than any written account could capture. The camp doctor, seeing his back, asked for a photographer to capture Peter’s suffering. It became a portrait of the evils of slavery.

President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1 of 1863. But some in the North felt emancipating slaves was not their concern. Why not simply let the South keep their slaves? This photograph, published and widely disseminated by abolitionists that year, *moved* people. It led many in the North to a deep resolve that the war must continue until all 3.5 million slaves in the South were free. This image changed the course of a nation and played a key part in liberating millions of people.

That is a powerful example of the impact of a portrait of unjust suffering. In the case of Jesus, we see, or better hear, by Christ’s suffering, death, and resurrection, God’s redemptive, reconciling, healing, transforming Word; we hear God’s judgment on sin, God’s mercy for sinners, God’s love for humanity, and God’s will for our lives.

When we understand the Crucifixion through the lens of John’s Prologue, again, our first question isn’t “How does the Crucifixion work?” but “*What is God trying to say to us through it?*” Understood this way, we can appreciate why there are a

WHEN WORDS FALL SHORT, THE CROSS STILL SPEAKS.

With pastoral tenderness and striking theological clarity, Adam Hamilton re-opens the conversation about atonement in a way that feels both ancient and startlingly new. This is for anyone who wants to be changed—again and again—by the costly, beautiful shape of God’s love.

—KATE BOWLER, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Everything Happens for a Reason (And Other Lies I’ve Loved)*

If you imagine or were taught that there is one correct answer to one of Christianity’s most perplexing questions, this book is for you. Rejecting the notion that God needed Jesus to die, Adam Hamilton encourages us to ask what Jesus’ death *means*. The breadth of meaning will astonish you, and more importantly, deepen your faith. Like me, you’ll want several copies of *Why Did Jesus Have to Die?* on hand—one to keep and others to give away.

—MARIANN EDGAR BUDDE, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington

Who knew that atonement theory discussions could be both stimulating and personally challenging? Do typical understandings of Jesus’s death shortchange God into someone who demands recompense? In a rare feat, Pastor Adam Hamilton *jettisons* corrupted approaches to the death of Jesus, *explains* the theories, *shows the importance of a multiphasic approach* to the death of Jesus, and then explains how each can help us to follow Jesus today.

—SCOT MCKNIGHT, author and theologian

To understand the need for this book, all you have to do is ask a thoughtful person the title question. In response you’ll likely get a blank stare or a look of bewilderment. How can a cruel death twenty centuries ago help heal what’s wrong with planet earth—and with us, its inhabitants? In a feat of boldness and clarity, Adam Hamilton makes the doctrine of the atonement accessible.

—PHILIP YANCEY, author of *The Jesus I Never Knew* and *What’s So Amazing about Grace?*

See page i for further endorsements.



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