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## Christ Died: Love, Grace, and the Reconciling Work of God

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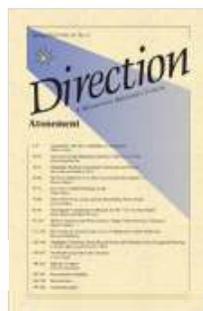
The Scriptures tell the story of two worlds: the fallen world and the new creation. The fallen world, graphically described in Genesis 3ff, was marked by sin, guilt, moral inability, disease, disaster, and death. The presence of evil pervaded everything, prompting a very sobering analysis by God: “The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time” (Gen. 6:5 TNIV, *passim*). On the other hand, the new creation, described in passages like Isaiah 65–66, Romans 8 and Revelation 21–22, reveals a world of forgiveness, purity, life, ability, harmony, health, and glory. There is no more sin, disease, death, etc. The amazing result is that all evil is banished from this world, prompting the jubilant cry, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them...He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’” (Rev. 21:3, 5).

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What can bridge the gap between these two worlds? A gap of the massive problem of evil, characterized by sin, guilt, enslavement, corruption, depravity, and death. How God will deal with evil is the issue discussed by N.T. Wright in *Evil and the Justice of God*. I wish to propose that the biblical answer to the problem of evil is Jesus’ death on the cross, including his



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### Article subject

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incarnation, life, resurrection, and exaltation. “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that *Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures*, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve” (1 Cor. 15:3–5). But how can such a horrid, cruel, sadistic, torturous symbol of execution like the cross become the answer? And how is the cross of Jesus different from all other crucifixions? This remains a great mystery!!

In exploring the mystery of Jesus’ death on the cross I will use “Paul’s master story” (Gorman, 2) in Philippians 2:1–11 as the anchor text. This is a large project, and we will only touch on the highpoints.

### CHRIST DIED: WHAT WAS GOD *DOING* ON THE CROSS?

This question, drawn from McGrath’s *What was God Doing on the Cross?*, raises a very significant issue. God’s work on the cross can be summarized under three intertwined themes: the cross (1) reveals the nature of God, (2) unveils the suffering of God, and (3) displays the victory of God. We will explore these in turn.

First, the cross reveals the *nature of God*. It was pure *love* that moved God to the radical death of Christ on the cross. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). “You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly...But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:6, 8). He acted in sheer *grace* for people’s redemption. “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God” (Rom. 5:1–2). “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Eph. 2:8–10). The effect of God’s love and grace was *reconciliation*. By nature he is a reconciling God. “For if, while we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through

his life!” (Rom. 5:10). God’s love, grace, and reconciling work, starkly revealed on the cross, are foundational to his nature.

However, the *humility* of God is also vital to his nature as revealed on the cross. This aspect is ably developed by Gorman in his discussion of Philippians 2:1–11 (Gorman, 9–39). Several things become clear in a careful reading of Philippians 2:6–8: “Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human being, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!” It is important to note that the nature of Christ/God is self-giving/abandonment. Contrary to self-serving Adam, Christ does not use his position to his own advantage, but humbled himself to meet human need. This is supported by other texts: “For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: ‘The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me’” (Rom. 15:3; cf. Ps. 69:9) and “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9). Being humble in nature, he did not *give up* or *divest* himself of his divinity but *exercised* it! His incarnation and death did not *hide* his deity but *revealed* it. He was truly “God with us.” Irenaeus (V, preface, 1) stated that “God became what we are to make us what he is,” echoing 2 Peter 1:4: “Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.” Thus Jesus’ self-giving, humble death on the cross for us is a most divine act. It reveals the core of God’s nature.

## DIVINE SUFFERING

Second, the cross unveils the *suffering of God*. One could focus the emphasis of the question as: What was *God* doing on the cross? It is clear from general biblical evidence that the actions of the Father and Son are unified: they are one and the same. John 5:19–20—“Jesus gave them this answer: ‘Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Yes, and he will show him even greater works than these, so that you will be

amazed’ ”—is one of many texts to make this point. In his incarnate life, Jesus, doing the work of the Father, began reclaiming his Creation with many advance signs of the new heaven and earth. These included miracles of feeding the hungry, healing the sick, stilling storms, exorcisms, and even raising the dead. The “greater works” possibly point to his definitive redeeming work on the cross and the eschatological consummation of this age in the new heaven and earth. Since the work of the Father and Son are unified, it is the triune God who suffers on the cross. Hence, Jesus’ death on the cross is *not* a case of cosmic “child abuse” (e.g., Weaver, 127–29) *but* God himself, in Christ, taking the sins of the world on himself and suffering its consequences. Boersma puts it well: “The mystery of the incarnation means that the violence in penal substitution is the violence of self-sacrifice, an act that stems from the pure hospitality that is the essence of God’s being. God is therefore not a ‘bloodthirsty’ God who punishes his innocent Son” (Boersma, 178 n81).

And so, on the cross, Christ (God) suffered and atoned for the sins of the world so that we might live. “ ‘He himself bore our sins’ in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; ‘by his wounds you have been healed’ ” (1 Pet. 2:24, quoting Isa. 53:4–6). Evil did its worst in crucifying Jesus to his death, and lost. God, in Christ, absorbed evil and sin on the cross and robbed it of its power (Wright, *Evil*, 92, 136–37). This is powerfully affirmed in Hebrews 2:9–10, 14–15:

But we do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered...Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

The triune God suffered for us, took the full force of our judgment on himself and thus, in unprecedented forgiveness,

liberated us from the clutches of evil, sin, death, and even the devil. This is indeed a great mystery.

### GOD'S VICTORY

And so, third, the cross displays the *victory of God*, both definitively and eschatologically. Philippians 2:9–11 states: “Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” On the cross Christ overcame the hold of our sins on us (with its guilt and pollution) through forgiveness. “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace” (Eph. 1:7). He also broke the monstrous dominating power of sin through a mighty act of liberation. “But now that you have been set free from Sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life” (Rom. 6:22). In addition, he overthrew the devil and all the forces of his dark kingdom. When his disciples performed exorcisms he cried out, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven” (Luke 10:18), and before his crucifixion he boldly declared, “Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:31–32). The apostle Paul echoes this theme in Colossians 1:13–14: “For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” Above all this, he defeated death itself through his resurrection, a reality powerfully stated by Paul: “Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 15:54–57). Evil was defeated on the cross! Though evil is real, it is not self-sustaining; it is parasitic, non-productive, corrupting, and non-creative in nature. It was dealt a death blow, though not yet obliterated. And so we continue to pray in the Lord’s prayer: “deliver us from evil.”

Another aspect of Christ’s victory on the cross goes beyond mere defeat of evil in its various forms. It involves Christ’s positive reclaiming of his Creation from the corruption of the Fall and its evil results. This is described as “recapitulation” by Irenaeus (1:541,

V.14.1) and as “reconstitution” by Wright (*Victory*, 169). I wish to suggest “recreation” as another way of describing Christ’s reclamation of his Creation project. First, as a transformation on the personal level. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the *new creation* has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Cor. 5:17). Second, as a renewal on a global scale:

The creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. (Rom. 8:21–24)

It should be noted that this victory of divine “warfare” is nonviolent and redemptive. Evil means perpetuate evil and do not redeem because “to fight violence with violence can only ever result in a victory for violence, not a victory over it” (Wright, *Evil*, 80). John, the seer, describes the rider on the white horse as waging “war” in a robe spattered with blood (his own, not that of others) and conquering through his Word: “I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood [his own], and his name is the Word of God” (Rev. 19:11–13). Jesus defeated evil on the cross by self-giving, not by compulsion. Therefore, in the exaltation of Philippians 2:9–11, God recognized—i.e., publicly vindicated (not rewarded or promoted)—Christ because he had truly acted like God, by humbly going the way of the cross. Hence, he truly deserves the divine title “Lord” who governs all things (cf. Isa. 45:23) and to whom every knee shall bow.

## CHRIST DIED: THE CROSS AND ATONEMENT THEORIES

I will treat the moral influence, penal representation/substitution, and *Christus Victor* theories together and briefly. They describe the atoning work (God’s self-giving love on the cross) from different perspectives and are intertwined with

each other. A rather lengthy quotation from Boersma summarizes the interrelationship adequately:

As the representative of Israel and Adam, Christ instructs us and models for us the love of God (moral influence). As the representative of Israel and Adam, Christ suffers God's judgment on evil and bears the suffering of the curse of the Law (penal representation). As the representative of Israel and Adam, Christ fights the powers of evil, expels demons, withstands satanic temptation to the point of death, and rises victorious from the grave (Christus Victor)...Each of the three atonement models describes something of Christ's work of redemption for the sake of the church as the new humanity....the moral-influence model tells us that Christ as teacher imparts to us the knowledge of salvation (illumination) and that Christ as the incarnation of God's hospitable love motivates us to open our arms in love for God and creation and so be reconciled to God. The penal model shows us God's anger with human sin and tells us that through the cross God frees us from the penalty of the Law, so that we can receive forgiveness of sin and can again be made righteous before God. The Christus Victor model tells us that God in Christ unshackles us from the slavery that holds us in bondage to the principalities and powers of this world (liberation), and adopts us as his children, and raises us up with Christ to a new life in eternal fellowship with God. (Boersma, 112–13)

These atonement models reflect an interdependent structure. First, Christ's obedient, self-giving life and penal suffering as our representative substitute are foundational to redemption and lead to his great victory. They are instrumental in showing how the victory was won. They demonstrate how the great "summing up" of Ephesians 1:9–10 is accomplished: "he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." Without Christ's penal representation as our substitute there could be no final victory. Without the final victory any substitutionary atonement would be left aborted. Without substitutionary atonement leading to ultimate

victory there would be no moral incentive for repentance or the Christian life. Therefore, second, we need to integrate and hold together all three in our understanding of Christ's work on the cross and its effect on us. The astounding, self-sacrificing act of Christ's death on the cross as an atonement for our sins is definitive for our salvation. The powerful example of his self-giving is our incentive for the Christian life. His monumental victory over sin, death, and evil is the basis for our victory now and our anticipation of future deliverance and the consummation of God's purposes.

What a tremendous blessing has come to us! Christ bridges between the two worlds—the Fall and the new heaven and earth. His work on the cross has cosmic results, so we must not collapse what happened on the cross into personal piety alone. He will make all things new! What love!? What grace!? What marvelous restoration and reconciliation!?

### CHRIST DIED: IMPLICATIONS FOR HIS FOLLOWERS

First, as evident in Philippians 2:5, the cross of Christ needs to shape our minds: "In your relationships with one another, have the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had." The self-effacing, humble action of God in Christ needs to characterize his followers.

Second, the cross summons us to worship Jesus as the true Lord: to celebrate his victory in humble submission, to unashamedly confess his name publicly, and to bow to him by receiving his finished work and submitting to his lordship with full allegiance and loyalty.

Third, Christ's death moves us to implement the achievement of the cross in our world in anticipation of God's new creation (Wright, *Evil*, 104). "Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Cor. 15:58). We engage in mission in all its varied forms (whether evangelism, edification, or all service to human need) because that is already the work of the new creation and anticipates its consummation. Jesus died, and in that death (including his resurrection and exaltation) redemption and renewal was firmly secured and the victory over evil was won. So now we work toward and anticipate the full realization of the new creation as John saw it, but something only Jesus can bring!

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever. (Rev. 22:1–5)

And so, we echo the words of the apostle in Revelation 22:20: “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!” Come, make real to us your atoning death! Come, move us to live in your self-giving ways! Come, lead to the final victory of the new heaven and earth!

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