

# Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God

The Scandalous Truth  
of the Very Good News



Brian  
Zahnd

## Praise for *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God*

“With the heart of a pastor and the skill of a poet, Brian Zahnd cuts through all the fear and fundamentalism to reveal a gospel that is indeed good news. *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God* is a beautifully written, pointed, and prophetic tribute to the love of God as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. As Zahnd shows us, this love is not weak; it’s not a safe, feel-good cop-out. Rather, it’s the very revelation of God, the force that changes the world.”

—RACHEL HELD EVANS, author of *Searching for Sunday*

“The same attributes that make Brian Zahnd a great pastor make him a gifted author: he’s honest, humble, willing to change his mind, and unfailingly centered on Christ. For him to reconsider his view of God took study and prayer, and we benefit. *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God* will be an extraordinary gift to many, for it clearly and compellingly teaches God’s love. This is the book that the evangelical church needs.”

—TONY JONES, author of *Did God Kill Jesus?*

“Brian Zahnd walks boldly into the violent propensity of so much Christian theology and preaching that has wounded so many people, a propensity in which he himself has participated. He not only shows what bad, irresponsible theology this is, pervasive as it continues to be; he exposes the ‘hackneyed trope of dispensationalism’ that feeds so much worldly violence and that authorizes so much wounding. But more than that, in his poetic mode, Zahnd invites to an alternative that is grounded not in ‘Biblicism’ but in the reality of Jesus who embodies the inexplicable love of God that passes all human understanding. Zahnd writes as one emancipated to evangelical joy. He invites his readers to walk with him into such a God-given vocation that honors the God of love and that loves the neighbor.”

—WALTER BRUEGEMANN, Columbia Theological Seminary

“I know we’re a bit too quick to say things like ‘This will change your life!’ these days, but seriously: this book will change your life. For too long, too many of us have wondered if God is angry or disappointed or frustrated or disgusted with us: you don’t need to wonder anymore. Brian’s new book is one of the most beautiful, truthful, and compelling visions of God as revealed by Jesus I have ever read. I can’t shut up about this glorious, necessary, healing book: it is a must-read for every Christian.”

—SARAH BESSEY, author of *Jesus Feminist* and *Out of Sorts: Making Peace with an Evolving Faith*

“I can’t count the times I felt like standing and cheering while reading this book. Brian Zahnd knows his material extremely well. He speaks from a blend of study and experience, with the authority of a theologian, the care of a shepherd, and the inspiring beauty of a poet. From Genesis to Revelation, Brian helps us identify, expose, and oppose the weaponization of Scripture and instead embrace Jesus as the Bible’s central theme and God’s ultimate self-disclosure. If you read one book about Jesus this year...buy mine. But if you read two, this one will do just nicely.”

—BRUXY CAVEY, teaching pastor at the Meeting House, and author of *The End of Religion* and *(re)union: the Good News of Jesus for Seekers, Saints, and Sinners*

“With too many American Christian leaders echoing the angry, arrogant, vindictive, and violent rhetoric of our political culture, it’s hard to imagine a book more relevant and needed than Brian Zahnd’s *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God*. Zahnd rightly helps us see that for better or worse, we reflect the image of the God we believe in. Zahnd’s insights into Scripture are rich and deep, making clear that if we want a less violent future, we need a vision of a nonviolent God.”

—BRIAN D. McLAREN, author of *The Great Spiritual Migration*

“I have come to love Brian Zahnd and his writings. They are deep, reflective, authentic, and inspiring. *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God* is a brilliant and important book that every Christian should read. If you’ve ever struggled with the violence attributed to God in Scripture, or the angry and vengeful images of God sometimes taught in Christian circles, this book will speak to you.”

—ADAM HAMILTON, pastor and author of *Making Sense of the Bible*

“Without overstatement, I believe we are living in the midst of a seismic, apocalyptic shift in how we understand the character of God. There is a widescreen revelation of God’s heart unfolding, shaking the very foundations of the Church. This revelation of the tenderness of God is so vast and pervasive that all kinds of former assumptions must be called into question—demanding that violent ‘texts of terror,’ in Phyllis Trible’s phrase, be revisited. Brian Zahnd is the most lucid, crisp, prophetic articulator of this revelation/revolution, and *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God* is him at his incisive best. It is masterfully written, illuminating both the Jesus of Scripture and the violence of the world that rejected him. At the intersection of John the Baptist and Bob Dylan, Brian Zahnd prepares the way for us to behold and see that the God we heard was a lion, was actually a lamb all along. This is startling, revelatory reading.”

—JONATHAN MARTIN, author of *How to Survive a Shipwreck* and *Prototype*

Foreword by William Paul Young

# Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God

*The Scandalous Truth of the Very Good News*

Brian Zahnd



## SINNERS IN THE HANDS OF A LOVING GOD

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In memory of L. Glen Zahnd

1931–2009

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# Foreword

There is a chapter in the novel *Cross Roads*, which I wrote after *The Shack*, called “The War Within.” This war is between our heads and our hearts, between our experiences of past and present, between the false self with all the lies that have become sanctuaries and the Truth that tenderly invades its domain, between what we thought to be right and the path we seem to be traveling. Below the chapter title in the novel is the following quote:

The apostle tells us that “God is love”; and therefore, seeing he is an infinite being, it follows that he is an infinite fountain of love. Seeing he is an all-sufficient being, it follows that he is a full and overflowing, and inexhaustible fountain of love. And in that he is an unchangeable and eternal being, he is an unchangeable and eternal fountain of love.

Partway through the chapter, the main character, Tony, finds himself in a monstrous battle. His accusers are caricatures of his own false self, liars and pretenders. They use god-language and throw back into his face his own deepest secrets. Among the language of their attack are phrases such as,

...pour out your just and holy fury, the bow of your wrath bent and the arrow made ready on the string, and justice bending the arrow at their hearts...

The quotes above were written by the same man, Jonathan Edwards. The fiery language of accusation was delivered in his famous sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” and the other line was from his “Heaven, a World of Charity, or Love” in *Charity and Its Fruits*.

What happened between a beautiful expression of a God of First Love and the jarring explosion of a vindictive being focused on retributive justice? Was this a movement or a constant tension within him?

We will never know for sure, but during his lifetime, Edwards experienced significant personal losses. He changed his mind on public issues and was eventually ostracized by his own congregation. After witnessing injustice, he took a stand against slavery and became an advocate for the indigenous tribal people. Visitors would come to hear him speak, but his own people would not. Edwards knew personally about the war within.

Dr. Baxter Kruger refers to this inner tension as the windshield wiper of the soul that vacillates between two visions of God. The first is powerful and transcendent, a God of glory or might, sitting on a distant throne wrapped in unapproachable light. While this transcendent imagination of God might inspire awe and fear, it does not generate relational embrace or ease.

But there is a second, qualitatively divergent vision of God that also attracts us. It doesn't begin with the mind trying to grasp the immensity and grandeur of God, but the heart that yearns for beauty and the wonder of being well loved. This is the God of my deepest longings, the One whom I can taste in the rhythms of music and creativity, catch glimpses of in my encounters with love, and feel embraced in the holy encounter with an 'other.' This is the whisper of the Spirit and the gentle touch of love.

It should be no surprise that we are naturally attracted to both. We not only experience this flip-flop within our own soul's journey, but this windshield-wiper effect is evident throughout Scripture. The psalmist and the prophet move back and forth, sometimes within the same verse: light and dark, good and evil, power and comfort, transcendence and immanence, faithfulness and abandonment.

Into this polarity is introduced an astounding event that reframes everything—Jesus!—the incarnation of the transcendent God directly into the deepest longings and aspirations of our humanity. In Jesus everything is brought together, all the disparate extensions of our mindful grasping after the transcendent God, and the scattered but viscerally real pursuit of an integrated and relational love with an immanent

God. Both our understanding and experience of God must be grounded in our Christology. Apart from Jesus, we can do, know, be nothing.

Every author writes something they later regret. Every preacher wishes they could take something back that they once delivered as truth. If transformation is by the renewal of the mind and I have never changed my mind, then be assured I am actively resisting the work of the Holy Spirit in my life. Everyone who grows, changes.

But it is hard work to change, to be open, to take the risk of trust. Change always involves death and resurrection, and both are uncomfortable. Death because it involves letting go of old ways of seeing, of abandoning sometimes precious prejudices. It means having to ask for forgiveness and humble ourselves. And resurrection is no easy process either; having to take risks of trust that were not required when everything seemed certain, agreeing with the new ways of seeing while not obliterating the people around you, some who told you what they thought was true but isn't after all.

Transformation is not easy; ask any butterfly.

In this book, Brian Zahnd is pushing Jesus into the middle of our windshield-wiper conversations about God. This is not an exercise in being right but an invitation to know God, who we discover is a Person. Therefore, this book is about a relationship full of mystery and the loss of control, which is another way of talking about trust. As difficult as the transformation feels, the result is something almost too beautiful for words—resurrection.

—WM. PAUL YOUNG,

author of *The Shack, Cross Roads, Eve, and Lies We Believe About God*

# Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God

“Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” It’s a Puritan classic. An American greatest hit. A revered revivalist text. I had my own handmade copy. I assembled photocopies of this 250-year-old sermon into a homemade booklet. This was back when cutting and pasting were done with scissors and glue. I carefully collated and stapled the twenty pages. My favorite passages were highlighted in bright pink. I provided it with a blue card-stock cover. The title was handwritten with a heavy black marker: “Sinners in the Hands of an ANGRY GOD.” Yes, I wrote *ANGRY GOD* in all caps. Thirty years later I still have this artifact from my angry-God days. It serves as a reference point to give perspective on my long spiritual journey away from an angry, violent, retributive God toward the God who is revealed by Jesus as our loving Father.

I fashioned my handmade copy of Jonathan Edwards’s famous sermon because I was fascinated by it. I wanted to memorize portions for my preaching arsenal. This famous sermon preached on July 8, 1741, has long been associated with the Great Awakening, and as a young pastor I wanted to help lead a new spiritual awakening in America...or at least in my fledgling church. My logic was as simple as it was naive: if it worked for Jonathan Edwards, it should work for me. If Edwards could scare people into repentance, maybe I could too. Evangelism by terrorism. Conversion by coercion. Edwards’s sensational sermon is eighteenth-century hellfire preaching in its most articulate form. Most modern Americans become acquainted with “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” in school where, for some strange reason, it is a standard example of descriptive writing. Probably the most famous part of the sermon is the spider passage.

The God that holds you over the pit of Hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect, over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times so abominable in his eyes as the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours.<sup>\*1</sup>

Lovely, isn’t it? God depicted as a sadistic juvenile dangling spiders over a fire. We do have to admit the writing is descriptive. I’m sure Edgar Allan Poe would be impressed. We feel the revulsion Edwards intends as he shifts the analogy of how God views sinners from loathsome spiders to venomous snakes. Most of us don’t care much for spiders and snakes. But here’s the question: Is it true? Is it true that God is so dreadfully provoked to wrath by our sin that he looks upon us as abominable snakes and loathsome spiders? Does God *abhor* sinners and view them as worthy of nothing else than to be cast into hellfire? Well, that’s what Jonathan Edwards said, and as a twenty-five-year-old preacher I believed it. Who was I to argue with the great revivalist? So let the gospel terrorizing begin! The spider passage may be the most well-known part of Edwards’s most famous sermon, but my favorite part was toward the end when Edwards is hammering home the everlasting nature of God’s wrath.

It would be dreadful to suffer this fierceness and wrath of Almighty God one moment; but you must suffer it to all eternity: there will be no end to this exquisite horrible misery: When you look forward, you shall see a long forever, a boundless duration before you, which will swallow up your thoughts, and amaze your soul; and you will absolutely despair of ever having any deliverance, any end, any mitigation, any rest at all; you will know certainly that you must wear out long ages, millions of millions of ages, in wrestling and conflicting with this almighty merciless vengeance; and then when you have so done, when so many ages have actually been spent by you in this manner, you will know that all is but a point to what remains.<sup>\*2</sup>

Welcome to God’s torture chamber! The Almighty’s eternal Auschwitz. A divine perfection of pain and misery. Edwards describes hell as he imagines it as “exquisite horrible misery” emanating from “almighty merciless vengeance.” Abandon all hope, ye who enter here! But, again, is it true? Is God actually merciless in vengeance? Is God really an omnipotent Dr. Mengel inflicting eternal torture? I know we can cobble together disparate Bible verses to create this monstrous deity, but is it true? Many preachers and parishioners have been led to think so. For them, believing in a sadistic God who maintains a gruesome dungeon of horrors is simply being faithful to the Bible. But is it? At last Edwards brings his horror-genre sermon to a thunderous close with this:

The wrath of Almighty God is now undoubtedly hanging over a great part of this congregation. Let every one fly out of Sodom: *Haste and escape for your lives, look not behind you, escape to the mountain, lest you be consumed.*<sup>\*3</sup>

They tell us that Edwards’s congregation was pretty shook up by this sermon; some even writhed on the floor, begging God for mercy, which, I suppose, means the sermon was a success. Once the congregation had been sufficiently traumatized, Jesus could now, according to Edwards’s gospel, save them from this enraged God who was on the verge of torturing them forever. What a relief! Of course,

those parishioners may suffer from a spiritual post-traumatic stress disorder for the rest of their lives, but that's a small price to pay for being rescued from an eternity of "exquisite horrible misery." Yet the question still remains: Is it true?

At this point I should clarify that Jonathan Edwards's most famous sermon is not representative of his entire preaching ministry. He wasn't always terrorizing his congregation with lurid depictions of hell, and it may be unfair that his best-known sermon is "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Nevertheless, Edwards preached that sermon, and it has left its mark on the religious imagination of America. It is generally regarded as the most important sermon in American history. And this is a tragedy. It's regrettable this sermon has shaped the American vision of God for nearly three centuries. Of course, all sermons are preached within a context, and Reverend Edwards was apparently the pastor of a particularly difficult and contentious church. As a pastor I can sympathize with being so fed up with a congregation that you want to call them a bunch of loathsome insects that God is ready to fling into the fire, but still, *is it true??* Does God really hate sinners? Is the heart of God really a volcano of seething rage? Is the living God really an angry God?

By the time I encountered Edwards's "Angry God" sermon—as Christian theology and not just creative writing—I was a pastor in my twenties and fascinated with revivalism. I saw angry-God preaching as a legitimate means of scaring people into accepting Jesus. The end justified the means. Getting people to respond to the altar call justified preaching a mean God. Threaten them with an angry God so they would accept a merciful Jesus. A kind of good cop/bad cop technique of evangelism. Use the angry God as a cudgel to coerce conversion. I was adept at this kind of preaching. Angry-God preaching got results.

The first seeds of an angry-God theology were sown much earlier in my life, and they came in the form of cartoons—the infamous gospel tracts by J. T. Chick. These little cartoon pamphlets were a kind of lowbrow version of Edwards's "Angry God" sermon. With titles like "This Was Your Life," "Somebody Goofed," "The Awful Truth," and "Are Roman Catholics Christians?," Chick tracts usually end with everyone but fundamentalist Christians being hurled into what looks like the fires of Mount Doom by a merciless God depicted as a faceless white giant.

A well-meaning but unhelpful Sunday school teacher gave me a Chick tract when I was twelve, and those garish images with their ludicrous theology burned their way into my adolescent imagination. I had met the angry God! And I was afraid, very afraid. Who wouldn't be? Think about it. In the gospel according to J. T. Chick, if you don't believe *just right*, an omnipotent giant will consign you to eternal torture! Fortunately, I could believe in Jesus and be saved from his Father—the angry God. But then I heard a revival preacher ask a disturbing question: "Do you believe in Jesus in your *heart* or just in your *head*?" He went on to say that if we believed in Jesus in our *heads* but not our *hearts*, we would miss heaven by eighteen inches and wind up in hell forever! More anxiety-inducing theology! Now I had to decide if I had faith in my heart or if I was on my way to hell because I only believed in Jesus with my head. That's a lot of pressure for a twelve-year-old...or anyone. I had grown up believing in Jesus, but now I had to decide if I was believing with my head or my heart. My eternal destiny was at stake. If I got it wrong, I would be tortured forever. But how could I know? How could I be sure? I thought I believed in Jesus with my heart, but that thought was in my head, so...let the madness begin! What I did know was that I liked Jesus, but I was really scared of his Dad, the faceless white giant with obvious anger issues who hurled Catholics and others who didn't believe *just right* into the fires of Mount Doom. And presumably some of those hapless souls thrown into hell were Baptist kids who tried to believe in Jesus with their hearts but really only believed in Jesus in their heads. That kind of theology is a prescription for religious psychosis! The image of the angry God haunted my adolescence. Did the specter of the angry God help me toe the line? Maybe. Maybe not. But that's not the question. The real question isn't "Does it scare kids straight?" but "Is it *true*?" The real question isn't "Does it motivate people to pray a sinner's prayer?" but "Is it faithful to the God revealed in Jesus?" Is God accurately represented when depicted as a faceless and remorseless white giant whose anger fuels the raging flames of hell?

Fortunately, Jonathan Edwards and J. T. Chick weren't the only preachers presenting portraits of God. Consider an excerpt from another sermon, this one from the prophet Jeremiah. Speaking in the name of God, Jeremiah says,

Oh! Ephraim is my dear, dear son,  
my child in whom I take pleasure!

Every time I mention his name,  
my heart bursts with longing for him!  
Everything in me cries out for him.  
Softly and tenderly I wait for him.<sup>\*4</sup>

There's nothing about loathsome spiders and venomous serpents in this sermon. (Though I admit that if you *want* to find passages like that in the Bible, you can.) In Jeremiah's sermon we find a beautiful bit of poetry channeling the heart of God for beloved Ephraim. And who is Ephraim? Ephraim is Israel in the seventh century BC. More significantly, Ephraim is Israel in its worst spiritual condition and lowest moral ebb. Ephraim is idolatrous, adulterous, backslid, covenant-breaking, sinful Israel. But Ephraim is still the child of God, and Jeremiah reveals God's unconditional love for his prodigal son, the wayward Ephraim. Seven centuries before the full revelation of God that will come with Jesus, Jeremiah's poetry captures the heart of God toward sinners. This is the heart of God toward me. Toward you. This is the good news that God is love. At our worst, at our most sinful, at our furthest remove from God and his will, God's attitude toward us remains one of unwavering love. J. T. Chick and his menacing portraits of God are wrong. As it turns out, God is neither menacing nor faceless. Jesus Christ is the face of the Father. The apostle Paul said it this way: "For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."<sup>\*5</sup> Jesus is the One who shows us the face, the countenance, the disposition, the attitude of the Father. The apostle John is very bold when he tells us, "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known."<sup>\*6</sup> That is an audacious claim. For when John says, "No one has ever seen God," we could use the Bible to argue with the apostle. What about Abraham? He saw God and shared a meal with him under the oaks of Mamre. What about Jacob? He saw God at the top of that ladder as the angels ascended and descended at Bethel. What about Moses? He met God face to face. What about the seventy elders of Israel? They too saw God on the top of Mount Sinai. What about Isaiah? He saw God "in the year that King Uzziah died...and the train of his robe filled the temple."<sup>\*7</sup> What about Ezekiel? He saw visions of God by the river Chebar in Babylon. With these biblical proof texts we could argue with John's claim that no one has ever seen God. But I can imagine John replying, "You don't have to teach me the Bible. I know all the stories, from Genesis to Malachi. But no matter what visions, dreams, revelations, epiphanies, theophanies, or Christophanies people had in times past, they pale into insignificance when compared to the full revelation of God that we have in Jesus Christ!" Then the writer of Hebrews chimes in to affirm what John has said: "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son....He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being."<sup>\*8</sup> God has a face and he looks like Jesus. God has a disposition toward sinners and it's the spirit of Jesus. This is the beautiful gospel. God is not the faceless white giant of a Chick tract. God is like Jesus. God has always been like Jesus. There has never been a time when God was not like Jesus; we haven't always known this, but now we do. God is like Jesus! God is not a sadistic monster who abhors sinners and dangles them over a fiery pit. God is exactly how Jesus depicted him in his most famous parable: a father who runs to receive, embrace, and restore a prodigal son. It's not a Chick tract or a Puritan sermon that perfectly reveals the nature of God, but Jesus! This is why I deeply reject the horrid distortion of God given to us in the angry-God motifs. I understand how this image of God can be justified. I understand we can use the Bible as our palette to paint a monstrous portrait of God, but when we're finished, if the image doesn't look like Jesus, we have got it wrong! It's a false and distorted portrait. Having seen the face of God in Jesus Christ, I cannot abide J. T. Chick's faceless giant or Jonathan Edwards's angry God. Neither could the great George MacDonald.

George MacDonald was a nineteenth-century Scottish novelist, poet, preacher, lecturer, mystic, and theologian. His influence on seminal thinkers and writers seems to exceed his fame among the general public. G. K. Chesterton, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Lewis Carroll were all enormously influenced by George MacDonald. C. S. Lewis said of him, "I have never concealed the fact that I regarded him as my master; indeed I fancy I have never written a book in which I did not quote from him."<sup>\*9</sup> Regarding the portrait of God found in Jonathan Edwards's "Angry God" sermon, George MacDonald says this:

I desire to wake no dispute, will myself dispute with no man, but for the sake of those whom certain *believers* trouble, I have spoken my mind. I love the one God seen in the face of Jesus Christ. From all copies of Jonathan Edwards's portrait of God, however faded by time, however softened by the use of less glaring pigments, I turn

with loathing. Not such a God is he concerning whom was the message John heard from Jesus, *that he is light, and in him is no darkness at all.*\*<sup>10</sup>

George MacDonald was right, just as the apostle John was right. People have never seen God until they see Jesus. Every other portrait of God, from whatever source, is subordinate to the revelation of God given to us in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Word of God, the *Logos* of God, the Logic of God in the form of human flesh. Christians are to believe in the perfect, infallible, inerrant Word of God—and his name is Jesus. Jesus is the icon of the invisible God.\*<sup>11</sup> So whether it's Jonathan Edwards's Puritan sermon or J. T. Chick's fundamentalist tracts, we have to ask, does this portrait of God look like Jesus? We must reject these monstrous portraits of God because Jesus said things like "Whoever sees me sees him who sent me"\*\*<sup>12</sup> and "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father."\*\*<sup>13</sup> But still many of us struggle with an image of God that is angry, violent, and vindictive and that bears little resemblance to the Jesus who was the friend of sinners. These distorted images of God come from many sources, and not all of them are Puritan sermons and fundamentalist tracts. Some of these images are picked up from the Bible, especially certain depictions of God found in the Old Testament. It's true that we can piece together a mosaic of a malicious God by selecting the most gruesome passages of the Bible. But this doesn't mean we have revealed God as he is. Sometimes the Bible is like a Rorschach test: our interpretation of the text reveals more about ourselves than about God. However else we address the problem of proof-texting an angry God, we must always remember that any depiction of God, from whatever source, is subordinate to the revelation of God seen in Jesus. If the mystery of God is a thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle, the picture on the cover of the box is the face of Jesus! Jesus is the face of God, the icon of God, the Word of God, the divine *Logos* made flesh.\*<sup>14</sup> This is a recurring theme among the New Testament writers. What the Bible does infallibly is point us to Jesus. The Bible itself is not a perfect picture of God, but it does point us to the One who is. This is what orthodox Christianity has always said.

We also need to keep in mind that the Old Testament doesn't give us just one portrait of God but many. It's impossible to make the Old Testament univocal. The Old Testament is a chorus of voices, and they're not always in perfect harmony. The Old Testament is often a theological debate with both sides making their case. Proverbs and Job have differing stories to tell. Proverbs says if you fear God and do what is right, good things will happen to you. And there's truth in that. But Job says that's not always the whole story by telling his tragic tale showing how bad things can happen to good people. Then there's this question: Does God require animal sacrifice? The priests and Levites say yes, and that's what we find in the Torah. But eventually the psalmists and prophets begin to challenge this. David says, "Sacrifice and offering you do *not* desire....Burnt offering and sin offering you have *not* required."\*\*<sup>15</sup> In this psalm David brashly contradicts the Torah's unambiguous laws requiring animal sacrifice! Later Hosea claims that God doesn't want sacrifice but mercy.\*<sup>16</sup> Eventually Jesus will weigh in and affirm the position of Hosea.\*<sup>17</sup> Does that mean that the Torah is wrong about animal sacrifice? That would be to put too fine a point on it. Rather, the Old Testament is a journey of discovery. The Bible doesn't stand above the story it tells, but is fully enmeshed in it. The Bible itself is on the quest to discover the Word of God. What we find in the Old Testament is a progression of revelation. The Old Testament begins with a primitive assumption that God requires ritual sacrifice but eventually moves away from that position. We simply can't make Moses and Hosea agree perfectly. If we want to just pluck a verse here and there to proof-text something, the Old Testament gives us many (and often contradictory) options. There are plenty of angry-God texts in the Old Testament, but we also find Jeremiah's tenderhearted Father longing for sinful Ephraim. In the Old Testament God is portrayed as both quick to anger and slow to anger.\*<sup>18</sup> It's Jesus who settles the dispute.

One of the main challenges in talking about God is the problem of metaphor. We cannot talk about God without using metaphor; it's the only option we have when speaking of the supremely transcendent. But to literalize a metaphor is to create an idol and formulate an error. For example, God is not a man, not a rock, not a tower, not a fortress, not a hen, not a husband, not a mother, not a warrior, not a charioteer, not a farmer, not a king...even though the Bible uses all these metaphors to talk about God. We can use these metaphors, but we can't literalize them. The only way to deal with this problem is to create a multitude of metaphors and occasionally retire some that have outlived their usefulness. The wrath of God is a biblical metaphor we use to describe the very real consequences we suffer from trying to go through life against the grain of love. Canadian theologian Brad Jersak says, "The wrath of God is understood as divine consent to our own self-destructive defiance."\*\*<sup>19</sup> When we sin against the two great commandments—to love God with all our heart and to love our neighbor as

ourselves—we suffer the inevitable consequences of acting against love. We can call this the wrath of God if we like; the Bible does, but that doesn't mean that God literally loses his temper. God no more literally loses his temper than he literally sleeps, even though the Bible says, "The Lord awoke as from sleep."<sup>20</sup> Literalizing a divine metaphor always leads to error. We easily acknowledge that God is not literally a rock and not literally a hen, but we have tended to literalize the metaphor of divine anger. Yet even in the Old Testament there are hints of how we can better understand the wrath of God. One of those hints is found in Psalm 7.

God is a righteous judge,  
and a God who has indignation every day.  
If one does not repent, God will whet his sword;  
he has bent and strung his bow;  
he has prepared his deadly weapons,  
making his arrows fiery shafts.<sup>21</sup>

These three verses, laden with metaphor, make it sound as if God directly visits retribution upon sinners with personal indignation. But the next three verses give us a different perspective.

See how they conceive evil,  
and are pregnant with mischief,  
and bring forth lies.  
They make a pit, digging it out,  
and fall into the hole that they have made.  
Their mischief returns upon their own heads,  
and on their own heads their violence descends.<sup>22</sup>

These verses reveal that what we may call the whetted sword of God's vengeance is, on a deeper level, the reciprocal consequences of seeking to harm others. These sinners fall into their own diabolical traps and their violence boomerangs back onto their own heads. But here I need to make something very clear: *that God's wrath is a biblical metaphor does not make the consequences of sin any less real or painful.* The revelation that God's single disposition toward sinners remains one of unconditional love does not mean we are exempt from the consequences of going against the grain of love. When we live against the grain of love we suffer the shards of self-inflicted suffering. This is the "wrath of God." But we must not literalize this metaphor so that we end up saying, as Jonathan Edwards said, "God...abhors you."<sup>23</sup> This is only a few steps removed from the tragicomic antics of the Westboro Baptist folk as they tell us with absolute certitude whom it is that God hates. Their obsession with an angry God has placed them on a trajectory that ends with a "God is hate" theology. The apostle John, working from the assumption that God is fully revealed in Jesus, arrives at the opposite conclusion: "God is love."<sup>24</sup>

What I want you to know is that God's attitude, God's spirit, toward you is one of unwavering fatherly-motherly love. You have nothing to fear from God. God is not mad at you. God has never been mad at you. God is never going to be mad at you. And what about the fear of God? The fear of God is the wisdom of not acting against love. We fear God in the same way that as a child I feared my father. I had the good fortune to have a wise and loving father, and I had deep respect, reverence, admiration, and, perhaps, a kind of fear for my father, but I never for one moment thought that my dad hated me or would harm me. God does not hate you, and God will never harm you. But your own sin, if you do not turn away from it, will bring you great harm. The wisdom that acknowledges this fact is what we call the fear of God. Sin is deadly, but God is love.

I know some will be quick to remind me that the writer of Hebrews tells us, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."<sup>25</sup> And no doubt it is. In the hands of God, there is no place to hide. We have to be honest with ourselves about ourselves. In the hands of God, we can no longer live in the disguise of our lies. In the hands of God, we have to face ourselves. And that can be terrifying. When the prodigal son returned home and fell into the arms of his father, I'm sure the boy felt afraid. We can tell by how he immediately speaks of his unworthiness: "I am no longer worthy to be called your son."<sup>26</sup> This wayward son has fallen into the hands of his father; his fate is in his father's hands... and he is afraid. But there is no better place to be! This gracious father in Jesus's parable is given to us as a picture of our heavenly Father! When the prodigal son fell fearfully into the hands of his father,

forgiveness, healing, and restoration began. Just because the prodigal son felt fear as he fell into his father's hands doesn't mean he had anything to fear from his father. In his father's hands was the only safe place to be. It was in the far country that the prodigal son was in danger, not in his father's hands. When we fall into the hands of the living God, we are sinners in the hands of a loving God.

Because of a tendency to literalize anger metaphors, there are portraits of God as a faceless white giant and portraits of God as a merciless torturer. But Jesus gives us a different portrait: the portrait of a loving and forgiving father. This is the portrait that preachers and theologians and artists should work from. In 1669 the great Dutch painter Rembrandt turned Jesus's parable into one of his masterpieces: *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. Today this painting hangs in the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg, Russia, where I have seen it more than once. It always brings tears to my eyes. There's a reason Henri Nouwen once sat in front of the painting for eight hours.

In Rembrandt's *Return of the Prodigal Son* the reckless son has returned home from the far country. This boy has been to hell and you can tell. He's clothed in dirty and torn rags, which are in stark contrast to the luxurious robes of his father. He has the shaved head of a prisoner, and his shoes have nearly disintegrated. The boy is kneeling in humility with his face buried in his father's chest. Rembrandt has worked with color and light in such a way that our eyes are drawn to the hands of the father as they rest tenderly upon his son. Strangely, the right hand is feminine and the left hand is masculine. Of course, this is not due to some deficiency in the skill of the painter. Rembrandt seems to want to capture both the fatherly and motherly natures of God's love. This masterpiece is a portrait of a sinner in the hands of a loving God. Those of us who know the story realize that those hands will soon present his son with a rich robe, new shoes, and a costly ring. Then those hands will clap with authority as the father orders the preparation of a great feast to celebrate the return of his long-lost son. The prodigal son fell with fear into the hands of his father, but in doing so he fell into the hands of a loving father. This is infinitely more beautiful than the tawdry ugliness of a Chick tract.

But the wrath of God is not absent from Jesus's parable of the prodigal son. After the younger son left his father's house, the consequences of his sin eventually caught up with him in the far country, and the boy ended up living with the pigs. Call this the wrath of God if you like. But never think that the father was mad at his son. He was not. Never think that the father looked upon his son as a loathsome spider. He did not. The father had nothing but love in his heart for his profligate son. As long as the son remained in the far country, the "wrath of God" abided upon him. But when he turned toward home and sought mercy, he was saved from "wrath" and found himself a sinner in the hands of a loving God.

Today my handmade copy of "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" is stored safely away among other memorabilia. I'm no longer mining it for material to terrorize sinners. The monster god has faded away, and today I preach the beauty of God revealed in the face of Christ. But that doesn't mean there are no monsters. The monsters of war, violence, greed, exploitation, oppression, racism, genocide, and every other form of antihuman abuse continue to inflict our species with unimaginable suffering. If we try to manipulate these monsters for our own self-interest, they eventually turn on us and destroy us. We can call this the wrath of God. But the hands of God are not actually hurling thunderbolts from heaven like Zeus of the Greek pantheon. The hands of God have been stretched out in love where they were nailed to a tree. The nail-pierced hands of God now reach out to every doubter and every sufferer, revealing the wounds of love. The hands of God are not hands of wrath but hands of mercy. To be a sinner in these hands is where the healing begins.

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\*1. Jonathan Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," in *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God and Other Puritan Sermons* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2005), 178.

\*2. Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," 181–82.

\*3. Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," 184.

\*4. Jeremiah 31:20, MSG.

\*5. 2 Corinthians 4:6.

\*6. John 1:18.

\*7. Isaiah 6:1, ESV.

\*8. Hebrews 1:1–3.

\*9. C. S. Lewis, *George MacDonald: An Anthology* (New York: HarperCollins, 1946), xxxvii.

- \*10. George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons* (Whitehorn, CA: Johannesen, 2011), 540, italics in the original.
- \*11. See Colossians 1:15.
- \*12. John 12:45.
- \*13. John 14:9.
- \*14. See John 1:1–14.
- \*15. Psalm 40:6.
- \*16. See Hosea 6:6, NKJV.
- \*17. See Matthew 9:13; 12:7.
- \*18. Compare Psalm 2:12 and Exodus 34:6.
- \*19. Brad Jersak, e-mail message to the author, February 27, 2016.
- \*20. Psalm 78:65.
- \*21. Psalm 7:11–13.
- \*22. Verses 14–16.
- \*23. Edwards, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” 178.
- \*24. 1 John 4:8, 16.
- \*25. Hebrews 10:31.
- \*26. Luke 15:21.



# Closing the Book on Vengeance

Oh God said to Abraham, "Kill me a son"  
Abe says, "Man, you must be puttin' me on"  
God say, "No." Abe say, "What?"  
God say, "You can do what you want Abe, but  
The next time you see me comin' you better run"  
Well Abe says, "Where do you want this killin' done?"  
God says, "Out on Highway 61"

—Bob Dylan, "Highway 61 Revisited"

Let's play a little game. I'll ask a few questions and you answer them. Okay?

First question: Did God tell Abraham to kill his son?

You say yes? But hastily add that God didn't actually require Abraham to go through with it—it was just a test of faith. All right.

Next question: Did God command Joshua, King Saul, and the Israelites to kill children as part of the ethnic cleansing of Canaan?

Is that a hesitant yes I hear, like walking in untied shoes?

My next question is simple and straightforward: Does God change?

I sense your confident answer of no to this question. And you are quite correct. A cornerstone of Christian theology has always been that God is immutable—that is, God doesn't mutate from one kind of being into another kind of being. The immutability of God is the solid ground upon which our faith stands.

Next question (brace yourself): Since God doesn't change, and since you have already acknowledged that in times past God has sanctioned the killing of children as part of a genocidal program of conquest, is it then possible that God would require *you* to kill children?

You say you don't like this game? I understand. I don't really like it either. But bear with me a little more; we're almost done.

Last question: If God told you to kill children, would you do so?

I know, I know! Calm down. Of course, you answer without hesitation that under no circumstances would you participate in the genocidal slaughter of children. (At least I hope that's how you answer!)

Yet in answering with an unequivocal no to the question of whether you would kill children, are you claiming a moral superiority to the God depicted in parts of the Old Testament? After all, the Bible says God commanded the Israelites to exterminate the inhabitants of the land during their conquest of Canaan, including children...right? Yet (hopefully) you find the very suggestion of participating in genocide morally repugnant. So what's going on here? Is genocide something God used to command but now God has reformed his ways? We already agreed that God doesn't change, God doesn't mutate. So if God used to sanction genocide, and God doesn't change...well, you see the problem. You've been painted into a corner.

So where do we go from here? Our options are limited. We really have only three possible courses.

1. We can question the morality of God. Perhaps God is, at times, monstrous.
2. We can question the immutability of God. Maybe God *does* change over time.
3. We can question how we read Scripture. Could it be that we need to learn to read the Bible in a different way?

For some there seems to be a fourth possibility: to simply ignore the whole thing, to pretend there is no problem. But this is impossible for honest, thoughtful readers of the Bible. I regularly speak with serious readers of the Bible—usually young people—who are deeply troubled with the problem of the divine sanction of genocide in the Old Testament. They just can't reconcile a God who commands genocide with the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ. As a pastor I can't very well tell these anxious inquirers to just ignore the problem. And you shouldn't ignore it either.

So we are left with questioning the morality of God, questioning the immutability of God, or questioning our reading of Scripture. For me, the first two options are off the table. I cannot believe that God is a moral monster or that God is in the process of mutation.

If you suggest that we go with a variation of the first option by claiming that when God commands genocide it's not immoral, that is asking me to violate my own conscience. I cannot do this. I must not do this. Genocide is immoral. The murder of children is immoral. I know this. And you know it too! Who doesn't know that killing children is wrong?! Only those who want to defend at all cost a certain flat reading of Scripture can pretend that the wanton murder of children is not always immoral. In an effort to defend a simplistic “The Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it” reading

of Scripture, they find it necessary to ignore the cognitive dissonance of deep moral contradictions. But justifying genocide is too high a price to pay for the cause of defending that way of reading the Bible.

Worse yet, clinging to the idea that if God commands genocide it's not immoral opens the door for all manner of atrocity to be justified in the name of God, something the human race has proved itself all too adept at doing. Persecutions, pogroms, crusades, and the Shoah are all the bitter fruit of this corrupt seed. ISIS may justify killing children in the name of God, but followers of Jesus must never do this. Never! What we *should* do is recognize that it's very easy for us to project our own violence and immorality on God in an attempt to assuage our conscience by an imagined divine sanction for our sins.

Others seem comfortable with the second option, the option of a mutating God who is in the process of learning and growing. I am not comfortable with this. The immutability of God is foundational to our faith. If God is subject to change, then the very ground beneath our feet is moving and nothing is stable. If God is evolving, how do we know that somewhere down the line God won't mutate into an omnipotent malevolent monster...or something else? The idea of a mutating God is a radical departure from what the church fathers and Christian theologians, from Gregory of Nyssa to Thomas Aquinas, from Karl Barth to David Bentley Hart, have always said about God. Christian orthodoxy has always attested to the immutability of God. I cannot accept the heterodox idea that God changes.

What I *can* accept is that *our own understanding of God* is in the process of growth, change, and mutation. Something *is* changing, but it's not God. When we watch the sunrise and sunset, it certainly appears that the sun is moving, when in fact it is the earth that is rotating. The apparent movement of the sun is an illusion created by our own movement. Likewise, if it appears that God is changing over time, it is in fact *we* who are changing. We mutate, we grow, we change, but God does not. Just as we can project our own violence and immorality onto God, we can also project our own moral development onto God.

This leaves us with the third option. We have no choice but to revisit how we understand Scripture, particularly the Old Testament. Let's begin by asserting that it is Jesus who is the true Word of God. This is nothing novel; it's the accepted orthodoxy of a high Christology. Christians confess that Christ is the Logos (divine Logic) made flesh. This is the theme of John's majestic gospel as he asserts over and over that it is Jesus who finally and fully reveals to humanity what God is really like. The Incarnation is the ultimate act of divine self-disclosure. It's Jesus, not the Bible, that is the perfect revelation of God. The Bible's relationship to the living Word who is Christ is similar to the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus. In the prologue to his gospel, the apostle John describes John the Baptist like this:

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world....

(John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'")<sup>1</sup>

John the Baptist was sent by God, but John was not God. John bore witness to the Word, but John was not the Word. John was inspired by God, but John was not God incarnate. This is how we should understand the relationship between the Bible and the revelation of God in Christ. The Bible is sent by God and inspired by God, but the Bible is not God. The Holy Trinity is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—not Father, Son, and Holy *Bible*. John the Baptist and the Bible play similar roles in relation to the eternal Logos who is Christ. We might say it this way: "There was a book sent from God, whose name was the Bible. It came as a witness to the light, so that all might believe through it." The Bible testifies through John the Baptist, "[Jesus is] he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'"<sup>2</sup> This is not a low view of Scripture but a high view of Christ.

So if we don't want a monstrous God who occasionally commands genocide, and if we don't want a malleable God who is slowly mutating away from a violent past, how do we view the Old Testament? Something like this: The Old Testament is the inspired telling of the story of Israel coming to know their God. It's a process. God doesn't evolve, but Israel's understanding of God obviously does. If the revelation of God is perfectly depicted in the Pentateuch, why follow the story line of Scripture into the Prophets, Gospels, and Epistles? It seems obvious that we should accept that as Israel was in the

process of receiving the revelation of Yahweh, some unavoidable assumptions were made. One of the assumptions was that Yahweh shared the violent attributes of other deities worshiped in the ancient Near East. These assumptions were inevitable, but they were wrong. For example, the Torah assumed that Yahweh, like all the other gods, required ritual blood sacrifice, but eventually the psalmists and prophets take the sacred text beyond this earlier assumption.

Even a casual reader of the Bible notices that between the alleged divine endorsement of genocide in the conquest of Canaan and Jesus's call for love of enemies in his Sermon on the Mount, something has clearly changed! What has changed is not God but the degree to which humanity has attained an understanding of the true nature of God. The Bible is not the perfect revelation of God; Jesus is. Jesus is the only perfect theology. Perfect theology is not a system of theology; perfect theology is a person. Perfect theology is not found in abstract thought; perfect theology is found in the Incarnation. Perfect theology is not a book; perfect theology is the life that Jesus lived. What the Bible does infallibly and inerrantly is point us to Jesus, just like John the Baptist did.

The Old Testament tells the story of Israel coming to know the living God, but the story doesn't stop until we arrive at Jesus! It isn't Joshua the son of Nun who gives us the full revelation of God but Yeshua of Nazareth. It's not the warrior-poet David who gives us the full revelation of God but the greater Son of David, Jesus Christ. We understand Joshua and David as men of their time, but we understand Jesus Christ as "the exact imprint of God's very being."<sup>3</sup>

Once we realize that Jesus is the perfect icon of the living God, we are forever prohibited from using the Old Testament to justify the use of violence. Using Scripture as a divine license for the implementation of violence is a dangerous practice that must be abandoned by we who walk in the light of Christ. If we hold to the bad habit of citing the Old Testament to sanction our own violence, how do we know that we won't use those texts to justify a new genocide? This isn't inflammatory rhetoric but a legitimate question. It's a legitimate question because the Old Testament *has* been used by Christians to justify genocidal violence. This was the very justification used by European and American Christians during the American Indian genocide in North America. Here is just one example.

In 1637 the English colonial leadership in Connecticut sought to launch a war of aggression against the Pequot tribe for the sole purpose of acquiring their cultivated land. A war party of ninety settlers was raised and placed under the command of John Mason. When some of the colonists expressed moral qualms about launching an unprovoked attack on their peaceful neighbors, the matter was referred to their chaplain, the Reverend John Stone. After spending the night in prayer, Reverend Stone "was 'fully satisfied' with Mason's proposal."<sup>4</sup> At dawn on May 26, 1637, the armed colonists attacked "the main Pequot village at Mystic Lake on the central Connecticut River, killing an estimated 400 to 700 Indians. Most of the dead were women and children—often historically the victims of ethnic cleansing—burned to death in their wigwams as the English slaughtered those who ran."<sup>5</sup> Captain Mason describes the slaughter in these words:

Thus was God seen in the Mount, Crushing his proud Enemies and the Enemies of his People...burning them up in the Fire of his Wrath, and dunging the Ground with their Flesh: It was the LORD's Doings, and it is marvellous in our Eyes!<sup>6</sup>

Notice how John Mason attributes the massacre of Pequot Indians to the actions of God. What followed over the next few months was the virtual extinction of the Pequot tribe. But apparently not all the colonists were comfortable with a Christian-led genocide. In his critically acclaimed history of Native America, *The Earth Shall Weep*, James Wilson writes,

There also seem to have been colonists with misgivings about what had happened. Captain Underhill was clearly replying to criticism when he wrote: "It may be demanded, Why should you be so furious? (as some have said). Should not Christians have more mercy and compassion?" He echoes Mason by taking his defence from the Old Testament, presenting the English—typically—as the put-upon underdog in a crusade against Evil:

...I would refer you to David's war. When a people is grown to such a height of blood and sin against God and man...Sometimes the Scripture declareth women and children must perish with their parents...We had sufficient light from the Word of God for our proceedings.<sup>7</sup>

There you have it. The Bible used to bless barbarism. Genocide justified in the name of God. (This kind of biblical justification of genocidal violence against the native peoples of North America continued throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries.) There is a sad and twisted logic to evoking God's will as the rationale for ethnic cleansing. If Captain Joshua can claim God

commanded the Israelites to kill Canaanite women and children, why can't Captain Mason and Captain Underhill claim God commanded English colonists to kill Pequot women and children? My point is, if you leave the door open to justify the Canaanite genocide, don't be surprised if modern crusaders try to push their way through that same door and then cite the Bible in their defense. We need to say something more responsible about the depiction of God-endorsed violence in the Old Testament. We should acknowledge that in the late Bronze Age, Israel made certain assumptions about the nature of God, assumptions that now have to be abandoned in the light of Christ. It is abundantly clear from the Gospels that Jesus has closed the door on genocide, just like he has closed the book on vengeance.

If we want to find a vengeful God of retributive wrath meting out violent justice upon his enemies (who conveniently turn out to be our enemies), we can find that depiction of God in the Old Testament. This is not the only depiction of God in the Old Testament, but it's there. If we want a proof text to confirm that God is vengeful toward his enemies, we can find those texts if we know where to look. But is this how Jesus read the Old Testament? The Hebrew prophets frequently prophesied that in the Day of the Lord Yahweh would bring violent vengeance upon the Gentile empires. But is this what Jesus did? Did Jesus endorse the call for divine vengeance on Gentiles? Remember, Jesus was himself a Jewish prophet. Jesus's preaching was the culmination of the Hebrew prophetic tradition. What began with Amos and Isaiah found its fullest and finest expression in Jesus of Nazareth. But Jesus demonstrates a new and creative way of reading and preaching the Hebrew prophets. Before we look at an example of how Jesus read the Prophets, it would be helpful to first consider the big picture of the Hebrew prophetic tradition.

The geography of Israel played a significant role in shaping ancient Hebrew theology. Israel was situated between the great southern and northern empires of the ancient Near East. With Egypt to the south and a succession of empires in Mesopotamia to the north, Israel was under constant threat from these superpowers. Israel was a small nation and extremely vulnerable to expansionist policies of those powerful empires. The biblical history of Israel was a long narrative of threat and oppression. The first Hebrews were enslaved by Egypt; Israel was forcefully deported to Assyria; Judah was sent into Babylonian exile following the destruction of Jerusalem. Vulnerability was a key ingredient in forming Hebrew identity.

But this vulnerability was also used by God to form Israel into a people with a keen sense of justice. One of the reasons the Old Testament talks so much about justice is because the Hebrew people so often suffered *injustice*. When you're the top dog you don't think so earnestly about justice, but if you're on the bottom you have a different perspective. There's a reason Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King Jr. are probably the two best examples of American prophets. Their prophetic edges were sharpened on the cruel flints of slavery and segregation. The Hebrew prophetic tradition developed in the crucible of enduring threat, invasion, and oppression from Gentile empires. In this crucible of suffering a theology of justice was forged, but it also produced the slag of vengeance theology.

In anticipation of a Spirit-anointed king who would bring justice by a restoration of the ancient Jubilee in which debts were canceled, slaves emancipated, and property inheritance restored, Isaiah gives this famous messianic prophecy:

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,  
because the LORD has anointed me;  
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,  
to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and release to the prisoners;  
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,  
*and the day of vengeance of our God.*<sup>\*8</sup>

Isaiah's vision of the Day of the Lord is that Messiah will bring the justice of Jubilee to the Jews while bringing violent vengeance upon the Gentiles. Isaiah sees divine vengeance against Gentile empires as the crowning achievement of salvation. The Hebrew longing for justice and restoration was accompanied by a desire for revenge and retaliation. These long-oppressed people wanted *their* God to bring a day of vengeance upon *their* enemies. To put it more pointedly, Israel yearned for the day

when they would have their turn on top and be able to stick it to their former oppressors. This biblical theme of vengeance recurs regularly throughout Psalms and the Prophets.

But retaliatory vengeance is not the only lens in the Old Testament for viewing Gentiles. There are also stories that seem to undermine vengeful thinking, subtexts that subvert retaliatory desire. In 1 Kings 17 we find the story of the widow of Zarephath. During a famine God sends the Hebrew prophet Elijah to the land of Sidon, where a Gentile woman is given the miracle of a flour barrel that is never empty and a jar of oil that never runs out. This Gentile widow survives the famine through a miracle given by a Jewish prophet. This isn't just a nice story about God's supernatural provision. This is a subversive text about God's love for Israel's enemies!

In 2 Kings 5 the subtext of divine kindness bestowed upon Israel's enemies is pushed further when Elijah's successor, Elisha, heals the Gentile Naaman of leprosy. But Naaman wasn't just any Gentile; Naaman was the general of the dreaded Syrian army that had been threatening Israel. It's one thing to make a Gentile widow a sympathetic figure in a Jewish story, but it's another thing to do that with a Syrian general. Imagine an Israeli story where God heals a Hamas general and you'll get some idea of what is going on with this story. Yet this is the genius of biblical subtexts. Because the story is skillfully told, the Jewish reader is seduced into rooting for the Syrian general; the reader can't help but be happy for Naaman. Of course, once you start feeling sympathy for Syrian generals, you might have to rethink Syrians altogether.

In these two stories Gentiles are made human and sympathetic figures. The Jewish reader doesn't want God's vengeance to fall upon these two Gentiles. Instead of thinking Gentiles deserve to be punished by divinely orchestrated famine, the reader rejoices that the widow of Zarephath receives mercy from God. Instead of seeing Naaman as a two-dimensional villain deserving divine retribution, the reader sees Naaman as a real human being in need of God's kindness. In telling these two stories, the Hebrew Bible subverts a Jewish lust for vengeance. Because we hear their stories, these two "enemies of God" are no longer viewed as enemies. What is an enemy? An enemy is someone whose story you haven't heard. So the Bible supplies us with subtext stories to subvert our assumptions about enemies. Some of the best parts of the Bible are found in the subtexts. And as we will see, the Old Testament stories of the widow of Zarephath and Naaman the leper, with their subversion of vengeance, made a big impression on Jesus. Now let's go to the New Testament.

In his gospel, Luke tells us that after Jesus had been baptized by John in the Jordan and completed his forty days of prayer and fasting in the wilderness, Jesus returned to Galilee to begin his ministry. After teaching and healing in villages throughout Galilee, Jesus finally returned to Nazareth. Jesus's newfound fame had preceded him, and there was tremendous anticipation surrounding his homecoming. Nazareth was ready to embrace Jesus as their hometown hero. On the Sabbath Jesus went to the synagogue and was invited to read from the Scriptures.

And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.<sup>9</sup>

Did you catch what happened? Do you see what Jesus did? While reading from the familiar passage of Isaiah 61, Jesus stopped midsentence and rolled up the scroll! It would be like someone singing the national anthem and ending with "O'er the land of the free." Everybody would be waiting for "and the home of the brave." Jesus didn't finish the line. Jesus omitted the bit about "the day of vengeance of our God." Jesus edited Isaiah like this:

to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,  
and the day of vengeance of our God.

In announcing that God's jubilee of liberation, amnesty, and pardon was arriving with what he was doing, Jesus omitted any reference to God exacting vengeance on Israel's enemies. In claiming that Isaiah's prophecy had been fulfilled in their hearing, Jesus is claiming to be Jubilee in person. But the scandalous suggestion is that this Jubilee is to be for everybody, even Israel's enemies. Jesus has edited out vengeance, and this gives us a key to how Jesus read the Old Testament. And lest we think that Jesus's omission of "the day of vengeance" was simply an oversight or meaningless, consider what Jesus says to the hometown crowd in the synagogue following his edited reading of Isaiah.

Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, "Doctor, cure yourself!" And you will say, "Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum."... Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.<sup>\*10</sup>

Jesus is announcing the arrival of the Lord's favor, but he is emphasizing that it is for everybody, even for Sidonians and Syrians, even for Israel's enemies! Jesus takes the implicit subtexts of mercy and makes them his explicit primary text. Jesus is making clear that in bringing the Jubilee of God he is bringing it for everybody! How was this message of God's inclusive favor received in Nazareth? Not well, not well at all. Initially Jesus's hometown "spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth."<sup>\*11</sup> But as soon as Jesus made clear that he was closing the book on vengeance, that he would not endorse the idea of divine retribution on Israel's enemies, the crowd turned viciously against Jesus.

When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.<sup>\*12</sup>

Jesus refused to read Isaiah's vision of vengeance in the synagogue, just as he would refuse to be a violent, vengeful Messiah in the model of King David and Judah Maccabee. And that ignited the rage of the crowd. It's amazing just how angry some people can become if you try to take away their religion of revenge. As long as Jesus announced that it was the time of God's favor, the crowd spoke well of him. But as soon as he made it clear that God's favor is for everyone, as soon as Jubilee was made inclusive and not exclusive, they tried to throw him off a cliff.

Until we are captivated by the radical mercy of God extended to all, we will cling to the texts of vengeance as cherished texts. We do this not for the noble sake of justice but for the spiteful sake of revenge. With the incident in the synagogue of Nazareth we learn that Jesus has closed the book on vengeance. The Word made flesh prevents us from riffling through the Bible to find texts of vengeance to fling upon our enemies. If we try to hold on to a divine warrant for vengeance, Jesus passes through our midst and goes away. If we cling to vengeance, we lose Jesus. If we don't want this to happen, we need to learn to give mercy to our enemies. If we commit to loving our enemies, Jesus will abide with us and help us learn how to do it.

Jesus didn't come to bring vengeance; he came to close the book on vengeance. Jesus announced the Jubilee good news of pardon, amnesty, liberation, and restoration. Jesus doesn't bless revenge; he blesses mercy and teaches that the mercy we show to our enemies is the mercy that will be shown to us. God does not allow us to hope that the book of divine vengeance will be closed for us but left open and inflicted in full upon others. This is not how it works in God's economy of grace revealed by Jesus.

Does this mean there's no divine judgment? Of course not. Certainly there is divine judgment, but it is a judgment based on God's love and commitment to restoration. The restorative judgment of God gives no warrant to a schadenfreude yearning to see harm inflicted on others. Jesus has closed the book on that kind of lust for vengeance.

When we read the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath or the story of Elisha and Naaman the leper, whom do we identify with? Are we Elijah? Are we Elisha? Probably not. More likely we're a starving widow or a suffering leper. We are the outsiders in need of God's mercy. More provocatively, whom do we identify with in the conquest narratives of Joshua? Why do we imagine ourselves as the conquering Israelites when we have more reason to imagine ourselves as the conquered Canaanites? To be blunt: If you are going to imagine divinely endorsed genocide, you should not imagine yourself as Joshua but as the unfortunate Canaanite whose entire family and village have just been murdered. Instead of always seeing yourself as the cowboy, try being the Indian sometime. Imagine yourself as a

Pequot Indian instead of an English colonist. Try being the Lakota Sioux instead of the American cowboy. Do that and then ask yourself how you feel about justifying genocide in the name of God.

We must constantly resist the temptation to cast ourselves in the role of those who deserve mercy while casting those outside our circle in the role of those who deserve vengeance. Jesus will have no part of that kind of ugly tribalism and triumphalism. Clinging to our lust for vengeance, we lose Jesus. But if we can say amen to Jesus closing the book on vengeance, then Jesus will remain with us to teach us the more excellent way of love.

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\*1. John 1:6–9, 15.

\*2. John 1:15.

\*3. Hebrews 1:3.

\*4. James Wilson, *The Earth Shall Weep: A History of Native America* (New York: Grove, 1998), 90.

\*5. Gary Clayton Anderson, *Ethnic Cleansing and the Indian: The Crime That Should Haunt America* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014), 43. See also <http://colonialwarsct.org/1637.htm>.

\*6. Wilson, *The Earth Shall Weep*, 91, ellipsis in the original.

\*7. Wilson, *The Earth Shall Weep*, 92–93, ellipses in the original.

\*8. Isaiah 61:1–2.

\*9. Luke 4:17–20.

\*10. Luke 4:23–27.

\*11. Luke 4:22.

\*12. Luke 4:28–30.

## Jesus Is What God Has to Say

When I was sixteen I sold my bicycle and bought a Bible. I parted with a good ten-speed, but I sold it so I could buy a really expensive Bible. Why did I do that? Because I was what was called in those days a Jesus freak. And I earned that moniker! Jesus crashed into my life on a Saturday night in 1974, and suddenly I went from being the high school Led Zeppelin freak to the high school Jesus freak. The Monday after my mystical encounter with Jesus I carried a Bible to school—not to make a statement, but to read it. And I *did* read it! Over and over. I was constantly reading the Bible. I took a Bible with me everywhere I went. At first I just picked up one of the Bibles we had in our home: King James, Revised Standard, Good News Bible, Living Bible, Jerusalem Bible; I read them all. But I didn't still have my own Bible.

Then one day I saw it, behind a glass case in the Narrow Way bookstore. A New American Standard Bible bound in top-grain cowhide. It was a red-letter edition, with gold edging, exhaustive cross-references, and wide margins (where I could inscribe my teenage revelations about the sacred text). I was smitten like a debutante ogling Tiffany jewelry. I just had to have that Bible. A week later I sold my bicycle, made my purchase, and obtained the object of my desire. The store embossed my name on the cover in gold lettering. I'm not sure I've ever owned a possession I prized more than that Bible. I read it every day, took it everywhere, underlined it, highlighted it, and filled those wide margins with my own commentary. A year later I had completely worn out that expensive Bible. It was dog-eared and whole sections had come loose from the binding. The book of Revelation was in danger of falling right out of the canon. So I saved up some more money from my summer job at Swanson's grocery store, went back to the Narrow Way bookstore, and told the proprietor I wanted to purchase another one of those expensive Bibles behind the glass case.

The owner said, "Didn't you just buy one?"

"A year ago," I replied.

"That Bible has a lifetime guarantee."

"You're kidding me!"

"Do you have your old Bible?"

"Right here."

When I showed the owner my now utterly worn-out Bible, he gave me a new one free of charge. He said he would send my defective Bible back to the company for a refund.

I left the bookstore the proud owner of a brand-new Bible. A year later I was back again with another broken-down Bible. I told the owner, "I guess this one's defective too." By this time he had gotten to know me, the high school Jesus freak from Savannah. He simply replied, "There's nothing wrong with these Bibles; they're just not made for people like you." I took it as a compliment.

What I'm trying to say is that I've been a hard-core Bible reader for forty years. So when I point out that the Bible is the penultimate word of God that points us to the ultimate Word of God who is Jesus, I do so as a person with a high view of Scripture and a lifelong commitment to the Bible. When we speak of the Word of God, Christians should think of Jesus first and the Bible second. It's Jesus who is the true Word of God, not the Bible. The Bible is the word of God in a secondary sense, faithfully pointing us to the perfect Word of God: the Word made flesh. Jesus is what the Law and Prophets point toward and finally bow down to. Jesus is what the Law and Prophets were always trying to say but could never fully articulate. The great truth that the Law and Prophets sought to imperfectly communicate was the child born of a virgin in Bethlehem. As John said, "The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."<sup>\*1</sup> God couldn't say all he wanted to say in the form of a book, so he said it in the form of a human life. Jesus is what God has to say! And that's what we see on the Mount of Transfiguration.

One of the most mysterious stories in the Gospels is the Transfiguration of Christ. It occurred a week after Simon Peter made his great confession about who Jesus is: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."<sup>\*2</sup> Jesus responded to Simon's confession by saying, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church."<sup>\*3</sup> (This is Jesus's first mention of the church.) A week later Jesus took Peter, James, and John up a high mountain (traditionally believed to be Mount Tabor). Jesus "was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them."<sup>\*4</sup> Perhaps the strangest aspect of the Transfiguration is the appearance of Moses and Elijah, who have a conversation with Jesus. The appearance of these two towering figures from the Old

Testament contains some obvious and powerful symbolism. Moses the lawgiver and Elijah the prophet are representative figures signifying the Law and the Prophets, or what Christians commonly call the Old Testament. Peter, James, and John are representative of the church and are witnesses to what happened. On Mount Tabor, Moses and Elijah are summoned from the Old Testament to give their final witness to the anointed Christ who will fulfill what they had begun.

At the beginning of his ministry Jesus said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”<sup>\*5</sup> What Moses and Elijah—the Law and the Prophets—had begun, Jesus would fulfill. The goal of the Law and the Prophets was to produce a society of fidelity and justice. Jesus and the kingdom he announces and enacts is where that project finds its fulfillment. The new society formed around Jesus was what the Law and the Prophets were aiming for all along. The Transfiguration is where Moses and Elijah find their great successor. The Transfiguration is where the Old Testament hands the project of redemption and restoration over to Jesus. The Transfiguration is where the old witness (testament) yields to the new witness (testament).

But initially Peter misinterpreted what the presence of Moses and Elijah meant. Or to say it in the symbolism of the story, the church misunderstood the relationship of the Old Testament to Jesus. Peter’s first impulse was to build three memorial tabernacles on Tabor, treating Moses, Elijah, and Jesus as approximate equals. Peter’s implicit suggestion that the Old Testament be given roughly the same authority as Jesus is what I mean by a flat reading of the Bible. What can happen with a flat reading of the Bible is that Jesus’s teaching of nonviolence in the Sermon on the Mount can be conveniently ignored because we found divine sanction for violence in the Old Testament. In other words, Jesus can be overruled by Moses and Elijah. But Mark tells us how Peter’s suggestion for a triumvirate of Moses, Elijah, and Jesus was rebuked on Mount Tabor: “And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, ‘This is my beloved Son; listen to him.’ And suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them *but Jesus only.*”<sup>\*6</sup>

Moses and Elijah have left the stage and now only Jesus remains. There’s now no possibility of Jesus being upstaged or countermanded by the Old Testament. Jesus is all in all. The Law and the Prophets were the lesser lights in the pre-Christ night sky. They were the moon and stars. They were sent by God, but they were not the fullness of divine light. Israel could grope forward by the moonlight of the Torah; the ancient Hebrews could navigate through the pagan night guided by the constellations of the Prophets. In a world of Stygian darkness, the moonlight and starlight emanating from the Torah and the Prophets made all the difference. But with the coming of Christ, morning has broken, the new day has dawned, and the sun of righteousness has risen with healing in its rays.<sup>\*7</sup> Now the moon and the stars, Moses and Elijah, the Law and the Prophets are eclipsed by the full glory of God in Christ! The moon and stars recede from view because the sun has risen. When Peter, James, and John looked around on Tabor after the voice from heaven had spoken, they saw only Jesus. This is significant. To say it as plainly as I know how, the Old Testament is not on par with Jesus. The Bible is not a flat text where every passage carries the same weight. This is why Jesus can say things like, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.”<sup>\*8</sup>

Where had Jesus’s audience heard it said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”? In the Hebrew Scriptures, of course.<sup>\*9</sup> But Jesus dares to challenge those Scriptures on his own authority. Which is why at the end of his Sermon on the Mount we’re told of this reaction from those who heard Jesus: “The crowds were astonished at his teaching. He was teaching them, you see, on his own authority, not like their scribes used to do.”<sup>\*10</sup> Imagine a preacher today saying, “The Bible says, but I say to you...” This is what Jesus is doing. Those listening to Jesus were forced to make a monumental decision: Does Jesus have the authority to challenge the Scriptures? This is why in his book *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus*, Jacob Neusner is uncomfortable with and ultimately rejects the Sermon on the Mount. As he says, “Only God can demand of me what Jesus is asking.”<sup>\*11</sup> Precisely! Rabbi Neusner clearly understands what is at stake. Is Jesus merely an expositor of Scripture, or is he the Word of God in person? The answer to the question is central to what makes a Christian a Christian.

With the “eye for an eye” command, the Old Testament presents a vision of reciprocal justice. Which, in its time, was a vast improvement over unrestrained and ever-escalating retaliatory violence. But Jesus is not a mere echo of Moses. Jesus is taking the revelation of God’s nature and God’s will far beyond where the Torah ever could. Jesus is not giving the word of God through a Bronze Age cultural filter. Jesus is the Word of God made flesh! This is among the most radical and central claims that Christians make concerning Jesus Christ.

I remember preaching on Jesus's call to the practice of radical forgiveness and being challenged by a church member who said, "Yeah, but the Bible says, 'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.'" I had to explain to him that a Christian can't cite Moses to silence Jesus. When we try to embrace Biblicalism by placing all authority in a flat reading of Scripture and giving the Old Testament equal authority with Christ, God thunders from heaven, "No! This is my beloved Son! Listen to him!"

Though Moses taught that adulterers, rebellious children, and other sinners should be stoned to death, God says to us, "Listen to Jesus!" And Jesus says, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice."<sup>\*12</sup> The Pharisees brought a woman to Jesus and said, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?"<sup>\*13</sup> Jesus didn't reply, "Well, you've got a Bible verse. If the Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it. Where are the rocks? Let's get this stoning started!" No, Jesus says something new: "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."<sup>\*14</sup> That wasn't what the Law said, but Jesus was revealing the heart of God, not giving a conservative reading of the Torah. Jesus gives us a new ethic of life-affirming mercy, which sets aside the old ethic that supported death penalties. Biblicalists who desire to condemn sinners to death can quote the Bible by citing Moses. But Jesus says something else. That is why I was so appalled when a well-known evangelical leader wrote an opinion piece for CNN defending the death penalty by citing Moses, yet never once mentioned Jesus.<sup>\*15</sup> We cannot create Christian ethics while ignoring Christ!

The centrality of Christian ethics is found in Christ himself. Though Elijah called down fire from heaven to burn up his enemies, God says to us, "Listen to Jesus!" And what Jesus says is "Love your enemies."<sup>\*16</sup> When a Samaritan village refused hospitality to Jesus and his disciples, James and John wanted to go "shock and awe" on the Samaritans and call down fire from heaven. They did so by finding biblical warrant from the actions of Elijah in the first chapter of 2 Kings. But Jesus didn't say, "Well, that's a biblical principle, all right. So let's nuke 'em!" No, Jesus, says something else: "You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives but to save them."<sup>\*17</sup> War-affirming Biblicalists who desire to justify drone strikes and carpet bombing can cite Elijah, but Jesus says something else.

Moses says this. Elijah does that. But Jesus says and does something completely new and different. And what does God say? Does God instruct us to find a healthy balance between Moses, Elijah, and Jesus? No! God says, "Listen to my Son!" If we want to rummage around in the Old Testament and drag out Moses or Joshua or Elijah or David to mitigate what Jesus teaches about peacemaking and loving our enemies, we are trying to build an Old Testament tabernacle on the holy mountain of Christ's glory, to which God says, "No!"

The role of the Old Testament is to give an inspired telling of how we get to Jesus. But once we get to Jesus we don't build multiple tabernacles and grant an equivalency to Jesus and the Old Testament. This was Peter's mistake on Tabor. Jesus is greater than Moses. Jesus is greater than Elijah. Jesus is greater than the Bible. Jesus is the Savior of all that is to be saved...including the Bible. Jesus saves the Bible from itself! Jesus shows us how to read the Bible and not be harmed by it. Jesus delivers the Bible from its addiction to violent retaliation. Moses may stone sinners and Elijah may kill idolaters. And so violent holiness can be justified as biblical. But for a Christian that doesn't matter. We follow Jesus!

It's not biblical principles that we seek to live by but the truth of Christ. Christians don't get to choose in which tabernacle they will be instructed—the tabernacle of Moses, Elijah, or Jesus. The light brighter than the sun shining from the face of Christ on Tabor brings an end to the idea that any other revelation is equivalent to Christ. The apostle Peter sets forth this high view of Christ when he writes,

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.

So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.<sup>\*18</sup>

Christian Scripture attests that Jesus is the daybreak of divine revelation who illuminates the human heart benighted by primitive darkness. The Bible (in both the Old Testament and the New Testament) does indeed give us the biblical principles for adjudicating the institution of slavery. But

that doesn't mean that God endorses slavery. Jesus is what God has to say, and Jesus gives us a trajectory of love that leads us to the abolition of slavery. The Bible may not give a clear repudiation of the institution of slavery, but the living Christ does!

It's not biblical justice that we pursue but Christlike justice. Biblical justice may call for the punitive measures of stoning sinners and executing idolaters, but Christ clearly calls us to a higher ethic of mercy.

It's not biblical manhood that men should aspire to but Christlike manhood. If we only speak of biblical manhood, who is our pattern? Abraham? Moses? David? Elijah? With their propensity for deceit, anger, adultery, and violence? No, Jesus alone is our model of redeemed manhood.

It's not biblical womanhood that should inform women but the light of Christ. Much of the Bible operates from a cultural assumption that women are the property of their fathers and husbands. But Jesus elevates women to a status of absolute and independent equality.

Wars of conquest, violent retribution, the institution of slavery, and women held as property are all biblical. But when placed in the light of Tabor these primitive assumptions must be renounced. What was once acceptable in the dim light of Moses and Elijah is now rejected in the light brighter than the sun shining from the face of Christ. Today Moses and Elijah (the Law and the Prophets) do one thing: they point to Jesus!

I'm a Christian, not a Biblicalist. The Bible is subordinate to Christ. But let me make this clear: I love the Old Testament. I'm a million miles from the second-century heresy of Marcion who regarded the God of the Old Testament as a demigod and wanted to eliminate the Hebrew Scriptures from the Christian canon. My approach to the Old Testament is nothing like Marcion's. I call the Old Testament sacred Scripture. I read the Old Testament every day. I pray the psalms. I preach the Prophets. I understand the history of Israel as the essential prequel to the story of Christ. But I don't regard the Old Testament as the perfect revelation of God, and I never read the Old Testament without Jesus. Jesus is my sponsor for admission into the Old Testament. (Why else would a Gentile read the ancient Hebrew Scriptures?) I don't read the Law and the Prophets by the light of Moses and Elijah; I read the Law and the Prophets in the light of Christ. So if Moses instructs capital punishment and Elijah models violent retribution, I remember Mount Tabor and the voice from heaven that said, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him."<sup>\*19</sup> The final testimony of Moses and Elijah is to recede into the background so that Jesus stands alone as the full and true Word of God. Jesus is what God has to say!

The Bible is the written word of God that bears witness to the living Word of God. God did not become a book, but God did become a human being. The Incarnation is not the creation of the canon of Scripture but the virgin birth of Jesus Christ. The Bible is not perfect; parts of it are now obsolete. Surely you admit this. Do you ever worry about violating the biblical prohibition found in Leviticus 19:19: "Nor shall you put on a garment made of two different materials"? Of course not. You understand that part of the Bible to be obsolete as a contemporary command. But nothing about the risen Christ is obsolete. Christ alone is the perfection of God.

It's not contending for the freedom of modern people to wear mixed-material garments that compels me to write about how Christians should view the Old Testament. The compelling issue is violence. It is the bad habit of using the Old Testament as a divine endorsement for violence that moves me to take up my pen. If we are going to use the supposed divine endorsement of the wars of Joshua and David to justify our own wars, we should at least be consistent about the Bible's blessing on violence and admit that the Bible permits lethal violence toward slaves. Consider this embarrassing verse in the Old Testament:

When a slaveowner strikes a male or female slave with a rod and the slave dies immediately, the owner shall be punished. But if the slave survives a day or two, there is no punishment; for the slave is the owner's property.<sup>\*20</sup>

Does that make you cringe? It should! And it's not as simple as glibly saying, "Well, the New Testament ended all that." The fact is, even the New Testament accepts slavery as an inevitable institution. As we read in Ephesians, "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling."<sup>\*21</sup> The question isn't "What does the Bible say?" The Bible says lots of things. The question is "What does the living Word of God to which the Bible points us have to say?" The New Testament gives us a trajectory toward the living Word, who clearly commands the dignity of all human beings and calls for the abolition of slavery.

But as Mark Noll shows in his important book *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, not only did southern Christians in antebellum America use the Bible to justify slavery, but many antislavery northern Christians were hesitant to issue an out-and-out condemnation of the institution of slavery for fear that it undermined the Bible.<sup>\*22</sup> A Biblical reading of the Bible can be a clever way of hiding from the rule of Christ. The slavery issue is not settled by citing chapter and verse from the Bible. The slavery issue is settled by listening to the living word from the living Christ. Even though the Bible does not give a clear and unmitigated denunciation of slavery, the living and reigning Christ surely does! But until 1865 a majority of American evangelicals had a hard time seeing slavery in the light of Christ because they recognized that the Bible treated slavery as normative. Their reading of the Bible prevented them from being illumined by the light of Christ.

We need to understand that the Bible is not an end in itself. The Bible is a means to an end but not the end itself. Jesus said it this way: “You search the Scriptures because you think they give you eternal life. But the Scriptures point to me!”<sup>\*23</sup> If we see the Bible as an end in itself instead of an inspired witness pointing us to Jesus, it will become an idol. Idols are gods we can manage according to our own interests. If we want to make the Bible our final authority, which is an act of idolatry, we are conveniently ignoring the problem that we can make the Bible say just about whatever we want. In doing this we bestow a supposed divine endorsement upon our already established opinion. The historical examples of this are nearly endless; crusaders, slaveholders, and Nazis have all proved themselves adept at bolstering their ideologies with images drawn from the Bible. Consider these chilling words from a speech given by none other than Adolf Hitler:

My feeling as a Christian points me to my Lord and Savior as a fighter. It points me to the man who once in loneliness, surrounded only by a few followers, recognized these Jews for what they were and summoned men to fight against them and who, God's truth! was greatest not as a sufferer but as a fighter. In boundless love as a Christian and as a man I read through the passage which tells us how the Lord at last rose in His might and seized the scourge to drive out of the Temple the brood of vipers and of adders. How terrific was His fight for the world against the Jewish poison. Today, after two thousand years, with deepest emotion I recognize more profoundly than ever before—the fact that it was for this that He had to shed His blood upon the Cross. As a Christian I have no duty to allow myself to be cheated, but I have the duty to be a fighter for truth and justice.<sup>\*24</sup>

So if Hitler wants to exterminate Jews, he can concoct a way to make the Bible seem to support his diabolical intentions. This is the problem of Biblicalism untethered from the revelation given us in Christ. Unscrupulous readers of Scripture can always find a loophole or rogue verse to make the Bible seem to do their bidding. The most egregious abuse of the unscrupulous is when the Bible is pressed into service as a sponsor of violence.

Consider torture. (Or the current Orwellian euphemism for it: “enhanced interrogation.”) What does the Bible say specifically about interrogation enhanced by state-sponsored torture? Well, nothing. There is no verse that says, “Thou shalt not torture suspected terrorists.” So if we treat the Bible as a perfect catalog fully revealing the minutia of God’s will and we find no specific prohibition regarding torture, does that mean we have a green light for waterboarding? Or we could even take this approach, which I’ve seen practiced in real life: “The Bible says, ‘For everything there is a season, a time for every activity under heaven....A time to kill....A time to hate....A time for war....’”<sup>\*25</sup> Well, there you have it. If the Bible says there’s a time for everything, including killing, hating, and waging war, then presumably there is a time to torture your enemies. This is how we make the Bible stand on its hind legs and dance a jig to whatever tune we play.

This kind of biblical rationalization may help explain why in 2009 the Pew Research Center reported that six in ten white evangelicals in the United States said they supported the use of torture on suspected terrorists at least some of the time.<sup>\*26</sup> (This despite the fact that the use of torture is illegal in the United States!) Among the demographic groups Pew Research studied, only white evangelicals had a majority who supported the use of torture. How could 60 percent of Bible-believing white evangelicals come down in favor of torture? Well, as Bob Dylan said, “You never ask questions when God’s on your side.”<sup>\*27</sup>

I’m confident that most of these torture-supporting evangelicals could find a way to make the Bible endorse their position, despite the fact that Jesus teaches his followers to love their enemies and be kind to the wicked.<sup>\*28</sup> Jesus says to love and be kind, but Ecclesiastes says sometimes you have to hate and kill. So with no apparent qualms of conscience, six in ten white evangelicals support torturing suspected terrorists at least some of the time. This is how we can use the Bible as an idol to try to hide

from the truth of Jesus. But the writer of Hebrews says we *can't* hide from the living Word of God, who is Jesus Christ.

Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before *him* no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.<sup>29</sup>

The “word of God” referred to in this text is *him*—Jesus! The writer of Hebrews is not talking about the Bible as the all-seeing judge of every thought and intention, but Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Word of God. Jesus is what God has to say. Jesus is God’s ultimate act of self-disclosure. Jesus is the “true light, which enlightens everyone.”<sup>30</sup> The living Word, who is Christ, is the One who informs us theologically, politically, socially, and personally. And in the light of the crucified and risen Christ, torture stands condemned as evil and barbarous, and it doesn’t matter in the least that a text from Ecclesiastes says there’s a time to kill and hate. Jesus cannot be locked up in the Bible; he is the living Word who enlightens humanity with the light of God. There is a sense in which asking the almost clichéd question “What would Jesus do?” has deep validity. We may not always know what Jesus would do, but we can usually discern what Jesus would *not* do. And Jesus would not and does not torture people!

The Bible is a violent book. The story it tells is crowded with scenes of violence, some of it horrific violence. The Bible recognizes the tragedy that civilization is founded upon human violence. The Bible is wrestling with the miserable reality. But the Bible is not univocal about violence. It says “There is...a time to kill”<sup>31</sup> and “Thou shalt not kill.”<sup>32</sup> The Bible says “Show no mercy to them”<sup>33</sup> and “Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.”<sup>34</sup> Are these contradictions? Of course they are! And it’s a fool’s errand to try to reconcile all the disparate things the Bible says about violence. But there is a trajectory in the Bible, a movement away from violence as normative and toward God’s peaceable society where swords become plowshares and spears become pruning hooks. It’s not by plucking isolated Bible verses here and there that we arrive at the truth of God but by identifying and following the Bible’s trajectory. Regarding the biblical account of the Israelite conquest of Canaan, James Carroll writes,

The violence wreaked in the name of Hebrew arrival was justified not by superior power but by God’s prior promise. Israel begins in violence, yes, but Israelites are already uneasy about that, which is why the promise matters. Israel’s uneasiness about violence is what generates not only the Bible, but Israel’s dynamic and ever-evolving understanding of God. That is why violence is so prominent in the Bible: because violence is the problem it is addressing. Across one thousand years, the human conscience began to reject what human life had always apparently required, and the record of that rejection is the Bible.<sup>35</sup>

The progression of biblical revelation reaches its pinnacle not with Joshua or David but with Jesus Christ. It’s not what Joshua or David said and modeled about violence that is definitive but what Jesus said and modeled about violence. Christian faith is not founded upon violent conquest but upon the crucifixion of a nonviolent Messiah. To set aside what Jesus taught about nonviolence in favor of what we can dig up in the violent conquest narratives of the Old Testament is to turn away from the light of salvation and rush headlong back into the darkness. Amid the contradictory biblical messages on violence, we must always remember that Jesus is what God has to say.

To simply ask what the Bible says about violence yields no simple answer. The Bible gives us a chorus of discordant voices on the subject of violence; it speaks both for and against violence. If the question is whether God is violent or not, and whether violence can be appropriated by God’s purposes, both sides can stockpile an arsenal of Bible verses to bolster their positions. But this only leads to a stalemate of conflicting Scriptures. There needs to be some way of adjudicating what texts are definitive in the Bible, especially on the subject of violence. John Dominic Crossan convincingly sets forth how a Christian should decide what is authoritative and what is not.

The Christian Bible forces us to witness the struggle of these two transcendental visions *within its own pages* and to ask ourselves as Christians how we decide between them. My answer is that *we are bound to whichever of these visions was incarnated by and in the historical Jesus*. It is not the violent but the nonviolent God who is revealed to Christian faith in Jesus of Nazareth and announced to Christian faith by Paul of Tarsus.

I conclude with an image to hold in imagination....

As you pass from outer to inner narthex [in Istanbul’s Church of St. Savior], the doorway is crowned with a magnificent mosaic of Christ *Pantokrator*....As in all such Eastern icons, frescoes, or mosaics of Christ, his right hand is raised in an authoritative teaching gesture, with his fingers separated into a twosome and a threesome to command Christian faith in the two natures of Christ and the three persons of the Trinity. As usual, he holds a book in his left hand. But he is not reading the book—it is not even open, but securely closed and tightly clasped.

Christ does not read the Bible, the New Testament, or the Gospel. He is the norm of the Bible, the criterion of the New Testament, the incarnation of the Gospel. That is how we Christians decide between a violent and nonviolent God in the Bible, New Testament, or Gospel. The person, not the book, and the life, not the text, are decisive and constitutive for us.<sup>\*36</sup>

John Dominic Crossan's simple suggestion is that we allow Jesus to judge all things, including the contradictory passages in the Bible regarding violence. For believers this approach should not be seen as controversial but deeply Christian. Again, this is not a low view of Scripture but a high view of Christ. Jesus alone is the Alpha and Omega, the full and true Word of God. Jesus is Lord and the final arbiter of all things, even the Bible. Jesus is what God has to say.

## Reading the Bible Right

It's a STORY  
We're telling news here  
Keeping alive an ancient epic  
The grand narrative of paradise lost and paradise regained  
The greatest "Once upon a time" tale ever told  
The beautiful story which moves relentlessly toward—  
"They lived happily ever after"  
Never, never, NEVER forget that before it's anything else, it's a story  
So let the Story live and breathe, enthrall and enchant  
Don't rip its guts out and leave it lifeless on the dissecting table  
Don't make it something it's really not—  
A catalog of wished-for promises  
An encyclopedia of God-facts  
A law journal of divine edicts  
A how-to manual for do-it-yourselfers  
Find the promises, learn the facts, heed the laws, live the lessons  
But don't forget the Story  
Learn to read the Book for what it is—  
God's great big wild and wonderful surprise ending love story  
Let there be wonder  
Let there be mystery  
Let there be tragedy  
Let there be heartbreak  
Let there be suspense  
Let there be surprise  
Let it be earthy and human  
Let it be celestial and divine  
Let it be what it is, and don't try to make it perfect where it's not  
This fantastic story of—  
Creation  
Alienation  
Devastation  
Incarnation  
Salvation  
Restoration  
With its cast of thousands  
More like a Tolstoy novel than a thousand-page sermon  
It's a Story because we are not saved by *ideas* but by *events*!  
Here's a plot line for you: Death, Burial, and Resurrection  
Yes, it's a story—not a plan, not an ology or ism, but a story  
And it's an amalgamated patchwork story told in mixed medium  
Narration, history, genealogy  
Prophecy, poetry, parable  
Psalm, song, sermon  
Dream and vision  
Memoir and letter  
So understand the medium, and don't try so hard to miss the point  
Try to learn what matters and what doesn't  
It's not where and when Job lived  
But what Job learned  
In his painful odyssey and poetic theodicy

It's not how many cubits of water you need to put Everest under a flood  
But why the world was so dirty that it needed such a big bath  
Trying to find Noah's ark  
Instead of trying to rid the world of violence  
Really is an exercise in missing the point  
Speaking of missing the point—  
It's not did a snake talk?  
But what the damn thing said!  
Because even though I've never met a talking snake  
I've sure had serpentine thoughts crawl through my head  
Literalism is a kind of escapism  
By which you move out of the crosshairs of the probing question  
But parable and metaphor have a way of knocking us to the floor  
Prose-flattened literalism makes the story small, time-confined, and irrelevant  
But poetry and allegory travel through time and space to get in our face  
Inert facts are easy enough to set on the shelf  
But the Story well told will haunt you  
Ah, the Story well told  
That's what is needed  
It's time for the Story to bust out of the cage and take the stage  
And demand a hearing once again  
It's a STORY, I tell you!  
And if you allow the Story to seep into your life  
So that THE STORY begins to weave into *your* story  
That's when, at last, you're reading the Bible right

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\*1. John 1:17.

\*2. Matthew 16:16.

\*3. Matthew 16:18.

\*4. Mark 9:2–3.

\*5. Matthew 5:17.

\*6. Mark 9:7–8, ESV.

\*7. See Malachi 4:2.

\*8. Matthew 5:38–39.

\*9. See Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:20; Deuteronomy 19:21.

\*10. Matthew 7:28–29, as translated by N. T. Wright in *Matthew for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1–15* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 78.

\*11. Jacob Neusner, *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus* (London: McGill-Queens University Press, 2000), 68.

\*12. Matthew 9:13.

\*13. John 8:4–5.

\*14. John 8:7.

\*15. R. Albert Mohler Jr., “Why Christians Should Support the Death Penalty,” *Belief* (blog), CNN, May 1, 2014, <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2014/05/01/why-christians-should-support-the-death-penalty>.

\*16. Matthew 5:44

\*17. Luke 9:55–56, NKJV.

\*18. 2 Peter 1:16–19.

\*19. Mark 9:7, ESV.

\*20. Exodus 21:20–21.

\*21. Ephesians 6:5.

\*22. Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

\*23. John 5:39, NLT.

\*24. Speech delivered at Munich on April 12, 1922; from Norman H. Baynes, ed., *The Speeches of Adolf Hitler: April 1922–August 1939*, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1942), 19.

\*25. Ecclesiastes 3:1, 3, 8, NLT.

\*26. “The Religious Dimensions of the Torture Debate,” Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C., April 29, 2009, [www.pewforum.org/2009/04/29/the-religious-dimensions-of-the-torture-debate](http://www.pewforum.org/2009/04/29/the-religious-dimensions-of-the-torture-debate).

\*27. Bob Dylan, “With God on Our Side,” *The Times They Are A-Changin'*, copyright © 1963, Columbia Records.

\*28. See Luke 6:35–36.

\*29. Hebrews 4:12–13.

\*30. John 1:9.

\*31. Ecclesiastes 3:1, 3.

\*32. Exodus 20:13, KJV.

\*33. Deuteronomy 7:2, ESV.

\*34. Luke 6:36, ESV.

\*35. James Carroll, *Jerusalem, Jerusalem: How the Ancient City Ignited Our Modern World* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), 50.

\*36. John Dominic Crossan, *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 94–95, italics in the original.

## The Crucified God

In the ugliest place of human existence (crucifixion and death) God reveals himself as absolute, total self-giving love....Being disguised under the disfigurement of an ugly crucifixion and death, the Christform is paradoxically the clearest revelation of who God is.

—John R. Cihak

Here's a big question: What is God like? I suppose this is the biggest question theology can ask. And we don't need to be theologians to ask this question. It's one of the most basic questions facing anyone who attempts to worship or even just think about God. But how shall we answer the question? Our capacity for imagining God seems virtually limitless. Is God like Zeus, whose incited anger results in hurled thunderbolts? Is God like Ganesh, the lovable elephant-headed god of prosperity from the Hindu pantheon whose idol I've seen in hotel lobbies across India? Is God like the comic white-bearded old man sitting behind a computer in a *Far Side* cartoon? Does God bear any resemblance to the primitive tribal deities who lead *their* people in waging war on *other* people? Is God Nietzsche's totalized Will-to-Power whose omnipotence controls every event in the universe? Is God the aloof and absent clockmaker of Thomas Jefferson and the eighteenth-century deists? Is God the amorphous everything and nothing of New Age spirituality? And so on.

To even venture an attempt to answer the question of what God is like seems to court idolatry. How can mere mortals possibly try to answer the question about God's nature without being guilty of not only theological error but outrageous hubris? Part of the genius of the ancient Hebrew religion was its unique prohibition against graven images. The problem with idols is that they put too fine a point on what God is like. The second of the Ten Commandments—"You shall not make for yourself an idol"<sup>\*1</sup>—prevented Israel from claiming too much precision about their knowledge of God. The image of God would not be carved in stone or cast in bronze. Refusing to make an image of God is a marvelous concession to humility.

And yet Christians do something different; for we *do* talk about the image of God being definitively revealed in the life of Jesus Christ. This is why the church, in the Second Council of Nicaea in 787, ruled in favor of icons, arguing that since Jesus bears God's perfect image (the Greek word is *ikon*), icons are therefore an acceptable part of Christian worship. The church fathers recognized that in Christ, God had given humanity not an idol but an icon of the divine nature. The confession of the Second Council of Nicaea was more than a ruling in support of the sacred art of Christian iconography; it was an acknowledgment that in the life of Jesus Christ we find a definitive answer to the question of what God is like. God is like Jesus! Jesus is not an idol; Jesus is not just one of many avatars of God; Jesus is the perfect icon of the invisible God!

As we look at the life of Jesus we see the character of God made comprehensible through a human life. In the song "One of Us," Joan Osborne asks the provocative question "What if God was one of us?" For the Christian the answer is immediate: God *is* one of us, and his name is Jesus! This is what we celebrate every Christmas: God with us and one of us. Immanuel. So if Jesus is the definitive answer to the question of what God is like, can we pinpoint a decisive moment in the life of Jesus? Is there an archetypal event that sums up the life of Jesus? In other words, can we locate the axis of Christian faith? Of course the answer is the cross—Good Friday as understood in the light of Easter. There's a compelling reason why the cross has become the universal symbol of Christianity: the cross is our quintessential symbol because it is where sin is forgiven, where the world is set right, and where God is fully revealed. At the cross of Christ, we discover the axis of divine love that refounds a fallen world. If the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is where humanity contracted death, then it's at the tree of Calvary that humanity finds its cure. The cross is indeed the focal point of Christian faith.

But we should admit the strangeness of this. We Christians are a peculiar people. We worship—as incredible as it sounds!—a *crucified* God. All religions more or less worship some version of a powerful, glorious, triumphant God, but Christians are unique in worshiping a betrayed, tortured, crucified God. This is the original scandal of the Christian faith: the worship of a God who was nailed to a tree! As the apostle Paul wrote, "But we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles."<sup>\*2</sup> The shockingly succinct phrase *Crucified God* was coined by Jürgen Moltmann as the title to his theological masterpiece published in 1972.

Jürgen Moltmann was raised as a secularist in Germany during World War II. At the age of twenty, while serving as a soldier in the German army, Moltmann was captured and placed in an English prisoner-of-war camp. Reading the New Testament, the young secularist encountered Jesus's cry from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" and thought, "Here is someone who understands me."<sup>\*3</sup> In time Jürgen Moltmann became a Christian and eventually one of the most important theologians of the twentieth century. In the foreword to the fortieth anniversary edition of *The Crucified God*, Miroslav Volf writes,

*The Crucified God* is a truly great book. It is existential and academic, pastoral and political, innovative and traditional, readable and demanding, contextual and universal, deeply Christian and equally deeply human—and all of this in explicating the bearing of the central Christian theme (the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth) on a fundamental human experience (suffering).<sup>4</sup>

At the heart of the Christian faith lies the apparent scandal of the crucified God. Over the centuries there have been attempts to soften the scandal of a crucified God by giving nice, tidy explanations of it. These “atonement theories” are attempts to reduce the scandal and mystery of the cross to rational and utilitarian formulas. But I’m suspicious of this project. For the most part I find these theories unconvincing. Some theories are merely inadequate, while others are repellent. Especially odious are those theories that ultimately portray God as sharing the petty attributes of the primitive and pagan deities who can only be placated by the barbarism of child sacrifice. This simply will not do. God is not like Molech!

Unfortunately, over the last thousand years, the Western Church has drifted into the idea that God required the violent death of his Son in order to satisfy his honor and pay off justice. (This theory was wisely rejected in the Eastern Church.) In an attempt to explain the cross according to the honor codes of feudalism, the character of God has been viciously maligned. The cross is many things, but it is not a quid pro quo to mollify an angry God. Above all things, the cross, as the definitive moment in Jesus’s life, is the supreme revelation of the very nature of God. At the cross Jesus does not save us from God; at the cross Jesus reveals God as savior! When we look at the cross we don’t see what God *does*; we see who God *is*!

We need to resist the temptation to be too quick to explain the cross in the utilitarian terms of juridical formulas and economic equations. Before we attempt any explanation we should first be struck mute at the sight of the crucifix. Who is this tortured man, nailed to a tree, suffering a violent death? Incredibly Christians say this is God! The *crucified* God. If we don’t find this scandalously shocking, we have grown far too familiar with the crucifixion of Jesus. The crucifixion of Good Friday isn’t an economic transaction; it is the torture and murder of an innocent man. This isn’t a business deal to balance the celestial books; it is a crime of cosmic proportions. Before the cross is anything else, it is a catastrophe. It is the violent lynching of an innocent man. It is the murder of pure life and blameless love! Does this way of looking at the cross shock you? This is precisely how the apostles spoke of the crucifixion in the book of Acts.

You killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead.<sup>5</sup>

The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree.<sup>6</sup>

They [your ancestors] killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers.<sup>7</sup>

The death of Jesus upon the cross was a murder; it was a lynching; it was the state-sponsored execution of an innocent man. It wasn’t an act of justice; it was a travesty of justice. It was a murder. Yes, it was a murder that God knew would happen—because of our addiction to sin and violence—but God’s foreknowledge of this killing doesn’t mean that it was God’s will for Jesus to be murdered. And it didn’t even require omniscient foreknowledge to know that a man like Jesus of Nazareth would be crucified. The Greek philosopher Plato knew that a perfect man would be killed if he ever appeared in a sinful society. Writing in his *Republic* four hundred years before Christ, Plato tells us what would happen to a perfectly just man: “Our just man will be scourged, racked, fettered...and at last, after all manner of suffering, will be crucified.”<sup>8</sup> Just as Plato’s foreknowledge of the murder of a perfectly just man does not mean that Plato willed it, neither does God’s foreknowledge of the murder of Jesus mean that God willed it. What God willed was that Jesus be faithful to truth and love so that through Jesus’s violent and sinful death we would be liberated from violence, sin, and death. The sacrifice of Jesus is the ultimate gift of love offered to a world distorted by hate, where death is wielded as the supreme weapon. The sacrifice of Jesus is *not* a utilitarian payment to an offended deity bound to an economy of appeasement. The ugliness of the cross is found in human sin. The beauty of the cross is found in divine forgiveness.

Think about Good Friday. Where do we find God during the suffering of Christ? Do we find God in the high priest Caiaphas demanding a sacrificial scapegoat? Do we find God in Pontius Pilate requiring a punitive death to satisfy imperial justice? No! On Good Friday we find God in Christ absorbing the sin of the world and responding with forgiveness. The cross is where God receives the most vicious blow of human sin, turns the other cheek, and forgives. The apostle Paul tells us that “in

Christ God was reconciling the world to himself.”<sup>9</sup> This should not be misunderstood as God reconciling himself to the world. It wasn’t God who was alienated toward the world; it was the world that was alienated toward God. Jesus didn’t die on the cross to change God’s mind about us; Jesus died on the cross to change our minds about God! It wasn’t God who required the death of Jesus; it was humanity that cried, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” When the world says, “Crucify him,” God says, “Forgive them.”

Golgotha is where all the great crimes of humanity—pride, rivalry, blame, violence, domination, war, and empire—are dragged into the searing light of divine judgment. At Golgotha we see the system of human organization that we blithely call “civilization” for what it is: an axis of power enforced by violence so corrupt that it is capable of murdering God in the name of what we call truth, justice, and liberty.

Golgotha is also the place where the love of God achieves its greatest expression. As Jesus is lynched in the name of religious orthodoxy and executed in the name of imperial justice, he expresses the heart of God as he pleads for the pardon of his murderers. At the cross we discover that the God revealed in Christ would rather die in the name of love than kill in the name of freedom. In Christianity the supreme value is not freedom but love. We can kill in the name of freedom, but in the name of love we suffer and forgive. Our savior is Jesus Christ crying “Forgive!”—not William Wallace crying “Freedom!”

The cross is not a picture of payment; the cross is a picture of forgiveness. Good Friday is not about divine wrath; Good Friday is about divine love. Calvary is not where we see how violent God is; Calvary is where we see how violent our civilization is. The justice of God is not retributive; the justice of God is restorative. Justice that is purely retributive changes nothing. The cross is not where God finds a whipping boy to vent his rage upon; the cross is where God saves the world through self-sacrificing love. The only thing God will call justice is setting the world right, not punishing an innocent substitute for the sake of appeasement.

So was the death of Jesus a sacrifice? Yes, the death of Jesus was indeed a sacrifice. But it was a sacrifice to end sacrificing, not a sacrifice to appease an angry and retributive god. Jesus sacrificed himself to the love of God manifest in forgiveness, not to the wrath of God for the satisfaction of vengeance. It was not God who required the violent death of Jesus but human civilization. A system built upon violent power cannot tolerate the presence of one who owes it nothing. Jesus was nailed to the ultimate symbol of violent power. But Jesus’s act of forgiveness transformed the cross into a new symbol—the symbol of Christian faith, hope, and love. The sacrifice of Jesus was necessary to convince us to quit producing sacrificial victims, but it was not necessary to convince God to forgive. To forgive sinners *is* the nature of God. When Jesus prayed on the cross for the forgiveness of his executioners, he was not acting contrary to the nature of God; he was revealing the nature of God as forgiving love. The cross is not what God does; the cross is who God is!

The cross is not about the satisfaction of an omnipotent vengeance. The cross is about the revelation of divine mercy. In Christ we discover a God who would rather die than kill his enemies. Once we understand that God is revealed *in* Christ (and not *against* Christ), we realize what we are seeing when we look at the cross. The cross is where God in Christ absorbs human sin and recycles it into forgiveness. At Golgotha humanity violently sinned its sins into Jesus. Jesus bore these sins all the way down into death and left them there. On the third day Jesus arose without a word of vengeance, speaking only “Peace be with you” on that first Easter.”<sup>10</sup> When we look at the cross we see the lengths to which God will go to forgive sin. The cross is both ugly and beautiful. The cross is as ugly as human sin and as beautiful as divine love—but in the end love and beauty win.

There is a healthier and more theologically sound way of viewing the cross, a way that doesn’t do violence to the Trinity by imagining the Father as punishing the Son. Pope Benedict points in the right direction when he says,

The Father supports the cross and the crucified, bends lovingly over him and the two are, as it were, together on the cross. So in a grand and pure way, one perceives there what God’s mercy means, what the participation of God in man’s suffering means. It is not a matter of a cruel justice, not a matter of the Father’s fanaticism, but rather of the truth and the reality of creation: the true intimate overcoming of evil that ultimately can be realized only in the suffering of love.<sup>11</sup>

So we return to the question of what God is like. Is God harsh, severe, demanding, petulant? God is often depicted this way. Or, to push a little harder, is God vicious and vengeful, malicious and

malevolent? Is God (dare we say it?) monstrous? I've met many Christians who think so. Or at the very least, they think God has a monstrous side. For them, the hope of salvation is that Jesus will save them from the monstrous side of God. Jesus is beloved as the One who will save them from his angry Father. They usually don't say it just so, but this is essentially their theology of the cross. When the cross is viewed through the theological lens of punishment, God is seen as an inherently violent being who can be appeased only by a violent ritual sacrifice. Those who are formed by this kind of theology will harbor a deep-seated fear that God is a menacing deity from whom they need to be saved. But is this right? I know that if we are inclined to do so we can find a way to make the Bible support a monster-God theology. But is it true? Is God a vengeful giant whose essential nature requires him to vent his wrath upon sinners with omnipotent fury? Or is God cosuffering love whose very nature is to offer unconditional forgiveness? These are honest questions. The term *God of the Bible* does not give as coherent a picture as we like to pretend. Is the God to whom the Bible points chiefly revealed as infinite anger or as immeasurable love? It's possible to read the Bible in support of both. What we need is a way to center our reading of Scripture. We do this by reading from the center of salvation history: the cross. When we view the cross in the light of resurrection, we are looking at salvation, but what do we see? Are we looking at the appeasement of a monster God through the barbarism of child sacrifice? No, we are seeing the very opposite. The crucifixion is not what God inflicts upon Jesus in order to forgive; the crucifixion is what God endures in Christ as he forgives. The monstrous aspects of Good Friday are of entirely human origin. What is divine about Good Friday is the completely unprecedented picture of a crucified God responding to his torturers with love and mercy. Golgotha offers humanity a genuinely new and previously unimagined way of conceiving the nature of God.

For eons human beings conjured and internalized a monstrous vision of God. Every flood, storm, earthquake, and plague was interpreted as the contrivances of a vindictive god. Calamities were made a bit more bearable by attributing inexplicable disasters to the wrath of the gods. These gods could be worshiped in dread and appeased by appropriate sacrifice and ritual, but these capricious gods could never be truly loved. Only love begets love. So across the ages the religious imagination of humankind was haunted by monstrous gods. And if monotheism takes hold, the monstrous gods are absorbed into a single monster god. (Or at least a god with a monstrous side.) But at the cross we find the death of the monster god. By this I mean it is at the cross of Christ that our wrong idea of God as a vengeful monster finally dies. Among the many meanings of the cross is this one: in the crucified body of Jesus we see the death of our mistaken image of God. God is not a monster. God does not have a monstrous side. God is whom we find in the Word made flesh. When Jesus dies, he does not evoke revenge; instead he confers forgiveness. Jesus does this for one profound reason: this is what God is like.

A forgiveness-centered view of the cross saves us from a pathological anxiety about God, which is so detrimental to the soul. We can now understand that the monster god is our own creation—a monster born of our projected issues of anxiety, anger, and shame. We are the Dr. Frankenstein who created the monster god. The image of a terrifying god is created in the hearts of anxious people. The image of a raging god is born in the hearts of angry people. The image of a condemning god is created in the hearts of ashamed people. Because we are such anxious, angry, and ashamed people, we imagine horrors where we should be seeing salvation. If we persist in looking at the cross through the distorted lens of fear, anger, and shame, we will imagine that the cross is what God does in order to forgive, instead of perceiving the cross as what God endures as he forgives. Richard Rohr pointedly shows the absurdity and danger of imagining that God cannot forgive apart from a violent appeasement.

How and why would God need a “blood sacrifice” before God could love what God had created? Is God that needy, unfree, unloving, rule-bound, and unable to forgive? Once you say it, you see it creates a nonsensical theological notion that is very hard to defend. Many rightly or wrongly wondered, “What will God ask of me if God demands violent blood sacrifice from his only Son?”<sup>12</sup>

The monster god of religious terror is an angry, abusive, violent deity who must be appeased, whether by throwing a virgin into a volcano or by nailing a son to a tree. It's this kind of monstrous view of God that is the origin of a lot of atheism. A good deal of atheism is protest atheism. The protest atheist is essentially contending that the angry god of ritual appeasement should not exist. And I agree. When I ask atheists to describe to me the God in which they don't believe, I'm often able to tell them I don't believe in that god either! The good news is that the angry and abusive god does *not* exist! The god that the protest atheist insists should not exist turns out to be merely a figment of a diseased religious imagination. The God whom Jesus called Abba is not a monster god with anger

issues, prone to violence. The Father of Jesus is whom we see demonstrated in the life of Jesus. The gospel of John goes to great lengths to make it clear that Jesus is the full revelation of who God is.

No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.<sup>\*13</sup>

Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise."<sup>\*14</sup>

The Father and I are one.<sup>\*15</sup>

Then Jesus cried aloud: "Whoever believes in me believes not in me but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me."<sup>\*16</sup>

Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?"<sup>\*17</sup>

Jesus's entire life was a demonstration of the true nature of God. As Jesus heals the sick, forgives the sinner, receives the outcast, restores the fallen, and supremely as he dies on a cross forgiving his killers, he reveals what God is like. To see Jesus is to see the Father. At last we know that God is not like the thunderbolt-hurling Zeus or any of the other angry gods in the pantheon of terrorized religious imagination. God is like Jesus, nailed to a tree, offering forgiveness. God is not a monster. God is like Jesus!

The truth is that there are monsters in this world, but the God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is not one of them. We have an imagination for monsters because we know of their existence. Venomous and vicious beasts were a daily peril for our earliest ancestors. Volcanoes and tsunamis can swallow whole cities. Hurricanes and tornadoes roar from the heavens, leaving hell in their wake. Epidemics of disease are lethal predators taking their pitiless toll. Worst of all, there are monstrosities of men—conquerors and warlords, tyrants and despots—galloping across history like ringwraiths, bringing conquest, war, famine, and death. We can imagine monsters because we have met them. But the living God is not one of them. Not the God whom Jesus called Abba.

Oh, the pagan gods are monstrous; of course they are. They are mercurial and merciless, petty and vengeful. They have to be mollified by a virgin flung into a volcano or a victim sacrificed on a stone altar. They always demand a violent and bloody appeasement...or else! But we know about these gods now; we know what they really are. They are personifications of those beasts and disasters and epidemics and wars and tyrants that frighten us so. They are deified projections of our own rage and fear. They are the desperate attempt to deal with our own sin, suffering, and shame.

The good news is that the God revealed in Christ does not belong to the category of Mars and Molech, of Ares and Zeus. These are the false gods of our frightened and shame-laden imaginations. The Creator God, the One True God, is not vengeful and retributive like those gods of the primitive pantheon. In his triumph Jesus put these petty and vindictive gods out of business. It's only their fading ghosts that haunt us today. In the dread of night we may be tempted to think that the true God shares the fearsome attributes of the vanquished monster gods. In our horror we imagine how Scripture confirms our nightmares. In our terror we may use the Bible as a palette to paint a macabre and monstrous image of God. But then the day dawns and we hear Jesus say, "It is I; do not be afraid."<sup>\*18</sup> With the dayspring of Christ the terrors of night fade away. Jesus is perfect theology. And the perfect theology of Jesus saves us from our primeval nightmares about the divine. The hands of God are not hurling thunderbolts. The hands of God have scars; they were nailed to a tree as he forgave monstrous evil.

I remember being in the office of a New Testament professor at a Pentecostal university and seeing an Orthodox icon on his wall. It was an icon of Saint Anthony the Great (251–356). In this icon the hands of Saint Anthony hold a scroll bearing the words "I no longer fear God, but I love him. For love casts out fear." I agree with Saint Anthony. I am also well aware that some will vehemently protest Saint Anthony's words and my agreement with them. Nevertheless, I agree with the great saint because this has been my experience as well. For many of us, a dread fear of God may be the only place we can begin our journey. It's how we first take God seriously. But it's only the starting point, and we must not stay there. Yes, I understand the Bible commends the fear of God, and I do too, but only as a preliminary beginning. God desires us to grow beyond the rudimentary beginning of fear. The apostle John said it this way:

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them....There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in

love.\*<sup>19</sup>

In what is called the fear of God, what I fear is not God but the suffering my sin can inflict on myself and those around me. What God calls me to fear is the destructive results of sin—and I take God seriously. The shorthand term for this is the *fear of God*. The malevolent consequences of sin are all too real. But I'm not afraid of God. I used to be, but I am no longer. I am no longer afraid of God because I have come to know God as he is revealed in Christ. I have come to know that God's single disposition toward me is one of unconditional, unwavering love. The knowledge of God's love has made it impossible for me to be afraid of God.

You may think such language is reckless. It is not. The peace of no longer being afraid of God has been hard won. It has come from relentlessly seeking to know God as he is revealed in Christ. It is not the result of a liberal, sloppy, pick-and-choose theology. Rather, it is the result of pushing through the dark outer courts of the fear of God into the holy of holies, where the love of God shines eternally and dispels all darkness. After years of praying, meditating on the Gospels, and sitting with Jesus in contemplation, I am simply no longer afraid of God. Maturing love is driving out fear.

God is not a monster. There are monster-god theologies, but they are mistaken theologies. Accusation and scapegoating, the ravages of war, and the wages of sin are monsters. The cruel vagaries of chance, until they are tamed by Christ in the age to come, may fall upon us as monsters. But God is not a monster. God is love. Jesus reveals this to us. If we move against the grain of love, we will suffer the shards of self-inflicted suffering—and we can call this the wrath of God if we like—but the deeper truth remains: God is love.

You no longer need to sit in the dark with the tormenting idea that God somehow harbors malice and ill will toward you. It's all a cruel fiction. Turn on the light of Christ and realize that the monster you imagined does not exist. Who exists is Jesus. And he is the One who says to you, "It is I; do not be afraid."\*<sup>20</sup> Jesus is the crucified God whose death, burial, and resurrection brought to an end the terrors of the monster god.

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\*1. Exodus 20:4.

\*2. 1 Corinthians 1:23.

\*3. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 40th anniversary ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2015), ix.

\*4. Miroslav Volf, foreword to *The Crucified God*, by Jürgen Moltmann, x.

\*5. Acts 3:15.

\*6. Acts 5:30.

\*7. Acts 7:52.

\*8. Plato, *The Republic*, trans. A. D. Lindsay (New York: Knopf, 1976), 37.

\*9. 2 Corinthians 5:19.

\*10. John 20:19.

\*11. Pope Benedict XVI, interview by Jacques Servais, *Catholic News Agency*, March 17, 2016, [www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/full-text-of-benedict-xvii-recent-rare-and-lengthy-interview-26142](http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/full-text-of-benedict-xvii-recent-rare-and-lengthy-interview-26142).

\*12. Richard Rohr, "Incarnation Instead of Atonement," *Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation*, February 12, 2016, <http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?ca=2b0f5eaf-df1a-4470-9670-852ead1104bd&c=696c5640-eef6-11e3-969cd4ae529a826e&ch=6a8a2250-eef6-11e3-97f2-d4ae529a826e>.

\*13. John 1:18.

\*14. John 5:19.

\*15. John 10:30.

\*16. John 12:44–45.

\*17. John 14:8–10.

\*18. John 6:20.

\*19. 1 John 4:16, 18.

\*20. John 6:20.

## Who Killed Jesus?

A few years ago during Lent I preached a series of sermons grappling with the horror of the cross. Why was Jesus murdered? Why was he tortured? Why was he crucified? And most pointedly, *who killed Jesus?* Throughout that Lenten series I made it clear that God did not kill Jesus. Jesus was killed by the principalities and powers, a term used by the apostle Paul<sup>\*1</sup> to describe the very powerful, the very rich, the very religious, the institutions they represent, and the spirits that operate within these institutions. Jesus was put to death by the structures of political, economic, and religious power represented by Pontius Pilate, Herod Antipas, and Joseph Caiaphas. In the Gospel narratives we see the Roman governor, the king of Judea, and the high priest acting in demonic concert to execute Jesus. God did not kill Jesus; human culture and civilization did. God did not demand the death of Jesus; we did.

Those Lenten sermons turned out to be surprisingly popular. I've discovered that most Christians are deeply relieved to learn that the forgiveness of our sins is not predicated upon God killing Jesus. Most people take it as good news to learn that child sacrifice is not part of God's plan to save the world. Due to the popularity of those sermons, a Bible college invited me to participate in a public debate on whether or not God killed Jesus. My debate opponent held to John Calvin's theory that God had to expend his anger upon an innocent victim before he could find it within himself to forgive sin. Among the many problems of Calvin's theory of the cross is that it turns God into a petty tyrant and a moral monster. Punishing the innocent in order to forgive the guilty is monstrous logic, atrocious theology, and a gross distortion of the idea of justice. This debate, billed as "The Monster God Debate," was recorded and eventually viewed tens of thousands of times online. Over the next year I received hundreds of correspondences from people around the world relieved to learn that Good Friday was not the day when God killed his Son. What Jesus did on the cross is far more mysterious and beautiful than simply offering himself as a primitive ritual sacrifice. Ritual sacrifice may appease the Aztec god Quetzalcoatl, but it has nothing to do with the Father of Jesus. The cross is a cataclysmic collision of violence and forgiveness. The violence part of the cross is entirely human. The forgiveness part of the cross is entirely divine. God's nature is revealed in love, not in violence. The Roman cross was an instrument of imperial violence that Jesus transformed into a symbol of divine love.

In our scriptures and creeds, we confess that Christ died for our sins, but this does not mean we should interpret the cross according to an economic model where God had to gain the necessary capital to forgive sins through the vicious murder of his Son. How would this "pay off God" theory of the cross work anyway? Did God have some scale of torture that once met would extinguish his wrath? If God required the death of Jesus in order to forgive, did it have to be a violent death? Did it have to be by crucifixion? Did it have to involve the torture of the Roman scourging? Did God require a minimum number of lashes that Jesus had to endure? Was the crown of thorns necessary? Did God require a specific number of thorns to expiate his anger? And if you say, "No, that's absurd! Some of the abuse Jesus suffered was gratuitous torture by the hands of cruel men," well, please explain just how this division of labor works. How much of the torture of Jesus was necessary to satisfy God's wrath, and how much was just for the sport of it? A theory of the cross that says it was God who desired the torture and murder of Jesus on Good Friday turns the Father of Jesus into a cruel and sadistic monster. It's salvation by divine sadism.

Or perhaps we want to exonerate God from culpability in the murder of Jesus, so we claim that it wasn't God, but rather justice, that demanded the crucifixion of Jesus. But this begs the question of who is really in charge? Is God merely a penultimate deity subordinate to the goddess Justice? Are we to imagine God saying, "Look, I'd really like to forgive you, but I've got to pay off Lady Justice first, and she's a cruel goddess who demands the blood of an innocent victim through a torturous death"? No! God is not beholden to retributive justice. We are the ones who demand sacrificial victims, not God. We are the ones who insist upon a brutal logic that says God can't just forgive. We are the ones who mindlessly say, "God can't forgive; he has to satisfy justice." But this is ridiculous. It's a projection of our own pettiness upon the grandeur of God. Of course God can just forgive! That's what forgiveness is! Forgiveness is not receiving payment for a debt; forgiveness is the gracious cancellation of debt. There is no payment in forgiveness. Forgiveness is grace. God's justice is not reprisal. The justice of God is not an abstract concept where somehow sin can only be forgiven if an innocent victim suffers a severe enough penalty. In the final analysis punitive justice is not justice at all; it's merely retribution. The only justice God will accept as justice is actually setting the world right! Justice is *not* the punishment of a surrogate whipping boy. That's injustice!

In the parable of the prodigal son, the father doesn't rush to the servants' quarters to beat a whipping boy and vent his anger before he can forgive his son. Yet Calvin's theory of the cross would require this ugly insertion into Jesus's most beautiful parable. No, in the story of the prodigal son, the father bears the loss and forgives his son from his treasury of inexhaustible love. He just forgives. There is no payment. Justice as punishment is what the older brother called justice. The only wrath we find in the parable belongs to the Pharisee-like older brother, not the God-like father. Justice as the restoration of relationship is what the father called justice.

The ritual sacrifice of a substitute victim has nothing to do with the justice of God. Ritual sacrifice has its dark origins in the scapegoat mechanism, where the tribe extinguishes the danger of all-against-all violence by killing a single victim.<sup>\*2</sup> Ritual sacrifice does not originate in the heart of God; it originates in the violent heart of humanity.

In the earliest history of Israel, the Law of Moses required blood sacrifices for the remission of sins. But this idea was later challenged by the prophets. Six hundred years after Moses gave the Law regarding ritual sacrifice, David said, "Sacrifice and offering you do *not* desire....Burnt offering and sin offering you have *not* required."<sup>\*3</sup> Hosea says that God desires "steadfast love and *not* sacrifice."<sup>\*4</sup> This is why the writer of Hebrews says, "Indeed, *under the law* almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins,"<sup>\*5</sup> but then goes on to say,

Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said,

"Sacrifices and offerings you have *not* desired,  
but a body you have prepared for me;  
in burnt offerings and sin offerings  
you have taken *no* pleasure.  
Then I said, 'See, God, I have come to do your will, O God'  
(in the scroll of the book it is written of me)."

When he said above, "You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings" (these are offered according to the law), then he added, "See, I have come to do your will." He abolishes the first in order to establish the second.<sup>\*6</sup>

In other words, the psalmists, the prophets, and the writer of Hebrews come to understand that God abolishes primitive ritual sacrifice in order to establish as justice actually doing God's will. This is what we see in the life of Jesus. Jesus was faithful to embody God's will even to the point of shedding his blood as he forgave sinners. Jesus did not shed his blood to pay off God in the form of a ritual sacrifice. That's not what God wanted. Jesus shed his blood in faithful obedience to his Father's will, demonstrating divine forgiveness even as he was crucified! As Jesus told the sacrifice-obsessed Pharisees, "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, *not* sacrifice.'"<sup>\*7</sup> God desires lives marked by mercy, not the sacrifice of victims. Jesus's death was not a ritual sacrifice of appeasement but the supreme demonstration of God's mercy. Jesus did not shed his blood to buy God's forgiveness; Jesus shed his blood to *embody* God's forgiveness!

One of the problems with a theory of the cross that fractures the Trinity by pitting the Father against the Son in order to vent divine rage is that it fails to take sin seriously enough. The serious problem of sin cannot be solved by the cultic practice of ritual sacrifice. Primitive religion is an entirely inadequate response to the mystery of iniquity. The idea that the cross is a blood payment violently extracted from a sinless victim to somehow balance the cosmic scales trivializes sin. Viewing the cross as payment to God for our personal debt of sin ignores the deep problem of systemic sin. When we turn the cross into a payment for our personal sin debt to an offended God, we leave unchallenged the massive structures of sin that so grotesquely distort humanity. If the cross is simply Jesus purchasing our ticket, our "get out of jail free" card, then the principalities and powers are left unchallenged to run the world the way they always have. The world is left unsaved. But that's not how the apostle Paul understood the cross. Paul says the cross heaps shame on the rulers and authorities that preside over structural sin: "In this way, he disarmed the spiritual rulers and authorities. He shamed them publicly by his victory over them on the cross."<sup>\*8</sup>

The principalities and powers seek legitimacy by claiming to be wise and just, but the cross proves they are neither wise nor just. At the cross the principalities are stripped of their cloaks of legitimacy so that their naked bid for power is exposed to the world for what it really is. God didn't

crucify Jesus; Rome and the Sanhedrin did. Now the cross forever shames the rich and powerful who seek to preserve their privilege and position through the use of violence. Their pretentious claim that they are wise and just enough to use violent means to achieve good ends is put to everlasting shame. If we claim that it was God who required the crucifixion of Jesus, we seek to clothe with false dignity the very structures of sin that Jesus deliberately stripped bare and put to open shame in his death!

But this distorted understanding of the cross gets worse. If we say that at the cross Jesus was being punished by God for our sins, it forces adherents of this theological system to say that what Jesus suffered in torture and crucifixion is what every person *deserves*. We've probably all heard preachers say that very thing. *What Jesus suffered on the cross is what we all deserve!* (I used to say it!) But is that true? Is it true that every person *deserves* to be tortured to death? Is it true that your grandmother *deserves* to be tortured to death? Is it theologically accurate to point to a six-year-old girl and say, "That little girl *deserves* to be tortured to death"? Is it true that God created humanity in such a way that every single man, woman, boy, and girl *deserves* to be beaten, scourged, and nailed to a tree? Of course it's not true! You know it's not true! No one *deserves* to be tortured to death! So where does this religious nonsense come from? It mostly comes from Calvin painting himself into a theological corner in order to maintain the logic of his system. (Once you've concocted a theological system that forces you to defend the idea that every person deserves to be tortured to death, it would be best to just scrap the whole system!) But to assert that every person deserves to be violently tortured to death is worse than theological nonsense; it's a vicious assault upon divine goodness and human dignity. What sinners need (shall we say *deserve*?) is love and healing, not torture and death. We are worthy of God's love and healing not on the basis of personal merit but because of the image we bear: the very image of God. Original blessing is more original than original sin!

God did not kill Jesus, but Jesus's death *was* a sacrifice. Jesus sacrificed his life to show us the love of the Father. Jesus sacrificed his life to shame the ways and means of death. Jesus sacrificed his life to remain true to everything he taught in the Sermon on the Mount about love for our enemies. Jesus sacrificed his life to confirm a new covenant of love and mercy. Jesus sacrificed his life to Death in order to be swallowed by Death and destroy Death from the inside. The crucifixion of Jesus was a sacrifice in many ways. But it was *not* a ritual sacrifice to appease a wrathful deity or to provide payment for a penultimate god subordinate to justice.

When we say Jesus died for our sins, we mean something like this: We violently sinned our sins into Jesus, and Jesus revealed the heart of God by forgiving our sins. By saying "we" violently sinned our sins into Jesus, I mean that all of us are more or less implicated by our explicit or tacit support of the systems of violent power that frame our world. These are the political and religious systems that orchestrated Jesus's death. At the cross we see how Adam and Eve's penchant for shifting blame and Cain's capacity for killing led to the ultimate crime: the murder of God! The transgression of our first parents along with the sinful violence of the founders of human civilization led inevitably to the killing of Jesus on Good Friday. At Golgotha human sin is seen as utterly sinful. God did not require the death of Jesus, but our sinful systems certainly did! We are so addicted to the idea of redemptive violence—problem solving by killing—that it even infects our theology of the cross. With our superstitious reverence for redemptive violence we wrongly assume that God was the source of violence on Good Friday. But once we see the absurdity of this erroneous notion, we can then take an honest and hard look at the killing of Jesus and consider its deep implications.

Why was Jesus killed? Jesus himself suggests that he would be killed for the same reason that Abel and Zechariah were killed.

Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets whom your ancestors killed. So you are witnesses and approve of the deeds of your ancestors; for they killed them, and you build their tombs. Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, "I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute," so that this generation may be charged with the blood of all the prophets shed since the foundation of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, it will be charged against this generation.<sup>9</sup>

As René Girard has shown in his groundbreaking work on sacred violence and the origin of religion, Jesus recognized Abel and Zechariah as archetypes for sacrificial murder victims.<sup>10</sup> Jesus said that this kind of ritualized killing would reach its pinnacle with his own death, that the satanic practice of accusing and killing (sacrificing) a ritual victim (a scapegoat) would be summed up in the generation responsible for his own death in Jerusalem. To understand this dark mystery is to gain a deep insight into the cross. The evangelist Mark was the first of the gospel writers to chronicle how the

principalities and powers colluded together to put Jesus to death. Please read Mark's account of the killing of Jesus with careful consideration.

Very early in the morning the leading priests, the elders, and the teachers of religious law—the entire high council—met to discuss their next step. They bound Jesus, led him away, and took him to Pilate, the Roman governor.

Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

Jesus replied, "You have said it."

Then the leading priests kept accusing him of many crimes, and Pilate asked him, "Aren't you going to answer them? What about all these charges they are bringing against you?" But Jesus said nothing, much to Pilate's surprise.

Now it was the governor's custom each year during the Passover celebration to release one prisoner—anyone the people requested. One of the prisoners at that time was Barabbas, a revolutionary who had committed murder in an uprising. The crowd went to Pilate and asked him to release a prisoner as usual.

"Would you like me to release to you this 'King of the Jews'?" Pilate asked. (For he realized by now that the leading priests had arrested Jesus out of envy.) But at this point the leading priests stirred up the crowd to demand the release of Barabbas instead of Jesus. Pilate asked them, "Then what should I do with this man you call the king of the Jews?"

They shouted back, "Crucify him!"

"Why?" Pilate demanded. "What crime has he committed?"

But the mob roared even louder, "Crucify him!"

So to pacify the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He ordered Jesus flogged with a lead-tipped whip, then turned him over to the Roman soldiers to be crucified.<sup>\*11</sup>

In Mark's gospel we see it wasn't God who accused Jesus of many crimes. It wasn't God who shouted "Crucify him!" It wasn't God who ordered Jesus flogged with a lead-tipped whip. The work of accusation, condemnation, and torture is the work of the satan<sup>\*12</sup>—the accuser. The chief priests accused Jesus of many things—heresy, blasphemy, sedition—because they were under the sway of the satanic spirit of envy and blame. The spirit of God is not heard in the blood-lusting cries of "Crucify him" but in the merciful plea "Father, forgive them." We must not imagine the machinations of the devil as the handiwork of God!

When Jesus arrived in Jerusalem, the principalities and powers of Caiaphas, Herod, and Pilate and their constituent institutions of religious, economic, and political power were at enmity with one another. These power brokers were bitter rivals forced into a fatal embrace. But when they took their rivalry-induced fears and anxieties and projected them onto Jesus as their chosen scapegoat, they achieved a demonic unity. Luke precisely tells us this: "That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies."<sup>\*13</sup> This kind of satanic unity is the glue of civilization—harmony achieved through envy and accusation, scapegoating and ritual violence. This is how Cain built the first city; it's what Jesus calls "the foundation of the world." But on Good Friday the whole foundational system of accusation and violence is going to reach a hellish crescendo in the crucifixion of Jesus. And there is a divine purpose in this, as Jesus said: "So that the blood of all the prophets, *shed from the foundation of the world*, may be charged against this generation."<sup>\*14</sup> According to Jesus, the crucifixion is not charged against God but against Cain's system of civilization.

The killing of Abel and Zechariah and every other scapegoated, sacrificed victim is summed up when human civilization did the same thing to the Son of God. Jesus's solidarity is with the Abel-like victims, not with the Cain-like conquerors. On Good Friday Jesus refounds the world as an Abel-like victim and not a Cain-like conqueror. This is something entirely new. It's in this way that the blood of the Lamb is the foundation for the New Jerusalem. It's in this sense that Jesus is the Lamb (an innocent scapegoat) slain from the foundation of the world.<sup>\*15</sup> The "foundation of the world" is not the beginning of creation but the beginning of human civilization. Abel was an innocent lamb slain at the world's foundation. And the pattern has been repeated over and over ever since, from A to Z, from Abel to Zechariah. But when the satanic system of civilization sacrificed the holy Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, it reached a breaking point. On Good Friday we see that our violent system of blame and ritual killing is so evil that it is capable of the murder of God. And once we see it, we can repent of it, be forgiven for it, and be freed from it. This is how the cross saves the world.

God did not kill Jesus. God's action on Good Friday was to surrender his beloved Son to our system. And our system killed him. But on Easter Sunday God overthrew our satanic verdict by raising Jesus from the dead! God did not kill Jesus; we did. What God did was to raise Jesus from the dead and in Christ give us a new way of organizing the world. Instead of being organized around blame and ritual killing, the world is to now be organized around forgiveness and cosuffering love. The cross is

not the place where God vents his wrath on Jesus. The cross is the place where human fear and anger are absorbed into God's eternal love and recycled into the saving mercy of Christ. If we persist in thinking that somehow it was God who demanded the murder of Jesus, we continue to exonerate the very system of evil that God intends to save us from. It's at the cross of Christ that the world and its violence are condemned so that the world, at last, might be saved by the love of God. The cross is not about the wrath of God finding a suitable sacrifice. The cross is about the love of God offering humanity a way out of the vicious cycle of producing endless victims. The cross of Christ is the end of sacrifice. It's not the appeasement of a vengeful deity but the supreme demonstration of God's everlasting love.

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\*1. See Romans 8:38; Ephesians 3:10; 6:12; Colossians 1:16; 2:15; Titus 3:1.

\*2. See René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 79–80, and René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 177.

\*3. Psalm 40:6.

\*4. Hosea 6:6.

\*5. Hebrews 9:22.

\*6. Hebrews 10:5–9.

\*7. Matthew 9:13.

\*8. Colossians 2:15, NLT.

\*9. Luke 11:47–51.

\*10. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*.

\*11. Mark 15:1–15, NLT.

\*12. *Satan* is not a proper name but simply the Hebrew word for “accuser.”

\*13. Luke 23:12.

\*14. Luke 11:50, ESV.

\*15. See Revelation 13:8.

## Hell...and How to Get There

My dad was in the process of his slow dying. Dementia had rendered this intelligent and articulate judge nearly as mute as the sphinx. He had broken his arm in a fall and I was sitting with him in the hospital. Since conversation with my dad was nearly impossible, I had a book with me, Abraham Joshua Heschel's *The Prophets*. Abraham Joshua Heschel was a Polish-born American rabbi, theologian, philosopher, and social activist who worked with Martin Luther King Jr. and lent his prominent voice to the civil rights movement. It is remarkable that a Jewish rabbi's writings have been so influential among Christian ministers, theologians, and lay people around the world. The preeminent Christian Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann has often cited Heschel's influence on his own work. Everything I've ever read from Heschel has shown him to be a thoroughly God-saturated soul, a kind and wise sage of the highest order. Rabbi Heschel was so immersed in the Hebrew prophets that he became one—a modern-day Jeremiah marching arm in arm with Dr. King across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, in brave defiance of entrenched racism. Recalling his participation in the Selma March, Rabbi Heschel said, "I felt my legs were praying."<sup>1</sup> Heschel's whole life was a kind of prayer, and I have the highest admiration for this man of God, just like I have the highest admiration for my dad. For some reason my dad was often confused for a well-known rabbi. Maybe because he looked vaguely Jewish but more, I like to think, because of his kind and wise bearing. In many ways L. Glen Zahnd was not unlike Abraham Joshua Heschel.

So there I was sitting at the bedside of my dying father reading *The Prophets*. My mind was occupied with thoughts of life and death, God and the prophets, wisdom and kindness, how we ought to live our lives, and how L. Glen Zahnd and Abraham Joshua Heschel were great examples of men who did it right. Shortly before midnight I left my father's room to go home. The hospital corridors were quiet and the lights were turned low. It was an ambiance that matched my pensive mood. I entered the empty elevator, pushed the button for the ground floor, and watched the doors close. At that moment a thought erupted from some fundamentalist outpost in my brain asking this disturbing question: "Is Abraham Joshua Heschel in hell?" I uttered my reply instantly and out loud with more than a hint of indignation: "What would be the point of that?!"

For most of my life I had held to a simplistic equation about the afterlife: Christians go to heaven, where they enjoy eternal bliss, while everyone else goes to hell, where they suffer eternal torment. But now with death, my dad, and Rabbi Heschel weighing heavy on my mind, my tidy and trite equation began to crack under the strain. Was Rabbi Heschel in hell? After all, he wasn't a Christian. Of course, there were a lot of reasons for that, not the least of which was that he had barely escaped the horror of the Holocaust inflicted upon European Jewry by Christian hands in Christian lands. But was I to believe, as some theologies suggest, that Rabbi Heschel had escaped Hitler's ovens in Auschwitz only to be eternally consigned to God's own ovens in hell? At that moment, just before midnight, in that hospital elevator, a theology claiming that God locked Abraham Joshua Heschel (along with Anne Frank!) in an eternal torture chamber suddenly appeared irredeemably ludicrous as I protested out loud, "What would be the point of that?!" It was the beginning of a serious rethinking of what we Christians mean and do not mean when we talk about the four-letter word *hell*.

One of the problems with understanding what is meant by *hell* is that this tiny word has been forced to carry so much freight. Over the centuries it has picked up meanings often far removed from what was originally intended in the Bible. *Hell* has become a catchall word for however we imagine eternal punishment in the afterlife. But the Bible doesn't talk near as much about the afterlife as we have imagined. A surprising thing about the Old Testament is its almost total disinterest in the afterlife. We think of heaven and hell as being the stock-in-trade of religion, but this was not the case with the writers of the Hebrew Scriptures. While the pagan religions of the Gentiles made elaborate speculations about the nature of the afterlife (this was a specialty with the Egyptians and Babylonians), the Hebrews were conspicuous in having almost no afterlife theology. For the Hebrews, death was *Sheol*, the grave, the underworld, the abode of the dead. The Hebrew Scriptures are fundamentally concerned with *this* life. C. S. Lewis emphasizes this point in his book *Reflections on the Psalms*.

It seems quite clear that in most parts of the Old Testament there is little or no belief in a future life; certainly no belief that is of any religious importance. The word translated "soul" in our version of the Psalms means simply "life"; the word translated "hell" means simply "the land of the dead", the state of all the dead, good and bad alike, *Sheol*.

It is difficult to know how an ancient Jew thought of *Sheol*. He did not like thinking about it. His religion did not encourage him to think about it. No good could come of thinking about it. Evil might. It was a condition from which very wicked people like the Witch of Endor were believed to be able to conjure up a ghost. But the ghost told you nothing about *Sheol*; it was called up solely to tell you things about our own world.<sup>2</sup>

Only about a century and a half before the birth of Christ did the hope of resurrection (a very different hope than a paradisiacal heaven) take hold among certain sects within the Jewish world. So when Jonah says, “Out of the belly of hell [Sheol] cried I,”<sup>\*3</sup> Jonah doesn’t mean that he had entered a Dante-like inferno haunted by pitchfork-wielding devils but that he had simply sunk down to death’s door. This is why modern translations either leave *Sheol* untranslated or translate it as “realm of the dead” or some similar phrase.<sup>\*4</sup> Over millennia, hell has picked up all kinds of popular imagery and common assumptions that get read back into the biblical text. In other words, many concepts of hell are not derived *from* the text but read *into* the text.

When we get to the New Testament we find *Hades* (the underworld from Greek mythology) used in place of *Sheol*. C. S. Lewis says, “Hades is neither Heaven nor Hell; it is almost nothing.”<sup>\*5</sup> Hades does not generally correlate with the lurid images of a medieval torture chamber depicted in Chick tracts and popular imagination. Hades, like Sheol, simply refers to the realm of the dead. So, for example, in the book of Revelation Jesus says, “Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades.”<sup>\*6</sup> Only the archaic King James Version translates *Hades* as “hell.” All other English translations either leave *Hades* untranslated or translate it as “the grave.” The other New Testament word that the King James Version translated as “hell” is *Gehenna*—a reference to the Valley of Hinnom south of Jerusalem. This valley of the shadow of death had been the infamous site where children were sacrificed as burnt offerings upon the hideous fiery idols of Molech. Later the Valley of Hinnom became the city garbage dump, a place where the fires were never quenched and the maggots never died. As a burning, maggot-infested garbage dump, the Valley of Hinnom (transliterated from Hebrew *Ge Hinnom*, literally “Valley of Hinnom,” to the Greek *Gehenna*) became a primary source for imagining hellish judgment.

Six centuries before Christ, the prophet Jeremiah predicted that because of its sinful rebellion Jerusalem would be dragged into the valley of Hinnom,<sup>\*7</sup> a prophecy that was fulfilled when the armies of Nebuchadnezzar sacked and burned Jerusalem in 587 BC. Jerusalem had gone to Gehenna...or hell. Jesus made many similar predictions about the impending doom of Jerusalem, especially during the final week leading up to his crucifixion. At one point a clearly frustrated Jesus said to the Pharisees, “You snakes, you brood of vipers! How can you escape being sentenced to hell [Gehenna]?”<sup>\*8</sup> Indeed they did not escape! In AD 70 the Roman general Titus destroyed Jerusalem, killing hundreds of thousands in the process. In the smoldering, corpse-strewn ruins of the city, the fires were not quenched and the maggots did not die. Jerusalem had gone to hell...again.

I don’t mean to imply that Jesus never spoke of an afterlife hell—he did and we’ll get to that—but he did not speak of it as much as is often presumed. Much of the time Jesus was talking about a literal hell in *this* life. Consider this passage from Luke’s gospel.

At that moment some people came up and told them the news. Some Galileans had been in the Temple, and Pilate had mixed their blood with that of the sacrifices.

‘Do you suppose’, said Jesus, ‘that those Galileans suffered such things because they were greater sinners than all other Galileans? No, let me tell you! Unless you repent, you will all be destroyed in the same way.

‘And what about those eighteen who were killed when the tower in Siloam collapsed on top of them? Do you imagine they were more blameworthy than everyone else who lives in Jerusalem? No, let me tell you! Unless you repent, you will all be destroyed in the same way.’<sup>\*9</sup>

For a host of reasons many people have been trained to read references to an afterlife hell into this passage. They assume Jesus is saying something like, “Yes, some people were killed by Pilate and others were killed in a building collapse, but I tell you, unless you repent you’re all going to hell when you die.” But that’s not what Jesus says at all. Jesus is not talking about hell, or at least not an afterlife hell. Jesus isn’t talking about what happens to people when they die. Jesus is talking about an avoidable threat in *this* life. In effect Jesus is saying, “Unless you rethink everything, embrace the way of peace that I am teaching, and abandon your hell-bent flight toward violent revolution, you’re all going to die by Roman swords and collapsing buildings.” This is exactly what happened forty years later when the city collapsed under the bombardment of Roman catapult balls (hundred-pound hailstones) and more than half a million people were killed by Roman swords. Jerusalem had become hell—a horribly real and literal hell!

It’s very eye opening to realize that in all the evangelistic sermons found in the book of Acts, none of them makes an appeal to afterlife issues. Not one. If preaching the gospel is telling people

how to avoid an afterlife hell, the apostles in Acts did not preach the gospel! Peter and Paul were not preaching a gospel of “how to go to heaven and not hell when you die.” Their gospel was the audacious announcement that the world has a new Lord, a new King, a new emperor: the crucified and risen Jesus of Nazareth. Their invitation was to believe this joyful announcement, turn from the destructive ways of sin, and be baptized into the new world where Jesus is Lord. They preached that those who responded to this gospel by faith and baptism were forgiven of their sins and made citizens of Christ’s new kingdom. Presumably the apostles had beliefs about an afterlife heaven and hell, but those beliefs certainly were not central to their gospel. Their gospel was about the arrival of the kingdom of Christ here and now, and about the hope of resurrection in the age to come. True to their Jewish roots the apostles preached a gospel that had little or no emphasis on the fate of departed souls.

When Jesus does speak of an afterlife hell (most extensively in the parables of the rich man and Lazarus and of the sheep and the goats), he is making this point: it is the *wicked* who end up being condemned. And we need to recognize that Jesus uses the word *wicked* in a conventional sense: the wicked are those who live wicked lives, inflicting evil upon others. Jesus does not use the word as a technical term for all of humanity except those who have “accepted Jesus into their hearts.” Jesus does not use *wicked* as a synonym for non-Christians! The idea that all non-Christians are wicked is the result of some very arrogant and deeply mistaken theological systems. It’s an absurd imposition upon the text. According to Jesus, the avoidance of afterlife condemnation is not based upon being able to give particular answers to abstract theological questions cribbed from John Calvin and labeled “faith” but on how one actually lives his or her life. Jesus certainly did not lay the foundation for an afterlife theology that claims all non-Christians go to hell. This has become a common way of thinking about heaven and hell—“Christians go to heaven; non-Christians go to hell”—but it is not based on anything Jesus ever said!

Life is not an elaborate testing center for afterlife placement based on theological acumen. Life is a gift from God, a gift that is properly appreciated and respected by loving God and neighbor. The New Testament teaches that it is Christ who judges how we have lived our lives: “For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.”<sup>10</sup> Jesus says it this way: “Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.”<sup>11</sup> And we should note that Jesus doesn’t say that those who have done evil will be tortured eternally; all he says is that they will face a judgment of condemnation. A lot of wrong thinking about hell is the result of reading into the text what is not actually there.

A careful reading of the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31–46) shows that Jesus is not strictly speaking about an afterlife judgment but about what happens “when the Son of Man comes in his glory.”<sup>12</sup> According to Jesus, the coming of the Son of Man is not an event postponed to a distant future but an imminent event. On the night of his arrest, Jesus told the high priest Caiaphas that he (Caiaphas) would witness the coming of the Son of Man. “But I tell you, ‘From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.’”<sup>13</sup> During his trial before the Sanhedrin, Jesus claimed to be the Son of Man referred to in Daniel 7, the humane ruler who is the alternative to the beasts of empires. It is to this Son of Man that the Ancient of Days<sup>14</sup> gives everlasting dominion over the nations. When Jesus, the Son of Man, was vindicated by God in resurrection and given all authority in heaven and on earth, the nations were given a Christ-informed moral arc that if followed leads to what Jesus describes as “the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”<sup>15</sup> But if the nations reject the way of Jesus, it leads them to “the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”<sup>16</sup> Jesus teaches us that the nations that care for the impoverished, the infirm, the immigrant, and the imprisoned enter the Father’s kingdom, while those nations who ignore “the least of these”<sup>17</sup> are on the path to a smoldering Gehenna with the devil and his angels.

What Jesus certainly does *not* say is that the sheep and goats are divided on the basis of who has and who has not said a sinner’s prayer! Unfortunately, a cobbled-together misreading of Paul has been used to either ignore or evade what Jesus taught about the priority of loving our neighbors as ourselves being the criterion for judgment. Jesus taught that the Golden Rule is the narrow gate that leads to life. The narrow gate is not a sinner’s prayer but a life of love and mercy. The way of self-interest that exploits the weak is the wide road to destruction; the way of cosuffering love that cares for the weak is the narrow road that leads to life. At the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said it like this:

In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.

Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it....

Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.<sup>\*18</sup>

It should be noted that when Jesus talks about the kingdom of heaven, he is not talking about an afterlife kingdom *in* heaven but the reign and rule of God that comes *from* heaven. The kingdom of God is the government of God. Jesus's entire ministry consisted of announcing and enacting this kingdom, this government, that comes from God. In the Sermon on the Mount, in his provocative parables, by his radical hospitality of welcoming sinners, and through his compassionate healing of the sick, Jesus was explaining and embodying God's new government for humanity. But Jesus tells us that this is a hard road to walk. We are deeply addicted to the old system of prioritized self-interest. Jesus knows that the single greatest obstacle for people entering the kingdom of God is economic self-interest. It's why Jesus famously said, "How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."<sup>\*19</sup> And Jesus put it more bluntly when he said, "Nobody can serve two masters. You will end up hating one and loving the other, or going along with the first and despising the other. You can't serve God and money."<sup>\*20</sup> Luke then tells us what happened when Jesus told the Pharisees that the love of money was the great obstacle to entering the kingdom of God.

The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this, and mocked Jesus. So he said to them, 'You people let everyone else know that you're right—but God knows your hearts. What people call honorable, God calls abominable!'

'The law and the prophets lasted until John. From now on, God's kingdom is announced, and everyone is trying to attack it.'<sup>\*21</sup>

The Pharisees loved money and regarded wealth as a sign of God's blessing. Likewise, the Pharisees viewed sickness as God's punishment for personal sin. This was the standard pharisaical reading of Deuteronomy: good people are blessed and bad people are cursed.<sup>\*22</sup> But Jesus disagreed with the Pharisees' health-and-wealth interpretation of the Scriptures. So when the Pharisees mocked Jesus for saying that you can't serve God and money (which Jesus described as attacking the kingdom of God), he gave them the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Please read it carefully.

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames." But Abraham said, "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us." He said, "Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house—for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment." Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them." He said, "No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent." He said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."<sup>\*23</sup>

In response to the Pharisees who saw health and wealth as signs of God's favor and believed sickness and poverty were punishments sent by God, Jesus told a story about a rich man for whom every day was a feast and the poor, sick Lazarus who longed for the crumbs from the rich man's table. Jesus confers dignity upon the indigent and infirm beggar by giving him a name while leaving the prominent tycoon nameless, thus hinting at the impending reversal of fortunes. Eventually both men die and both men are in Hades. For Lazarus death is a place of comfort, but for the rich man death is a place of torment. They are both in death (Hades), but they experience it quite differently. We see much of the rich man's problem in his disdainful attitude toward Lazarus. He doesn't deign to speak with Lazarus directly but addresses himself only to Abraham. He still views Lazarus as an inferior being, thought of, if at all, as the help. We see the rich man as a kind of comical Thurston Howell III character, assuming privilege and lacking all self-awareness as he tells Abraham, "Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue."<sup>\*24</sup> We can imagine Abraham shaking his head and muttering, "He still doesn't get it." In short, the rich man has still not learned to love, and in this loveless state, his soul finds nothing but torment.

The first part of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus was an existing Jewish folk tale; there are seven versions of it in rabbinic writings. But Jesus supplies his own twist to the parable by adding the bit about the five brothers. The effect of this new addition is to pull the story back into this present life. The original point of this rabbinic story was that a day would come when there would be a great reversal. Jesus's point is that the day of great reversal has arrived with the coming of the kingdom of God! The Pharisees, who have been mocking Jesus and attacking the kingdom of God, are the five brothers of the rich man. The rich man wants to send Lazarus to his five brothers (the Pharisees), but in Jesus's parable Abraham says the brothers have the Law and the Prophets and that they are enough. According to Jesus, when the Law and the Prophets are read correctly, without being screened out through the lens of self-interest, the message adds up to love—love of God demonstrated by love of neighbor. The rich man argues that this isn't enough, but if someone were raised from the dead, his brothers would be convinced. Jesus says this isn't the case. In the previous chapter of Luke's gospel Jesus gave the Pharisees the parable of the prodigal son. Did the return of the prodigal son who "was dead and has come to life"<sup>25</sup> convert the older brother (the Pharisees)? No. In the final scene, the older brother is outside the father's house, gnashing his teeth in resentment and rage. The father has not exiled his elder son to the outer darkness; rather, in his refusal to forgive, the embittered brother has exiled himself. If the Pharisees can't be converted to the way of love by listening to the Law and the Prophets, and by witnessing sinners coming to life through the ministry of Jesus, they won't be convinced even when a crucified Messiah is raised from the dead on the third day!

Jesus's teaching on hell is basically this: if you refuse to love, you cannot enter the kingdom of God and will end up a lonely, tormented soul. If we take Jesus seriously as a teacher, we must never think the gospel is a means by which we can ignore God, scorn the suffering, mock the poor, and have everything turn out all right. If you want to know how to find hell, follow the path set by the rich man...you'll get there.

How do I read the parable of the rich man and Lazarus? I don't read it as a reconnaissance report on hell—a hell I'm certain I'll never see because once upon a time I prayed a salvation prayer. No, this parable is not a voyeur's view of the damned to inform the comfortable and curious. I read the parable as a rich man living in a world where at least a billion people long for the crumbs from my table. I don't read it and then think, "Well, after all, I prayed a sinner's prayer when I was fifteen, so I don't need to worry about any of this." That would be to mock Jesus, the very thing the Pharisees did! To be a Christian means I am deliberately attempting to follow Jesus. Being a Christian does *not* mean I can ignore Lazarus with impunity! Being a Christian means I can no longer pretend that I don't see Lazarus lying at my door.

Not long ago I saw a homeless man panhandling at the Country Club Plaza in Kansas City. For all I know his name could have been Lazarus. I gave him a few dollars. A police officer saw what I did and told me, "You shouldn't give him money. He'll probably just spend it on booze or drugs." I told the officer, "When I give money to the homeless, I don't do it just for them; I also do it for my own soul. They can spend it on whatever they like, but I cannot afford to ignore them." Yes, I also support credible organizations doing good work to help the homeless, but I know I can't afford to pretend I don't see Lazarus. Jesus teaches me that ignoring Lazarus is the road to the hell of a tormented soul... and I don't want to go there.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Fyodor Dostoevsky introduces Eastern Orthodox theology and wisdom into his novel through the saintly character Elder Zosima. In his mystical discourse on hell, Elder Zosima says, "I ask myself: 'What is hell?' And I answer thus: 'The suffering of being no longer able to love.'"<sup>26</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre famously said in his existentialist play *No Exit*, "Hell is other people." Elder Zosima's response to Sartre's cynicism would be, "No, hell is the inability to love other people." Dostoevsky's Zosima seems very close to how we should understand hell. It has something to do with a wrong reaction to the very essence of God: love. We might even say that hell is the love of God wrongly received. Hell is not God's hatred of sinners; God has a single disposition toward sinners, and that is love. God is always the loving father of both the prodigal younger son and the resentful older son. He always loves them both. Hell is not God's hatred; rather, hell has something to do with refusing to receive and be transformed by the love of God. Isaac the Syrian, a seventh-century bishop and theologian who had an enormous influence in shaping the theology of the Christian East, writes,

Those who are suffering in hell, are suffering in being scourged by love....It is totally false to think that sinners in hell are deprived of God's love. Love is a child of the knowledge of truth, and is unquestionably given commonly

to all. But love's power acts in two ways: it torments sinners, while at the same time it delights those who have lived in accord with it.<sup>\*27</sup>

We find a similar thought from the important early church father John Chrysostom, who says, "It is not God who is hostile, but we; for God is never hostile."<sup>\*28</sup> Saint Anthony said of God, "He is good, and He only bestows blessings and never does harm....Thus to say that God turns away from the wicked is like saying that the sun hides itself from the blind."<sup>\*29</sup> God is love. As sinners we are sinners in the hands of a loving God. God has a single disposition toward sinners, that of unconditional, unwavering love. From the heart of God there flows an eternal river of fire, the fire of unquenchable love. The question is not whether God loves us but how we respond to God's love. To those who respond to God's love with love—"We love because he first loved us"<sup>\*30</sup>—the river of fire is a source of warmth and light. But to those who refuse to love, this same river of fire produces torment.

In Romans 12 the apostle Paul echoes the Sermon on the Mount when he writes, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them....Do not repay anyone evil for evil."<sup>\*31</sup> Then Paul goes on to write (quoting from Deuteronomy and Proverbs),

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.<sup>\*32</sup>

What is Paul doing here? Is he teaching us how to torture our enemies? Of course not! Paul is following Jesus in teaching us to love our enemies. But Paul also draws us into the deep mystery that the wrath of God is the love of God wrongly received.

Let's say I have an enemy whom I deeply despise; my heart is filled with nothing but bitter contempt for my enemy. And let's say that I wind up destitute, living on the streets. I'm friendless and homeless, hungry and thirsty. Then my despised enemy finds me on the streets, takes me into his home, and gives me food and drink as acts of cosuffering love. If I respond to my enemy's love with entrenched hatred, these acts of kindness are a source of torment; they burn me up. Hot coals of resentment are lodged inside my head. I am tormented. I've turned heaven into hell. When hate wins, hell is inevitable. But what if I will repent, if I will change my thinking, change my heart, if I will say, "Why am I acting this way? This man is not my enemy. He's a good person. He has nothing but love for me. I repent. I'll stop resisting him as my enemy and receive him as my friend"? If I do that, what had previously been a source of bitter torment becomes the warmth and delight of a shared meal with a dear friend. What had been hell turns into heaven. This is close to how I understand hell. Hell is the love of God refused.

Is the postmortem state of a hell-tormented soul eternal? Perhaps. I speculate that hell is as eternal as the human capacity to resist the love of God, and thus hell is potentially eternal. But this is only speculation. I can't make the claims of certainty made by either universalists or infernalists. What I'm convinced of is this: no one who calls upon the mercy of God is ever refused. Perhaps you can imagine repentant sinners crying to the Father of Jesus for mercy and being told coldly, "No, it's too late." I cannot imagine that from the God who is eternal love. But I can imagine a perversion of the human will that persistently resists turning toward the love of God. C. S. Lewis says it like this:

I willingly believe that the damned are, in one sense, successful rebels to the end; that the doors of hell are locked on the *inside*. I do not mean that the ghosts may not *wish* to come out of hell, in the vague fashion wherein an envious man "wishes" to be happy: but they certainly do not will even the first preliminary stages of that self-abandonment through which alone the soul can reach any good. They enjoy forever the horrible freedom they have demanded, and are therefore self-enslaved just as the blessed, forever submitting to obedience, become through all eternity more and more free.<sup>\*33</sup>

The idea of hell as the self-exile of the soul from the love of God is a theme C. S. Lewis explores in his fascinating novel *The Great Divorce*. Does this mean that I (or C. S. Lewis) know what happens to people who wind up in a postmortem state of hell? No. And neither do you. Do I believe in hell? Of course I do! I believe in the literal hell of war, and I believe in the present and postmortem hell of a tormented soul incapable of love. Most importantly, I agree with everything that Jesus believed and taught about hell. But that doesn't mean I have to agree with everything that smug, mean-spirited, self-righteous, Bible-thumping know-it-alls believe about hell. They don't get to dictate what Jesus taught about hell. I'm very leery of making claims of certitude about precisely what is meant by *hell* and exactly who goes there. I regard it as extraordinarily dangerous and detrimental to the soul to go

through life convinced that everyone except people like me are going to wind up in hell. That must surely be one of the back alleys to hell! If you want to find your way to hell, a good way to go about it would be to assume that everyone unlike you is headed there!

The idea that all Christians upon death are received into heavenly mansions of eternal bliss while all non-Christians are plunged into an eternal torture chamber is more the product of popular and pagan myth than derived from anything Jesus ever taught. This pernicious and arrogant posture about the afterlife is highly repugnant to people who have not been scripted into this particular sect of Christian thought. Jesus never taught anything that remotely supports the idea that all Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists will be tortured for eternity. This kind of thinking about hell crept into the minds of Christians via popular misconceptions and glitches in systematic theologies run amuck. It doesn't come from Jesus.

Let's try a thought experiment. Consider two women—we'll call them Becky and Belqees. They are imaginary women but certainly representative of real people. Our imaginary women were born on the exact same date, March 5, 1959. Becky was born in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and Belqees was born in Kabul, Afghanistan. Because of their geography, Becky is a cultural Christian and Belqees is a cultural Muslim. Unfortunately, Becky is a mean, judgmental, self-righteous Pharisee. You know the type. She holds her Christian faith with a kind of triumphalism that makes her insufferable to everyone outside her tiny fundamentalist tribe. She has boundless disdain for all who are unlike her politically, culturally, ethnically, and especially religiously. She holds Muslims in particular contempt. Belqees, on the other hand, is a kind and generous soul. She is known throughout her neighborhood for her acts of charity, and she regularly cares for the poor and sick. She is a devout Muslim, worshiping God in the only way she knows within her cultural context. She loves God and she loves her neighbors. In a strange coincidence, these women who share the same birthday also die on the very same day. What happens next? Is your theology such that you are forced to say that Becky is escorted to her finely appointed luxury mansion while Belqees is dragged away to a dark dungeon of eternal torture? This is a monstrous theology that is utterly contrary to the spirit of the gospel! The gospel is not the appalling claim that billions of people are fated to unending agony by a capricious God! If you say, "But only Jesus can save," I say, "Yes and amen." And who are you to tell Jesus whom he can and cannot save?! Are you going to tell Jesus he cannot save Belqees? Jesus can save whomever he wants. Jesus is Lord.

This thought experiment, which I've given to many people, often leads to the objection that such a theology would lead to a lack of motivation for evangelism. But this is true only if you think the gospel is about the postmortem issues of heaven and hell, a subject never raised in the apostolic sermons of Acts. The truth is that the gospel is the joyful proclamation that the kingdom of God has arrived with the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The gospel is the audacious announcement that Jesus is Lord and that the world is to now be reconfigured around his gracious rule. The gospel is the beautiful story of how God is bringing the world out of bondage to sin and death through the triumph of Jesus Christ. If you don't know how to preach the gospel without making appeals to afterlife issues, you don't know how to preach the gospel!

Hell in its popular and pagan misconceptions has been a blight upon the beauty of the Christian gospel. Hell, in the sense of a legitimate questioning about what happens to the wicked upon death, is a vast subject, and it's a subject that largely lies behind an impenetrable veil. We should not pretend to know more about what lies beyond the veil of death than we actually do. Fools rush in where angels fear to tread. When talking about hell, a good dose of humility is in order. It is certainly beyond the scope of this single chapter to give a thorough examination of Christian thought regarding hell as it has evolved down through the centuries. (For a thoughtful exploration on the theology of hell, I recommend *Her Gates Will Never Be Shut: Hope, Hell, and the New Jerusalem* by Brad Jersak.)

What I can say about hell is that we do not need to (and must not!) hold to a perverse doctrine that all non-Christians are subjected by God to eternal conscious torment. So let me say it plainly: I do not believe Abraham Joshua Heschel is condemned to hell. Indeed, what would be the point of that?! The gospel is not a perverse theological system in which good people are tortured by God for eternity. Christians must stop suggesting anything like that! I remember a college student in my church who had returned from a visit to Auschwitz with a deeply shaken faith. In tears she told me she could not continue to be a Christian if it meant she had to believe that all the Jews who died at Auschwitz were now being eternally tortured by God. I was glad to tell her that such a belief was not Christian but an arrogant fundamentalist fiction, an ugly distortion inflicted upon Christian faith. Years later when I officiated her wedding, she told me how that conversation had saved her Christian faith. Using hell as a

means of scaring people into Christianity may also drive them out of Christianity when they become a little more thoughtful. Insisting that Abraham Joshua Heschel, Anne Frank, Albert Einstein, and all other Jews are condemned to hell is an arrogant and malevolent doctrine that is responsible for the creation of countless atheists. I am sympathetic with the atheist who cannot believe in a god who is so petty and cruel that he defends his so-called honor by torturing billions of souls for eternity. I don't believe in that god either. But I'm no atheist. I believe in the God who is the Father of Jesus and who relates to sinners in the very same way that Jesus did. I believe in the God revealed in Christ, the heaven-sent Savior who harrows hell to rescue sinners...sinners like me.

No one who loves the way of grace ever comes to a bad end.

—Terrence Malick, *The Tree of Life*

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- \*1. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), xiv.
- \*2. C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, in *The Beloved Works of C. S. Lewis* (Edison, NJ: Inspirational Press, 2004), 150, italics in the original.
- \*3. Jonah 2:2, KJV.
- \*4. See the New International Version.
- \*5. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 150.
- \*6. Revelation 1:17–18.
- \*7. See Jeremiah 7:20–34.
- \*8. Matthew 23:33.
- \*9. Luke 13:1–5, as translated by N. T. Wright in *Luke for Everyone* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 161.
- \*10. 2 Corinthians 5:10.
- \*11. John 5:28–29.
- \*12. Matthew 25:31.
- \*13. Matthew 26:64.
- \*14. See Daniel 7:13, NKJV.
- \*15. Matthew 25:34.
- \*16. Matthew 25:41.
- \*17. Matthew 25:45.
- \*18. Matthew 7:12–14, 21.
- \*19. Luke 18:24–25.
- \*20. Luke 16:13, as translated by Wright in *Luke for Everyone*, 195.
- \*21. Luke 16:14–16 as translated by Wright in *Luke for Everyone*, 195–96.
- \*22. See Deuteronomy 28.
- \*23. Luke 16:19–31.
- \*24. Luke 16:24.
- \*25. Luke 15:32.
- \*26. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (San Francisco: North Point, 1990), 322.
- \*27. Alexandre Kalomiros, *The River of Fire* (Seattle: Saint Nectarios, 1980), 35, ellipsis in original.
- \*28. John Chrysostom, quoted in Kalomiros, *The River of Fire*, 15.
- \*29. Saint Anthony, quoted in Kalomiros, *The River of Fire*, 14–15.
- \*30. 1 John 4:19.
- \*31. Romans 12:14, 17.
- \*32. Romans 12:19–21.
- \*33. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1978), 127–28, italics in the original.

## Anthem of the Lamb

As a child growing up in the First Baptist Church, I didn't always feel fully engaged with the sermon. On those occasions, as my options for entertainment were limited, I would resort to the pew Bible as reading material. And I always went to the same place—to the very back of the Bible, to the final installment in Scripture, to the enigmatic book of Revelation. My adolescent imagination was fascinated with its mysteries and monsters, its beasts and battles, its dragons and demons. But what was I to make of this first-century Christian composition written in the style of Jewish apocalyptic literature? I approached it the way most American evangelicals did in the 1970s...I assumed it predicted contemporary events. The only way I knew to approach the book of Revelation was through dispensationalism, a thoroughly modern and deeply mistaken reading of the Bible. I was eleven years old when Hal Lindsey wrote *The Late Great Planet Earth*, a wildly popular book that claimed Revelation was a series of predictions that ostensibly proved the world was taking its final turns. In the wake of *The Late Great Planet Earth*, the best-selling nonfiction book of the 1970s, millions of Christians assumed that Revelation was a kind of biblical code that foretold the future. So as I tuned out Reverend Presley's sermon and tuned into Revelation, I thought I was reading an encrypted foretelling of the geopolitical events of the late twentieth century. I thought Revelation was about communism, the Cold War, international intrigues involving Henry Kissinger, and a supercomputer in Brussels called the Beast. But I was mistaken. And so, it turns out, was Hal Lindsey.

The book of Revelation is easily the most misunderstood and misused book in the Bible. It's the book that had the hardest time gaining admission into the New Testament canon of Scripture. Fifteen centuries after its composition, in the early days of the Reformation, Martin Luther wanted to remove it from the Protestant Bible. Luther derided Revelation as

neither apostolic nor prophetic....I can in no way detect that the Holy Spirit produced it....Again, they are supposed to be blessed who keep what is written in this book; and yet no one knows what that is, to say nothing of keeping it....Christ is neither taught nor known in it.<sup>\*1</sup>

Luther had no use for the book of Revelation, until he used it to preach that the pope was the Antichrist. Pope Leo X returned the favor and used Revelation to preach that Luther was the Antichrist. Protestants and Catholics have been weaponizing the book of Revelation ever since. Unfortunately, this kind of mistreatment of the Apocalypse has been common throughout church history. Revelation has been regularly shanghaied as a polemic against enemies and as a warrant for violence. All of this abuse is sad, since Revelation gives us one of the most stunning, creative, and beautiful portrayals of Jesus Christ and his kingdom in all the Bible.

Though I often cringe at how Revelation is typically preached, the book is perhaps the most important biblical text for the American church right now. Its particular relevance has to do with Revelation's intensely political nature. If there is one book in the Bible that is written specifically for Christians living as citizens in a superpower, Revelation is it. The Apocalypse brings the Bible's most creative and powerful critique of the idolatry inherent within economic and military superpowers. Regarding Revelation as a political work, Eugene Peterson says, "The gospel of Jesus Christ is more political than anyone imagines, but in a way that no one guesses."<sup>\*\*2</sup> For Christians living in an economic and military superpower and called by Christ to resist the idolatrous greed and militarism of empire, Revelation is supremely important. But to serve this purpose it has to be rescued from its sensationalist and outrageous misinterpretations.

The book of Revelation was written around the end of the first century by a preacher named John who was almost certainly not John the son of Zebedee, one of the twelve disciples. (Uncertainty regarding the author's identity was one of the challenges Revelation had in gaining admission into the New Testament canon.) The author of Revelation was most likely either the bishop over the churches in the seven major cities of Asia Minor mentioned in the book, or a traveling prophet familiar with those churches. At some point during his ministry, John ran afoul of the local Roman authorities and was sent into political exile on Patmos, a small Greek island in the Aegean Sea. Thus the author of Revelation is variously known as John the Revelator, John the Divine, or John of Patmos. It was while in exile on Patmos that John composed his wild, enormously creative, highly imaginative masterpiece destined to conclude the grand biblical story begun in Genesis.

Revelation was written during the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian (AD 81–96). A generation earlier, during the reign of Nero (AD 54–68), there had been a fierce persecution of Christians. It was during Nero's infamous persecution that both Peter and Paul were executed in Rome. But during the reign of Domitian, persecution of Christians had mostly subsided and Christians

were beginning to feel more at home in the empire. Yet it seems John the Revelator was *not* at home in the Roman Empire, and this eventually led to his exile on Patmos. From his island exile John writes his apocalyptic drama for his seven churches on the mainland. The Revelator's composition is intended somewhat to comfort but mostly to warn Christians who were getting too cozy with the Roman Empire. Adopting the artistic form of a Greco-Roman play, complete with drama, tragedy, comedy, and chorus, John communicates a startling message to those in his prophetic theater. With astounding theatics John in essence says, "Don't get comfortable with the Empire! Remember it's a beast! It's Jesus who is the Savior of the world, not Caesar! The last best hope for the world is not Rome but the kingdom of Christ!"

Revelation can also be seen as a prophetic interpretation of the cataclysmic events of the previous generation: Nero's vicious persecution, the plague that ravaged Rome, the economic crisis generated by crop failures in Egypt, and, most significantly, Rome's destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish temple. Jesus himself had connected the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem with the full arrival of the kingdom of God. In Revelation John gives a dramatic retelling and prophetic interpretation of those tumultuous and significant events.

But most of all Revelation is a prophetic critique of the Roman Empire. Revelation is a daring proclamation that Jesus Christ, not Julius Caesar or any other emperor, is the world's true emperor and Savior. It's the empire of Christ, not the empire of Rome, that is the eternal city. It's the *Pax Christi*, not the *Pax Romana*, that brings true peace to the world. Revelation captures the conflict between competing claims on how the world is to be ruled and saved. Revelation is a wild and creative portrayal of the clash between the beastly empire of Rome and the peaceable reign of the Lamb of God. What Revelation portrays in powerful symbol is the triumph of Christ and his kingdom. John the Revelator, as a Holy Spirit-inspired playwright, employs a genre of macabre comedy in his prophetic play: hideous monsters are finally conquered by a little Lamb, a slaughtered Lamb who lives again. This is how John describes the triumph of Jesus over the Roman Empire and all beastly empires.

When reading the inspired and prophetic theatrical play that is the book of Revelation, it is important to keep in mind that everything is told in the language of symbol. Everything! From the seven-eyed lamb and the seven-headed dragon to the burning lake and bejeweled city, everything is encased in symbol. If some people admit that the lamb with seven horns and seven eyes is obviously symbolic but insist that Jesus riding a flying white horse is literal, they're going to have to explain their system of interpretation. Or if they claim that Jesus is going to wage a literal war upon his return but the sword depicted as proceeding from his mouth is symbolic, again they're going to have to justify the logic of their system. Of course, the truth is they have no logic or system but arbitrarily categorize some images as symbolic and others as literal. But this will not do. The only way to consistently interpret the book of Revelation is to acknowledge that *everything* is communicated by symbol. While everything in Revelation is symbol, these are not empty symbols. Whether it's a river of blood flowing as high as a horse's bridle for two hundred miles or a tree bearing twelve kinds of fruit with leaves that heal the nations, these are symbols that point to terrible and glorious realities. Both Armageddon and New Jerusalem are symbols, but they are true symbols of very real alternative fates. The way of the Beast leads to Armageddon, while the way of the Lamb leads to the New Jerusalem.

One of the challenges in understanding John the Revelator's garish and glorious vision is that we are two thousand years removed from the symbols he employs. One of the ways of thinking about the book of Revelation is that it is an extremely elaborate political cartoon. Political cartoons are creative ways of symbolically communicating a political message, but to discern the message the reader has to understand the symbols. Today if we see a cartoon of a donkey and an elephant glaring at each other and wearing boxing gloves, we instantly recognize it as a kind of comic commentary on American partisan politics. But someone seeing the cartoon two thousand years from now would be very unlikely to understand its original meaning. Trying to understand the book of Revelation without understanding the Greco-Roman world of the first century is like trying to understand Don McLean's song "American Pie" without understanding the rock 'n' roll scene of the '50s and '60s. So here is an important interpretive key for reading Revelation: keep in mind that all the monstrous images found in the book are symbols for cosmic evil working through Caesar and the Roman Empire.

The final book of the Bible is not a coded newspaper foretelling of future geopolitical events. Rather, it is a glorious depiction of the triumph of Jesus Christ. Revelation is not *about* the twenty-first century, but nothing could be more relevant *for* the twenty-first century than the vision John saw! With consummate skill the Revelator shows us how Jesus's lamb-like kingdom is the saving alternative

to the beast-like empires of the world. Through his masterful use of drama and symbol, those who read John's theatrical play are shown that the way of the Beast leads only to the hellish lake of fire, while the way of the Lamb leads to the heavenly city. Revelation isn't about the violent end of the world; it's about the end of the evil of violence. The book of Revelation doesn't anticipate the end of God's good creation; it anticipates the end of death-wielding empire.

Perhaps the best way to understand the book of Revelation is that it is a prophetic critique of civil religion. By civil religion I mean the religion of state where *the state is the actual object of worship*. Civil religion is religious patriotism. Christians are called to practice responsible citizenship but to renounce religious patriotism. In the practice of civil religion, the truth that the state is what is actually being deified and worshiped is usually carefully concealed. Instead of directly worshiping the state as God, worship of the state is expressed through sacred symbols, myths, and personifications of the state treated with religious reverence. The tendency to deify the state is particularly pronounced in empires—rich and powerful nations that believe they have a divine right to rule other nations and a manifest destiny to shape history according to their agenda. God's contention with empire is one of the major themes of the Bible. From Egypt and Assyria to Babylonia and Rome, the prophets constantly critique empire as a direct challenge to the sovereignty of God. This prophetic tradition of empire critique reaches its apex in the book of Revelation. John the Revelator tells us that Rome's claim of a divine right to rule the nations and of a manifest destiny to shape history is the very thing that God has given to his Son, Jesus Christ. Thus the drama of Revelation is cast as an epic conflict between the Lamb (Jesus) and the Beast (Rome).

Rome's worship of its empire took on many expressions, but it was most pronounced in the cult of emperor worship. The worship of the Roman emperors usually occurred posthumously. After the death of a popular emperor the Roman Senate would often elevate the deceased emperor to the status of a state divinity. Once these emperors had received apotheosis and been made divine, they would be conferred imperial titles like Son of God, Prince of Peace, or Savior of the World. Coins bearing the image of the emperor with his divine titles were disseminated throughout the empire. This was civil religion promulgated through the mass media of the day. The reverence given to the memories, images, and statues of these divinized emperors was a way to galvanize the citizens in their worship of Rome. This is civil religion, and this is what Revelation subverts.

The practice of emperor worship first took root and was most popular in Asia Minor among the very seven cities where the churches of Revelation were located. Thus John can say to the church in Pergamum, "I know where you are living, where Satan's throne is."<sup>3</sup> John is very direct in implicating the civil religion of Rome with the worship of Satan, but John is also very careful never to mention Rome directly. Instead John speaks of Babylon, the beast, the great whore, and elaborate veiled references to Caesar Nero. It's as a form of resistance to the powerful seduction of Roman civil religion that John composes his prophetic and theatrical polemic. John wants his readers, who he fears are slipping into a complacent complicity with Rome, to remember that Rome isn't evil only when it persecutes Christians; rather, Rome is *always* evil because of its idolatry and injustice. Empire is always a direct challenge to the kingdom of God. To be faithful to Christ and his kingdom means that the believers in the seven cities of Asia Minor must resist the temptation to accommodate Christian faith to Roman civil religion. John, as a political exile on Patmos, knows by his own experience that to resist complicity with the empire may very well lead to suffering. Thus the call to "be faithful" and "come out of Babylon" runs throughout the entire drama. In his tremendous book *Reading Revelation Responsibly*, Michael J. Gorman says,

Revelation is therefore a *theopolitical* text. It makes claims about who is truly God and about right and wrong connections between God and the socio-political order; it challenges the political theology of empire and the religious ideology that underwrites it; and it reveals God and the Lamb alone as the true Sovereign One, source of all blessings, and proper object of worship. Moreover, Revelation tells us not only who is really sovereign but also what kind of sovereignty the true God exercises, namely what many have called nonviolent and non-coercive "Lamb power."<sup>4</sup>

One of the most creative and beautiful aspects of Revelation is how John attempts to create loyal followers of Jesus through the call to faithful worship. Revelation is a book brimming with scenes and songs of worship. After his introductory chapter and two chapters where Jesus gives personal messages to the seven churches, the next two chapters are scenes of worship. In these two beautiful chapters what is claimed by the imperial religion of Rome is ascribed to the Lamb. This is Revelation

as subversion of civil religion. Through the worship depicted in the book of Revelation the church learns to be a countercultural community and to pledge its allegiance solely to the Lamb.

Chapter 4 of Revelation opens with a glorious vision of worship far grander than anything ever witnessed in the Pantheon of Rome. Surrounding the throne of the sovereign Lord of the universe are sights and sounds of majesty that make the idolatrous worship of Rome look tawdry and cheap. Then in chapter 5 the drama begins. John sees in the hand of the One who sits upon the throne a sealed scroll. The scroll seems to represent God's good purposes for humanity. To open the scroll and read its proclamation is to implement God's salvation for the world. But after searching all of humanity, the living and the dead, not one person is found worthy to execute God's redemptive program. Even the great Jewish heroes like Abraham, Moses, David, and Elijah were not found worthy to preside over the redemption of the world. With the horrible news that God's plan for saving the world would remain sealed, thus sealing the world's fate to its miserable status quo, John begins to weep inconsolably. Indeed, what could be more depressing than the idea that world history is the only possibility for the world's future? It is the antigospel! Who wouldn't weep over that?!

But then John's guide, one of the twenty-four elders, intervenes. "Stop weeping! Look, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the heir to David's throne, has won the victory. He is worthy to open the scroll and its seven seals."<sup>5</sup> The elder's instruction for John to look, because the Lion of Judah has overcome, is the setup for one of the most comical and significant moments in John's theatrical drama. When John looks, expecting to see a fearsome lion, he doesn't see a lion but a lamb—a little slaughtered lamb. "Then I saw a Lamb that looked as if it had been slaughtered, but it was now standing."<sup>6</sup> If I startle you by saying "Look! A lion!" but then point to a lamb, it's a kind of joke. But in Revelation it's a divine joke, and the joke is on Caesar! Rome will be conquered not by another superpower beast but by a little Lamb. As this slaughtered Lamb with seven horns and seven eyes takes the scroll, a song is raised. First the elders sing, then millions of angels join in, and finally all of creation sings the anthem of the Lamb.

You are worthy to take the scroll  
and break its seals and open it.  
For you were slaughtered, and your blood has ransomed people for God  
from every tribe and language and people and nation.  
And you have caused them to become  
a Kingdom of priests for our God.  
And they will reign on the earth....  
Worthy is the Lamb who was slaughtered—  
to receive power and riches  
and wisdom and strength  
and honor and glory and blessing....  
Blessing and honor and glory and power  
belong to the one sitting on the throne  
and to the Lamb forever and ever.<sup>7</sup>

Over the years I've heard countless sermons and songs about the Lion and the Lamb in the book of Revelation. But they've missed the point. There is no lion in Revelation, only a Lamb...a little slaughtered Lamb. Jesus is the Lion of the tribe of Judah only in that he is a descendant of the tribe of Judah. (The lion was the symbol of the tribe of Judah.) But when we look for Jesus to be a lion, we see only a Lamb. Jesus is King of kings and Lord of lords; he reigns not as predatory lion but as a sacrificial lamb. Part of the divine comedy of Revelation is how the beasts of empire are conquered, not by another beast, but by a tiny slaughtered Lamb. The elder tells John to look for a lion: "Look, the Lion of the tribe of Judah."<sup>8</sup> But a lion is never seen. What is seen is the Lamb. Jesus is referred to as the Lamb twenty-eight times in Revelation. John, in his obsession with numerical symbolism, probably means Jesus is the Lamb  $7 \times 4$ , which is to say God's divine Lamb is given dominion over the four corners of the earth. So when we speak of Jesus as "the Lion and the Lamb," we are missing the point. The Lion is the Lamb!

What John is doing is giving us a highly symbolic and very powerful contrast between the Roman Empire and the kingdom of Christ. Christ's empire does not come in the way of Caesar's empire. Jesus does not advance his empire by the beastly means of violent onslaught. Jesus advances his

empire by being the slaughtered Lamb. Jesus is the meek Lamb who inherits the earth. Jesus is not king of the beasts; he is not a beast at all! Jesus is the Lamb of God. The kingdom of God does not conquer the world by the violent means of the beast but by the self-sacrificing way of the Lamb.

That John is inspired to cast a vision of all creation singing the anthem of the Lamb is a truly remarkable thing. Martin Luther, in his frustration with the book of Revelation, said he could not detect that the Holy Spirit produced it. But right here is the evidence of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit upon John of Patmos. At a time when believers in Jesus were limited to small house churches scattered among the major cities of the Roman Empire, and at a time when millions of people worshiped the imperial might of Rome through myths, monuments, and deified Caesars, John dares to prophesy of the whole world singing the anthem of the Lamb! Through the Holy Spirit John tapped into the divine trajectory of redemption history. Rome and its gods (and Rome as a god) would not endure. Rome would fall just as Babylon had fallen. But the anthem of the Lamb will be sung world without end!

Babylon is fallen—that great city is fallen!  
She has become a home for demons....  
How terrible, how terrible for that great city!...  
Praise the LORD!  
The smoke from that city ascends forever and ever!...  
Praise the LORD!  
For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns.  
Let us be glad and rejoice,  
and let us give honor to him.  
For the time has come for the wedding feast of the Lamb,  
and his bride has prepared herself.  
Worship only God. For the essence of prophecy is to give a clear witness for Jesus.<sup>\*9</sup>

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\*1. Michael J. Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly: Uncivil Worship and Witness: Following the Lamb into the New Creation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 1, ellipses in the original.

\*2. Eugene H. Peterson, *Reversed Thunder* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 117.

\*3. Revelation 2:13.

\*4. Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly*, 43.

\*5. Revelation 5:5, NLT.

\*6. Revelation 5:6, NLT.

\*7. Revelation 5:9–10, 12–13, NLT.

\*8. Revelation 5:5, NLT.

\*9. Revelation 18:2, 16; 19:3, 6–7, 10, NLT.

## War of the Lamb

The second Sunday after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, I preached a sermon titled “The Road to Armageddon.” During those days of grief and rage when I should have preached the gospel of peace and forgiveness, I instead resorted to the hackneyed trope of dispensationalism that claims a megawar in the Middle East must occur before Jesus can return. I’ve repented and made amends for that pastoral failure, but the fact remains that my mistake was made possible by the terrible eschatology I had inherited. *The Late Great Planet Earth* and *Left Behind* and the subsequent books in its series are only the best known of countless books that have popularized the worst possible reading of Revelation.

The phenomenon of modern dispensationalism with its endorsement of supposed divine and unavoidable hyperviolence is such an ugly and perverse eschatology that it’s unworthy of the name *Christian*. A Christian eschatology of peace and hope has been supplanted by a dreadful eschatology of violence and doom. An eschatology that insists there must be more wars, more famines, more earthquakes, and more epidemics before Jesus can return is not a Christlike eschatology. The apostle Paul calls the glorious appearing of Christ the “blessed hope,”<sup>\*1</sup> but there’s nothing blessed about another war or global catastrophe. Yet hoping for “wars and rumors of wars” is the predicament the adherents of dispensational eschatology find themselves in. According to their system (based in an utterly mistaken reading of the Olivet Discourse and the book of Revelation), Jesus cannot return until a series of global catastrophes culminating in World War III occurs first. This leads to the deplorable phenomenon of some Christians secretly (or not so secretly) hoping for another war and finding a reason to rejoice over the latest catastrophe. An earthquake kills a hundred thousand people in China, and somewhere in America a Christian smiles and says, “Praise the Lord. It’s a sign of the end times. Jesus is coming soon!” An eschatology that rejoices over earthquakes and causes people to *want* another war in the Middle East is not a Christian eschatology! Christian hope is for the peace of New Jerusalem, not the horrors of Armageddon.

Contrary to the fictions of *The Late Great Planet Earth*, *Left Behind*, *Four Blood Moons*, and their lesser known siblings, the road to Armageddon does not lead to New Jerusalem. When giving directions to New Jerusalem we don’t say, “Go down the road to Armageddon, where two hundred million people will be killed in a megawar in the Middle East, then keep on going until you finally get to New Jerusalem.” No! We don’t arrive at the peace of New Jerusalem by going to Armageddon first; we find New Jerusalem by following the Lamb. Armageddon is the antithesis of New Jerusalem. The two are always distinct possibilities but divergent fates. New Jerusalem is the ever-present hope and possibility that the nations can forsake the Beast with its endless Armageddons and follow the Lamb into the heavenly city whose gates are never shut. Armageddon and the burning lake are symbols John of Patmos employs to warn us against following the Beast of empire. So let’s take a closer look at Armageddon.

And the demonic spirits gathered all the rulers and their armies to a place with the Hebrew name *Armageddon*.<sup>\*2</sup>

Few words have captured our collective religious imagination more than *Armageddon*. For the amount of traffic this word gets you might think it occurs frequently in Scripture, but in fact it occurs only once. In Revelation 16:16 John envisions demonic spirits gathering the armies of the world to a place called Armageddon, a Hebrew word meaning “valley of Megiddo.” Today Tel Megiddo, a World Heritage Site, is one of the most visited archaeological sites in Israel. Rising two hundred feet above the Jezreel Valley, this artificial mound is the result of the city being destroyed and rebuilt twenty-six times. The fertile Jezreel Valley made Megiddo a desirable location for an ancient city, but unfortunately the Jezreel Valley was also located in a geography of war. Situated between the great Assyrian and Babylonian empires to the north and the great Egyptian empire to the south, Megiddo often found itself in the middle of a raging battlefield. Megiddo’s woeful history of being destroyed twenty-six times makes it an apt symbol for endless war. For John’s original readers, a reference to Armageddon would evoke the image of a battlefield. If I make a reference to Omaha Beach, you probably don’t imagine a seaside picnic but a bloody battlefield. This is Armageddon; it’s an icon of war.

Prior to evoking Armageddon, John the Revelator paints a picture of three evil spirits like frogs coming out of the mouths of the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet.<sup>\*3</sup> In Revelation the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet are a kind of unholy trinity symbolizing satan, Rome, and imperial propaganda. The frogs that crawl out of the mouths of the unholy trinity are the demons of accusation,

empire, and propaganda. These demonic frogs exert a powerful influence over world political leaders. Under the spell of the frogs croaking out accusation, empire, and propaganda, politicians are seduced into leading the world to Armageddon...or Waterloo, Gettysburg, Flanders Field, Pearl Harbor, Hiroshima...and so it goes.

As long as we practice accusation, empire, and propaganda, Armageddon looms. Our looming Armageddons are always a possibility but never an inevitability. The demonic seduction of accusation, empire, and propaganda always leads humanity to another bloody battlefield. Armageddon isn't the end of war; Armageddon is endless war. We cannot war our way to peace. There is no way to peace; peace is the way, and Jesus is the Prince of Peace. If we try to end war by war, we always get another war. World War I was billed as "the war to end all wars." So seventeen million people were sacrificed on the altar of war in order to end war. And what did we get? Sixty million people killed in World War II! What caused World War II? World War I. And what caused World War I? World leaders seduced by accusation, empire, and propaganda. This is the relevance of the book of Revelation. John's apocalyptic vision doesn't predict an inevitable war where two hundred million people will be killed in the Middle East; rather, John presents us with our choices. Either we follow the Lamb into the shalom of New Jerusalem, or we follow the Beast into the horrors of Armageddon. We either listen to the Lamb or we listen to the frogs. The frogs know the way to another Armageddon. The Lamb leads the way to the beautiful city of peace.

This is how we understand the wrath of God and the will of God in the book of Revelation. If we follow the Beast we will end up in Armageddon; this is the wrath of God or, as it's called in Revelation 6:16, "the wrath of the Lamb." It's the wrath of God as divine consent to our own deadly trajectory. But if we follow the Lamb we will end up in New Jerusalem; this is the will of God. God's will is never Armageddon; God's will is always New Jerusalem.

But according to the hokum of *Left Behind* and that ilk of egregious misinterpretation, Armageddon is a final and inevitable war in the Middle East that must occur before Jesus can return. This kind of reckless eschatology forces its adherents to be warmongers, not peacemakers. If you believe there *must* be a megawar in the Middle East before Jesus can return, you're going to be a lousy peacemaker! A fatalistic eschatology requiring end-time hyperviolence that slaughters hundreds of millions is more befitting of ISIS than the followers of the Prince of Peace.

So allow me to say it as emphatically as I know how: *There doesn't have to be another war for Jesus to return!* God has not written an unalterable script that requires war. If we reject the way of the Lamb, we get Armageddon. This is the wrath of God, wrath as consequence, not retribution. If we embrace the way of the Lamb, we get New Jerusalem. This is always the will of God. But there is no divine determinism that requires yet another Armageddon. So if you've thought the blessed hope cannot be realized without the bloodiest war in history occurring first, you can now let go of that hideous distortion of the gospel. Please do!

We escape our addiction to endless Armageddons when we learn to follow the Lamb. John the Revelator depicts the Lamb's triumph over the dragon, the beast, the false prophet, and the armies of Armageddon in the symbol of a blood-drenched rider on a white horse with a sword protruding from his mouth.

Then I saw heaven opened, and a white horse was standing there. Its rider was named Faithful and True, for he judges fairly and wages a righteous war....He wore a robe dipped in blood, and his title was the Word of God....From his mouth came a sharp sword to strike down the nations.<sup>\*4</sup>

Those who want to hold on to a primitive vision of a violent and retributive God often cite this passage from Revelation. They usually say something like this: "Jesus came the first time as a lamb, but he's coming back the second time as a lion." By this they mean the nonviolent Jesus of the Gospels is going to mutate into what they imagine is the hyperviolent Jesus of Revelation. The saddest thing is that the adherents of this schizophrenic Jesus often seem to prefer the violent Jesus over the peaceable Jesus. At a basic level they essentially see the Bible like this: After a long trajectory away from the divine violence of the Old Testament culminating in Jesus renouncing violence and calling his followers to love their enemies, the Bible in its final pages abandons a vision of peace and nonviolence as ultimately unworkable and closes with the most vicious portrayal of divine violence in all of Scripture. In this reading of Revelation, the way of peace and love that Jesus preached during his life and endorsed in his death is rejected for the worn-out way of war and violence. When we literalize the militant images of Revelation we arrive at this conclusion: in the end even Jesus gives up on love and

resorts to violence. Tragically, those who refuse to embrace the way of peace taught by Jesus use the symbolic war of Revelation 19 to silence the Sermon on the Mount.

This kind of hermeneutic has disastrous implications; it mutes Jesus's message of peace and forgiveness. When we literalize the ironic and symbolic images employed by John of Patmos, we illegitimately use Revelation to give license to our own hellish violence. We reason that if Jesus is going to kill two hundred million people upon his return,<sup>\*5</sup> what does it matter if we kill one hundred thousand people at Hiroshima? This kind of reading of Revelation gives license to military superpowers to employ massive violence, which is exactly the opposite of what John is trying to accomplish! Is John the Revelator really trying to tell us that in the end the Lamb is going to transform into the ultimate killing machine? Of course not! A *Left Behind* theology of Revelation turns the Lamb into a beast! It turns a text that was intended to subvert empire into a text that endorses empire. There is not a worse possible abuse of the final book of the Bible than this!

To avoid this tragic exploitation of Revelation, we must always remember that all of Revelation is communicated in theatrical symbol—*all of it!* Locusts that look like horses with human faces, women's hair, and lion's teeth.<sup>\*6</sup> An army of two hundred million soldiers riding lion-headed horses that breathe fire and belch sulfur.<sup>\*7</sup> A red dragon with seven heads in the heavens that sweeps away a third of the stars with its tail.<sup>\*8</sup> A seven-headed beast from the sea with the body of a leopard, the feet of a bear, and the mouth of a lion.<sup>\*9</sup> An angel in the sky with a giant sickle who reaps all the grapes of the earth and puts them in a wine press that generates a river of blood for two hundred miles.<sup>\*10</sup> These are all symbols! None of them are literal! Just as Jesus riding a flying white horse wearing a blood-drenched robe with a sword protruding from his mouth is a *symbol*. The question is, what is John communicating to us with his creative symbols?

To begin with, the rider on the white horse is called Faithful and True, and his name is the Word of God. John is not depicting a literal event in the future but giving us a symbolic reality about the *present*. John is depicting the glorious triumph of the Word of God—Jesus Christ. The One called the Word of God is not riding the red horse of war but the white horse of triumph. Jesus doesn't overcome evil by war but by his word. This is how Jesus wages his righteous war. Jesus doesn't wage war like the murderous beast of Rome but instead as the slaughtered Lamb of God. Concerning war and the white-horse rider, Eugene Peterson says,

For a time, writ large in the headlines, war is perceived as an evil, and there are prayers for peace. But not for long, for it is quickly glamorized as patriotic or rationalized as just. But war is a red horse, bloody and cruel, making life miserable and horrid. It is the action of power-hungry persons; it is the delusion of insane pride; it is an expression of greed gone crazy....

The perennial ruse is to glorify war so that we accept it as a proper means of achieving goals. But it is evil. It is opposed by Christ. Christ does not sit on the red horse, ever.<sup>\*11</sup>

After riding the peace donkey on Palm Sunday to contrast his peaceable kingdom with the violent empires of a pagan world, Jesus does not later contradict himself by riding a warhorse in an exaggerated imitation of Genghis Khan. Perhaps John of Patmos is asking too much of modern readers, but he assumes we will keep in mind that Jesus is ever and always the slaughtered Lamb. As Richard Bauckham reminds us, "When the slaughtered Lamb is seen 'in the midst of' the divine throne in heaven..., the meaning is that Christ's sacrificial death *belongs to the way God rules the world.*"<sup>\*12</sup> Christ always rules from the cross, never from an Apache attack helicopter. John stresses that Jesus reigns through self-sacrifice by depicting the white horse's rider as wearing a robe drenched in blood *before the battle begins*. Jesus's robe is soaked in his own blood. Jesus doesn't shed the blood of enemies; Jesus sheds his own blood. This is the gospel! The rider on the white horse is the slaughtered Lamb, not the slaughtering beast.

To further make his point, John tells us that the sword the rider uses to smite the nations is not in his *hand* but in his *mouth*. Soldiers with literal weapons of war hold them in their hands, not their mouths. This is not Caesar's sword but the word of God. The Revelator so desires that we not miss this point that he comes right out and tells us, "His name is called The Word of God."<sup>\*13</sup> It's the same as when a political cartoon labels the symbol to make sure we properly identify it. The sword is not a sword; the sword is a symbol. The sword is the word of God.

If we combine all of John's creative symbols, the message is clear: Jesus wages war by self-sacrifice and by what he says. Jesus combats evil by cosuffering love and the word of God. This is the righteous war of the Lamb. Christians are called to believe that cosuffering love and the divine word

are all Christ needs to overcome evil. A fallen world addicted to war does not believe this, but the followers of Jesus do, or should! If Jesus conquers evil by killing his enemies, he's just another Caesar. But the whole point of John's Revelation is that Jesus is *nothing* like Caesar! The idea that the world would continue to be run by the violent ways of Caesar and Pharaoh and all the rest was the bad news that made John weep when the elder told him there was none worthy to open the scroll of God. John the Revelator is giving us the gospel, not the antigospel. The war of the Lamb looks nothing like the war of the beast. Jesus is not like Caesar. Jesus does not wage war like Caesar. To miss this point is to misunderstand everything the Apocalypse is trying to reveal!

Think about how Jesus waged war against demonic evil in the Gospels. Did he do it by taking up arms against evil? No. Jesus set the demon-possessed free by his words. When a demon-possessed man in the country of the Gerasenes had broken his shackles and terrorized the outskirts of the city, did Jesus overcome demonic evil by killing the demon-possessed man? No. He overcame demonic evil by his word. Jesus said, "Come out of the man, you evil spirit."<sup>\*14</sup> We might say Jesus waged war on demonic evil with the sword that came from his mouth. Jesus doesn't wield a sword in his hand to kill people; Jesus wields a sword from his mouth to set people free. The war of the Lamb is the same war the apostle Paul describes to the Corinthian church.

We are human, but we don't wage war as humans do. We use God's mighty weapons, not worldly weapons, to knock down the strongholds of human reasoning and to destroy false arguments. We destroy every proud obstacle that keeps people from knowing God. We capture their rebellious thoughts and teach them to obey Christ.<sup>\*15</sup>

This is the kind of war that is symbolically depicted in Revelation with a rider on a white horse called the Word of God who wears a robe drenched in his own blood and wages a righteous war with a sword coming from his mouth. This is not a literal war; this is a symbolic war. This is not a future war; Christ is waging this war right now. I know Christ is waging this war right now because I am among those who have been slain by the sword of his mouth and raised again to newness of life! Jesus slays me. He slays me with his divine word. And in slaying me, he sets me free. This is salvation. John the Revelator is showing us how Jesus saves the world.

When my wife and I lead Christian pilgrim tours of Israel we always visit Tel Megiddo. Located in the lush Jezreel Valley it's a beautiful place, and it's an excellent site for an introduction to biblical archaeology. Unfortunately, its beauty is regularly marred by well-intended but misguided pastors telling their pilgrim groups that the beautiful valley they are overlooking from Tel Megiddo is where Jesus is going to come back on his flying white horse and kill two hundred million people. This kind of eschatology is the ultimate endorsement of an angry, violent, retributive God. And it's very ugly. So let's look at this more carefully.

Why does John set his symbolic war of the Lamb in the Jezreel Valley? This is where a bit of historical information goes a long way. Before and after the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, the imperial *Legio Sexta Ferrata* ("Sixth Ironclad Legion") was encamped in the Jezreel Valley. This may very well have inspired John to set the Lamb's war here. The legion was known as the *Fidelis et Constans*—"Faithful and Steadfast." But John, with a wink to the reader, says that the rider on the white horse is called Faithful and True. This kind of playfulness, where John applies the motto of a Roman imperial legion to Jesus, is something that could be easily recognized by people living in the Roman Empire at the end of the first century, but it is completely missed by readers today. John certainly doesn't believe that Jesus is going to conquer the Roman legion by killing them. John knows that Jesus will conquer the Roman legion the same way he conquered the demonic "legion" in Mark 5: by his word. And eventually Rome *was* conquered by the word of Christ! But all this beauty is lost when we imagine Jesus coming back on a flying white horse and literally killing two hundred million people. (It's interesting to note that two hundred million was roughly the population of the known world in the first century. John may be trying to communicate that eventually the entire world will fall under the word of Christ.)

During one of our recent pilgrim tours, the Israeli guide we have worked with for years was unavailable and we were working with a new guide. While we were at Tel Megiddo, our Jewish Israeli guide asked me if I would like to give a talk from the Bible about Armageddon, and I said I would. I then talked about how John the Revelator was using his symbols to creatively communicate the peaceable rule of the Lamb. I concluded by telling our group that Jesus is not coming back to renounce the Sermon on the Mount and kill two hundred million people. While our guide listened, I told our group that this is a false and pernicious reading of Revelation and that it needs to be once and

for all renounced. When I concluded my talk I noticed that my guide had a wry smile on his face. I knew what he was thinking. So I said to him, “You haven’t heard it taught that way before, have you?” He replied, “No, I haven’t. I always hear about how Jesus is going to come back as a violent warrior.” Then I asked, “What do you think about what I said?” He answered, “I like the way you talk about Jesus so much better. It sounds like good news.” *It sounds like good news.* That Jewish Israeli got it right. If it doesn’t sound like good news, it’s not the gospel!

The book of Revelation is not where the good news of the gospel goes to die. The Apocalypse is not where the gospel becomes the antigospel. The book of Revelation is where the good news of the gospel finds its most creative expression. Through inspired dreamlike images, John the Revelator dares to imagine a world where the nightmare of endless war finally succumbs to the peaceable reign of Christ. Revelation is where the Lamb is victorious *as a lamb!* The Christ who is victorious in Revelation is the same Christ who preached his gospel of peace in the Sermon on the Mount. John calls his Christian readers to believe the audacious claim that it is the way of the Lamb that rules the world. If the theme of John’s majestic Apocalypse can be summed up in a single verse, it’s this one:

The world has now become the Kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ,  
and he will reign forever and ever.<sup>\*16</sup>

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\*1.1. Titus 2:13.

\*2. Revelation 16:16, NLT, italics in the original.

\*3. See Revelation 16:13.

\*4. Revelation 19:11, 13, 15, NLT.

\*5. See Revelation 9:16.

\*6. See Revelation 9:7–8.

\*7. See Revelation 9:16–17.

\*8. See Revelation 12:3–4.

\*9. See Revelation 13:1–2.

\*10. See Revelation 14:17–20.

\*11. Eugene H. Peterson, *Reversed Thunder* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 77.

\*12. Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 64, italics in the original.

\*13. Revelation 19:13.

\*14. Mark 5:8, NLT.

\*15. 2 Corinthians 10:3–5, NLT.

\*16. Revelation 11:15, NLT.

## City of the Lamb

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Light. Water. Land. Plants and trees. Fish, birds, and beasts. Finally, beings to bear the image of God. A man called Humankind and a woman named Life. It was all very good...until it all went wrong. There was a temptation, a transgression, an expulsion from paradise. A flaming sword to block the way home. Thorns and thistles, struggle and sorrow, dust to dust. Death. Yet life goes on. Humankind and Life had two sons—Cain the tiller of the ground and Abel the keeper of sheep. As the agrarian and the nomadic came into conflict, the farmer killed the shepherd, lied to God about it, moved east of Eden, and founded the first city. The violence unleashed by Cain became seventy times seven more violent in the days of Lamech, and completely out of control in the days of Noah. In an attempt to solve the problem of exponential violence, God intervened with his own violence. Salvation by tsunami. Human violence washed away by a divine deluge. A flood from which only eight survived. Problem solved. Except it wasn't solved. Not long after the dove offered the olive branch, the foundations of Babylon were laid in the land of Shinar. God's attempt to solve the problem of violence by violence didn't work. So God began a new plan and called the son of Terah. Enter Abraham. The redemption of the world would not come by the eradication of evil people, but through the propagation of a faithful family. By faith Abraham would father a son and spend the rest of his life searching for a city whose builder and maker is God...

—Brian Zahnd

This is the way the story is told in the beginning of the Bible. This is the overarching narrative of the first chapters of Genesis. Creation. Catastrophe. Killing. An attempted fix by a flood. Finally, the beginning of true salvation history with the call of Abraham. This salvation story that begins with Abraham eventually finds its true hero in Jesus and its happy ending in New Jerusalem. What Abraham was looking for from the moment he left Ur of the Chaldeans is what Jesus is building. The Bible concludes its epic story with a portrait of the city coming from heaven, and this is exactly the way the Bible had to end. Only the book of Revelation provides a fitting conclusion to the story begun in Genesis. With its bookends of Genesis and Revelation the Bible takes us from creation to new creation.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new."<sup>\*1</sup>

The final eschatological vision in the book of Revelation is the answer to the church's constant prayer: "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." In the last two chapters of Revelation, John of Patmos paints a portrait of the arrival on earth of the heavenly city, New Jerusalem, the city of the Lamb. What John shows us is not heaven but a renewed earth marked by fidelity and justice. The paradise Adam and Eve lost is what the Lamb recovers. The city Abraham was always looking for, but only saw from afar by faith, is what the carpenter of Nazareth is building. In the closing chapters of the Bible, the lost garden of Eden and Abraham's sought-after city are combined in the garden metropolis of the Lamb. The big story the Bible tells doesn't end with people going off to heaven but with heaven coming to earth. The coming of New Jerusalem is celebrated as a great wedding. Just as Jesus began his earthly ministry at the wedding in Cana, now the ascended Christ presides over the marriage of heaven and earth. John seems to say it this way: the tragic divorce between heaven and earth is now reconciled by the Lamb.

John calls his vision of a flourishing human society healed by Jesus *New Jerusalem*. It's a new Jerusalem because, though it's a new thing in salvation history, it has continuity with what God was doing all along through the Hebrew patriarchs and prophets. The perennial vision of the prophets was that Jerusalem would embody fidelity of worship and a commitment to neighborliness, and thus be a light to the nations. But the prophets spent most of their time calling Jerusalem to repent of its idolatry and injustice. Instead of being a light to the nations, Jerusalem was mostly just another city built on the idolatry of self-interest and the injustice of exploitation. As Jesus began his ministry he spoke of fulfilling the aim of the Law and the Prophets, and of gathering a people around himself who would be the light of the world, a city set on a hill.<sup>\*2</sup> Thus John the Revelator describes the city of the Lamb like this:

And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it.<sup>\*3</sup>

When Jesus arrived at Jerusalem on Palm Sunday riding the donkey, he came as the culmination of the Hebrew prophetic tradition. When Jesus looked upon Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, he wept over the infidelity, the injustice, and the impending fate of the city. Five days later Jesus was crucified in Jerusalem. A generation later Jerusalem was destroyed, a horrendous event that John graphically and theatrically depicts in his Apocalypse. But Jerusalem is also the city where Jesus was raised from the dead and where something new began. Out of the husk of the old Jerusalem was born the new Jerusalem. From the city of David on Mount Zion would come the global city of the Lamb. With Easter and Pentecost, New Jerusalem began its slow but inexorable annexation of the old empires of death. John tells us that New Jerusalem is fifteen hundred miles long and fifteen hundred miles wide,<sup>\*4</sup> not coincidentally the same dimensions as the Roman Empire. The meaning is obvious: the Roman Empire is to be replaced by the empire of the Lamb! That John also says the city is fifteen hundred miles *high* tells us that New Jerusalem is the marriage of heaven and earth.

It's important to understand that John doesn't depict New Jerusalem as belonging purely to a distant future but as *a present reality in the process of becoming*. New Jerusalem is both present and still arriving; it's now and not yet. That a little more than two centuries after his composition of

Revelation most of the Roman Empire had converted to Christianity shows what a remarkable prophet John was! Twenty centuries later the expansion of New Jerusalem continues. We also live in the tension of the now and not yet. Today it is the task of every local church to be a kind of suburb of the New Jerusalem here and now.

In communicating his vision of God's alternative society in Christ, John the Revelator employs the twin symbols of city and bride. As a metaphor of *place*, the church is depicted as New Jerusalem, a city with the same geographical dimensions as the Roman Empire. As a metaphor of *people*, the church is depicted as the bride of the Lamb. John is drawing a deliberate contrast between the chaste bride of Christ and the great whore Roma. Roma was the pagan goddess of antiquity who personified the glory of Rome. The Roma idol was depicted as a stately and regal woman seated upon a throne with a scepter in her hand. But in Revelation 17 John of Patmos transforms Roma into a drunken prostitute riding on the back of a beast with a cup of abominations in her hand. Today it would be like depicting the Statue of Liberty as a drunken prostitute. (No wonder John ended up a political prisoner!) Then, in Revelation 21, John introduces the true chaste bride in her regal splendor; it's not the goddess Roma but the church, the bride of Christ. Admittedly from our vantage point of two thousand years of often embarrassing church history, we are painfully aware that the bride of Christ has too often been wantonly unfaithful; nevertheless, this is John's glorious vision of the church. In the closing scene of his theatrical drama, John is telling us that it's not Rome (or any other empire) that is the last, best hope of earth but the kingdom of Christ. The Roman Empire is to be replaced by New Jerusalem, and the goddess Roma is to be replaced by the bride of the Lamb. This is how Revelation subverts the civil religion of Rome. This is the hope John the Revelator has for the world.

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. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.<sup>\*5</sup>

The last two chapters of Revelation are a creative composite of many passages from the Old Testament. John weaves a tapestry of images borrowed from Genesis, Exodus, Psalms, Isaiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, and Zechariah. The culmination of John's artistry is a stunning vision of hope. In particular John borrows from Ezekiel's vision of a new temple.

Ezekiel was a priest and prophet during the Babylonian exile in the fifth century BC. At a time when the Jerusalem temple was in ruins, Ezekiel casts a vision of a new temple (or we might say a new Jerusalem). What Ezekiel saw wasn't the second temple that would be built by Zerubbabel and later expanded by King Herod but a mystical temple. Ezekiel's temple was a symbolic temple reflecting a spiritual agenda. Flowing from this mystical temple Ezekiel sees a stream of water.<sup>\*6</sup> At first it's just a trickle, but as it flows it becomes deeper and wider. This tiny stream from the temple flows into the desert and becomes a river, with trees suddenly springing up along its banks. But these are no ordinary trees; they bear fruit every month and have leaves with healing properties. When the river reaches the Dead Sea, the lifeless waters are healed, and suddenly the Dead Sea is dead no more but is teeming with fish! Everywhere the river from the temple flows there is healing and life. This is Ezekiel's vision of a mystical temple that brings life and healing to the waste places outside of Jerusalem. Ezekiel anticipates something coming from the center of the Jewish world that will bring healing to a deeply wounded world.

In the grand finale to his Apocalypse, John borrows Ezekiel's vision of a mystical temple, a river of life, and healing trees as he paints a picture of a new Jerusalem, the new society formed around the Lamb. It's Jesus who has emerged from the center of the Jewish world to heal the nations. And where do we find New Jerusalem? Wherever we find people banding together with the intention of following the Lamb in the new way of being human. New Jerusalem is found in Ephesus, Corinth, Rome, London, Los Angeles, Lagos, and Beijing. Wherever churches enact a healing presence in broken communities, New Jerusalem is there. New Jerusalem is both a symbolic prophetic vision and a tangible present reality.

New Jerusalem is a marriage—the marriage of God and humankind, the marriage of heaven and earth, the marriage of garden and city. Adam's lost garden and Abraham's longed-for city are united in holy matrimony in New Jerusalem. As a garden city, New Jerusalem brings well-being to both people and planet. In our hurting world every city needs communities of Jesus followers committed, now more than ever, to bringing this healing. With nations raging and warring, with a planet melting and

burning, it's time to live as citizens of New Jerusalem. Today humanity stands at a crossroads. The way of the beast points to the lake of fire. The way of the Lamb points to New Jerusalem.

Those who choose the peaceable way of the Lamb become citizens of New Jerusalem. The bride of the Lamb as the citizenry of New Jerusalem is to be an agent of healing for both people and planet. As the church eventually learned that followers of Jesus cannot treat *people* as their slaves, we now have to learn that we cannot treat the *planet* as our slave. As God's image-bearing creatures we are to exercise dominion over the earth as healing caretakers, not as rapacious profiteers. To mistreat God's good creation, people and planet, is always the highway to hell. We either cooperate with New Jerusalem or we cooperate with the lake of fire. These two alternative fates are both present in the closing scene of John's theatrical Apocalypse: a lake that never stops burning and a garden city whose gates are never shut.

John presents New Jerusalem as the saving alternative to the burning lake. Kings and nations living outside New Jerusalem, where the lake of fire burns day and night, are invited into the holy city. To those living in the hellscape that is the abode of the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet, an invitation is offered.

The Spirit and the bride say, "Come."  
And let everyone who hears say, "Come."  
And let everyone who is thirsty come.  
Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.<sup>7</sup>

What a generous and gracious invitation! To nations living in the miserable land of the burning lake, the Spirit and the bride invite the thirsty to come to the city of the Lamb and drink from the water of life as a free gift! The city has twelve gates, but they are not for defense, for these gates are never shut.<sup>8</sup> The gates are open on every side of the city, telling us entrance into the heavenly city is always a possibility. All who repent and turn their backs on the beast with its idolatry and injustice and who wash their robes in the blood of the Lamb will be received into the holy city. As John tells us, "Blessed are those who wash their robes. They will be permitted to enter through the gates of the city and eat the fruit from the tree of life."<sup>9</sup> In Genesis God drove Adam and Eve out of the garden and blocked the way to the tree of life by an angel with a flaming sword.<sup>10</sup> But in Revelation the Spirit and the bride call to the sons of Adam and daughters of Eve living in the land of the burning lake and invite them to enter the garden city through ever-open gates and to partake freely of the tree of life! To those banished from paradise, exiled to a living hell, a way back home is offered. Prodigal sons and daughters don't have to suffer forever in self-imposed exile in the far country; the door to the father's house is always open. In the final chapter of the Bible we see the hands of a loving God reaching out to welcome weary sinners.

In my early days of ministry, I prayed over and over that God would give me a vision of hell. It became a strange obsession. *Oh, God, give me a vision of hell!* I must have prayed this thousands of times. Why? Morbid curiosity? There may have been a bit of that. But there was also a more noble motivation. Somehow I thought if I could witness the suffering of the damned it would help me to be a better preacher of the gospel. I reasoned that a voyeur's view of Hades might give me a greater burden for the lost. If I knew what hell was really like, I could prevail upon sinners to avoid its doom at all costs. So I wanted to see hell. But how? This was before sensationalist books like *23 Minutes in Hell* and similar titles began to crop up on best-seller lists as the dark alternative to all those books like *My Trip to Heaven*. In those days what was available to me were the Puritan hellfire-and-damnation books. Along with "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," I repeatedly read John Bunyan's *Groans of a Lost Soul*. (The full title was *Sighs from Hell! or The Groans of a Damned Soul Discovering from Luke xvi. 19, &c. the Lamentable State of the Damned. And may fitly serve as a Warning Word to Sinners, both old and young, by Faith in Jesus Christ, to avoid the same Place of Torment. With a Discovery of the Usefulness of the Scriptures, as our safe Conduct for avoiding the Torments of Hell.*)<sup>11</sup> As I had with my homemade copy of "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," I marked and memorized passages in my well-worn copy of *The Groans of a Lost Soul*. On page 31, now emblazoned by a pink highlighter, Bunyan says,

But when they drop into hell, and lift up their eyes there, and behold their souls to be in extreme torments; their dwellings to be the bottomless pit; their company thousands of damned souls; also the innumerable company of devils; and the hot scalding vengeance of God, not only to drop, but to fall very violently upon them; then they will be awakened, who all their lifetime were in a dead sleep.<sup>12</sup>

As I soaked in these seventeenth-century Puritan classics with their lurid depictions of hell, I hoped they would somehow trigger my own vision of hell. I would sit before a fireplace and try to fathom the unimaginable suffering of those condemned to ceaseless agony from the eternal flames of God's wrath. I read. I prayed. I waited. But, alas, no supernatural vision of hell ever occurred. I was never granted a guided tour through the corridors of the damned. I was not destined to be a modern-day Dante.

So after praying for years to see hell, to no avail, I finally gave up and forgot about it. No more beseeching God to give me a vision of hell. But that's not the end of the story. It was many years later that I realized my youthful and no doubt naive prayers had actually been answered. I *had* seen hell! I had even *visited* hell! More than once! As clearly as Dante and John the Revelator, I have seen the burning abyss.

I've seen hell as I walked through the slums of India and Haiti, witnessing firsthand dehumanizing poverty in rat-infested shantytowns with open sewers and cardboard hovels. I've seen the chronicles of hell documented and cataloged in the Yad Vashem: World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem. I've seen hell in Gaza City as I sat with Palestinian people who live in a real-life Gehenna as they struggle to survive in the broken skeletons of bombed-out buildings. I've brushed up against hell in some of the most violent cities of the world: Lagos, Juarez, and San Pedro Sula. I've seen the mouth of hell in the rotten teeth of meth addicts in my own city. I prayed to see hell, and God sent me to India, Haiti, Israel, Gaza, Nigeria, Honduras, Mexico, and Missouri. I've seen the refugee camps dotting the shores of the lake of fire. Yes, I've seen hell. I've heard its groans, smelled its stench, tasted its bitterness, and felt its fear. And just as I suspected so long ago, it *does* compel me to preach the good news of Jesus and invite everyone into the city of the Lamb.

I've already stated in this book that I believe in the postmortem hell of a tormented soul incapable of love. But I also empirically know of the existence of all kinds of real-life hells tormenting souls around the world right now, because I've been there, I've seen them. And if I am to take Jesus seriously, and if I want to avoid judgment in an afterlife hell, I dare not ignore Lazarus and his kind who are already living in hell. This is why we must venture forth from the city of the Lamb to bring hope and healing to those suffering on the cruel shores of the lake of fire. How thirsty must they be who live in the land of the burning lake! There must be many who are ready to hear and accept an invitation to enter the city of the Lamb.

"Come!" say the Spirit and the Bride.

Whoever hears, echo, "Come!"

Is anyone thirsty? Come!

All who will, come and drink,

Drink freely of the Water of Life!<sup>\*13</sup>

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\*1. Revelation 21:1–5, ESV.

\*2. See Matthew 5:13–17.

\*3. Revelation 21:23–24.

\*4. See Revelation 21:15–16.

\*5. Revelation 22:1–2.

\*6. See Ezekiel 47.

\*7. Revelation 22:17.

\*8. See Revelation 21:25.

\*9. Revelation 22:14, NLT.

\*10. See Genesis 3:24.

\*11. John Bunyan, *The Groans of a Lost Soul* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2003).

\*12. Bunyan, *The Groans of a Lost Soul*, 31.

\*13. Revelation 22:17, MSG.

## Love Alone Is Credible

Love alone is credible; nothing else can be believed, and nothing else ought to be believed....

The first thing that must strike a non-Christian about the Christian's faith is that it obviously presumes far too much. It is too good to be true: the mystery of being, revealed as absolute love, condescending to wash his creatures' feet, and even their souls, taking upon himself all the confusion of guilt, all the God-directed hatred, all the accusations showered upon him with cudgels, all the disbelief that arrogantly covers up what he had revealed, all the mocking hostility that once and for all nailed down his inconceivable movement of self-abasement—in order to pardon his creature, before himself and the world. This is truly too much from the Good.

—Hans Urs von Balthasar

Hans Urs von Balthasar tells us that love alone is credible, and I deeply concur with the great Swiss theologian. Love is how we are to think about God, talk about God, believe in God. Yet we are constantly tempted to retreat from believing in the full extent of God's love. To us who are so aware of our own sinfulness and selfishness, this divine love seems too good to be true. This is why Balthasar says that "faith is ordered primarily to the inconceivability of God's love."<sup>1</sup> In other words, what we are to believe in above all things is the greatness of God's love. Balthasar recognizes that to the non-Christian, the central Christian claim about the love of God "is too good to be true: the mystery of being, revealed as absolute love."<sup>2</sup> But it's not just non-Christians who struggle with the incredulity of it all. It seems the call to believe that the mystery of being is revealed as absolute love is often just as challenging—and in some cases more so!—among *Christian* people. We are hesitant to believe that the deepest essence of God's being is cosuffering, self-giving, never-ending love. Yet this seemingly inconceivable truth about the love of God is the pinnacle of scriptural revelation.

The topography of biblical witness is full of peaks and valleys, mountains and plains. The Bible is not flat terrain. The honest reader of the Bible readily admits that the Levitical prohibition against eating shellfish does not reach the same heights as the lofty Christology in Colossians. As we look at the great peaks of inspired biblical witness, none soars higher than the twin peaks of divine revelation given to us by the apostle John.

But anyone who does not love does not know God, for *God is love*....

We know how much God loves us, and we have put our trust in his love.

*God is love*, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them.<sup>3</sup>

Soaring above everything else the Bible has to say about God are these twin peaks found in John's first epistle: *God is love*. *God is love*. The Arapaho Indians called Longs Peak and Mount Meeker *Neniisotou'u*, meaning "two guides."<sup>4</sup> The twin peaks of this towering massif are useful for orientation when traveling in the front range of the Colorado Rocky Mountains, just as the twin peaks of 1 John 4 verses 8 and 16 are invaluable when navigating our way through the Bible. When the aged apostle put quill to papyrus to tell his readers that God is love (twice), and that to know love is to know God, and that to live in love is to live in God, he was making a daring move...and he dared to do it!

More than a thousand years earlier, Moses reaches the apex of God's revelation to him when he hears and reports the voice of God from the burning bush saying, "I AM WHO I AM."<sup>5</sup> But John leads us higher up the holy mountain when he reveals that God is love. These two guides on the holy mountain work together to lead us to the summit of divine revelation: God is who God is... and God is love. If we ever reach the top and catch a glimpse from the God Is Love summit of the holy mountain, it changes the way we look at everything. The view from the base of the mountain, or even halfway up, is simply not the same as from the summit. If we can follow John's lead to the summit of the holy mountain of scriptural revelation, we will see the whole Bible in a new light.

God is not wrath. Though we may rightly understand and describe the consequences of divine consent to our own self-destructive will as the wrath of God, the truth remains that God is not wrath; God is love. God is not a bloodthirsty deity requiring ritual killing. Though this may have been the only way we could understand God four millennia ago on the lower flanks of the holy mountain, the truth remains that God is not bloodthirsty; God is love. God is not violence. Despite the fact that religion has a long history of sacralizing violence by projecting it on God, the truth remains that God is love. God does not operate an eternal torture chamber. However we understand the state of a postmortem soul incapable of love, the truth remains that God is not a sadistic torturer inflicting eternal pain; God is love. God is not a killer. Though many have misread the book of Revelation to such an extent that they think God's final solution for sin is the "Final Solution," the truth remains that God is not a genocidal killer; God is love.

The wages of sin is death—but God is love.

War is hell—but God is love.

Violence is human—but God is love.

At this point I can hear my critics howl, “You’re just making God the way you want God to be!” No. That’s not what I’m doing. I was quite content to believe in and preach an angry, violent, retributive God. I did so for decades. I did it convincingly. I did it successfully. You can build a big church preaching such a God. Fear is a powerful motivator. Religious people generally like to be told that God is like that, as long as this divine disposition is primarily directed toward other people. The way I *wanted* God to be was the way I *assumed* God was: angry, violent, retributive. I knew how to use the Bible to preach God this way, and I wasn’t interested in changing my theology. If my motivation were to make God the way I wanted God to be, I would still be lifting passages from “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” to add rhetorical flourishes to my angry-God sermons. The change that occurred in my theology came about not by wishing for God to be something other than I assumed God was but from actually discovering God as revealed in Christ.

My turning away from an angry, violent, retributive vision of God began after I had turned forty and while reading Augustine’s *Confessions*. Saint Augustine’s spiritual memoir moved me to pray what may have been the most important prayer of my life: *God, I want to spend the rest of my life discovering you as you are revealed in Christ*. That prayer in June of 2000 launched me on a journey of theological discovery that I have recounted in my spiritual memoir *Water to Wine*. Following cairns set up by climbers of the holy mountain who have gone before me has led me away from the primitive and mistaken notions of an angry, violent, retributive God and toward the Father who is fully revealed in Christ. This is the God the apostle John says is love.

But it wasn’t primarily reading theologians like Hans Urs von Balthasar, Henri Nouwen, and Stanley Hauerwas that led me away from an angry-God theology; it was mostly mystical experiences in prayer. As I learned to directly experience the presence of God in contemplative prayer—or sitting with Jesus, as I describe it—I have come to know God as love and light. I have seen the face of God in Jesus. Moses says that no one can see God’s face and live.<sup>\*6</sup> But Paul says God “has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”<sup>\*7</sup> Paul, having climbed higher up the holy mountain, discovers that we *can* see the face of God and live. In fact, it is seeing the face of God in Christ that causes us to really live! We might now say that no one who has *not* seen God’s face can live! To see the face of God in Christ is what brings us to life. Eternal life is to know God as revealed in Jesus Christ.<sup>\*8</sup>

John, who lived so much longer than all the other apostles and seems to have climbed higher than them all, says, “This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.”<sup>\*9</sup> There was a time when I thought the darkness of anger, violence, and retribution cast a sinister shadow upon the face of God, but having learned to sit with Jesus in contemplative prayer, I have discovered by my own experience that what John said is true: God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. God is the eternal light of self-giving love. There is no darkness. No anger. No violence. No retribution. Only love.

One day as I was sitting silently in contemplative prayer, I whispered this to the One who was there: “Father, I don’t believe you torture people for eternity.” And then I began to laugh. And the One who was there laughed too. There was healing in that shared laughter. It is such a ludicrous notion that the God who is love would of his own volition inflict torment upon people eternally. The idea is so ridiculous that it is either hilarious or horrendous. In that moment we chose to have a laugh about it. But again, I sternly add this: I believe in hell. I believe in hell here and now, as Jesus taught, and I believe in the possibility of self-exile from the love of God in the afterlife, as Jesus indicated. But the notion that God, out of personal offense and infinite spite, inflicts eternal torture upon his wayward children is completely incompatible with the revelation of God in Christ. Being saved includes being saved from belief in malicious libel against God.

For God to resort to violence in order to save the world is not saving the world; it’s condemning the world. But John tells us, “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”<sup>\*10</sup> God saves the world not through the impatience of violence but through the infinite patience of divine love. I understand the incredulity of unbelievers toward the idea that the world can be saved by love and without violence; it is this very incredulity that lies at the foundation of their disbelief. But it is the very inconceivability of God-saving love in Christ that Christians are to believe in most of all. If John 3:16 is to mean anything, it must mean that God gets what God wants through love, or not at

all. If I believe that love never fails, it's because I believe that God is love. To believe in the sufficiency of God's love to save the world is not naive optimism; it's Christianity.

In the conclusion of his “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” sermon, Jonathan Edwards says, “The axe is in an extraordinary manner laid at the root of the trees, that every tree that brings not forth good fruit, may be hewn down, and cast into the fire.”<sup>\*11</sup> And I say, “Amen.” I thank God that the theological tree that produced the bitter fruit of belief in an angry, violent, retributive God has at last been hewn down and cast into the fire. In my life the poisonous tree of angry-God theology is now gone. In its place grows the tree of life, a tree whose leaves bring healing.<sup>\*12</sup> It’s a tree that looks like it once may have been an ugly cross, but it is now beautiful and verdant, producing the fruit of eternal life. Planted by the Father himself, this tree is an everlasting reminder that I am a forgiven sinner now being healed in the hands of a loving God.

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\*1. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone Is Credible*, trans. D. C. Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2004), 101.

\*2. Balthasar, *Love Alone Is Credible*, 102.

\*3. 1 John 4:8, 16, NLT.

\*4. “Longs Peak and Mount Meeker,” *The Arapaho Project*, University of Colorado–Boulder, accessed March 14, 2017, [www.colorado.edu/csilw/arapahoproject/coplacenames/placepages/longs.html](http://www.colorado.edu/csilw/arapahoproject/coplacenames/placepages/longs.html).

\*5. Exodus 3:14.

\*6. See Exodus 33:20.

\*7. 2 Corinthians 4:6.

\*8. See John 17:3.

\*9. 1 John 1:5.

\*10. John 3:17.

\*11. Jonathan Edwards, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” in *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God and Other Puritan Sermons* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2005), 184.

\*12. See Revelation 22:2.

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