HANS-JÖRG RONSDORF

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For Our Sins He Died

What Happened There?

STUDY EDITION

Reading Sample

This reading sample contains:

the front matter and the complete table of contents
chapters 1 and 2 in full
the first two pages of each of chapters 3 to 18
the complete bibliography

The page numbers are those of the complete book.
Where an excerpt ends, a note at the foot of the page says so.

For Our Sins He Died

Hans-Jörg Ronsdorf

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What Happened There?

Study Edition

Self-published

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For Our Sins He Died. What Happened There? Study Edition

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For I delivered to you first of all what I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.

1 Corinthians 15:3–4

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Part I

The Question

1. Preface

For many evangelical Christians the matter is simple. What the cross means. How our redemption comes about. For a long time it was that way for me too. But if you keep thinking about the cross over the years, questions come up, and they want answers.

I am not a theologian. I am what people would call an interested layman, and I write for laypeople. This study is not meant for theologians. They are welcome to read it, of course, but they work with far more material and deal with specialized questions and aspects of this subject. My approach is more general, and anyone can follow it.

Since my earliest youth I have had a hobby: studying the Bible. And reading books about the Bible and its themes. If you do that for decades and read widely, you are all but swamped with ideas, theses, and debates. All the more so with the almost unlimited possibilities of the internet. A huge wave of texts comes rolling in, on this subject too. You can switch off and so protect yourself from new questions – or from doubts. I did the opposite. For the last 15 years I have engaged with it. I have researched. Gathered. Summarized. That is why there is a fair amount of material behind this book. From every era and from every present-day branch of Christendom. The bibliography – though it is not exactly short – therefore comes nowhere near covering everything that has been written on this subject. It contains what was available to me and what I was able to get hold of. Measured by the number of books about it, the subject could probably fill libraries.

In all my thinking, praying, and searching I came to see things that I later found again in the church fathers and in present-day theologians. That encouraged me and sometimes confirmed that my thinking was on the right track. But I also found that none of these thoughts leads, in the end, to a full understanding of the cross and what happened there.

In chapter 2 I tell how I began to question what I had learned.

Two things come together in this book. I want to keep them apart from the start.

The first is my personal path. I wanted to arrive, for myself, at a view of the cross, atonement, and redemption that makes sense to me. Or makes more sense than the one I had. I wanted to understand how salvation comes

about. How the *mechanism of salvation* works or functions. I wrote that for myself. As I write, I learn and sort out my thoughts. Some things I have to discard; others lead further and light up what was unclear before. This book is not meant to win supporters. No one has to agree with my conclusions. Often two or more explanations stand side by side with almost equal weight. Then I have to decide. And depending on the decision, you come to a different result. People can argue about that for a long time.

The second is almost more important to me. It is the message to my fellow human beings. To people who do not yet know Jesus. How do I tell them today what happened for them on the cross? In this day and age. In their language and in their world of thought. And with all my heart and with conviction. So that they may believe and be saved. It is for Jesus that I want to win people. Not for my view of the cross.

That is why there are two books. You are holding the study edition, "For Our Sins He Died," in your hand. It takes the long road. The small book "Warum musste Jesus sterben?" [Why Did Jesus Have to Die?] came out in October 2026. It is short and easy to read. It is written for people who do not yet know Jesus. It sets out to tell them why a bloody death brings reconciliation with God. And that this death is for them too. And it does so knowing that it takes the illumination of the Holy Spirit to receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. No explanation, however simple and logical, is enough to convince a person. But it will help. And our explanation should also match what the Bible actually says.

Sometimes the death of Jesus and its effect are narrowed down to a few sentences. And this one understanding is then raised to the one and only saving faith. But we are not saved because we accept and hold a particular understanding of the atonement. We are saved because we trust Jesus Christ and acknowledge that he is Lord. That includes repentance and conversion. And the trust that he forgives because he died for us. Hardly anyone understands, at the moment of conversion, in what way the death of Jesus saves us. But this much a person does understand: Jesus Christ alone saves me.

I find that – especially looking back, now that this book is finished – truly comforting. In the moments when God's grace enlightens a person, no particular interpretation of the atoning death is required. The first Christians did not require it. The New Testament does not require it. Nor has the church ever defined one. Councils have ruled on the Trinity. On the person of Christ as well. On his work, on the how of redemption, never. Even the doctrine of satisfaction, which Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) developed, never became the confession of the whole church. So we should not require a particular interpretation[1] either.

My book about the theme at the heart of Christianity could be misunderstood. So I place one premise ahead of all the reflections that follow:

> ***The death of Jesus was necessary for our salvation. So were his resurrection and his ascension. They are one single work. On this event hangs our whole existence as Christians.***

No one has to keep reading this book. Still, I am glad for every reader. Perhaps the subject will become a little brighter for you as you read. Perhaps you will gain a little more clarity. Perhaps a question will be settled that has long been open. Then I thank my God for it.

A book records a state of understanding. Today's. Admittedly, I have been working on this subject for at least 15 years. I cannot say how I will think about one aspect or another in five years. Even as followers of Jesus we are all on a journey that keeps bringing change. The New Testament calls that growth. But one thing is not touched by it: the firm ground on which I stand. ***He has made everything right for us.***

And finally: if you find errors in the content, let me know.

For research and plausibility checks, for translations, and for formatting and typesetting I used an AI (Claude).

Hans-Jörg Ronsdorf
Sulzberg, December 2026

2. What This Is About

The guiding question

There are quite a few "theories of the atonement." All of them try, or claim, to be grounded in the Bible. Some complement one another. Others contradict one another. Chapter 4 presents them. This book measures them all by the same question: How does the death of Jesus bring about our salvation? That is a path through difficult terrain. But I believe it is worth the effort. One thing should stand at the end: deep appreciation, admiration, and worship of the Savior.

Why it matters

Someone might say: Leave it alone. Being saved is what matters. Why a whole book about the question of how the death of Jesus works? There are at least four reasons.

The first reason is God himself. As we think about the cross, so we think about God. Is the Father the one from whom Jesus has to protect us? Did God the Father pour out his wrath on the Son? Or is he the one who so loved the world that he gave his Son?[2] Those are big differences. Whoever sees the cross distorted gets a distorted picture of God. And a distorted picture of God shapes our spiritual life of faith.

The second reason is our own life. We are to imitate God. We are to forgive one another as God in Christ has forgiven us.[3] In my working paper of January 2024 I asked myself: Did God insist on his rights and his honor by being angry with his Son and punishing him on the cross? God insists on his rights and his honor, and we are to imitate him?[4] What would such imitation look like?

How we understand the cross shapes how we treat one another.

The third reason is the people we talk to. People today ask: Why blood? A God who first has to see blood before he forgives? That repels them. In the small book I wrote: Many have heard it that way, in churches too. Some left because of it.[5] We have to take this question seriously. Not to make the gospel more comfortable. But to say it rightly. The word of the cross is an of-

fense.[6] That will not change. But it should be the real offense. Not one that we have created ourselves with explanations that fall short.

The fourth reason is worship. Whoever understands more marvels more. Whoever sees deeper gives deeper thanks. No thought in this book has any other goal.

> As we think about the cross, so we also think about God. That is why it is so important to understand the cross rightly.

What I was taught and my thinking about it

At some point I began to question what I had been taught. The understanding of the cross from my youth, in the evangelical world of the Brethren movement. But that happened only after I had written a small book myself.[7] With it I wanted to defend this "only true position." Today I see that, sadly, I was not defending Holy Scripture alone. I was defending a particular interpretation of Scripture. One that I absorbed early and always held to be the only right one. Yet there are in fact several of them, standing side by side, each with good biblical grounds. Many debates act as if there were only one choice. Either penal substitution, and then the cross really accomplished something. Or a mere example that, say, "only" shows us God's love. That is a false alternative. A false either-or. The history of the church knows several ways of speaking of the cross as a real act of rescue. So whoever questions penal substitution does not automatically end up with the cross as a mere example.

The heart of the problem

As I studied, I noticed more and more in how many ways the New Testament (abbreviated NT from here on) speaks about the cross. About Jesus' saving death for us. After that it no longer surprised me how widely and how fiercely theology argues about the death of Christ. The positions on the reconciling death of Jesus are anything but reconciled.

What we may understand and what remains hidden

One thing holds on every page. Whoever thinks about the death of Jesus, and about how salvation comes about, must also keep a certain distance. A reverent, inner distance from the suffering that befell Jesus on the cross. In

other words: This is not about theories of the atonement. It is not about a mechanism of salvation that can be analyzed with formulas. It is also, and above all, about a historical event. A man dies the most horrible death. In a mortal body with spirit and soul that feels pain and forsakenness.

How this book proceeds

The book proceeds in nine parts. Part I poses the question. Part II gathers all the passages of the NT that speak of the death of Jesus. Part III listens to how the church has understood the cross over two thousand years. Part IV clarifies the essential terms. Part V asks who God is and who man is. Part VI goes back into the Hebrew Bible, to the sacrifices and to Isaiah 53. Part VII listens to how Jesus himself interpreted his death, and reads the weighty and central sentences of the apostles and the Letter to the Hebrews. Part VIII attempts the answer: how the cross saves us. Part IX says it for people of today.

Every section ends with a key sentence.

At the end of the book comes the appendix, "Topics and Questions." It is more than an extra. In 18 short pieces it pursues questions that the chapters only touch on. Or do not raise at all. What does "It is finished" mean? Where does the doctrine of wrath upon the Son come from? For whom did Christ die? Was the cross only a sign of love? Each piece stands on its own. You do not have to have read the whole book to understand it.

What this book is

The study edition takes the long road. It asks thoroughly. It examines the texts of the Bible. It listens to voices from two thousand years. It is meant for all who want to think along and check for themselves.

What this book does not want

This book is not meant to be a textbook of atonement theories that goes through them one by one. Others have done that. Still, I give an overview, to show that my main question about the cross and what happened there is not unfounded. Countless people have asked it before me. Theologians too leave it open. William Witt and Joel Scandrett pay tribute to the old picture of the victory of Christ. Then they write: "It seems necessary to say more about the work of Jesus Christ than just this: Jesus resisted the powers of evil and defeated them, or again: Jesus reconciled sinners to God. The question of how

Jesus does this remains unclear."[8] This is the very question that this book, among other things, pursues.

Once more: I do not want to convince anyone of what has become important to me. Or to convince anyone of my conclusions. This book is my *process of thinking through* what the Bible lets us know about the cross and what happened there. Along the way there may well be respectful assessments or evaluations of other conclusions that I distance myself from, or go along with, or can make my peace with.

Notes

1 William G. Witt and Joel Scandrett, Mapping Atonement, Grand Rapids 2022, pp. 5–6.

2 John 3:16.

3 Eph 4:32; 5:1.

4 Hans-Jörg Ronsdorf, Mein erneuertes Verständnis des erlösenden und sühnenden Todes Christi [My Renewed Understanding of the Redeeming and Atoning Death of Christ], January 12, 2024, unpublished.

5 Hans-Jörg Ronsdorf, Warum musste Jesus sterben? [Why Did Jesus Have to Die?], 2026, p. 9.

6 1 Cor 1:18, 23.

7 Hans-Jörg Ronsdorf, Gottes Lamm, Golgota und die Ewigkeit. Eine Verteidigung des Sühnetodes Christi und des ewigen Gerichts [God's Lamb, Golgotha, and Eternity: A Defense of the Atoning Death of Christ and of Eternal Judgment], Höfen: distomos Publikation, **2015**.

8 Witt and Scandrett, p. 60.

Part II

What the New Testament Says

3. All the Passages at a Glance

Why we begin with the passages: only one source counts

When Paul came to Berea, he preached in the synagogue. His hearers did not simply accept what they heard. They received the word with all readiness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.[1] Luke praises them for it and calls them more noble than others.

We take the same path. Before we hear what church fathers, Reformers, and theologians say, we go to the source. Every interpretation of the cross must be measured against the inspired texts and statements. First we hear the witnesses. Only then do we hear those who interpreted their testimony and shaped it into doctrine.

And we do not read only the familiar favorite passages. Whoever reads only a few verses easily finds what he already thinks he knows. That is why all the passages of the New Testament that speak of the death of Jesus are set out here, about a hundred. After them come the most striking passages of the Old Testament. For the Scriptures that were examined in Berea were exactly these.

You do not have to read the tables in one sitting. You can leaf through them and look things up. And you can check for yourself whether these things are so.

How the table is built: passage, key statement, preposition, who acts and on what, what is brought about

Every passage is asked the same questions. That is why the table has five columns.

The column ***Passage*** gives the reference. The column *Key statement* reproduces what the verse says. It follows the wording of the Elberfelder translation, Edition CSV Hückeswagen, and shortens it with three dots.[2] In a few places I deliberately depart from it, because there the CSV carries a theological decision into the text. There you will find “Own or other translation,” and a footnote explains why this rendering is the more exact one.

The column ***Word*** names the small preposition in the Greek: *for, in place of, with, through*. Often more hangs on it than you might think. But a preposi-

tion is not yet a doctrine. The context decides what it means in a given passage.

The column ***Who acts, on what*** asks two things. Who does something here, God or Christ? And what is the effect directed at: at us, at sin, at death and the devil, at law and curse, or at God, who receives a gift? The last column says what is brought about by it.

The passages are arranged by fourteen ways in which salvation works. As I understand it, these have emerged from the evidence. Within each group they follow the order of the Bible, from the Gospels to Revelation. Many verses belong in several groups. The notes *Also* and *Also echoed in* point to this. Perhaps you will find still more passages, or would arrange some things differently.

The fourteen ways in which salvation works through Christ and his death: an overview

Mode of effect	**Passages (main emphasis)**	**Passages (in all)**
1. Participation: died with him	11	22
2. Cleansing, sanctification, access	12	18
3. Sacrifice and gift: sin is taken away	13	24
4. Ransom and redemption	8	17
5. Establishing the New Covenant	6	11
6. Verdict, curse, and justification	8	23
7. Victory over death, the devil, and the powers	6	16
8. Reconciliation and peace	5	6
9. Demonstration of love and obedience	7	21
10. Example and discipleship	3	14
11. Exaltation and reign	5	24
12. Gathering of a new people	5	13
13. Gift of life	2	11
14. God's plan, wisdom, and Scripture	9	22
Total	100	242

The first number counts each passage once. The second also counts the places where one of these ways is only echoed. The numbers are an aid. They depend on how one groups and assigns the passages. More important than the number is the overall picture, or the panorama of salvation: ***No single***

End of excerpt · continued in the book

Part III

The Interpretations of the Death of Jesus

4. How the Church Has Understood It over Two Thousand Years

The same question is put to every era: How does the death work? Each section ends with two paragraphs: What this view explains best. Where it reaches its limits.

Every interpretation is also rooted in the culture in which it arose and was thought through. We can hardly free ourselves from that. And we have to admit it honestly.

The interpretations at a glance

How many interpretations are there?

There is no single answer to that. Not even among those who spend a lifetime on the subject. Gustaf Aulén (1879–1977) made do with three basic types in 1931. Wayne House counts nine theories, Peter Schmiechen ten. Fleming Rutledge does not want to speak of theories at all, but of eight motifs.

The numbers depend on what you count as a theory in its own right and what you take to be only a variant of another. And on how you sort them. The overview shows how differently the experts count.

Who is counting	Number of interpretations	How they are arranged
Gustaf Aulén, Christus Victor (1931)	3 basic types	classic (victory), Latin (satisfaction), subjective (influence)
William Lane Craig, The Atonement	3 directions	The death works on the devil, on God, or on us
John Stott, The Cross of Christ	5	Who is satisfied? The devil, the law, honor, justice, the moral order
Bruce Demarest, The Cross and Salvation	6	historical
Jackson W. (Brad Vaughn), The Cross in Context	6	theories that say what happens, and theories that say how it happens
Fleming Rutledge, The Crucifixion	8 motifs	not theories, but biblical motifs
Louis Berkhof, Systematic Theology	8 and 1	eight divergent theories, and penal substitution as his own doctrine

Who is counting	Number of interpretations	How they are arranged
William G. Witt and Joel Scandrett, Mapping Atonement (2022)	8 models	historical, each with one chief witness; each model tested on three levels: image, story, the being of God; interpretations in which the death effects something versus those in which it only illustrates
H. Wayne House, Charts of Christian Theology	9	what the death is directed at: Satan, man, God
Manuel Becker, 9 verschiedene Möglichkeiten, das Kreuz zu verstehen	9	a list with pros and cons
Peter Schmiechen, Saving Power	10 in 4 groups	Each theory answers a different human need
Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy	about 12	classic and more recent models
This book	21 in 4 groups	what the death works on: the powers, God, human nature, the human being

The twenty-one interpretations in this book are a decision too. Some would combine a few of them. Others would add more. That shows that even the experts do not agree on how many answers there are to the question of how the death of Jesus saves us.

The table arranges the interpretations by what the death of Jesus works on: on the powers, on God, on human nature, or on the human being. Many interpretations overlap. The grouping shows where the emphasis lies, not the whole doctrine.

A. The death works on Satan and the powers

Interpretation	How the death works	Originator, early proponents	Held today by
1. Ransom paid to the devil	The devil holds man captive. Christ is given to him as the price. Because he kills one who is guiltless, the devil loses his right.	Origen; Gregory of Nyssa (bait and fish-hook); Augustine (abuse of his right)	hardly held anymore echoes in C. S. Lewis's Narnia books
2. Christus Victor (victory)	Christ conquers sin, death, and the devil and sets the captives free.	the fathers from Irenaeus to John of Damascus; Luther; Gustaf Aulén (1931)	Gregory Boyd; Fleming Rutledge; Jeremy Treat (combined with penal substitution)
3. Nonviolent Christus Victor	It is not God who wills the death, but the powers. God conquers by raising Jesus, not by violence.	J. Denny Weaver (2001)	Weaver; Boyd (Cross Vision)

End of excerpt · continued in the book

Part IV

The Essential Terms That Are at Issue

5. The Terms of Salvation

5.1 Atonement

What the word says: to cover, to cleanse, to remove (kipper, hilaskomai). What to watch for: God is the subject of atonement, never its recipient; atonement is made for the sanctuary and for the human being. In dispute: appeasement or cleansing? The direction of atonement: among the pagans man appeases the gods; in the Bible God acts.

What the word says. Anyone who hears the German word *Sühne* (atonement) today thinks of punishment. The offender must atone for his deed. But the Bible does not mean it that way. The old German word *suona* comes from the language of the courts. It meant the verdict, but also the settling of a dispute, peace.[1] From the same root comes the German word *versöhnen* (to reconcile). So atonement originally aimed at peace, not at retribution. In the Old Testament the word for it is *kipper*. It occurs 101 times, almost half of them in Leviticus. It has two sides. It means to ransom: a forfeited life is released. And it means to cleanse, to wipe away. Twelve times an atonement text ends with: and it shall be forgiven him. Twelve times with: and he shall be clean.[2] The New Testament takes up the Greek word *hilaskomai*. Christ is the priest who makes atonement. He is the atonement for our sins. And he is the place of atonement.[3]

What to watch for. Watch who makes atonement. In the sanctuary it is the priest. But surprisingly often it is God himself. Yet he was merciful; he atoned for the guilt and did not destroy.[4] And watch for whom atonement is made. Atonement is made for a person. Atonement is made for the altar or the sanctuary. But no one ever atones God. With people, by contrast, it can be done. Jacob wants to atone the face of his brother Esau with a gift, that is, to appease him.[5] The Bible never once says that of God. Here lies the great difference from the surrounding religions. There man wins the favor of the gods. In the Bible God acts. He himself gives the blood upon the altar.[6] And John says: God loved us and sent his Son as the atonement for our sins.[7] Atonement is not the cause of his love. It is its consequence. It is the proof of his love.

What is disputed. For almost a hundred years interpreters have argued over two English words. Does *hilaskomai* mean ***propitiation***, that is, making

God gracious? Or ***expiation***, that is, wiping out sin? Outside the Bible the Greek word does in fact often mean to appease an angry god.[8] The British scholar C. H. Dodd (1884–1973) said in 1931: In the Bible it is different. There it means to wipe out. Leon Morris (1914–2006) disagreed: It is also about God's wrath.[9] He has reasons for this. Before Paul calls Christ the place of atonement, he speaks at length of the wrath of God against all ungodliness.[10] And in the Old Testament there are passages where atonement turns away wrath. They are not in the sacrificial laws, it is true, but they are in the Bible.[11]

The other side answers with an observation that cannot be argued away. With this word God is never the one at whom atonement is aimed, neither in the Hebrew nor in the Greek Bible. He is the one who institutes it, and the means of atonement also comes from him. Bernd Janowski therefore speaks of a reversal of the idea of sacrifice: God receives nothing; he grants.[12] If afterward there is no more wrath, it is not because man has changed God's mind. God himself has removed what stood between him and man. Behind this dispute stands the question: Is atonement directed toward God or toward sin? It will stay with us through the whole book.

I myself choose the word ***expiation***, *wiping out sin*. In my view it fits better into the overall picture of God's saving action in grace, in which he is the one who acts in atonement. In saying this I neither deny nor diminish God's wrath. But it is directed against sin, and atonement removes sin. God did not have to be made to change his mind. He himself provided the way. His wrath dies out, so to speak, because with the removal of sin the reason and occasion for the wrath are gone. The Greek Bible of the Old Testament also supports this. Psalm 130 says: With you there is forgiveness. The word there is *hilasmos*, the same word that John uses for Christ. And the tax collector in the temple prays: O God, be gracious to me, the sinner. There too we find a word from this family. Both times it is about grace, not about rendering satisfaction to an angry God, in whatever way.[13]

> Atonement is not something that man does to God. Atonement is what God does for man.

5.2 Substitution

What the word says: for us, in our place, on our account; the little words hyper, anti, peri, dia. What to watch for: inclusion (died with him) and exclusion (in our place)

End of excerpt · continued in the book

Part V

God and Man

6. Who God Is

God's love

Who is God? The Bible answers with one short sentence: God is love.[1] That is not one attribute among many. It is his nature. God does not love because we are lovable. He loves because he is God.

That is why love stands at the beginning of the cross, not at its end. God shows his love toward us in this, that Christ died for us while we were still sinners and enemies.[2] God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son.[3] He loved us and sent his Son as the atonement for our sins.[4] Love is the source of the atonement. Not its result.

On this point almost everyone who writes about the cross agrees. The defenders of penal substitution say it too: no kind Son had to change a grim Father's mind first.[5] More than a hundred years ago one interpreter put it this way: Among the pagans, atonement is what makes the gods willing to forgive. In the Bible it enables God to do what he was never unwilling to do.[6]

Calvin (1509–1564) already says this. By his love God goes before our reconciliation. "Because he first loved us," he afterward reconciles us. Charles Hodge (1797–1878), a strict defender of penal substitution, also writes: The atonement "does not first awaken love in God." It only makes it "consistent with justice" for God to show his love to transgressors. Witt and Scandrett do not accept that. For Hodge, punishment must come first; only then may God be gracious. In this way, they say, he reverses the order of forgiveness and atonement. God first has to be "brought to be gracious." So watch this point closely. It is not enough that love is there before the cross. It must not have to wait for the cross either.[7]

Augustine (354–430) already knew this. God loved us even when he hated us. He hated what we had done. And he loved what he himself had made.[8] The cross did not change God's mind. It is the expression of a love that was already there.

And this love is not for the good. It is for sinners, for the ungodly, for enemies.[9] No one gives up his child, not for all the money in the world. God gave his Son for people who rejected him.[10] God has no pleasure in the death of the ungodly. He wants him to turn back and live.[11]

Above all, though, God is the giver. The Father gives the Son. And the Son gives himself.[12] The love of the Father and the love of the Son are not two different loves. It is one single love. That is why the one cannot stand against the other at the cross. Augustine asked a shrewd question about this. If God had become gracious to us only through the cross, why then did he give up his Son for us? He would not have done that if he had not loved us already. So the love of the Father stands at the beginning, not only at the end. Father, Son, and Spirit act together in this, and in full unity. And yet Augustine maintains with Paul: We are justified by the blood of Christ.[13]

What does that mean for our question? However the death of Jesus works, it does not work by first moving God to love. Anyone who explains the cross that way has misunderstood it from the start.

> The love of God is not the result of the cross. It is its source.

God's righteousness

God is love. But is he also righteous? And if so, what does that mean?

When we hear of righteousness, we often think of a judge. He weighs, he rules, he punishes. The Bible knows that. God does not leave the guilty unpunished.[14] But Hebrew thought is broader. The word for *judge* also means: to secure justice. For the poor, the widow, the orphan.[15] Judgment and rescue belong together. The Old Testament does not even have a word of its own for *punishment*.[16] God's righteousness is first of all his faithfulness. He stands by his word. He brings justice where injustice rules. That is why the Psalms pray: Deliver me in your righteousness![17]

Why then can God not simply forgive, the way we forgive one another? Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) answered: If God simply passed over sin, wrong would be freer than right.[18] John Stott says: We forgive as private persons. But God is not a private person. He is the author of the order in which we all live.[19] A God who overlooked all evil would not be a good God. Offenders and victims alike need justice.[20] Someone who has done another person grave wrong cannot be treated as if nothing had happened.

But this matters too: God is not under a law. He is not like King Darius, who had to throw Daniel into the lions' den because his own law bound him.[21] The law that God keeps is his own nature.[22] Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) goes further still: God has no one above him. When he forgives, he wrongs no one.[23]

End of excerpt · continued in the book

7. Who Man Is

Man as creature and image of God

How deep man's need is can only be seen from the cross. Whoever sees the remedy begins to sense how grave the illness was. That is why this chapter does not begin with sin. It begins with what man was meant to be.

Man is a creature. God made him, not because God lacked anything, but out of free love.[1] To be a creature is not a defect. It is no evil that man is not God. The serpent in the garden talked him into thinking otherwise: You will be like God.[2] It is not evil that stands at the beginning. It is good. And behold, it was very good.[3]

But the creature does not live of itself. It lives from God, as a fish lives in water. In the water it is free. Outside it dies. Athanasius (c. 298–373) says: What was created out of nothing tends back toward nothing. Man has life only as long as he stays joined to God.[4]

And this creature is God's image. In chapter 6 we saw what that means. Man is to represent God on this earth. That is a commission. But it is more. It is a relationship. Man was created to stand before God. He is the counterpart whom God can address and who can answer him.[5]

Irenaeus (c. 135–c. 200) saw something more. Adam and Eve were like children at the beginning. Good, but not yet finished. They were meant to grow, in freedom, without compulsion.[6] The goal was full fellowship with God. Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) says something similar: Man was created to enjoy God and to be blessed in him.[7]

And who is the perfect image of God? The New Testament answers: Christ. He is the image of the invisible God.[8] In him we see what man was meant to be. And God's goal for us is that we become conformed to his image.[9]

Do you notice how high man has been placed? That is exactly what makes his fall so deep.

> Man is creature and image of God at once. He lives from God, and he is meant to show God in the world.

Sin: as act, as guilt, as power, as stain, as uncleanness

What is sin? The Bible has not one picture for it, but many. And each picture calls for a different answer.[10]

Sin as act. Man transgresses God's commandment. He does what he should not do. This is the picture we know best. Where does this act come from? Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–c. 394) says: Sin is an invention of the created will.[11] It has no other ground than the self. And at bottom it is unreasonable.

Sin as guilt. An act leaves something behind. It becomes guilt, and guilt has to be borne. That is why the Lord's Prayer says: Forgive us our debts.[12] Guilt weighs heaviest before God. That is why David prays: Against you alone have I sinned.[13] Whoever sees guilt only between human beings has grasped only half of it.[14]

Sin as power. Paul almost always speaks of sin in the singular. It reigns like a king.[15] It sells man like a slave.[16] Man does not do what he wants, but what he hates.[17] So sin is not only my act. It is also a fate that holds me. If it were only my act, I could redeem myself.[18] But a power cannot be forgiven. It has to be broken. We are perpetrators and victims at once.

Sin as stain. Sin leaves dirt behind. Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.[19] Whoever is guilty feels soiled. He is ashamed. Adam and Eve hide.[20]

Sin as uncleanness. Sin does not defile only the person. It defiles the land and the sanctuary.[21] It is like a contagion that spreads. Frederica Mathewes-Green puts it pointedly: Sin is not only transgression, but infection. No one else can get over an illness for me, any more than a friend could go through my chemotherapy for me.[22] Where there is uncleanness, God cannot dwell.

Five pictures, five solutions. An act needs repentance. Guilt needs forgiveness. A power needs liberation. A stain needs cleansing. Uncleanness needs sanctification. That is why no simple answer is enough for the question of what happened at the cross. The cross has to meet all five.

> Sin is act and guilt, power and stain, and also uncleanness. Each of these sides needs its own answer.

Death: consequence and sentence at once

The wages of sin is death.[23] So Paul writes. Already at the beginning God had said: In the day that you eat of it, you shall die.[24] Through one man sin entered the world, and through sin death.[25]

End of excerpt · continued in the book

Part VI

The Hebrew Bible – the Old Testament

8. The Meaning of the Sacrifices

The meaning and function of the sacrifices

When the New Testament calls the death of Jesus a sacrifice, it assumes that we know what a sacrifice is. The first Christians knew. Most of us no longer do. For us an *Opfer* (the German word means both sacrifice and victim) is someone who suffers harm. A victim of a road accident, a victim of war. Or something one gives up reluctantly. The Bible means something else.

The Hebrew word for sacrifice is ***qorban***. It comes from a verb that means *to draw near*. So a sacrifice is first of all a drawing near. Whoever sacrifices to God comes near to God.[1] He brings a gift, just as a guest brings something for his host. That is not a bribe. It is a sign of honor.

Something stands out here. Most sacrifices have nothing to do with sin at all. In the whole first chapter of Leviticus sin is not mentioned.[2] There are thank offerings and fellowship offerings, where people eat and celebrate. A simple rule helps: Where the one who offers eats of the sacrifice, no atonement is made.[3]

Three basic forms belong together, in a fixed order. First comes the purification offering, which takes away what separates. Then follows the whole offering, which goes up in smoke and stands for devotion to God. Last comes the fellowship offering, where one eats at one table with God. Atonement, consecration, fellowship: That is the path of sacrifice.[4]

And who invented the sacrifices? Not man, in order to win God's favor. God himself ordained them. He says what a sacrifice must be like for him to accept it.[5] Even in giving, man remains the one who receives. The old principle of the religions, "I give so that you may give," does not apply here. The sacrifices solve man's problem, not God's.[6]

Keep that in mind as we go on in the next sections. Sacrifice is not a means of changing the mind of an angry God. It is a way that God opens so that man can draw near to him.

> To sacrifice is to draw near to God. God himself opens the way so that man can come to him.

Passover and the making of the covenant at Sinai

Two events shaped Israel like no others: the night of the exodus from Egypt and the making of the covenant at Sinai. Both have to do with blood. And Jesus takes up both on the last evening.

The Passover. In the night when God passes through Egypt, every family slaughters a lamb. They smear the blood on the doorposts. And God says: When I see the blood, I will pass over you.[7] The blood is a sign. It protects those who are in the house.

But what does it protect from? Here the interpreters part ways. Some say: It protects from the judgment of God. Without the blood, Israel's firstborn would have died too. The lamb dies in his place.[8] The others say: The Passover is not an atoning sacrifice. There is no priest and no altar. The family eats the lamb itself. And later the firstborn are not redeemed by a lamb but by the service of the Levites.[9] There are good reasons for both readings. But one thing is certain: God himself prescribes the blood, God himself passes over. He is judge and savior at once. He saves his people from his own judgment.

The covenant at Sinai. Fifty days later Israel stands at the mountain. Moses reads out the book of the covenant. The people say: All that the Lord has said we will do. Then Moses takes the blood of the sacrifices. Half of it he sprinkles on the altar, the other half on the people. And he says: Behold, the blood of the covenant.[10] After that the elders eat before God.[11]

Here the blood binds God and people together. It is like a signature on a contract, written with one's own life. Only three times in the whole Torah does sacrificial blood come upon people. This is the first time.[12]

And now hear what Jesus says at the Last Supper: This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.[13] He takes up the words from Sinai. He is celebrating the Passover as he does so. And Paul later says: Our Passover lamb is Christ.[14] Whoever wants to understand the death of Jesus must know these two events.

> On Passover night the blood protects, and at Sinai it seals the covenant. Jesus takes both up into himself.

The whole offering that goes up in smoke

Israel's most important sacrifice is called ***olah***. That means: that which goes up. Martin Luther (1483–1546) translated it as *Brandopfer* (burnt offering). *Ascent offering* or *whole offering* would be more apt. For the whole animal is

End of excerpt · continued in the book

9. Isaiah 53

A man reads and does not understand

A road in the desert. It leads down from Jerusalem to Gaza. A chariot rolls south. In it sits a high official from Ethiopia. The treasurer of his queen. He has been in Jerusalem to worship. Now he is on his way home. And he is reading. Aloud, as people read in those days. On his knees lies a scroll. The prophet Isaiah.

He has come to a passage that is dark to him. He was led as a sheep to slaughter, and as a lamb is mute before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation his judgment was taken away. But who will describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.[1]

A stranger is running alongside the chariot. His name is Philip. He listens. Then he asks: Do you understand what you are reading? The answer is honest. How could I, unless someone guides me? The stranger climbs up. And now the man in the chariot asks his question. Of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?

Philip begins with this passage of Scripture. And he tells him the good news of Jesus. A little later the man has the chariot stopped. There is water. He is baptized. And he goes on his way rejoicing.[2]

Did you notice? Luke does not tell us what Philip said. Not a word of it. We learn only this: the man understood who is meant. That was enough. He believed. He was baptized. He belonged to Jesus.[3]

And notice one small detail. The official did not read Isaiah in Hebrew. He read the Greek translation. Luke breaks off the quotation in the middle of verse 8. Some think he avoided the next sentence because it speaks of punishment. But in the Greek Bible there is nothing about punishment there at all. It says: Because of the lawlessnesses of my people he was led to death.[4] Here we already see: how you understand this song also depends on how you translate it.

How does this death save? The official can hardly have grasped that on that day. Perhaps he thought about it later. On the long journey home. After all, he had the scroll with him.

That is exactly where we stand. We know who is meant. We believe in him. We belong to him. And now we read the song itself. All of it, and

slowly. And we ask the official's question once more: Of whom does the prophet say this? And what happens to the one he speaks of? This chapter attempts an answer.

> "Of whom does the prophet say this?" The official's question is also the question of this chapter.

The text

We come to one of the most precious texts in the whole Bible. It should be read slowly. And it should be read in full. The song does not begin with chapter 53. It begins three verses earlier, in chapter 52, verse 13. Here it is in full, in three translations side by side. On the left is the reading version of the Offene Bibel, a present-day German translation from the Hebrew. Christians work on it together and put it on the web free of charge.[5] In the middle is the German rendering by Martin Buber (1878–1965) and Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929).[6] Both were Jews and did *not* see Jesus as the Messiah. So no one who reads their translation should think they had Jesus in mind. That is exactly what makes it valuable: it shows what the Hebrew text itself says. On the right is the Septuagint, the Greek translation from the time before Christ.[7] Jews made it for Jews. This is the version the official read in his chariot. And the apostles often quote from it.

Offene Bibel (reading version)	**Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig**	**Septuagint (Greek)**
52:13 Behold: My faithful one – He will be successful. Highly exalted. Lofty.	52:13 Now then, my servant will grasp it, will rise, be borne aloft, tower mightily.	52:13 Behold, my servant will be understanding and will be exalted and greatly glorified.
14 – So many people once froze In horror at you – So disfigured was his appearance Inhuman And his form So unlike a child of man:	14 Just as the many froze before him – so inhumanly marred was his appearance, unlike Adam's sons his form –,	14 As many will be appalled at you, so your appearance will be without honor before men and your glory before men,

End of excerpt · continued in the book

Part VII

How Jesus Himself Interprets His Death

10. How Jesus Himself Interprets His Death

What Jesus says about his death

Now we listen to the one this book is about. The apostles interpreted his dying. The church has thought about it for two thousand years. But Jesus himself spoke first. Nothing we have on our question weighs more than his own words. And he spoke about his death often. Not just once at the end, but again and again. In announcements, in images, at the Last Supper, on the cross, and after the resurrection. The following overview brings these words together. The summaries are brief and in my own words. You will do best to read the passages in your own Bible.

Two things stand out at once. First: Jesus almost always speaks of his death together with the resurrection. Second: he uses many different images for it. A must, a ransom, a covenant, a cup, a baptism, a shepherd, a grain of wheat. None of them explains everything. Together they show how Jesus understood his path.

The announcements and the divine must

Passage	What Jesus says	Image
Mark 8:31 (Matthew 16:21; Luke 9:22)	The Son of Man must suffer many things, be rejected and killed, and after three days rise again.	The divine must
Mark 9:12 (Matthew 17:12)	It is written that he is to suffer many things and be despised.	Scripture
Mark 9:31 (Matthew 17:22–23; Luke 9:44)	He is delivered into the hands of men.	Delivered up
Mark 10:33–34 (Matthew 20:18–19; Luke 18:31–33)	He is delivered to the Gentiles, mocked, scourged, and killed.	Delivered to the nations
Luke 17:25	First he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation.	The must
Matthew 26:2	In two days it is Passover; then the Son of Man is delivered up to be crucified.	Passover
Luke 13:32–33	On the third day I reach my goal. A prophet cannot perish outside Jerusalem.	A prophet's fate

Passage	What Jesus says	Image
Matthew 12:39–40 (Luke 11:29–30)	The sign of Jonah: three days in the heart of the earth.	Sign of Jonah
John 3:14	The Son of Man must be lifted up like the serpent in the wilderness.	Lifting up
John 8:28; 12:32–34	When I am lifted up, I will draw all to myself.	Lifting up

The image sayings

Passage	What Jesus says	Image
Mark 2:19–20	The bridegroom will be taken away.	Bridegroom
Luke 12:49–50	I have a baptism to be baptized with. How distressed I am until it is accomplished.	Baptism, fire
Mark 10:38–39 (Matthew 20:22–23)	Can you drink the cup that I drink?	Cup and baptism
Mark 10:45 (Matthew 20:28)	He has come to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.	Ransom
Mark 12:1–12	Last of all the lord of the vineyard sends his beloved son. The tenants kill him.	Parable of the vineyard
Matthew 23:29–39; Luke 13:34–35	Jerusalem, you kill the prophets.	A prophet's fate
Mark 14:8 (John 12:7)	She has anointed my body beforehand for burial.	Anointing
Mark 14:21 (Luke 22:22)	The Son of Man goes as it is written.	Scripture
Mark 14:27 (Matthew 26:31)	I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.	The stricken shepherd
Mark 8:34–35	Whoever wants to follow me, let him take up his cross.	Participation
John 2:19–21	Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.	Temple
John 6:51	The bread is my flesh, which I give for the life of the world.	Bread
John 10:11–18	The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. No one takes it from me; I lay it down of myself.	Shepherd
John 12:23–28	Unless the grain of wheat dies, it remains alone. If it dies, it bears much fruit.	Grain of wheat
John 12:31–33	Now judgment comes upon this world. Its ruler is cast out.	Judgment on the power
John 15:13	No one has greater love than he who lays down his life for his friends.	Love
John 16:32	You will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone; the Father is with me.	The Father is there

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11. Core Apostolic Texts

11.1 Died for our sins. 1 Corinthians 15:3

This chapter is devoted to the well-known sentences. There are six texts, all from the letters of the New Testament. They carry the doctrine of the cross. In them we will see whether they can also be read in some other way than as pure penal suffering. And we put the same question to each one: So how does his death work according to this sentence?

The oldest sentence

Paul writes to the Corinthians: For I delivered to you first of all what I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.[1]

Notice two words: *received* and *delivered*. These are fixed terms for teaching that is handed on. Paul did not invent this sentence. He took it over. Most scholars think the formula comes from the first years after Easter.[2] James Dunn says that this brings us to within two or three years of the beginning of Christianity.[3] Paul writes the letter around the year 55. He received the formula much earlier. So this is the oldest sentence we have about the meaning of Jesus' death. It is older than any Gospel.

That is why it is the title of this book.

What does "for" mean?

The Greek here has the little word ***hyper***. It can mean many things. Because of. For the benefit of. With regard to. In place of. The dispute hangs on this word.

With persons, *hyper* can mean: in place of. He died for us. But here there is no person, only a thing: our sins. And you do not die in place of a thing. You die because of it. Or in order to get rid of it.[4]

Jens Schröter puts it this way: The sentence joins the two. Our sins are the reason for his death. And their removal is its goal.[5] Because of our sins. And *against* our sins. Christian Wolff reads the verse in the same way. What fits best here is: on account of our sins. The sins are the reason for his death, and through it they are removed.[6]

Paul himself explains elsewhere what the goal is. Christ gave himself for our sins, that he might take us out of the present evil world.[7] The goal is liberation.

According to the Scriptures

Which Scriptures does Paul mean? He names none. But every reader at that time heard the Servant of God in the background. In the Greek Bible it says there: He was wounded because of our sins. And: Because of their sins he was given up.[8] Christian Wolff remarks: Only in this one place does the Old Testament speak of one dying for others. N. T. Wright sees further still. Paul is not thinking of individual proof texts. For him the Bible was like a story waiting for its ending.[9]

Hans Walter Wolff has shown that Paul almost never quotes Isaiah 53. And yet he presupposes it everywhere. Wolff has a fine sentence about this: For Paul, Isaiah 53 was "food, not a tool."[10] Paul does not need the chapter as an instrument for proving something. He lives on it as on daily bread.

Notice what is missing

The sentence says: He died for our sins. It does not say how that works. It says nothing of punishment. Nothing of wrath. Nothing of payment. It is a confessional formula. It presupposes an explanation, but it does not give one.

That holds in both directions. Whoever derives penal substitution from this sentence reads more into it than is there. So does anyone who concludes from it that the death achieved nothing at all. A critic of the doctrine of penal suffering puts it this way: The formula does not say *how* the death is of benefit.[11] Both mistakes occur in the commentaries. John Calvin (1509–1564) reads a great deal into it. For him the sentence says: Christ's death was "a penal suffering that made satisfaction for our reconciliation." Luise Schottroff goes the other way. For her, salvation is "the raising alone." Eckhard Schnabel thinks as Calvin does. And yet he concedes: In the brief formula the death on the cross is "of course not" explained.[12]

So how does his death work according to this sentence? It says only three things. Our sins are the reason. Their removal is the goal. And everything happens according to God's plan, according to the Scriptures. How the removal happens, the next texts will show. Adolf Schlatter (1852–1938) puts it in one sentence. Here "the judgment of God on man is proclaimed, and at the same time his will that seeks him and reconciles him to himself."[13] In the gospel!

End of excerpt · continued in the book

12. The Letter to the Hebrews

Priest, sacrifice, and gift in one person

No book of the New Testament speaks at such length about the death of Jesus as the Letter to the Hebrews. And none is as foreign to us, with its priests, blood, and curtain. One interpreter called the letter a riddle, another a stranger in the canon.[1] William Lane even says: Anyone who loves riddles will enjoy this letter.[2] Why is such a difficult book in the Bible? Donald Guthrie answers: Because it asks the most important question. How can we come to God?[3] And yet the letter is really a sermon. It is the oldest complete Christian sermon we have. It can be read aloud in a good half hour.[4] The letter has never let me go. Some time ago I retold the whole of it.[5] And I am convinced: Anyone who wants to understand how the death of Jesus works cannot get around this letter.

The priest offers himself

In the old worship there were three different things: the priest, the animal, and the gift for God. Hebrews puts all three into a single person.

He did this once for all when he offered up himself.[6] He entered into the sanctuary through his own blood.[7] Through the eternal Spirit he offered himself without spot to God.[8]

A pagan would have been surprised at this. How can the priest himself be the sacrifice?[9] And so would a reader from Israel. But that is exactly what is new. The priest does not offer something. He offers himself.

A body you have prepared for me

The letter puts a psalm into the mouth of the Son: Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you have prepared for me. Behold, I come to do your will, O God. And then: By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.[10]

Notice what the sacrifice is here. Not only the death, but the whole body, the whole life lived in obedience. The Son learned obedience from the things he suffered.[11] Ramsey Michaels puts it concisely: The obedience of Christ is not just better than sacrifice. It is his sacrifice.[12] Hebrews 5:7 already shows

this. There it says: He offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears. *To offer up* is a word for sacrifice. Lane concludes: His whole suffering was priestly prayer. And God heard it. That means: He accepted the sacrifice.[13] His sacrifice does not begin only at the cross. It begins with the sentence: Behold, I come.

That is why no animal could do what he did. In my retelling there is a short sentence about this: Sacrificed animals, after all, know nothing of sin.[14] An animal does not give itself. It is given. But he gave himself. Adolf Schlatter (1852–1938) puts it this way: The animal dies without wanting to. Christ steps in for us of his own free will. He comes before God as one of us. There he does for us what we could not do. And he comes to us as God's Son. Here he does to us what God himself wants to do. So he brings us to God, and he brings God to us.[15]

Victim of men, gift to God

English has two words for what German calls *Opfer*. A ***victim*** is someone who suffers an act of violence. A ***sacrifice*** is the gift one offers to God. German has only the one word. On the cross Jesus is both.

The Sanhedrin, Pilate, and the soldiers made him the victim of their violence. But Jesus accepted this death and gave it to God. So the act of violence becomes a gift. Michaels sees in this the special contribution of Hebrews. Perhaps the readers struggled with a Messiah who suffers. The letter does not dodge this. It places the suffering of Jesus at the center of its teaching about Christ. And yet it does not show him as a defenseless victim. It shows him as a priest who himself acts.[16] The Lutheran interpreter Carl Friedrich Keil (1807–1888) already saw this. His enemies killed Jesus. But his death became reconciliation because he gave himself up to death of his own free will. That is why his suffering was not only something endured but at the same time a deed.[17] In the introduction to my retelling I put it this way: Hebrews in particular shows how God accepts the violent death of Jesus and sanctifies it as his complete and voluntary self-giving.[18]

The phrase *through the eternal Spirit* is important. The Son gives himself in the power of the Spirit, and so it is the triune God who acts.

So how does the death work according to Hebrews?

For now, only the first point. What is effective is not the amount of pain. What is effective is the voluntary self-giving of a life that belonged wholly to God. Even John Calvin (1509–1564), who taught penal substitution, says so: "Even in death itself his willing obedience is the important thing, because a

End of excerpt · continued in the book

Part VIII

How the Cross Saves Us

13. How the Death Works

13.1 Died with him

This is the center of the book. We have read the New Testament, questioned the church across two thousand years, and considered the sacrifices, Isaiah 53, and the essential verses. Now we try to put the pieces together. How does the death of Jesus work? We will pursue this question in nine steps:

1. Died with him.
2. Borne: in his body, through the judgment.
3. The sentence fulfilled.
4. Life in the house of death.
5. Set free justly, not by force.
6. The gift that pleases God.
7. Why one is enough for all.
8. Why blood? Why death?
9. How it reaches me.

None of these steps explains everything, but together they make a picture. We have gone through a great deal of material. So as we put it together, we keep coming back to Bible passages and thoughts that were already discussed in the earlier chapters. Repetition cannot be avoided here, because we are building on that groundwork. Not everything is explained again here. Here I try to show how the pieces fit together.

One for all, therefore all

Paul writes an astonishing sentence: that one died for all, and therefore all died.[1]

Notice the word *therefore*. Paul does not say: One died, therefore the others no longer have to die. He says: *therefore* all died. His death is not only a death in our place. It is our death. We are taken up into it. But who are these all? Paul says right afterward: He died for all, so that those who live should no longer live for themselves. He died for all. But it becomes real for the one who is in him by faith. That is why the text goes on: If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.[2]

Paul says it again and again. Do you not know that we, as many as have been baptized into Christ Jesus, have been baptized into his death?[3] I am cru-

cified with Christ.[4] You have died, and your life is hidden with the Christ in God.[5]

A representative who includes us

How can that be? How can the death of one person be the death of many?

There are two ways to step in for someone else. The first shuts him out: One steps in so that the other does not have to. The other stays outside. The second includes him: The representative acts for those he represents. What he does, they do.[6] Even William Lane Craig, a defender of penal substitution, puts it this way: Christ did not simply die in my place. What my representative did, I did. Christ's death was representatively our death.[7] A critic of penal substitution, Michael Hardin, says almost the same: The one stands for all. Not instead of, but as representative.[8] Witt and Scandrett have studied the great interpretations of the cross, compared them, and set them in relation to one another. At the end of their chapter on penal substitution they bring everything down to one question: "The key question is whether Jesus Christ does his atoning work instead of us or on behalf of us." They themselves want to hold on to both: the substitution in which one stands in our place, and the participation in which we are in him. The first is exclusive substitution, the second inclusive substitution.[9]

In inclusive substitution no guilt is transferred from one person's account to another's. The sinner dies along with Christ, in him.[10]

Head and body

For this to be possible, the representative must belong to us. He must not be a stranger. And he is not. He is of Adam's race. A son of Adam, then. He is the son of Abraham and the son of David. He is Israel in one person, the Servant of whom God says: You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will glorify myself.[11] And Israel stands for the world. What does that mean? God chose Abraham so that in him all the families of the earth would be blessed.[12] Israel was not called for its own sake. It was to be the light of the nations.[13] What concerns all of humanity plays out in Israel on a small scale: God gives his word, man breaks it, and death follows. What began with Adam repeats itself in Israel. That is why Israel's story is the story of humanity in one people. N. T. Wright concludes from this: If the Messiah does what Israel was meant to do and could not, then he does it for the whole world.[14]

Paul calls him the head and us his body. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) drew the conclusion: Head and members are, as it were, one person.[15] What happens to the head happens to the body. Admittedly, Paul uses the picture

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14. Cross, Resurrection, Ascension: One Work

If Christ is not raised, you are still in your sins

Many books about the cross end on Good Friday. The resurrection then comes as an appendix, as proof that everything went well, as a receipt. This chapter aims to show that cross, resurrection, and ascension are one single work. None of them works alone. Some of what is said here has already been touched on, in chapter 12 on the Letter to the Hebrews and in chapter 13 on the death of Jesus. That cannot be avoided, for it is one single work, and here we only see it from another side. Where something is repeated, that is exactly how the whole is meant to come into view.

In my book about Jesus the King I wrote: Every step, the whole life of the King, was necessary for salvation. Otherwise he would only have had to appear for the cross.[1] That is also true of what came after the cross.

An astonishing sentence

Paul writes to the Corinthians: But if Christ is not raised, your faith is vain. You are still in your sins.[2]

That is astonishing. We would have expected: If Christ did not die for your sins, you are still in your sins. But Paul ties forgiveness to Easter. Without the raising, the cross too would have no effect.

Cynthia Westfall writes that she is still looking for the Bible verse that says the atonement was completed in one single act on the cross. What Paul says instead is this sentence.[3]

Without Easter, one more murder

Imagine there had been no Easter morning. What would the cross be then? It would have been a judicial murder in the long history of humankind, a righteous man who failed. Martin Benz puts it in a few words: A cross without resurrection is one more murder.[4] The Swedish bishop Gustaf Aulén (1879–1977) put it this way: "Without the resurrection the cross would simply be the cross of a martyr. In the light of the resurrection it is the sign of victory." And he adds: "The living Lord bears the marks of the cross."[5]

More than that. According to the law, a hanged man was cursed by God.[6] Without Easter the cross would have been the proof that Jesus was not the Messiah. Only because God raised the crucified one could Paul say: He became a curse for us.[7] The disciples on the road to Emmaus had lived through exactly that. They said: But we were hoping that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel.[8]

The No of men, the Yes of God

That is why the apostles always preach both: You killed him, but God raised him.[9] The cross is the cruelly hard No of men. The raising is the emphatic Yes of God.[10]

Edmund Schlink shows that three are acting at the cross at once. Men gave Jesus up. Through the shared No of Jews and Gentiles, he says, Jesus was brought to the cross. God gave him up, precisely through these men. And the Son gave himself up, of his own free will. All three work in and through one another. In this, says Schlink, lies the mystery of Jesus' dying.[11]

God the Father is not silent at the death of the righteous one. He was silent in Gethsemane. He was silent when Jesus hung on the cross. But then the Father spoke and put forth all his divine power and brought Jesus back to life. It was the glory of the Father that raised him, because it could not be silent when death ruled over him.[12]

Sin stayed in the grave

What does this mean for the question of this book? We have said: He carried our sin into his death and left it there. But it has only been left there once he comes out again without it. If he had stayed in the grave, the bearer would have stayed in death together with the burden. Then we would still be in our sins.

He took on our death and took our sins away from us and carried them into the grave himself.[13]

In the raising it is sealed that the question of guilt, the problem of our sins, is settled once for all. In our favor.[14]

Some defenders of penal substitution see in the resurrection above all a proof: It proves, they say, that the sacrifice has been accepted.[15] That is not wrong, but Paul says more: Without Easter, sin would not be gone.

> Without Easter we would still be in our sins. The guilt stayed in the grave, but he did not.

End of excerpt · continued in the book

15. What Did Not Happen at the Cross

Back to the question from the beginning

One of the questions at the beginning of this book was this: Was the Father angry with the Son at the cross? Did he pour out his wrath on him? It is not the only question in this book, but it is an important one. We set it aside for a long time, because another question had to be settled first: How does the death of Jesus work? Now we can try to answer the question from the beginning as well. In doing so I take up some things that already came up in chapter 4, in chapter 13, and in the appendix. Here it is all brought together, so that the answer can be seen at a glance.

Keeping three statements apart

First we have to be precise. When people say that Christ bore our punishment, they mean different things. Three statements have to be kept apart.[1]

> Statement A: Christ bore our punishment, namely death. This is how the early church spoke.
>
> Statement B: Christ stood under God's wrath against sin. This is how many Reformers spoke.
>
> Statement C: The Father was angry with the Son and poured out his wrath on him. This is how it was preached, above all from the seventeenth to the twentieth century.

This chapter is directed against statement C. Whoever refutes statement C has not thereby refuted A and B. Statement A still stands in part. Statement B can be taken up in a changed form: Christ stood where the judgment on sin falls.

Eight clarifications

What did not happen at the cross? I answer with eight clarifications.

1. No wrath of the Father against the Son. Jesus says: Therefore the Father loves me, because I lay down my life.[2] Nowhere do we read that the Father was angry with the Son.

2. No rift in God. Father, Son, and Spirit act together at the cross. God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself.[3] Whoever teaches a rift in the Trinity says more than the Bible says.

3. No torment of hell. Scripture names death as the limit. Christ died for our sins.[4] Nowhere does it say that in three hours he suffered what all the lost would have had to suffer forever.

4. No imputed guilt. He did not become the perpetrator. As our head he bore what we had done. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) said long ago: Each one is punished only for his own sin.[5]

5. No transaction. God does not pay God. Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 329–390) says: The Father neither asked for the blood nor demanded it.[6]

6. No lightning rod. Christ is not like a lightning rod that the lightning strikes so that it spares us. He is our representative and our head. In him we died too.[7]

7. Nothing automatic. The work is done for all, but it takes effect in union with him, through faith.[8]

8. No God who first has to be won over. God gave the Son because he loved the world.[9] The cross did not make God gracious. It is the shape his grace takes. This is also true of a milder form of the same thought. Some say: God must first punish sin before he can forgive. That sounds different, but at its core it means the same. Then, too, God must first be brought to be gracious.[10]

Not only critics say this

It is worth noting that almost every one of these clarifications comes from defenders of penal substitution themselves. Peter Taylor Forsyth (1848–1921) drew up his own list of denials: no lightning rod, no conflict among God's attributes, no appeasement, no equivalent suffering, no bookkeeping that balances guilt against suffering, no punished Son.[11] John Stott writes: At the cross there are two actors, not three. Christ is neither whipping boy nor lightning rod.[12] And even the authors of "Pierced for Our Transgressions," the most important defense of penal substitution, reject five of these points.[13]

So the real dispute comes down to only a few points: the Father's wrath against the Son, the torment of hell, and imputed guilt.

In my text of January 2024 I wrote: For me it is a fact that God's wrath was not poured out on him on the cross in the three hours of darkness.[14] I stand by that.

End of excerpt · continued in the book

16. How the Cross Saves: An Approach

One event, five sides

At this point I want to sum up what all of this comes to for me. In one sentence: God gives the Son, who represents Israel and humanity, over to the consequences of our sin. Sin does to him what it is, and it comes to its end because he does not repay. And in raising him God reverses the verdict and accepts the gift of the Son. This one event can be looked at from five sides. They do not follow one another like steps. They belong together like the parts of a circle. Much of this you already know from the earlier chapters. Here it is once more, briefly, in one place.

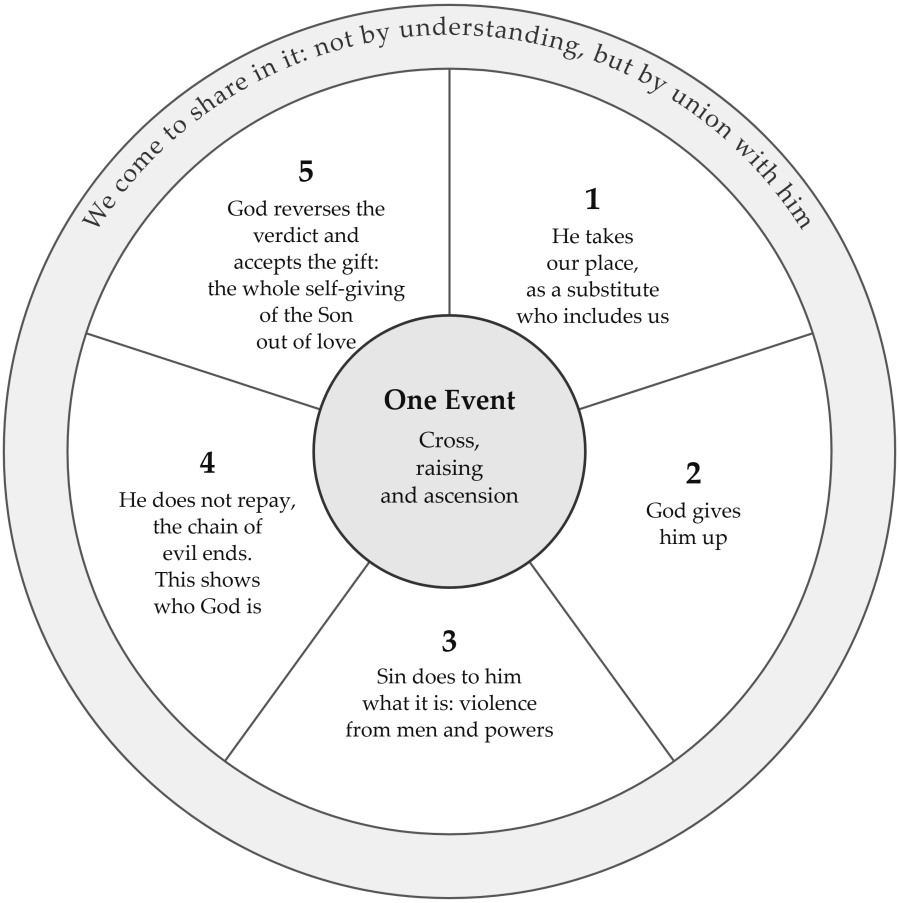


Figure: One event, five sides

First: He takes our place, as our substitute. Jesus dies as the One who represents the many. In the Servant of God, Isaiah sees Israel in a single figure, and Paul sees in Christ the new Adam. But he is not a replacement who shuts us out. A replacement player runs onto the field for someone else, and the other one sits out on the bench. It is not like that at the cross. David is a better picture. When he went out against Goliath, he did not fight in place of a people that looked on. He fought for all Israel, and his victory was the victory of all. Had he fallen, all would have ended up in bondage.[1] Jesus is a substitute who includes us: What happens to him happens to us with him, because he carries us in himself. Two theologians of our day, William Witt and Joel Scandrett, see this as the key question of every doctrine of the cross. They ask "whether Jesus Christ does his atoning work instead of us or on be-

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Part IX

The Message

17. The Good News for People Today

Why a bloody death?

At the end of this long road one task remains. How do we talk with people today about the cross? This study edition is meant to help us find words for that. For many people ask: Why did Jesus have to die? And why like this? Why blood?

It is an honest question, and I have asked it myself: Is there no way without a bloody sacrifice? Above all without the terrible death of Jesus on the cross?[1]

People who did not grow up in the church no longer understand many of our words: *sin*, *atonement*, *sacrifice*, *blood*. And often they no longer know what a cross was. It was the most shameful death the ancient world knew. It was meant not only to kill a man but also to blot out his name.[2]

It is striking how briefly the Gospels tell of it. They say little more than: They crucified him.[3] They describe no agony and measure no pain. Many pictures and films dwell at length on the blood. The evangelists do not. What counts for them is not the extent of the suffering, but who is dying there and for what.

The answer in five steps

After all we have considered in this book, the answer can be given in five steps. Much of this you already know from the earlier chapters. Here I say it the way I would say it to someone who has not read this book.

First: Jesus takes our sins upon himself. Not only individual deeds, but sin itself, the power that holds us captive. He bears them in his body.[4]

Second: He does this as our representative, just as the Servant in Isaiah 53 represents the people of Israel. And Israel stands for all humanity. He is one of us, and that is why he can step in for us.[5]

Third: He undergoes the judgment of God through the sufferings that people inflict on him. God gives him up and withdraws his protecting hand, and people do with him what they want. And in this the judgment on sin takes place. But the Father is not angry with the Son.[6]

Fourth: He takes our sin away, into his death. There it stays, but he comes back on the third day without it. The guilt stayed in the grave; he did not.[7]

Fifth: Because he committed no sin, he can take it upon himself. A sinner cannot bear the sin of another, for he has enough to bear with his own. Only the pure one can carry away what is impure.[8]

Anyone who wants to read this in more detail will find these steps in the small book "Warum musste Jesus sterben?" [Why Did Jesus Have to Die?] and in chapters 13, 14, and 16 of this book.

Why blood?

And why blood, of all things? Because in the Bible blood stands for life. The soul of the flesh is in the blood.[9] Whoever sheds his blood gives his life.

That is why blood. Not because God wants to see blood. But because guilt costs a life. And because God decided that it should be his own.[10]

Notice the direction. It is not we who bring God blood so that he will be gracious. God gives his own life so that we may live. It should be clear to us that we needed a sacrifice. Not God. We had a problem. Not God.[11] And: Bloodshed and death belong to the nature of sacrifice, but suffering and cruelty do not.[12]

The cruelty at the cross came from human beings, not from God. God took our evil deed and made it into a gift.

The question about the blood is old. Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 329–390) asked as early as the fourth century: Why should the blood of the Son delight the Father? After all, God "would not receive even Isaac, when he was being offered by his father." Rather, he "changed the sacrifice, putting a ram in the place of the human victim."[13]

Did it have to be this way?

The question remains: Was there no other way? Jesus himself asked this in Gethsemane. My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.[14] The cup did not pass.

The words in the garden answer our question. It was not possible to fulfill God's saving will without the cross and the death of Jesus.[15] Perhaps God could have forgiven without it. He often did. But God wanted more than forgiveness; he wanted us completely. And the only way we get rid of our old life is through death.[16]

End of excerpt · continued in the book

18. Further Individual Topics and Questions

In this appendix I take up topics and questions that the main part of the book only touched on. Each of the following pieces stands on its own. In the main part a sentence points to each one: More on this in the excursus. So you can read the pieces one at a time, at the point where you happen to be in the book. But you can also read the appendix as a whole. Then you will come across some thoughts again. That is deliberate. Here they are supported in a little more detail, with further voices and evidence.

1. Tetelestai: "It Is Finished" (John 19:30)

On the cross Jesus says: It is finished. In Greek that is a single word, ***tetelestai***.[1] It comes from *teleō*, and *telos* is contained in that. The word *telos* means the goal or the end. So *tetelestai* means: It has been brought to its goal. The form also says: It is done and stays done.

John even uses the word twice. First he tells us: Jesus knew that all things were now finished. This happened so that the Scripture might be fulfilled. Then Jesus speaks the word himself.[2] With that the mission is fulfilled, and so is the Scripture. Leo the Great (c. 400–461) and Martin Luther (1483–1546) already read it this way.

One often hears that the word was written on receipts and meant something like *paid*. Gary Manning has examined the roughly 315 receipts that survive. Almost all of them bear only the abbreviation *tetel*. Where the word is written out, it is a different verb. It reads *tetelōnētai*, paid as customs duty. For *tetelestai*, the meaning *paid* is not attested in any ancient source.[3] *Teleō* means to pay only when a word like *tax* goes with it.[4]

In the New Testament *teleō* belongs to the way of Jesus. He announces: All things that are written will be accomplished.[5] On the last evening he quotes Isaiah 53. Then he says: The things concerning me also have their completion.[6] On the cross the moment has come: The mission on earth is fulfilled. But the whole work reaches further than Golgotha. It also includes the resurrection and the ministry in heaven.[7]

So the last word on the cross is not a cashier's stamp. It is the cry of the one who has completed his way, all the way into death. Anyone who wants to understand the cross does best to read it from its goal. Here what the Scripture announced reaches its goal. And Jesus took it upon himself to the end.

> "It is finished" means that something has been brought to its goal. It was never written on a receipt.

2. Abraham and the Binding of Isaac (Genesis 22)

On the way to Moriah Isaac asks: My father, but where is the sheep for a burnt offering? Abraham answers: God will provide himself with the sheep for a burnt offering, my son.[8] In the end a ram dies in Isaac's place, but the question about the sacrificial lamb stays open. Christians hear the answer from John the Baptist. He says of Jesus: Behold, the Lamb of God.[9]

In Mark the story echoes softly: At the baptism the heavens are torn open. A voice says: You are my beloved Son. That is also what the Greek Bible calls Isaac. In Gethsemane Jesus prays: Abba, Father. At his death the curtain in the temple is torn. Mark uses the same word for it as at the baptism.[10] That is an interpretation, not a proof. One difference remains in any case. On Moriah a voice calls a halt. On Golgotha none does.

Three times the New Testament takes up the story explicitly. Paul writes that God did not spare his own Son. That is almost word for word the wording of Genesis 22.[11] The Letter to the Hebrews says that Abraham counted on a raising from the dead.[12] James, by contrast, sees in the binding of Isaac an example. It shows him the faith that acts.[13]

Jews call the story the *Akedah*, the binding. For them it shows above all the obedience of Abraham. Isaac here stands for Israel itself. Later Isaac was portrayed as a willing martyr. Whether that happened before or after the New Testament is disputed.[14]

Irenaeus (c. 135–c. 200) already saw Christ in Isaac, not in the ram. Isaac carries the wood as Christ carries his cross.[15] Basilides taught at that time that someone else had been crucified in Jesus' place. Irenaeus rejects that. The Son himself walks the path.[16]

Both readings show Father and Son on a shared path. Twice it says: And they went both of them together.[17] What Abraham did not have to do in the end, God did. He gave up his own Son. Seen from Moriah, the cross appears

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