

## “Friday; How Should We Think About Jesus’ Death?”

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### Fifth in a Series “The Final Week”

Source Material: *The Last Week; What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus’ Final Days in Jerusalem*,  
Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan; Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*.

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Script: Mark 15:33-41; Romans 6:3-11

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The story is told of a man accused of committing a bank robbery. Evidence was compiled against him, trial conducted, and then a long deliberation by the jury concerning his guilt. Finally the verdict was in. All filed into the courtroom where the jury foreperson read the charge and their finding that he was “Not guilty.”

The confused defendant then stood up to ask the judge a question: “Does that mean that I can keep the money?”

I have two older sisters who are identical twins. When they were young one of them misbehaved and, as it happened in those days, punishment was issued by my father (when he got home) with a spanking. The spanking was finished. Later it was discovered that the *other* twin was actually the guilty one and so another punishing was in order. When the time came to issue the spanking my father couldn’t do it. He then realized that spanking had more to do with his anger than any correction, and never spanked his children again.

In each of these stories there was a stunning twist at the end which revealed something important to the whole story. Today we think about the Friday of Jesus’ death—the stunning end that flashes a whole new light upon the rest of the story.

Ever since the events on that Friday afternoon when Jesus was killed his followers have tried to make sense of it. A messiah who ends his life in a humiliating death as an insurgent doesn’t make sense—his life was a failure (in their categories) and so they really wrestled with what it meant, especially its end. The church has struggled ever since to make sense of it, and has come up with a few options, but nothing official, nothing final.

But if you attend any Good Friday liturgy, you walk away with the impression that there’s only one way to see his death. I remember attending those ecumenical services as a child and youth and being both gripped by the experience of pondering Jesus’ death and at the same time bothered by the hymns especially. It wasn’t just the glorification of suffering and death that they slipped into sometimes, but something darker:

There is a fountain filled with blood  
drawn from Emmanuel's veins;  
and sinners plunged beneath that flood  
lose all their guilty stains... (*UMH No. 622 vs. 1*)

Part of me loves the deep sorrow and minor key tunes of these old passion hymns. A clear message emerges in them though:

Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon thee?

Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee!  
 'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee;  
 I crucified thee. (*UMH No. 289 vs. 2*)

And again:

Alas! and did my Savior bleed,  
 and did my Sovereign die!  
 Would he devote that sacred head  
 for sinners such as I?

Was it for crimes that I have done,  
 he groaned upon the tree?  
 Amazing pity! Grace unknown!  
 And love beyond degree! (*UMH No. 294 vs. 1&2*)

The clear message in these hymns and liturgies is that Jesus' death was the result of *my* sinfulness...“Jesus died for my sins.” This message is so pervasive now in our thinking that we assume it is the only meaning to Jesus' death and that it is the “real” reason, or the “official” meaning. This way of seeing Jesus' death is part of a larger package that includes the sense, as Marcus Borg puts it,

“that all of us are sinners...that sin is a crime against God. Disobedience requires punishment, or else it is not taken seriously...In order for God to forgive sins, a substitutionary sacrifice must be offered. But it would not be adequate for an ordinary human being to be the sacrifice, for such a person would be a sinner and would only be dying for his or her own sins. Thus the sacrifice must not be a sinner, but a perfect human being. Only Jesus, who was not only human but also the Son of God, was perfect, spotless, and without blemish. Thus he is the sacrifice, and Good Friday is the day that makes our forgiveness possible.”<sup>i</sup>

This legal and priestly metaphor is only one of the ways the New Testament has of speaking of our relationship with God. This package goes far beyond what the New Testament actually says, and especially the Gospel of Mark (the earliest of the Gospels). Even before the Gospels were written, Paul had developed a number of ways to see Jesus' death— Substitutionary sacrifice only being one of them. In fact, the notion that Jesus died for our sins— to atone for our sinfulness wasn't the dominate theory for the first 1,000 years of Christianity. I've always been bothered by this picture of an angry God demanding a sacrifice in order to have a unity with humanity. It makes the Christian faith static, passive— Christ has done everything and I'm don't have to do any transformative work in my soul or world at all. So when I learned that there were other Christian ways of viewing his death, I got excited.

A couple of years ago, I had the privilege of hearing a lecture in Chicago by a scholar whose name is Rita Nakashima Brock. She told of researching Christian art-work in Western Christianity all over Europe and making a remarkable discovery. She noticed that from the time of Jesus' death in roughly 33 A.D. to the year 961 A.D. **there are no depictions of Jesus dead.** For the first thousand years of Christianity, Jesus was usually posed as a shepherd, a teacher, or as the risen Christ, triumphant over death and ruler of the universe (the Pantocrator) or risen triumphant over the cross.

She also noted in the Communion liturgies at that time that the focus of the first thousand years of Christian Communion was as a feast *with* the risen Christ. After that, we see a noticed a decided shift to a theology of sacrifice— the sense that Christ is sacrificed every time in the sacrament of Communion.

What happened about a thousand years ago to cause this shift from Christ triumphant over the cross and death and present at table in communion with the faithful to Christ dead, and sacrificed?

The short answer is Charlemagne and Anselm of Canterbury. Anselm developed his atonement theory in 1097 and before that Charlemagne needed to solidify his imperial power hold on the faithful & did so by emphasizing sin, guilt, and sacrifice. The focus shifted from this world, to a heavenly afterlife.

For the first thousand years of Christianity the death of Jesus was seen as his conquering over the forces of evil, sin, and death that hold us bondage. “Christos Victor”<sup>ii</sup> it was called. In this lens, Christ overcame those things that hold us in bondage & prevent full, abundant life. He made the breakthrough, we can follow him into a new kind of life. It is really based upon the story of the Exodus. Christ is the first born, we are the second born. He is the “pioneer and perfecter” of our faith, as Hebrews puts it.

The other lens the early church saw the death of Christ through was the experience of Exile; off in a foreign land, longing for our true home and selves. Jesus’ death then is seen as being a “revelation” of the deep love of God for us, and the cross as symbolic of the inner spiritual process that brings us into full communion with God (back home from Exile). Paul wrote about this in these terms:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? <sup>4</sup>Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

<sup>5</sup> For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. (Romans 6:3-5).

This seems to be what Jesus is meaning when he invites us to follow him:

‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>35</sup>For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. (Mark 8:34b-35).

This is not Jesus’ death as substitution or sacrifice, but as *participation with and in* Jesus. As we have walked through Jesus’ last week in this Lenten season we’ve seen this consistent invitation to us— to join Christ in his life and death as a gateway to the Kingdom of God he was willing to die to proclaim. In Christ we die to sin, to our selfish ways, to death itself... and rise to new life in Christ.

The usual “package” we’ve been sold ever since Anselm is a picture of God as a human judge writ large, who demands punishment for sin in some legal system that is somehow imposed upon creation, seemingly outside of God’s control. My sense of Jesus’ picture of God is quite different. Jesus spoke of, and taught us to pray to God as *Abba*, “Papa.” In his teachings, the God-figure is the Prodigal Son’s father, who runs to welcome home the son even before he can choke out his rehearsed speech. So Jesus didn’t go with a legal metaphor to speak about our relationship with God, but a familial one; parent-child. Would a loving parent demand their child’s death to satisfy some extraneous requirement? Was it God’s will that Jesus die? I don’t think so. Was it inevitable? Knowing Jesus commitment to the nonviolent process of the Kingdom of God... Yes, it was inevitable.

Michael Talbot, in his book *Beyond the Quantum*, describes a phenomenon known as the “M” effect. Simply stated, it is a strange process whereby when **“a single member of a species achieves a new awareness or adaptation, this new awareness becomes readily available to other members of the species even though they have no direct contact with the first individual to achieve it.”**<sup>iii</sup> This effect exists on many levels of life, from the microscopic to the human. When one member grows, that learning/achievement is somehow available to the rest. When one breakthrough in understanding comes, a whole explosion of growth becomes available to the whole of creation. We think the internet is something new...yet nature has been sharing files for a long time it seems.

Jesus brought a whole new life with him that has since brought new life to countless millions: new ways of seeing ourselves as God’s Children; new ways of understanding God; new ways of relating to others—

with love, even of enemies— with grace, not laws and divisions, with openness and compassion, not rules & barriers. My sense is that Jesus’ whole life and his cross experience had this “M” effect— bringing into possibility worldwide the holy kind of life he lived.

Borrowing the words of Frederick Buechner, “he died for us, died because, in some way that he did not try to explain, his death would make all the difference, for everybody, until the end of time.”

The question for us is, *does it?* Does it make all the difference for you? Does it empower you to live a life more like **his** kind of life? More *loving, forgiving, braver*  *truer*, with more *beauty* and *grace*?

I believe that by his dying he released into the world an entirely new kind of life, **his kind of life**, that has flowed down through the tragic centuries like water through a dry land, making alive and whole all who will only kneel to drink. And that is the only reason why it is not blasphemy to speak of the Friday of his unspeakable death as Good Friday.”<sup>iv</sup>

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<sup>i</sup>Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week; What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus’ Final Days in Jerusalem*, pp. 138-139.

<sup>ii</sup> Gustaf Aulen, *Christos Victor*, translated by A.G. Hebert. 1939

<sup>iii</sup> Quoted from John A. Sanford, *Mystical Christianity; A Psychological Commentary on the Gospel of John*.

<sup>iv</sup> Frederick Buechner, *The Hungering Dark*, pp. 109-110.