

NEW YORK TIMES Bestseller

TIMOTHY
KELLER

Belief in an Age of Skepticism

The Reason
for God

With a New Preface



TWELVE

THE (TRUE) STORY OF THE CROSS

I could accept Jesus as a martyr, and embodiment of sacrifice, and a divine teacher. His death on the cross was a great example to the world, but that there was anything like a mysterious or miraculous virtue in it, my heart could not accept.

—Gandhi, *An Autobiography*

I would catch a glimpse of the cross—and suddenly my heart would stand still. In an instinctive, intuitive way I understood that something more important, more tumultuous, more passionate, was at issue than our good causes, however noble they might be.... I should have worn it.... It should have been my uniform, my language, my life. I shall have no excuse; I can't say I didn't know. I knew from the beginning, and turned away.

—Malcolm Muggeridge, *Jesus Rediscovered*

THE primary symbol of Christianity has always been the cross. The death of Jesus for our sins is at the heart of the gospel, the good news. Increasingly, however, what the Christian church has considered good news is considered by the rest of our culture to be bad news.

In the Christian account, Jesus dies so that God can forgive sins. For many, that seems ludicrous or even sinister. “Why would Jesus *have* to die?” is a question that

I have heard from people in New York far more often than “Does God exist?” “Why couldn’t God just forgive us?” they ask. “The Christian God sounds like the vengeful gods of primitive times who needed to be appeased by human sacrifice.” Why can’t God just accept everyone or at least those who are sorry for their wrongdoings? While the Christian doctrine of the cross confuses some people, it alarms others. Some liberal Protestant theologians reject the doctrine of the cross altogether because it looks to them like “divine child abuse.”

Why, then, don’t we just leave the Cross out? Why not focus on the life of Jesus and his teachings rather than on his death? Why did Jesus have to die?

The First Reason: Real Forgiveness Is Costly Suffering

Let’s begin with a purely economic example. Imagine that someone borrows your car, and as he backs it out of the driveway he strikes a gate, knocking it down along with part of a wall. Your property insurance doesn’t cover the gate and garden wall. What can you do? There are essentially two options. The first is to demand that he pay for the damages. The second is to refuse to let him pay anything. There may also be middle-of-the-road solutions in which you both share the payment. Notice that in every option the cost of the damage must be borne by *someone*. Either you or he absorbs the cost for the deed, but the debt does not somehow vanish into thin air. Forgiveness, in this illustration, means bearing the cost for his misdeed yourself.

Most of the wrongs done to us cannot be assessed in purely economic terms. Someone may have robbed you of some happiness, reputation, opportunity, or certain aspects of your freedom. No price tag can be put on such things, yet we still have a sense of violated justice that does not go away when the other person says, “I’m really sorry.” When we are seriously wronged we have an indelible sense that the perpetrators have incurred a debt that must be dealt with. Once you have been wronged and you realize there is a just debt that can’t simply be dismissed—there are only two things to do.

The first option is to seek ways to make the perpetrators suffer for what they have done. You can withhold relationship and actively initiate or passively wish for some kind of pain in their lives commensurate to what you experienced. There are many ways to do this. You can viciously confront them, saying things that hurt. You can go around to others to tarnish their reputation. If the perpetrators suffer, you may begin to feel a certain satisfaction, feeling that they are now paying off their debt.

There are some serious problems with this option, however. You may become harder and colder, more self-pitying, and therefore more self-absorbed. If the wrongdoer was a person of wealth or authority you may instinctively dislike and resist that sort of person for the rest of your life. If it was a person of the opposite sex or another race you might become permanently cynical and prejudiced against whole classes of people. In addition, the perpetrator and his friends and family often feel they have the right to respond to your payback in kind. Cycles of reaction and retaliation can go on for years. Evil has been done to you—yes. But when you try to get payment through revenge the evil does not disappear. Instead it spreads, and it spreads most tragically of all into you and your own character.

There is another option, however. You can forgive. Forgiveness means refusing to make them pay for what they did. However, to refrain from lashing out at someone when you want to do so with all your being is *agony*. It is a form of suffering. You not only suffer the original loss of happiness, reputation, and opportunity, but now you forgo the consolation of inflicting the same on them. You are absorbing the debt, taking the cost of it completely on yourself instead of taking it out of the other person. It hurts terribly. Many people would say it feels like a kind of death.

Yes, but it is a death that leads to resurrection instead of the lifelong living death of bitterness and cynicism. As a pastor I have counseled many people about forgiveness, and I have found that if they do this—if they simply refuse to take vengeance on the wrongdoer in action and even in their inner fantasies—the anger slowly begins to subside. You are not giving it any fuel and so the resentment burns lower

and lower. C. S. Lewis wrote in one of his *Letters to Malcolm* that “last week, while at prayer, I suddenly discovered—or felt as if I did—that I had really forgiven someone I had been trying to forgive for over thirty years. Trying, and praying that I might.”¹ I remember once counseling a sixteen-year-old girl about the anger she felt toward her father. We weren’t getting anywhere until I said to her, “Your father has defeated you, as long as you hate him. You will stay trapped in your anger unless you forgive him thoroughly from the heart and begin to love him.” Something thawed in her when she realized that. She went through the suffering of costly forgiveness, which at first always feels far worse than bitterness, into eventual freedom. Forgiveness must be granted before it can be felt, but it does come eventually. It leads to a new peace, a resurrection. It is the only way to stop the spread of the evil.

When I counsel forgiveness to people who have been harmed, they often ask about the wrongdoers, “Shouldn’t they be held accountable?” I usually respond, “Yes, but only if you forgive them.” There are many good reasons that we should want to confront wrongdoers. Wrongdoers have inflicted damage and, as in the example of the gate I presented earlier, it costs something to fix the damage. We should confront wrongdoers—to wake them up to their real character, to move them to repair their relationships, or to at least constrain them and protect others from being harmed by them in the future. Notice, however, that all those reasons for confrontation are reasons of love. The best way to love them and the other potential victims around them is to confront them in the hope that they will repent, change, and make things right.

The desire for vengeance, however, is motivated not by goodwill but by ill will. You may say, “I just want to hold them accountable,” but your real motivation may be simply to see them hurt. If you are not confronting them for their sake or for society’s sake but for your own sake, just for payback, the chance of the wrongdoer ever coming to repentance is virtually nil. In such a case you, the confronter, will overreach, seeking not justice but revenge, not their change but their pain. Your demands will be excessive and your attitude abusive. He or she will rightly see the confrontation as intended simply to cause hurt. A cycle of retaliation will begin.

Only if you first seek inner forgiveness will your confrontation be temperate, wise, and gracious. Only when you have lost the need to see the other person hurt will you have any chance of actually bringing about change, reconciliation, and healing. You have to submit to the costly suffering and death of forgiveness if there is going to be any resurrection.

No one embodied the costliness of forgiveness any better than Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose story I recounted in Chapter 4.² After Bonhoeffer returned to Germany to resist Hitler, he wrote in *The Cost of Discipleship* (1937) that true forgiveness is always a form of suffering.

*My brother's burden which I must bear is not only his outward lot, his natural characteristics and gifts, but quite literally his sin. And the only way to bear that sin is by forgiving it in the power of the cross of Christ in which I now share.... Forgiveness is the Christlike suffering which it is the Christian's duty to bear.*³

In April 1943 Bonhoeffer was arrested and imprisoned. He was eventually moved to Flossenburg concentration camp and executed just before the end of World War II.

How did Bonhoeffer live out his own words? His forgiveness was costly suffering, because it actually confronted the hurt and evil before him. His forgiveness was not what he called (in *The Cost of Discipleship*) “cheap grace.” He did not ignore or excuse sin. He resisted it head on, even though it cost him everything. His forgiveness was also costly because he refused to hate. He passed through the agonizing process required to love your enemies, so his resistance to their evildoing was measured and courageous, not venomous and cruel. The startling evidence for this is found in the letters and papers that Bonhoeffer wrote while in prison. The lack of bitterness was remarkable.

Please don't ever get anxious or worried about me, but don't forget to pray for me—I'm sure you don't. I am so sure of God's guiding hand that I hope I shall always be kept in that certainty. You must never doubt that I'm traveling with gratitude and cheerfulness along the road where I'm being led. My past life is brim-full of God's goodness and my sins are covered by the forgiving love of Christ crucified....⁴

Here we see Bonhoeffer simply living out what Jesus had done for him. Jesus bore his sins, bearing the cost of them. Now Bonhoeffer is free to do the same for others. Bonhoeffer uses divine forgiveness to help him understand human forgiveness. But let's now use Bonhoeffer's marvelous example of human forgiveness to understand the divine.

The Forgiveness of God

“Why did Jesus have to die? Couldn't God just forgive us?” This is what many ask, but now we can see that no one “just” forgives, if the evil is serious. Forgiveness means bearing the cost instead of making the wrongdoer do it, so you can reach out in love to seek your enemy's renewal and change. Forgiveness means absorbing the debt of the sin yourself. Everyone who forgives great evil goes through a death into resurrection, and experiences nails, blood, sweat, and tears.

Should it surprise us, then, that when God determined to forgive us rather than punish us for all the ways we have wronged him and one another, that he went to the Cross in the person of Jesus Christ and died there? As Bonhoeffer says, everyone who forgives someone bears the other's sins. On the Cross we see God doing visibly and cosmically what every human being must do to forgive someone, though on an infinitely greater scale. I would argue, of course, that human forgiveness works

this way because we unavoidably reflect the image of our Creator. That is why we should not be surprised that if we sense that the only way to triumph over evil is to go through the suffering of forgiveness, that this would be far more true of God, whose just passion to defeat evil and loving desire to forgive others are both infinitely greater than ours.

It is crucial at this point to remember that the Christian faith has always understood that Jesus Christ is God.⁵ God did not, then, inflict pain on someone else, but rather on the Cross absorbed the pain, violence, and evil of the world into himself. Therefore the God of the Bible is not like the primitive deities who demanded our blood for their wrath to be appeased. Rather, this is a God who becomes human and offers his own lifeblood in order to honor moral justice and merciful love so that someday he can destroy all evil without destroying us.

Therefore the Cross is not simply a lovely example of sacrificial love. Throwing your life away needlessly is not admirable—it is wrong.⁶ Jesus's death was only a good example if it was more than an example, if it was something absolutely necessary to rescue us. And it was. Why did Jesus *have* to die in order to forgive us? There was a debt to be paid—God himself paid it. There was a penalty to be born—God himself bore it. Forgiveness is always a form of costly suffering.

We have seen how human forgiveness and its costliness sheds light on divine forgiveness. However, it is divine forgiveness that is the ultimate ground and resource for the human. Bonhoeffer repeatedly attested to this, claiming that it was Jesus's forgiveness of him on the Cross that gave him such a security in God's love that he could live a life of sacrificial service to others.

The Second Reason: Real Love Is a Personal Exchange

In the mid-nineties, a Protestant denomination held a theological conference in which one speaker said, "I don't think we need a theory of atonement at all; I don't think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff."⁷ Why

can't we just concentrate on teaching about how God is a God of love? The answer is that if you take away the Cross you don't *have* a God of love.

In the real world of relationships it is impossible to love people with a problem or a need without in some sense sharing or even changing places with them. All real life-changing love involves some form of this kind of exchange.

It requires very little of you to love a person who is pulled together and happy. Think, however, of emotionally wounded people. There is no way to listen and love people like that and stay completely emotionally intact yourself. It may be that they may feel stronger and more affirmed as you talk, but that won't happen without you being quite emotionally drained yourself. It's them or you. To bring them up emotionally you must be willing to be drained emotionally.

Take another example. Imagine you come into contact with a man who is innocent, but who is being hunted down by secret agents or by the government or by some other powerful group. He reaches out to you for help. If you don't help him, he will probably die, but if you ally with him, you—who were perfectly safe and secure—will be in mortal danger. This is the stuff that movie plots are made of. Again, it's him or you. He will experience increased safety and security through your involvement, but only because you are willing to enter into his insecurity and vulnerability.

Consider parenting. Children come into the world in a condition of complete dependence. They cannot operate as self-sufficient, independent agents unless their parents give up much of their own independence and freedom for years. If you don't allow your children to hinder your freedom in work and play at all, and if you only get to your children when it doesn't inconvenience you, your children will grow up physically only. In all sorts of other ways they will remain emotionally needy, troubled, and overdependent. The choice is clear. You can either sacrifice your freedom or theirs. It's them or you. To love your children well, you must decrease that they may increase. You must be willing to enter into the dependency they have so eventually they can experience the freedom and independence you have.

All life-changing love toward people with serious needs is a substitutional sacrifice. If you become personally involved with them, in some way, their weaknesses flow toward you as your strengths flow toward them. In *The Cross of Christ*, John Stott writes that substitution is at the heart of the Christian message:

*The essence of sin is we human beings substituting ourselves for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for us. We...put ourselves where only God deserves to be; God...puts himself where we deserve to be.*⁸

If that is true, how can God be a God of love if he does not become personally involved in suffering the same violence, oppression, grief, weakness, and pain that we experience? The answer to that question is twofold. First, God can't. Second, only one major world religion even claims that God does.

The Great Reversal

JoAnne Terrell wrote about how her mother was murdered by her mother's boyfriend. "I had to find a connection between my mom's story and my story and Jesus's story," she said. She found it in understanding the Cross—namely, that Jesus did not only suffer for us but with us. He knew what it was like (literally) to be under the lash, and to refuse to be cowed by those in power, and to pay for it with his life. He voluntarily took his place beside those who were without power and suffering from injustice.⁹ As John Stott wrote, "I could never myself believe in God if it were not for the Cross. In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it?"

Therefore the Cross, when properly understood, cannot possibly be used to encourage the oppressed to simply accept violence. When Jesus suffered for us, he was honoring justice. But when Jesus suffered with us he was identifying with the

oppressed of the world, not with their oppressors. All life-changing love entails an exchange, a reversal of places, but here is the Great Reversal. God, in the place of ultimate power, reverses places with the marginalized, the poor, and the oppressed. The prophets always sang songs about God as one who has “brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the poor” (Luke 1:52), but never could they have imagined that God himself would come down off his ultimate throne and suffer with the oppressed so that they might be lifted up.

This pattern of the Cross means that the world’s glorification of power, might, and status is exposed and defeated. On the Cross Christ wins through losing, triumphs through defeat, achieves power through weakness and service, comes to wealth via giving all away. Jesus Christ turns the values of the world upside down. As N. T. Wright says:

*The real enemy, after all, was not Rome but the powers of evil that stood behind human arrogance and violence.... [On the cross] the kingdom of God triumphed over the kingdoms of this world by refusing to join in their spiral of violence. [On the cross, Jesus] would love his enemies, turn the other cheek, go the second mile.*¹⁰

This upside-down pattern so contradicts the thinking and practice of the world that it creates an “alternate kingdom,” an alternate reality, a counterculture among those who have been transformed by it. In this peaceable kingdom there is a reversal of the values of the world with regard to power, recognition, status, and wealth. In this new counterculture, Christians look at money as something to give away. They look at power as something to use strictly for service. Racial and class superiority, accrual of money and power at the expense of others, yearning for popularity and recognition, these normal marks of human life, are the opposite of the mindset of those who have understood and experienced the Cross. Christ creates a whole new order of life. Those who are shaped by the great reversal of the Cross no longer need

self-justification through money, status, career, or pride of race and class. So the Cross creates a counterculture in which sex, money, and power cease to control us and are used in life-giving and community-building rather than destructive ways.

To understand why Jesus had to die it is important to remember both the result of the Cross (costly forgiveness of sins) and the pattern of the Cross (reversal of the world's values). On the cross neither justice nor mercy loses out—both are fulfilled at once. Jesus's death was necessary if God was going to take justice seriously and still love us. This same concern for both love and justice should mark all our relationships. We should never acquiesce in injustice. Jesus identified with the oppressed. Yet we should not try to overcome evil with evil. Jesus forgave his enemies and died for them.

Why then, did Jesus have to die? Even Jesus asked that question. In the Garden of Gethsemane he asked if there was any other way. There wasn't. There isn't. On the cross, in agony, he cried out the question, "Why!?" Why was he being forsaken?¹¹ Why was it all necessary? The answer of the Bible is—for us.

The Story of the Cross

I have tried to explain what Jesus has done for us when he died. I've done so by distilling some principles. I can't do the doctrine of the Cross full justice, however. I've heard that the great author Flannery O'Connor was once asked to put the meaning of one of her short stories "in a nutshell." She responded tartly that, if she could have put the meaning into a nutshell, she wouldn't have had to write the story. I've been trying to put the Cross of Jesus in a nutshell because I think it is an important exercise. Nevertheless, an exposition like this chapter of mine can't convey all the life-changing power of the narrative arc itself.

The stories that always seem to move us most deeply are those in which someone faces irremediable loss or death in order to bring life to someone else. There is almost no popular movie, for example, that doesn't make this its main theme. One of

my personal favorites is *Angels with Dirty Faces*. James Cagney plays Rocky Sullivan, a celebrity criminal who is the idol of all the young juvenile delinquents in the city. He is about to go to the electric chair. The night before his execution he is visited by his boyhood friend Jerry, played by Pat O'Brien, who is now a priest trying to save inner-city kids from a life of crime. Jerry makes a shocking request, but he says it is the only way that the kids he is working with can be turned away from the destructive path they've chosen.

I want you to let them down. You see, you've been a hero to these kids, and hundreds of others, all through your life—and now you're gonna be a glorified hero in death, and I want to prevent that, Rocky. They've got to despise your memory. They've got to be ashamed of you.

Rocky is incredulous.

You asking me to pull an act, turn yellow, so those kids will think I'm no good.... You ask me to throw away the only thing I've got left.... You ask me to crawl on my belly—the last thing I do in life.... Nothing doing. You're asking too much.... You want to help those kids, you got to think about some other way.

Jerry is calling Rocky to do the Great Reversal, the substitutionary sacrifice. If you hold on to your dignity, he says, they'll die in shame. If you die in shame, relinquish your glory, the boys' lives can be saved. It's the only way to release his boys from their hero worship. Rocky refuses. But the next morning he walks to the execution chamber. Suddenly he begins to cry out for mercy in cowardly hysterics, and dies in humiliation, making the ultimate sacrifice. Movie viewers are always stunned. I should know because every time I watch it I am shaken and it makes me want to live my life differently. Such is the life-affecting power of story.

Another great example of this kind of narrative is *A Tale of Two Cities*. Charles Darnay and Sydney Carton look very much alike, and they both love the same woman, Lucie Manette. Lucie chooses and marries Charles and they have a child. The setting of the story is the French Revolution, and Charles, who is a French aristocrat, is arrested, imprisoned, and sentenced to die by guillotine.

At the end of the novel, Sydney, who is English, visits Charles the night before he is to be executed. He offers to exchange places with him. Charles refuses, but Sydney has him drugged and smuggles him away into a waiting carriage. Then Sydney takes Charles's place. Charles and his family escape afterward to England.

That night in the prison, a young seamstress who is also condemned to die comes up to Sydney and begins to converse with him, thinking him to be Charles Darnay. When she realizes that it is not him, her eyes widen and she asks: "Are you dying for him?" Sydney responds: "And his wife and child. Hush! Yes." The seamstress then confesses that she is terribly frightened and is not sure she will be able to face her death. She asks the brave stranger if he will hold her hand to the end. When the time comes, they go to death hand in hand. She finds herself composed, even comforted and hopeful, as long as she keeps her eyes on him.

The girl in the story was sinking under the weight of her trial. Her strength was giving out, but then she was smitten by the wonder of his substitutionary sacrifice, and it enabled her to face the ultimate test.

Moving? Yes, but the gospel goes one better.¹² I always found these stories of sacrifice very emotionally affecting. I came away from them resolving to live more courageously and unselfishly. I never did follow through on my resolutions, however. The stories moved my emotions and pricked my conscience, but my heart's basic patterns stayed intact. I was still driven by a need to prove myself to others, to win approval and acclaim, to control what people thought of me. As long as these fears and needs had such power over me, my intentions to change could not go very far.

The gospel, however, is not just a moving fictional story about someone else. It is a true story about *us*. We are actually in it. We are those delinquent boys, and to save us Jesus gave up something infinitely greater than human celebrity. Also, Jesus has come to us in our prison and despite our unwillingness to be saved has taken our place. The seamstress was moved by a sacrifice that wasn't even for her. How much more can we be empowered by the discovery that Jesus has given himself for us, has changed places with us?

I can only say that observing these stories from the outside stirred me, but when I realized I was actually inside Jesus's story (and he inside mine) it changed me. The fear and pride that captured my heart was finally dislodged. The fact that Jesus *had* to die for me humbled me out of my pride. The fact that Jesus was *glad* to die for me assured me out of my fear.