

Executing God

Rethinking Everything You've Been Taught
about Salvation and the Cross

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Introduction

Execute: to carry out a plan or action, to follow out an intention
Execute: to inflict capital punishment, to put to death in pursuance of a sentence.

—*Oxford English Dictionary*

Whan ye thinke eny good thought, execute it.

—Earl Rivers, tr., *Dictes or Sayengis Philosophbres* (Caxton) (1877)

Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed.

—Luke 23:32 (NIV)

Once upon a time I was a fundamentalist, Southern Baptist and I had God all figured out. I knew it all, and delighted in telling people all about God. Men and women flocked to my Bible study classes. They sold cassette tapes in the church narthex, and people bought them. If someone had a question about God, I was one of the first persons they turned to for answers. I knew what I believed and held onto those beliefs tightly. I was proud that I spent hours and hours a day studying the Bible and praying, even though I was raising four small boys, homeschooling one of them, and taking care of a home while my husband traveled for work 80 percent of the time. I memorized whole books of the Bible and used Scripture as a tool to discipline my sons. I knew what it said on every topic that confronts us in life, from abortion to dating, from sexual orientation to marriage, from managing money to rearing children, and from creation to kingdom come. God spoke to me personally, and I always listened. I even knew what God was telling other people and had Scripture to back it up. Yes, I had a hotline to God. I knew with absolute certainty how God acted and why God acted in certain ways. Then a couple of things happened one right after the other: two of my children became very sick with an incurable liver disease, and I went to seminary.

All of a sudden I didn't know everything about God anymore. In fact, I didn't know anything. The tragedy of two sick sons made me question all that I thought I knew about God. Learning Greek,

Hebrew, and basic hermeneutical skills made me realize that I had been so wrong about so much. My whole belief system came crashing down around me, and I wandered around in the rubble, kicking at the broken pieces of my absolute certainty. My anger at God and my surprise at learning about how much I never knew had a strange effect. I started asking the kinds of questions that good Southern Baptist women never dare to ask. As time went by we all learned to deal with my sons' liver disorder, and I continued working toward a PhD in theology and religion. But my questions and my search for answers became bolder, more numerous, and much more intense. As it turned out, the more I kicked around in the rubble of my crushed certainty, the more I realized that in the midst of the destruction one thing remained the same, one belief stayed firm, one foundation survived upon which I could plant my feet: that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior. And upon that foundation I began to rebuild.

Nagging questions still plagued me: for example, "Is God really love?" or "Would a loving God send most of the world's population to burn in an eternal hell for temporal sin?" or "Does God really require the death of an innocent man in order to forgive sin?" I decided that if Jesus were to remain my foundation, then I would have to search for answers and rebuild my faith according to what Jesus modeled and taught. Then, from there, I would move on to the Old Testament and then to the letters of Paul, Peter, and others. I did just that, and found a God of love, compassion, mercy, grace, hospitality, and healing: a God who forgives unconditionally, who seeks to reconcile with every person ever born, who desires nothing less than the healing and salvation of all people (and of all creation if you believe Romans 8:18–22). The answers I found to my questions so completely changed my view of God that I felt compelled to write about them. Thus the birth of this book.

Even though I successfully rebuilt my belief system into something new and more forgiving, my absolute certainty never returned. In fact, doubt replaced certainty and that doubt gave birth to faith. Strange, isn't it? I always thought doubt was the opposite of faith. Now I realize that if it weren't for doubt we wouldn't need faith at all. Absolute certainty is the opposite of faith. The more certain we are about something, the less we need faith, or hope for that matter. So now my doubt-turned-faith gives me hope for the future, for what God has in store for us, and for how God will deal with us all as time meanders on to its end.

In fact, this book is about hope—hope for the healing of our souls and hospitality for all who enter our gates, for reconciliation between estranged parties and restoration of broken relationships, for open minds that lead to open hearts toward differences of opinion or disagreement over doctrine, for love that overcomes evil and mercy that triumphs over judgmentalism. So this book begins with a question, one that deals with the cross of Jesus, one I have asked over and over again, and one that several of my students have asked as well. It is a question that I hope to answer in the following pages. Did God have Jesus murdered? That question, an echo of my own thoughts, came from a theology student during a class discussion about the cross on a chilly autumn afternoon. But the questions and discussion that followed were even more chilling than the weather outside. One of my best students interjected with, “Right! Did God so love the world that God gave us Judas or Caiaphas or Pilate? Were they employed by God to execute Jesus and make it look legal?” I could almost imagine God commissioning one or more of these heavies to take out Jesus. But as sacrilegious as these questions sound, they provoke some extremely troubling quandaries surrounding the crucifixion. For the sake of argument, let’s say that God did premeditate the murder of Jesus, knowing the torturous suffering he would endure and needing that suffering in order to fulfill the divine plan. The questions we must ask, then, are these: Does God require the suffering and death of an innocent person in order to redeem? Does God demand the torture and abuse of an innocent man before God will forgive sin?

Some of you may be thinking that this is what we’ve always been taught. Why question it now? I question it because I have to. I can no longer sit comfortably with my head stuck in the proverbial sand (or my backside sitting in a comfortable pew in an air-conditioned building) and think that the death of Jesus somehow served divine justice. I don’t agree that the horrific death of an innocent man somehow “bought” God off so God would forgive sin. The whole deal smacks of blasphemy. I say this with both a sense of satisfaction and fear—satisfaction because I’m finally being honest about my thoughts, and fear because I could be wrong. Maybe you’re thinking that I’m the one blaspheming. God forgive me if that’s true. I want to portray God in thought and print just as Jesus portrayed God: as loving, compassionate, merciful, and forgiving. I want those who hate God to see and to know God as one who strongly desires to redeem all creation and to restore all people to loving relationships, not only with God but also with each other.

But that's not the only reason for this book on salvation and the cross. Those who believe in and love God may need to reconsider traditional views in order to see God mainly through the lens of mercy and compassion as well. And here's why.

I'm extremely concerned about religious violence; I am worried about the thousands upon thousands of people injured, massacred, or otherwise abused by violence committed in the name of some God or some theological "certainty." Violence in itself is bad enough, but the fact that it's "religious" adds insult to horrifying injury. This type of violence infects our world and poisons our relationships with nations, states, communities, and other people. We don't need scientific evidence for proof; just pick up any newspaper and read. Religious violence wreaks havoc on our world and has done so for millennia. We may wonder why a religion based on the love of God and others so often produces love's opposite—acts of hatred and violence in the name of God. Consumed with some sort of holy fire, divine impetus, or doctrinal justification (we claim), we do horrendous things to each other. Why? What makes us behave in such unloving ways? I believe that for Christianity at least, we can begin with the Old Testament and find plenty of fodder for rationalizing our violent behavior.

In these sacred pages we read about a God who wipes out thousands in one fell swoop, who commands the massacre of entire nations without blinking an eye, and who drops balls of fire on an unsuspecting city with apparent abandon. Although these stories make for exciting reading, they unfortunately incite copycat killings here on earth. Take Jerry Falwell as an example. After 9/11 he opined that we should blow the terrorists away in the name of the Lord—just like God did in the Old Testament.

But, pointing our finger at the Old Testament alone overlooks a major instance of violence in the New Testament. Traditionally, we have called doctrines of the death of Jesus "atonement theory," and we came up with names for these various theories as they were developed throughout Christian history. The four we will discuss in this book are

Christ as the Victor theory

The Satisfaction theory

The Penal Substitution theory

The Moral Example theory

Although each of these theories differs significantly from the others, they all have one thing in common. They hinge upon violence, and divine violence to boot. Jesus is murdered. Moreover, the murder of this innocent man is orchestrated by none other than God. In other words, the cataclysmic event of the Christian religion and of its doctrine of redemption and reconciliation is born from divine violence. The crux of our entire belief system, the one major event that activates the good news of God's grace, requires, and at best condones, violence and serves as a model for us to imitate. If the violence Christians have wreaked in the last two thousand years results from our desire to do as God would do, we may safely say that human religious violence is the child (however illegitimate) of divine violence.

But as I mentioned before, there's another impetus for reinterpreting traditional theories of atonement. Not that divine violence and the consequent copycat cruelty isn't reason enough. Our common theories of atonement may give birth to violence for those inside the faith, but they also act as a repellent to those outside the faith. Many atheists and those who have turned their backs on God cite the cruelty of God as their reason. For example, one woman said, "the main reason I had to reject Christianity was because god killing his son went too far. I could never worship a god that evil."¹ Sad. But if we stop a second and try to see the cross through the eyes of an unbeliever, it does come off looking much like an injustice. Some theologians have gone so far as to call it divine child abuse.² I want to redeem God for those who have become disillusioned and have turned their backs on the God who redeems. In addition, one of my former students (I'll call her Lindsay) turned away from Christianity and then from God altogether because of the "mean-spirited, close-minded, judgmental Christians" she knew. She figured that kind of behavior fit right in with a God who would order the death of a beloved son in order to forgive sin. She reckoned she could live without a forgiveness that entailed such retributive and unjust measures. So, I say it's time to rethink not only the image of God but also those made in the image of God—not just God's *modus operandi* in the world and in the story of redemption, but also our own.

That said, my desire to write a book on salvation and the cross emerges out of a desire to think differently about the workings of God in what we traditionally refer to as the atonement. As a Christian who is stymied and disturbed by religious violence, I want to help other Christians rethink an issue that historically has caused massive pain

and suffering. In the desire to take up our own cross and follow Jesus, we have crucified countless others in our zeal to please God and rid the world of heretics. If any of our violent behavior, any at all, stems from traditional theories of atonement—from what we might call “redemptive violence”—then we must begin to reinterpret these theories. In light of the spread of religious violence infecting our societies and cultures worldwide, rather than portraying God as a violent, angry deity, finger cocked in readiness to blast the disobedient with lightning bolts of destruction, we need to emphasize the God of mercy. This God loves enemy and friend alike and desires to transform the world, not through arms and ammunition but through grace and forgiveness. I am not suggesting we throw away two millennia of Christian tradition in favor of the newest trend in theological studies; I am suggesting that, as believers have done for centuries, we reinterpret our tradition so that it remains relevant for our changing world, and powerful enough to transform our world with the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ.

I’ll be right up front with you from the very beginning. I am going to privilege certain texts of Scripture. We all do it. For centuries we have privileged the biblical passages that speak of God’s retribution, vengeance, wrath, and punishment—just take a close look at our doctrines of hell and atonement, at our theories of just war and capital punishment. We have subordinated the biblical texts that portray God’s restorative justice, love for enemies, extravagant forgiveness, and mercy. I will privilege the teachings of Jesus and the Old Testament prophets who proclaimed God’s desire for peace, nonviolence, and love of others—yes, love, even to the point of loving the stranger in our gates. Even to the point of loving our enemies. I do this because we have to do something to stem the tide of violence, resisting the shameless call to abuse others in the name of the Prince of Peace. I want to reinterpret our tradition in order to disarm the rulers and the powers that be with the love of God through Jesus Christ.³ If just one person changes his or her perspective on how God behaves in the world and, therefore, how we should behave, then it will be worth all the criticism a book like this may generate.

As in my earlier book *Razing Hell: Rethinking Everything You’ve Been Taught about God’s Wrath and Judgment*, we will wrestle with our difficult questions and quandaries with conversation partners, people just like us, who have the same struggles, who worry about how to think about God, the Bible, the Christian tradition, and their own faith journey. Along the way, various students will join in the conversation as we

journey through rethinking the cross. Some of my more theologically sophisticated students who struggle between faithful adherence to the tradition of the community of faith and the inconsistencies they see in traditional doctrines of faith will enter into the discussion. We'll hear from others who hold to pacifist ways of thinking and who want to interpret the Bible through the lens of a peaceful, loving God. We will consider questions from students whose disillusionment with the theological inconsistencies found in traditional theories of atonement and the portrayal of God as an angry father out for a pound of flesh before granting grace has caused them to question seriously their deeply held beliefs. And I am sure you will relate to Josh's questions. He is a very conservative Christian ministries major who took a number of my courses. I can always count on Josh to ask the tough questions, to hold my feet to the flames so to speak and take the class back to what the Bible says. His questions are pointed, relevant, and he asks them with a humility and open-mindedness that is a rarity in most students. I am hoping that these conversations will help my students and readers to reconstruct their theology in life-giving ways.

So we journey together as we rethink God, salvation, and the cross. We will struggle together as we deconstruct and then reconstruct one of our most fondly held doctrines—the doctrine of the atonement. To keep from feeling too threatened by this exercise, let's just consider it a thought experiment, another way of perceiving what God has done for all creation through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. All I ask of my students as they learn the various ways of thinking through their faith theologically is that they give it some thought, chew on it awhile, consider it, much like they'd try a new dish at the dinner table. Then, after careful study and consideration, they can decide what they believe—a decision made from knowledge, not from what a pastor, Sunday school teacher, college professor, or anyone else has told them must be true. As with my students, I ask that readers of this book give new ideas and models a chance. Then you can make up your own minds based on what you yourself have discovered as you struggled and studied and contemplated God and your faith.

WHAT YOU'LL FIND IN THIS BOOK

Every book has a purpose and every author a motivation for writing it. In chapter 1, I will explain my motive and the purpose of the

book. Too often our deeply held religious convictions lead to violence. Because that's the case, we need to responsibly explore, deconstruct, and reconstruct our fondly held, yet potentially dangerous, beliefs. We have seen horrific acts of terror committed in the name of God—from wars to massacres to slander. Our perception of God influences how we behave. If we perceive of God as justifiably violent, it becomes easier for us to be violent. I believe that to staunch the onslaught of violence and to ensure a future in which Christians promote peace and justice, we need fresh and relevant interpretations of our central doctrines. So, in this chapter I will build a case for the part religion plays in the world's violence. I will talk briefly about the violence prevalent in Christian history, the need for new ways of being Christian, reading Scripture, and living as productive members of God's kingdom in the here and now.

If we are going to talk about the various models of atonement in the Bible and throughout the Christian tradition, we also have to discuss the wide use of metaphor in Scripture itself, especially metaphors that describe the work of Jesus on the cross. Deep and otherwise incomprehensible truths—truths that human language cannot grasp—can often only be revealed and understood through the word pictures that we are familiar with: that is, through metaphor. So, in chapter 2 we will discuss the use of biblical and cultural metaphors used in forming understandings of God and of the atonement.

In order to construct an alternate way of thinking about a certain Christian doctrine we also need to familiarize ourselves with what has gone before. So, in chapter 3 we will discuss traditional theories of atonement, examining how theologians of the past have explained God's work of salvation through Jesus. We will think about both the positive and negative aspects of these various theories and discuss the theological quandaries they leave us with.

In chapter 4 we will talk about how such traditional theories of atonement have led to a dysfunctional image of God that promotes human violence and abuse. We'll discuss some of the biblical passages that lead us to see God as violent and compare them to those passages that portray God as loving and compassionate. We'll build a case for a compassionate, peace-loving God who abhors violence and wants human beings to live peaceful, loving lives.

If we rethink our traditional theories of atonement, we also have to rethink justice. The model of justice portrayed in traditional atonement theories is based upon a retributive model: Jesus "paid" the debt

for our sin or Jesus made satisfaction to merit forgiveness of sin. Our ways of thinking about justice and the atonement also portray God as necessarily violent and retributive, requiring the death of an innocent person in order to forgive sin. Without thinking about the implications, we've considered the divinely required death of an innocent man just. When Jesus died on the cross, suffering an unjust death, our culturally imbedded minds have been taught to believe that something good happened. So, in chapter 5 we will talk about notions of justice in Scripture and in culture, revealing that divine justice is reconciling rather than retributive.

After we've wrestled a bit with the concept of justice, we'll tackle forgiveness. Is forgiveness an economy of quid pro quo? Does God forgive only on the basis of a system of pay back—as when Jesus dies and suffers our punishment, thereby paying God back for the debt of sin? If so, the nature of forgiveness is compromised. In chapter 6 we will discuss the “dilemma of forgiveness”—that if God truly forgives sin, God doesn't require payment in advance through the death of an innocent man. God pardons without the need for divinely ordained violence. Such notions of forgiveness require that we think differently about atonement.

Many might ask at this point, what about sacrifice? If God doesn't need repayment in order to forgive, is the death of Jesus sacrificial? If so, how? The short answer is yes: through his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus offered a costly sacrifice on our behalf for our redemption. In chapter 7 I will tie sacrifice into the notion of forgiveness. Although forgiveness does not entail a violent economic transaction of any sort between Father and Son, the sacrifice of forgiveness is extremely costly. In this chapter we'll discuss just how and why the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus were very much a sacrifice. But that's not all. We'll also discuss the blood.

“Nothing but the blood of Jesus.” This theologically loaded hymn has been a familiar and comforting part of our worship all our lives. And as we sing we think of the blood of Jesus that washes away our sin, that provides the payment for our forgiveness, we inadvertently put forth an image of God as violent and retributive, who cannot forgive sin without recompense of some sort. In this case, the recompense happens to be the horrific death of an innocent man. If I take away the notion of payment from the atonement, what happens to the blood of Jesus? What significance does it play in the passion and in the effecting of our redemption? Is it true that “without the shedding of blood there

is no forgiveness” (Heb. 9:22)? Could this be metaphorical language, and if so, what is its meaning? We’ll find some answers to these questions in chapter 7.

In chapter 8, we’ll discuss what Jesus really accomplished with his life, death, and resurrection. I will weave together all the things we discussed in the preceding chapters dealing with the atonement: metaphor, images of God as a loving forgiver, justice, forgiveness, the power of the blood of Jesus, sacrifice, concluding with our “at-one-ment.”

In the last chapter, we will construct and consider an interpretation of our redemption in Christ that speaks against the complicity of violence in God’s plan to forgive and to redeem creation. We will also consider the profound implications for witnessing to those who don’t claim Jesus as savior. If we hold to the view of atonement put forth in this book, we can no longer scare people with a message of forgiveness only through divine punishment of sin, even if we believed that an innocent man suffered the punishment instead of us. This does not mean, however, that we give up preaching the good news. The exact opposite, in fact! We finally begin preaching the good news of salvation through the love and forgiveness of God revealed and accomplished by Jesus. Part of preaching any message, of course, is living it out for family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers to see—the “so what?” of atonement. So in this chapter we will also address kingdom living for those who have been redeemed by God through Jesus.

I hope you enjoy this execution of God and the examination of the cross. And while you read, I hope you’ll find new and refreshing ideas and ways of thinking about God that will enable you to tell others about the good news of salvation through Jesus. Take a bite, taste, and see—maybe the Lord’s goodness is sweeter than we thought. Let’s begin our journey.