

# HOW JESUS SAVES

ATONEMENT FOR ORDINARY PEOPLE



JOSHUA M. MCNALL

## Praise for *How Jesus Saves*

People say “Jesus saves,” but actually do not know the depth of its meaning. Josh McNall takes the power of the theological meaning of the atonement not only in an intellectual pursuit but also to the depths of one’s soul. The reader is taken to new freedoms in his or her personal life as a result of the healing presence of the atonement. Using down-to-earth illustrations of conversations with his children, as well as engaging in stories from Medieval times, McNall weaves together the transforming power of “Jesus saves.” Each chapter presents personal exercises for the reader and group to truly engage the text—to get it into daily living and thinking.

—Jo Anne Lyon

general superintendent emerita  
the Wesleyan Church

Josh McNall isn’t just an academic who can bestow his knowledge to us. He is a teacher in the true sense of the word, and an excellent writer. *How Jesus Saves* is a question that is not left merely for the classroom, nor can it be reduced to oversimplified evangelical slogans. Everyone must wrestle with this question and its implications. McNall doesn’t shy away from the objections and tough questions surrounding what happened on a Roman cross more than two thousand years ago when Jesus died and rose again. What is it that we need and how does God give that to us? This will be a go-to book to communicate to ordinary people the multifaceted ways that Jesus brings salvation to all who believe.

—Aimee Byrd

author of *The Sexual Reformation* and  
*Recovering from Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*

McNall has written an engaging introduction to important questions about the work of Christ on our behalf. This is a wonderful resource for the church with clear explanations brought to life through consistent cultural references.

—Madison N. Pierce  
associate professor of New Testament  
Western Theological Seminary

For two millennia, Christians have wrestled with the question: How does Jesus save us? This question is no doubt complicated and has led to polarized debates, accusations of heresy, and myriad theories. Joshua McNall cuts through the noise by offering an answer that incorporates the depth and breadth of Scripture's teaching on Jesus's atonement for our sins. In doing so, readers are able to better understand the multifaceted beauty of God's love for us through Jesus's life, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension.

—Brandon D. Smith  
assistant professor of theology and New Testament  
Cedarville University  
co-founder of the Center for Baptist Renewal

Josh McNall has done it again! Of all topics he could have covered in this book, the atonement is one of the toughest. And yet Dr. McNall has a gift of making tough topics so much more accessible. Even as a pastor of twenty-plus years, there were simply things in this book I needed to hear. Thanks for this great resource!

—Phill Tague  
lead pastor  
Ransom Church

We live in a world of mouths that seeks to create our own pathways to eternal salvation and righteousness. Despite of all this, the fact remains, Jesus Christ alone can save. We cannot save ourselves no matter what we attempt or how hard we try. We need the atoning work of Jesus on the cross of calvary to have the opportunity to be forgiven and obtain eternal communion with God in heaven. Dr. Josh McNall brilliantly walks through the various doctrinal understandings of the atonement in a way that is practical and applicable to any audience in this work. Put aside the distractions related to saving yourself and learn from a book that proclaims the fullness of God's greatest gift of reconciliation—*How Jesus Saves!*

—Dr. Jim Dunn  
president

Oklahoma Wesleyan University

The power of language isn't only in what it makes us feel, but also in how it helps us live the days we are given. McNall successfully provides enough explanation and captivating creativity to help us understand the gravity of what Jesus has done. This book is soaked in potential. Read it and allow the detail that Jesus loves you to move from your head to your heart.

—David Kinnan  
author and pastor

Fountain Springs Church

I'm so grateful for a book that helps Christians go beyond simply singing "Jesus saves" with gusto and fervor, and offers a framework to grasp *how* and *why* Jesus saves. McNall takes one of the greatest theological complexities and gives us simple and memorable handholds to understand Jesus's salvific work on the cross without losing the mystery of it all. *How Jesus Saves* points us back to a moment in human history when God's love was poured out for everyone, and points us forward toward deeper holiness and a fresh spiritual awakening.

—Andrea Summers

campus pastor/dean of spiritual formation

Indiana Wesleyan University

— HOW —  
**JESUS SAVES**

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JOSHUA M. MCNALL





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Seedbed Publishing, 415 Bridge Street, Franklin, Tennessee 37064

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For Ewan Gregory,  
king

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# Introduction

## Atonement for Ordinary People

**D**addy, how does Jesus save us by *dying* on the cross?" That was my young daughter's question as we lay upon her bunk after nightly prayer. If you're a parent, you know bedtime brings the deep questions. Prior favorites in our house include: "Daddy, why are you going bald?" and "Daddy, why do you groan when you get off the couch?" Some questions are delay tactics, like the fourteen glasses of water required for a child to be adequately hydrated for sleep. And some questions come seemingly from nowhere. But I knew where this question had come from. We had attended a funeral.

My daughter's uncle (Daniel) died when he was only thirty. That's almost the same age as Jesus. Daniel was the husband of my youngest sister. He was a pastor. And he succumbed to a terrible disease called ALS. My daughter knew that an early death was not "good news." So why was Jesus different? After all, we don't celebrate state-sponsored executions as a means of saving grace, especially if the victim is innocent. Why do Christians look to the cross specifically as our greatest symbol of hope? It's a good question.

Looking back on the bedtime conversation, I should have had a snappy answer. After all, I had just written a long book on the atonement—the branch of theology that speaks to the reconciliation (“at-one-ment”) between God and humans because of what Jesus did.<sup>1</sup> That book had more than a thousand footnotes and was generally well-received amongst scholars. Which is to say, you’ve never read it. Academic texts don’t normally make best-seller lists. And though it was dedicated to the very daughter who had asked the bedtime question, I knew my treatment of high-flying terms like “Irenaean recapitulation” and “penal substitutionary objections” would not help her. They might not help you either.

Those ideas matter—a lot, actually—but they need to be made more accessible.

That’s the reason for the book you’re holding now: we need a work on the atonement for ordinary people, not just theologians. If you want to go deeper on a particular question of history or interpretation, you may find it helpful to consult my longer text, *The Mosaic of Atonement: An Integrated Approach to Christ’s Work*. Cross questions are not just for pastors and academics. The cross is for fishermen and fork-lift operators. It’s for porn stars and prodigals, elder brothers and overachievers. The cross is for everyone, including children as they lie upon their beds. The biblical writers knew this: “My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice

for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:1–2).

But how exactly does that work?

While “Jesus saves” is perhaps the most basic claim of Christianity, the ensuing question—*How?*—demands attention. This whole book resides within that single word. How does Jesus save us by the cross?

One answer to my daughter’s question is, of course, that Jesus didn’t stay dead. His death, we might say, didn’t *stick*. But resurrection alone doesn’t answer a question about salvation and the cross. After all, if Elvis or Tupac were raised from the dead, we might correctly say that the world was a very strange place. But we would not conclude that the occurrence offered salvation to all who believed.<sup>2</sup> Christ’s resurrection is essential for atonement.<sup>3</sup> But it does not necessarily reveal why Scripture connects the gospel so frequently to what happened on a Roman cross. Despite my academic work, my first attempt to simplify the matter left me trotting out some Sunday school answers. Allow me to rehearse a few of them.

## Cross Questions

“Well, honey, Jesus died for our sins.” That’s true. But the answer raises other questions. For instance, how can an innocent person justly die for the sins of the guilty? Don’t the basic rules of justice prohibit that? If this happened in our legal system, as it sadly has, we would not celebrate it. The book of Proverbs says it this way: “Acquitting the guilty and condemning the



innocent—the LORD detests them both” (17:15). How could Jesus justly take our penalty since he did not commit the crime? Are sins like frequent flier miles that can be exchanged by some cosmic transfer? And why would the death of Jesus for *our* sins make God reconciled with sinners, especially since it was human sin that caused Christ’s suffering?

The cross also raises questions about forgiveness. For instance, couldn’t God simply forgive humanity apart from Jesus’s bloody death, especially if we expressed repentance for our sins? After all, isn’t the meaning of forgiveness to *set aside* a debt without requiring payment? If Jesus “paid it all” (as one song proclaims), then what did God forgive? When my own children sin against me, I do not make their place in the family contingent upon the slaughter of an innocent sibling or the family pet. What does it mean to revel in the fact that our forgiveness is connected to Christ’s “atoning sacrifice” for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2)?

If that weren’t enough, Satan also barges in to the atonement conversation—like an annoying dinner guest, in red tights. The book of 1 John claims: “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work” (3:8). But how often do you bring up Lucifer in public conversation? To strike up talk of the demonic at a sophisticated dinner party might get you labeled a nut in certain circles. And if the Son of God came to destroy the devil’s work, why does it seem that Satan’s work is still alive and well? Have you seen social media lately?

Another claim about the cross and resurrection is that it marks Christ's *triumph* over death. The empty tomb is proof of this accomplishment. Yet if Jesus really conquered death, why does death's reign seem so uncontested? As we survey human history, the grave seems like a heavyweight champion who may have been knocked down on Easter Sunday but came back as strong as ever. The mortality rate still hovers around 100 percent, however much we delay it with medicines, super foods, and exercise routines. If it is by Jesus's "wounds we are healed" (Isa. 53:5; 1 Peter 2:24), why had my sister's husband died and left her a young widow? Where is the evidence of Christ's triumph over death?

A final understanding of the cross sees it as a loving example to be imitated. "This is love," proclaims 1 John when speaking of Christ's death (4:10). And even earlier, Jesus called his followers to take up their own crosses in order to follow him (Matt. 16:24). Cross-bearing is a command for Christians. And the call to sacrificial love goes far beyond a literal crucifixion. "Do not resist an evil person." Jesus says, "If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also" (Matt. 5:39). These are hard statements. And some who work closely with the victims of abuse question whether the understanding of the cross as an example to follow actually enables and prolongs abuse as victims "follow Jesus" in refusing to resist the violence done against them. Is this true? Do some views of the cross perpetuate injustice?

## **Distraction: The Biggest Challenge to Atonement Doctrine**

None of these questions arose specifically in my daughter's bedtime conversation. In fact, I had only begun to explain the matter when she got distracted and changed the subject to what was going on at school, the next day's schedule, and the Harry Potter book she was reading.

In our own ways, adults do that too.

Perhaps the biggest barrier to grasping Jesus's saving work is not a rational objection about non-transferable penalties or the meaning of forgiveness. Our biggest problem is distraction. In a digital age especially, our attention is repeatedly diverted by a flood of flashing, dinging, ringing, vibrating notifications (even as you try to read this short introduction). Interruptions—both trivial and important—assault us. Our distractions involve work, school, money, politics, laundry, podcasts, children, and celebrity breakups. Like a dog that is jolted from its thoughts by the appearance of a furry friend across the lawn, our biggest hindrance to sitting at the foot of the cross is the human equivalent of “*Squirrel!*”

“The constant distraction of our culture,” writes Alan Noble, “shields us from the kind of deep, honest reflection needed” in order to see what God has done for us.<sup>4</sup> Or in the words of Andrew Sullivan: “If the churches came to understand that the greatest threat to faith today is not hedonism but distraction, perhaps they might begin to appeal anew to a frazzled digital generation.”<sup>5</sup> Books on the atonement often miss this challenge. But it matters

because Christ's saving work is not primarily a problem to be solved or a point of doctrine to be affirmed to stay in the Christian club. The cross is meant to lead us to worship, like the disciple Thomas when he encountered the scarred but risen Jesus, and then exclaimed: "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28).

Arguing about atonement doctrine is one particularly dangerous distraction, especially amongst academics. To take one example, the idea of Jesus bearing the penalty for sin has been dubbed "divine child abuse" by some, while an opposing camp claims that emphasizing any picture of atonement other than "penal substitution" (I'll define that later) is as outrageous as renouncing the Apostles' Creed. This is especially odd since the early church never required Christians to choose one single understanding of how Jesus saves as most important. Unfortunately, the greatest act of reconciliation has turned into one more thing for Christians to fight over. When this happens, we sit beneath the cross, like disgruntled Roman soldiers, squabbling over Jesus's bloody garment but never looking up (John 19:23–24).

## Conclusion

So before we explore the questions I have highlighted, I must conclude with one request: *Look up*. Look up at the cross that stands empty like the tomb. But look also to the throne of heaven where Jesus sits victorious over sin, death, and the devil. Look up from social media, from your smartphone, and from the

busyness of daily life to see Jesus in a new light. When we do so, our faces will be illuminated. And in Paul's words: "everything that is illuminated becomes a light" (Eph. 5:13).

Each chapter of this book explores a particular way Christ brings salvation. And each one returns to some of the tough questions previously mentioned. Unlike some modern treatments of the cross, however, I do not raise questions in order to show that the historic understandings of atonement are nonsensical and barbaric. Not at all. If you're reading this book in the hopes of getting my completely new and original explanation of atonement, you'll be disappointed. Because while we must take seriously the questions and objections leveled, my conclusion will be that Scripture and theology provide resources to address those concerns without throwing the baby of atonement out with the bathwater of bad analogies and false assumptions.

There is mystery in atonement, but it is not a myth that trades in superstitious nonsense. I believe that Jesus saves. Hence, each chapter will explore a particular way in which Christ brings about salvation:

- By revealing the depth of our sin problems (chap. 1)
- By acting faithfully as the true Adam (chap. 2)
- By being judged in our place (chap. 3)
- By securing victory over death and the devil (chap. 4)
- By revealing God's love and pouring out his transforming Spirit (chap. 5)

Jesus does all that and more. That's why he's worth dropping everything to follow. These topics are complex, but my aim is to keep it simple. So each chapter comes in response to my daughter's question: "How does Jesus save us?"

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## Chapter One

# Jesus and the Bigger Boat

Imagine if Quentin Tarantino directed a live-action version of *Finding Nemo* with only eleven dollars reserved for special effects. That's *Jaws*. If you're too young to remember the classic 1975 film, allow me to initiate you. The iconic scene begins with Roy Scheider's character (Martin Brody) chumming bloody bits of fish into the sea from the back of a dilapidated trawler. With a cigarette dangling from his lips, Brody turns from the ocean momentarily, just as a massive, tooth-filled head emerges from the water. The shark's colossal size inspires the famous line that becomes a prophecy of doom. Brody turns to the captain with a blank stare and proclaims: "You're gonna need a bigger boat."

Strange as it sounds, the cross of Jesus reveals the same reality. It shows us our collective human problem is bigger than we thought. So before we can speak of how Jesus saves, we must first ask why (and from what) we need saving.



## Everybody Blames

Almost everyone admits there's something wrong with the world. Like the classic children's story *Everybody Poops*, another universal truth is "Everybody blames." Sometimes the tendency shows up in odd and extreme ways. When a massive hurricane slammed Florida and Texas, the actress Jennifer Lawrence prophesied that the devastation was Mother Nature's wrath on a nation that had elected a certain reality TV star as president. And a few years earlier, the president of a well-known Christian university attributed the 9/11 terrorist attacks to the sins of gays and lesbians.<sup>1</sup>

Why do people do this? There is something comforting about rendering our troubles meaningful as retribution. Retribution implies purpose. And it's invariably "the other side" to blame. Despite our talk of grace, we often find karma more appealing. One cable news network points the finger toward woke snowflakes, millennials, social justice warriors, and illegal immigrants. But just check another news site and you'll hear that gun-lovers, science-deniers, and religious bigots are to blame.

Everybody judges. But which side is correct?

Into this partisan shouting match, the apostle Paul might walk—or rather, limp—and say, "You're both right." And also, "You're both *very* wrong."<sup>2</sup> Scripture shows that the problems we need saving from are more universal than one side of the political aisle. And they cannot be solved by simply electing the right people.

A predator lurks beneath the surface of our world and our skin. For this reason, the cross of Jesus isn't just a solution to our problems. It also functions like a warning indicator—a kind of “sin sonar”—to show how deep our issues are. The message, then, is simple: “You’re gonna need a bigger boat.”

## Better Fall Saul

Paul came to this conclusion in an odd way. He fell. In the book of Acts, Paul (also called Saul) set out to persecute the followers of Jesus in a city called Damascus. In his mind, the biggest problem was bad Jews worshipping a crucified Messiah. But on his way to arrest these Christians, a bright light flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice call out: “Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?” In response, Paul asked: “Who are you, Lord?” Then he was shocked to hear this answer: “I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting” (Acts 22:6–8).

Here Paul gets an inkling of a shocking reality: The Lord of creation, the King of kings, the Messiah of Israel . . . is Jesus. And he died a criminal's death. *That's* how serious our problem was and is. It required nothing less than the sacrifice of God's beloved Son, nailed up to a Roman cross. For Paul, the catastrophic nature of the solution (the cross) revealed the catastrophic nature of our problem (sin, death, and the devil). But this is, admittedly, the opposite of how we normally reason.<sup>3</sup> We usually work from problem to solution.

**Problem:** I notice that my roof is leaking.

**Solution:** Call a home repair company and my insurance agent.

**Problem:** My clothes don't fit, and I get winded climbing stairs.

**Solution:** Start exercising or buy sweatpants and a ranch-style house.

**Problem:** My neighbor revs his muscle car at midnight while our baby is sleeping.

**Solution:** Ask him politely to stop. If he doesn't, learn karate.

The usual progression from *problem* to *solution* makes sense. But, occasionally, we are blindsided by a catastrophic solution. This unexpected and unsettling fix causes us to radically alter our perception of how bad the problem must have been. You go under the knife for a minor knee surgery, but when you awake the doctor tells you, "The bad news is we had to amputate; the good news is we got the cancer." A catastrophic solution is how Paul came to see the cross. God's fix was so terrible and unanticipated that it upended Paul's perception of how deep our problems were apart from grace.

Let's backtrack. Other Israelites in Paul's day had pointed the finger of blame at more specific culprits: (A) bad Jews, (B) bad spirits, or (C) bad Gentiles. But after his fall on the Damascus Road, Paul opted for a fourth option: (D) all of the above. The first choice

was popular amongst the Pharisees (Paul's old sect). The next was taken by the Essenes (a vegan doomsday cult camped by the Dead Sea). The third was standard amongst the Zealots (revolutionary Rambo-Jews who saw Rome as the Great Satan). Each answer had merit. But each answer was too narrow. The diagnoses were like the selective blame games played by TV preachers, political pundits, and secular celebrities alike. Paul's jarring realization was that the sin-problem flows forth from each and every one of us, and its roots go far deeper than any other Jew had yet concluded.<sup>4</sup>

Paul traced the problem all the way to Genesis. In the first book of the Bible, one called "human" (*adam*) was led astray when tempted to distrust and disobey the Creator (Rom. 5:12a). In looking to Adam, Paul wasn't passing the buck to an ancient ancestor. He wasn't saying *everything* is Adam's fault alone. To clarify that point, Paul writes: "in this way death came to all people, because all sinned" (Rom. 5:12b). That's why "There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:22b–23).

Sin is why even beautiful things—like sex and work and friendship—are now broken. This depressing reality is sometimes called "total depravity." Contrary to the way it sounds, total depravity does not mean that everyone is as bad as they could be. (You could be clubbing a baby seal right now with a bat you stole from underprivileged T-ball players.) A proper view of total depravity means that every *area* of life is bent by

sin and human fallenness.<sup>5</sup> Paul says it this way in a passage that would make even the most disillusioned teenager seem chipper:

What shall we conclude then? Do we [Jews] have any advantage? Not at all! For we have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin. As it is written:

“There is no one righteous, not even one;  
there is no one who understands;  
there is no one who seeks God.

All have turned away,  
they have together become worthless;  
there is no one who does good,  
not even one.” (Rom. 3:9–12; citing  
Pss. 14:1–3; 53:1–3; Eccles. 7:20)

How’s that for a downer? Nobody stencils those verses on a Christian T-shirt or inscribes them on a coffee mug.

## The CAT Scan King

In medicine, a CAT scan (or CT scan) is used to diagnose problems that cannot be seen with the naked eye. It does so by combining electronic images to create a three-dimensional view of what’s beneath the surface: bones, blood vessels, soft tissues. The rest of this chapter functions like a kind of CAT scan for the cosmos as a whole. It is an attempt to look at multiple

layers of our problem, so we are prepared to see Christ's saving work in its full beauty.

Christians often fail here. In one segment of the church, the cross is simply Jesus taking our *penalty*. This approach implies that our problem is merely guilt demanding punishment. In another camp, the cross and resurrection are simply ways to victory and eternal life. In this diagnosis, the problem is our defeat by death and evil powers. In still another camp, Christ's work is seen as a powerful example of God's love that compels us follow. This is certainly accurate, but if left by itself it runs the risk of implying that a good example would be powerful enough to save us—as if standing over a coffin and showing an example of breathing could raise up the corpse.

In reality, we need several layers in this cosmic CAT scan.

If we only recognize one aspect of our problem, then our view of Jesus's work will be shallow. We will be like a patient who comes to recognize only *symptoms* of an ailment (the ache of loneliness, anger, or fear) without addressing the underlying diseases that cause them. So let's zoom in.

## Death: The Final Enemy

In the Bible, “the last enemy to be destroyed is death” (1 Cor. 15:26). I began writing this chapter at a strange and frightening time in history: the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. We learned new words: *lock-down*, *ventilators*, *social distancing*. And I remember the

shock of learning that my next-door neighbor—a man named Tony—had died of the disease. He was in his forties, seemingly healthy, and he had two small children. The fear of death was everywhere. And even when the subject wasn't mentioned, it hovered silently in the background like the villain in a Harry Potter story: "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named."

My youngest son, Teddy, suffered his first asthma attack at the start of the pandemic. He was only two and I was scared. Should I take him to the ER and risk the strange new respiratory virus that might infect him? Or should I wait and gamble that his symptoms could get worse? After several sleepless hours, Teddy's breathing slowly improved. But in the days that followed, I noticed I was saying "I love you" more frequently—sprinkled liberally between commands to stop striking siblings and leaping from the furniture. "I love you, buddy." But what I meant was, *I'm scared you'll die*. Death is our great global pandemic. And the fear of it is not limited to COVID-19.

For this reason, the book of Hebrews says Jesus took on human flesh to "free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death" (Heb. 2:15). It is not just mortality that stalks us; it is the fear of death that haunts before the Enemy can pounce.

Some people try to repackage death to make it pretty. Several years ago, I sat on the platform for a college graduation at which a pastor quoted the late Steve Jobs: "Death is very likely the single best invention of Life," he said. "It is Life's change agent. It clears out the old to make way for the new."<sup>6</sup> That sounds

nice. It makes death seem like a forward-thinking entrepreneur, fostering change and getting rid of old models. To speak of death in these sunny tones makes dead children, dead grandparents, and dead spouses sound like late-model Buicks that needed to be shuffled off the lot. Hogwash. Paul knew better. In Scripture, death is *always* an enemy—even though it results in an eternal “gain” for Christians (Phil. 1:21), and even when it comes at a ripe old age, or as a release from suffering.

But what is death? The answer might seem obvious. Even animals and children can tell when something has died. Recently, my children played with a pet frog so long that they literally killed it with their “love.” They weren’t fooled when I said the creature was just napping. But there are hints in the Bible that things are not so simple. Death comes in different forms. After Christ’s resurrection, the New Testament writers begin to speak of it as “sleep” for Christians. “[W]e do not want you to be uninformed,” writes Paul, “about those who sleep in death” (1 Thess. 4:13). This transformation does not make death pretty (the passage mentions grief explicitly). But it does mean that physical mortality becomes a temporary state for Christians, like the repose of Sleeping Beauty as we await our Bridegroom to awaken us.

Scripture tells of another death: a spiritual and relational one. The deepest and most problematic death isn’t a stopped heartbeat or a decomposing body. The worst death involves our relationship with our Creator and our relationship with others. God told Adam



that on that day you eat the forbidden fruit, “you will certainly die” (Gen. 2:17b). But of course, he didn’t. Adam and Eve didn’t keel over like the great mathematician and code-breaker Alan Turing, who supposedly committed suicide with a cyanide-laced apple. Adam and Eve lived physically for years after the fateful bites in Genesis 3. But that doesn’t mean the serpent was right.

Death claims us while our hearts keep beating. Paul tells the Ephesians, “you were *dead* in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world” (Eph. 2:1–2a, emphasis added). And to the church at Sardis, Jesus says, “I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead” (Rev. 3:1b). These texts reveal death as a problem that afflicts not just our bodies but our souls (Rev. 2:11). Death stems from a severed relationship with the one who is life: our Creator. This raises an important question: How alive are you right now?

The trouble with death is that it is not solvable by us. We may be able to delay death from a physical standpoint, but death turns out to be like winter in Russia: it’s always coming. Eternal life is not a do-it-yourself project. You can’t un-death yourself. And life’s final enemy screams out from the abyss: “You’re gonna need a bigger boat.”

## **The Devil: Something Laughing in the Darkness**

In the Bible, death is the domain of dark spiritual powers. Scripture says Christ died so that “he might

break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil” (Heb. 2:14). But to speak like this risks ridicule. To modern people, talk of Satan and demons may sound spooky and superstitious. “Nothing commends Satan to the modern mind,” writes Walter Wink. He is uncomfortable to speak of, like “a bone in the throat of modernity.”<sup>7</sup> As proof, a recent survey claims that 40 percent of American Christians think the devil is *not* a “living being,” but merely a “symbol of evil.”<sup>8</sup>

Why is this? One reason may be that Christians have sometimes said foolish things about the devil. Satan is occasionally depicted as almost an equal power to God. And in a related fashion, Christians sometimes describe the devil in ways that make him seem all-knowing or all-present. The Bible doesn’t do that. The fancy word for this error is “dualism” since it ends up with *two* spiritual powers (God and Satan) with nearly equal strength. Dualism makes good superhero movies, but it is bad theology.

As a kid growing up in the ’80s and ’90s, I remember listening to a song called “The Champion” by the Christian artist Carman. To understand the musical genre, imagine that an audiobook mated with an ’80s synthesizer and the child grew up to do fight commentary for the Ultimate Fighting Championship. (If you’re under thirty, YouTube it.) In “The Champion,” the contest is literally described as a prizefight between apparently equal adversaries: Christ and Satan. The boxing match is overseen by God the Father, who utters such maxims as “You shut your face, I wrote

the book!” Now, to be fair to Carman, the truth within the epic rap battle is that Jesus *is* victorious, but the misconception is that Satan is nearly as powerful as the divine Son of God.<sup>9</sup>

Between these two extremes—modern disbelief and a kooky dualism—resides the biblical position. Much mystery remains for Satan in the Bible. But some things can be said with confidence. Christians have always claimed that the devil is a creature. Only God is eternal. And since God is not the author of evil, the devil must have been created good originally. Unfortunately, as milk and mankind reveal when left alone for long enough—even good things can go bad. The Bible does not tell us exactly how that happened with the devil,<sup>10</sup> but, at some point, Satan and his minions fell.<sup>11</sup>

This does not mean, however, that we encounter demons flapping independently about the sky. In the Bible, dark spiritual power seems to need to be embodied in some way. Like the COVID-19 virus, evil spiritual powers are parasites that seek hosts. Thus, in Scripture, they are described as possessing persons, pigs, and political regimes. Satan enters Judas (Luke 22:3–6; John 13:27) who is called a “devil” (John 6:70). Satan gives his authority to the “beast” in Revelation, which is a symbol for the violent power of the Roman Empire (Rev. 13:4). And, on one occasion, some demons beg to be cast into a herd of swine (Matt. 8:31; Mark 5:12; Luke 8:32). It’s weird and, perhaps, it seems unbelievable to you.

Yet this desire for possessive and devouring unions may be another sign that evil spirits were originally

created good. After all, being fallen does not remove *our* desire to be one with other persons and groups. We still crave connection. But our brokenness renders these unions imperfect, codependent, and even abusive if we continue down dark paths. Fallenness turns union to possession and oppression. So, too, with evil spirits.

In J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*, Lord Voldemort seeks to unite his broken soul with physical objects (called horcruxes) in order to prolong his power. Analogously, evil spiritual power becomes incarnate in physical entities like exploitative corporate boards, violent or nationalistic political regimes, and profit-hungry tech companies that don't care what their anxiety-inducing algorithms do to people. This doesn't mean you can scream "Satan!" or "Possession!" every time you encounter discomfort or disagreement. (Some Christians have been too quick to smell sulfur around their enemies.) Nonetheless, you don't need to watch *The Exorcist* to see something demonic. Just look to the prescription drug companies that pumped 780 million painkillers into the state of West Virginia in just six years—an overdose-inducing feat that amounts to 390 pills per person.<sup>12</sup> Of course, those same opioids can be a blessing to suffering individuals. But the upside to this tragic problem merely illustrates my point: evil power is always a *corruption* of the good.<sup>13</sup>

But wait. Can we really expect modern people to believe in fallen spiritual powers? In one sense, that question is irrelevant. Evil spiritual powers do not depend on your belief for their existence. Satan does

some of his best work in cultures that disbelieve in him. Still, it bears noting that our incredulity toward evil spirits has little basis in consistency. After all, belief in God still hovers near 90 percent in places like the United States. And as Alvin Plantinga notes, it's odd to affirm the possibility of *one* spiritual being (God) while drawing the line firmly against all others.<sup>14</sup> Imagine if we did this with mammals, dinosaurs, or aliens. I mean, if you are willing to grant there could be one . . . why not others?

Disbelief in evil spirits may sometimes betray a form of racial or nationalistic prejudice. *We are not like those superstitious people in the "third-world,"* says the sophisticated Western person. And in the same moment, we congratulate ourselves for having moved past other prejudices. African theologian Esther Acolatse calls out this inconsistency.<sup>15</sup> After all, what is so bizarre about believing that certain creatures could be created good before falling into rebellion? Look in the mirror for evidence of such a species.

Despite our questions about Satan, all of us have heard the voice of an accuser whispering destructive words within our ears. And very few of us can look at something like the Holocaust and not wonder whether whole nations may give themselves over to a kind of possession. Who among us can gaze upon our planet—so full of beauty and bloodshed—and not wonder if the cosmos itself has a backstory that is longer, darker, and more complex than we can fathom? In the face of this mystery, it is possible, as Robert Jenson notes, to hear the voice of something out there “laughing at us.”<sup>16</sup>

We don't just have a death-predicament, we have a devil-problem too.

## Sin: A Suicide Machine

But that doesn't mean we can say, "The devil made me do it." In Scripture, death is not merely the work of demons, it is also "the wages of sin" (Rom. 6:23). Unfortunately, for many modern people, sin also sounds like an old-fashioned concept, and especially when combined with the idea of divine wrath. Surely, you might say, we've moved past the old notion of a vengeful God who demands blood atonement? After all, when we attend a concert or sporting event, no one begins by leading an animal to the front and slaying it for all to see (Ozzy Osbourne notwithstanding). So why does Paul link death to "sins" that deserve "wrath" (Eph. 2:1, 3)?

One answer is simple. Sin kills. It dehumanizes people, destroys creation, and defames God's name. Sin always carries consequences—even if these repercussions are sometimes no more than the natural outcomes of our actions. Case in point: If you drink a keg of beer, you will suffer the wrath of a hangover. But that's hardly because God is sending vindictive wrath-rays toward your forehead. In other cases, God's wrath over sin does seem more active, personal, and forward-looking—as when Jesus threatened something *worse* than millstones around the necks of those who harm "little ones" (Luke 17:2). In either case, the result is clear: sin ultimately leads to death more surely

than smoking to lung cancer, drunk driving to a DUI, Cheetos to orange fingers.

Still, the question remains: Why *must* death result from sin? If God is loving and powerful, why couldn't he simply overlook offenses? Why doesn't God simply forgive humanity just as a loving parent forgives their child without requiring death or blood atonement? I will return to the blood question in a later chapter. But suffice it to say that God doesn't get his jollies by watching creatures bleed out. The link between blood and atonement has a different purpose than cosmic sadism. Scripture teaches that God bears patiently with humans, even when we deserve judgment.

The LORD is gracious and compassionate,  
slow to anger and rich in love.

The LORD is good to all;  
he has compassion on all he has made.  
(Ps. 145:8–9)

But love cannot ignore evil forever. Part of holy love is a zeal for justice. For example, we would all agree that to torture puppies, light a national park on fire, and abuse children *ought* to carry penalties. For a court to excuse these actions would not be compassionate. It would highlight a corrupt system and a complicit judge. Imagine looking at the horrific crimes of a man like Harvey Weinstein and saying something like, "Because I am merciful, I am going to let you off with a warning." No. Love and justice are not antithetical to penalties.

So, too, with sin. If there is a problem with our modern viewpoint, it is summed up by the medieval theologian Anselm, when he remarks to a questioner, “You have not yet considered the exceeding gravity of sin.”<sup>17</sup> In the Bible, sin is not just a naughty action done by individuals or the breaking of an arbitrary rule. Sin piles up to become cosmic treason and it gathers steam to become an enslaving and oppressive power at both personal and systemic levels. When this happens, “Sin” takes on a capital S.

Parts of the Christian tradition (often conservative, white evangelicals) emphasize the *individual* aspects to our sin-problem: things like lying, lust, and adultery. Meanwhile, other camps (often more progressive and diverse ones) emphasize the social and systemic sides of sin: things like institutionalized racism, abusive power structures, and governments that become “beast-like” in oppressive ways (Rev. 13).<sup>18</sup> In reality, sin is both personal and social.<sup>19</sup> It entraps us like an unbreakable addiction or a cruel slave master.

To focus *only* on systemic injustice allows individuals to justify their faults while decrying institutions. Conversely, to focus only on individual sin allows the church to justify complicity in systems, companies, and political parties that become oppressive, even while we congratulate ourselves for being faithful spouses or hardworking, God-fearing citizens.<sup>20</sup> Sin is both individual and systemic in its implications; hence, Scripture cares about both personal morality and corporate justice.



## Shame: What It Feels Like to Be Naked

Another side effect of sin is not merely death, but also shame. After all, I have noted already that Adam and Eve do not drop physically dead when they disobey. Instead, they cover their genitals. That's shame for you. And if we miss this layer of our human problem, we will miss something crucial indeed. While guilt attaches to wrong actions, shame attaches to our personhood. Shame is the feeling not merely that I have done wrong but that I *am* wrong: worthless, unlovable, tainted, or defiled.<sup>21</sup> This makes shame insidious. Punishment or reparation may pay the debt of guilt, but shame clings to us like an ugly scar.

More terribly, we feel shame not just when we *do* wrong, but when others wrong us. The sexual assault victim feels ashamed of what was done to her. A bullied child feels shame for words shouted on the playground or posted on the Internet. One may be fat-shamed or slut-shamed regardless of one's weight or actions. And an elderly parent can feel shame for having lost his independence or the ability to control his bowels.

A biblical example of shame involves the woman Tamar in the Old Testament. We meet her in the reign of David. She was raped by her halfbrother, Amnon. And before being brutalized, Tamar cries out: "Don't force me! . . . Where could I get rid of my disgrace?" (2 Sam. 13:12–13). Tamar's question rings unanswered across college campuses, casting couches, and dark corners in the church basement. Where can one go to get rid of shame?<sup>22</sup>

Shame requires an unlikely cure. It can't simply be punished or defeated; it must be shared. It must be borne and then transformed, sometimes slowly, by an empowering and empathetic union—a union with one who reveals to us our true identity as precious beyond price. Disgrace requires a transformative entering in to the victim's experience. It cannot be fixed merely by punishing the guilty or forgiving the repentant.

It is no coincidence, then, that Jesus was crucified naked. Christian artwork can't handle this gritty reality, but the Gospels can: "They divided up his clothes by casting lots" (Matt. 27:35b). We know the Romans crucified their victims nude.<sup>23</sup> And the custom served a purpose: "The whole point of Roman crucifixion," writes Philip Cunningham, "was to reduce the victim to the status of a thing, stripping him of every vestige of human dignity, in order to discourage any challenging of the might of Rome."<sup>24</sup> Christ was therefore splayed out publicly before even his mother, female disciples, and a gawking crowd of friends and enemies alike. I can think of few things more humiliating.

Christ's naked death was even mocked in early graffiti. In what may be the earliest depiction of the crucifixion, a non-Christian artist derisively scratched a picture of a Christ-follower named "Alex" (Alexamenos) worshipping a figure on a cross. In the drawing, Jesus has the head of a donkey and the unmistakably naked buttocks of a human being. "Alexamenos worships his god," says the rude inscription. "Your savior is an 'Ass'" is the intended jest.

But shame was not the main takeaway of early Christians. Many early believers were slaves, women, and other marginalized persons in Roman society. In a stunning move, the church commandeered the shameful symbol of the cross. They hijacked the Roman propaganda and transformed it into a sign of triumph, empathy, love, and justice. Hebrews describes this holy hijacking when it asks its persecuted readers to fix their eyes on Jesus, who “endured the cross, scorning its shame” (Heb. 12:2).

Salvation is therefore spoken of as being *clothed* “with Christ” (Rom. 13:14)—a clothing that took place at baptism (Gal. 3:27). Hence the church began to baptize converts naked in imitation of the Christ who hung naked on the cross.<sup>25</sup> The meaning had nothing to do with the nudist exhibitionism of Woodstock or Burning Man. Rather, the metaphor of nakedness was transformed from a mark of shame to a metaphor of purity, innocence, and empowered vulnerability. To belong to Jesus was to be “naked” without shame (Gen. 2:25). “My Jesus bore my shame,” one might hear across the centuries, from both Tamar and Alexamenos alike. But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

## Conclusion

The point of this chapter has been only to highlight the problems that we face apart from Christ. What does Jesus save us from? To answer this question, I have undertaken a kind of 3D diagnosis of our human plight, like a cosmic CAT scan. Other layers could of course be

added. But for the sake of time, these four “slices” (sin, death, Satan, shame) are sufficient to prove the iconic line from *Jaws*. When it comes to all the challenges that face us, “We’re gonna need a bigger boat.”

The early Christian writer, Augustine (AD 354–430), knew this. He had wrestled with unbelief, sexual misdeeds, a broken home, persistent pride, and bouts of despair. For all those reasons, he came to view the cross as a “wooden raft” that allows us to sail the sea of life and death. Since we could not sail to God ourselves, Augustine writes, “the one we were longing to go to came here.” God made a “wooden raft for us to cross the sea on.”<sup>26</sup> Astonishingly, however, Jesus did not just send the boat; he climbed aboard himself as our good Captain.<sup>27</sup> The cross of King Jesus, Augustine claims, is the bigger boat we’ve been needing. The atonement reveals how serious our problems are and it provides a way through churning waters.

## ENGAGE THE TEXT

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To reflect on the human predicament apart from Christ, read the following passages and ask God to speak to you through his Word:

- Psalm 14
- Romans 3:9–26
- 1 John 3:1–8

## DISCUSS THE TEXT

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1. This chapter argues that the cross isn't simply a solution; it also reveals how deep our problems actually are apart from God's grace. After all, if the Son of God had to take on flesh and die in order to redeem us, our plight must have been serious indeed.
  - Do you think most people still have a sense that they need a Savior?
  - Or have most people shifted their focus from transcendent problems (e.g., separation from God) to more temporal and immediate ones?
2. Which aspect of our human plight has most haunted you? Which one do you have a tendency to downplay or ignore?
  - Death
  - The devil
  - Sin
  - Shame

3. According to Scripture, death is “the last enemy to be destroyed” (1 Cor. 15:26).
  - How have you experienced the sting of death in your own life?
  - How did the early church shift its terminology on death, and what meaning did this shift convey?
  - Why is it good news that Jesus truly died, and not merely that he truly resurrected?
4. The devil is another aspect of our human problem.
  - The chapter describes the extremes of modern disbelief and kooky dualism on views of Satan. To which extreme are you most prone?
  - How has the devil been depicted or thought of in the culture, family, or tradition in which you were raised?
  - How is it that Jesus overcomes the devil? Can his method of overcoming Satan give you cues on how we can do the same?
5. This chapter describes sin as an offense against God, our fellow humans, and the created order God has made. Sin is also described as both individual and systemic.
  - Why do you think we are tempted to denounce some sins and not others?
  - In reflecting upon your background, are there some sins that you have tended to focus on, and others you have tended to ignore?

- Why does sin sometimes seem to take on a capital S within the Scriptures?
6. Shame is yet another side effect of sin. Hence, Christ comes to save us from it.
- According to the chapter, what is shame and how is it distinguished from guilt?
  - How does Jesus deal with our shame problem?
  - Is there an area of your life where you feel burdened by the weight of shame? If you are comfortable, would you be willing to share that struggle in the context of a safe, Christ-honoring community?