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FIFTY REASONS WHY
JESUS CAME TO DIE

JOHN PIPER

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TO
Jesus Christ

Despised and rejected by men;
a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief . . .
we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.
But he was wounded for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his stripes we are healed.

All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned every one to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he opened not his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he opened not his mouth. . . .

He was cut off out of the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people. . . .
There was no deceit in his mouth.
Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him;
he has put him to grief.

THE PROPHET ISAIAH
CHAPTER 53, VERSES 3-10

INTRODUCTION

CHRIST AND THE CONCENTRATION CAMPS



The most important question of the twenty-first century is: Why did Jesus Christ come and die? To see this importance we must look beyond human causes. The ultimate answer to the question, Who killed Jesus? is: God did. It is a staggering thought. Jesus was his Son! But the whole message of the Bible leads to this conclusion.

GOD MEANT IT FOR GOOD

The Hebrew prophet Isaiah, centuries before Christ, said, “It was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief” (Isaiah 53:10). The Christian New Testament says, “[God] did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all” (Romans 8:32). “God put [Christ] forward . . . by his blood, to be received by faith” (Romans 3:25).

But how does this divine act relate to the horribly sinful actions of the men who killed Jesus? The answer given in the Bible is expressed in an early prayer: “There were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus . . . both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place” (Acts

4:27-28). The scope of this divine sovereignty takes our breath away. But it is also the key to our salvation. God planned it, and by the means of wicked men, he accomplished it. To paraphrase a word from the Jewish Torah: They meant it for evil, but God meant it for good (Genesis 50:20).

And since God meant it for good, we must look beyond human causes to the divine purpose. The central issue of Jesus' death is not the cause, but the purpose—the meaning. Human beings may have their reasons for wanting Jesus out of the way. But only God can design it for the good of the world. In fact, God's purposes for the world in the death of Jesus are unfathomable. I will try to describe fifty of them, but there will always be more to say. My aim is to let the Bible speak. This is where we hear the word of God. I hope that these pointers will set you on a quest to know more and more of God's great design in the death of his Son.

JESUS' DEATH WAS ABSOLUTELY UNIQUE

Why was the death of Jesus so powerful? He was convicted and condemned as a pretender to the throne of Rome. But in the next three centuries his death unleashed a power to suffer and to love that transformed the Roman Empire, and to this day is shaping the world. The answer is that the death of Jesus was absolutely unique. And his resurrection from the dead three days later was an act of God to vindicate what his death achieved.

His death was unique because he was more than a mere human. Not less. He was, as the ancient Nicene Creed says, "very God of very God." This is the testimony of those who knew him and were inspired by him to explain who he is. The apostle John referred to Christ as "the Word" and wrote, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the

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Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:1-2, 14).

Moreover he was utterly innocent in his suffering. Not just innocent of the charge of blasphemy, but of all sin. One of his closest disciples said, “He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth” (1 Peter 2:22). Add to this the fact that he embraced his own death with absolute authority. One of the most stunning statements Jesus ever made was about his own death and resurrection: “I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again” (John 10:17-18). The controversy about which humans killed Jesus is marginal. He chose to die. His heavenly Father ordained it. He embraced it.

THE PURPOSE OF HIS DEATH WAS VINDICATED BY THE RESURRECTION

God raised Jesus from the dead to show that he was in the right and to vindicate all his claims. It happened three days later. Early Sunday morning he rose from the dead. He appeared numerous times to his disciples for forty days before his ascension to heaven (Acts 1:3).

The disciples were slow to believe that it really happened. They were not gullible. They were down-to-earth tradesmen. They knew people did not rise from the dead. At one point Jesus insisted on eating fish to prove to them that he was not a ghost (Luke 24:39-43). This was not the resuscitation of a corpse. It was the resurrection of the God-man into an indestructible new life. The early church acclaimed him Lord of heaven and earth. Jesus had finished the work God gave him to do, and the resurrection was

the proof that God was satisfied. This book is about what Jesus' death accomplished for the world.

THE DEATH OF CHRIST AND THE CAMPS OF DEATH

It is a tragedy that the story of Christ's death has produced anti-Semitism against Jews and crusading violence against Muslims. We Christians are ashamed of many of our ancestors who did not act in the spirit of Christ. No doubt there are traces of this plague in our own souls. But true Christianity—which is radically different from Western culture, and may not be found in many Christian churches—renounces the advance of religion by means of violence. “My kingdom is not of this world,” Jesus said. “If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting” (John 18:36). The way of the cross is the way of suffering. Christians are called to die, not kill, in order to show the world how they are loved by Christ.

True Christian love humbly and boldly commends Christ, no matter what it costs, to all peoples as the only saving way to God. Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). But let it be crystal-clear: To humiliate or scorn or despise or persecute with prideful putdowns or pogroms or crusades or concentration camps is *not* Christian. These were and are, very simply and horribly, disobedience to Jesus Christ. Unlike many of his so-called followers after him, he prayed from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).

The death of Jesus Christ is the most important event in history, and the most explosive political and personal issue of the twenty-first century. The denial that Christ was crucified is like the denial of the Holocaust. For some it's simply too horrific to affirm.

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For others it's an elaborate conspiracy to coerce religious sympathy. But the deniers live in a historical dreamworld. Jesus Christ suffered unspeakably and died. So did Jews.

I am not the first to link Calvary and the concentration camps—the suffering of Jesus Christ and the suffering of Jewish people. In his heart-wrenching, innocence-shattering, mouth-shutting book *Night*, Elie Wiesel tells of his experience as a teenager with his father in the concentration camps of Auschwitz, Buna, and Buchenwald. There was always the threat of “the selection”—the taking away of the weak to be killed and burned in the ovens.

At one point—and only one—Wiesel links Calvary and the camps. He tells of an old rabbi, Akiba Dumer.

Akiba Dumer left us, a victim of the selection. Lately, he had wandered among us, his eyes glazed, telling everyone of his weakness: “I can’t go on. . . . It’s all over. . . .” It was impossible to raise his morale. He didn’t listen to what we told him. He could only repeat that all was over for him, that he could no longer keep up the struggle, that he had no strength left, nor faith. Suddenly his eyes would become blank, nothing but two open wounds, two pits of terror.¹

Then Wiesel makes this provocative comment: “Poor Akiba Dumer, if he could have gone on believing in God, if he could have seen a proof of God in this Calvary, he would not have been taken by the selection.”² I will not presume to put any words in Elie Wiesel’s mouth. I am not sure what he meant. But it presses the question: Why the link between Calvary—the place where Jesus died—and the concentration camp?

When I ask this question, I am not thinking of cause or blame. I am thinking of meaning and hope. Is there a way that Jewish suffering may find, not its cause, but its final meaning in the suffer-

ing of Jesus Christ? Is it possible to think, not of Christ's death leading to Auschwitz, but of Auschwitz leading to an understanding of Christ's death? Is the link between Calvary and the camps a link of unfathomable empathy? Perhaps only Jesus, in the end, can know what happened during the "one long night"³ of Jewish suffering. And perhaps a generation of Jewish people, whose grandparents endured their own noxious crucifixion, will be able, as no others, to grasp what happened to the Son of God at Calvary. I leave it as a question. I do not know.

But this I know: Those alleged "Christians" who built the camps never knew the love that moved Jesus Christ toward Calvary. They never knew the Christ who, instead of killing to save a culture, died to save the world. But there are some Christians—the true Christians—who have seen the meaning of the death of Jesus Christ and have been broken and humbled by his suffering. Could it be that these, perhaps better than many, might be able to see and at least begin to fathom the suffering of Jewish people?

What an irony that Christians have been anti-Semitic! Jesus and all his early followers were Jews. People from every group in Palestine were involved in his crucifixion (not just Jews), and people from every group attempted to stop it (including Jews). God himself was the chief Actor in the death of his Son, so that the main question is not, "Which humans brought about the death of Jesus?" but "What did the death of Jesus bring about for humans—including Jews and Muslims and Buddhists and Hindus and nonreligious secularists—and all people everywhere?"

When all is said and done, the most crucial question is: Why? Why did Jesus come to die? Not why in the sense of *cause*, but why in the sense of *purpose*. What did Christ achieve by his death?

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Why did he have to suffer so much? What great thing was happening on Calvary for the world?

That's what the rest of this book is about. I have gathered from the New Testament fifty reasons why Jesus came to die. Not fifty causes, but fifty purposes. Infinitely more important than who killed Jesus is the question: What did God achieve for sinners like us in sending his Son to die?

FIFTY REASONS WHY
JESUS CAME TO DIE



TO ABSORB THE WRATH OF GOD



*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a
curse for us—for it is written,
“Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.”*

GALATIANS 3:13

*God put [Christ] forward as a propitiation by his blood,
to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness,
because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.*

ROMANS 3:25

*In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us
and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.*

1 JOHN 4:10

If God were not *just*, there would be no *demand* for his Son to suffer and die. And if God were not *loving*, there would be no *willingness* for his Son to suffer and die. But God is both just and loving. Therefore his love is willing to meet the demands of his justice.

God’s law demanded, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:5). But we have all loved other things more. This is what sin is—dishonoring God by preferring other things over him, and acting on those preferences. Therefore, the Bible says, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). We glorify what we enjoy most. And it isn’t God.

Therefore sin is not small, because it is not against a small Sovereign. The seriousness of an insult rises with the dignity of the one insulted. The Creator of the universe is infinitely worthy of respect and admiration and loyalty. Therefore, failure to love him is not trivial—it is treason. It defames God and destroys human happiness.

Since God is just, he does not sweep these crimes under the rug of the universe. He feels a holy wrath against them. They deserve to be punished, and he has made this clear: “For the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). “The soul who sins shall die” (Ezekiel 18:4).

There is a holy curse hanging over all sin. Not to punish would be unjust. The demeaning of God would be endorsed. A lie would reign at the core of reality. Therefore, God says, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them” (Galatians 3:10; Deuteronomy 27:26).

But the love of God does not rest with the curse that hangs over all sinful humanity. He is not content to show wrath, no matter how holy it is. Therefore God sends his own Son to absorb his wrath and bear the curse for all who trust him. “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (Galatians 3:13).

This is the meaning of the word “propitiation” in the text quoted above (Romans 3:25). It refers to the removal of God’s wrath by providing a substitute. The substitute is provided by God himself. The substitute, Jesus Christ, does not just cancel the wrath; he absorbs it and diverts it from us to himself. God’s wrath is just, and it was spent, not withdrawn.

Let us not trifle with God or trivialize his love. We will never stand in awe of being loved by God until we reckon with the seriousness of our sin and the justice of his wrath against us. But when, by grace, we waken to our unworthiness, then we may look at the suffering and death of Christ and say, “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the [wrath-absorbing] *propitiation* for our sins” (1 John 4:10).

TO PLEASE HIS HEAVENLY FATHER



*Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him;
he has put him to grief.*

Isaiah 53:10

*Christ loved us and gave himself up for us,
a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*

Ephesians 5:2

Jesus did not wrestle his angry Father to the floor of heaven and take the whip out of his hand. He did not force him to be merciful to humanity. His death was not the begrudging consent of God to be lenient to sinners. No, what Jesus did when he suffered and died was the Father's idea. It was a breathtaking strategy, conceived even before creation, as God saw and planned the history of the world. That is why the Bible speaks of God's "purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began" (2 Timothy 1:9).

Already in the Jewish Scriptures the plan was unfolding. The prophet Isaiah foretold the sufferings of the Messiah, who was to take the place of sinners. He said that the Christ would be "smitten by God" in our place.

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our

iniquities. . . . All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:4-6)

But what is most astonishing about this substitution of Christ for sinners is that it was God's idea. Christ did not intrude on God's plan to punish sinners. God planned for him to be there. One Old Testament prophet says, "It was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief" (Isaiah 53:10).

This explains the paradox of the New Testament. On the one hand, the suffering of Christ is an outpouring of God's wrath because of sin. But on the other hand, Christ's suffering is a beautiful act of submission and obedience to the will of the Father. So Christ cried from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). And yet the Bible says that the suffering of Christ was a fragrance to God. "Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Ephesians 5:2).

Oh, that we might worship the terrible wonder of the love of God! It is not sentimental. It is not simple. For our sake God did the impossible: He poured out his wrath on his own Son—the one whose submission made him infinitely unworthy to receive it. Yet the Son's very willingness to receive it was precious in God's sight. The wrath-bearer was infinitely loved.

TO LEARN OBEDIENCE AND BE PERFECTED



*Although he was a son, he learned obedience
through what he suffered.*

Hebrews 5:8

*For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist,
in bringing many sons to glory,
should make the founder of their salvation
perfect through suffering.*

Hebrews 2:10

The very book in the Bible that says Christ “learned obedience” through suffering, and that he was “made perfect” through suffering, also says that he was “without sin.” “In every respect [Christ] has been tempted as we are, *yet without sin*” (Hebrews 4:15).

This is the consistent teaching of the Bible. Christ was sinless. Although he was the divine Son of God, he was really human, with all our temptations and appetites and physical weaknesses. There was hunger (Matthew 21:18) and anger and grief (Mark 3:5) and pain (Matthew 17:12). But his heart was perfectly in love with God, and he acted consistently with that love: “He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth” (1 Peter 2:22).

Therefore, when the Bible says that Jesus “learned obedience through what he suffered,” it doesn’t mean that he learned to stop disobeying. It means that with each new trial he learned in prac-

tice—and in pain—what it means to obey. When it says that he was “made perfect through suffering,” it doesn’t mean that he was gradually getting rid of defects. It means that he was gradually fulfilling the perfect righteousness that he had to have in order to save us.

That’s what he said at his baptism. He didn’t need to be baptized because he was a sinner. Rather, he explained to John the Baptist, “Thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15).

The point is this: *If the Son of God had gone from incarnation to the cross without a life of temptation and pain to test his righteousness and his love, he would not be a suitable Savior for fallen man.* His suffering not only absorbed the wrath of God. It also fulfilled his true humanity and made him able to call us brothers and sisters (Hebrews 2:17).

TO ACHIEVE HIS OWN
RESURRECTION FROM
THE DEAD



*Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead
our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep,
by the blood of the eternal covenant,
equip you with everything good that you may do his will.*

Hebrews 13:20-21

The death of Christ did not merely precede his resurrection—it was the price that obtained it. That’s why Hebrews 13:20 says that God brought him from the dead “by the blood of the eternal covenant.”

The “blood of the . . . covenant” is the blood of Jesus. As he said, “This is my blood of the covenant” (Matthew 26:28). When the Bible speaks of the blood of Jesus, it refers to his death. No salvation would be accomplished by the mere bleeding of Jesus. His bleeding *to death* is what makes his blood-shedding crucial.

Now what is the relationship between this shedding of Jesus’ blood and the resurrection? The Bible says he was raised not just *after* the blood-shedding, but *by* it. This means that what the death of Christ accomplished was so full and so perfect that the resurrection was the *reward* and *vindication* of Christ’s achievement in death.

The wrath of God was satisfied with the suffering and death

of Jesus. The holy curse against sin was fully absorbed. The obedience of Christ was completed to the fullest measure. The price of forgiveness was totally paid. The righteousness of God was completely vindicated. All that was left to accomplish was the public declaration of God's endorsement. This he gave by raising Jesus from the dead.

When the Bible says, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins" (1 Corinthians 15:17), the point is not that the resurrection is the price paid for our sins. The point is that the resurrection proves that the death of Jesus is an all-sufficient price. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then his death was a failure, God did not vindicate his sin-bearing achievement, and we are still in our sins.

But in fact "Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father" (Romans 6:4). The success of his suffering and death was vindicated. And if we put our trust in Christ, we are *not* still in our sins. For "*by* the blood of the eternal covenant," the Great Shepherd has been raised and lives forever.

TO SHOW THE WEALTH OF
GOD'S LOVE AND
GRACE FOR SINNERS



*One will scarcely die for a righteous person—
though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—
but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners,
Christ died for us.*

ROMANS 5:7-8

*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son,
that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*

JOHN 3:16

*In him we have redemption through his blood,
the forgiveness of our trespasses,
according to the riches of his grace.*

EPHESIANS 1:7

The measure of God's love for us is shown by two things. One is the degree of his sacrifice in saving us from the penalty of our sin. The other is the degree of unworthiness that we had when he saved us.

We can hear the measure of his sacrifice in the words, "He gave his only son" (John 3:16). We also hear it in the word *Christ*. This is a name based on the Greek title *Christos*, or "Anointed One," or "Messiah." It is a term of great dignity. The Messiah was to be the King of Israel. He would conquer the

Romans and bring peace and security to Israel. Thus the person whom God sent to save sinners was his own divine Son, his *only* Son, and the Anointed King of Israel—indeed the king of the world (Isaiah 9:6-7).

When we add to this consideration the horrific death by crucifixion that Christ endured, it becomes clear that the sacrifice the Father and the Son made was indescribably great—even infinite, when you consider the distance between the divine and the human. But God chose to make this sacrifice to save us.

The measure of his love for us increases still more when we consider our unworthiness. “Perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that *while we were still sinners*, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:7-8). We deserved divine punishment, not divine sacrifice.

I have heard it said, “God didn’t die for frogs. So he was responding to our value as humans.” This turns grace on its head. We are *worse* off than frogs. They have not sinned. They have not rebelled and treated God with the contempt of being inconsequential in their lives. God did not have to die for frogs. They aren’t bad enough. We are. Our debt is so great, only a divine sacrifice could pay it.

There is only one explanation for God’s sacrifice for us. It is not us. It is “the riches of his grace” (Ephesians 1:7). It is all free. It is not a response to our worth. It is the overflow of his infinite worth. In fact, that is what divine love is in the end: a passion to enthrall undeserving sinners, at great cost, with what will make us supremely happy forever, namely, his infinite beauty.

NOTES

1. Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982, originally 1960), p. 72.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 32.