

THE DAY THE REVOLUTION BEGAN

Rethinking the Meaning of Jesus' Crucifixion

by **Tom Wright**

SPCK, 2016

Part 1: Introduction

Chapter 1: A Vitally Important Scandal: Why the Cross?

The first Christians saw Jesus' crucifixion, not as just another execution, but as the trigger of a revolution that had implications for the whole world. It meant more than being able to be saved from personal sins and go to heaven.

The cross, even as a symbol, still has enormous emotive power. Why is this? And why did Jesus die? What does it mean that he died 'for our sins'? What elements in the minds of first-century people shaped their understanding of it?

Chapter 2: Wrestling with the Cross, Then and Now

How did what was popularly viewed as a 'scandal' and 'folly' become so central so quickly? And it did. Christian teachers in the first 200 years celebrated the cross, but didn't define it in terms of how it benefited believers. Nor has it been pinned down in later generations. That's good, because it's too big to reduce to a simple formula. Indeed, the danger is that we over-simplify it by using dodgy illustrations.

A brief summary of church history with respect to the cross. The dogmatic disputes of the first five centuries did not touch on this aspect of Christian truth. The creeds stick at saying that Jesus died 'for us', but don't elaborate. Two themes were commonly combined in a loose way: first, Christ won a great victory over the power of evil at the cross; second, in some sense he died 'in our place'.

Detailed theories didn't begin to emerge till after the East-West split, 1000 years ago. In the West, Anselm (11th c) developed the 'satisfaction' theory—which the East never embraced (God's honour was impugned by our sin and must be satisfied). Abelard, also in the West, focused more on the 'moral example' theory. The Eastern churches saw the cross as a mere prelude to the resurrection, without digging any deeper.

Today's Western debates take place in the wake of the Reformation and its more recent look at the subject, though the Reformers tended to neglect both this and eschatology. The two are connected: *how* we are saved is shaped by what we are saved *for*.

The Reformers focused on challenging the then-popular idea of purgatory, and tended not to challenge the linked ideas of heaven and hell as ultimate destinations. The Reformers insisted that post-mortem purgatorial punishment for the still-sinful believer was unthinkable because punishment had already been inflicted on Jesus in the sinner's place. Thus penal substitution became an anti-purgatory weapon. They did not challenge the linked aspect: that the death of Jesus pacified the divine wrath (though they were keen not to portray a kind Jesus and an angry Father).

The Reformers were also challenging the Mass, especially the notion that the priest at the altar was sacrificing Jesus all over again. Jesus, they said, died in our place once for all. The Reformers, then, in grappling with the atonement, were trying to give biblical answers to *mediaeval* questions: 'They were wrestling with the question of how the angry

God of the late mediaeval period might be pacified, both here (through the Mass?) and hereafter (in purgatory?). To both questions they replied: no, God's wrath was already pacified through the death of Jesus.'

Their focus on these questions kept them from looking at the ones the biblical text suggests. Certainly they failed to address the traditional heaven/hell framework—which the Eastern church has never accepted.

The Enlightenment drove a wedge between 'heaven' and 'earth'. The Western churches colluded with this, and 'going home to heaven' became a popular focus, alongside an emphasis on the personal aspects of piety. The idea of the gospel changing the world had been all but lost.

At the same time, society embraced Deism, then Epicureanism, further separating 'this-worldly' aspects from 'spiritual' ones. Atonement theologies addressed the latter aspects only, leaving the former to be dealt with under 'the problem of evil'. The result was that the cross was not seen as being relevant to social and political evil, just personal sin. But in Christian theology God deals with all evil at the cross.

Scandalous—For the Wrong Reasons?

Today, many find the cross offensive. They don't believe in 'sin', so a cross claiming to deal with it is irrelevant. Others see the cross as a symbol of fear—demonstrated in 'Christian' persecution of people of other faiths. Constantine and the Ku Klux Klan are seen as examples.

Many believers, too, are reacting against appeasement ideas linked to the cross (e.g. opposition to '*and on that cross, as Jesus died / the wrath of God was satisfied*'). It portrays God as a bloodthirsty tyrant. So they focus on other biblical angles on the cross.

There is much confusion. People tend to overlook the Bible's clear teaching that, as a result of the cross, something happened as a result of which the world is a different place: it was a revolution. They also miss the Bible's 'bigger picture' of God's kingdom being inaugurated.

A modern generation jaded by widespread violence in the world is alarmed to see signs of the same culture of violence and death in some expressions of Christianity. Certainly the Bible contains some horrific violence. Some wonder whether this justifies the use of violence ourselves. If God used it on Jesus to achieve his ends, maybe we can do the same? To some, it justifies the death penalty and dropping bombs on terrorists.

There have been two main alternatives to 'punishment' models of the atonement. One is that God, in Christ, won a victory over the dark 'powers' that had usurped his rule over the world. This was popular in the early church and has Bible support. But *how* did the cross achieve that? And if it is true, why is there still so much evil in the world?

The other is the 'moral example' approach: the cross is the supreme example of love, prompting us to love in the same way. This, too, has biblical support. But unless there is a reason *why* Jesus had to die that way, how could his death be an example of love?

Other related topics currently popular include (1) an outright rejection of violence (Christian pacifism); (2) the notion that the Father suffered with the Son on the cross; (3) the idea that the 'human' Jesus suffered on the cross but the 'divine' Jesus did not. These show that atonement must cause us to look again at the Trinity.

The NT presents a remarkably varied picture of the cross, so we need to take a closer look at it.

Chapter 3: The Cross in Its First-Century Setting

There are three first-century contexts within which the cross finds its meaning. The first is the *Graeco-Roman society of the time*.

Homer's *Iliad* begins with 'wrath'. It portrays petulant and angry gods, liable to zap those who displease them, and 'salvation' is escape from such a fate. Virgil's *Aeneid* begins with 'arms'. Wrath and arms were the way the first-century world was.

It was a violent society, with crucifixion a part of it. And everyone knew that crucifixion was the lowest point possible, not just physically, but socially and politically, too. Rome didn't invent it, but quickly made it their own. It was the most harsh and degrading death possible. It was also a way of mocking a victim's political pretensions; 'You want to be high and lifted up? OK, we'll fix it for you.' The sign 'King of the Jews' put on Jesus' cross had this intention.

Greek and Roman literature of the time (e.g. 6 of Euripides's plays) had many examples of the idea of *someone dying for someone else*. These people were seen as dying a noble death—but nobody would have seen a crucifixion as possibly having a noble element.

Within the Jewish World

The second context for the death of Jesus is the early Jewish world.

Jews' lives revolved round the annual festivals, especially Passover. It celebrated the deliverance from slavery and Egypt and the eventual settlement in the Promised Land. It was a freedom festival, and Jews looked forward to a greater future deliverance. Because Jesus himself chose Passover to do what he had to do, leading to the cross, early believers used Passover as the main lens for interpreting his death.

Israel's sins had led to the exile. While this had technically ended, continued foreign domination meant that, in one sense, it hadn't ended, and a further Passover-type deliverance was needed. And maybe also another 'Day of Atonement' to deal with the sins that had led to their oppression in the first place.

Some Jews anticipated a time of suffering ahead, but they didn't link that with the promised Messiah.

Approaching the New Testament

The first 50 years of the church saw an explosion of ideas as believers tried to express what the death of Jesus involved. The four Gospels have different emphases from the NT letters, for example. Christians believed that Jesus' death was 'in accordance with the Scriptures' (1 Cor 15:3)—but in what sense? And 'sacrifice' was a notion attached to his death, so the Temple sacrificial system must have been in view, though it is not easy to bottom out how it was interpreted.

In what follows, the word 'atonement' will be used sparingly, because of the huge range of meanings commonly given to it.

Part 2: "In Accordance with the Bible" *The Stories of Israel*

Chapter 4: The Covenant of Vocation

Some theories about what the cross achieved have built on wrong premises. One is that what we need is help to get to heaven, whereas the NT insists that the divine plan is 'to sum up...everything in heaven and on earth' in the Messiah. A wrong diagnosis of the problem means the wrong 'treatment' is applied. So we have...

- *A Platonised goal*: 'going to heaven' away from this earth—and 'fellowship with God' in the meantime.
- *A moralising diagnosis*: the problem is sins (bad behaviour, deserving punishment).
- *A paganised solution*: an angry deity pacified by human sacrifice.

The real goal, however, is not heaven but the 'new heaven and new earth'. And the real problem is not sin (the breaking of moral codes) but *idolatry* and the distortion of humanness that it produces. The true goal is a *renewed human vocation* within God's renewed creation.

We need to get away from the 'works contract' enshrined in the Westminster Confession of 1646. It holds that we failed to keep God's behaviour-code perfectly. The penalty was death; we were heading for hell. Jesus obeyed the moral code perfectly and, in his death, paid the penalty on behalf of the rest of the human race. If we believe in him we benefit from his accomplishment and go to heaven, where we will enjoy eternal fellowship with God.

The first three chapters of Romans are commonly interpreted to undergird this. 'Righteousness' there is taken as the moral status we would have had if we had kept the code perfectly, and the status we can now have by faith—the righteousness of Christ is available as a gift. But that is not what Romans is about at all!

The Bible offers not a 'works contract' but a covenant of *vocation*: for humans to be God's image-bearers, 'reflecting the Creator's wise stewardship into the world and reflecting the praises of all creation back to its maker.' Those who do this are the 'royal priesthood', operating in the Temple that creation is. But humans have instead given worship and allegiance to forces within creation itself: and that is *idolatry*. Moral failure is just a small part of that greater fall.

In failing this way we have handed over our power and authority to evil forces (like money, sex and power), which ruin lives, spoil creation and turn the world into hell.

Called to the Royal Priesthood

This human vocation appears in Revelation (1:5-6; 5:9-10; 20:6). The first two references indicate that Jesus' death has served to achieve this goal. The third one pictures the 'new heaven and new earth' where this is worked out. 'The priestly vocation consists of summing up the praises of creation before the Creator; the royal vocation, in turn, means reflecting God's wisdom and justice into the world.'

Some don't like the 'royal' bit, because of corrupt rulers throughout history. But Jesus spoke of God becoming King, and his is a kingdom of a different kind altogether. 'Priesthood', too, is despised by some because of its history of corruption, power and abuse. But the priesthood God has in mind for us is pure and good!

Communities of Reconciled Worshippers

Two famous Pauline passages also link the death of Jesus with a renewal of vocation. One is 2 Cor 5:21, which is not, in context, about the 'works contract', as it is usually made out to be. Instead, the death of Jesus, reconciling people to God, brings about the renewal of their human vocation—here, specifically, the apostolic vocation.

The other is Gal 3:13. Here Paul is not saying that Messiah's death brings us back into fellowship with God. Instead, by it the road-block ('the curse') has been removed so that God's promises to Abraham of a worldwide family can now be realised.

Rom 5:17 takes a similar line. Here, the obedience of Christ, compared with Adam's disobedience, has led, not to 'going to heaven' or even the mere forgiveness of sins, but to our ability to 'reign in life' as God's regents.

In Romans more generally, and especially in chapters 1-2, Paul identifies the main problem not as 'sin' but as idolatry: a failure of *worship*. Humans give away their power to created forces, which then move in to rule them, bringing slavery and death—the corruption and destruction of God's good world. It is fundamentally this that Jesus saves us from. 'Sin' is a symptom of the deeper problem.

Chapter 5: 'In All the Scriptures'

The NT's 'kingdom of priests' vocabulary harks back to Genesis 1-2, claiming that the original project is now back on track. It also echoes Israel's vocation to be 'a priestly kingdom and a holy nation' (Ex 19:4-6). The prophets expressed this often (e.g. Is 49:6-7; 60:1-3); Israel would be a light for the Gentiles, to bring them, too, into their true vocation.

The OT is a story looking for an appropriate ending. It has many loose ends, and no 'happy every after' ending.

Israel and Adam

The *exile* is the major theme of the OT. Not just the one in Babylon, but also the many sub-sets of that idea. The patriarchs spend time in Egypt. King David is exiled for a while. The northern tribes end up dispersed in Assyria. Then Judah are taken to Babylon: *the exile*.

From there, some returned. But they never really regained lasting independence. The prophecies of a great and glorious return from exile were not fulfilled in any meaningful way. And the post-exilic prophets suggested that God himself had not yet returned to join the returnees. Daniel (9:24) suggests that the exile will in fact last for seventy

weeks of years. Against this background, the Jews lived in hope of its ending. It was, of course, Jesus who would achieve that—and it is *vital to view his death within this OT context*.

The early Christians, in writing about Jesus' death, drew on a variety of OT metaphors: redemption (from slavery), justification (a law-court picture), and sacrifice (a Temple picture). These, and others, indicate what is meant by Jesus' death being 'in accordance with the Bible'. It has its roots in *the OT story*, and only as we grasp this will we understand the meaning of its being 'for our sins'.

'The story of Israel and its land is set in *deliberate parallel to the story of Adam and Eve in the garden*.' Abraham and Sarah were called to undo the problem of Adam and Eve. The promised land was to be the new Eden: a place of life, of the divine presence, and an advance signpost for something much greater—the whole world brought under God's rule.

But Israel proved to be part of the problem, not the answer to it. So the prophets began to see that, just as God had intended little Israel to reach the big world, he would now raise up a remnant within Israel—perhaps a remnant of one—to reach Israel as a whole. One way or another, God would remain faithful to his covenant and achieve the 'forgiveness of sins'.

'Sin' and 'Exile' in a Biblical Framework

'Sin' is much misunderstood. We tend to limit it to personal misdemeanours—usually somebody else's—while overlooking major issues of injustice and oppression. Paul says Messiah died 'for our sins in accordance with the Bible'. So what did he have in mind by 'sin' in this Bible context?

The Greek *hamartia* means 'missing the mark'—a broader concept than a fussy list of dos and don'ts. In the Bible as a whole, it is the outworking of our fundamental idolatry and our failure to be God's image-bearers. At root is a failure of *responsibility* to fulfil our intended role as kings and priests in God's creation. We have handed over our power to dark forces, behind which is one dominant evil, which we may call the devil, the satan, or 'sin'. This is the sin (singular) that needs dealing with if things are to be turned round. Our sins (plural) are simply the expressions of the dominance of sin (singular) resulting from our loss of vocation through idolatry.

Exile was, for Israel, a kind of corporate national *death*, the inevitable result of 'sin'—their rejection of the mandate given them by God to be his kingdom of priests. The undoing of exile would thus be, at once, the 'forgiveness of sins', a new life the other side of 'death' and the restoration of the divine presence. This is not just an 'illustration' of spiritual realities to come with Jesus, but 'part of the story in which Jesus and his followers were still living.'

Jesus' death brought that long story to its long-awaited goal—and this is what is meant by it being 'in accordance with the Bible', as Jesus explained on the Emmaus road in Luke 24.

Chapter 6: The Divine Presence and the Forgiveness of Sins

God's personal presence is a key biblical theme: Eden, appearances to the patriarchs (Bethel), the meeting-place that was the Tabernacle.

Presence and Glory

The Ark of the Covenant becomes important in NT thinking, with its lid—the *place of meeting* (Greek *hilasterion*).

When, in the OT, David wanted to build a 'house' to give the Ark a more permanent home, God said that, on the contrary, he (God) would provide David with a house, meaning a *family*. Solomon's Temple would only be a signpost to the ultimate fulfilment of God's promise; David's 'seed' would somehow be a 'son' to God (2 Sam 7:11-14). Meanwhile, God's presence was tangible at the inauguration of the Temple.

The destruction of that Temple was, according to Ezekiel, only possible because God's presence had left it. But in chapter 43 he speaks also of God's returning to a rebuilt Temple, with promises indicating something altogether better than the one built by the returnees from exile. There are other prophetic passages, like Isaiah 53, in that context: one person suffering and dying on behalf of the many. But Jews never saw the divine presence as gracing either that Temple or Herod's Temple. The *shekinah* was missing.

The NT writers say that *Jesus* is the new Tabernacle/Temple: he ‘tabernacled’ among us (Jn 1). In him the divine presence had returned at last. And the glory of that presence, according to John, was fully unveiled at the cross.

Jews of the Second Temple period looked forward to God’s coming to sort things out. They had no thoughts of heaven and hell; they looked for the *renewal of creation* and the worldwide presence of God. One phrase used to refer to this whole scenario was ‘the forgiveness of sins’. If exile (which was the result of sin) was to be undone, sin would have to be forgiven (Lam 4:22; Is 40:1-2). Jer 31 portrays the joyful returning exiles, returning on the basis that God has said, ‘I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sins no more’ (31:31-34).

To develop this we need to note that (1) God had promised to come back as King. (2) The promised redemption would be in the context of suffering. (3) It would be the divine covenant *love* that brought about the forgiveness of sins and the end of exile. Here we note the first of these (the other two will be covered in chapter 7)...

Kingdom of God

‘Your God reigns’ (Is 52:7) epitomised Israel’s expectation, often declared in the midst of contrary circumstances. It is ‘kingdom of God’ language. Deliverance from exile would be a new Exodus. The first one (Egypt) had not involved ‘forgiveness of sins’, because sin had not been its cause. But the Babylonian exile had been the direct result of sin. So ‘forgiveness of sins and the overthrow of the enslaving power would belong exactly together.’

Daniel 2, 7 and 9 were prominent in Jewish thought at the time of Jesus. They portray a succession of world empires, followed by God’s own kingdom being introduced. When Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God, which he did a lot, it would conjure up this context in people’s minds. God would therefore, they saw, accomplish the deliverance and bring in his kingdom through acting to ‘finish transgression, put an end to sin, atone for iniquity.’

Chapter 7: Suffering, Redemption and Love

Daniel (e.g. 12:1) suggests that when God intervened to end the exile, it would happen through a time of intense suffering for God’s people—or for a sub-group within them. Albert Schweitzer called these sufferings the ‘messianic woes’. The same theme occurs in some psalms (e.g. Ps 2). No Jews before Christ’s time, however, saw the Messiah as being a sub-group of one who would suffer this way.

In the OT, only Isaiah 53 presents the suffering as the *means*, and not simply the *context*, of the expected deliverance, the forgiveness of sins. This notion of redemptive suffering is new there. And in the NT this passage is often used as a scriptural clue to the meaning of Jesus’ death. But some Christians have taken it out of its *covenantal* context and put it into a pagan one.

The books of Maccabees record an application of Isaiah 53 in the 160s BC when the Jews were overrun by the paganising Syrians under Antiochus Epiphanes. The hope was expressed that the death of the martyrs would absorb the suffering that otherwise might touch the whole nation. The language of ransom and sacrifice is prominent in these writings, too. So the idea of ‘dying for others’ was present in Jewish thought at the time of Jesus.

Divine Faithfulness and Covenant Love

When God redeemed his covenant people it would be because of his faithful love. His love for them was unshakable, and is a popular OT theme, often linked with the promised deliverance from exile.

Some passages show that God’s love for Israel will be extended to embrace the nations, who will have their own Exodus (e.g. Is 42:6-7). In pagan stories of noble death on behalf of others, it was always humans who managed to avert the punishment or tragedy; but here it is God alone, acting in covenant love, who deals with the issue.

Redemption and Forgiveness of Sins

So we have all these themes intermingling as the time of Jesus drew near. Three aspects are particularly relevant to our subject.

1. What God’s people needed was, from one point of view, the ‘end of exile’ and, from another, the ‘forgiveness of sins’ that had caused that exile.

2. The long-awaited event would be a new Exodus, the final great Passover.
3. The redemption, when it came, would be through the personal, powerful work of Israel's God himself.

There are many open questions as to how these three relate, and to what agents they point, as well as about the deeper significance of Isaiah 40-55, but they were available to the early church as interpretive tools in trying to explain the death of Jesus. It looks as if the 'servant', anointed with God's Spirit, is somehow embodying God's covenant love. The first Christians seized on these ideas to show how Christ died 'in accordance with the Bible'.

Part 3: The Revolutionary Rescue

Chapter 8: New Goal, New Humanity

In Luke 24 Jesus set the events of his recent death and resurrection firmly in the context of the OT Scriptures (v26-27). Israel's hope of a this-worldly new creation had not been replaced by a 'take you away to heaven' alternative; it had been fulfilled, Jesus said. Jewish expectations had been radically redefined around the person of Jesus and his achievement.

What is the calling of humans in this promised new world? It will be the working out of the original vocation, ruling on God's behalf in a world founded on total love and justice. Nothing to do with floating off to 'heaven', away from it all.

OT concepts of what the needed redemption would involve have been replaced in the NT by drastic new interpretations gathered around the person of Jesus. We see this redefinition taking place, first, in Luke's account of John the Baptist and some of the things said about him by the likes of Zechariah. All are located within the context of 'the redemption of Israel'—which would mean, in turn, the blessing of the whole world. The 'forgiveness of sins' would free the nations from their own slaveries. "'Forgiveness of sins" is to be seen *both* as the summary of the redemptive blessings promised to Israel *and* as the key blessing that will enable non-Jews to be welcomed into the one family.'

But the 'forgiveness of sins' is given a personal application, too (Acts 3:26). In particular, the Jewish leaders needed to repent of their refusal to recognise Jesus as the Messiah. And Peter's message at the house of Cornelius offers forgiveness of sins to the Gentiles who believe in him (Acts 10:41-42). As a result, they become fully-functioning image-bearing human beings in God's world now, and more completely in the future.

It is vital to keep the OT connection in view, and to keep the larger goal of salvation always in mind. The NT writers see in Jesus an unexpected but wonderful fulfilment of all the ancient promises.

Acts shows how believers in Jesus acted in the 'new world' of which they were now part: they *worshipped* and they *witnessed*. The first corresponds to the 'priesthood' theme, the latter to the 'royal' theme.

The Cross-Shaped Kingdom

What did Jews think it might mean for 'the kingdom to be restored to Israel' (Acts 1:6-8)? It would mean Israel set free from pagan overlords; God, through Messiah, ruling the whole world in truth and justice; God's presence dwelling among his people, so that they could worship him fully.

Acts shows all three coming into being. The liberation had come about through Jesus and the Spirit; the powers had been overcome by the power of the cross and the word; and the presence of God had been revealed, not in the Temple, but in the community of believers.

Chapter 9: Jesus's Special Passover

How did the first Christians interpret the death of Jesus?

It's odd that most Christian books on the atonement do not start with Jesus himself! Few give attention to the Gospels. They seldom link it to his announcement of the kingdom 'on earth as in heaven'. They don't mention Jesus' choice of Passover as the time to achieve his goal. We will aim to remedy these deficiencies.

Resurrection

The crucifixion on its own was just another Roman execution. People did not think about giving the cross of Jesus any theological significance until the *resurrection* had taken place. That meant, for Jews, that God's new age had begun—not, as expected, at the end of history, but in the middle of it.

Luke shows how Jesus himself, talking to the Emmaus-road disciples, put his death in the context of the fulfilment of Israel's scriptures. And, there, his death was 'for our sins'.

Why Did Jesus Choose Passover?

Passover said, 'Freedom—now! Kingdom—now!'

Jesus' choice of Passover to bring things to a head was clearly deliberate. His confrontation with the Jerusalem authorities (echoing those of Moses with Pharaoh) took place at a time when all were celebrating the Exodus from Egypt and praying that God would do it again, on a grander scale.

The Last Supper says much about Jesus' intentions. He turned the remembrance away from historical events to what was about to happen to himself. And that would somehow confront the dark powers in the way that Egyptian power had been overthrown. He would liberate his people.

Jesus words over the bread and wine were significant. 'Eating the Passover said: it happened, once for all, and we are part of the people to whom it happened. Jesus's words over the bread transformed this, so that it now said: the new Passover *is about to happen*, and those who share this meal will thereafter be constituted as *the people for whom it had happened* and through whom it will happen in the wider world.'

The wine was his covenant blood, shed 'for many for the forgiveness of sins'—the final undoing of exile and slavery. There are echoes of Jeremiah 31, which refers to the original covenant ceremony in Exodus 24:3-8. This new Passover would thus be a covenant-renewal.

How exactly could Jesus' death effect 'forgiveness of sins'? We can begin to find the answer only in Jesus' own creative interpretation of Israel's Scriptures. Some, notably Isaiah 53, spoke of a 'suffering servant'—and Jesus clearly saw himself in that passage. 'He would go ahead of his people and take upon himself the suffering that would otherwise fall upon them.' Luke draws out some of this theme in different ways (Luke 13:34; 23:31; 22:40).

Jesus also said he was the servant who would give his life 'as a ransom for many' (Mark 10). In this and many other ways he constantly announced that *God's kingdom* was coming, and Passover was the time to bring that out; Egypt's kingdom or rule would be broken, and God would be King.

All these multifaceted Gospel pointers unite in Paul's statement that 'God was reconciling the world to himself in the Messiah' (2 Cor 5:19). But, viewed historically, the Gospels overall point to a *human being* doing what Israel's God had said *he* would do.

Chapter 10: The Story of the Rescue

'Kingdom' and 'cross' have traditionally been kept separate. But the NT keeps them close together. The kingdom comes through Jesus' entire work, culminating with the cross, and the cross is that of the 'King of the Jews'.

Listening to the Evangelists

All four Gospels tell the story of Jesus as one of *Israel's God returning at last*. The openings of Mark and John prepare us, in different ways, for the coming of God himself. Jesus is '*God with us*'. Luke, too, makes it clear: Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem, for example, is 'the time of *God's coming to you*' (19:44).

The Gospels portray Jesus as forceful and firm when necessary, but as predominantly gentle, patient and loving. In line with this, their picture of his death is of someone *embodying the love of God himself*.

Alongside this, they portray the steady build-up of opposition and evil against Jesus. In the OT evil is evident even in the greats like Abraham, Jacob and Moses. The nation of Israel and its kings are seriously flawed. Priests and prophets are not exempt. But Jesus is different.

The Gospels see this evil converging at one point, starting with the Slaughter of the Innocents and ending with the crucifixion. Jesus' kingdom vision didn't suit the Jewish leaders, who opposed him in every way. In his exorcisms he was up against the dark forces. And, as the cross approached, he was about to perform one final, massive exorcism; evil was coming to a head so that Messiah could deal with it once for all.

In his desert temptations Jesus had had an initial victory over the 'strong man', enabling him to do his healings and exorcisms (Mat 12:29). Now, as the cross approached, the battle was resumed and came to a head (Luke 22:53). Satan claimed to have authority over the nations, but by Mat 28:18 'all authority' had been given to Jesus. *'Something had happened to dethrone the satan and to enthrone Jesus in its place.'*

John, in chapters 12-19, increasingly shows the powers of darkness—the 'ruler of this world'—closing in on Jesus, then acting through Judas to bring things to a showdown. Finally, Jesus confronts the 'ruler of this world' in the person of Pontius Pilate. Throughout John's Gospel, *victory* and *love* are the keynotes that explain the meaning of the cross.

All four Gospels bring the story to a climax at Passover. John is the most explicit: Jesus is the Passover lamb (1:29, 36; 19:36). But the 'dealing with sin' aspect, too, is woven into the Gospels. Jesus will 'save his people from their sins', and exile will be ended at last.

These two themes combine in the expression 'Son of Man', with its basis in Daniel 7. Jesus is the Messiah, whose inaugurated rule will overthrow the rule of the powers of this world—as at the Passover. And it happened at the cross. The cross is the kingdom-bringing victory that will provide forgiveness of sins.

Representative Substitution

The Gospels show, in their whole narrative, how the forgiveness of sins and return from exile come about: because *the one will stand in for the many*. 'Jesus dies, innocently, bearing the punishment that he himself had marked out for his fellow Jews as a whole.'

'Throughout his public career, Jesus had been redefining power, and his violent death was the ultimate demonstration-in-practice of that redefinition.' One man will die for the nation (Jn 11:50), and also open the door to 'the scattered people of God' from the Gentiles (11:51-52). This is because what God did for Israel had always been seen as the key to the inclusion of non-Jews. What Israel failed to do, Jesus did, thus opening that door wide. In Jn 3:16 'the larger victory is achieved by means of the intimate and personal exchange in which the one dies on behalf of the many.'

Luke's focus on the exchange of the rebel-brigand Barabbas for Jesus highlights the truth that Jesus will die a brigand's death *in place of rebel Israel as a whole*. This is repeated in the conversation between the two thieves crucified with Jesus (Luke 23:39-41). To the repentant one Jesus states that he will be with him in paradise that very day: the kingdom was that close!

Jesus constantly warned the Jews of the terrible fate due to fall on Jerusalem and the nation at the hands of the Romans. But Jesus took on himself the death prophesied for the impenitent nation. The one bore the sins of the many. 'Jesus *represents* his people, as Israel's Messiah, and so he and he alone can appropriately be their *substitute*.'

Matthew shows what the coming kingdom will be like: the Beatitudes. The people mentioned in them are the kind of people through whom the kingdom will be launched. The whole Sermon on the Mount is, in fact, the outline of Jesus' own vocation.

Mark emphasises Jesus' teaching on servant-leadership, which was in marked contrast to the power-seeking ideas of even his disciples. But the kingdom will not come that way. Jesus has a baptism to undergo and a cup to drink: it will

come through his suffering. He will give his life as ‘a ransom for many’. The power of self-giving love will be let loose on the world.

Chapter 11: Paul and the Cross (apart from Romans)

Paul uses a bewildering range of imagery in connection with Christ’s death. We do well not to focus on just one of them! We will choose some key passages to examine.

There are two secure basic points: (1) Paul shared the early Christian vision of the *goal* of redemption: the renewed creation, with humans doing their royal and priestly work within it. (2) That goal would be achieved by *means of* the death of Jesus, who died ‘for sins’, taking on himself the divine condemnation of Sin itself so that those ‘in him’ would not suffer it themselves.

There are also some central Pauline formulas, beginning with 1 Cor 15:3, ‘The Messiah died for our sins in accordance with the Bible.’ We have already put this in its context of Israel’s sin and the exile. His dying was the kingdom-establishing event.

Others are typically 1 Thes 5:10; Rom 14:8-9; 1 Cor 8:11; 1:18, 22-25; Gal 1:4. All assume that the people he is writing to believe in Messiah’s death ‘for them’ as part of their Christian identity, and see the ‘powers’ that held them captive as defeated. Also, Paul constantly keeps the work of Jesus linked to its OT background: Jesus who died was Israel’s Messiah. He is also strong on the unity of those who believe: Jew and Gentile believers are *one*.

Galatians

Galatians is not about the ‘works contract’ and ‘how to get saved’. It is about *unity*, and what Paul says there about the cross has that as the point. In Jesus, God has conquered the powers that kept the Gentiles in darkness and the Jews enslaved to sin.

Messiah’s death is at both the beginning of the letter (1:3-4, with its Passover pointers) and the end (6:14-16, with its ‘new creation’ emphasis). At the centre of the letter (4:3-7) is a compressed Passover narrative designed to deal with total human slavery.

God has dealt with this, via the work of the Son and Spirit, by breaking the exile through the forgiveness of sins (3:10, 13-14—a passage alluding to Deut 27, where the focus is not on individuals’ sins but on the sins of the nation as a whole). There is clearly here a *penal* aspect to Jesus’ achievement, and also a *substitutionary* one, but not meant in the usual way those terms have been used. It is all about Israel’s *vocation* to be a means of blessing to the world. The unity that Jews and Gentiles now enjoy in Christ puts to bed all previous identities.

Being part of the new age means living appropriately, by the Spirit. This is the background to chapter 5, which holds difficulties when approached from a ‘works contract’ angle.

Corinthians

While mentioning the cross often, Paul does not go into any detailed exposition here. He draws on Passover imagery (1 Cor 5:7-8; 6:19-20; ch 10). We, he holds, are the ultimate Passover people. He links this to the Lord’s Supper, too.

In ch 15 he looks at the eschatological aspects of Christ’s work, especially his resurrection—which could take place only because his death had dealt effectively with the sin issue.

In 2 Cor Paul defends his own apostolic ministry, which is shaped by the Messiah and his cross. He lives the way Jesus lived, strong in weakness (4:7-12; 6:4-10). And we are all to live that way. ‘The victory that was won *through* the cross has to be *implemented* through the cross—in particular, through the cruciform life and ministry of the apostles.’ This is the gist of that key passage, 5:14-6:2.

5:21b has been commonly misunderstood as ‘the great exchange’, based on double imputation. ‘[Paul’s] point is that the cross has liberated people from sin, so that they can be God-reflecting, image-bearing working models of divine covenant faithfulness in action.’

Philippians

The poem in 2:6-11 hinges on the cross, which is at the centre of all Jesus achieved. It is the means of victory over all the world's powers and the establishment of God's rule. It also sets the pattern for how we, too, should conduct our lives.

Jesus' submission to the cross 'was not something Jesus did *despite* the fact that he was "in God's form" and "equal with God", but rather something that he did *because* he was those things.'

Colossians

2:13-15 is a key passage on how Jesus triumphed over the powers. As he hung on the cross it looked as if the opposite were true: that they had triumphed over him! He conquered them by dealing with our sins on the cross.

All that Paul ascribes to Jesus and his death in this passage is shown to be the work of the one God himself. Paul's trinitarianism is implicit here.

Chapter 12: The Death of Jesus in Paul's Letter to the Romans—The New Exodus

There are some very pointed passages here, e.g. 4:24-25; 5:8; 7:4; 8:3-4, 31-32, 38-39; 3:25-26. Some have been given a variety of interpretations!

Romans 1-4 has usually—and mistakenly—been read as a 'works contract', sometimes called the 'Roman road'. But that's not right.

The Puzzles of Romans

Romans is a careful composition. Its four sections (chs 1-4, 5-8, 9-11 and 12-16) work together like the movements of a symphony. It is not, contrary to popular opinion, a handbook of systematic theology. At different periods of history, people have superimposed on Romans what they were interested in at the time—like justification in the 16th c. Much exegesis has ignored the climax of Romans 5-8 in 8:18-25—the renewal of creation.

This is presented as the goal of God's rescue operation. The primary problem is shown to be, not sin, but 'ungodliness', a failure of *worship* rather than primarily of behaviour. It produces an out-of-jointedness that can be called 'injustice'. 'Sin' against this background, is not primarily moral misdemeanours but a failure to be the fully-functioning human beings that God intended. This is our falling short of 'God's glory': the glory he intended us to experience.

Through Christ we embark on our priestly and kingly mission. Part of the priestly role is prayer, and this introduces chs 9-11. That priestly link carries through to the start of ch 12. So 'in Paul's presentation of salvation, the *goal* is for humans to share the "royal" and "priestly" ministry of the Messiah himself.' How has the death of Jesus brought this about?

Romans 5-8 and the New Exodus

Romans 5: Jesus's Death and the Coming of the Kingdom

The typical 'works contract' interpretation of chs 1-4 always plays down the promises to Abraham. But it is God's faithfulness to those promises that Romans emphasises: his 'righteousness'. The 'redemption' Jesus has achieved is Exodus-language, and it is in chs 5-8 that Paul opens this theme up. There are more refs to Jesus' death in this section than any other.

People have misread 3:25-26 (the 'propitiation' bit) to mean that the 'wrath' falls on Jesus instead of on us. But 5:9 makes that difficult, because if he has thus saved us from the wrath, why will he still need to save us from it in the future?

In 5:12-21 Paul surveys the whole saga from Adam to the Messiah and concludes that the issue has been resolved through what Jesus has done. We are now 'reigning in life', sharing God's rule, his 'reign of grace'. It is kingdom of God language.

Paul weaves the role of the Jewish law into this narrative. The works-contract approach sees it as the equivalent of the original commands given to Adam and Eve, but this is not what Paul has in mind, and that is a more complex story, which unfolds in ch 7. The law was given, he says, *so that* the trespass might be filled out to its full extent—and so that *redemption* would thus come. It was part of God’s plan.

Romans 6-8: The New Exodus

These chapters are not Paul’s description of the Christian life. They are his exposition of what he called (in 3:24) ‘the *redemption* which is found in Christ Jesus’. This is Exodus and Passover language. We thus have the Red Sea of baptism and other allusions.

The defeat of the ‘powers’ remains a theme in this section, too, with its great climax in 8:38-39. In Romans 5 Paul moves quietly from talking about ‘sins’ (plural) to talking about ‘sin’ (singular). ‘Sin’ is one of the ‘powers’, more than just the sum of all human failure. It is what has enslaved humanity, requiring a new Exodus. Israel’s plight in 7:23 is that it has been ‘taken captive’ by the law, hence the need for deliverance.

The law served to heap sin up into one place, so to speak, so that it could be condemned there once for all. This is the background to ‘he died for our sins’—which he did ‘in accordance with the Bible’: it is vital, if we are to understand what Jesus did, not to sever it from the story of Israel that Paul outlines especially in chapter 7 (where the ‘I’ and ‘me’ is a literary device for telling the life-story of Israel under the Torah). Through the law, Israel recapitulated the sin of Adam.

How Jesus undid all that is summarised in 8:1-4—God ‘condemned sin in the flesh’. Here is the closest we get to penal substitution, though not of the ‘works contract’ kind. But it is not God punishing Jesus; it is God punishing Sin *in the flesh* of Jesus. This is a vital difference. ‘The death of Jesus, seen in this light, is certainly *penal*. It has to do with the punishment on Sin—not, to say it again, on Jesus—but it is punishment nonetheless. Equally, it is certainly *substitutionary*: God condemned Sin (in the flesh of the Messiah), and therefore sinners who are “in the Messiah” are not condemned. The one dies, and the many do not.’

It is an expression of the divine covenant love. In sending Jesus, God is sending his own very self.

Paul also describes Jesus’ death as a ‘sin offering’. Why pick out that particular type of sacrifice from all the others? Because in the OT it was for unwilling and unwitting sins—the very kind Paul has attributed to Israel under the Torah in ch 7. The result, in ch 8, is that we are free to live out our true vocation ‘in the Spirit’—not to go off to heaven. This includes the priestly work of intercession, in which the same Spirit helps us.

That same Holy Spirit leads us to our promised inheritance (8:12-16) just as the pillar of cloud and fire did before. There is strong trinitarian truth in this passage. God suffered in Christ. We have a Trinity of overflowing, creative love.

Chapter 13: The Death of Jesus in Paul’s Letter to the Romans—Passover and Atonement

We return to chapter 3, where many have tried to locate a precise ‘atonement theology’. The core passage is v21-26. Every phrase has proved controversial!

The Exodus/Passover background remains important to its interpretation. And the ‘works contract’ is the wrong context altogether. It omits key element of Paul’s argument that precede and follow this chapter.

The *covenantal* element, for example, is prominent. The Greek *dikaioisune* occurs 7 times in our passage, and it has a covenantal meaning. Then there is the *cultic* element: humanity’s primary failure was *idolatry*, a failure of *worship*. The two fuse in Israel’s story which is the background. The Tabernacle epitomised this, especially the Ark and its lid, the *hilasterion*, mentioned in v25.

The Usual Reading of Romans 3—and Its Problems

The usual reading of chapters 1-4 has a ‘works contract’ background. It gives to the word *hilasterion* in v25 a particular meaning: God punishes Jesus in our place. Divine justice is thus ‘satisfied’ and God can ‘justify’ people

justly. Many English NT translations take this line. Some supporters point to the use of the word in 4 Maccabees as upholding this approach. But none of this is what Paul is saying.

This view leaves v27-31 stranded; it appears to change the subject completely. Then ch 4 becomes undervalued. What Paul says about Abraham is reduced to a mere illustration. It also ignores the plain meaning of 2:17-20, which in turn leaves 3:1-9 high and dry. It assumes the problem Paul is dealing with to be simply human wrongdoing ('sin') and fails to see the major point that sin is rooted in idolatry.

It also assumes that the problem is one of divine wrath and how, using the term *hilasterion*, it is dealt with. But there are major difficulties with all this:

1. *Hilasterion* is a *place*—where God meets with his people.
2. It is a mistake to think that, in referring to the OT sacrificial system, an animal is killed in the place of a worshipper.
3. 5:9 becomes a tautology: if we *have been* saved, why do we still need to be in the future?
4. God has 'passed over sins', which is the very opposite of punishment.

More fundamentally, 'God's righteousness' does not mean a status he confers on people. It is his own righteousness, namely, his faithfulness to his covenant. While Israel has broken it, God has not, and through Christ he has dealt with the issues.

Another mistaken assumption is that Paul's only point in 1:18-3:20 is that 'all humans are sinful'—leading to the 'works contract'. But this is to ignore the implicit Temple theme in 'fall short of the glory of God'. Giving glory to God has been a major element in Romans so far, with its opposite: idolatry—out of which flows sin.

The usual interpretation also fails to show how the passage fits in with the line of thought introduced in 2:17-24. Paul is not there addressing 'the Jew' in terms of a 'works contract' but with regard to Israel's *vocational* covenant: Israel had indeed been called to be a light for the Gentiles. They had failed, so how was God going to manage the situation? Through Jesus, who *is* Israel.

'The question Paul faces in 3:21-26 is then the double problem of human sin and idolatry, on the one hand, and the divine faithfulness, on the other.' God covenanted to give Abraham a worldwide family of forgiven sinners turned faithful worshippers, and the death of Jesus is the means by which this happens.

Next, a more detailed look at the passage (3:21-26).

Redemption Reimagined

God's Covenant Faithfulness

The theme of the passage, plainly, is 'the righteousness of God'—or 'God's covenant justice'. And the main point Paul is making is that 'God has done, in and through Jesus, what he promised and purposed all along'—a worldwide family for Abraham, and Israel as a light to the nations. The unveiling of God's covenant justice is an act of free grace.

The Messiah's Faithfulness to God's Purpose for Israel

Here *pistis Christou* is not 'faith in Christ' but 'Messiah's faithfulness'. God's covenant justice comes into operation through Jesus' faithfulness, who will complete Israel's role by his death. The Messiah was 'faithful' in offering to God the Israel-shaped obedience previously lacking.

Justified by Faith

Those who believe this are 'justified'. The word has two complementary meanings: justification is (1) the covenant declaration, establishing in a single family all who have *pistis* (faith); (2) this believing family is declared to be 'in the right'—here and now, anticipating the judgment of the final day.

New Passover, New Exodus

What God has done in Jesus is represented by the key terms *apolytroton* ('redemption') and *hilasterion* ('place of mercy') (v23-25a).

Both are Exodus vocabulary—redemption is, by definition, from slavery. Then, because they had been set free in order to worship God, the redeemed Israelites were able to build the Tabernacle, with the ‘mercy seat’ in its Most Holy Place. Paul uses this vocab to explain how God has been faithful to the covenant.

Mercy Seat and Meeting Place

The mercy seat was where purification was made, by the sprinkling of blood, so that God and his people could safely meet. Note that there is nothing about punishment here, even though it has commonly been read into this passage. Paul is not saying that God punished Jesus for the sins of Israel or of the world. Indeed, ‘passing over [Israel’s] former sins’ is the opposite of punishment!

God ‘put...forth’ Jesus as the *hilasterion*, the ‘meeting place’, by his divine initiative of grace. So we have a new *hilasterion* at the heart of a new *apolytroxis*. At the ‘mercy seat’ which is Jesus, cleansing is provided by blood to enable a meeting with God.

The Servant Vocation

Our passage echoes Isaiah 40-55: God’s covenant faithfulness liberates his people. But it involves the forgiveness of sins, and this is linked with the ‘servant’-figure. The servant *is* Israel (49:3) but, at the same time, stands over against Israel, representing them and doing for them what they can’t do for themselves. Paul draws on this Isaiah passage in Rom 4:24-25.

The ‘punishment that made us whole’ (Is 53:5) is not viewed against a ‘works contract’ background, but against a *vocational* one. Jesus himself, in his death, is the place where God meets with his world, removing by the sacrificial blood the pollutions of sin and death that would have made such a meeting impossible. It is all about vocation, Temple, and love. Love—the covenant is the *marriage* of God and Israel.

Jesus was YHWH himself taking upon himself the *consequence* of Israel’s idolatry, sin and exile, which brought into focus the idolatry, sin and exile of the whole human race. Exile was the *consequence* of what Israel had done. Isaiah uses the term ‘punishment’ but he frames it within a long section on God’s covenant love, his victory over the idols, his dealing with the exile, and renewing both the covenant and, thus, creation in chs 54-55. So we must use ‘punishment’ language with great care; it is a sharp metaphor only.

Jesus ‘will draw onto himself the actual results of Israel’s sin—the pagan hostility against God’s people—in order to exhaust it and so make a way through.’

The Fresh Revelation of God

Jesus has been ‘put forth’ as the place where heaven and earth meet. He is ‘the image of God’ and thus the answer to the problem of idolatry highlighted in 1:18-23.

Echoes of the Martyrs

All this now sheds light on 4 Maccabees 17 (which in turn depends on 2 Maccabees 7)—used by some to strengthen their argument for the ‘works contract’ approach to this passage. The author was probably writing for non-Jews, and combined some elements of Israel’s scriptural heritage (notably Isaiah) with some pagan ideas. We have no reason to believe that Paul’s reasoning owed anything of substance to this material.

The New Covenant in Jesus’s blood

The combination of themes we have noted in our passage is very similar to those in the various accounts of the Last Supper; it can hardly be accidental, especially in view of Paul’s own treatment of that subject in 1 Cor 11:23-26.

We seem, therefore, to be in touch with some of the earliest Christian reflections on the cross. ‘God was revealed in human form, in utter self-giving love, to be the focus of grateful worship, worship that would replace the idols and would therefore generate a new, truly human existence in which the deadly grip of sin had been broken for ever.’

Conclusion: Redemption Accomplished, Revolution Launched

‘Paul is not simply offering a roundabout way of saying, “We sinned; God punished Jesus; we are forgiven.” He is saying, “We all committed idolatry, and sinned; God promised Abraham to save the world through Israel; Israel was faithless to that commission; but God has put forth the faithful Messiah, his own self-revelation, whose death has been our Exodus from slavery.”’

So what is Paul saying had happened by 6pm on the first Good Friday?

1. God’s age-old covenant plan to rescue humanity and the world from sin and death had been accomplished.
2. God himself had done this in his act of covenant faithfulness (love), in Messiah’s death.
3. In true Passover style, Jews and Gentiles alike are free from past sins, and free to come into the single covenant family. They have been justified and thus able to face the final day without fear.
4. Passover and the Day of Atonement had met in the death of Jesus. Sins had been dealt with and the exile undone.
5. Israel’s representative Messiah had been ‘handed over because of our trespasses’ in the sense of Isaiah 53. The powers had been thus robbed of their power.

In this approach, nothing vital has been lost from traditional Western Christian thinking. ‘What has been lost is the paganised vision of an angry God looming over the world and bent upon blood.’ Instead, we have a loving, generous creator God who gives his own very self for the life of the world.

Beyond the Gospels and Paul

We have not looked at Hebrews and 1 Peter, but their angles of vision complement the NT portions we have examined.

What is clear, is that there was, in the first generation of the church, an explosion of revolutionary beliefs about what happened when Jesus died, all summarised in the statement that the Messiah ‘died for our sins in accordance with the Bible’.

‘The early Christians stuck to the basic belief. Jesus had been raised from the dead; therefore, he really was Israel’s Messiah; therefore his death really was the new Passover; his death really had dealt with the sins that had caused “exile” in the first place; and this had been accomplished by Jesus’s sharing and bearing the full weight of evil, and doing so alone. In his suffering and death, “Sin” was condemned. The darkest of dark powers was defeated, and its captives were set free.’

Part 4: The Revolution Continues

Chapter 14: Passover People

Jesus’ resurrection was at once the ‘surprise ending’ to Israel’s long story and a new, revolutionary beginning. A new sort of power had been unleashed upon the world.

It made the first Christians realise that victory was coming in two stages. Christians had a task to do now: to proclaim the message in the *power of suffering love*. That message is more than saying that Jesus died so that we can go to heaven. Christian mission means *implementing the victory that Jesus won on the cross*.

How, then, has the ‘go to heaven’ view become so widespread? Most Protestant Christianity in the 17th and 18th centuries was optimistic in Europe and America. The gospel was changing lives and communities as travellers took it abroad. This, they believed, was how the kingdom would come (reflected in the order of Handel’s *Messiah*). But by the end of the 18th c the emphasis had shifted: now the world was unimportant, as souls were saved to ‘go to heaven’. This paved the way for the Enlightenment, where secular optimism replaced the Christian kind. It thrived in the neo-Epicurean split-level view of the world. And this all led, in turn, to various ‘social gospel’ movements in the 20th century that reacted against the ‘it’s all about heaven’ trend.

Rethinking Mission

What this book has done is rediscover a view of the gospel that will produce results more like the earlier Christian approach than the later developments.

But we don't want that kind of triumphalism without 'forgiveness of sins' at its core. Equally, an approach that emphasises 'forgiveness of sins' so that we can go to heaven, without the 'victory' element, is also a distortion. What Jesus launched was 'a complete new way of being human in the world and for the world.' We are set free to be what we were made to be, as a 'royal priesthood'. Jesus 'gave himself for our sins, to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of God our father' (Gal. 1:4).

We are here to make a difference in the world! But we must be careful: the 'tangled motives and flawed schemes' of some well-meaning Christians can leave the world a worse place rather than a better one. No, we reach out in active *love*, and that will prompt a reaction from the 'powers'. Suffering will come our way, as it did to Jesus: 'the victory of the cross will be implemented through the *means* of the cross.' See 2 Cor 6:4-10.

Paul enlarges on this important theme in Romans 5:3-5 and again in 8:17-25. 1 Peter and Revelation echo it, too. It was suffering that has given us the teaching and example of men like Irenaeus and Bonhoeffer.

The sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper are important reminders of our position in this regard. They benefit us, in enabling us better to understand the position we enjoy as a result of Christ's work. But they also 'proclaim' to the powers that they are doomed.

Chapter 15: The Powers and the Power of Love

Jesus gave his followers a gospel commission. 'Jesus's followers are to go out into the world equipped with the power of his own Spirit to announce *that a new reality has come to birth*, that its name is "forgiveness," and that it is to be had by turning away from idolatry ("repentance").'

It is not to be over-individualised, as if, if you repent, God will decide not to press charges in this case. No, a whole new world has been unleashed, with forgiveness at its heart. Forgiveness is the new reality; it is the power of the revolution. You simply need to turn from the idols, whose power has been broken, and join in the celebration of Jesus' victory. 'Resurrection is the result of death's defeat; forgiveness, the result of sin's defeat.'

Freedom

'Because of the cross, *the world as a whole is free to give allegiance to the God who made it.*'

This is what opened the way for 'the Gentile mission'. Their idols have been defeated, and they are free to embrace God's new way. See Acts 26:16-18. This truth is repeated time after time by Paul (e.g. Acts 14:15-17; 17:22-31). The reign of the crucified Jesus only has to be announced for it to be effective! The powers can no longer stop people believing.

Both Eastern European communism and South African *apartheid* collapsed because of the key role played by the Christian church. In the Western world, money, sex and power (especially military power) still hold millions in their grip; but they, too, can fall. So can militant Islam. We need great wisdom in tackling the challenge they present. [The author suggests several lines of approach].

In particular, we need to *speak the truth to power*. Elected officials may be corrupt and it is our duty to challenge such. But such wider-world proclamation of the revolution must be matched by an equal determination to maintain our own moral integrity, and for the same reasons.

Cruciform Mission

The message of the cross challenges much traditional *eschatology*, particularly the 'going to heaven' bit.

It also challenges our approach to *mission*. 'Mission, as seen from the New Testament perspective, is neither about "saving souls for heaven" nor about "building the kingdom on earth." It is the Spirit-driven, cross-shaped work of

Jesus's followers as they worship the true God and, confronting idols with the news of Jesus's victory, work *for* the signs of his kingdom in human lives and institutions.'

The cross will shape our approach to the task. It will involve self-denial and suffering as we take up our cross and follow Jesus. This applies at church-level, too: 'It is all too easy to equate "success" with increasing congregations and growing budgets. Church history teaches otherwise.' The revolution is cross-shaped at every point.

Jesus' washing of his disciples' feet has much to teach us. It was an acted parable of what Jesus was about to accomplish through his death.

The final paragraph:

'Forget the "works contract," with its angry, legalistic divinity. Forget the false either/or that plays different "theories of atonement" against one another. Embrace the "covenant of vocation" or, rather, be embraced by it as the Creator calls you to a genuine humanness at last, calls and equips you to bear and reflect his image. Celebrate the revolution that happened once for all when the power of love overcame the love of power. And, in the power of that same love, join in the revolution here and now.'