



RORY SHINER

FORGIVEN Forever

Living in the death of Jesus

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For my parents, Jim and Alison, who were the first
to teach me why Jesus died.

And for Philippa, my sister, who lives it out.

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INTRODUCTION

Why did Jesus of Nazareth die?

What sort of question are we asking?

This book is given over to answering the question of why Jesus of Nazareth died. It's an odd question to ask in some ways. What exactly are we asking?

It could, of course, be a *medical* question. History tells us that Jesus died by crucifixion, and a coronial inquest might want to go into exactly how crucifixion brings about someone's demise. What would his death certificate have said? Was exposure, or asphyxiation, or heart failure the actual cause? Jesus did, after all, die with unusual speed. A death by crucifixion often took days; for Jesus it was a mere six hours. There's something worth exploring.

Historians, on the other hand, are interested in the *historical* causes of Jesus' death. A historian might ask whether the claim that Jesus died by crucifixion is

historically plausible. The French atheist Michel Onfray claimed several years ago that the Romans didn't crucify Jews at this period in history, and therefore the claim that Jesus died by crucifixion was historically suspect. Onfray's claim is a little perplexing, given the preponderance of evidence for first-century Roman executions of Jews. Still, it is a claim that could be posed and answered in good faith by historical method.

Political scientists might be interested in the *political* causes. On which charges, and under whose authority, and through the action of which political actors, was Jesus crucified? What aspects of the Roman judicial system were in play? Was it, legally speaking, unjust? Whose interests were advanced or impeded by his death?

These are all valid questions, and Christian theology is not easily partitioned off from politics, history, or even medical science. But the primary purpose of this book is to address the question *theologically*. Theology is the study of God and his ways. And in this book, we're primarily asking: what was God doing in the death of Jesus?

But even with this specific focus, we have plenty to work with.

Forgiveness of sins?

Why did Jesus die? The instinctive Christian answer is, of course, that Jesus died to forgive our sins. Isn't that it, really?

The first thing to say is, "Yes! That's it!" Jesus died so

that our sins could be forgiven. Amen! Even as I write I am humming in my head the words of the hymn:

Jesus paid it all,
All to him I owe;
Sin had left a crimson stain,
He washed it white as snow.¹

I'm tearing up just a little bit at the very thought.

But even if we were to spend all our time on the cross as the means of the forgiveness of sins, we'd still have some work to do, and many questions to answer.

Why does forgiveness require the death of Jesus in the first place? Couldn't God just forgive? If that's what God requires of us, then why doesn't he do the same himself? Why does *Jesus'* death bring the forgiveness of sins? Would the death of any perfect person have achieved the same result? Do we live in a universe where there is some deep magic associated with such a death? What if Jesus had died as a baby, or in old age, or through a long battle with cancer? Would our sins have been forgiven then? If not, why not?

Even if this entire book were given over to Jesus' death for the forgiveness of sins, that would be enough to keep us occupied.

But according to the Bible, the death of Jesus does more (not less) than that. The death of Jesus achieves a bewildering host of outcomes. It defeats Satan, it overthrows the "rulers" and "authorities" in the heavenly

1 EM Hall, 'Jesus Paid it All' [hymn], 1865.

realms (Eph 6:12), and it reconciles Jew and Gentile. The death of Jesus affects the way we share meals and visit restaurants, love strangers and plant churches, read the Old Testament and worship God. It should shape everything from our national politics to our life and home. The cross changes everything.

The contested meaning of the cross

When it first happened, Jesus' crucifixion wasn't an event in search of meaning. Christians didn't have to pour meaning into a vacuum. It already meant something. It meant something to the Romans. It meant something to the Jews. The challenge for the early Christians was to persuade the world not that it meant *something at all*, but that it meant something *else*.

The Romans, you see, weren't just executing people in the only way they knew how. For Roman crucifixions, 'cruel and unusual' was the whole point. It was both cruel and unusual by design. For this reason, it was reserved for insurrectionists, slaves and rebels.

One of the features of crucifixion, according to first-century historian Josephus, is that the executioners could contort the body however they wanted: arms up or arms down; right way up or upside down; weird clothes or nakedness. Whatever. You were in control—the body of the condemned was your toy to have fun with. This person wasn't just being killed; they were being shamed.

The death was slow. The sheer height of the victim

made the death public and easily observed. The opportunities for humiliation were legion. For Rome, crucifixion meant, “This is a non-person. This is what comes of people who dare take us on. Accord him no dignity. Feel free to laugh.”

For the Jewish people, with imaginations steeped in Scripture, the cross had another meaning. The Bible gave a very specific interpretation of the death of anyone who died in such a manner: “anyone who is hung on a pole is under God’s curse” (Deut 21:23). For Bible-soaked Jews, death on a cross meant “cursed by God”. Expressed as a syllogism, we could put it this way:

Premise one: Anyone hung on a pole is cursed by God.

Premise two: Jesus was hung on a pole.

Conclusion: Jesus was cursed by God.

Any claim that Jesus was in fact David’s true son and the Blessed One of God faced the seemingly insurmountable challenge of the manner of his death.

You see, if Jesus died at 3 pm on Friday April 33 AD, already by 3:01 pm it *meant* something.² For the Romans,

2 In using this date, I’m following the work of Andreas J Köstenberger and Justin Taylor (with Alexander Stewart) in their book *The Final Days of Jesus: The most important week of the most important person who ever lived* (Crossway, 2014). As they acknowledge, the date of Jesus’ death is disputed: many Christian historians favour a date in 30 AD, while others opt for 33 AD. But while it’s an interesting historical debate—and a useful reminder that the crucifixion is a real event in real history—our preferred date is unimportant.

it meant ‘failure’, ‘non-person’, ‘usurper’, ‘shamed’. For the Jews, it meant “cursed”—and, by biblical precedent, ‘not our true king’. Christian sense-making had to contend with the sense others had already made. The early Christians had their work cut out for them. The New Testament is our record of how they faced this enormous communicative challenge. Getting from “death by crucifixion” to “God has displayed his power and wisdom in the death of a man on a cross” was not an easy step to make. But the whole coherence and power of the Christian gospel relies on making precisely that move.



We are certainly interested in theological questions about the death of Jesus. But truth be told, my endgame is not academic, but (like all good theology) practical. The pulsing heart behind this book is not a conviction that the cross is under-taught, but rather that it is under-lived. I cannot think of a single passage in the New Testament that was written simply to teach the doctrine of the cross in the abstract. Every single New Testament mention of the cross is first and foremost an urgent appeal to live the cross. The doctrine, rich though it is, is a means to that end.

Put the other way around, it’s hard to think of many practical problems addressed in the New Testament for which the cross isn’t part of the solution. Attitudes toward government, marriage, dining habits, ethnic tensions, courtship dramas, church growth strategies, spiritual war-

fare, parenting, overcoming tyranny, industrial relations—all of these are topics about which New Testament authors think to themselves, “Do you know what will fix that? A better understanding of the cross.”

The cross is a vast ocean of spiritual power and liveable truth. Too often we are content to play on that ocean’s shore. My prayer for you as you read this book is that you’ll be at least encouraged to come in up to your knees. Then, once you’ve gone that far, you’ll feel how fresh the water is, and you’ll just keep swimming.

Chapter 1

THE JESUS MEAL

Time: Thursday 2 April, 33 AD, evening

Place: Upper Room, Jerusalem

Jesus on the death of Jesus

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take and eat; this is my body.”
(Matt 26:26)

Ty Treadwell and Michelle Vernon’s book *Last Suppers* is a record of final meals chosen by inmates on death row.³ Victor Feguer (hanged 1963) chose for his last meal a single olive. John Wayne Gacy (executed 1994)

3 Ty Treadwell and Michelle Vernon, *Last Suppers: Famous final meals from death row*, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2011.

went for a bucket of Original Recipe KFC, deep-fried prawns, chips, and a punnet of strawberries. Ronnie Lee Gardner (executed 2010) ordered steak, lobster tail, apple pie and ice cream, which he ate while watching the extended edition of *The Lord of the Rings*.

The book is macabre but fascinating. The whole tradition of allowing the condemned to choose their last meal is so strange, but it reflects something profound: our meals can *mean* something. For we humans, eating is more than refuelling. Our meals can be theatres by which we assert identity, culture and value. A birthday cake, the first meal of a married couple, your last meal—these meals carry meaning. They tell us something about who we think we are, and what we think matters.

The task of understanding the cross as the action of God did not first fall to the early Christian preachers, but to Jesus himself. Jesus preached the cross. He spoke many times about his death. Some of his most concentrated teaching about the cross happened at and through a meal. It is to that meal we now turn.

The meaning of the Passover

For his last meal, Jesus chose the Passover. Why? At the time of Jesus, the Jewish people had several major festivals—harvest festivals, festivals celebrating the giving of the law, and festivals celebrating the rededication of the temple. They had a festival specifically focused on the forgiveness of sins, Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement).

If Jesus wanted to time his death for a festival, he had a rich suite of options. He chose the Passover, and we should take that seriously: he's telling us something.

Passover was a politically charged moment for the Jewish people, and it's not hard to see why. If you were a Jew, you were celebrating the fact that you were once slaves, but now you were free. You once laboured under an oppressive foreign power in Egypt, but God defeated the Egyptians and their gods. He brought judgement on the nation that oppressed you, but he passed you over so that you were free to live under God's rule and to worship him.

How could you possibly celebrate all of that without also reflecting on your current circumstances of being under Roman occupation? Almost everything this meal says you are, you're not. It says you're free, but you're not. It says you've escaped the rule of foreign powers, but you haven't. It says your sins are forgiven, but are they? It says death has passed you by, but has it? Passover in the first century went from being a celebration of who you are to a battle cry for who you want to be. And as all those hopes were rekindled, the city of Jerusalem was like a tinderbox. The occupying forces were on high alert. The atmosphere would have been thick with a heady mixture of hope and longing. When would God bring his kingdom? And should we be doing something to nudge things along?

This is the context of Jesus' last supper. This is the meal that he chose to provide the grid by which we could understand his death.

Jesus and the new meaning of the Passover

It's worth stating the blindingly obvious: the last supper was a meal, not a church service. And Jesus didn't talk about a meal; he participated in one. It was a meal familiar to all of his disciples since childhood, in much the same way that people today might be familiar with American Thanksgiving, Chinese Reunion Dinner or British Christmas. It's that sort of meal. And in the middle of it, Jesus takes things in a surprising direction. He started to make this traditional, meaning-laden meal all about himself.

To do this, Jesus used the bread and the wine. In the context of a Passover meal, these were not his only options. On the table before him there would likely have been bitter herbs (perhaps representing the bitterness of slavery), maybe eggs, and certainly lamb—the meal's *pièce de résistance*, recalling the lambs whose blood was painted on the doors of the Hebrew houses in Egypt (Exod 12:7–8; Num 9:11).

Jesus had options, and yet he took the bread. Why? Why not another element—especially the lamb? It would seem to perfectly capture what was about to happen to him. The bread's specific meaning was the haste with which they left Egypt (flat bread, because there was no time to wait for the dough to rise; Deut 16:3). But Jesus took the bread (not the lamb) and said, “This is my body”. Why?

I believe Jesus chose the bread not for its specific meaning within the Passover, but because bread stands

for the entire meal. Today we might arrange to meet for ‘coffee’, even though the participants may choose tea or cold drinks. In many Asian cultures, an invitation to ‘eat rice’ is not a specific comment about what’s on the menu, but a general invitation to share food. In the Bible, ‘breaking bread’ is about sharing a meal (Acts 2:42, 20:7), not about joining forces in literally dismembering an innocent loaf of sourdough.

When Jesus broke the bread and said, “This is my body”, the “this” in that sentence is the whole Passover meal, not the bread in isolation. In communion services, the leader will sometimes say that Jesus said, “This is my body *broken* for you”. This reinforces the idea that the bread is standing for his body, a picture of broken flesh. But this is not what Jesus said.⁴ He said, “This is my body given for you” (Luke 22:19). Indeed, the Bible makes a point of the fact that Jesus’ body was *not* broken in the process of crucifixion. In the last supper, the breaking of the bread doesn’t carry the primary symbolic significance. It is a practical step so that each of those at the table can eat some of it. Just as a birthday party is not constituted by the mere presence of a cake, but also requires candles, a song and three “hip-hip hoorays!”, so too the breaking of the bread alone does not carry the meaning. It is a reference to the entire Passover meal.

4 The King James Version of the Bible renders 1 Corinthians 11:24 “this is my body which is *broken* for you”. But this is based on a less reliable manuscript tradition. Most modern Bible translations reflect what is likely the original text: “This is my body, which is for you” (NIV).

Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you.”
(Matt 26:27)

The cup is an obvious symbol of Jesus’ blood. What they drank was undoubtedly wine, and the suitability of wine as a picture of blood is clear. Yet it is interesting that Jesus’ emphasis falls on the cup itself as much as on the contents of the cup: “Drink *from it*, all of you ...” (Matt 26:27).

Most likely, everyone had their own cup. But at this point in the meal, Jesus says in effect, “Hey, everyone! Drink from *this cup—my cup*”. Where the breaking of the bread is a practicality more than symbolic, the sharing of the cup does carry symbolic weight. Why? Because it’s *his* blood! The invitation is not for all of them to shed their blood, but to share in the benefits of his blood, shed for them. It is a symbolic way of stating the truth that salvation is in Christ alone.

The cup’s contents are, of course, also full of meaning:

“This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” (Matt 26:28)

In the story of the exodus, several chapters on from the events of the Passover itself, Moses gathers the people. There’s a sacrifice of bulls, with half the blood being splashed against the altar and the other half being sprinkled on the people. And Moses says to them: “This is the blood of the covenant” (Exod 24:8). Israel, you see, were God’s covenant people. They had entered into

an agreement with God to be God's people and to shine the light of God to the world.

What is a covenant? Essentially, it's a formal agreement between two parties. Such a covenant normally involves a promise and a sign. A wedding ring, signing a piece of paper, or even handshakes are all in their own ways signs of a covenant. Covenants also involve a statement of the consequences should one party break the covenant. Covenants promise blessings to those who keep them, and curses to those who break them.

Israel had a covenant to be God's people, to live under God's law, and to show forth God's glory to the world. The consequence for breaking the covenant was exile and death; they would be cast out of the land that God was to give them. Back in Exodus, "the blood of the covenant" is, among other things, probably a sign that the consequence for breaking the covenant is death. At the last supper, Jesus says, "This is the blood of the covenant ... drink from it all of you". Just as Moses implicated everyone by sprinkling them all with the blood, Jesus implicates everyone by having them drink from his cup.

Israel had broken the covenant. Many years before Jesus came, they had received from God the promised punishment for covenant-breaking: exile. They had, to be sure, returned to the land. Well, some of them had. The truth is that, even since the exile to Babylon in the early part of the sixth century BC, most Jewish people had lived outside the land. And for those who had returned, they now lived under Roman occupation. God had promised in Jeremiah and Ezekiel that a new

covenant—a new agreement between God and the people—was coming, and that in that new agreement their sins would be wiped out. Their exile would end. They would return to God, and they would receive God’s Spirit. Jesus is saying that in his death, that time has now come. The curse of covenant-breaking would fall on Jesus. And in Jesus, a new covenant would be made.

From slavery to freedom

We should pay particular attention to Jesus’ own interpretation of his death. What conclusions can we draw on the meaning of the death of Jesus from the last supper? I want to highlight three.

First, if I’m correct that Jesus was in effect saying, “this whole meal is about to be fulfilled in my death”, then understanding the Passover is the key to understanding Jesus’ death. Consider a router for an entire family’s home internet connection. Everything goes through it. The Passover is the perfect router. Freedom, worship, sacrifice, victory, membership, trust, covenant—all the strands of Old Testament hope and longing come through the Passover. It’s all there. Jesus, I believe, is saying that about his death too: it’s all there.

Second, the meal established its participants as the new people of God. A festival like Yom Kippur was for atonement, the Feast of Tabernacles was for thanksgiving, and the Feast of Booths (also called Pentecost) was for the giving of the Law. All of them are vital

aspects of Jewish theology and the Old Testament story. But the Passover alone—then and now—was the feast by which Israel said, “This is us—this is what constitutes us as a people”. Passover was Israel’s God-given festive answer to the question “Who are we?” The answer: Israel is the people who were brought from slavery in Egypt to be God’s freed people.

If Jesus chose the meal that told Israel who they were, it follows that the last supper was the meal that told Jesus’ followers who they were. It tells us who we are. We are the people who have been brought from slavery to freedom through the death of Jesus.

Third, if this is the meal by which Jesus interpreted his death, it points to the status of those who have trusted in Jesus as people who have been set free. Freedom *from* slavery, but also freedom *to* worship God.

The importance of this can be easily overlooked. We sometimes cast the story of the gospel as a simple two-act, before-and-after, bad-and-good story. In the crudest form of this story, Act One says that we were sinners, and Act Two says that God in his grace decided to forgive us through Jesus’ death. As a simple table, it looks like this:

Act 1	Act 2
BAD	GOOD
We are sinners.	Jesus died for us.

Both of those things—we are sinners, and Jesus died for us—are true, but they are in fact the second and third

acts of a much grander four-act story. In Act One, we were created by God as his image bearers. In Act Two, we rebelled and became sinners. In Act Three, Jesus by his death, resurrection, ascension and pouring out of the Spirit made us free—free to worship God, to put off the old self, to escape slavery to sin, and to live a new life as we await Act Four: his final coming kingdom.

Act 1	Act 2	Act 3	Act 4
GOOD	BAD	BETTER	BEST
We are created as God's image bearers.	We become sinners.	Jesus died for us. We are the new people of God, being transformed and awaiting his final kingdom.	God's kingdom comes on earth as in heaven.

Put more simply, the story goes 'Good', 'Bad', 'Better' and 'Best'. The Passover locates us in 'Better'. The death of Jesus, which has not yet ushered in the new creation ('Best'), has nevertheless dealt the decisive blow against the world, the flesh and the devil ('Better'). The cross of Jesus has genuinely changed our circumstances, such that we are, in a very real sense, free. We have been forgiven. We have peace with God. We experience the first fruits of the blessings of the coming age—even while we still cry (as the Jewish communities often do at Passover), "Next year, Jerusalem!"